

# Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* and "Chinese Element"

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**Abstract.** Gustav Mahler was one of the most predominant composers and conductors between the late 19th century and the early 20th century, *Das Lied von der Erde* is one of the most representative music works in his later years. Creation background, Taoist thinking, application of Tang dynasty poems, and integration of pentatonic mode and Western music system are discussed in the article, which centers analysis of Chinese elements in *Das Lied von der Erde* and elaborates that *Das Lied von der Erde* is a great orchestral work with wisdom and poetry. It is the result of civilizational exchange and mutual learning and it has high artistic value.

**Keywords:** Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, Chinese Elements, Tan Dun, Ye Xiaogang.

## 1. Introduction

Gustav Mahler, a famed Austrian composer and conductor between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a representative of late Romantic period in Western classical music. He lived a rough life and had illnesses in his later years. He accomplished a multitude of music works mainly including orchestral and vocal pieces, and *Das Lied von der Erde* was composed during this period. The piece was conceived since the summer of 1907, in the same year, Mahler resigned from Vienna Court Opera and served as the director of New York's Metropolitan Opera, in the meanwhile, his daughter died and Mahler was diagnosed with heart disease. During his rest, he found Bethge's adapted *Die chinesische Flöte* containing a lot Tang Dynasty poems and lost in reading it, Mahler also felt emotional resonance from Tang Dynasty poems and selected several of them as text of *Das Lied von der Erde*, then, the orchestral song cycle was accomplished in 1908. There is no dearth of attention, in China and in the West, to the inspiration which Mahler drew from Tang Dynasty poets (Li Bai, Qian Qi, Meng Haoran, Wang Wei) late in life, in *Das Lied von der Erde*. Predictably, many scholars and other commentators feel content to point to Mahler's use of the pentatonic mode, as if this inflection of Western music shows the composer's earnest engagement with China.

Compared to his contemporaries, Mahler earlier interested in Chinese culture although he had never come to China, he expressed his understanding and thinking of life and entered into Utopia in his mind by composing *Das Lied von der Erde* which can be one of representative pieces of Mahler. Its prominent uniqueness is the application of Chinese elements by Mahler, the so-called "Chinese elements" refer to cultural achievements created and inherited by Chinese people, embodying the Chinese humanism and folk psychology, and having Chinese national characteristics, all of which are Chinese elements, which also contains ideology, moral idea, and Chinese traditional culture and so forth. (Chen, 2010) This article seeks to recuperate the dynamics of global cultural exchange that, while imperfectly set in place through the creative license taken in the textual adaptation of Tang Dynasty poetry. Recognizing Chinese efforts to repatriate this poetry (with and without Mahler's music) and hearing the music in a value-neutral framework (where pentatonic sounds are not exotic inflections but aural mooring) are important both in China but also in the West. *Das Lied von der Erde* also reflects heavy-hearted emotion at that period. Mahler's Chinese element can be found in all six movements included in the piece, Mahler integrated his unique compositional technique with Chinese pentatonic mode to newly interpret and express ancient Chinese poems, which also reflected the circumstances of his own life and his perception of life.

## 2. Views of *Das Lied von der Erde* based on Chinese poems

### 2.1 “Reappropriation”/Adaptation of Chinese poems

As early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, French missionaries in China showed strong interest in Chinese poems. Du Halde, a French Jesuit historian, first mentioned two famous poets of Tang Dynasty Li Bai and Du Fu, in his book *Physical Description of the Empire of China*. (Qian & Zhou, 2015) In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Goethe continuously rewrote Chinese poems and absorbed Chinese elements and philosophy in their creations. Rewriting ancient Chinese poems in this time period had reached a new height in quantity, quality, and social influence. This kind of literary work is featured as highly poetic and it also reflects creative adaptation. Since Goethe's *Chinesisch-deutsche Jahres-und Tageszeiten* by had been finished in 1827, (Yang, 2017) which pioneered borrowing or transplanting Chinese elements by German writers. Goethe drew inspiration from Chinese poems and Chinese culture, and he could further experience aesthetic implication of ancient Chinese poems through practicing his creative adaptation, which made him closer to internal beauty of Chinese poems and culture, he was understanding the spirit of Chinese culture and aesthetic of Chinese poems in his re-creation. (Qian & Zhou, 2015) From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, German writers laid emphasize on adaptation and conversion in image and artistic conception of ancient Chinese poems for satisfying the social mentality of German people who were eager to experience Chinese culture at that time period and German people's adaption and acceptability to Chinese culture, and German writers also enriched their own language expression in poetics. These authors include Richard Dehmel, Arno Holz, Hans Heilmann, and Hans Bethge, (Wei & Ma & Zheng, 2002) they pushed the trend of adaptation to a new high and adaptation of Chinese poems was positively than ever. Bethge, as a prominent German poet of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was famous for adaptation of literature of various countries such as China, ancient Persia, India, Japan, and Turkey etc. Among all his works, his most celebrated work can be *Die Chinesische Floete*, (Hutchinson, 2020) which was based on *Le Livre de jade* by Judith Gautier and *Poésies del'époques des Thang* adapted by Marquis d'Hervey de Saint Denys from *Chinesische Lyrik vom 12. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis zur Gegenwart* and *Englische Prosaquellen*. Poems by Li Bai account for the majority among Bethge's adaptations, Poems by Li Bai were highly respected for the rich Taoist color, Romantic ethos, deep emotion to humanism, and the universal values, it even became a trend in that period.

*Die Chinesische Floete* published in 1907 contains more than eighty ancient Chinese poems, and 15 poems by Li Bai are included. Bethge was the pioneer in adapting ancient Chinese poems on a large scale in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since 1907, he rearranged plentiful literatures from Asia and he was prominent in “re-creation” of Chinese poems. His adaptation of ancient Chinese poems had a considerable social influence, which reflects the climax of spreading ancient Chinese poems in Europe. *Die chinesische Flöte* marked a highpoint in the reception of Chinese poems in modern Europe. (Hutchinson, 2020) Bethge's adaptation played an important role of spreading Chinese poetry and culture.

### 2.2 Taoism in *Das Lied von der Erde*

Mahler was deeply touched by those poems with Taoist spirit and mysterious color when he read *Die Chinesische Floete* in Fall of 1907, then, he selected and adapted several translated poems and created his music work between 1908 to 1909, thus, the symphonic song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* with six movements had been published. Why Mahler applied and set ancient Chinese poems for composing *Das Lied von der Erde*? Apparently, it is not curiosity. Most people believe Mahler and his music was deeply influenced by Nietzsche, the point that Nietzsche's thoughts can be one of the most prominent elements of influences in Mahler's creation is undoubted until now. However, multiple ideas impacted Mahler's music, for example, Goethe can be considered as the sun that illuminates his spirit, moreover, Mahler not only absorbed thoughts of Angelus Silesius who was a German Catholic priest and Jean Paul who was a German Romantic writer, but obtained ideas from Chinese philosophers like Laozi, an ancient Chinese Taoist philosopher and the founder of Taoism.

Thus, Taoism can be found in Mahler's music, especially in his *Das Lied von der Erde*. Taoism not only influenced generations of Chinese. It was highly sought after by the West.

In 16th century, Taoism was spread in the West, (Fang, 2014) its acceptance by the West began in 1788 since *Tao Te Ching* in Latin translations had been firstly published, and these translations were mainly done by missionaries. After World War I, European people hoped retuning to peace and sought natural Life, thus, they tended to pay attention to Wu Wei, an ancient Chinese concept from Taoism. According to Wikipedia, Laozi's Wu Wei was most commonly used to refer to an ideal form of government, it also describes a state of personal harmony, it generally also more properly denotes a state of spirit or mind. Since the introduction of *Tao Te Ching* to Germany in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was quickly accepted by German people and which aroused an upsurge of spreading Laozi's philosophy. German writers and philosophers in modern times were influenced by Laozi's thought and created many German literatures relating to Laozi and Taoism. Treatise about exploring Laozi sprung up at that time. Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, believed that seeking Taoism and the meaning of life was seemingly becoming a collective phenomenon. (Jung, 2003) Based on the perspective, Bethge accomplished his adaptation/translation called *Die chinesische Flöte*, Mahler selected 7 poems from it as text of *Das Lied von der Erde*, four poems by Li Bai with strong Taoist thinking are included among them, thus, it reflects that Mahler not just like them, but find resonance from selected poems.

Mahler became further stressful and depressed in his later years when he struggled between life and death. Although he was gifted and had created glittering career, he suffered the three heavy losses from 1906 to 1907, which made Mahler negative emotion. During his darkest hour, Mahler found and read Bethge's *Die chinesische Flöte*, he had found his Pure Land and peace from thinking of "taking everything easily" in poems by Li Bai.

It is no coincidence, I argue, that Mahler, in composing *Das Lied von der Erde*, was drawn to ancient poems with Taoist tendency from *Die Chinesische Flöte* with a strong Taoist leaning. Among these poems, four poems with the strongest Taoist by Li Bai were chosen. Based on Mahler's own understanding of Taoist and empathy for Li Bai, he adapted chosen poems from *Die Chinesische Flöte* and ensouled the music piece, Mahler not passively followed with the original version of poems. Mahler set "Waking from Drunkenness on a Spring Day" by Li Bai and translated by Bethge in the fifth movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, the Taoist thought "let nature take its course" is completely unfolded in this movement. (Li, 2005) Li Bai reflected failed aspiration in his poem, but Mahler reflected his pain about the big difference between ideal and reality in his music work, a lyric "Was geht mich denn der Frühling an!? Laßt mich betrunken sein!" means "if I cannot achieve my goal, I just hope to be a light-hearted drinker", Mahler understood and found the state of Taoist mind of Li Bai that annoyance, gain, and loss on earth can be escaped and forgotten in being tipsy, which accorded with Mahler's mind.

"Der Abschied", the sixth movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, perfectly reflects Mahler's Taoist thought "Cycle of life". The sixth movement is about half an hour, which amount to the duration of the first five movements. This is the most impressive, most moving, most inspired, and most thoughtful movement in *Das Lied von der Erde*. The funeral march and Arioso by the mezzo-soprano are the backbone of the whole movement, in final, death is transcended by the sudden enlightenment/understanding about the cycle of life in nature and universe as musical procedure, then, life is eternal. Mahler himself freely added verses "Still ist mein Herz und harret seiner Stunde! Die liebe Erde allüberall blüht auf im Lenz und grünt! Auf's neu! Allüberall und ewig blauen licht die Fernen! Ewig...", it is exact the Taoist philosophy "circle of life". (Ma & Liu & Xiong, 2005)

In September of 2021, Grammy Museum hosted a panel discussion in connection with the Shanghai Symphony's recording of *Das Lied von der Erde*. Panelists included the symphony director Yu Long, composer Ye Xiaogang, and Mahler's granddaughter Marina Mahler. A recurring topic was the practical and cultural considerations in the current international situation. Marina Mahler's recollections about the role of Chinese poetry in the Mahler household are scarcely musicological evidence. Her mother, Anna, was young (age 5) when *Das Lied von der Erde* was composed. Yet it

is fascinating to eavesdrop on the legacy passed from woman to woman in that family. Marina Mahler also said in conversation “Ancient Chinese poetry grew up with her. She is very passionate about Lao Tzu and Chinese culture. When I was a kid, she always said to me, "If you promise to be a horse, you have to run" (the horse doesn't stop). She told me it was an old Chinese saying that meant a lot to her. For my maternal grandfather, these were also very important. He resonated deeply with these Chinese poems, which came from ancient and excellent civilizations, and made him feel instantly. He wrote the most beautiful music for poetry, and in his time, it was an encounter between East and West. Today we need to rekindle this encounter, and in today's world, we need to open our hearts, work together, and embrace each other.”

Minds of European people might be opened by Taoist thinking at that time period, Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* had integrated ideas of China and the West, its value and influence is far beyond any orchestral works.

### 3. Pentatonic modes in *Das Lied von der Erde*

Traditional Chinese folk music is, of course, based on pentatonic mode. The enduring interest in pentatonicism, even with some composers to this day, has strengthened its link to Chinese identity. Chinese pentatonic scale consists of 5 notes formed by perfect 5<sup>th</sup> for 4 times, it features as lack of chromatic intervals like minor 2<sup>nd</sup>, which is widely utilized in traditional Chinese folk music. In *Das Lied von der Erde*, Mahler employed pentatonic mode not as a sort of Chinoiserie, with thematic allusions, but within the very structure of the work. The pentatonic mode is present in the main thematic material, in the contrapuntal lines, and within the harmonic fabric, integrated with western music modes. That can be a symbol of cultural exchange between China and the West.

Pentatonic modes as two different types of themes were represented by Mahler in multiple places of the piece across all six movements, examples below give details for their presentations.



The introductory theme occurs in recapitulation of the third movement from m. 97-100, transformed from its initial appearance. This theme is fully pentatonic: the mode is in B<sup>b</sup> flat Gong mode, which is the first note of Chinese pentatonic scale in sequence among all five notes-Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, Yu. Pentatonic scales in the west needs to base on western modes/scales in 7 notes, five notes can be found by specific intervals of pentatonic scale mentioned above in western scale. (Take C major, for example, the five notes sequentially and respectively correspond with C, D, E, G, A in the western system) However, the formation of pentatonic scale in Chinese way is different from the west, the five notes need to be found through perfect 5<sup>th</sup> for 4 times from anyone note. (Take C major for example again, C-G-D-A-E, then, five notes are arranged in sequence “C-D-E-G-A”) Thus, the formations of both are distinguishing.

The image shows a page of a musical score for Mahler's 'Das Lied von der Erde', 6th movement, measures 167-174. The score is arranged in a system with multiple staves. The instruments listed are 1. & 2. Fl. (Flute), Mandol. (Mandolin), 1. Harfe (1st Harp), 2. Harfe (2nd Harp), 2. Vl. (2nd Violin), Br. (Brass), and Kb. (Keyboard). The score includes tempo markings such as 'Rit.' (Ritardando), 'Fließend' (Flowing), and 'morendo' (Morendo). Dynamic markings include 'p' (piano) and 'pp' (pianissimo). Two specific musical phrases are highlighted with boxes: a yellow box around a phrase in the 1. & 2. Fl. part at measure 172, and a green box around a phrase in the 1. Vl. part at measure 172. Both highlighted phrases are labeled 'zu 2'. The page number '23' is visible in a box at the bottom center.

Fig 2. Mahler, Das Lied von der Erde, “6<sup>th</sup> movement, mm. 167-174”

This musical phrase from mm. 167-174 of the sixth movement as an independent theme is firstly performed by flute, which mainly occurs in the instrumental part but later also in the vocal part. The music material is in F Gong mode in Chinese pentatonic scale. It begins with the three notes including “d-f-g”, then, it dramatically expands until the all five notes appear and the pure pentatonic theme has been formed. It frequently appears later and finally echoes the presentation of the lyric “Ewig...” heard seven times.

Fig 3. Mahler, Das Lied von der Erde, “1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm. 89-94”

The music material above is motif “a” from the last eighth note in m. 89 to m. 94; it can be considered as a transition between various vocal phrases. In coda, the motif is represented once more in a minor for echoing the introduction.

Let us turn to how Mahler integrated pentatonic mode within the western music system through counterpoint in *Das Lied von der Erde*.

The image displays a page of a musical score for Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, 1st movement, measures 124-133. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. The instruments listed on the left are: 3. Hr. in F, 4. Hr. in F, 1. Trp. in F, 3. Trp., 1. Pos., 3. Pos., 1. Vl., 2. Vl., Br., and Ten.-St. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (ff, mit Dämpfer, sfp, p, f), articulations (Zungenstoß), and performance instructions (arco, dim.). A boxed section highlights a specific melodic motif in the trumpet parts and its echo in the tenor part. The lyrics at the bottom of the page are: "Hier, die - se Lau - te nenn' ich mein!"

Fig 4. Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, "1st movement, mm. 124-133."

From the last eighth note E in m. 124 to m. 133 of the first movement, the entire theme is pentatonic. Motif a appears from mm. 124-128 as connection between vocal phrases; motif b appears from the last eighth note E in mm. 128-133 and echoes with the following tenor part as a contrapuntal melody.

3 Hr.  
in F  
2.4.Hr.  
Glockensp.  
1.Harfe  
2.Harfe  
31 Rit. - - - zu 3 Tempo I  
1.VI.  
2.VI.  
Br.  
Ten.-St.  
sing! ich euch ein Lied!  
Das Lied vom Kum - mer  
immer machtvoll  
40  
1.VI.  
2.VI.  
Br.  
Ten.-St.  
soll auf - lachend in die See - - - le euch  
Vlc.  
Kb.  
6

U. E. 3392. 8

Fig 5. Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, “1st movement, mm. 32-44.”

This example is similar to the last one, with motif a connecting the vocal/tenor phrases from the last eighth note in mm. 32–36 of the first movement; motif b, again, served as counterpoint to the vocal part.



Fig 6. Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, “3<sup>rd</sup> movement, mm. 26-34.”

In mm. 26-29 of the third movement, the pentatonic theme is taken up in the clarinet in counterpoint with the tenor part. Overall, it is in B<sup>b</sup> flat Gong mode; however, the tonality turns to F Gong mode, which is dominant of B<sup>b</sup> major from m. 27 to the third beat of m. 28; then it returns to the original tone until the end of the contrapuntal theme. Also, the melody performed by oboe from mm. 29-34 connects vocal phrases and the contrapuntal theme in the clarinet with pentatonic mode in B<sup>b</sup> Gong mode. The contrapuntal theme consists of flowing eighth notes and centers on D (Jue in B<sup>b</sup> Gong mode), it is similar to embellishments in Chinese folk music. (Mok, 1966)

114

235

*Sich beruhigend*

1. & 2. Fl. in B

1. & 2. Kl. in B

1. & 2. Fag.

1. Hr. in F

Mandol.

1. Harfu.

2. Harfu.

1. Vi.

2. Vi.

Br.

Alt. St.

zu 2

zu 2

*pp*

*pp*

*sempre pp*

*pizz.*

*arco*

*pizz.*

*arco*

*pp*

Ich wand - - le auf und nie - - der mit mei - - ner

245 Wieder sehr ruhig (3/4)

1. Harfe

2. Harfe

245 Wieder sehr ruhig (3/4)

1. VI.

2. VI.

Br.

Alt-St.

Lau - - - - te

Mit großer Empfindung, aber zart 1

Vlc.

pp arco

Kb.

pp

31

Fig 7. Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, “6<sup>th</sup> movement, mm. 232-246.”

The theme, in mm. 167-174 of the sixth movement, also plays a prominent role as counterpoint. The theme initially enters in the instrumental part in m. 233 of the sixth movement; the vocal part enters in m. 236, thus, canonic imitation with relatively free rhythm can be formed. Then, from mm. 241-244 of the movement, the middle part occurs, which forms a short polyphonic combination of three parts

The image shows a page of a musical score for Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, 1st movement, measures 1-9. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. The instruments listed on the left are: 1. 3. Horn in F, 2. 4. Horn in F, 1. Trompete in F, 2. 3. Trompete in F, 1. 2. Posaune, 3. Posaune, Glockenspiel, Becken, 1. Harfe, 2. Harfe, 1. Violine, 2. Violine, Bratsche, Tenor-Stimme, Violoncell, Kontrabaß, and Violinen (VI.). The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (e.g., *ff*, *pp*, *dim.*), articulations (e.g., *mit Dämpfer*, *Zungenstoß*, *spring. Bogen*), and performance instructions (e.g., *Allegro pesante (Ganze Takte, nicht schnell)*). A specific instruction at the bottom of the score reads: *\* Klingt, wie angegeben!*. The score is in 3/4 time and features a complex orchestration with prominent brass and string parts.

Fig 8. Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, 1<sup>st</sup> movement, mm. 1-9.

The opening theme of the first movement (mm. 1-9) is not just introductory but continues through the whole movement. It is also the most distinctive melodic material in the movement. The theme consists of two sections. First is a symmetrical series of gestures in the brass (mm. 1-5) is directly unfolded. The prominent material is pentatonic three-note group constituted by major 2<sup>nd</sup> and perfect 4<sup>th</sup>, which forms the core of motif a. Motif b, in the strings (mm. 5-7), consists of a descending three-note group with major 2<sup>nd</sup> and minor 3<sup>rd</sup>; then, the motif expands in m. 8 and 9. Since the pentatonic mode is established on a natural minor, the interface between pentatonic mode and western major/minor system is straightforward.

Fig 9. Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, “3<sup>rd</sup> movement, mm. 3-6.”

The introductory musical material is in F Zhi mode/scale of Chinese pentatonic mode; the mode sounds strongly like Chinese pentatonic style. The last three notes can be considered as the broken tonic triad. Moreover, the feature of B<sup>b</sup> major in the theme makes it easier to integrate with western major/minor system.

Fig 10. Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, “4<sup>th</sup> movement, mm. 6-13.”



Fig 11. G Gong scale/mode

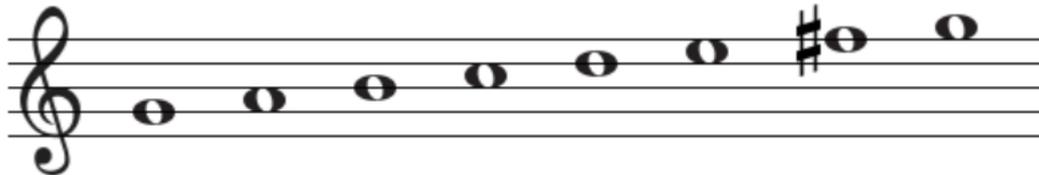


Fig 12. G Major scale

Another striking instance of pentatonic character is the first theme of the 4<sup>th</sup> movement (Example 10). The simultaneity here is important; the vocal part is composed, while in G major; the contrapuntal melody is in G Gong of pentatonic mode. A distinguishing feature here is the scoring: by multi-instrument/integrated timbre including flute, oboe, and clarinet.

Mahler left not only a paragon of combination of poems and music to the world, but also a great cultural exchange between western and Chinese culture. Thus, themes/motifs with “Chinese element” in *Das Lied von der Erde* are crucial and distinctive components.

## 4. Chinese reappropriation of *Das Lied von der Erde*

### 4.1 Solving problems of authentic origin of poems in the piece

In 1998, the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra gave the Chinese premiere of *Das Lied von der Erde*, performing the work in both Beijing and Shanghai, the famed Chinese conductor Yu Long, who had served as principal conductor of the Central Opera Theatre in Beijing (1992–1995), conducted the Shanghai performance. *Das Lied von der Erde* became a source of fascination in musical and literary circles among musicians and litterateurs in China, therefore, interpretation and confirmation around Chinese poems were carried out. Western musicians who using Chinese materials as text for musical creation was few, and fewer western musicians like Mahler who directly employed Chinese poetry in his music, seven Tang poems are contained among six movements of *Das Lied von der Erde*, however, origins of poems in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> movement were controversial although both poets’ names “Tschangtsi” and “Li Taipo” were respectively signed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*. The celebrated Chinese poet’s name “Li Taipo”, which is Li Bai of course, was signed, but which poem of Li Bai was applied in the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement was still uncertain in poetic meaning. The uncertainty of two poems was shelved as the unsettled question in many introductory writings about the *Das Lied von der Erde*. Li Lanqing, newly appointed as Vice Premier of the People's Republic of China, said that it should be clear as soon as possible (in English). Therefore, the project of interpretation and confirmation with special meaning in history of cultural exchange between both Chinese and Western culture started since then. (Wang & Bi, 2002) Interest from many sectors—the concert public, the wider public, professional musicians, and politicians—showed that the stakes were high. Identifying the source of Mahler’s texts became a matter of enormous cultural significance, not an arcane scholarly query. Multiple experts in China were appointed to the project. Because Mahler even adapted these changed poems and added verses into them by himself while composing the music, it made *Das Lied von der Erde* become “Das Rätsel von der Erde”. Soon it was announced that one of China’s leading musicologists, Qian Renkang (1914–2013), solved the mystery and confirmed that the first four verses of “Long Autumn Night” by Qian Qi, a poet in Tang Dynasty, are well contacted with the second movement “Der Einsame im Herbst”

in poetic meaning. As to which poem of Li Bai was employed in the third movement "Von der Jugend", there are still several perspectives so far, Qian Renkang believed it originated from Li Bai's *Evening in the Pavilion of My Friend Tao* (in English), some people like Ren Yiping, Lu Zhenlun, and Yang Wenke believed that it based on Li Bai's *Song of pure happiness*. (in English) Thus, the project was considered as "Goldbach conjecture" in poetics by Zhou Duwen, the Vice President of Chinese poetry society. (Wang & Bi, 2002) Tang poems of *Das Lied von der Erde* with several adaptation contain either image and artistic expression of their original texts or new things including added subjective imagination and invented elements of adaptors. Although these original tang poetries had definitely changed by misreading, their artistic fascination was not inferior and it has expanded spread and influence of Chinese culture in Europe, it has also broadly spread the special Chinese poetic image and new artistic value has been brought for the original Chinese poetry. Also, *Das Lied von der Erde* has become a classic work for exploring difference between Chinese and Western culture.

#### 4.2 Conversation in musical creation between China and the West

Everything is seeking an evolution and open development. In recent years, many Chinese musicians have been attracted to *Das Lied von der Erde* due to its artistic conception of Tang dynasty poems, these Chinese musicians are continuously exploring better interpretation of *Das Lied von der Erde*. As two representative musicians, Tan Dun and Ye Xiaogang have both sought to recompose *Das Lied von der Erde* and expressing the real artistic conception of Tang poetry in Chinese eyes, they dialogue with Mahler across time and space.

##### 3.2.1 Dialogue between Tan Dun and Gustav Mahler

In September of 2009, anticipating the 150th anniversary of Mahler's birth in 2010, Tan Dun gave the premiere of his piece *Earth Concerto for stone and ceramic percussion with orchestra* in National Centre for the Performing Arts Beijing. This piece is composed for large orchestra and 101 stone and ceramic percussions, Tan Dun has said this work is for echoes and responds to *Das Lied von der Erde*. *Earth Concerto* has three movements, directly borrowing titles of movements from *Das Lied von der Erde*. Tan Dun's first movement is titled after Mahler's third movement, "Of Youth", which is featured as minimalist repetitive rhythmic pattern, ceramic instruments were played for making audiences touch and closer to the earth in the first movement, and percussion applied in the movement revived the wildness of the Earth; Tan Dun's second movement is named after Mahler's first movement, "The Drinking Song of Earth's Sorrow", ceramic xun and ocarina were the principal instruments with the double-tone stone Chime, and the melodic materials of this movement is originated from an ancient Chinese music *Parting tune with a thrice repeated refrain*; and Tan Dun's third movement is titled after Mahler's fifth movement, "The Drunkard in Spring." Tan Dun created instruments out of more than 100 ancient potteries from six major centers in China, audiences could feel some elements like Beijing opera, Tang poetry, and the dreamy blank-leaving, it was like a drinking song by Li Bai. Tan Dun combines multiple creative thinking such as his dialogues with Li Bai and Mahler, conversation between western and eastern instruments, and even his dialogue with the Earth. These elements has structured the perfective aspect. Tan Dun said "Some foreign students have asked me whether I could explain and analyze the features of traditional Chinese music using a five-line staff or piano. That's the challenge I have tried to tackle in the last 40 years, and will continue to explore in the future – how to turn our music and the idea of 'organic music' into a systematic theory that can be studied and researched by academies, musicians and musicologists around the world." Tan 's piece has a crucial enlightenment for current exploration and musical creation by today's musicians in both idea of expression and creation thought.

In 2021, the year of the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mahler's death, in the summer music festival of Shanghai, Tan Dun rearranged the piece in a new version, the new version has a more compact structure, and which is 7 minutes shorter than the previous version, thus, compared to the previous version in 2009, the rearranged one has stronger expression in rhythm. Also, the singing form of female and male duet as central axis point made the piece symmetric beauty. Tan Dun said *Earth*

*Concerto for stone and ceramic percussion with orchestra* not only presents natural sound by ceramic percussions, it also combines organic/natural Chinese music with symphonic elements including rhythmic pattern, melody, and structure.

### 3.2.2 The encounter of two versions of *Das Lied von der Erde*

Perhaps the boldest re-appropriation of *Das Lied von der Erde* was conceived by the leading conductor of Western art music, Yu Long, who years before had studied music and worked in Germany. Yu Long proposed that the composer Ye Xiaogang compose a work titled *Das Lied von der Erde* with the same poetry (in Chinese) which Mahler had selected. The premiere was in 2005. In 2021 (another Mahler year), Deutsche Grammophone recorded both Ye Xiaogang's and Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*; Yu Long conducted Shanghai symphony orchestra. In this meaningful album, ancient Chinese poems spreading from Tang Dynasty to Europe were employed for music work hundreds of years ago, then, they have repatriated to their homeland. Ye's *The Song of the Earth* is also an orchestral song cycle echoing Mahler's original work, and Chinese poetries are utilized as lyric/text for creating the piece. Mahler's text was based on adapted Chinese poems in German, but Ye Xiaogang chose authentic Tang poetries. Since authentic ancient Chinese poems have been used in music work, unique and authentic Chinese connotation which is differ from western understanding should be further unfolded. Although Mahler applied pentatonic modes, frequent switches between major and minor actually reflects pure western musical language. *The Song of the Earth* by Ye Xiaogang was based on traditional Chinese opera. In this music work, the composer drew on elements from traditional Chinese opera including gong and drum from Sichuan opera and "blank-leaving" in Peking Opera and so forth, these elements were combined with western orchestration and modern compositional technique with personality and innovation. The adapted and repatriate Tang poetries were unfolded to people in a newly and more Chinese and enjoyable aspect. The album has received attentions from international medias. Richard Fairman, reviewing for the *Financial Times*, saw the enterprise "as a meeting of two cultures..." Ye's music is atmospheric, grandly romantic and enticingly Chinese in its sensitivity."

In the online meeting in September of 2021 mentioned above, panelists also discussed the practical and cultural significance of this album under current international situations. Marina Mahler said "Das Lied von der Erde" includes not only the original version in her mind, but also other versions such as the graceful and energetic rewrite by Ye Xiaogang. In this conversation, the host Elliott Forrest, who is a broadcaster of WQXR located in New York, asked Yu Long to introduce Mahler's popularity in China, Yu Long said that Mahler is popular in China and there is at least half of nearly 70 Chinese orchestra often performs Mahler's symphonies and his song cycles, Mahler is becoming one of the most valued and most popular composers in China because most Chinese audiences love listening to his music.

According to new interpretations of Chinese musicians, people will see that both oriental and western culture can be fused although the cultural difference does exist, people from different cultural backgrounds have their own expressions of common feelings, thus, music can help people to understand their differences when they discuss.

## 5. Conclusion

Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* is a great symphonic work with high musical value, Mahler integrated folk art, literature, and philosophy into music. Mahler not only selected Chinese classical poems, but also utilized pentatonic modes with strong Chinese style, he also perfectly combined Chinese elements with western symphony. Tracing the creation motive and origin of *Das Lied von der Erde* is like the exploration of music philosophy and history. Since spread of ancient Chinese poems from ancient China to Europe, then, Mahler brought these poems into his music, finally, changed poems returned to China and some celebrated Chinese musicians like Tan Dun and Ye Xiaogang recreated *Das Lied von der Erde* with authentic Chinese ancient charm based on inheriting and innovation. *Das Lied von der Erde* imperceptibly but inexorably reflects the Taoist thought

“Circle of life”. Das Lied von der Erde is also a grand music work with profound and philosophical connotation; it is the result of cultural exchange and mutual learning between China and the West, which has a high artistic value. Therefore, the musical treasure is worthy to further and deeper explore and appreciate for Chinese musicians and Mahler’s fans.

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