

Perspectives

The Identity of the Chinese Poem Mahler adapted for “Von der Jugend”

by Teng-Leong Chew

Of all the texts that Mahler used for *Das Lied von der Erde*, the source of “Von der Jugend” is particularly elusive, and tracing its evolution may offer some insights into the nature of the poem. Mahler received a copy of Hans Bethge’s “*Die chinesische Flöte - Nachdichtungen chinesischer Lyrik*”¹ from Theobald Pollak in 1907. It was around the time when Mahler was deeply affected by a series of personal crises in life; his beloved daughter “Putzi” had died, and the doctor had made the fateful diagnosis of his heart condition. The poems in the anthology struck a responsive chord with the composer and he selected seven poems as texts for *Das Lied von der Erde* in the following year.

Collectively, the poems chosen by Mahler reflect a dualistic philosophy, which culminates in *Der Abschied* the ultimate reconciliation of two polarities: resignation in the face of existential impermanence, on the one hand and on the other, the celebration of the perpetual renewal of life. In order to augment the interplay of the opposites, Mahler significantly departed from the German *Lied* tradition, which presupposed, at least as an ideal, a faithful regard for the chosen text. While his predecessors seldom went beyond omitting a stanza or two from a long strophic poem, Mahler rewrote words, added new lines of words, and even reorganized groups of text to match his central theme of *Das Lied von der Erde*.

The significant textual alterations have undoubtedly made the effort of identifying the original poems rather difficult. Unfortunately, Hans Bethge’s German text provides little help in resolving the matter. Bethge’s anthology is a collection of poems from the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 AD) in China. In reality, Bethge did not translate any of the poems himself, but rather based his anthology, in the form of loose imitation, on Hans Heilman’s *Chinesische Lyrik*.² The convoluted literary journey from the original Chinese poems to the final text of Mahler’s *Lied von der Erde* did not stop there. Hans Heilman’s anthology was based, in turn, on two French translations: Le Marquis d’Hervey-Saint-Denys’s *Poésies de l’époque des Thang*, and Judith Gautier’s *Livre de Jade*.

While Hervey-Saint-Denys was a distinguished sinologist, Judith Gautier (daughter of Théophile Gautier) was a dilettante. In general, Hervey-Saint-Denys’s translations of the Chinese poems were scholarly and can be easily traced back to their respective sources. Judith Gautier, however, did not translate literally. Her work was mainly to serve the purpose of creating her own piece of *chinoiserie*. This observation certainly holds true for the seven poems used in *Das Lied von der Erde*. The five poems translated by Hervey-Saint-Denys, which Mahler adapted for *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde*, *Von der Schönheit*, *Der Trunkene im Frühling*, as well as the two parts of *Der Abschied*, are easily identifiable even after the drastic changes made by Mahler.³ The other two poems derived from Judith Gautier’s “*Livre*”, in contrast, are rather problematic.

For example, in the case of the second song, *Der Einsame im Herbst*, the translation by Gautier is so unauthentic that both Donald Mitchell and Henry-Louis de La Grange did not agree about the identity of the poem. It is important to note that Bethge’s version of this poem bears little changes compared to Gautier’s French version. So any literary alteration in the original Chinese version could not have taken place in

¹ Hans Bethge, *Die chinesische Flöte: Nachdichtungen chinesischer Lyrik* (Leipzig, 1907).

² Hans Heilman, *Chinesische Lyrik*, vom 12. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis zur Gegenwart (Munich, 1907).

³ To follow the textual changes that occurred in the Chinese poems from the hands of the French translators to their final form in Mahler’s song symphony, refer to Teng-Leong Chew, “*Das Lied von der Erde*: The Literary Changes.” www.mahlerarchives.net/DLVE/DLVE.html

the hands of either Hans Bethge or Hans Heilman, and should therefore be attributed to Judith Gautier. One of the most obvious discrepancies between Gautier’s translation and that of the original Chinese version presented by La Grange⁴ is the length of the poem: the original Chinese poem is six stanzas longer than *Der Einsame im Herbst*. Also confusing is the name of the poet, which La Grange (with the help of several Chinese scholars) spelled as Ts’ien-Ts’i, while Gautier attributed the poem to “Tchang Tsi”. These discrepancies, quite understandably, have led Donald Mitchell to reject the identity of the poem proposed by La Grange.⁵

These major obstacles in tracing the original poems therefore highlight the problem with Gautier’s translation, and must be addressed in details before we can proceed to identify the “missing poem” Mahler adapted for *Von der Jugend*. In that regard, Fusako Hamao argued⁶ that all previous studies have overlooked two important aspects: First, all of them have examined only the poems in question, not realizing that a thorough comparison of all of the poems in *Le Livre* would have implicated the degree of freedom Gautier took in modifying the poems in general. Second, Gautier’s attributions of the names of the poets were often inaccurate. Such erroneous practices thus underscore the need to pinpoint precisely the material source as well as to identify the unifying characteristics of Gautier’s style.

According to Joanna Richardson’s biography⁷, Judith Gautier had studied mainly, if not exclusively, Chinese manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Impériale in Paris. It is therefore likely that all the textual materials translated by Gautier can be found in this library. Based on this assumption, Hamao conducted a rather exhaustive survey of all the Chinese manuscripts that Bibliothèque Impériale acquired prior to 1867, the year *Le Livre* was published. He concluded that many of the obstacles that hinder our ability to identify the originals are all traceable to the mistakes made by Judith Gautier.

Judith Gautier developed her interest in the Far East when she was only seventeen years old, and learned Chinese from Tin-Tun-Ling, who later helped her in translating the Chinese poems into French in 1865. The first edition of *Le Livre de Jade* was well received when it was published in 1867. Each of the seventy-one poems included in the collection is accompanied by the name of the original author, but does not have any further annotation or explanatory footnote. In 1902, Gautier revised the book, and had the following to say: “I was not absolutely sure about the accuracy of the poems which made up this little book; and so I did not dare affirm that they were exact translations... Later on, I took up *Le Livre de Jade* again. I enlarged it a great deal and corrected it ruthlessly, and this time, I could guarantee that it was translated from the Chinese.”⁸ The 1902 edition included not only the addition of forty new poems, but also the Chinese characters of the poets’ names alongside the French spelling. Interestingly she removed the Chinese characters from the 1933 edition without further explanation. Since Hans Heilman’s *Chinesische Lyrik* (1905) included the poems newly added by Gautier, he must have used the 1902 edition of *Le Livre*, and he translated the poems from Gautier’s *Le Livre* and Hervey-Saint-Denys’s *Poésies* quite faithfully.

Surprisingly, of the 111 poems collected in the 1902 edition of *Le Livre*, only about sixty can be traced back to their original sources.⁹ Among the recognizable poems, Hamao identifies the following literary discrepancies characteristic of Gautier’s style:

⁴ Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler III: Le Génie Foudroyé (1907-1911)* (Paris 1984), pp. 1121-22

⁵ Donald Mitchell, “Gustav Mahler: Songs and Symphonies of Life and Death” (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), p. 461

⁶ Fusako Hamao, “The Sources of the Texts in Mahler’s *Lied von der Erde*.” *19th-Century Music* 19(1): 83-94, summer 1995.

⁷ Joanna Richardson, *Judith Gautier: A Biography* (London, 1986), pp.25-26

⁸ Cited by Hamao from Suzanne Meyer-Zundel, “*Quinze Ans auprès de Judith Gautier*” (n.p., 1969), p. 245 (cited from Richardson, “Judith Gautier”, p. 56).

⁹ Fusako Hamao, “The Sources of the Texts in Mahler’s *Lied von der Erde*.” *19th-Century Music* 19(1): 83-94, summer 1995.

1. Truncations

Gautier often translated only part of a long Chinese poem, leaving the remaining part unused, or used it to make another poem with a different title. This is clearly the case for the poem used for *Der Einsame im Herbst*. As shown below, Gautier completely omitted the bracketed portion of the poem in her translation of *Le soir d'automne*.

錢起
效古秋月長

秋漢飛玉霜
北風掃荷香
含情紡織孤燈盡
拭淚相思寒漏長
簷前碧雲靜如水
月弔棲鳥啼雁起
誰家少婦事鴛機
錦幕雲屏深掩扉
白玉窗中聞落葉
應憐寒女獨無依

Using minimal working syntax, I have translated the poem using the “non-interference” rule previously discussed in my essay “Tracking the Literary Metamorphosis of *Das Lied von der Erde*”¹⁰ to maintain the freedom in the Chinese syntactical structures. I also adopted the universal and official “Pinyin” system to spell the poet’s name “Qian Qi” (which is pronounced as Chien Chi). Since Chinese can be written in both horizontal directions as well as from top to bottom, to avoid confusion, I adhere to the writing direction of left-to-right (as in English) for all the Chinese characters in this essay. The first line is the name of the poet, and the second, slightly slanted, line is the title of the poem. The actual poem begins after a line break.

Imitation of Old Poem: Long Autumn Night – by Qian Qi

Autumn sky, jade-like frost drifting
Northerly wind carries lotus fragrance
With love, weaving till the lonely lamp fades
Wipe tears, fond memory, long cold night
[Eaves edge, blue clouds pure like water
Rising moon, roosting birds caw; geese soar.
Whose young wife is weaving love birds on her loom?
Deeply concealed by silk curtain and inlaid screen
Listening to falling leaves by the white jade window
Pity the woman, chilled and alone without company]

This truncation thus addresses Mitchell’s concern over the poem proposed by La Grange. The discrepancy was not a result of incorrect attribution by La Grange, but of the arbitrary omission by Gautier.

2. Conversion of proper nouns to common nouns

Proper nouns were often changed to common nouns in *Le Livre*. Take the case of the fourth song of *Das Lied von der Erde*, *Von der Schönheit*, the original poem by Li Bai refers to a specific river, “*Ruo Ye*”¹¹. While Hervey-Saint-Denys translated the same poem, and his translation adheres to the name, as in “*Sur les Bords du Jo-yeh*”, Gautier simply used “a river” throughout her translation. Interestingly, although Bethge based his translation on Hervey-Saint-Denys’s *Poésies*, the proper noun is also dropped in the German version.

3. Extraneous adjectives

Most Indo-European translators tend to add description to a noun during translation when the original Chinese poem does not contain any adjective. Gautier was no exception. This general problem has been discussed in great length previously. Hamao also observes that Gautier favored adjectives that indicate color.

¹⁰ Teng-Leong Chew, “Tracking the Literary Metamorphosis in *Das Lied von der Erde*”. http://www.mahlerarchives.net/archives/daslied_lit.pdf

¹¹ *Ruo Ye* Brook is in present-day Zhejiang Province in China, southeast of the city of Shaoxin.

4. Extraneous texts

Gautier frequently added extraneous texts, from a single word to an entire sentence, in complete disregard to the original poems. In numerous instances, this has not only skewed the meaning of the poems, but rendered them untraceable. Gautier is known to also incorporate footnote or commentary into her translation, making them appear as part of the poem. One of the poems that suffered the most under this practice is the poem by Li Bai that Mahler employed as the text for *Von der Jugend*. I shall discuss this in greater detail later.

5. Alteration of Sentence Order

It is also very common for Judith Gautier to rearrange the sentence order.

6. Erroneous Attributions

Gautier is known to confuse the name of the protagonist (such as a heroine) in the poem with that of the poet. There are also several examples wherein the Chinese characters she inserted alongside the poets’ name did not match the Roman character. One such example is the poem used in *Der Einsame im Herbst*. Gautier attributed the poem to a poet named “Tchang-Tsi” in the 1902 edition, and she also added the Chinese characters that are not read as “Tchang-Tsi”, but as Li-Wei. This misattribution again led to the disagreement between Mitchell and La Grange over the identity of the poem, as there is no such poet named Li-Wei.

The last example clearly raises the question of whether Judith Gautier indeed knew the Chinese language well enough to pursue her translation, as the surname of “Li” is a very common word. Such confusion can only be due to carelessness or her failure to grasp the language. One may speculate that such embarrassment might have been the reason why she eventually withdrew all the Chinese characters from her 1933 edition of *Le Livre*. In any case, despite the extremely careful comparison and survey, Hamao did not mention another critical error Gautier made, which subsequently masked the identity of the source of “*Von der Jugend*” for later scholars. This is discussed below.

The poem chosen by Mahler for the third song of *Das Lied von der Erde* is derived from *Der Pavillon aus Porzellan* (The Porcelain Pavilion) in Hans Bethge’s anthology, which bears an identical title to its French counterpart, translated by Gautier, “*Le Pavillon de Porcelaine*”. Judith Gautier identified Li-Bai (also Li Tai-Po, or Li-Tai-Pé, as spelled by Gautier) as the poet. Since Bethge’s version differs only slightly from Gautier’s translation, we can assume that the majority of literary changes took place in the hand of Judith Gautier.

“The Porcelain Pavilion” begins with:

In the middle of the little pool
Stands a pavilion of green
And white porcelain.

Like a tiger’s back
Arches the bridge of jade
Over to the pavilion.

An exhaustive search, either manually or by computer, using “pool”, “porcelain”, “pavilion”, “tiger”, and “jade bridge” as keywords had yielded no match in the entire anthology of Tang poetry that remotely resembled “The Porcelain Pavilion”, even when the search was widened beyond Li Bai to include every poet.

Based on Gautier’s usual style, it is possible that the addition of extraneous texts may have camouflaged the actual identity of the poem. Another possibility is that texts may have been reorganized to create something novel that bears little resemblance to the original. At this point, name misattribution can be temporarily set aside since the computer search should have covered every known poet. Although it was still possible that the actual poet might not be Li-Bai, a more pressing concern had been whether the poem actually existed, or that Gautier had made up the poem herself. It is therefore critical to identify the central theme of the poem when faced with such a literary problem, and conduct the search afresh without restrictions of keywords.

The poem depicts “a party at a pavilion”. If one ignores all the other keywords, Li Bai did indeed write a poem describing a party at a pavilion. Other than the two related words “party” and “pavilion”, the poem bears little resemblance to Gautier’s “*Le Pavillon de Porcelaine*”. Could this be the poem? Before I proceed to address this question, let’s take a look at the potential source in detail.

李白
宴陶家亭子

曲巷幽人宅
高門大士家
池開照膽鏡
林吐破顏花
綠水藏春日
青軒祕晚霞
若聞弦管妙
金谷不能夸

Banquet at Tao’s Family Pavilion – by Li Bai

Winding path; private residence in quietude
Tall gate; great scholar’s home
Open pond mirrors reflection
Protruding forest trees intermingle with colorful flowers
Turquoise water hides the Spring sun
Green room camouflages evening hue
If strings and woodwinds are delightful to hear,
Unmatched by “golden valley”¹²

The most critical word lies in the title of the poem:

宴陶家亭子

The second character (from the left) is a dual-meaning word, which depicts a family name, “Tao”, as well as “porcelain”. Although the word sometimes means “porcelain”, when it is used with the third character (meaning “family” or “house”), it is customary to understand the two characters as “Tao’s family”, and not “a porcelain house”. Every Chinese character denotes certain concrete and/or abstract meaning(s), and when several characters are used together, they often form a compound word that indicates a specific meaning. Therefore, no proficient Chinese reader will ever read the title of the poem and register the concept of “porcelain” in their mind. That immediately precludes this poem from being identified during the manual search, and since it is likewise registered as “Tao’s family” in the anthology database, an exhaustive computer search by keywords also failed.

With this in mind, it is likely that Judith Gautier had misinterpreted the characters as “The Porcelain Pavilion”. Further compounding the problem, she habitually favored adjectives that denote color, and hence a pavilion of “green and white”. The more vivid the image of the pavilion, the more she locked the reader’s mind into definite perspectival position and the less likely one could trace the identity of the original poem.

As fitting as this candidate may appear, more evidence is needed to conclude that this is indeed the “missing” poem. The other telltale signs in Gautier’s translation are the “friends who are drinking, talking, and tracing verses in the pavilion”. The gathering of friends was never depicted in Li-Bai’s poem, but merely implied. Could Gautier have made up the scene herself? According to Hamao, the Chinese anthology acquired by the Bibliothèque Impériale before 1867 were supplemented with standard footnotes, written by the commentator Wang-Khi.¹³ The commentator described in the footnote how splendid the party was: “here people drank, made verses, and played music.” Consistent with Gautier’s style previously mentioned (point 4), these

commentary notes have somehow been incorporated into the translation. Having examined the footnote by Wang Khi and Gautier translation, Hamao confirmed that “Banquet at Tao’s Family Pavilion” must be the source of the missing poem, whose identity had been hitherto concealed by the misinterpretation and unauthentic translation.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to speculate how *Das Lied von der Erde* would have been different from its present form if not for these literary errors. Mahler himself did consequently alter the text of every poem he used in the work. More importantly, this literary *faux pas* might have precipitated several important aspects in “*Von der Jugend*”. Mahler was evidently fascinated by the description of not only the chattering friends, but also of the bridge which, arching like the back of a tiger, leads to the pavilion in the pond; and that the arch, together with its reflection in the water, forms a complete circle (none of this, of course, is in the original poem). In fact, his modification of Bethge’s “*Der Pavillon aus Porzellan*” to fit the music, as pointed out by Donald Mitchell and Arthur Wenk¹⁴, was a stroke of genius.

Mahler only changed one word out of Bethge’s version, but he reversed the order of the two final verses of the poem, strophes 6 and 7, as shown below:

7. *Alle auf dem Kopfe stehend
In dem Pavillon aus grünem
Und aus weissem Porzellan.*
6. *Wie ein Halbmond scheint der Brücke
Umgekehrter Bogen. Freunde,
Schön gekleidet, trinken, plaudern*

Conceptually, Mahler allowed the arch described by the poem, strophe by strophe, to lead the readers from one side of the pond to the pavilion itself. However, due to this transposition, Mahler left us with a last line in which those enchanting friends were the principal image, albeit with an utterly different perspective – the friends were now in our retrospective glimpse. “We have traveled an arch, crossed a bridge.”

As implicated by Wenk, Mahler’s title, “Of Youth”, casts a metaphorical view to the poem. Thus “youth”, idealized in reverie, becomes an “isolated pavilion of pleasure”, with joyous gathering of friends. One may also infer a quality of illusion, of reflection mistaken for reality.

Gautier’s extraneous concept of “arch” also geared Mahler into a structural micromanipulation of dividing the seven stanzas into three sections for a musical arch of 2+3+2. The near-perfect palindrome was made possible by the reversal of strophes 6 and 7, as mentioned. In addition to this three-part form, the movement displays a four-part division by key relations: Stanzas 1 and 2 in B-flat major; stanzas 3 and 4 in G major; stanza 5 in G minor; and the last two stanzas back in B-flat major. Despite all the detailed description of the musical architecture, the most telling sign of how deeply the composer has been captivated by Gautier’s misinterpretation is also the most easily recognizable: the twelve-bar miniature orchestral prelude, which establishes the characteristic chatter of the woodwind – an unmistakable embodiment of the image of friendly gathering.

It is interesting to speculate how the atmospheric sparseness of the Chinese language could have influenced Mahler’s compositional style, which clearly resonates with the very core of *Das Lied von der Erde*, if he were aware of it. But such exercises remain, at best, mere postulations. Ironically, while Gautier’s apparent mistranslation might have masked the source, it also served as the basis for Bethge’s text, providing Mahler the inspiration to shape the “paraphrased” poem into an allegory of transient existence, only to be dissipated into the embrace of eternal recurrence in *Der Abschied*.



¹² According to the supplementary footnote in the collection of the Bibliothèque Impériale, “Golden Valley” was the garden where the banquet took place.

¹³ Fusako Hamao cited the following reference in his paper: “*Li tai po tsi tsi tchou* (The work of Li-Tai-Po with Commentaries), commentaries by Wang Khi, preface, dated 1759”.

¹⁴ Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler: Songs and Symphonies of Life and Death*, p. 253-255; and Arthur B. Wenk, “*The Composer as Poet in Das Lied von der Erde*.” *19th-Century Music* 1(1): 33 - 47, 1977.