

Intersections, Interactions, Integrations: Chronological Entanglement of a Chinese Poem

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ABSTRACT:

Translating from one medium into another, for example from music into poetry, constitutes an extended idea of translation, in which the radical reshaping of the original into the poem is conscious and embraced.

In this paper we explore a contemporary Chinese poem – Zhang Zao's "Dadi zhi ge", as an intermedial translation of an intermedial source text – Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (musical and verbal).

The aim is threefold: to enhance appreciation of the Chinese poem, to understand what intermedial translation means in practice, and at the same time draw from this analytical exploration theoretical propositions that can help us reconceptualize literary belonging and cross-cultural encounters.

We therefore take this poem to constitute a productive conjecture to alter geometries of attention, from a notion of translation as something that deals with the problem of the incommensurability of the material conditions of languages to one that transcends such incommensurability. In fact, the poem is here to be considered as both an original and a translation at the same time.

We first analyse Zhang Zao's poem with reference to Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*; we then move onto some theoretical considerations, which could be applied to the study of other cross-cultural encounters.

Primary questions include: Where does this poem begin? What does this poem translate? What's behind the choice of the source text?

A metaphor underscoring our exploration is that one of the "skein of yarn" (Calvino), or of the spinning of a "thread" (Wittgenstein), that is an image reporting on relational theories of literature, history and translation.

Introduction

“Dadi zhi ge” (大地之歌, The Song of the Earth) (1999), by the late poet Zhang Zao 张枣 (1962-2010), uses Gustav Mahler’s (1860-1911) symphony *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) (1909) as its source text. Not only does this poem use a musical piece as its source text, but the text of Mahler’s homonym symphony, which was written ninety years earlier, in 1908-09, was itself based on Chinese Tang poems. So, this case study can be explored from both directions of the intermedial translation, while also raising compelling issues of transculturality, on which we will duly comment below.

Two sets of questions will guide this investigation. The first set pertains to a relationship between the two works: Where does the relation between the source text (Mahler’s symphony) and its translation (Zhang Zao’s poem) lie? How crucial is Mahler’s work, the text and the music, as source text? Is it something that the reader is very much helped by knowing?

The second set of questions pertains to a more speculative operation aimed at acknowledging and harnessing the personal and cultural context in which the two authors produced their works: Why did Mahler choose Chinese Tang poetry as its source text? Why did Zhang Zao choose a piece of Western classical music, such as Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*? What is the source text associated with? A location? A culture? What kind of aesthetic trope does it represent?

The relationship of Zhang Zao’s “Da di zhi ge” to Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*

For his lyrics, Mahler had adapted seven Chinese classical poems, selected from an anthology of Tang poetry edited and translated into German by Hans Bethge, after undergoing extensive passages of adaptation.¹ Bethge’s were by no means literal or scholarly translations from Chinese but rather “paraphrased poems” or “variations on Chinese poems” as he himself called them. In fact they were thrice removed from the original Chinese poems, which had been first independently translated into French by Judith Gautier in *Le Livre de Jade* (The Book of Jade, 1867),² and by Le Marquis

¹ Namely the poems are: Li Bai’s 李白 “Song of Woe” (*Bei ge xing* 悲歌行, first movement) “The Porcelain Pavilion” (*Yan taojia tingzi* 宴陶家亭子, third movement), “Picking Lotuses” (*Cai lian qu* 采莲曲, fourth movement) and “On Aspirations in Life as Uttered upon Rising from a Drunken Slumber on a Spring Day” (*Chunri zuiqi yanzhi* 春日醉起言志, fifth movement); Qian Qi’s 钱起 “The Lonely One in Autumn” (*Xiao gu qiuye chang* 效古秋夜长, second movement); Meng Haoran’s 孟浩然 “Spending the Night at Abbot Ye’s Abode in the Mountain and Waiting for Ding Dai” (*Su yeshi shanfang dai dingda buzhi* 宿业师山房待丁大不至) and Wang Wei’s 王维 “Bidding Farewell” (*Songbie* 送别, sixth movement).

² Published under the pseudonym of Judith Walter, *Le Livre de Jade* collected 71 poems based on a variety of Chinese originals. The text is available online: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5459967d.textelImage>. David Hunter traces the genesis of *Le Livre* in the early 1860s, when Théophile Gautier, father of Judith, hired Tin-Tun Lin as a Chinese tutor for his daughters. Identification of the original Chinese poems translated in *Le Livre* has not been a straightforward matter, raising doubts about the nature of these poems. Gautier herself recognised these poems as ‘translations’ only in 1902. Origins apart, most scholars see this anthology as an important contribution to the development of the prose poem in France. The anthology was indeed enthusiastically received from eminent literary figures such as Victor Hugo, François Coppée, Paul Verlaine, and Stéphane Mallarmé. *Le Livre* was translated and adapted into more European languages – into German, Italian, Portuguese, and eventually into English, Russian and Polish. Some individual poems or variations were

D'Hervey-Saint-Denys in *Poésies de l'époque des Thang* (Poems of the Tang Dynasty, 1862), then translated by Hans Heilmann from French into German, in *Chinesische Lyrik* (Chinese Lyrical Poetry, 1905), and finally loosely paraphrased by Bethge for his anthology *Die Chinesische Flöte* (The Chinese Flute, 1907).³ Thus, we can see that *Das Lied*, as source text, constitutes itself an intermedial translation based on a textual translation that underwent so many passages to actually raise doubts about the identity of some of its source texts. In addition, Mahler made further changes to adapt the text to his symphony. But why did Mahler decide to use Chinese Tang poetry as lyrics?

According to Michael Kennedy (1974, 156), in order to meet his own themes, Mahler modified the lyrics so as to express “nostalgia” more clearly. Yeung (2008) considers that Mahler’s choice of the distant Chinese texts as his lyrics might have given him the licence to break with the existing conventions of classical music and the contemporaneous orthodox philosophy of life. Theodor Adorno proposes yet a different explanation that I think is worth following. He regards the work’s “inauthentic Chinese element” as “a pseudomorph that does not take itself literally but grows eloquent through inauthenticity”. For Adorno, Mahler’s integration of Chinese poetry into a Western Romantic symphony is a stylistic device that relates to his migrant condition and to Mahler’s “Jewish element”, by conveying an effect of alienation (Adorno, 1992, 148-9). Adorno’s explanation is supported by an autobiographical reading of *Das Lied von der Erde*, in turn supported by Mahler’s stating that this was “the most personal thing I have yet created”.⁴ *Das Lied* was composed in 1908-9, when Mahler was about to leave Vienna for New York, following his resignation as Director of Vienna Court Opera, because of increased anti-Semitism. In this period, Mahler was also distraught by the death of his daughter and demoralised at the news that he had a fatal heart defect, which was the cause of his premature death, few years later, at the age of 51.

“Dadi zhi ge” was first published in the literary journal *Shanghai Wenxue* (Shanghai Literature) in October 1999 and then included in the poetry collection *The Poetry of Zhang Zao* (Zhang Zao de shi, 2010). The poem was dedicated to the poet Chen Dongdong 陈东东, and marked Zhang Zao’s return to China in 1996, after 7 years of voluntary exile in Germany, following the onset of Tiananmen Incident in 1989.⁵

So, Zhang Zao and Mahler are both artists with a transcultural and transnational identity. In the unfortunate biographical circumstances of personal and socio-political predicament, a first

published in Emile Blémont’s popular *Poèmes de Chine* (1887) and Franz Toussaint’s *La Flûte de Jade* (1922), which is reputed to have run through 131 editions. Hunter also points out that Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley read this anthology, hinting at “an intriguing link with English modernism”. David Hunter, “A Bridge across Cultures”.

³ Teng-Leong Chew offers a good investigation of the manipulations of the Tang poems in his “Tracking the Literary Metamorphosis of *Das Lied von der Erde*”, as does Fusako Hamao in “The Sources of the Texts in Mahler’s ‘Lied von der Erde’”, *19th Century Music*, 19.11 (1995), 83-95. Jessica Yeung in her article “The Song of the Earth” (2008) conducts a thorough comparison between Bethge’s translations and Mahler’s adaptation, and on his back adaptation into a Chinese dance work by Chiang Ching.

⁴ Writing in September 1908.

⁵ Chen Dongdong reports Zhang Zao writing: “What happened in China [in 1989] made me feel that I had lost my home”. Chen, “Wo yao xianjie”, p. 72.

entanglement can be found in the translating impulse of these two artists. Under this overarching argument, there is correspondence and there is dissonance.

From a basic structural perspective, *Das Lied* is a sequence of six movements, with the sixth that lasts for nearly half of the time of the whole symphony. Accordingly, Zhang Zao's poem comprising six sections to match Mahler's six movements, with the last one as the longest. Some correspondence is found between the lengths of some of the movements and of the poem sections. Discrepancy is found between the second poem section, which is rather short, whereas in *Das Lied* is rather long; and between the fourth poem section, which is quite long, whereas in Mahler's piece it is very short. Chen Dongdong (Chen, 86) considers that the short second and fifth stanzas in Zhang Zao have a similar function to the sound of timpani and triangle in Mahler.

This structure guides the narrative flux. From a very basic narrative perspective, *Das Lied* depicts human ontological crisis for living in alienation from Nature and for facing the prospect of death. From the first to the fifth movement, the persona is presented as in her life journey, through "the medium of memory" (Adorno, 155). Eventually, in the sixth movement, the persona dies. Death, the farewell from earth, resolves the persona's crisis, by reuniting her with Nature, in the heavens.

Zhang Zao's sections 1 to 5 narrate the persona's journey in time and space, from Europe to China. The poem also presents the flux of life in a series of critical depictions, spanning from the menace of war as in the image of the first line, "a dozen US stealth bombers", to loneliness, and the internal struggle of the persona's longing for her reunion with the "earth". But earth in "Dadi zhi ge" is not Mahler's universal trope for Nature. It is in fact the specific urban setting of Shanghai. Personal memories intermingle with vignettes of Shanghai everyday life and people. As in Mahler, these vignettes are all fragments of human experience on "earth".

The two works also mirror each other in the circularity of their structure. The first movement, as the first section of the poem, establishes a theme of conflict that is to be reconciled in the last movement of the symphony, as in the last section of the poem. Looking closely, a sense of circularity is also created between the two works. Zhang Zao's persona is explicitly made living in the temporal continuation of Mahler's life:

...你不是马勒，却生活在他虚拟的未来之中，
... You are not Mahler, you live in his virtual future,
[line 2, section 3]

The two text-worlds appear in this way as two consecutive worlds, rather than superimposing one another. Such time gap is important because not only amplifies the persona's sense of alienation and uncertainty, but it also, and more importantly here, questions his source text, and implicitly comments on his translational operation. Zhang Zao's emphasis on the representational gap (temporal and

conceptual) between *Das Lied* and China and between *Das Lied* and “Dadi zhi ge” is clearly and strongly expressed in the third and fourth sections of the poem:

3

你不是马勒， [...]

[...]。你不是马勒，却生活在他虚拟的未来之中，
迷离地忍着，

马勒说：这儿用五声音阶是合理的，关键得减弱音器，

关键是要让它听上去就像来自某个未知界的
微弱的序曲。错，不要紧，因为完美也会含带
另一个问题，

一位女伯爵翘起小姆指说它太长，

马勒说：不，不长。

4

此刻早已是未来。

但有些人总是迟了七个小时，
他们对大提琴与晾满弄堂衣裳的呼应
竟一无所知。

[...]

3

You're not Mahler, [...]

[...]。You are not Mahler, you live in his virtual future,
Putting up with it in confusion,

Mahler said: It is reasonable to use the pentatonic scale here, crucially add a mute,

It's crucial to make it sound like a feeble overture arising from
an unknown world. Wrong? it does not matter, because perfection can also include
Another problem,

A countess raises her little finger and says it is too long.

Mahler said: No, not so long.

4

This moment is already the future.

But some people are always seven hours late.

They know nothing at all of the echo

Of the cello, of the alleys full of clothes airing in the sun.

Zhang Zao is well aware of the representational distance between him and Mahler, and between Mahler's beautified China and Shanghai. The unbridgeable distance between Mahler's translation and Chinese classical poetry is historical and geographical. The 7-hour time gap between Europe and Shanghai pseudomorphically symbolizes the alienation of the composer and of the poet, who live in exile; the gap is untranslatable: "They know nothing at all of the echo/ of the cello, of the alleys full of clothes airing in the sun".

Zhang Zao thus underlines the anachronism of Mahler's project, as the language of utopian aspiration, exile, migration and European colonialism. "Dadi zhi ge" alters geometries of attention, and engages in a conversation on the interrelationship of cultures. However, such conversation soon develops into polemics. The contemporary doesn't leave history behind; it further complicates it. In this sense, Zhang Zao critiques "translatability" not by rejecting translation but by demanding it (Walkowitz, 76).

In Adorno's interpretation, Mahler too was well aware of such gap and used it as his principal aesthetic device: the China he referred to was intended as an other world that does not exist, perhaps never existed. 1909 China was not the idyllic place described by Mahler. It was a geographic area ridden by wars and imperialist struggles. Mahler's intentional use of a place far in the East and far in history gives his choice an interesting edge, while also winking at the European attraction for chinoiserie.

Zhang Zao's decision to use Mahler's translation of Tang poetry, instead of Tang poetry itself, extends this distance, strengthens the themes of alienation and nostalgia, but also offers an already mixed world of western music and Chinese poetry. Perhaps this operation could offer a resolution of Chinese modern poetry's long standing dilemma since the 1919 May Fourth Movement about how to get out of China's great classical poetry tradition and the shadow of the Western influence. This reading is supported by Chen Dongdong's reading of the poem and of the role of Shanghai in it. In fact, choosing Shanghai as synecdoche and trope for the homeland, is intriguing, since Zhang Zao was not from Shanghai but from Hunan. Chen believes that the reason for choosing Shanghai as the primary setting in this poem is to be found in this city's modernity – something that he sees as a trope for the poetic project of Chinese new poetry.⁶ Thus Chen reads what Zhang Zao calls the "problem" of "how to rebuild this great Shanghai of ours" as the problem of how to create a new Chinese poetic

⁶ Chen's reading is convincing, especially if we note that Zhang Zao's doctoral research was on the modernity project of Chinese new poetry (Zhang Zao. *Auf die Suche nach poetischer Modernität*). Chen also considers that Shanghai is probably the reason why the poem was dedicated to him, a Shanghai poet.

diction. Mahler is part of rebuilding “this great Shanghai of ours”, as Mahler’s modernity project included Tang poetry. This point is also made by Bei Dao in his tribute essay to Zhang Zao, when he states: “With his deep grasp of Western literature and culture, Zhang Zao looks back and understands the broad and profound oriental aesthetic system. He aims at finding a new tension and a melting point between the two”.⁷ What Zhang Zao and Mahler seem to assert is that “our” aesthetics cannot fall into a solipsist circle. It includes entanglement.

Throughout “Dadi zhi ge”, we encounter several music-related terms (the title, “drum”, “aria”, “pentatonic”, “mute”, “sound”, “overture”, “cello”, “flute”, “the song of the earth”, “tambourine”, “a figure swaying in thirds”, “oboe”, “motif”, “contrapuntal”, etc.), Mahler’s name itself appears seven times. Such a constant reference to music works as a lexical reminder that the reader cannot miss. But the most prominent role among all the instruments, in both Mahler’s and Zhang’s pieces, is taken by the flute. The flute is for Mahler the instrument that best represents China, the foreign, the exotic.⁸ Interestingly, in Zhang Zao’s overall poetic production, the trope of the flute occurs often, almost invariably used as objective correlative of poetry itself. At the end of the fourth section of “Dadi zhi ge”, the flute is again invested of a metaphoric meaning that stands for poetry.⁹ It is presented as the powerful instrument that has the potential of overcoming China’s cultural crisis of urban modernity, conflating European and Chinese traditions:

... 这支笛子，这只给全城血库
供电的笛子，它就是未来的关键。

... this flute gives power to the city’s blood bank
This flute is the future. It’s the key.

The theme of exile is further explained with the motif of the “cranes flying back” was introduced in the first line of the poem, and occurs a total of six times throughout. The bird in Mahler works as a symbol of Nature, playing the role of an interlocutor; the crane in Zhang Zao is a viewer looking down from above, a video camera, in whose eyes many negatives are stored.

Considered an auspicious bird, representing health or longevity, the crane is often employed in Chinese traditional texts to represent the immortal, the *junzi*, or the *literatus*, the theme of homecoming, or, when flying toward the West, they may symbolise death. The fact that in this poem the cranes fly from the West to the East, from Europe to Shanghai, may thus acquire a meaning of

⁷ Bei Dao, “Beiqing wangshi”, p.100.

⁸ It’s worth reminding that the title of Bethge’s German anthology of translations of Tang Chinese poems was indeed *The Chinese Flute*.

⁹ The significance of the flute in pre-modern China can be compared to that one of the lyre in ancient Greece. Ancient Chinese flutes were made of bamboo, so “si zhu” 丝竹, literally “silk bamboo” stands for “music”, where *silk* refers to stringed instruments, and *bamboo* refers to the flute.

resurrection.¹⁰ In any case, the image of the crane is central in this poem as well as in later poems by Zhang Zao.¹¹ One particular reference that springs to mind is the Daoist mythological folktale of Ding Lingwei,¹² re-narrated by the modern poet He Qifang (何其芳 1912-1977), in his 1937 collection of prose poetry *Huameng lu* (画梦录, *Painted Dreams*). According to the legend, Ding Lingwei was a prefect who was condemned to death by stoning for using government grain to feed the poor. At the point of his execution, cranes surrounded him and carried him away into the mountains. Secluded into the mountains, homesick, Ding then rose into the air transformed into a crane. Flying back home, the

buildings and houses, all strange developments outside of his memory, stirred his sense of time's distance [...]. *Born of earth, returned to the earth*, [...] could it be there lingered a trace of regret for long years sent hidden in the mountains [...]?

So why have I returned? [...] Those who have travelled great distances through time, like the farmer who has ploughed innumerable barren winter fields, find it hard even in a green-scarred springtime to stir up any faith in the earth's prosperity. *But I want to get a look at these descendants of man.* [...]

He stared through his crane's eyes down at the half-circle of people below him, standing motionless, until they began to wonder if he were not an unlucky omen and their curiosity changed to anger. They waved their hands at him and called out threateningly; finally, one young man suggested going for a bow to shoot him down with. [...] Just before he pierced the domed wall of heaven and disappeared, he again let out several hoarse but ringing notes, which translated into human language go approximately like this:

There came a bird, a bird! And it

Was Ding Lingwei,

Left home a thousand years ago

And just returned today.

[...] ¹³

I find the intertextual and contextual references quite striking, confirming a reading of the crane in “Dadi zhi ge” as a trope that stands for the poet himself. The tragic sense of Mahler's persona bidding

¹⁰ The Southern Liang *litteratus* Yin Yun 殷芸 (471-529 AD) in his *Lesser Tales* 小说 includes the story “Yaochan shiwan guan, qi he shang Yangzhou” (腰缠十万贯, 骑鹤上扬州 Girdled a Hundred Thousand Strings Rode into Yangzhou astride a Crane), in which an immortal dreams to ride a crane into Yangzhou, with a hundred thousand strings [of coins] girdling his waist. It is likely that Zhang Zao also alludes to this story, expressing the meaning of an expensive journey to a prosperous city. For a comprehensive study of the symbolism of the crane in Zhang Zao, see Yan Lianjun, “Tian'e, huo hechangdui”.

¹¹ The Chinese critic Zhang Weidong, in his essay “He' de shixue”, explores the numerous intertextual references in Zhāng Zào's poetry, focusing especially on the symbolism of the crane. Zhang Weidong puts forward the hypothesis that the descriptions in “Dàdì zhi gē” may be syntactically inspired by Tomas Tranströmer's poem “Schubertiana” – which is also an intermedial poem inspired by music. Surprisingly, however, Zhang Weidong does not mention any reference to He Qifang, which I find illuminating, as discussed below.

¹² The folktale is included in *Epilogue to the Search for the Supernatural*, erroneously attributed to Tao Yuanming. Lu Lun (late eighth century) also writes in the first line of the poem “Inscribed at the Pond behind the Temple of Promoting Goodness”: “Outside the window the white cranes go to roost”.

¹³ He Qifang, “Ding Lingwei”, translated by Canaan Morse. Italics signal the crane's speaking.

farewell from the earth and reuniting with Nature in the heavens is matched by the homecoming of the crane in “Dadi zhi ge”.

Finally, in the sixth section Mahler’s resignation in the setting sun, death and the eternity of the cycle of Nature, are made by Zhang Zao to correspond to a sleepless persona thinking of this world in isolation, in the stillness of a clock “pointer laid off eternally at 12:21”, a specular number, representing the circularity of time, when the persona returns to his homeland, and also when Tang poetry returns to China, after both have undergone profound changes.

Kenneth Woods remarks that “Mahler explicitly writes moment of silence into the score”. “For the first time in Western music, the spaces left empty become eloquent in their own right”. At the end of the symphony, the music swings back and forth, and the lyrics express the persona’s calm acceptance of decade in the eternal cycle of life, while all around there is spring renewal, in the blue bright light: “Forever... forever”.

Die liebe Erde allüberall
Blüht auf im Lenz und grünt
Auf’s neu! Allüberall und ewig
Blauen licht die Fernen!
Ewig . . . ewig . . .

My heart is calm and awaits its hour.
Everywhere, the beloved earth
blooms in the spring and
is newly green! Everywhere and forever
the distances are blue and bright!
Forever... forever...

In Zhang Zao’s poem, we find a similar statement, with the textual rhythm and speed arriving at a stall, as in suspension. The dial always pointing to the same time

指针永远下岗在 12:21,
这沸腾的一秒, 她低回咏叹: 我
满怀渴望, 因为人映照着人, 没有陌生人;
人人都用手拨动着地球;
这一秒,

至少这一秒, 我每天都有一次坚守了正确
并且警示:

仍有一种至高无上.....

The clock hands laid off eternally at 12:21,
At this boiling point, she whispers back: I
am full of desire, because people reflect people, there are no strangers;
We all move the earth with our hands;
At this second,
 At this very second, every day, I hold my ground.
And warn:
 There is still a sublime...

“this moment” (*yi miao*) is repeated three times, as to convey a stillness in meaning as in semantics. Zhang Zao’s poem, as Mahler’s lyrics, ends with an ellipsis, and matches the eternal blue with “the sublime”.

Intersections, Interactions, Integrations

So, what exactly makes this poem a translation of Mahler’s *Das Lied*?

Because the translation approach requires that we look at the relationship a text has with other texts, it can point out that this poem has an overt and defining relationship to a prior text. Although “Dadi zhi ge” can claim autonomy from *Das Lied*, as an original work, nevertheless a significant degree of its meaning, and even some of the pleasure derived from it is the result of recognising the interplay between the source text and the target text. The poet exploits various narrative possibilities through Mahler’s musical reference, starting from the title, which alerts us, as readers, to go looking for the connections, although we do not expect full dependence between the two texts. “Dadi zhi ge” doesn’t have to observe fidelity as its critical issue. In fact, this case study shows that it is not so much that we sit down with Mahler’s notes, meter, rhythm, and so on, and then map all of this onto Zhang Zao’s poem.

As readers, we are prepared and have the privilege of accessing the poem using the source text as interface, perhaps in its structure, or in its cultural or aesthetic references, or in its criticism, or in the intersections between the authors’ life, etc. This basic relationship between the two texts, which I have been calling translation, has been theorised by some in terms of *intertextuality*, by others as *transcreation*, or as the “poet’s version”.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Lawrence Venuti, “The Poet’s Version”. I think however that we have to look at both, source text and translation. As Jørgen Bruhn states, “It is the selection of parts of the source text” (e.g. plot, characters. Settings, thematic content) “that makes it possible to make some kind of adaptation analysis that must necessarily, and I stress this, take as its starting point the vexed question of similarities and differences (but without investing these questions with normative and/or hierarchical evaluations)” Bruhn, “Dialogising Adaptation Studies”, p. 72.

We can perhaps think of this poem as a case of pseudomorphism, following Adorno,¹⁵ or as an “isomorph”,¹⁶ following Haroldo de Campos,¹⁷ or we can conceive of this process of mutation and fluidity as “cultural mobility” (Greenblatt 2010).

From any of these theoretical angles, translation is crucial. Zhang Zao does not hide the fact that this poem began somewhere else, that it is derived by another text: it has the same title of the source text and calls its author by his name within the poem. It also attempts some formal sameness, as we have seen. In fact, we can say that both Zhang Zao’s and Mahler’s piece are “saturated by translation” (Walkowitz, 2).

Translation is, in this case a medium, an origin, and an afterlife (Walkowitz, 4). It functions as a theme, a structure, and a concept. Zhang Zao’s poem is written *from* translation, i.e. it points backward as well as forward – the same as Mahler’s piece.

Looking at this poem as a translation tips the balance of literary history from poet to listener, and from single to multiple chronologies, refusing to occupy only one geographical space and addressing multiple audiences at the same time. As Chen Dongdong astutely reveals, Mahler and the crane, are all avatars of the poetic persona, which create multiple refractions of the “I”, continuously changing the tone of the monologue, as in a symphony.

In such an entanglement of lives, aesthetics, poetic languages and histories, Zhang Zao’s “Dadi zhi ge” and Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* constitute the “skein of yarn” or the spinning of a “thread”, as respectively conceptualised by Calvino¹⁸ and Wittgenstein.¹⁹

¹⁵ Adorno’s pseudomorph is a concept he modelled from Panofsky, who adopted the notion in his 1936 *Studies of Iconology*, probably from Spengler, who linked it to the concept of “Kulturseele” (cultural soil), in the particular acceptance of the configuration of the response of a culture, or of a cultural phenomenon, to the question of meaning in a specific historical moment. Spengler’s used a concept derived from mineralogy, pseudomorphism, to indicate the relationship between the hellenic matrix and the oriental components that are in it fused together (*Lo Gnosticismo*, 57). For Panofsky pseudomorphism has a heuristic value, since it’s able to metabolise important elements from ancient times and make it resurface during the Renaissance. Later however Panofsky returns to a view of pseudomorphism that is closer to simple, formal analogy.

¹⁶ “Isomorphism” is a term used in chemistry to refer to “the existence of two or more substances (isomorphs) that have the same crystal structure, so that they are able to form solid solutions.” Interestingly, these theorists of translation use concepts belonging to other disciplines in order to deviate mainstream default attitudes towards translation.

¹⁷ Cf. Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, “Anthropophagous Reason”.

¹⁸ In the section “Multiplicity” of *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino talks of Carlo Emilio Gadda as a writer who “views the world as a ‘system of systems,’ where each system conditions the others and is conditioned by them. Gadda tried all his life to represent the world as a knot, a tangled skein of yarn, so as to represent it as an inextricable complexity or, to put it better, the simultaneous presence of the most disparate elements that converge to determine every event”. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, pp. 105-106. A similar concept is expressed in *Mr Palomar*, where the writer states: “In other words, you cannot observe a wave without bearing in mind the complex features that concur in shaping it and the other, equally complex ones that the wave itself originates. These aspects vary constantly, so each wave is different from another wave, even if not immediately adjacent or successive; in other words, there are some forms and sequences that are repeated, though irregularly distributed in space and time”. Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, no. 67: “[...] as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres”.

By acknowledging the multiple contexts of its making, “Dadi zhi ge” bases its originality on its relations: on the way it relates to different works in Chinese (He Qifang, for example), or to the same work (Mahler) in different languages. *Das Lied von der Erde* provides the principal source for Zhang Zao’s thinking in this poem, a prismatic image and a methodological basis. By doing so, “Dadi zhi ge” also inflects Mahler’s symphony with new meanings. Naturally, as readers and translators of Zhang Zao’s poem, we too participate in these texts’ entanglement, furthering their afterlife and prismatic light. This principle is in contrast with the idea of the object simply in a static comparative relation the one with the other, instead it indicates a reading of the one through the other, in terms of relations, interactions, intersections and integrations.²⁰

Similarities and differences between Mahler and Zhang Zao, or Vienna, or Europe and Shanghai, or China are not what motivated us to undertake this investigation, but rather we were intrigued by the interactions and mutual asymmetric integrations that have reciprocally defined one another. Zhang Zao says: “we all move the earth with our hands”. “Dadi zhi ge” and *Das Lied von der Erde* are not two units of comparison but one complex entanglement, a “skein of yarn” or the “spinning of a tread”.

²⁰ Reference is due to Zimmerman and Werner’s concept of *histoire croisée*, as formulated in their 2016 essay.

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