

***Turandot* in the Bird's Nest: Artistic Work to Cultural Product**

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Abstract: Over 100 overseas versions have been performed since the Italian opera, *Turandot*, came out. As a successful cultural product of recent years, it went on a tour in Taiwan after its performance in the Bird's Nest directed by Zhang Yimou in 2009, whose success can be attributed to the oriental and occidental image difference of Princess *Turandot*, Chinese elements in the opera performance and the creation mode of landscape opera. This paper will analyze and discuss the experience and inspiration of the landscape opera *Turandot* directed by Zhang Yimou from the perspective of story content, creativity and marketing.

Key Words: *Turandot*; landscape opera; cultural creative industry

Zhang Yimou, a most renowned director of China, was invited to direct the new edition of *Turandot* by Florence Opera House in 1996, since when he began to study various editions of *Turandot*. He has realized that, "Most western opera directors make a weird image of China. I once watched an edition where the whole stage was gloomy like a haunted house.¹ The distorted expression and misunderstanding of Chinese image on the part of foreign directors made Zhang Yimou determined to display the Chinese story by luxuriant colors. Zhang Yimou created a live-action of *Turandot* in China against the background of Imperial Ancestral Temple in the Forbidden City with the old cast after he made it in Florence Opera House. Later,

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Zhang Yimou performed this edition all around, which has amazed audiences all over the world.

Zhang Yimou and his Olympic opening ceremony team moved the opera into the Bird's Nest with an investment of 120 million yuan in 2009. This edition of *Turandot* featured the use of the multi-media optical technology unapplied in the opening ceremony of Olympic Games. The big screen of 1000 square meters and 32 projectors installed in the Bird's Nest by the team helped to reproduce all plots with different forms and colors, which was rare around the world. Compared with other editions, the Bird's Nest edition provided a brand new audio-visual feast for audiences with a modern and fashionable style.

The Bird's Nest edition of *Turandot* featured Janos Acs, world renowned conductor, and Chinese singers, Dai Yuqiang and Yao Hong as well as other over 1,000 actors, which became the largest show held in the Bird's Nest since the opening and closing ceremony of the Olympic Games.

The Bird's Nest edition of *Turandot* was performed in Taizhong City, Taipei in March, 2010 without much being altered except the lineup increased. Zhang Yimou adjusted the visual effect of the stage to make it brighter in order to match the cultural atmosphere of Taizhong, thus producing a more fashionable edition.

The performance of *Turandot* in Taizhong is one of the largest cultural exchange activities between Taiwan and mainland in recent years. The joint performances involved more than 1000 actors (including 430 people in mainland China and 600 in Taiwan), with more than 40 containers, involving stage equipment, acoustics, lighting, props and costumes. The performance has not only gained great social benefits, but also achieved better economic results, since it sells over 40,000 tickets (over 90% of tickets were sold) with the highest price of 12,000 new Taiwan dollars and the lowest price of 1,200 new Taiwan dollar, which broke the local record.

A successful opera can be attributed to many factors. Now we will analyze the significance of this opera to Beijing cultural and creative brands from the following aspects.

1.Successful Innovative Content--the Attraction and Figurability of *Turandot* as Literary Work and Image

Turandot has become a cross-cultural and cross-spacultural phenomenon after centuries of development. Although Puccini didn't finish the opera in 1924, it kept

popular among audiences for the later century. The return of princess Turandot to China has even triggered debate among Chinese scholars as to the source of this story.

Turandot is a “Chinese Princess”, but the “Chinese Princess” image in the eyes of westerners is worthy of study and discussion, while there is a “Turandot” in the heart of every Chinese artist and audience. The “Chinese princess” is a complex image that is full of differences in aesthetic experiences and cultural differences between the east and the west, which makes her strange and familiar, and full of magical attraction to Chinese.

1.1 The World Tour of “Turandot”

Turandot, generally believed to be a story of a Chinese princess of the Yuan Dynasty, killed countless contestants by three riddles and finally fell in love with Calaf, the Prince of Tartar, who warmed her icy heart by his wisdom.

“Turandot” is actually a name consisting of *Turan* and *dot*. *Turan* refers to a place. According to the epic *Shahnama*² by Iran poet Ferdowsi (940-1020), the king of ancient Iran divided his territory into three parts and gave central Asia grassland and China (referring to the grassland in Northwest China) to his second-born son Tur, ³the fiefdom of whom was referred as “Turan”. *Dot* is the transliteration of Persian *dokht*, which means young girls, or princess. ⁴Therefore, the original meaning of “Turandot” is “Turan’s daughter” or “Turan’s princess”.

The story of Turandot originated from Persian folk tales. Pétis de la Croix, French orientalist found a complete story similar to *Turandot* in the second volume of *A Thousand and One Day*, following the example of *A Thousand and One Night*, at the beginning of the 18th century.⁵ However, the leading role was not Turandot, but Calaf, the man who conquered her. The story went that Prince Calaf, a master of pen and sword, whose country was defeated and home lost set foot on China to pursue his dream, and finally revenged on the enemy and won the love of princess after numerous difficulties and dangers.

However, many scholars are doubtful as to the identity of Turandot as a Chinese princess as in the Middle Ages, Persians vaguely knew about the geographic range of China. Therefore, some scholars held that she was a royal princess of Mongol nation⁶, and some even argued that she was a Russian princess⁷. In any case, they think *Turandot* was not a Chinese princess living in the Forbidden City.

A widespread *Turandot, a Chinese Tragicomedy* created by Carlo Gozzi, Italian dramatist in 1762⁸ in the Europe was the creation basis of later operas. The story was condensed in 24 hours according to the Three Unites of classicism only presented the middle part, namely the love story between hero and heroine, and deleted

the previous plot of Calaf's wandering life before he went to Beijing and the later plot of revenge.

Carlo Gozzi integrated a lot of Italian elements to cater to Venice audiences. For example, he changed the answer to the third riddle as "Adriatic's lion" (the symbol of Venice). Thus, Turandot became a nominal "Chinese princess", and there was nothing Chinese except the background of Beijing.

The application of the melody of *Jasmine Flower* in the opera by Puccini was a very classic Chinese element. In fact, many people had tried to add some Chinese characteristics to the performance of the opera before Puccini introduced the theme of Turandot, among whom German poet Fredrich Schiller made major contribution. Inspired by *The Fortunate Union*, a fiction of the Ming and Qing Dynasties circulated in German during that time, Fredrich Schiller added many Chinese characteristics to the performance of the opera and carefully designed the personality development of roles. Fredrich Schiller rehearsed *Turandot* in Weimar in 1802, which was just the version that Puccini fell in love with at first sight over 100 years later. Such being the case, Puccini started to combine real and fictive image of China and incorporate more Chinese music elements into the opera.

Thus, the opera would be bound to catch the attention of audiences of all over the world when it returned to its homeland Beijing and was performed in the landmark of China, the Bird's Nest.

1.2 The Cultural Differences Behind the Image of "Turandot"

Despite the long-term dispute of the primitive image of Chinese princess, Turandot has already become an oriental noble lady in the eyes of the west. However, for Chinese nowadays, she is a princess from an alien race different from traditional Han nationality, thus showing the explicit cultural differences between the oriental and occidental world.

Turandot is always a ruthless and arrogant princess in western opera whose beauty both attracts and terrifies people, which is an image of Chinese princess in the eyes of the west. The images of China and Chinese people in western literary works have always been moulded by westerners. They think that China is pretty much the same as the princess possessing charm and wisdom but difficult to reason with, and at last, she would be conquered by a "prince" coming from western countries. For western artists and audiences, China is always full of an exotic atmosphere that tempts and threatens them, which is also the western aesthetic emotion that they put in the role of Turandot.

The image of Turandot interpreted by the west was not fully accepted by Chinese audiences. Many editions, such as adaptations of drama, Beijing opera and

Sichuan opera, came into being since the public performance of *Turandot* directed by Zhang Yimou in 1996, and some even claimed to “put the *Turandot* back to home”. Chinese artists have been trying to restore an image of Chinese princess. One typical example is the Sichuan opera edition of Chinese Princess Du Landuo by Wei Minglun, who added modern consciousness to the story and integrated it into Chinese cultural traditions that look down upon scholarly honour or official rank. In the National Grand Theater version of *Turandot*, young composer Hao Weiya has rewritten the unfinished part of Puccini, thus, the version of *Turandot* has become a cross-cultural opera transcending time and space. The new interpretation of Princess *Turandot* against the background of Chinese culture would definitely make the opera more popular around the world.

The constantly enriched plots of *Turandot* and the controversial Chinese identity of the princess together with the interpretation of *Turandot* by Chinese artists contributed to bridging the huge gap between Chinese and western culture and widespread acceptance on the part of Chinese audiences for its huge attraction to both audiences and artists.

2. Successful Production-Landscape Opera and Innovation

Zhang Yimou managed to turn the traditional opera to a landscape opera out of the Imperial Ancestral Temple edition and the Bird's nest edition. However, different from the grand Imperial Ancestral Temple, a stadium needed the assistance of multimedia image and perfect light to demonstrate magnificent picture. Besides, traditional Chinese elements should be expressed in the modern landscape opera.

2.1 Landscape Opera

As a new form of opera presentation popular all over the world, the concept of landscape opera comes from outdoors live-action opera, which refers to an opera incorporating various performance forms taking place in outdoor places against the background of natural landscape where audiences can enjoy dance, circus, acrobatics, magic show and fireworks.

A typical example of landscape opera is *Aida*, presented in the Luxor Temple, Egypt, in 1987, where the story took place. The unique atmosphere created by solemn stone pillars, stone figures, mysterious ancient hieroglyphs and symbols located by the old Nile Riverbank improved the opera by association with the scene. The most famous landscape operas in the worldwide are the outdoors live-action

ones on the opening ceremony of Opera Art Festival held in Bregenz located in the border of Switzerland, Austria and Germany every summer. Many famous Italian operas have been presented here on the huge stage against the background of Constance, such as *Aida*, *Tosca* and other famous Italy operas, light operas by John Strauss and Robert Frost, and *Julieta* by Czech composers, which have drawn audiences all over the world every year. It has become a major event in the European opera and tourism industry. *Turandot* directed by Zhang Yimou is a successful landscape opera during recent domestic market.

The production of *Turandot* in the Bird's Nest was different in that it could not use any ancient buildings or natural scenery. Chen Weiya, the executive director, said that, "It is not difficult to produce an opera of high quality which integrates with ancient buildings and natural landscape. But there are just four stands in the Bird's nest without any live action related to the story. so it's rather difficult to produce a Chinese royal palace where the story took place." As a result, more reliance was placed on hi-tech multimedia technology.

Landscape opera was widely discussed in the industry before. Does it belong to opera? How does its function differ from that of an opera? Does it promote opera or contend with opera? First, the selection of topic of landscape opera is limited to a large extent, for example, there should be resplendent scenes in the plots, such as square, palace and military parade where a lot of people are present, which help to give the creativity to full play. So far, only a few works, including *Turandot*, *Aida* and *Carmen* are successful. Thus it is clear that the form of landscape opera doesn't suit all operas. Second, performance effects are totally different. Landscape opera is less advantageous in terms of musical effect for the necessity to use electroacoustic. Besides, due to the grand scene of landscape opera, it is difficult for audiences to capture details.¹⁰ Hi-tech means were just complementary to the demonstration of many close shots and details of *Turandot*. Third, landscape opera is presented differently from that in the opera house and functioned by different teams. The production of landscape opera, far more complicated than that of traditional opera, needed the coordination of more professional teams and a more experienced chief director because too much attention to fantastic visual and acousto-optic effects would distract audiences from the plots development.

Renowned for his reputation as director enjoying international fame and his application of colors and grand scenes, Zhang Yimou was the best person for directing the opera. Besides, BJAMC, as a professional production team, was a guarantee to the success of *Turandot*. It was the proper cooperation that contributed to a successful performance. Objectively speaking, the Bird's Nest edition of *Turandot* in China was worth attempting despite the fact that a large audience are not satisfied

with the Bird's Nest version of *Turandot* and doubt its manifestation.

Landscape opera, as the product of development of times, gives expression to the high efficiency and coordination of current society. Propelled by the development of modern technology and market economy, the function of cultural industry has become acceptable for all sides, and as a result, it is plausible to give traditional opera a brand new expression way and innovative idea. As some researchers pointed out, "If landscape opera is a pursuit of fashion, then we can say it's all about open opera, open audience and open scenery, all of which come from open times and ideas."¹¹ Landscape opera should be looked upon more as a cultural product than simply a piece of artistic work.

2.2 Innovative Elements in the Bird's Nest Edition of "Turandot"

The previous examples of landscape opera worldwide and experience of live-action performance in the Imperial Ancestral Temple were far from enough for the Bird's Nest edition of *Turandot*. Different from general stadiums, the Bird's Nest with a capacity of 100,000 people is a landmark featuring modern sense in Beijing, a glorified dreamland for Chinese. Therefore, performance in the Bird's Nest meant to show the culture soft power of China to the whole world. Without the natural background of the grand Imperial Ancestral Temple, the team needed to think about how to make up for the magnificent vigor, how to integrate more Chinese elements and how to ensure that tens thousands of audiences present could enjoy a visual and audio feast of high quality.

2.2.1 Combination of Hi-tech and Stage Design

The whole stage was a white hollow-out piece of scenery and an inlaid palace sketch without any extravagant palace model or grand man-made buildings. The seemingly simple stage setting consisted of mobile palace, palace door, hollow-out piece of scenery and background wall. The multimedia video effect of the three-hour opera was presented with the help of the hollow-out piece of scenery with a height of 17.5 m and width of 52 m together with 32 projectors. The background wall was used to realize the change of light effects, which clearly drew the outline of the mobile palace inserted in the middle of the hollow-out piece of scenery, presenting a simple, solemn and modern profile. In the middle of the mobile palace was the palace gate, the frame of which was covered by a white yarn of the same size used as a small curtain to show multimedia pictures. Using multimedia light and shadow technology, Chinese flavor together with stage effect of modern sense was demonstrated by the constantly changing scenes on the piece of scenery and curtain with the plot development.

2.2.2 Creating Magnificent Color Hues with Light and Shadow

Zhang Yimou has always been discontented with the “creepy and dark hue” used in the western versions of the opera *Turandot*. As a result, he decided to quit the graphite and gloomy tone and turn to bright and warm colors to create a glorious scene.

Zhang Yimou, famous for his use of colors in film-making, holds that colors were used to express emotions, such as cloudy and sunny, sad and joyful, or lonely and romantic rather than simply gaining visual effects, whether it is the sorghum fields under the red sky or the lush green bamboo forests, or the golden land covered with the leaves of Ginkgo. Thus it can be said that magnificent colors are the primary feature of Zhang Yimou’s works. *Turandot* he directed was no exceptional, as was evidenced by the fact that the heroine had three high-colored costumes (black, red and white). Different colors of costumes showed the emotional change with the development of plots. “Black stands for power and aggressiveness, which shows the princess’s fierce character at first and her unwillingness to open her heart and accept any relations. Besides, it fully interprets the artistic conception of *Nessun Dorma* on a Night stage.”¹² The prince melted her icy heart by a kiss at dawn, and the princess was willing to accept his love when Calaf confessed to her his identity. Pure white representing holy love expressed her inner calmness when she felt love. Finally, as *Turandot* and Calaf stepped into the wedding ceremony, they dressed in red, the favored color used in traditional Chinese wedding, which led to the climax of the whole story.

Coordinated with image technology and light coloring, the scene sometimes looked resplendent and magnificent, or solemn and dignified, or melancholy and desolate. This edition of *Turandot* featured amazing scenes.

2.2.3 Application of Creative Chinese Elements

Turandot was a western opera full of Chinese elements, especially the application of *Jasmine Flower*, a famous folk song in China, which let people feel the Chinese style but different from the feelings of traditional folk music. Zhang Yimou was trying to integrate as much Chinese elements in the content and performance in the opera as possible.

First of all, both the stage setting and costumes reflected rich Chinese style. Against the background of palace, a picture of freehand brush was presented to audiences--war, folk, palace or frontier. The stage pattern of nine-dragon screen under the background also indicated that it was a story taking place in Chinese royalty. Traditional Chinese Opera elements were added to costumes, and even court maids and general soldiers were dressed in gorgeous costumes with traditional Chinese

patterns of embroidery fancy carp and auspicious clouds.

Chinese elements were on display in various aspects. For example, Minister Ping, Peng and Pang with the performing style of clowns in Chinese operas, who were dressed up as three stars of Luck, Prosperity and Longevity in Chinese myth were seated in sedan chairs of different colors(red, purple and yellow) and lifted up to the stage. The role of the executioner was designed as a young person dressed in red with top military accomplishments who performed Tai Ji and sword dance, which displayed the elements of traditional Chinese martial arts. In the last scene, Turandot and Calaf were dressed in red robe, which was the typical scene of grand marriage ceremony common in Chinese opera. Thus, a western opera ended in Chinese phoenix coronet and robes of rank, which meant great fortune in the future.

The Bird's Nest edition of *Turandot* was turned into a fashionable visual feast featuring mixed styles, which has blurred the times character and historical background of the original story. The over dazzling light and shadow effect was also distracting as to an opera. Besides, the detailed performance and sound effect of singers on such a vast stage were barely satisfactory. However, it was due to these bright and fashionable characters that the Bird's Nest edition of *Turandot* has become an influential Chinese cultural brand different from traditional western operas.

3. Successful Sales--Brand Publicity and Marketing

Turandot directed by Zhang Yimou was oriented towards branding at the very beginning. Both Zhang Yimou and Chen Weiya held that the most important point of developing cultural creative industry is to intensify "industrial awareness", where lies the essence of China' development of cultural creative industry.¹³ "Industrial awareness" was fully manifested in the creation and production phase of *Turandot*, and as a cultural product, its success was closely related to the publicity and marketing in the sales stage. Ye Xun, investor of the 2009 Bird's Nest edition of *Turandot*, said that "*Turandot* is not only an opera, but a cultural brand, in our view." "According to international practice, the investment of the show accounts for 60%, and marketing 40%. We have spent 48 million yuan on *Turandot*'s marketing."

The key words "Zhang Yimou" "Bird's Nest" and "*Turandot*" have already attracted widespread attention. In addition to the opera itself, people's longing for the Bird's Nest and the Olympic Games as well as their love for Zhang Yimou could guarantee the box office. Sponsors included international brands like Benz, Starbucks and Logitech. Mainstream media, including Phoenix Satellite Television, China Beijing TV Station, Baidu and Sina covered this event. And Yu Dan, a professor of Beijing Normal University and celebrity in media, was invited to do cul-

tural propaganda for *Turandot*.

The Bird's Nest edition of *Turandot* adopted "integrated marketing", namely constantly using other projects to extend its brand, by which the talent shows of the image spokesperson of "Chinese Princess" and "Chinese boys" were carried out to attract white-collar workers and family members, thus rapidly establishing the brand image of the opera among high-end people.

Relevant information was sent to target audiences including college students by network and TV shows. A Miss China was appraised and elected as the spokeswoman of "Chinese Princess" by the opera team's cooperation with Tencent and Phoenix Satellite Television. "Chinese Princess" doll was created for the "Chinese Princess" brand, which is not only a souvenir for the Bird's Nest edition of *Turandot*, but also a calling card of *Turandot* to the world.

A selection was held to attract parents to encourage their children aging from eight to twelve to play in the opera for children and consumers over the age of 30. The talent show of children is liable to catch the whole family's attention against the Chinese educational environment, which would motivate a lot of relatives and friends to buy tickets and watch the opera. There were 1.7 million people participating in the talent show of "Chinese Boy" on PhoenixNet. "Family tickets" and "lover tickets" were also issued by the team to meet various demands.

For more citizens, experiencing activity was carried out for more common consumers to get in touch with the brand in their communities, which promoted the opera in Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai in two months since August, 1st. and successfully won consumers' favor. The audience can experience the performance profile of the new edition of the opera and interesting games set up in the buses.

The team put more effort in the publicity in Taiwan in order to set up the brand image of *Turandot* in 2009. Two presses were held in the Beijing the Imperial Ancestral Temple and Bureau of Culture before they went to Taiwan. And three presses were held in Taiwan, where Taipei Mayor, Hao Longbin and Taizhong Mayor Hu Zhiqiang showed up on the scene of the first press and recommending the opera by casting as the roles.

The publicity in Taizhong also put emphasis on public participation and welfare. The "announcement officer" and 20 "little acolytes" in the opera were selected publicly in Taiwan, among the latter ten were mass elected in Taizhong and another ten were reserved for children in remote area of Taiwan. Two of the "little acolytes" were schoolgirls, who gave up their beautiful hair in the shaving ceremony in the second press held in Taizhong.

After the performance, "over 100 media both home and abroad have reported it, among which there are 30 pieces of print media report in mainland, and 33

pieces in Taiwan, 33 pieces of TV report in mainland, 2710 pieces of network report in mainland, and 385 pieces in Taiwan. ”¹⁴ Major media outlets in the mainland and Taiwan have reported extensively.

Thus, the great attention to the opera should be attributed to its successful publicity and marketing.

4. From “Artistic Work” to “Cultural Product”

Zhang Yimou’s edition of *Turandot* has also been doubted and judged. For example, some hold that Zhang Yimou has followed his own old practice to show royal stateliness by using a large sum of background actors are no different from the group performance on the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, or that the improved costume has tampered the original historical background, or that the over reliance on visual effects and high-tech has covered sound effects and actors’ performance. In one word, such *Turandot* is “just a grand commercial performance irrelevant to art.”¹⁵

Indeed, these questions need to be reflected and improved by the Bird’s Nest edition of *Turandot*. We need to reflect on the problem between “artistic work” and “cultural product” against the background of current development of cultural innovative industry. Should we judge the cultural product by pure artistic standard? What’s the relationship between it and cultural work?

Artistic work is by no means the same as cultural product. Artists originally aim at expressing some ideology or personal feeling, or exposing social phenomenon when creating a work, instead of profit return. An artistic work is not necessarily profitable. However, a cultural product will take the economic value into consideration at the beginning of innovation and production, and think about how to make audience accept it. That is to say, cultural products pursue both commercial value and more importantly, the overall social value.

Cultural products are not artistic works of low quality nor gainful stuff. A successful cultural brand and product must contain certain artistic elements. The creation period tends to feature artistic design and writing as well as technique skills from gainful. Not all artistic works can be turned to corresponding cultural products, but cultural products of high quality can be well integrated with art.

Successful cultural works can promote artistic development. A successful cultural brand can facilitate the development of a series of derivative products, thus the progress of cultural innovative industry and the whole consumer market which includes the consumption of artistic works. Cultural products can attract more ordi-

nary consumers, thus spreading artistic common sense and arousing people's attention to art. As Chen Yawei, the executive director, said, "The Bird's Nest edition *Turandot* is hoped to set up a bridge between elegant opera art and common people. Maybe many people would go into opera house after they go out of the Bird's Nest."

Industrial spread is undoubtedly an important way to propagate Chinese culture with regard to the special cross-cultural text of *Turandot*. It features individuality to perform a well-spread work among western countries in the form of landscape opera integrated with a large quantity of Chinese cultural elements, which facilitates the replication and worldwide performance of the cultural brand of *Turandot*, like *Cats*, *Riverdance* and *Aida*.

Notes

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