

# “Originated in China”: Western opera and international practices in the Beijing National Centre for the Performing Arts

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## ABSTRACT

The international reputation of Western operas – with artists and producers moving across the world’s opera houses – has become even more global in recent years. Nevertheless, the field of opera has never been analyzed in terms of strategies to foster this vocation in line with the development of the emerging markets outside Europe. China is one of the most flourishing among them in terms of the creation of grand theaters able to perform Western opera together with a strong indigenous op-era tradition. Due to the novelty of such appealing context, a case study analysis would provide an evidence-based account of the questions raised as to how this ambivalence is managed: How does a Chinese opera house performing Western opera find its legitimacy in the international arena? Which are the artistic and production strategies fitting under the definition of international practices? Why is the Chinese context appealing to the Western opera industry? This paper, therefore, aims to address such questions by examining the international practices of the National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA) in Beijing, in view of the process of building a reputation in the global opera network, with a particular focus on the artistic program, casting choices, the attractive power of the theatre and the exchange of expertise between Western and Chinese operatic contexts.

## Keywords:

Western opera

China

Globalization

Cultural identity

Internationalization

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## Introduction

### ***Globalization, cultural identity and internationalization: the case of opera***

In his comprehensive chapter on globalization and cultural economy, Throsby (2008) argues that the interaction between the economic and cultural consequences of globalization has resulted in a crisis of value. His position focuses on the effect of different cultures upon each other, thus generating the risk of loss of cultural identity. A different perspective is proposed by Leung et al (2005), with an emphasis on the increasing importance of each national culture, recalling Hofstede's theories<sup>1</sup> (Hofstede, 1980 & 1984). Apparently opposite perspectives, one concerned with the possible risk of losing identity through the cultural melting pot, and the other

asserting a strengthening of national identity, they do not exclude each other, but may rather be framed in a logic of cause and effect. Driven by the underlying assumption that works of art play a decisive role in the development of a country's identity and citizens' education, Throsby (2008 & 2010) argues that countries react to globalization by trying to shelter art goods from market forces in order to prevent the replacement of original national creative products by imported forms, a process that would ultimately dilute the country's image (Grefe, 2008). This theoretical frame-

work refers to countries which are somehow affected by the spread of a dominant culture. Alongside, Rogers (2006) defines the use "of one culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture – regardless of intent, ethics, function, or outcome" (Rogers, 2006: 476), as a process of cultural appropriation. He further classifies it into four categories: (a) the exploitative cultural appropriation, in which members of the dominant culture appropriate without reciprocity, permission and com-

pensation; (b) appropriation as cultural dominance, referring to the use of a dominant culture's elements by members of a subordinated culture in a context in which the dominant culture has been imposed; (c) appropriation as cultural exchange, reflecting reciprocal exchanges of elements between cultures with similar levels of authority, and finally the (d) appropriation as transculturation, whereby cultural elements are the result of multiple cultures, so that the identification of a single originating culture becomes problematic. From the research perspective, this discourse is particularly relevant for those new countries<sup>2</sup>, such as China, importing Western opera<sup>3</sup> despite having their own ancient music theatre tradition.

The issue of cultural identity, defined by Triandis as the broad ideological framework of a country (Triandis, 1994) is probably the most relevant and immediate aspect motivating the internationalization of opera. The shared perception of opera as

## **“THE SHARED PERCEPTION OF OPERA AS NATIONAL HERITAGE GENERATES AN IMPROVEMENT PROCESS OF A COUNTRY'S IMAGE ABROAD, WITH ITS ROOTS STEMMING FROM THE COMPLEX INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN OPERA AND NATIONALISM ”**

national heritage generates an improvement process of a country's image abroad, with its roots stemming from the complex interconnection between opera and nationalism. Opera performances and opera houses physically contribute to creating national identities, often acting through national showcases and representing a country's political, social and economic status (Bereson, 2002: 2). Through the argument of identity, international recognition of a cultural institution becomes a key factor: it is a way to pursue international celebration but also to stimulate the citizens' understanding

and hence their willingness to support opera houses. International projects – being aimed at educational or cultural developments – are deeply intertwined with the interests of politics, in view of the exposure of a country's art and culture to overseas audiences. Such operations are framed into a long-standing tradition of wider political purposes behind international cultural relations, a component of the so-called soft power<sup>4</sup>, with the aim of fostering harmonious diplomatic alliances. In this landscape, opera too can be

1 In his work "Cultural dimensions in management and planning", Hofstede (1984) considers management skills as culturally specific, and discusses how national cultural differences affect the validity of management techniques and philosophies in various countries, stressing the difficulties in creating a global managerial culture.

2 In this study the term "new markets" or "new countries" refers to Bereson's (2002) definition of "Other operas" with some implementations. She groups South America, Africa, Asia and Asia Minor arguing that "They all in some way have taken opera from the European operatic tradition and translated it into their own environment" (Bereson, 2002: 77).

3 The term is used in order to distinguish the European operatic tradition from comparable art forms from other parts of the world. Common terminology on classical music refers to Western classical music, indicating the tradition started in Italy at the end of the 16th century (with Jacopo Peri's lost *Dafne*, produced in Florence in 1598).

4 The term soft power, originally coined by the Harvard professor Joseph S. Nye (2004), refers exactly to the ability of a nation to influence the behavior of other countries in attracting and persuading them to adopt their own goals. Nye's (2004) notion of soft power highlights the link between attractiveness and the ability to influence others in international relations.

## “CHINA IS IN POSSESSION OF A DEEP-ROOTED AND ANCIENT INDIGENOUS OPERA TRADITION WHICH WAS EXTENSIVELY INFLUENCED BY THE WESTERN GENRE AND GAVE RISE IN THE 1950s TO THE MODERN CHINESE OPERA ”

considered an agent of soft power within two major perspectives: one focusing on the European context, reliant on the competitive advantages derived from opera, and the other converging on the Chinese market, directed in building operatic venues to perform operas drawn from the European operatic tradition. The two aspects can be seen simply as different facets of the same phenomenon called internationalization.

### ***Chinese Western opera context and significance of the NCPA***

The history of Western opera in China must be framed within modern and contemporary Chinese political, social, cultural and economic changes, and the parallel evolution of traditional Chinese opera. Although pioneering European opera companies touring China arrived to Shanghai around the mid-1870s (Melvin, 2014)<sup>5</sup>, the broad consumption of Western opera in China is relatively recent and was strongly stimulated by the effects of the pursuit of market liberalization through economic reforms started by Deng Xiaoping in 1978: an extraordinary urbanization drive in the post-1990s and the emergence of a growing upper middle class keen to consume foreign culture in the 2000s (Chen, 2007; Yeh et al, 2011).

China is in possession of a deep-rooted and ancient indigenous opera tradition<sup>6</sup> which was extensively influenced by the Western genre and gave rise in the 1950s to the modern Chinese opera (*geju*)<sup>7</sup> (Chin, 1982). The institutionalization of both traditional and modern Chinese opera after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1st October 1949 contributed to a strengthened national identity and to legitimating the Chinese Communist Party's authority: state opera houses were established for each of the 360 styles of Chinese opera and a large amount

of public funding was directed into sustaining production, which was moreover experiencing a change in contents and style influenced by the Stanislavsky method<sup>8</sup> (Haili, 2016; Mackerras, 2008).

The recent massive employment of internationally celebrated “starchitects” enriching Chinese major cities with marvelous opera houses corroborates how opera trends broadly reflect those in the country as a whole (Mackerras, 2008: 2013). To the extent of my knowledge, there is no up-to-date study comprehensively listing all art venues able to host opera companies. The most exhaustive attempt is the one by Victoria Newhouse, who researched the architecture of new opera houses and concert halls around the world (Newhouse, 2012b). Despite her attention on the technical aspect of this phenomenon, her article “Houses of the rising sun” (Newhouse, 2012a) stresses two important features of most newly built Chinese theatres: 1) their artistic programs, not typically operatic, and 2) their structure, as all-encompassing buildings hosting other smaller theatres and cultural venues. At the moment it is estimated that about 50 theaters in China (Stabler, 2013; Allison, 2012) stage operas or hybrid musicals: Beijing NCPA, Shanghai Grand Theatre, Guangzhou, Hangzhou and Tianjin opera houses are the most famous ones in the country, all built by acclaimed Western architects following a broader market policy agenda, centered on branding and promotion (Ren, 2011), developing global city status, and constructing shared national and city identities (Kong, 2007). Some of these venues are renowned for their performances of Western opera, namely the NCPA and the Shanghai Grand Theatre, whereas others, such as the Chongqing Grand Theatre, have more varied programs, which allow performances of Western operas by guest companies but whose seasons are not entirely dedicated to opera.

Data<sup>9</sup> shows that the majority of theatres was inaugurated after 2004. Furthermore, as seen in figure 1, there has been a new wave of arts venue construc-

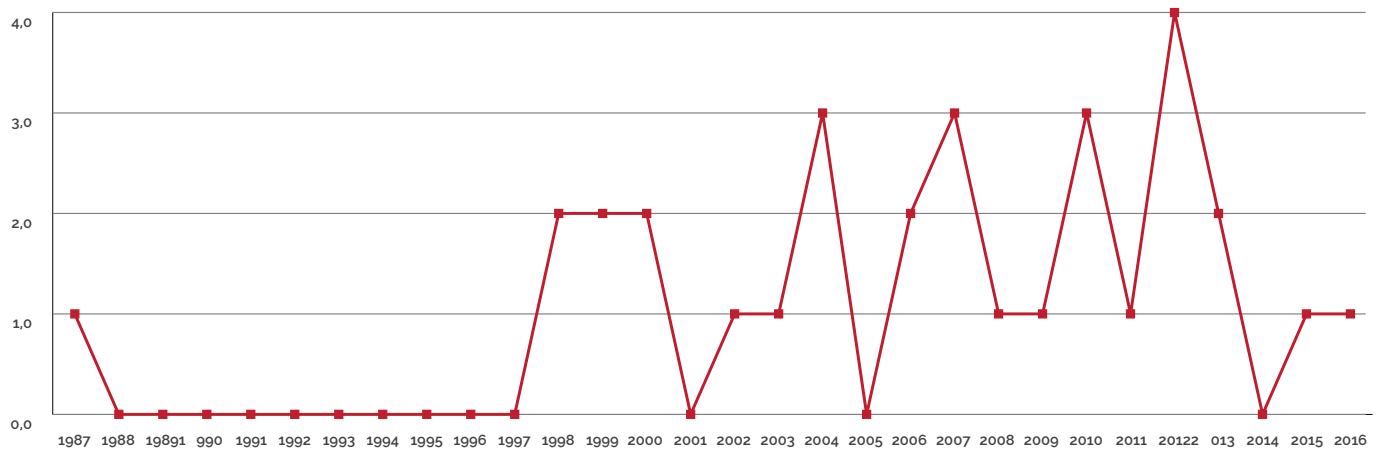
5 The first Italian opera troupe visited China in 1879. During its first visit to Shanghai, Augusto Cagli's Royal Italian Opera company performed *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, and *Ernani* – and *Donizetti* by Verdi, Rossini's *Barbiere di Siviglia* and Gounod's *Faust* (Melvin, 2014).

6 Chinese opera (*xiqu*) is a popular form of drama and musical theatre with numerous regional branches. Its roots are estimated to go back to the third century BC.

7 The term *geju* (song drama) refers to Chinese contemporary classical opera and was created under the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) influence, combining Chinese and Western music and drama techniques (Brandon & Banham, 1997).

8 The Stanislavsky method influenced first the production style favoring director-led productions and extending rehearsals periods. Opera's content and style were also influenced by the realist system of acting, owing its origin especially to the Russian director (Haili, 2016; Mackerras, 2008).

9 Data on theatres built was collected from relevant journals and books, daily or periodic general newspapers, online sources, the platform *Operabase.com*, books and interviews held in China during the fieldwork in 2014.



**FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF OPERA HOUSES BUILT IN CHINA AND PROJECTS TO BE COMPLETED (1987-2015)**

Source: Author's own elaboration.

tion since 2010, including three large-scale ongoing projects. Thus, contrary to expectations, this construction boom is not directly linked with the advent of the 2008 Olympics, but seems to be part of a more complex process of transformation of the Chinese Party-state into a force for architectural globalization, financing iconic projects as a demonstration of the Chinese geopolitical power (Ren, 2011). "If you want to find the level of a city, you ask if they have an opera house. If they do, it's a progressive, developed city" (Melvin & Cai, 2004: 301) said the composer Xiao Bai, to provokingly express the importance attached to a city's image through opera houses.

As distinct from Europe, Western opera performances in China are mostly staged in multi-purpose venues able to host different types of performing arts productions (Newhouse, 2012a), and they focus on the most renowned opera titles, often performed with a sensational and extravagant staging. One example is the 2000 *Aida* in Shanghai, with two orchestras, 500 chorus singers, 60 ballet dancers, 1,000 actors, 300 acrobats and various animals (Melvin & Cai, 2004). These venues become an attraction themselves, able to influence the captivate potential audience as in the case of Carnegie Hall, La Scala or the Sydney Opera House (Ouellet et al, 2008), but they are often designed as containers to be filled, whose artistic strategies might be an issue to think about only after the project is over (Melvin, 2010). This explains the need for the expertise of international professionals, capable of laying the foundation for a structured project concerning Western opera. For instance, the Canadian artist manager Wray Armstrong was appointed as the Tianjin's Grand Theater Director of International Programming and Giuseppe Cuccia is the consultant for Western opera productions at the NCPA (Malitz, 2013). Correspondingly, the Chinese government has also been investing in education with projects such as "I sing Beijing", introducing Mandarin as a lyric language, and with the establishment of conservatories specialized in Western music (e.g. the Sichuan Conservatory).

Nevertheless, while the architectural boom and the massive introduction of Western opera suggest a willingness to spread an imported tradition that is considered prestigious, holding "special status in contemporary Chinese society (...) in some ways superior to China's own music because it is more scientific, or heroic, or international" (Melvin & Cai, 2004: 307), the new tendency of the government cultural policy suggests a detachment from this propensity. The 12th Chinese five-year plan (2011-2015) introduced vigorous changes in the domain of cultural policy with a strategy aiming at maximizing cultural development as an active contributor to the country's GDP. This policy change is also reflected on the willingness of the Chinese government to use opera for the promotion of traditional Chinese culture as an antidote to Westernization (Sun, 2009). This attitude is also mentioned by the Director of the Beijing Italian Cultural Institute, Stefania Stafutti: "Right now the political attention is paid to the enhancement of the local heritage, the willingness to recover a precious heritage that has been neglected for years and that the world does not yet fully know" (interview to Stefania Stafutti, Director of the Beijing Italian Cultural Institute, Beijing, 12th September 2014).

Within this framework, the NCPA project responds to both of the cultural tendencies, by virtue of the mixture of performing arts and the coexistence of a local artistic line intersecting with the international thrust. Its wholeness and grandeur raise it as a cultural monument of the nation, a symbol of a new opening, a center of artistic trade and cultural creation where Chinese and Western culture coexist and enhance each other, rapidly fostering the NCPA's reputation in the international arena.

## Methodology

The examination of the international practices of the Beijing National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA) has involved both quantitative and qualitative approaches and was based on four main thematic categories: the history and organizational structure of the NCPA, the analysis of its artistic program, the western opera casting process, and finally the attractive power of the NCPA on international artists.

The data on the artistic program and casting were collected from the NCPA website under the heading "opera" and were gathered from theatre's booklets and from the professional database *Operabase.com*, considering the period from 2011 to 2014<sup>10</sup>. The considered time frame fits in with the aim of the study since it corresponds to a change in the artistic management strategy with the recruitment of Giuseppe Cuccia as consultant for Western opera in March 2011. The collected data is arranged on an annual basis and includes the list of opera productions put on stage, the typology of opera (Western or Chinese), the number of performances, the production system (new productions and revivals) and the presence of Western and Chinese singers in the soloist roles of each performance.

Data were then integrated with other external sources such as permanent exhibitions on opera production at the NCPA, newspaper articles and dedicated publications, together with in-depth, semi-structured interviews during a research trip following the entire production of 2014's *Norma*, a national premiere at the NCPA. Interviews were conducted with Giuseppe Cuccia, the NCPA Italian consultant for Western opera, the NCPA music coordinator, *Norma's* creative team, Western and Chinese singers engaged in the production, the Italian coach for Chinese singers and the Director of Beijing Italian Cultural Institute. These interviews provide the opportunity to deeply understand the institutional vision and to further assess the reputation-enhancing strategy from the point of view of a new Chinese theatre performing Western opera.

## Analysis

### *Chinese Western opera context and significance of the NCPA*

The National Centre for the Performing Arts was founded in December 2007 as a component of the magnificent venues built on occasion of the Beijing Olympic Games. As a symbol of the Chinese reform, it testifies the government's engagement in developing arts and culture as a component of a long term economic vision (O'Connor & Xin, 2006). On the other hand, the NCPA has become the subject of widespread discussions not only due to its futuristic appearance, but also because its construction replaced dozens of traditional *hútòng*<sup>11</sup>. These debates led to a wide dissemination of nicknames, extremely representative of social reactions to a project of this scale: supporters call it "water pearl", detractors label it "duck egg" (Melvin & Cai, 2004; Andreu, 2007), and some workers refer to it as "spaceship", alluding to the underground rehearsal rooms and offices. Specifically, the complex designed by French "starchitect" Paul Andreu is composed of a titanium circular shell covered with glass and surrounded by a lake which makes the building accessible only through a hallway underneath the water. Andreu himself motivated the iconic shape of his construction with both a symbolic and a cultural explanation, by stating that the particular entrance highlights the passage into the world of opera and the whole building recalls principles of ancient Chinese cosmology<sup>12</sup> (Moore, 2008).

The cultural centre is located between the Great Hall of the People and Tiananmen square, a position stressing its national importance (Andreu, 2007), and it stands in vivid contrast with the surrounding *hútòng* area, an aspect which has been considered a tangible glimpse of the Chinese social paradox (Bereson, 2002; Melvin & Cai, 2004). Construction works started in December 2001 with an initial planned cost of 2.688 billion renminbi (\$393.7 million USD), which rose to more than 3.2 billion renminbi (\$468.7 million USD) at the time of completion<sup>13</sup>. It is composed of three main halls: the Music Hall, designated for concerts, the Theatre Hall, used mainly for plays and some traditional Chinese operas, and the biggest Opera Hall, for opera

10 It has been preferred not to consider 2015 in the analysis, since at the time of the investigation the season was still ongoing and data on guest companies was incomplete. An exception was made for the list of new productions because I was able to consult the list of new Western titles previewed for the whole season, which is fundamental in order to get an overview of the evolution in the artistic choices.

11 *Hútòng* (胡同) are Beijing historical narrow streets hosting traditional courtyard residences.

12 In his articles Robbie Moore (2008) explains that the building wasn't built with feng shui references. Although Andreu's project received critics for its lack of symbolism, the egg shape floating in a lake has been interpreted recalling the beginnings of the universe as imagined by ancient Chinese cosmology.

13 Data retrieved from *The Egg Building in China – National Centre for Performing Arts*, 2 March 2010. Available at: <http://twistedstifer.com/2010/03/the-egg-building-beijing-china/> (accessed 12 March 2015).



## “NCPA’S MANAGEMENT MODEL IS ENVISAGED TO ENSURE A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INSTITUTION, TO PRIORITIZE PUBLIC WELFARE WHILE MAINTAINING HIGH ARTISTIC STANDARDS, AND TO ALLOW IT TO BECOME AN INTERNATIONALLY WELL-KNOWN ART BRAND MAINTAINING ITS CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS”

and ballet, with a total audience capacity of 5,452. Due to the presence of three big theatres in the same venue, a variety of performances can be put on stage at the same time. An additional “Fifth space”, hosting the Olive Hall, the Grand Foyer, shops, bars and restaurants, is designed for exhibitions and concerts.

Approximately 60% of the NCPA budget is subsidized by the central government and the Beijing Municipality, while the rest of the revenues come from the box office, individuals’ donations, foundations and corporations (Dongbei Academy of Economic & Social Development, 2004). The leadership of the NCPA is represented by the Beijing Committee of CPC and Beijing Municipality guided by the Ministry of Culture.

The President of the NCPA, Chen Ping, is also the Vice Chairman of Beijing Municipal Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the President and Secretary of the CPC NCPA committee<sup>14</sup>. Alongside him, an operation managers’ team works with an artistic director for each theater: art, drama, dance and music. Due to the presence of three theatres in one enormous performing centre, the organization chart is extremely complex and comprehends 22 departments and 17 major operational systems. As stated by the NCPA, this management model is envisaged to ensure a sustainable development of the institution, to prioritize public welfare while maintaining high artistic standards, and to allow it to become an internationally well-known art brand maintaining its Chinese characteristics<sup>15</sup>. The institution proclaims itself as the top performing arts centre of China aiming to emerge as: (1) a key member of prestigious international theatres; (2) the supreme palace of performing arts in China; (3) the leader of arts education and outreach; (4) the biggest platform for international arts exchange; (5) an important base for cultural and creative industry.

Since 2008, the NCPA has been organizing each year the NCPA World Theatre Forum, an international conference where representatives of the most famous theaters of the world discuss the future of opera. Through this annual meeting, 59 Chinese and international opera houses have subscribed a cooperation agreement with the intention to collaborate in the artistic production and in education programs (Comerford, 2013).

### ***Artistic Productivity: NCPA and programming choices***

The NCPA performing company consists of a large orchestra officially established in 2010, a chorus formed in 2009 and a group of supporting and leading solo singers. There is neither a ballet company nor a children’s choir within the NCPA. Operas are usually performed in the opera hall with a capacity of 2,416 seats, using the internal orchestra and Chinese soloists pertaining to the theatre. Occasionally the orchestra requires outsourcing due to commitments arising from the symphonic season of the same institution. Since its establishment, the NCPA has invited and engaged many of the internationally renowned singers who flank or alternate the Chinese cast with Western operas.

The artistic repertory in opera is not controlled strictly by one person, but is jointly arranged by the artistic director and the general manager with variances among theatres (Agid & Tarondeau, 2010; Caves, 2000; Sgourev, 2012). In some cases, the artistic director’s choices deeply depend on the propositions of the internal music conductor, and the general director expresses his judgment primarily in terms of feasibility and economic sustainability of the program. This happens mainly in theatres with a renowned principal conductor (e.g. Zubin Mheta at Opera di Firenze), whereas in other theatres the authority in repertory decisions could be given almost completely to the artistic director (e.g. Teatro Real in Madrid [Sgourev, 2012]) or to the general manager (e.g. Metropolitan Opera in New York [Sgourev, 2012]). The case of the NCPA is slightly different: since the NCPA performs both Chinese and Western opera, four years after the inauguration, a Western opera consultant was recruited within the opera department. As a result, even though proposals for the season are formally presented by the artistic director to the general director, there is in fact a division of tasks between the consultant, who is entirely in charge of the Western opera selection, and the artistic director, responsible for the Chinese opera season at the NCPA. The final and binding approval comes in both cases from the general director, who may validate or not the proposals of the artistic department.

<sup>14</sup> Information retrieved from the organizational structure proposed by NCPA theatre’s exhibition.

<sup>15</sup> In the theatre’s permanent exhibition it is clearly stated that NCPA aims to become a “Worldclass with Chinese characteristics”.

| Nr. | Year | Title                          | Co-production         | Nr. | Year | Title                       | Co-production                            |
|-----|------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----|------|-----------------------------|--|
| 1   | 2008 | <i>Turandot</i>                |                       | 17  | 2013 | <i>Les Contes d'Hoffman</i> |  |
| 2   | 2009 | <i>Magic Flute</i>             | Oslo Opera House      | 18  | 2013 | <i>Otello</i>               |  |
| 3   | 2009 | <i>Madama Butterfly</i>        | La Fenice Venezia     | 19  | 2013 | <i>Nabucco</i>              |  |
| 4   | 2009 | <i>Boheme</i>                  |                       | 20  | 2013 | <i>Le Nozze di Figaro</i>   |  |
| 5   | 2009 | <i>Rigoletto</i>               | Teatro Regio di Parma | 21  | 2013 | <i>L'italiana In Algeri</i> |  |
| 6   | 2010 | <i>Traviata</i>                |                       | 22  | 2014 | <i>Evgenij Onegin</i>       | Marinsky Saint Peterburg                 |
| 7   | 2010 | <i>Gianni Schicchi</i>         |                       | 23  | 2014 | <i>Il trovatore</i>         |  |
| 8   | 2010 | <i>Carmen</i>                  |                       | 24  | 2014 | <i>Cavalleria Rusticana</i> |  |
| 9   | 2011 | <i>L'elisir d'Amore</i>        |                       | 25  | 2014 | <i>Pagliacci</i>            |  |
| 10  | 2011 | <i>Tosca</i>                   |                       | 26  | 2014 | <i>Norma</i>                |  |
| 11  | 2011 | <i>Die Fledermaus</i>          |                       | 27  | 2014 | <i>Don Pasquale</i>         |  |
| 12  | 2011 | <i>La Cenerentola</i>          |                       | 28  | 2015 | <i>Andrea Chenier</i>       |  |
| 13  | 2011 | <i>Il Barbiere di Siviglia</i> |                       | 29  | 2015 | <i>Der Rosenkavalier</i>    |  |
| 14  | 2012 | <i>Der fliegende Holländer</i> |                       | 30  | 2015 | <i>Aida</i>                 |  |
| 15  | 2012 | <i>Un ballo in maschera</i>    |                       | 31  | 2015 | <i>Simon Boccanegra</i>     |  |
| 16  | 2012 | <i>Lohengrin</i>               |                       | 32  | 2015 | <i>Samson and Dalila</i>    | Teatro Regio Torino and Opera di Firenze |

**TABLE1. NEW WESTERN OPERA PRODUCTIONS BY NCPA FROM ITS OPENING TO 2015**

Source: Author's own elaboration based on NCPA data.

There are three main factors affecting the composition of the artistic program. First, the choice of the season's titles is made according to guiding principles with educational purposes. The aim is to create a Western opera culture starting from the opera classics. The second factor taken into consideration is theme, exploring the possibility of building a season celebrating, for instance, contingent composers' anniversaries (e.g. bicentenary from Verdi's and Wagner's birth). The third factor is the availability of relevant suitable artists (singers, stage directors and conductors). This last point suggests a strategy prioritizing artistic quality and laying the foundations for an illustrious international reputation.

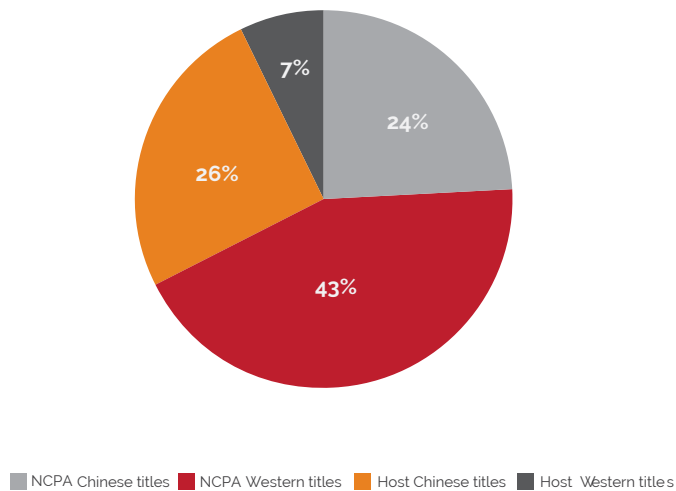
As presented in table 1, since 2008, the NCPA has produced a total of 32 Western opera productions,

which is noteworthy for a relatively new performing arts centre that not only performs two different opera traditions, but also produces other performing art forms such as dance and music<sup>16</sup>.

The share of Western opera productions from 2011 to 2014 corresponds to an average of approximately 50% in the whole NCPA opera program, in perfect balance with the number of productions of Chinese opera in the same period represented by the remaining 50%. But a detailed composition of productions shows that the majority of in-house productions is Western, corresponding to an average of approximately 43% of the whole NCPA opera production. On the other hand, the majority of guest productions is Chinese, which covers 26% of the whole NCPA productions, while guest Western opera productions rep-

<sup>16</sup> For example, considering the biggest Western opera houses, the Metropolitan of New York presents 30 operas annually (Sgourev, 2012), in 1998 the Deutsche Oper Berlin and the English National Opera presented respectively 36 and 22 different productions (Auvinen, 2001). Although these data are on annual basis, NCPA appears in line with such standards considering that it is producing not exclusively Western opera and that it is a newer institution.

resent only 7% of the whole program. As presented in figure 2, the data shows how the NCPA produces mostly in-house Western opera while hosting most of the Chinese opera productions, which can be explained through reason of accessibility and proximity. In fact most of the guest opera companies come from other Chinese cities, Taiwan and Korea. These measures indicate the high importance given to the proliferation of Western opera within the artistic agenda.



**FIGURE 2. THE COMPOSITION OF THE OPERA PRODUCTIONS WITHIN THE NCPA PROGRAM (2011-2014)**

Source: Author's own elaboration based on NCPA data.

As it can be seen in table 1, the list of Western opera productions describes exactly the didactic path which Giuseppe Cuccia, the Western opera consultant, is trying to follow. His arrival in 2011 corresponds to a change in the artistic agenda testified by a more refined choice of titles, moving the selection from catchy and popular operas such as Puccini's masterpieces, towards more complex compositions both from the musical and thematic point of view, from Wagner to Bellini's *Norma*. Furthermore, the list of co-productions reveals a general opening to the international market and a tendency to collaborate with important and renowned theatres from abroad, which can be interpreted as an attempt to build an international reputation. This attitude, supported by interviews, is more evident during the first years of the theatre, when the absence of a Western opera expert has been overcome through cooperation with prominent opera houses to establish the NCPA's reputation and create an internationally recognized value within the field. It is important to state that the NCPA collaborates more likely with famous theatres, considering the name of the institution as a fundamental criterion in the partnership selection. This is because collaboration with the Marijnski Theatre or with the Royal Opera House can easily increase the theatre's reputation while a co-production with a smaller and less known institution is less trenchant in terms of visibility<sup>17</sup>, an attitude proved by the list of co-production partners so far.

Overall, the NCPA presents approximately 86 opera performances annually, including both Western and Chinese operas, in a system of 4 seasons

| Year  | NCPA                           |                           |                           | Guest companies                 |                            |                            | Total nr. of performances |
|-------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
|       | Total nr. of NCPA performances | Western NCPA performances | Chinese NCPA performances | Total nr. of guest performances | Western guest performances | Chinese guest performances |                           |
| 2011  | 74                             | 47                        | 27                        | 11                              | 0                          | 11                         | 85                        |
| 2012  | 70                             | 26                        | 44                        | 37                              | 7                          | 30                         | 107                       |
| 2013  | 58                             | 45                        | 13                        | 5                               | 4                          | 1                          | 63                        |
| 2014  | 82                             | 53                        | 29                        | 7                               | 4                          | 3                          | 89                        |
| Total | 284                            | 171                       | 113                       | 60                              | 15                         | 45                         | 344                       |

**TABLE 2. NUMBER OF PERFORMANCES (2011-2015, ON AN ANNUAL BASIS)**

Source: Author's own elaboration based on NCPA data.

<sup>17</sup> From the interview with Giuseppe Cuccia, the Western Opera Consultant if NCPA, Beijing, 3rd September 2014.



## “THE STRONG PRESENCE OF WESTERN OPERA PRODUCTIONS REVEALS PRECISELY THE IMAGE THAT THE NCPA IS STRIVING TO SHAPE; AN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED PERFORMING ARTS THEATRE WITH LOCAL ROOTS, ABLE TO STAGE BOTH THE OPERA TYPES AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS”

corresponding to the solar periods starting from September and running until July. Regarding the type of production, there had been 284 in-house opera performances in total from 2011 until 2014, while the total number of guest companies' opera performances corresponds to 60 for the same period. As it can be deduced from the share of guest companies' opera performances, that corresponds to 17% on average for the period 2011-2014, the majority of the opera performances belong to in-house productions of NCPA. Table 2 summarizes the composition of the opera performances at the NCPA.

As far as the average life of a production is concerned, it is aimed by the artistic directory to annually stage every Western opera production on an average of four performances, while the average number of performances per production is two for both Chinese opera and guest companies' productions. This artistic goal is reflected in the statistical results which show how Western and Chinese operas are produced on an average of five Western and three Chinese new operas per year. These measures together with the higher percentage of Western in-house opera productions within the artistic program, reveal the prominence of the Western opera in comparison to the local opera tradition in the artistic program. The strong presence of Western opera productions reveals precisely the image that the NCPA is striving to shape; an internationally recognized performing arts theatre with local roots, able to stage both the opera types at the highest levels. The lower weight of Chinese opera productions within the artistic program can be explained looking at the territory through three possible reasons: (1) the scarcity of Western opera programs in Chinese mainland which sees the NCPA as the main center representing this form of art, (2) the number of companies in the territory specialized in Chinese opera favoring the outsourcing process, and (3) the aim of the NCPA to position itself as an international theatre.

Considering these measures as a whole, data indicates 2011 as a year of adjustment followed by a balanced growth in the creation of new works, appearing to have stabilized in the last two years (please see figure 3 and figure 4 for the details). The purpose seems to be the creation of an average of five new Western and three Chinese operas per year, with approximately the same amount of revivals compared with the volume of new productions. 2011 and 2012 are diametrically opposed in terms of new productions and revivals, this can be brought back again to the testing of different production strategies and to available budget possibilities for each specific year.

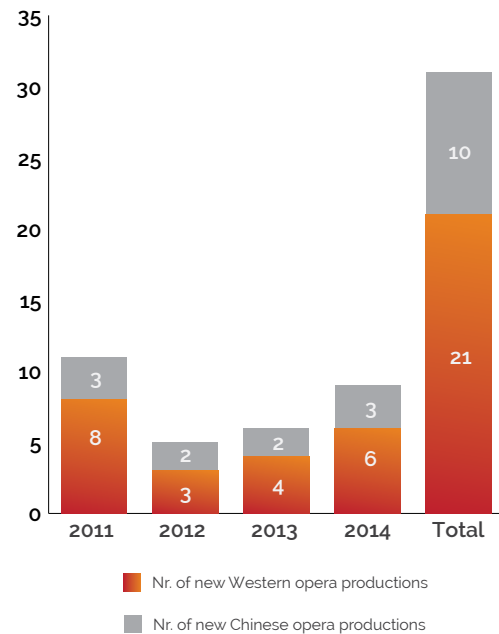


FIGURE 3. THE SHARE OF NCPA NEW WESTERN AND NEW CHINESE IN-HOUSE OPERA PRODUCTIONS WITHIN THE PROGRAM (2011-2015, ON AN ANNUAL BASIS)

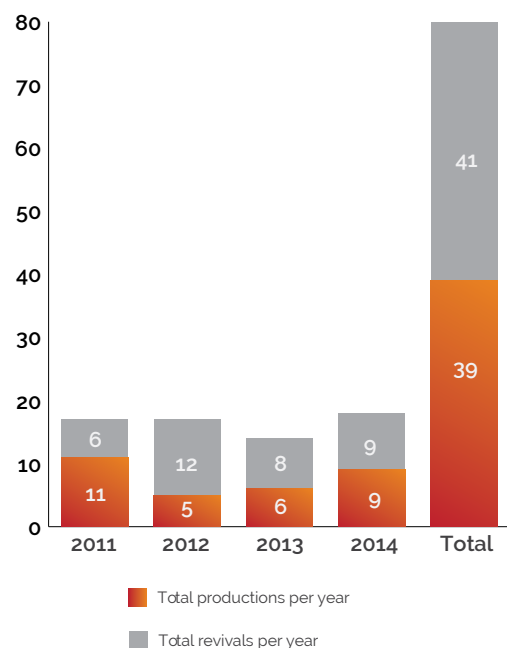


FIGURE 4. NCPA NEW OPERA PRODUCTIONS AND REVIVALS WITHIN THE PROGRAM (2011-2015, ON AN ANNUAL BASIS)

Source: Author's own elaboration based on NCPA data.

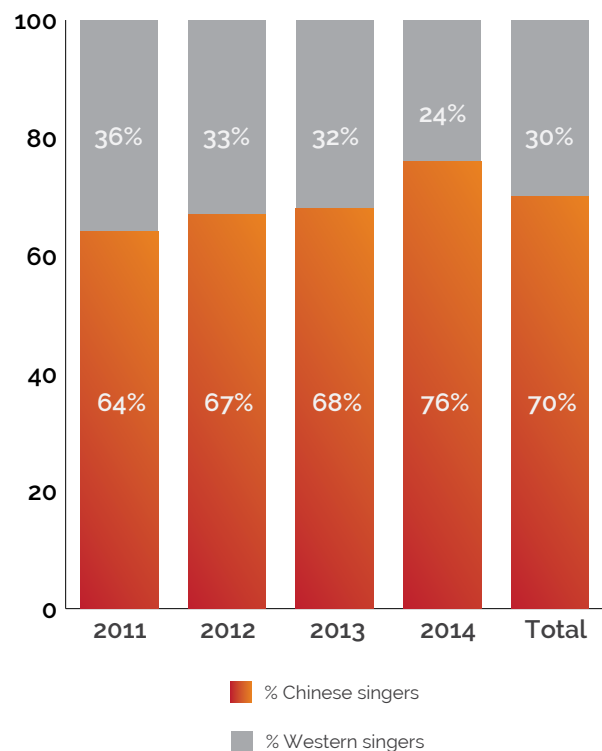
In 2013 the share between revivals and new productions seems to reach a balance: six new works and eight revivals are performed, and the following year the two variables are equal (see figure 4 for details). The NCPA hosts many guest companies, in particular dance performances, since it does not have a permanent dance company, whereas opera is hosted to a lesser extent. Though guest Western companies perform only Western opera for obvious reasons, Chinese companies are capable of dealing with Western opera as well (e.g. the China National Opera House Symphony Orchestra, a national opera company based in Beijing and founded in 1952<sup>18</sup>, often performs foreign operas at the NCPA Opera Theatre; the Shanghai Opera House was in tournée at the NCPA with Verdi's *Attila* in 2014).

The data also demonstrates a tendency to produce in situ and limit the presence of guest companies, with a constant trend after the settlement of 2011 and 2012. In this way the theater distinguishes itself from the "empty boxes to be filled" practice pursued by the most recently built Chinese theatres (Hays, 2008). Despite focusing on production to create a repertoire and an identity, the NCPA still leaves space for other companies, and gives crucial hints for becoming a national and international benchmark, with the associated benefit of expanding its audience and building trade potential for the future.

### ***Casting: the criteria behind casting choices and the balance between local and international artists***

In the NCPA, the choice of each opera title is followed by the designation of the creative team and the conductor. The stage director usually includes his personal set, costumes and lighting designers while the conductor establishes together with the consultant the version of the opera they intend to perform. On the other hand, costumes and set laboratories are outsourced and recruited through a public tender, prioritizing low costs as the selection criteria.

From 2011 to 2015 the theatre produced only six in-house operas with at least one Chinese member in the creative team<sup>19</sup>. While the Chinese creative team for Western opera is rare, the presence of Chinese conductors is frequent, also because the NCPA holds a principal conductor, Liu Jia, and a permanent orchestra conductor / artistic director of Music, Chen Zuohuang.



**FIGURE 5. CHINESE AND WESTERN SOLOIST SINGERS IN WESTERN OPERAS (% , 2011-2014)**

Source: Author's own elaboration based on NCPA data.

The NCPA proposes mostly two alternating casts: until 2011 there was a clearer division between the Western and Chinese cast, mainly because operas were often hired entirely from Western theaters. Over time, the casting has become increasingly mixed. Nevertheless, a division remains in the leading roles of the *premieres*, when one cast is composed of international artists for the main roles and by Chinese singers for minor roles. In the re-staging of in-house opera productions, however, the cast is often entirely Chinese. Data shows the relation between the share of Chinese and Western cast in Western opera productions. As seen in figure 5, after an initial decrease probably due to two more arduous Wagner productions put on stage in 2012, the Chinese cast is gradually growing. The casting choices affect the institution in three parallel ways related to quality of production, image of the theatre and financial effects. The first aspect is related to the recognition of a different preparation between casts who are performing roles for the first time and casts who perform them routinely ensuring less risky performances on a certain quality standard<sup>20</sup>. The theatre is investing massively on the

<sup>18</sup> The company is sustained by the Ministry of Culture and consists of a dance troupe, a chorus, a symphony orchestra and a stage design department.

<sup>19</sup> *Turandot*, *Gianni Schicchi*, *Tosca* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* in 2011 and *L'Elisir d'amore* in 2015.

<sup>20</sup> To this purpose, it is interesting to consider Ken Smith's (2014) article reviewing *Norma* production. The article, despite the subjectivity of the opinion, states the superiority of the Chinese cast and demonstrates how the Western excellence is beginning to be questioned. To deepen the discourse on performance quality evaluation in opera, see Boerner and Renz (2008). According to their research on performances' subjective judgements by experts' and non-experts "opera goers", both the two categories formulate reliable judgements, experts discerning more aspects of an opera performance than the non-experts.

Chinese singers, who are followed by international tutors for pronunciation and for the preparation of their parts. It is of crucial importance that the NCPA demonstrates such a strong effort in educating artists, a visionary and strategic project that allows the theater to dispose of trained and experienced singers also for Western operas in the future.

### ***Attractive power for international artists and competencies exchange***

A strong contribution to the NCPA's international reputation derives from the effort in the creation of an experienced and knowledgeable human capital. This process is made possible through a transfer of expertise from international artists, creative teams and coaches to local artists and professionals.

The production of *Norma* lasted from mid August 2014 until the last performance held in September the 14th, and encompassed a production team composed by a lighting designer, a projection designer, an assistant to the set designer, a costume designer, a choreographer, a stage director and an assistant director, all of them Italians. As already mentioned, during the four performances two casts alternated: one composed mostly by Italian singers (three Italians, one Spanish and two secondary soloists who were Chinese) and the other one completely Chinese. In preparing them, a crucial role was attributed to the two rehearsal pianists working also as vocal coaches for the non-Italian speakers in the preparation of the *Norma*'s roles. One of them was born in China but was educated and worked in USA before joining the NCPA in the role of music coordinator; the second pianist is hired by the NCPA only for specific productions and at the time of *Norma* he was working in China for the 5th time. The role of the vocal coach is determinant in the process of transfer of competencies from the Italian operatic culture to Chinese artists, who are performing, mostly for the first time, routine roles for Western singers, as confirmed by one of the vocal coaches: "the NCPA is a Ferrari but it needs people able to explain how to drive it. The geographical distance from Western opera base countries becomes an obstacle for the Chinese singers' learning process and our presence here is a way to overcome such problem" (interview with the rehearsal pianist and vocal coach during the *Norma* production at NCPA, Beijing, 5th September 2014).

Rehearsals and creation phases are constantly followed by a team of interpreters, each one assigned to a specific production area. The majority are young Chinese students studying Italian language and culture and who had the opportunity to spend periods of time in Italy to improve their language skills. Despite their fluency, different cultural backgrounds still rep-

resent a problem in the transmission of information for the creative team: the translation does not always accurately reflect the idea of a stage director or the effect that a set designer would like to achieve, because it is not part of a shared knowledge between partners. For this very reason, the Director of the Beijing Italian Cultural Institute, Stefania Stafutti, is convinced that there are great opportunities for Italian Chinese speakers within the opera industry, a formula that, alongside Chinese interpreters, could become fundamental in making Italian creative teams' hints understandable and actionable<sup>21</sup>.

Almost all of the creative team indicated that they were attracted by the NCPA because of the economic treatment and the technical possibilities offered by the venue. Renowned stage directors, who were accustomed to creating productions within a certain cost during the "golden age" of Western theatres, are now limited in their creative potential by the reduced resources, often being asked to produce high quality output with minimum costs. The NCPA represents an *El Dorado* for them not only for its financial possibilities but also for the low cost of sets and costumes and for the technical means of the stage, matched only by the most advanced Western theaters. In this regard, the stage director of *Norma* underlined:

*I am considered a director who makes expensive productions because I use a lot of special sets. In Italy there aren't neither money nor means anymore: they allow me to make my complete productions only for openings or big events but every time my projects are considered too expensive, they suggest me to make cuts. Here in China it does not happen (stage director of Norma).*

The same attitude was shared by the more technical part of the staff: the light designer and the projection designer were also impressed by the astonishing precision and technological skills demonstrated by the technical personnel, despite the linguistic limits for the mutual communication.

Singers and creatives are attracted by the NCPA for its disposable income and ability to pay in comparison with European theatres, particularly in times of deep crisis. Chinese theatres pay a net amount per performance and the NCPA specifically provides hotel and transports for each artist hired by a contract, which is an exceptional treatment considering that usually singers must provide for themselves. Only one of them singing in the *Norma* production had worked already five times in China (three times for an opera in concert format and two times in a tournée with an Italian theatre) and was at his second performance at the NCPA.

21 From the interview to Stefania Stafutti, Director of the Beijing Italian Cultural Institute, Beijing, 12th September 2014.

| Role                    | Attraction factors  | Costraints   | Contact channel   | Previous experiences in China                        | Comments on competence transfer   |
|-------------------------|---|--|---|--|---|
| <i>Stage director</i>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Economic treatment</li> <li>-Technical and economic possibilities offered by the theatre</li> <li>-Possibility to make new contacts in a new context</li> </ul>                                     |  | Contact with the Italian artistic consultant                        | No   |   |
| <i>Conductor</i>        | China is an expanding market for opera  |  | Agency  | Yes (first time in 1993 but for symphonic music)     |   |
| <i>Choreographer</i>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Exploration of a new market</li> <li>-Economic treatment</li> <li>-Possibility to make new contacts in a new context</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Organization and expertise level still reduced</li> <li>-More than the necessary number of rehearsals</li> </ul> | Contact with the Italian artistic consultant and the stage director | Yes (first time in tournée with her Italian company) | "Everybody does everything and nobody has a specific knowledge in one field".   |
| <i>Costume designer</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Economic treatment</li> <li>-Technical and economic possibilities offered by the theatre</li> <li>-Visit a new country and make contacts in a new theatre</li> <li>-Explore a new market</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Quality standards in the creation of costumes different from the Western ones</li> </ul>                         | Stage director  | No   |   |
| <i>Light designer</i>   | Precision and technological skills  | Linguistic barriers in the relation with Chinese technicians   | Contact with the Italian artistic consultant and the stage director | Yes (2nd time at NCPA)                               | "They are already looking towards the future with the design of a production citadel, already aware of sustainability issues. They think about the second step when we are still at minus one". |

|                            |   |  |  |                |  |
|----------------------------|---|--|--|----------------|--|
| <i>Projection Designer</i> | Size and technical possibilities offered by venues  | Knowledge absence  | Contact with the stage director                          | Yes (3rd time) | "Opera is created with years of experience and exchange of information with experts or with those who have a deep-rooted opera industry culture. To establish a tradition is a very long process". |
| <i>Western singers</i>     | -Economic treatment<br>-Exploration of a new market | -Flexibility deficiency in an artistic environment requiring it<br>-Deficiencies in the organization<br>-Excessive rehearsal times<br>-Linguistic barriers in the relation with colleagues | -Agency<br>-Contact with the Italian artistic consultant |                | "The idea is that they are trying to bring as much as possible from the West to then be able to produce opera by themselves. But Rome wasn't built in a day".                                      |

**TABLE 3. NCPA ATTRACTION FACTORS, CONSTRAINTS, CONTACT CHANNELS, PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE IN CHINA AND CONSIDERATIONS ON COMPETENCE TRANSFER**

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Curiosity was a constant attraction factor for the younger singers and people working for the first time in China, whereas experienced singers were more interested in expanding their working relationships. All of them declared their impression of being invited prominently for an image factor and thanks to the presence of the Italian artistic consultant Giuseppe Cuccia who "cares about quality" (interview to a singer of *Norma*, Beijing, 9th September 2014). They all shared the anticipation of a future for Western opera in China made by Chinese singers and perceived the transfer of knowledge only as an incubation period. The selection criteria, based on a personal relationship between the artistic consultant and artists, confirms the crucial role of the former in the creation of a system for the transfer of expertise: with few exceptions employed through an agency (but still chosen in accordance with Giuseppe Cuccia), the other members of the team were hired through direct contact with Cuccia or through their collaboration with the stage director, reached by the artistic coordinator. As argued by the Italian light designer: "I don't perceive an effort by Ital-

ian opera houses towards implementing export strategies, the merit of the contacts between Italy and China goes to the presence of Italians here".

None of the sample interviewed noticed substantial differences in their working experience in comparison with other theatres. Among the constraints noticed by the team, inexperience is a constant factor sometimes creating difficulties in the daily job performance; most of the observations concerned organizational issues and stock of knowledge, with remarks on the need for flexibility in the performing arts environment. Such considerations stem from deep cultural differences between Europe and China: "On the management side I perceive a lack in flexibility and creativity, the personnel is still not skilled enough to be rigorous concerning Western opera, the sector needs flexibility and imagination. There is a strong effort to be precise but if a failure happens rigidity comes in, not realizing that it is normal for problems to arise" (interview to a singer of *Norma*, Beijing, 9th September 2014).



Finally, the NCPA is perceived by international artists as a theater with enormous possibilities and with all the characteristics to become an international leader, provided that the competencies exchange lasts as long as necessary to create a solid cultural foundation. For the interviewees, it remains dubious whether this type of exchange and cooperation is only a step to learn and work independently in the future or may actually represent a model of cooperation and mutual development for both opera traditions.

## Conclusion

This case study attempts to consider international practices in the cultural context of a receiver country, by studying a market which has shown a strong interest in Western opera. Therefore in this section I aim to draw some conclusions on the effects of opera internationalization, by providing an evidence-based account of the phenomenon through the analysis of the Beijing National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) as a case study. The investigation on how the institution creates its reputation among the world's best opera houses brings light on the process of transfer of competencies, whereby international opera experts are directly involved.

A descriptive analysis of the data on NCPA showed how Western and Chinese operas alternate throughout the seasons and, each year, an average of five Western and three Chinese new operas are produced. I observed that choices in the Western opera repertoire are entrusted to an Italian expert, whose strategy includes an educational aim for the Chinese audience. Furthermore, there is a tendency to increase the number and quality of in-house Western opera productions, as opposed to outsourcing. This is also verified by the casting choices, which are crucial in production quality, image of the theater and financial effects. Such decisions are directly connected with the internationalization practices of Western theaters, confirming the interest for high quality opera and the need for Western experts able to establish a skills transfer process.

The analysis shows that all of the creative team of *Norma* and Western singers were attracted by the NCPA's economic and technical possibilities, but differences in their perceptions emerged according to

the various roles: technical roles in need of a direct contact with the Chinese technical department were more impressed by the precision and technical skills of the NCPA personnel; the artistic roles focused instead on aspects of excessive rigidity and inexperience. However, such traits all positively affect the process of information exchange, while language seems a strong obstacle in spite of the presence of interpreters. These dynamics are sustained by a general interest towards a new market: a sense of curiosity prevails in younger artists, but the more experienced ones tend to be more interested in establishing new working relationships. Despite the constraints listed by the respondents, the attraction factors are dominant and suggest a growth path which the theater may focus on.

As Zur Nieden (2013) observes referring to the structure of the theaters newly built or renovated in the 19th century, the process of internationalization

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implies nationalization in order to be competitive with other nations at higher levels. This thought finds a perfect expression in the speech of the Chongqing Theatre president during the 5th NCPA World Theatre Forum: “We don't want the etiquette 'made in China' but 'originated in China’” (Comerford, 2013). These words concisely summarize the path taken by the NCPA and the Western operatic system in China through international practices. To invite illustrious Western conductors, singing coaches, costume designers, set designers and stage directors to work at the theatre is not just a showcase but part of a far-sighted educational project. With this idea in mind, it can be argued that the NCPA is pursuing a double strategy where inter-

nationalization acts both as aid to and final output of the nationalization process: education through internationalization by strengthening national competencies, and divulgation in the global arena through the finished product serving to build a positive international reputation.

The fact that NCPA is in the process of developing a world's unique arts production center (60,000 square meters) separated from the physical location of the theater, with rehearsal rooms, scenery, costumes workshops, storage space, and even a hotel for artists (Proust, 2014) supports a shared vision, manifested during the interviews, of the future of Western collaborations. Will the theatre continue to foster international exchanges even upon reaching a certain

independence or, on the contrary, as soon as the expertise is well established, will it act independently and produce its own repertoire privileging local artists and experts?

Meanwhile, the theater organized its first Italian tournée in conjunction with the EXPO 2015. The choice of the theater has been to perform the NCPA production of the new Chinese opera *Rickshaw Boy*, moving from a passive internationalization phase to an active one, by promoting a local product in the homeland of Western opera.

At this juncture, the interest demonstrated by China towards Western opera can be brought back to the classification of cultural appropriation by Rogers (2006). Although there is not yet a complete appropriation of Western opera canons by the Chinese culture, newly produced Chinese operas mixing genres (e.g. in the *Rickshaw Boy*) suggest continuity in the passage from the appropriation as cultural dominance, to the appropriation as transculturation. Basically, despite not being in a context in which a dominant culture has been imposed, China is increasingly moving from the use of a dominant culture's elements by members of a locally-based culture (Western opera and Chinese traditional and modern opera), to a situation in which elements created by multiple cultures melt. What is still lacking is the reciprocity of the exchange and this assumption confirms Demonet's (2013) position on the need to identify and enlarge new common paths between China and European music markets. Along this path, research has shown that the internationalization of opera allows a bridge to form between cultures, through mutual exchange not only of production but also of expertise.

Building its international reputation involved in fact that NCPA adopted a strategy based mainly on the process of transfer of expertise from Western opera experts, technicians and artists to Chinese artistic and technical personnel. This was made possible by mixing human resources both on the decisional level (a local artistic director flanked by an Italian Western opera consultant) and on the artistic and production level, by creating an environment where Western experts and singers work alongside Chinese NCPA employees and artists. In this regard, educational institutions specialized in Western music and Western opera houses may orient their work towards the creation of a tangible culture exchange between the countries.

The NCPA's history, Western opera development and the process of exchange of expertise towards a mechanism of appropriation of Western opera by China all reflect the still vivid struggle of the government, in a desire to preserve the Chinese past, and the modern need for social change, due to the relentless progress of the country. If the creation of the PRC in 1949 led to the institutionalization of the traditional performing arts, the policy shift after 1978 turned China into a modern industrialized power, attracting and welcoming foreign productions onto its stages and promoting a process of restoration of tra-

dition. The advent of Xi Jinping and his policy of "State Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics" (Lam, 2015: 175) suggests that this latent conflict is now stronger than ever and recalls a parallelism with the NCPA's effort to develop a Western opera with Chinese characteristics, a "Western opera originated in China", which gives continuity to Mackerras's (2008) assumption on performing arts as microcosm of the Chinese history, where politics still play a decisive role in their evolution.

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