Tracking the Literary Metamorphosis in *Das Lied von der Erde*

by Teng-Leong Chew

The text used in *Das Lied von der Erde* underwent substantial literary changes from the original Chinese poems to the final form used in Mahler's symphonic song cycle. I will highlight and discuss several such examples in this essay to illustrate the difficulty in translating Chinese text into Western languages, and to perhaps add another dimension for the readers to appreciate Mahler's musical rendition of these poems.

Poetry is a very intricate part of Chinese literature, more so than it is in Western literature. Although poetry saw its origin since the early development of the Chinese civilization in 900-1000 BC, it reached its height during the T'ang Dynasty. Poems used in *Das Lied von der Erde* are from this Golden Age of Chinese poetry.

Part I: Syntactical Freedom vs. Constraint

The challenge in studying Chinese poetry for Indo-European language speaker remains in the extremely loose syntactical framework of the Chinese language. The same poem may invoke such different images that not only it may be perceived distinctly by different readers, it may in fact stir distinct emotions in the same reader if the same poem is revisited later in time. This is therefore analogous to what music can do to its listeners. Dr. Wai-Lim Yip (Department of Literature, University of California-San Diego) argued[i] that "Underlying the classical Chinese aesthetics is the primary idea of *noninterference* with Nature' flow." It was precisely this idea that has engendered the freedom in the Chinese syntactical structures. In most European languages, the construction of a sentence is governed by syntactical rules. In striking contrast, these rules, already near non-existent in regular Chinese usage, are often eliminated in poetry. This essentially opens up a limitless space, allowing readers to "enter and re-enter for multiple perceptions rather than locking them into definite perspectival position or guiding them in a certain direction." In addition, the sparseness of connective elements (e.g. prepositions or conjunctions) or the lack thereof, aided by the indeterminancy of parts of speech and the complete absence of tense declensions in verbs (Chinese, much like many Eastern languages, carries no tense to its verbs), literally affords the Chinese readers a great degree of freedom to consort with object and events of the real world. By the same token, this complete lack of syntactical rules would easily make a Western reader uncomfortable and confused – and in the attempt to put things into perspective (which negate the essence of the Oriental languages), introduce a well-defined idea, hence as Yip argued, "locking them into a definite perspectival position." Hans Bethge's text exemplifies the claim.

Yip provides in his book an excellent example from a poem by Meng Hao-Ran (the Mandarin pronunciation of Mon Kao-Yen, which is Cantonese). I will present the poem according to the original order of appearance and graphic impression of the Chinese characters. What one sees at this point is the word-to-word dictionary annotations plus some bare indications of their grammatical functions. The grammatical functions are presented using tentative English rules – the Chinese language rarely uses such classifications. Meaning(s) to each Chinese character is separated by a space – obviously each stanza has five Chinese characters.

移舟泊煙渚 日暮客愁新 野曠天低樹 江清月近人

move (v.) boat (n.) moor (v.) smoke (n/adj) shore (n.)
sun (n.) dusk (v.) traveler (n.) grief (n.) new (adj/v.)
wild/wilderness (n) far-reaching (adj.) sky (n.) low/lower (adj./v.) tree(s) (n.)
river (n.) clear (adj.) moon (n.) near (v.) man (n.)

This is what a Chinese reader would register in his mind, in the most literal sense. Should a Western reader who is used to the syntactical cooperation among various parts of speech then provide his own link between these sparsely scattered words in order to make sense out of it?

The poem quoted above also raised the following specific questions for the translator:
1.   Who moved the boat?
2.   What is a smoke shore?
3.   How to translate "grief new"? Should new be an adjective or a verb?
4.   What does "sky low tree" mean? Should low be an adjective or a verb?
5.   Should "near" be an adjective or a verb?

The most challenging part seems to center around the double-identity words – "new", "low", and "near". It is important to note that a given Chinese word will remain the same character regardless of the part of speech it belongs. It is therefore a very common mistake for a translator to introduce a subject (as in question 1), in order to make the sentence syntactically correct. As a result of these problematic issues, we have these innovative translations that are quoted in Yip's book. Capital letters denotes the translator's insertion, while quotation marks ("…") indicate translator's interpretation or paraphrases:

Giles (1898)
I steer MY boat to anchor
BY THE mist-clad river eyot
AND "mourn" THE dying day THAT BRINGS ME
NEARER TO MY FATE.

ACROSS THE woodland wild I SEE
THE sky "lean on" THE trees
WHILE close to hand the MIRROR moon
FLOATS ON THE shining streams.

Fletcher (1919)
WHILE MY LITTLE boat moves on its mooring mist
THE sorrows OF ABSENCE the sunset BRINGS back
"Low breasting the foliage the sky loomed black"
THE river IS bright WITH the moon at our side.

Bynner (1920)
WHILE MY LITTLE boat moves on its mooring mist
AND "daylight wanes, old memories begin..."
"How wide the world was, how close the trees to heaven!"
"And How" clear in the water the nearness of the moon.

Jenyns (1944)
I move MY boat and anchor in the mists OFF an islet;
WITH THE setting sun THE traveler's heart grows melancholy once more.
"On every side is a desolate expanse of water;"
"Somewhere" THE sky comes down to THE trees
AND THE clear water "reflects" a "neighboring" moon.

These examples demonstrate how the original mood of the poem is distorted in the various translations, and how the revolving perspectives of the poem that allow us to simultaneously view the totality of the scene have been stripped. In addition, since there is no tense declension in the Chinese language, all translators assumed that the scene was happening while the poem was written. None of the quoted translations thought it would be in the past tense. Regardless of which time frame one chooses, one immediately restricts the scope of the reader to that particular point in time.

Now let's examine how Hans Bethge translated the poem (based of Judith Gautier's original French translation) used in *Das Lied von der Erde*. The last section of *Das Lied von der Erde* is based on Wang Wei's original poem "Farewell". It is a five-character, six-line poem, and in the form of "Ku Shih" (or "Ancient Poem"). Its word-to-word translation reads as follow. Again, a space separates each Chinese character equivalent.

下馬飲君酒	down/dismount horse drink you/your wine
問君何所之	ask you where- to- go-
君言不得意	you say not happy/satisfied ("happy/satisfied takes two characters)
歸臥南山陲	return lie South Hill side
但去莫復問	but go do-not again ask
白雲無盡時	white cloud/s no end time

We can translate the poem with minimally working syntax in the English language as follows:

Dismount horse, drink your wine
Ask you: "Where to?"
You say: "At odds with the world
Return to rest by the South Hill"
Please go. Ask no more.
Endless, the white clouds.

If this poem is to be translated at all for an Indo-European reader, it dictates the presence of a subject. And in that case the minimalist translation no longer suffices. The loose syntactical rule of the Chinese language has effectively camouflaged the real meaning in this particular case. The sentence, which appears to be one instruction ("Ask no more") following the other ("Please go"), is in fact a command ("Please go"), followed by assurance ("'I' ask no more").

Part II: Literal Distortion
While the differences in syntactical rules between Chinese and Indo-European languages are unavoidable and pose a genuine hurdle in translation, in several instances the translators have indeed distorted the meaning of the original poems. One of the most blatant alteration can be found in the original poem "Lotus-Plucking Song", which Mahler adapted for the fourth movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, *Von der Schönheit*.

The original Chinese version is a seven-character, eight-line poem. Using minimal working syntax, the poem can be translated as follows:

若耶溪旁采蓮女	By "Ruo-Ye" Brook, lotus-picking girls
笑隔荷花共人語	Laughter and chatters among lotus flowers,
日照新妝水底明	Sun shines on the painted beauty – clear in the water
風飄香袂空中舉	Breeze lifts fragrant sleeves in the air
岸上誰家游冶郎	At the bank, who are the wandering young men
三三五五映垂楊	Gathering in threes and fives by the willows
紫騮嘶入落花去	Purple horses neighing pass, flowers fallen
見此踟躕空斷腸	Witnessing this, troubled and lament in vain

The last stanza of this poem is completely incongruent with the text in *Von der Schönheit*. The original poem depicts the lament of the lotus-picking girls troubled by the sight of horses trampling over the flowers. However, in *Das Lied von der Erde*, the poem has turned into a yearning of one of the maidens for the young horseman, as shown below:

Und die schönste von den Jungfrau'n sendet	And the loveliest of the maidens sends
Lange Blicke ihm der Sehnsucht nach.	long glances of yearning after him.
Ihre stolze Haltung ist nur Verstellung.	Her proud bearing is only pretence.
In dem Funkeln ihrer grossen Augen	In the flashing of her large eyes
In dem Dunkel ihres heissen Blicks	In the darkness of her passionate glance
Schwingt klagend noch die Erregung ihres Herzens nach.	The tumult of her heart still surges painfully towards him.

At what point during the literary metamorphosis did this discrepancy occur? Mahler altered Hans Bethge's text for this poem as he adapted the poem for *Von der Schönheit*. So is it possible that the composer had altered the meaning of the original text to suit his music? A closer comparison between the French translation by Marquis d'Hervey Saint-Denys (1862) with the German versions by Hans Heilman (1905) and Hans Bethge (1907) indicates otherwise. The transformation indeed occurred in the hand of Hans Bethge. This alteration prompted Mahler to further change the text to reflect the longing of the maiden for the horseman. As substantial as this poem has been altered, none of the literary changes is more critical than the final addition by Mahler himself to the last poem used in *Das Lied von der Erde*. Mahler has modified and expanded Bethge's final verse of Wang Wei's poem, starting from "*Die liebe Erde allüberall…*" While it is unclear if this addition represents Mahler's own creation to make the poems fit the musical idea or it was adapted from any known poem, it is interesting to note that the stanza "*Blüht auf im Lenz und grünt aufs neu!*" is a direct quote from another poem by Wang Wei, as shown in the line marked with an asterisk below.

王維　　　　　　　　*Farewell in the Mountain*
山中送別　　　　　　By Wang Wei

山中相送罷	Bid each other farewell in the mountain
日暮掩柴扉	Closing wooden gate at dusk
春草明年綠*	Spring grass green again next year*
王孫歸不歸	Will the honored friend return?

This addition carries profound implications. It sums up the musical essence of *Das Lied von der Erde*. This is Mahler's answer to the questions posed in the preceding movements. However, perhaps totally unintended by Mahler, this added stanza highlights one aspect of the Chinese language that will strategically link us back to the text of *Des Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde*. This warrants a closer look at the Buddhistic and Taoistic influence on the Chinese language, which will be addressed in Part III.

Before we proceed to the next part, however, it is necessary to look at the most distorted of all poems, the one used in *Von der Jugend*, titled Porcelain Pavilion. The original Chinese text can be translated as follows:

李白　　　　　　　　*Banquet at Tao's Family Pavilion***
宴陶家亭子　　　　　By Li Bai

曲巷幽人宅	Crooked path: personal residence in quietude
高門大士家	Tall gate: great scholar's home
池開照膽鏡	Open pond, mirrors reflection
林吐破顏花	Protruding forest trees intersperse with colorful flowers
綠水藏春日	Green water hides the Spring sun
青軒祕晚霞	Green room camouflages evening amber
若聞弦管妙	If strings and woodwinds are delightful to hear
金谷不能夸	Unmatched by a valley of gold

**Poem taken from http://www.guoxue.com/

For many years, the identity of this poem by Li Bai cannot be confirmed due to the heavily altered text. In fact, the poem was mistranslated even in its title. Judith Gautier originally translated it into "The Porcelain Pavilion", showing her serious lack of understanding of the Chinese language. The word "Tao" can mean porcelain as well as a Chinese family name. And in this case is clearly the latter. This misrepresentation has clearly caused many problems in locating the poem in the anthology of Chinese poems.

Of course, Judith Gautier had also added many extraneous elements to her translation, which at this point are apparent. These include the bridge that arches like a tiger's back to the pavilion, as well as the drinking friends. The original poem, on the other hand, puts almost its entire emphasis of describing the host's house more than the pavilion, and certainly does not mention anything about the guests. This of course is in striking contrast to the French version, which provides rather detailed description of what the guests are doing. One can therefore only speculate if Mahler would have chosen this poem for *Das Lied von der Erde* had Judith Gautier made a faithful literal translation.

Now let's proceed to the exploration of the Buddihist and Taoist influence on the Chinese language, a critical element for the understanding of the poems used in the *Der Abschied.*

Part III: Loss of Spiritual Context

As pointed out in Part I, T'ang Dynasty (618-907 AD) saw the development of Chinese arts and culture soaring to new heights. There were several reasons behind the sudden surge in cultural development. The two major causes can be attributed to the mapping of the Silk Road[ii], and the interest of the T'ang Dynasty in Buddhism. The discussion of the Buddhist influence in *Das Lied von der Erde* may seem irrelevant, however, the Chinese language is heavily influenced by Buddhism that without this basic knowledge, what is transpired in *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde*, and consequently in the *Das Lied von der Erde* cannot be fully appreciated.

Buddhists concern themselves with the idea of correct perception of the surrounding world. The central philosophy of Buddhism is in fact rather straightforward, as described in the Four Noble Truths:
1. There is an illness
2. There is a cause(s) of illness
3. There is a possibility of a cure of the illness
4. There is a prescription i.e., what we need to do to bring about a cure

The illness described here is *Dukkha*, a Pali word for "imperfection", "sufferings". *Dukkha* is precisely the concept imbued in the poem used by Mahler for *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde*. (It is important to note that "suffering" is not unique to Buddhism, but is central to Taoism as well.) The poem written by Li Bai can be translated with minimal working syntax as follows[iii]:

悲來乎　　　　　　[悲來乎
悲來乎　　　　　　悲來乎
主人有酒且莫斟　　鳳凰不至河無圖
聽我一曲悲來吟　　微子去之箕子奴
悲來不吟還不笑　　漢帝不憶李將軍
天下無人知我心　　楚王放卻屈大夫
君有數斗酒　　　　悲來乎
我有三尺琴　　　　悲來乎
琴鳴酒樂兩相得　　秦家李斯早追悔
一杯不啻千鈞金　　虛名撥向身之外
悲來乎　　　　　　范子何曾愛五湖
悲來乎　　　　　　功成名遂身自退
天雖長　　　　　　劍是一夫用
地雖久　　　　　　書能知姓名
金玉滿堂應不守　　惠施不肯干萬乘
富貴百年能几何　　卜式未必窮一經
死生一度人皆有　　還須黑頭取方伯
孤猿坐啼墳上月　　莫謾白首爲儒生]
且須一盡杯中酒

Sorrow comes; sorrow comes
Host has wine; pour not yet
Listen to my singing a sorrowful song
Sorrow approaches, neither sob nor laugh
This world - nobody knows my heart
You have several measures of wine,
I have three-foot lute
Lute playing complements happy drinking
One drink equals thousand taels of gold

Sorrow comes; sorrow comes
Everlasting as the heaven and the earth
Yet roomful of gold and jade shall not last
Hundred years of wealth amounts to what?
Everyone lives and dies only once
Lonely ape sits, howls the moon over the grave
Must empty this cup of wine in one gulp

The concept of *Dukkha* is immediately apparent even in the translation. The first line brings out the subject – "*Dukkha*", life is suffering, suffering is life, hauntingly consistent with *Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod*. Throughout the entire poem, Li Bai partially identifies the causes of life's suffering (thirst for wealth and fear of death), consistent with the second Noble Truth in Buddhism. However, the Eastern solution to life's suffering is brought out in line 4: "Sorrow approaches, neither sob nor laugh." This simple line in essence sums up the Third and Fourth Noble Truths. The identification of the target for intervention and the liberation from it is the basis of Buddhist teaching. Therefore, Li Bai's poem is a poetic microcosm of Buddhist's prescription for life. It establishes the symptom (sorrow), and it identifies the causes, which demand the acknowledgement of the existence of life's fulfillment (wealth, status), as well as its cruelty (life and death), it then prescribes the cure (realization of the disillusionment created by the fulfillments in life stated above). Thus, as "sorrow approaches, neither sob nor laugh". Such literary subtlety is impossible to be reproduced faithfully into any language that does not share the same cultural influence.

Mahler's choice of the poems as well as his own literary alteration of Bethge's translation are strategically geared toward the same setting - but it is beyond the scope of this essay to address.

---

[i] *Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres* by Wai-Lim Yip, 1997, Duke University Press

[ii] The "Silk Road" linked the imperial China major cities on the Pacific Coast, through the Taklamakan desert and Central Asia, to the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent. It was the major artery for trade, religious and cultural exchange.

[iii] The original poem is significantly longer than any of the translated versions. The un-translated portion is included within brackets on the right column.