



# A Study of Puccini's Opera "Turandot" and its Exoticisms

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**Abstract.** Puccini was the "last Italian opera master" in the field of opera creation in the Romantic period, and he constantly tried to incorporate exotic elements into his operatic creation, in which the opera "Turandot" used a lot of traditional Chinese cultural elements, so the study of the exoticism contained in the opera "Turandot" is of great significance for the dissemination of the East and West cultures in the world and the use of "localization". In "Turandot", traditional Chinese culture is reflected in the text, melody and costumes. Through the portrayal and representation of the Other, Puccini demonstrates the conflict and fusion between different cultures and identities.

**Keywords:** Puccini; "Turandot"; Exoticism; Traditional Culture.

## 1 Introduction

"Exoticism" traditionally refers to a particular foreign interest that is different from the culture or customs of one's own country. The earliest references were to exotic and foreign countries outside the United Kingdom. With the political, economic and cultural development of the United Kingdom, the term "exoticism" (exoticism) is no longer limited to refer to foreign affairs, its meaning also includes "unfamiliar people or things", that is, our conventional understanding of the "other" [1].

The Grove Dictionary of Music defines "exoticism" as the evocation (or perception and imagination) of places, people, or social environments that are radically different from accepted local norms in terms of attitudes, customs, and morals.

It should be especially pointed out that Puccini lived in the era of Romanticism, when the Western society had great curiosity and enthusiasm for the culture of the East, thus making the exoticism in the West become Romantic in color. The image of the Orient in Western literature, music and drama at that time showed a certain degree of change, and there was a certain difference with the actual image of the Orient.

The reasons for this can be roughly divided into the following: First, the objective existence of the transportation is not convenient, the vast majority of people in the West at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century have not been to the East, only through a small number of documents, people who have arrived in the

East of the East of the verbal expression, as well as some of the commodities and crafts from the East of the Orient thousands of miles away from the Orient to the East for the associations, and thus there will be for the Orient's image of the misconceptions; The second is the stereotype of Westerners to the East, from the mid to late 18th century industrial revolution, European countries through the industrial revolution, making the rapid development of the economy, politics, culture, military and so on, so as to form the "Eurocentric" idea, the same period of China is still in the closed, stagnant, and thus in the eyes of the Westerners, China's culture is grotesque, stupid and feudal [2].

Puccini's opera "Turandot" has had a profound impact on future generations, not only in the ups and downs of the story and the magnificent and beautiful use of musical language, but also in the cultural understanding of "exoticism", which has inspired countless scholars from both the Western and Chinese perspectives. In order to have a deeper understanding of the exoticism of "Turandot" and the cultural connotation behind it, one should not only listen to the music itself and watch the video of the corresponding performance, but also learn about the research results of the opera by the predecessors. Therefore, it is of some significance to organize the domestic and international research on "Turandot" and its exoticism, and introduce the relevant important research results.

## 2 Research by Chinese Scholars

An overview of Chinese scholars' studies on the opera "Turandot" and its exoticism reveals that they basically interpret the opera from several aspects, such as melodic references, the use of traditional costumes in the costume path, the embodiment of Chinese elements in the libretto, misinterpretation of Chinese culture, analysis of Puccini's personal style, and the portrayal of female characters in Puccini's operas.

### 2.1 Initial Knowledge of "Turandot" with Chinese Elements

In 1994, the Chinese scholar Luo Jianxin published an article entitled "Chinese Music in the Works of Foreign Composers" in the journal Northern Music. The article listed in chronological order the works of some famous European composers from the early 19th century to the 1930s in which Chinese music was utilized. One of them mentioned that "Italian composer Puccini's opera "Turandot"te used eight tunes such as the Chinese folk song "Jasmine Flower" from Jiangsu Province and the Anhui Province folk song "Feng Yang Tune", etc." This shows that there had been a preliminary study on the connection between the melody of "Turandot"te and the tunes of traditional Chinese folk songs in China at that time [3]. However, in the article, the author only lists the composers whose works use Chinese music, and does not analyze and discuss further, from this point of view, the article is more like a list or a catalog, which guides the future generations to carry out the next step of research according to this "list". With the economic development and social progress, the people of China know more and more about western operas, plus the opera ""Turandot"" is written by the famous Italian composer Puccini, tells the story of China, and uses Chinese tunes, an opera full of

Chinese elements, which has gradually become a cultural symbol for the exchange between the East and the West.

## 2.2 Zhang Yimou's Two Directions of the Opera "Turandot" and Their Evaluation

"Turandot", directed by Zhang Yimou, was performed in 1998 in front of the Forbidden City's Imperial Temple, which symbolizes China's 5,000 years of cultural inheritance, shocking both domestic and international audiences and triggering countless heated debates as a result. More and more scholars in China are beginning to learn more about the opera, and then exploring the deeper cultural connotations behind the opera. The research literature on "Turandot" opera was almost non-existent before that, which shows that the influence of the performance in China was unprecedented at that time [4]. Although in this version of "Turandot" used a lot of Chinese elements that had not been used before, such as Peking Opera, martial arts and so on. However, Zhang Yimou also admitted in a follow-up interview that he knew little about opera before guiding the opera performance. He watched two operas in Italy in a 'temporary' way, and 'slipped away' when watching Wagner's opera for too long. It can be seen that Zhang Yimou is not interested in the opera in fact, and even before guiding the opera, he did not have a very deep understanding of the opera. Therefore, he only made a visual adaptation of the Chinese elements in the "Turandot" version of the Forbidden City.

He very superficially redesigned the costumes of all the characters in the play, and it can be seen that the costumes of the actors in this version have the basis of the Ming Dynasty costumes or traditional Peking Opera costumes, but on the basis of this, the style is transformed into a more flamboyant and exaggerated. From the current aesthetic point of view, this version of the opera directed by Zhang Yimou at that time will feel 'spicy eyes', which is a western opera superimposed with many 'China' buffs. It is worth mentioning that, according to the box office and audience statistics at that time, more than 70% of the audience watching the Forbidden City version of "Turandot" were Westerners, and the ticket price was as high as 1,500 RMB a ticket, which can be speculated that the audience group of this version of "Turandot" at that time was not the majority of the general public in China, and that it was possible that Zhang Yimou intended to take this opportunity to open up the international market and increase the popularity of the visual elements of the design piled up with the Chinese elements that are familiar to the Westerners, and exaggerated them, to be used to cater to the audience [5]. At the time, the general social and scholarly comments on this version of the opera were "a great honor to the country", even though it seems quite unimaginable nowadays. However, when one looks at Zhang Yimou's internationally selected and award-winning works, the common feature is that they "fully satisfy the stereotypical Western image of the East, whether it is desirous and old-fashioned, or brilliant and ancient".

In 2008, Zhang Yimou once again directed the opera "Turandot", which was performed at the Bird's Nest in 2009. In the intervening year or so, the research of "Turandot" in the academic world has set off a wave of fever, with more than fifty research papers on "Turandot" appearing in domestic newspapers and periodicals, and the research directions include opera writing, libretto analysis, artistic characterization, and

comparisons with traditional Chinese dramas, etc. However, from the perspectives, contents, and analysis results, there is a lack of novelty, which is basically the same as what Wang Xiu published in 2004. However, from the point of view, the content and the result of the analysis, all of them lack novelty, basically rearranging and combining the papers published by Wang Xiu in 2004 and then adding personal analysis to them. On a positive level, with the expansion of "Turandot"'s audience and influence in China, research on "Turandot" has grown exponentially, stimulating enthusiasm for Western opera and reflection on local culture [6]. On the negative side, however, it is sad that not a single article since 2004 has made such a detailed discussion of the exoticism of "Turandot", nor has it put forward a new viewpoint or given a new perspective.

With the mockery of Zhang Yimou's 2009 Bird's Nest production of "Turandot", a large number of critical articles on the Bird's Nest version of "Turandot" appeared on the Internet and in periodicals, most notably Ji Xiujun's article "Chinese Opera Should Be Confident but Not Arrogant," published in China Education News, in which Zhang Yimou's "Turandot" leads to the question of the future of Chinese opera in the world's cultural currents. From this year onwards, society's enthusiasm for the opera began to decline somewhat, returning to its own theater audience. But also from this year onwards, the academic discussion on the characterization of "Turandot" and the analysis and understanding of the excerpts began to increase year by year.

### 2.3 Discussion of "Otherness" in "Turandot" Opera

In 2001, Xu Xiaozhong published the article "Italian Music - Chinese Mood - Japanese Aesthetics - A Look at Keita Asari's "Turandot" Directed at La Scala Opera House" in the journal Chinese Drama, which is the earliest article that can be found on the Internet with an analysis of the exotic mood in "Turandot" [7]. The author's attitude toward this version of "Turandot" is immensely appreciative, considering the chorus in "Turandot" to be extremely attractive and "another protagonist"; and comparing "Turandot" with another opera, *Madama Butterfly*, also directed by Keita Asari, he not only quotes the melody of *Jasmine* in its entirety, but also renders it in terms of harmony, rhythm, and timbral configuration according to his understanding of Oriental music. From the costume point of view, "instead of simply copying the costumes, props and make-up of Chinese Peking Opera from a Western director, the opera seriously reaches out to the ancient Chinese art of modeling". Keita Asari's version of the opera is, from an aesthetic point of view, a new attempt to synthesize elements of Chinese, Western opera and Japanese aesthetics, and we can also see in this opera and Xu Xiaozhong's article the Japanese interpretation of exoticism and attempts at localization, which paved the way for the subsequent academic discussions triggered by "Turandot".

In 2004, Wang Xiu, a master of the School of Music of Nanjing Normal University, made a very systematic discussion on the interpretation of "Turandot" for the Orient. From the historical origin and cultural environment of "Turandot" to the analysis of the textual level about the image of the Orient and the embodiment of the "Oriental characteristics" in the music [8]. It is worth mentioning that the author mentions the shaping and denial of "otherness" in the article. The author compares the Sichuan Opera "Turandot", *Princess of China* with Zhang Yimou's "Turandot" and compares it with

Zhang Yimou's version of "Turandot", Wei Minglun intentionally misinterpreted the Western original in his creation of the Sichuan Opera "Turandot", "Princess of China", but this misinterpretation is based on the idea to create a more reasonable and appropriate image of the Chinese Princess that is consistent with the Chinese aesthetics. "Otherness" refers to the process of cultural transmission in which something is shaped by the interpretation of literary figures and artists, supplemented by their own needs for intentional misinterpretation. The article provides a broader vision, criticizing Euro-American cultural centrism and ethnocentrism with the help of cultural relativism and the affirmation of various cultural values, which led the way for later academic interpretations of the cultural dimensions of "Turandot" [9].

Among them, the more valuable one is that Zou Yayan explained this point of view in detail from the perspective of the dissemination and interpretation of literary works in the article 'Madame Butterfly' and 'Chinese Princess' - exotic oriental imagination. It can be seen that women at this time had a more in-depth thinking on the 'Orientalized' Orient behind the work [10]. In the narrative way of opera, "Turandot" regards the relationship between Western men and Eastern women as a symbol and metaphor of the relationship between the East and the West, reflecting the power dominance relationship between the East and the West, and the discourse mode of the East under the influence of this relationship. It is the product of subjective construction of the East, with a distinct 'Western centralism' value orientation.

To sum up, "Turandot" has not received much attention in China for a long time, and due to the specificity of its content, which has led to extensive discussions, most of the academics have analyzed the exoticism in it from the perspectives of text, singing, observing and writing, and a few papers, such as the one mentioned above, have interpreted it from the perspectives of philosophy, sociology, and cultural dissemination. After more than twenty years of heated discussions, the scholarly community has basically solved the problem of analyzing the exoticism of "Turandot" from the textual level, but there is still controversy over the cultural connotations behind it.

### **3 Foreign Scholars' Research Works**

#### **3.1 Oriental Elements in "Turandot"**

Mosco Carner and G. R. (1936) in his paper *The Exotic Element in Puccini* clearly pointed out that *Madama Butterfly* and "Turandot" have exotic flavor, and focused on the relationship between national music and exotic flavor, how to make trade-offs in composing, and how to introduce exotic flavor without losing the national music's flavor [11]. This is the first known paper to explore the exoticism of "Turandot".

Mosco Carner (1959), in his monograph *Puccini-A Critical Biography*, gives a detailed analysis of the historical background, script selection, drama and music characteristics of each opera of Puccini, and elaborates on the realism, idealism and artistic style embodied in each opera. In particular, Puccini has repeatedly used the melody with obvious exotic music characteristics in his operas, such as the melody of the Chinese folk song "Jasmine" in "Turandot" [12].

Zuberi Nabeel (2007) in his *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* focuses on Western representations of the Other, in particular why, when and exactly how these representations occur [13]. It can be broadly divided into the historical eras of colonialism, imperialism, and globalization, with the second half of the article largely devoted to globalization since the 1990s. The article investigates the role of contemporary cross-cultural collaboration and world music production in the creation of apolitical works of "slight difference" and explores the creation of the music industry and the management of boundaries between its genres.

Andrew Davis (2010) in his monograph *II Trittico, "Turandot", and Puccini's Late Style* suggests the use of a broader diversity of styles in "Turandot" as an interplay between Romanticism, dissonance, and exotic styles, with exotic styles further subdivided into Chinese, primitive, and Persian dialects [14]. Throughout the book, Davis urges readers to connect Puccini's late music with the formal conventions of nineteenth-century Italian opera writing. Puccini's arias, duets, and ensembles, dialoguing with early nineteenth-century traditions and departing from that form are all markers of intentional expression in his later style.

German author Volker Mertens (2015) created a monograph on Puccini's musical works, *Giacomo Puccini: Wohllaut, Wahrheit und Gefühl*, which describes the backgrounds of the composition of all of Puccini's major works, their scripts, their performances, and the characteristics of the various versions of the singing actors; during this time, it outlines Puccini's growth as Verdi's successor [15]. The chapter "Turandot" uses the name: ""Turandot"" - the unredeemed princess, who comes from China. The monograph points out that the opera "Turandot" was written by Adami and Simoni in 1921. Against the background of mystery and horror, the opera takes the three characters of the Chinese princess "Turandot", the Tartar prince Kalav and the Tartar maid Liu'er as the main line, and successfully expresses the theme of love which is full of human nature but with strange twists and turns. As "Turandot" describes the affairs of a Chinese princess, it naturally takes on an exotic flavor.

### 3.2 The "Other" in the Eyes of the West

Joseph R. Roach of Yale University said: The process of drama reproduction itself is likely to intentionally or unintentionally impose the cultural value of one ethnic group on the members of another ethnic group: while saying to show their different characteristics, while caricature them; while saying to celebrate the value of their existence, while obliterating their existence. In the opera "Turandot", it is the Westerners who shape the image of the Orientals in their minds through the means of expression such as clothing and music. Although the Chinese elements are quoted, they are not carefully studied. Therefore, we can judge the stereotypes of the Western feudal dynasties and women's roles in China at that time through the characters created in the play. At the same time, through the promotion of the plot, that is, the cold, holy and beautiful Princess "Turandot" could not resist the kiss of the prince, and was finally conquered by Western men to 'caricature' and 'erase' Oriental women.

Said points out that "the Orient is not a natural existence", i.e. it is created by man and is an imaginary existence. It is true that in the eyes of the West, the East has always

represented the "other" as different from the "self" and is a foreign culture in every sense of the word. When we look at the Oriental culture from a Western perspective, it is in a passive position as an "object", objectively unable to express itself, but can only be expressed by the West. With the development of time, more and more people have added their own subjective interpretation of Eastern culture from a Western perspective, and under such a development trend, a discourse system about the East has slowly emerged, with a distinctive "Western-centered color". The core of this discourse system is Western-centeredness, which can be understood as the hegemony of the West over the East. The common interpretation is that Westerners use unsubstantiated subjective intentions to infer certain aspects of the characteristics of the East, and then brand the philosophical characteristics as "essential", and then, with the dissemination of culture, make them deeply rooted in the imagination of Westerners about the East.

Iris Hsin-chun Tuan (2011), in Zhang Yimou's "Turandot" in Taiwan: Intercultural Spectacle, Aesthetic of Excess, and Cross-ocean Sensibility, describes the 2010 episode in which Zhang Yimou created a 'completely different' and 'respectable' "Turandot", which won 'international' acclaim. In terms of exoticism, on the one hand, Zhang Yimou insisted on the Chinese folk tunes in Puccini's music works, on the other hand, he also exaggerated the Europeans' fantasy of China's 'otherness' to a certain extent[16].

In this kind of thinking and perspective, everything in the East as the "other" is given by the West, and the feudal ignorance and barbarism and backwardness of the East are used to set off the democracy, freedom, civilization and harmony of the West, and the East needs the West to save them. Just as Said said, "Everything in Orientalism is outside the East; the meaning of Orientalism depends more on the West than on the East"; "Knowledge of the East, as it arises from the strong force, creates in a sense the world of the East, the Oriental, and the Oriental people"; "The East is described as something to be judged, something to be studied and depicted, something to act as a disciplinary force, and something to act as a figure of speech" Therefore, we can judge that the Orient in the Western discourse is a product of the imagination in the Western subjective point of view, and it is not related to the Orient that exists in the objective sense (in reality).

To sum up, the East is "one of the most profound and frequent images of the Other in Europe", and Puccini constructs a whole set of European-oriented rhetorical system in "Turandot" to show the West's desire and hope for the exotic, and the exotic men use their own male charisma to rescue the Oriental women who are trapped in some kind of predicament. The exoticism of "Turandot" has been studied internationally since the 1930s, covering the reasons for the formation of the exotic style, the comparison between the exotic style of "Turandot" and that of *Madama Butterfly*, the refinement of the exotic style of "Turandot", the scripts and performance versions of "Turandot", and the preservation and exaggeration of the image of "the other" in the opera "Turandot" directed by Zhang Yimou.

## 4 Conclusion

Puccini's opera "Turandot" has an important status and artistic character in the music world. The creation of this opera combines theatricality, Chinese cultural elements and exoticism, which makes it a representative work in Puccini's creation. The image of jasmine, which symbolizes purity and love, gives "Turandot" a unique oriental flavor. This way of incorporating Chinese cultural elements not only increases the artistry of the work, but also wins it wider popularity. Puccini's way of incorporating Chinese cultural elements in the process of creation has played a positive influence on the artistic characteristics and exotic flavor of "Turandot".

Current studies on the exoticism and "otherness" in "Turandot" have mainly focused on the exploration of Eastern culture and identity. However, there are still some shortcomings in these studies, such as the lack of in-depth research on Puccini's creative intention and background, and the lack of a comprehensive exploration of the identity and culture of the "other" in the work. Therefore, future research can comprehensively explore the identity and culture of the "others" in the work, including their historical, cultural, and social backgrounds. In conclusion, "Turandot" is a work full of exoticism and "otherness", which shows Puccini's attention to and exploration of Oriental culture and multiculturalism. Future research can expand and deepen the meaning and value of this work from multiple perspectives.

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