Polyphony and politics: Representing and translating culture, race and gender in Puccini's Turandot

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ABSTRACT

In the context of a more radical and critical climate of opera performance and audience response, this article investigates the representation and performance of Chinese-related images, characters and themes in various productions of Puccini's *Turandot*, mainly those by Franco Zeffirelli, Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Chen Xinyi and Robert Wilson, with particular reference to their English and/or Chinese surtitles. It argues that, while the impression of contrived harmony in Puccini's mythologising of ancient China through yellowface performance is inevitably undermined by its contemporary cultural-political ramifications, the creative indeterminacy of the translational discourse can help to recover in this exquisite work the diversity and relevance that we deem necessary in our present time. Meanwhile, although cultural, racial and gender differences should be properly understood and duly respected in operatic contexts, it is imperative that representational and translational choices not be decided or evaluated by those considerations alone, that they not polarise into two warring ideological positions, i.e., Occidental versus Oriental, white versus non-white, male versus female.

KEYWORDS

Turandot, culture, race, gender, representation, translation, surtitle.

1. Introduction

The staging of opera constantly involves the choice between old and new, the vexed question of whether to produce works that are centuries old as they were originally conceived, or to update their content and setting for a modern theatrical audience. While the majority of the devotees of opera seems to find a number of its politically-incorrect elements unremarkable, gradually rising is a piquant awareness of the problematic nature of the unfavourable portrayal of the female sex and the partial representation of other (usually non-European) cultures in opera performances, as well as an urgent need to bring social relevance to this allegedly 'dying' art form by incorporating 'new work' that gives voice to ethnic and racial minorities into the repertoire[1]. Nevertheless, these ideas and practices have been received with mixed responses, as operagoers express concerns about the authentic style of operatic melodrama being bent to external pressure or even overwhelmed by the idiosyncrasy of directorship. Meanwhile, there are ongoing debates among singers, conductors and producers about finding the middle way, which would answer to the socio-political challenges of the new status quo without compromising the integrity and allure of this cherished art form. It is within this framework that I posit my discussion on the ways opera directors and performers have chosen to represent culture, race and gender and bring forward the aspect of translation or surtitling[2]. In the context of a more radical and critical climate of opera performance and audience response, what can the translator do to negotiate and balance the various, and sometimes conflicting, demands of the opera-text, the performer, the director and the wider and ever more diverse audience? Especially in cases of potential misrepresentation and controversy in opera, should the translator keep, eliminate or rectify the mistaken or misguiding elements in the source text? And how? To examine these questions and demonstrate

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their ramifications, Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*, an exquisite but disputed work that holds our interest for nearly a century now, serves as a fitting example.

Hailed as the "end of the Great Tradition" of Italian opera (Ashbrook & Powers, 1991, p. 164), Puccini's *Turandot* continues to captivate audiences and critics with its resplendent music and gripping story. A tale of visceral passion and sacrificial love set in legendary China, the opera, with a rich production history since its premiere at La Scala, Milan in 1926, has in recent years provoked questions about cultural appropriation, racial insensitivity and gender stereotyping. Such ideological concerns regarding the Orientalist predisposition inherent in Puccini's work and deeply seated in subsequent transcultural interpretations (notably those directed by Franco Zeffirelli, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige) have been registered at the general level of compositional history and production design from the perspective of intercultural communication and self-representation to foreign and domestic audiences (e.g., Ma, 2017; Stenberg, 2015; Zhang, 2013; Melvin & Cai, 2010; Metzger, 2003; Liao, 1990). Still, few critics have probed these subtle issues in a solidly "page-to-stage" manner, in a way that does not problematise only the ethnic simulacrum and the directorial and actorly agency but scrutinise them in parallel with the performed/adapted opera-text and the composite body of musical representation, let alone exploring the taxing process of translating and exhibiting the verbal, acoustic and performative dimensions of Puccini's opera through surtitling[3]. In this light, this article investigates the representation and performance of Chinese-related images, characters and themes in various productions of Puccini's *Turandot*, mainly those by Franco Zeffirelli, Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Chen Xinyi and Robert Wilson, with particular reference to their English and/or Chinese surtitles.

2. Critiquing *Turandot*: An Oriental story unfinished, represented, distorted

Taken at face value, the story of Puccini's last opera is undeniably one of Oriental fantasy. It begins in darkness and barbarity, with the formidable Chinese princess towering over a stage populated by the imperious mandarin, the menacing executioner and the bloodthirsty mob. Turandot, a princess of divine beauty, decrees that all suitors who fail the test of her three riddles must be decapitated. The country is thus submerged in terror, until the unknown prince Calàf, who braves his life for Turandot regardless of the pleadings of his father Timur and their salve Liù or the warnings of the court ministers Ping, Pang and Pong, solves the riddles and puts an end to the bloodshed. The haughty princess refuses to keep her promise, and then Calàf himself offers to be executed if his name is revealed before sunrise, at which Turandot commands the people of Beijing to search for the prince's name with their lives at stake. Although her love for Calàf is unrequited, Liù, now captured and tortured, tells Turandot about the altruistic nature of true love and sacrifices herself for the fulfilment of her master's quest. Left alone with the princess and seeing how she is still unmoved, Calàf forces a kiss on Turandot's lips and gives away the secret of his name. At dawn, Turandot brings the unknown prince before the emperor and announces that his name is Love, leading the crowd to celebrate the joy of love, life and eternal light.

The genesis of the opera likewise appears as yet another example of European imagination and acculturation of the East. Crafted by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni, the libretto for *Turandot* was adapted from the eponymous tragi-comic Chinese fable by the Venetian playwright, Carlo Gozzi, which itself is thought to have

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been inspired by Marco Polo's experiences in China, and was then considered unconventional for its combination of an Oriental story with the Italian *commedia dell'arte* (Carner, 1984, pp. 8–9). In terms of acoustic representation, the motive melody associated with Turandot, a key element within Puccini's sumptuous score, is taken from the popular Chinese folksong *Mo-Li-Hua* ['The jasmine flower'] that the composer came across in a tune from a music box (Ashbrook & Powers, 1991, p. 94–95). Other folk melodies, such as the one that would later be adapted into *Nan-Ni-Wan* (place name, literally 'South Muddy Bay'), are utilised and refashioned to add to the Chinese flavour of the piece, and the pentatonic scale which is often found in traditional Chinese music is extensively employed to create an exotic atmosphere (Puccini, 1958, pp. 197–209). In contrast, the show-stopping arias of the protagonists are quintessentially Italian in style, including Calàf's romanza, the acclaimed showpiece *Nessun dorma* ['None shall sleep'].

All these factors can in some way evidence the Orientalist mentality of Puccini as well as many of his contemporaries, for whom the idea of an imagined East came almost unawares for the service of their own artistic creations. Nevertheless, with a work so complex and influential as *Turandot*, it is imperative that we keep an open mind and penetrate to the depths of the work before concluding that its manifold aspects have been constructed and performed ineluctably to the detriment of our understanding of that which is Chinese. We may take into account the fact that Puccini left the opera unfinished. The composer died from a heart attack in 1924 and stopped composing at the point of Liù's death (which is also where the conductor Arturo Toscanini ended the show during its premiere). The formulaic 'happily ever after' ending is created by Franco Alfano from Puccini's sketches and seems rather abrupt and hastened when compared with the carefully structured scenes and well-paced drama of Puccini's original creation. In a sense, deriving from a Chinese-themed fairy tale, Puccini's *Turandot* cannot help but draw on forms of chinoiserie, but it transcends groundless and self-amusing fantasy. As will be shown, Puccini's is a modernist take on a primitive legend. As did many composers and writers in the first quarter of the 20th century, such as Richard Strauss and James Joyce, Puccini in his swansong, in his pursuit of 'new paths' (*vie non battute*), found himself caught between the sublime and the grotesque, the realistic and the outlandish (qtd. Carner, 1984, p. 7). The result is a work of contemporaneity emerging from anachronistic representation, that invites multidirectional reflection and remains open for interpretation, and whose translation requires cultural sensitivity, theatrical expertise, literary competence and musical knowledge.

2.1 Zeffirelli

Almost every established opera company boasts a specially designed production of Puccini's *Turandot* in their repertory. As the representative of a more traditional approach that seeks to recreate faithfully the archaic and majestic style of the work, Franco Zeffirelli's production for the Metropolitan Opera has been an audience favourite since its debut in 1987 with legendary singers Eva Marton and Plácido Domingo in the leading roles. Famed for his elaborately detailed, colourfully realistic productions of repertory staples, such as Puccini's *La Bohème* and *Tosca*, the Italian director was extolled as "the master of monumentality" for his achievement of a "big, eye catching, densely-packed, opulent new production" of *Turandot* (Kimball, 1987). On the other hand, more and more recent critics start to find Zeffirelli's costuming of

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certain characters stereotypically bizarre (such as the mandarin, with tapered fingernails in Qing-dynasty court attire), his treatment of the three ministers excessively clownish and his staging arbitrarily embellished and somewhat gaudy (Ma, 2017, p. 64; Tommasini, 2021, p. 6). While these are acute observations from cross-cultural perspectives, Zeffirelli's directorial choices are meant to serve the music and the drama in the first place. The mandarin's proclamations of Turandot's decree are accompanied in the orchestra with loud, agitating dissonance from Puccini's use of bitonality in like manner as Igor Stravinsky's *The rite of Spring* (Ashbrook & Powers, 1991, p. 102). In other words, it befits the character to be dressed in this half-official, half-vampire style because, by being visually disconcerting, it matches the irksome modernist style of music and enhances the dramatic effect of the foreboding, chaotic opening scene of the opera[4]. Similarly, the three ministers are shown as playful, tongue-in-cheek onlookers so that they can provide dramatic counterbalance to the emotionally charged protagonists and form an intriguing contrast to their own nostalgic side in Act II.

Furthermore, although there are instances of historically questionable use of makeup, costume and props, Zeffirelli's production internalises the syncretism of the Three Religions — Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism — a defining aspect of ancient Chinese civilisation. In the Act I scene of Prince of Persia's execution, the boys (*ragazzi*) and the priests (*sacerdoti*) appear to be clothed in white Buddhist robes with their heads shaved to perform funeral rituals (Adami & Simoni, 1926, p. 18–20). In the opening scene of Act II, the three ministers, who have attempted in vain to persuade Calàf into believing that nothing exists except the Tao, complains of wasting their life studying the "sacred books" (*libri sacri*) as incense sticks and candles are being burnt in front of them, which is an indispensable part of Taoist ceremony (Adami & Simoni, 1926, pp. 28, 41). Lastly, instead of the regular golden crown and dragon robe, the emperor Altoum wears a black gauze cap or *wushamao* and a black imperial gown in Zeffirelli's production, manifesting the sober and scholarly side of a benevolent ruler — a fundamental principle of Confucian philosophy. Taken together, Zeffirelli's meticulous representation of the multi-religious beliefs becomes all the more effective in that, to a large extent, *Turandot* is essentially a story about the competing ideologies of hierarchical power, free will and salvation (respectively championed by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism), cultural connections of much wider significance that are too often obscured by domesticating translations and productions.

2.2 Chinese directors

If we consider Zeffirelli's production as the standard operatic embodiment of a Western conception of Chinese culture, then Chinese directors Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Chen Xinyi have offered a series of counter perspectives. For reasons ranging from the technical to the political during the mid-to-late 20th century, the opera's Chinese premiere did not take place until 1990, when the Shanghai Opera House mounted a production in Chinese translation, and the China Central Opera House substituted a concert of selections for the scheduled production in Beijing (Melvin & Cai, 2010, pp. 486–487). Subsequently, *Turandot* became a cultural ambassador of sorts and toured with the China Central Opera House to cities as far as Damascus, Rome and Geneva. Though renowned for "bringing *Turandot* home", Zhang Yimou's 1998 production at the Forbidden City serves a similar function of displaying China's cultural heritage and soft power. The concrete temporal setting of the Ming dynasty takes its cue from the

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opera's backstory of Timur, the deposed King of Tartary, and reinforces the historically attested impression of a unified, vigorous empire, which contradicts Stenberg's claim of Zhang's production having "little regard for the historical record" and focusing only on self-orientalisation (Stenberg, 2015, p. 156). In fact, through the use of period costumes and punctiliously manufactured sets, Zhang historicises his production much more than he romanticises it. For instance, instead of the anticipated wedding ceremony that spotlights the royal couple (which is moved to the end of Act II when Turandot backs out, increasing the tension and irony of the plot), the performance ends with a stately exhibition of the full-body portraits of the imperial ancestors on a total of 36 giant plaques, lined from stage centre to each side. Each with a Chinese character on the opposite side, the plaques are eventually turned over to form an extended couplet, which is an amalgamation of two separate couplets quoted from Ming sources and expresses regal pride in the peace and glory of the empire while counselling the sovereign to study the classics and govern the country conscientiously. As the conductor Zubin Mehta remarks humorously in a backstage interview within Zhang's immense canvas of a grand stage, "our *Turandot* becomes a chamber opera" (also referring to the fact that the singers and the orchestra were transferred from the Teatro del Maggio Musicale) — Western romance overpowered by Chinese history (in Zhang, 1999).

One character that stands out in Zhang's production is the executioner Pu-Tin-Pao. Instead of being represented in the conventional style of a burly butcher/soldier, Pu-Tin-Pao is transformed into a short female martial artist, breaking out of the mould of her male incarnation and displaying an array of eighteen weapons typical of Chinese martial arts (again, in the form of plaques). For Metzger, representing the executioner in this way over-authenticates the Chineseness in her (Metzger, 2003, p. 211). Although Metzger's argument is understandable, I think Zhang reveals not only how authentic his way of characterisation tries to be, but also how diverse and sophisticated the idea of a dramatic character grown out of a mixture of Chinese culture and Western sentiments truly is, oscillating between male and female, muscular and agile, evil and righteous; or, in the words of the choreographer Chen Weiya in backstage interview, terrible, powerful and beautiful (in Zhang, 1999).

Likewise, in Chen Kaige's 2008 production at the Teatro del Maggio Musicale in Florence, Turandot is imbued with an androgynous quality. In her entrance scene, Turandot is disguised as a male dignitary among the crowd, wearing a black gauze cap and a black cape and observing the situation with a knowing smile, only to be spotted by the Prince of Persia. The mischievous side soon gives way to her empowered public persona in Act II, as Turandot, now in a blazing red gown, speaks of the sufferings of her ancestress Princess Lou-Ling at the hands of a Tartar king. The scene is particularly poignant because, upstage in the background, the nonchalant emperor is lying on the imperial divan and indulging himself with drinks (unlike the solemn and empathetic ruler in Puccini's original). In the subsequent riddle scene, Turandot wears a shimmering headpiece and changes into an icy blue costume, both of which similar to those in the Zeffirelli; in the Act III scene at the imperial garden, she wears a red cape in the style of a female warrior; and in the finale, in a velvety dress with overlapping petals of white-to-pink gradient colour, Turandot rushes offstage with Calàf like an ingénue. By apparelling Turandot in a variety of styles and colours, Chen's production fascinates the audience with not only the multi-faceted personality of the princess beneath her frigid demeanour, but also an air of cultural finesse and

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artistic ambiguity to Puccini's heroines that transcends geopolitical limits and resists easy categorisation.

Moreover, Chen also emphasises the representation of a different Pu-Tin-Pao by portraying him as a martial male role or *wusheng* from traditional Chinese opera, who holds in his hand a thin, pointed steel needle, a stealth weapon of sorts, and bares his torso to reveal the tattoos of a full-blossomed pink flower on his chest (echoing Turandot's finale costume) and a relatively smaller *Taiji* symbol of *Ying* and *Yang* on his neck. As Ma argues reasonably, the use of a needle instead of a broadsword seems to "parody the stereotype of Oriental brutality" (Ma, 2017, p. 66). However, Ma might have missed the point when comparing Chen's executioner to the *Liangshan* heroes, such as Lin Chong and Wu Song, in Shi Nai'an's novel *The Outlaws of the Marsh* because here the character is almost certainly depicted as Turandot's assassin. Indeed, this approach can seem self-exoticising, especially before a foreign (Florentine) audience, but it points to a far more significant issue in Puccini's original work. Execution in all forms normally takes place in public in the daytime, whether in Chinese culture (more specifically at noon) or in Western culture (e.g., the *auto-da-fé* in Verdi's *Don Carlo*). In contrast, it is assassination and murder that usually happen secretly at night (e.g. in Verdi's *Macbeth* or Puccini's *Tosca*). In other words, it is all too natural for the character of Pu-Tin-Pao, an aberrant nighttime executioner, to be comprehended and represented in strange and abnormal ways. The questions needed to be asked are really: Why Puccini's setting of moonrise? What is behind his obsession with the nocturnal, the macabre and the obscure (see 2.3)?

In Chen Xinyi's 2008 production at China's National Centre for the Performing Arts, the dark forces are embodied by a female dancer with scarlet floral decorations on pinnacled hair, in a pitch-black dress with long sleeves and silvery ancient patterns, a ghostly *femme fatale* in contrast to the pure, goddess-like Turandot (in opulent white, pink and golden costumes). For Chen (2017), as she says in her introduction to the recorded performance, the West's misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Turandot seems to arise from the peculiar image of China's last empress Cixi, the so-called 'Dragon Lady'. With Chen's modernist approach that focalises the tragic yet noble role of Liù, the director intends to recover the spirit of benevolent love and humanistic light in this "flawed masterpiece" of Puccini, who is to her a Shakespearean type of composer that combines boundless passion with earnest reason (Chen, 2017). In all, middle-ground conceptions like these and their prismatic materialisation are ubiquitous in all three Chinese directors' productions, constantly shifting dynamics between the Self and the Other. Far from "[endorsing] universalist master narratives that ignore race and culture" (Ma, 2017, p. 63), these ideas and practices rather acknowledge the ambiguous spaces between Orientalism and Cosmopolitanism, where the "complex, inconsistent power relations and positionalities at play in knowledge production" reside (O'Connor, 2023, p. 638).

2.3 Wilson

Following Zeffirelli's initial traditionalist take and subsequent inter-/intra-cultural reinterpretations by Chinese directors, in what might be called the third generation of the *Turandot* legacy, the newer productions are characterised by their unorthodox settings of time and place that are substantially removed from ancient China or irrelevant to it at all[5]. Robert Wilson distinguishes himself by formalising and

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simplifying the staging in a manner that fuses the original Gozzian style of the *commedia dell'arte* and his own signature style. On a stage equipped with mesmerising, celestial bars of light, the characters, all in bright white makeup, are required to make precise, repeated gestures in hypnotic slow-motion, except Ping, Pang and Pong who are freer with their movements. During the premiere run of this production at the Teatro Real of Madrid in 2018, the three ministers were costumed in blue in the style of Qing-dynasty officials. However, when the production was revived at the Canadian Opera Company in 2019, the ministers were renamed Jim, Bob and Bill, and swapped their dark blue court dresses for black suits. During the revival at the Paris Opera in 2023, the suits were kept on, but the names were changed back. In the former case, the idea is clearly to avoid racial offense[6]. In the latter, it is more likely that Wilson intends for the ministers to break the fourth wall so that the audience can identify with them, thus becoming more engaged with and appreciative of their repartees which encapsulate life's wisdom and misery in titbits of persiflage and sarcasm as they witness the events unfold on stage together. Overall, Wilson's priority is to focus the audience's attention on Puccini's music with his staging functioning as a kind of visual accompaniment or counterpoint.

On the other hand, Wilson's representation of Turandot is arguably one of the boldest. She is the only character wearing red costume (Calàf, Liù, Timur and Altoum are all dressed in white). Her headdress is an exaggerated *liangbatou* or *dalachi*, a typical Manchu hairstyle worn by the likes of Cixi. She holds in her hand a black *chaohu*, a long, narrow tablet used by officials during court gatherings. Moreover, in Act III, after Calàf reveals his name, Turandot suddenly makes the gesture of the death sentence, with stage light turned off on Calàf and revealing only his silhouette (signalling his demise). The performance ends with only Turandot standing centre stage in front of dark silhouettes against a red background on which a ray of light gradually descends. To a large extent, what Wilson is concerned with is less the distortion of the *Turandot* story or the misrepresentation of Turandot with her symbolic and cultural significance than the act of representation itself. In his own words from the aforementioned interview at the Paris Opera, "if Turandot wants to be evil, have fun being evil, and then we [the audience] will have fun" (Wilson, 2023).

Although Wilson's formalist approach can lead to confusion, his alternative ending underscores astringently the cyclic and annihilative nature of human history by bringing Turandot's revenge on foreign men full circle. It leaves the jubilant finale of the choral celebration of love's triumph in vanity and irony, which on the dark side is the exact repetition of an ancient tragedy, the ruthless conquering of a Chinese princess by a Tartar royal. In this light, *Turandot* is less a fairy tale made up of stock characters and a nonsensical plot than a modernist myth that recasts present struggle and anthropic pessimism in the recurring form of dark history and bleak vision. As indicated in his letter to Simoni, the composer proposed "a *Turandot*, by way of the modern mind" (qtd. Ashbrook & Powers, 1991, p. 61). This musically contestable statement is mostly viewed as Puccini's expression of his intention to present Turandot in a Freudian light (Ashbrook & Powers, 1991, p. 61). Nevertheless, the same modern predicament of being confined and tormented by a confused sense of self and desire out of traumatic experience or desperate love is certainly shared by Calàf, whose soul is stirred by merely perfumed air [*il suo profumo è nell'aria*] and surrenders to the 'nothingness' [*il niente*] that Turandot really is; and probably by Liù as well, who is martyred for *l'impossibile speranza* [an 'impossible hope'], for *l'ombra d'un sorriso* ['the

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shadow of a smile'] (Adami & Simoni, 1926, pp. 21, 27, 29, 73). Indeed, as will be demonstrated in 3.2, it is an anxiety or mortal fear shared by every man and woman in the *Turandot* universe, by the representative crowd in whole.

3. Translating *Turandot*: Incongruity and ambiguity within a modernist tale

Following on from this survey of the representation of culture, race and gender in *Turandot*, we need to analyse the translation of crucial details and significant passages within the opera-text for each production, focusing on the markers of Chinese culture, the collective role of the crowd and the relationship between Turandot and Calàf. As will be demonstrated, more than ideological sensitivity, translating *Turandot* requires a profound understanding of its discordant elements and ambivalent tendencies.

3.1 Cultural markers

Puccini's *Turandot* is a fictionalised work replete with specific yet sometimes inaccurate references to Chinese cultural images, historical figures and philosophical concepts, which have been translated or represented in various and nuanced ways. While reduction and generalisation may be useful translation strategies to avoid exposing inherent misunderstandings, translation in opera can do more for the production than camouflaging cultural fallacies, as long as it is understood in a collaborative and evolutionary manner rather than singularly and simplistically judged. In some cases, it can also help generate new representations and create additional effects.

In the Act I introduction of the *Mo-Li-Hua* theme, the boys' melodious chant evokes an ethereal vision, *Là sui monti dell'Est la cicogna canto* ['There on the mountains of the East, the stork sang'] (Adami & Simoni, 1926, p. 19). The image of the stork fits in the dramatic context in that it represents fertility and renewal in Western culture, ideals craved by Turandot's deceased suitors, which, however, renders awkward its present connection with the East or China where the 'stork' [*Ciconiidae*, '*鸛*] carries no such symbolism. On the other hand, in the surtitles for both Western and Chinese productions, this word-image is translated into Chinese almost unanimously as *鶴* [the 'crane', *Gruidae*], more specifically, *仙鶴* [the 'fairy crane'], a revered bird that symbolises longevity, wisdom and spirituality. While this seemingly insignificant stance of altered translation has been largely taken for granted, it has inspired Chen Xinyi's direction of the scene and induced a re-representation of the bird as a spirited white crane. Personated by a male dancer in shimmering white and gold zoomorphic costume, the crane leaps onto the stage with skilful choreography and joins his dark rival (the aforementioned ghostly female dancer) in an energetic pas de deux before dominating and expelling her. Later in Act III, the crane reappears to usher Liù's soul into heaven, reifying the religious association of the crane with the bearer of the dead and the herald of deity (similarly, in the video of the Zhang production, the silhouette of a crane statue fades in as Liù bids farewell to the world). By retranslating and re-representing the 'stork' as the 'fairy crane', Chen Xinyi (2017) encapsulates cultural and sexual politics through theatrically impressive and dramatically effective means, making yet another cogent statement on the beauty and power of the Chinese tradition. In comparison, in the more recent revivals of the Zeffirelli (2011, 2016, 2019, 2022), although the 'stork' is rendered into the 'crane' as well, no change was made in

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the production. Instead, the particular reference to *东方* ['the East'] in the original is substituted and deconstructed by the non-representation of an unspecified *远方* ['far away'] in the translation, replacing stereotypically exotic locales with imaginative and performative space.

Another notable aspect of the translation of *Turandot* is concerned with the opera's conflation of Chinese religious-philosophical concepts with Christian ideology. These problematic representations within the opera-text have caused the most disapproval and pose difficult challenges for the surtitler, who is sandwiched between the audience who may be distracted by any irreconcilability from translation and the singers who deliver the lyrics as written. In most cases, the translator can only try toning down the discrepancy, if not eliminating its source altogether, so that the audience is less likely to feel confused or misinformed, though he/she may also deftly reorganise the materials at hand.

In the Act I scene of the Prince of Persia's execution, the priests send their prayers for the dying youth to Confucius as if the ancient Chinese sage were the Christian God, "O great Kung-tze! May the spirit of the dying man come to you" [*O gran Koung-tzeé! Che lo spirto del morente giunga fino a te*] (Adami & Simoni, 1926, p. 21). On the whole, there seems to be no appropriate solution to the conundrum except deleting the textual reference while keeping the words sung as in the later revivals of the Zeffirelli (2011, 2016, 2019, 2022), which signals the Metropolitan Opera's increased awareness of cultural difference in the new century, considering how the misrepresentation of Confucius as the Chinese God is corroborated by the capitalised 'Thee' in the original run of the Zeffirelli (2003) production (and how it is maintained, strengthened or even acquiesced in "May the doomed man's spirit be united with you" in the 2023 revival of the Wilson at Paris Opera). As for the Chinese surtitles, in the Zeffirelli (2003), *孔子大人* ['Lord Confucius'] likely conflates the misplaced Confucius with *判官大人* [the 'Judge of the Underworld'] who takes charge of dead souls in Chinese mythology — a kind of creative and corrective re-appropriation of misapplied cultural imagery through retranslation.

Later in the same act, the three ministers endeavour to inculcate the stubborn Calàf with some wisdom from Taoist philosophy in the hope that he may abandon the deadly challenge to win a non-existent Turandot: *L'uomo! Il Dio! Io! I popoli! I sovrani! Pu-Tin-Pao...! Non esiste che il Tao* ['Man! God! I! Peoples! Sovereigns! Pu-Tin-Pao...! There exists only the Tao'] (Adami & Simoni, 1926, p. 27). Again, the Christian God is introduced into a land that He does not belong. Amid all the faithful but culturally erroneous translations, 'God' is rendered fittingly into Chinese as *天* ['heaven'] in the Zeffirelli (2003), which represents the highest and most inclusive form of deity in Chinese culture. On the other hand, the Wilson (2020) provides a rhetorically effective Chinese translation,*天地人神，君臣你我* ['heaven and earth, men and gods, king and subject, you and I'], by generalising the role of 'God' into the rank of *神* ['gods'], opposite that of human beings, and illustrating a series of contrastive but interdependent sides that can reflect the Taoist doctrines of the mutability of the hierarchical institution and the vanity of the phenomenal world.

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3.2 Racial imagery

Apart from the eccentricity that arises in translation and performance from cultural misapprehensions, Puccini's *Turandot* is often arraigned for its primitive representation of the people of ancient Beijing that enables the "civilised" Western audience to relish the graphic manifestation of their savage nature (Ma, 2017, p. 59). They are usually portrayed by non-Asian actors in yellowface as callous and timid men and women in rags who either eagerly join the executioner's men in preparing instruments of torture or tremble at the thought of being haunted by vengeful ghosts. Although measures have been taken by opera companies to ensure diversity and inclusion in casting for this growingly controversial piece, it becomes ever harder to decide how effective they can be in reshaping the ethnocultural fabrics of the drama (since the libretto remains unchanged) and whether disadvantaged actors truly benefit from the acts of positive discrimination (as some actors of Asian descent also complain of being pigeonholed). Nevertheless, the much-neglected part of translation can provide some form of buffering and help reorientate the artistic trajectory, if not the ideological undercurrent, in minute ways by implying what is unsaid as does the opera's orchestral writing to the sung/spoken script.

As one of Puccini's most choral operas, *Turandot* opens with a frenzied mob pushing for the spectacle of the death penalty, which, however, segues into a tranquil moment of musical meditation as the (*pittoresca*) ['picturesque'] crowd greets the rising moon in fearful silence (Adami & Simoni, 1926, p. 11). Impressionistic in style, the moonrise chorus is musically complex (D major - Eb major - E major - F major - Eb major), with all four parts (SATB) chasing, finishing and variating each other's lines (Puccini, 1958, pp. 48–62). The lyrics summon up melancholic images of the *facia pallida* ['wan face'], the *testa mozza* ['severed head'] and the *amante smunta dei morti* ['pale lover of the dead'] (Adami & Simoni, 1926, p. 18). However, this extended segment is often performed and surtitled as if it is a pointless interlude, with the crowd sitting immobile (or in languid movements) and singing obscure and repetitive phrases, which are scatteringly translated into unintelligible fragments in virtually all the productions in question except the Wilson, leaving the audience with a vague sense that the hour of execution is eagerly anticipated.

A careful look at the text and the music would reveal that here the chorus makes pivotal associations between the moon, the dead suitors and the princess herself, betraying a sense of degeneration that holds love to be both self-fulfilling and self-destructive. In the Wilson (2020), the Chinese translator synthesises the three abovementioned images/subjects by addressing an ambiguous "you" — "you who is pale as the severed head" ['*像头颅一样苍白的你*'], "you who is silent as the dead" ['*如死者一般缄默的你*'], "so many are willing to die for you" ['*多少人甘愿为你而死*'], thus creating out of ungraspable sentiments a unified impression of decadent mystique and complimenting Wilson's gloomy and highly metaphysical production where the chorus subtly comments on the characters and implicitly foretells the story as in Greek tragedy instead of simply propelling the dramatic development as a senseless mob.

The covert progression of futile love and morbid humanity continues throughout the whole opera under the overt plot of Oriental fantasy, and, most importantly, it reflects a self-conscious feebleness of the European world in general and the Italian nation in

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particular at the beginning of the 20th century. In the Act III scene of Liù's self-sacrifice, where Puccini's concern for the human race is most palpable, the crowd whose hearts were unfeeling as an "old machine" (*vecchio ordigno*) are eventually moved to pity and mourn the tragic death of Liù, who is to them the very personification of virtue, sweetness and, curiously enough, "Poetry" (*Poesia*) (Adami & Simoni, 1926, p. 77). As the meaning of the crowd's enigmatic evocation may lie in its Latin root: creation, the death of Liù embodies the decline of the (pro)creative spirit in a machine age when "puppets, robots and masked figures had become emblems of the avant-garde, icons of a moment of cultural crisis" (Wilson, 2007, p. 195). For the Zhang (1999), "Poetry" is retranslated into the ambiguous but thoughtful "poetic spirit", which is coupled with the symbolic gesture of Liù taking her own life with a hairpin snatched from the head of Turandot (instead of the dagger seized from a soldier), who, enclosed in a jade-like block of ice (double exposure), commands a group of soldiers in white armour, all silent and lifeless. In Chen Kaige's production, the flowers the crowd lay beside Liù's body are white roses, a token of purity and remembrance in Western culture that seems at odds with the opera's Eastern setting but makes perfect sense in commemorating the people victimised by the modern Western syndromes of industrialisation, mechanicity and alienation. For the translator as well as the director, the challenge is more than just neutralising or beautifying an otherwise uncultured racial image of the Chinese; rather, he/she needs to recognise the double duty of the crowd as both a represented character and a narratorial commentator and coordinate the dual dynamics of a regional, antique story and a cosmopolitan, modernist narrative.

3.3 Gender roles

Puccini's dramatisation of the intense love between Turandot and Calàf has long been questioned. Turandot's complete change of attitude from deep hatred to helpless affection for Calàf is for many sheer patriarchal fantasy. While this stereotypical imagination may not be fully justified by the artistic needs of Late Romanticism, the often-neglected Verismo side of Puccini's work requires Turandot to be seen more in flesh and blood than as a museum exhibit. Even her most unyielding and inimical moments, as Turandot tells of her ancestress's sufferings and threatens all who attempt to possess her, are accompanied by surging waves of the music of tender love (Puccini, 1958, p. 260). Therefore, the question here should really be: in translation and through representation, how can Turandot stay true to the multiplicity of her character, between the archetypes of the unreachable goddess and the conquered princess? The same can be said of Calàf, for he is almost uniformly portrayed as a headstrong and fearless hero who wins Turandot's heart with love, passion and intelligence. Then how can translation help to reveal his other, probably less glorious sides and thematise the different respects of their disputed relationship.

Taking Calàf's aria as example, the opening phrase "*Nessun dorma*" is sung and then repeated one octave lower, but, in most of the surtitles, the translation "None shall sleep" appears once only (Puccini, 1958, p. 324). Although this practice of avoiding repetition is empirically reasonable, it undermines the dramatic counterbalance between Turandot and Calàf because Calàf's words are an echo of Turandot's latest decree, his elation mixed with fear, as much as his riddle for her counterpoises her riddles for him. Within this repeated phrase of dual significance, what is (over)heard is the polyphonic voices of the domineering princess and the pusillanimous crowd, of

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both the rapturous self and the poised observer in Calàf himself. Moreover, the polyvocality of the dramatic context has prompted different translations of the line itself, as in 'no one must sleep', 'no one can sleep' or 'no one sleeps', which are not all faithful to the original but true of the concerned perspectives, enriching and complicating the act of representation.

In what follows, notice that it is Calàf rather than Turandot that is 'looking at the stars that tremble with love and with hope' [*guardi le stelle che tremano d'amore e di speranza*], who in his self-centred imagination substitutes his own point of view for Turandot's (Adami & Simoni, 1926, p. 62). This subtle yet substantial shift of perspective is lost in almost all the translations. Nevertheless, in the Wilson (2020), the climatic declamation of "*vincerò*" is translated into English as "I shall conquer" rather than the commonly seen 'I shall win', accentuating the sense of political repression and gender oppression. In the Chinese version,*胜利将属于我* ['victory belongs to me'] is chosen, with *属于我* ['belongs to me'] reappearing at the end of the aria, to reflect the possessive nature of Calàf's morally dubious actions. Correspondingly, unlike all other heroic representations, Wilson's Calàf seems to have a conspicuously ambitious side. At the end of Act I, right after striking the gong, the prince makes the gesture of taking off his mask, meaning that he is ready to show his true self. Moments later, he is standing high on the platform where Turandot first appeared, holding up Turandot's black tablet (representing political power) with his right hand and clutching in his left hand her red dress the way a bullfighter grasps a red cape (representing masculine power), his facial expression turning from dignified, to complacent.

4. Conclusions

All in all, while the impression of contrived harmony in Puccini's mythologising of ancient China through yellowface performance is inevitably undermined by its contemporary cultural-political ramifications, the creative indeterminacy of the translational discourse can help to recover in this exquisite work the diversity and relevance that we think of as being more appropriate to the ethos of our times.

Meanwhile, although cultural, racial and gender differences should be properly understood and duly respected in operatic contexts, it is imperative that representational and translational choices not be decided or evaluated by those considerations alone, that they not polarise into two warring ideological positions, i.e., Occidental versus Oriental, white versus non-white, male versus female. As shown above, throughout the extensive production history of *Turandot*, directors have variously sought to balance the particular with the general and merge the past into the now, acknowledging not only the cultural-historical aspects within the story of the opera, but also the opera's own history of genesis and composition and the modernist work of the opera itself.

Granted, opera has been endowed with and exerting to varying degrees socio-political influence since its inception over four centuries ago, but the large-than-life quality of operatic melodrama, the transcendental status of classical music and the very performative nature of this theatrical form have by far determined what opera can represent is only representation itself.

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Data availability statement

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or its supplementary materials].

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Notes

[1] One needs to look no further than the Metropolitan Opera, whose 2023–24 season features Daniel Catán's *Florencia en el Amazonas*, the first Latin American Spanish opera to take centre stage at the Met. Following in the steps of the BLM movement, the company also showcases Anthony Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, a biographical opera about the American Black militant religious leader, after having staged its first work by a Black composer, Terence Blanchard's *Fire shut up in my bones*, in 2021. Further, the season highlights a new *Carmen* with Carrie Cracknell's modern staging that explores the themes of crime, gender and domestic violence, which I believe echoes in important ways the 2018 production directed by Leo Muscato at the Teatro del Maggio Musicale, where it is Carmen that kills Don José in the end.

[2] Opera translation for the singer is not considered here, for the comparative difficulty, hence rarity, of the practice. To sing in the source language and provide the audience with surtitles has become the standard way nowadays (Bassnett, 2000, pp. 96–97).

[3] This negligence is partly due to the unrecognised status of the practice of surtitling itself, where the musically circumscribed and densely poetic texts are preferably reduced to plain information, usually through under-translation by someone who is expected to be invisible but may not be well informed about the operatic contexts (Palmer, 2020; Burton, 2009; Dewolf, 2001). It further points to a certain

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lack of directorial and critical engagement between ideas and prototypes that are abstracted, represented and critiqued, and characters and situations that are fleshed out in words and music that connect directly with the implied audience. Therefore, it is imperative to reconsider the role of opera surtitles, not as a subordinate tool of information service, but as an essential part of the media matrix, a 'polyphonic' agent of the multimodal discourse that can reflect, complement, or, in some cases, resist and complicate the artistic and ideological elements of the production.

[4] For detailed information on this and subsequent expositions of particular scenes, characters, etc. in each production of *Turandot*, or for the cited surtitles and interviews, please consult the discography in the References.

[5] For example, Fabio Cherstich's 2019 production at the Teatro Massimo, Palermo, sets the opera in the year 2070 in Beijing, by then a futuristic metropolis with biomorphic architecture within an artificial landscape. In December 2023, two avant-garde productions premiered, respectively by Vasily Barkhatov at the Teatro San Carlo and by Claus Guth at the Wiener Staatsoper. The former reimagines the story as a postmodern dream after the principals' car crash, and the latter recasts it as a psychoanalytical chamber piece.

[6] Paradoxically, for one commentator, Wilson's alteration of names and costumes masks the racism of the opera; instead, operatic stereotypes should be made visible to educate audiences about their historical contexts (Hu, 2019).

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