

Chinese returnee students and cultural production: the case of ex-students of Opera in Italy

Giuseppe Rizzuto

Abstract: The aim of this chapter is to point out the connection between mobility and cultural activities of Chinese returnee opera students. Many Chinese students in Italy attend cultural and artistic university courses. They may be considered significant in analyzing Chinese reverse migration from Italy. The examined connection involves several dynamics, including artistic aspects, historical reasons, social and economic changes, public policies and consumerism styles. Mobility and cultural production may be analyzed through both a structural and imaginative dimension. The structural dimension is composed of international agreements, global mobility law conditions, social and economic changes, and private investments in education to accumulate cultural capital that produce (or reproduce) certain social structures and experiences. On the other hand, the imaginative dimension is shaped by the lifestyle adopted by middle class families, including their work activities and cultural consumption. Returnee students are both the subjects who promote this process and the object of this dynamic. Chinese singers of Italian opera, upon graduating university in Italy, join the possibilities of the work field—in Bourdieu's perspective—which is formed by the two aforementioned dimensions. Finally, perceived differences between Italy and China in terms of musical technique and culture are reworked according to contemporary cultural policies.

Keywords: mobility, opera, Chinese returnee students, cultural production, Italy.

1. Mobility, imagination, and cultural production

Chinese international student mobility is not a contemporary phenomenon. The first phase of this specific mobility can be traced back to the mid-19th century; the second phase can be traced from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1920s. In these phases students moved to US, Japan, UK, French and Germany. The third phase then occurred during the first half of the 1950s, as students moved towards the USSR and a few other communist countries; and the latest phase started with Deng Xiaoping's 'open door policy' and is still ongoing in present day (Liu 2021). An increasing number of Chinese students have moved abroad to attend bachelor's, master's or doctoral courses. Some then returned to China looking for job opportunities created by globalization and the highly competitive Chinese labor market. The central aim of this chapter is to point out the connection between the mobility of Chinese returnee opera students who attended university courses in Italy and their cultural and artistic activities in China. Which social, political and econom-

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ic elements influence cultural production of these returnee students? What is the perception of these returnees regarding the contribution of mobility to their cultural activities in China?

Many Chinese students in Italy attend cultural and artistic university courses such as art, music, or design, thus they're significant in analyzing Chinese reverse migration from Italy. The connection between mobility and cultural activities involves several dynamics, including artistic aspects, historical reasons, social and economic changes, public policies and consumerism styles. While surveys have been conducted to learn more about returnee entrepreneurs or scientific and technical students (Wang and Bao 2015), it's difficult to find any inquiries about Chinese music students returning from Italy in international literature. While this chapter cannot nearly fill this gap, it outlines some preliminary reflections.

Observations on these Chinese students and their cultural production focus on three main points: 1) mobility between China and Italy; 2) the diffusion of interests in music that later influence everyday activities regarding education, work, lifestyle, leisure, consumption, social relationships and future imagination; 3) cultural production as a multi-level activity, from personal experiences to international economic and social issues. This interpretation is based on Urry's views of mobility (Urry 2007), Appadurai's vision of imagination (Appadurai 1996) and Bourdieu's approach to the social dimension of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993).

Mobility is one of the most important issues in today's world. Technological discoveries, globalization and worldwide connection continue to cause large scale movement in terms of people, objects and meaning. Migration represents just one part of these movements. According to the World Migration Report 2020 (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2022, 23), nearly 281 million people lived in a country other than their country of birth in 2020, most of whom were labor migrants. Asylum seekers, students, tourists, businessmen and businesswomen, refugees, and cultural, political or economic stakeholders also move to other places for climate change, war, severe economic and political instability or business opportunities. What they all have in common is the experience of mobility that affects people and both their places of origin and destination in different ways. This chapter looks at this phenomenon through the lens of "new mobility paradigm" (Sheller and Urry 2006). According to this approach, it is possible to study social and cultural space as a mix of physical, material and symbolic mobility. Therefore, the concept of mobility is useful to understand a person's long-term residency, daily urban movement, material mobility place and immaterial meaning diffusion. Urry himself notices some reasonable critiques to this approach, including the risk of idealizing people's movement, which is shaped from a privileged point of view over global phenomena (Sheller and Urry 2006, 211). Historical and power connections produce different kinds of discrimination (gender, political, religious, ethnic, and economic), while the concept of mobility looks to conserve an implicit sense of freedom that currently only few people can actually experience. Schiller and Salazar (2013), in

fact, speak about the ‘regime of mobility’ by writing, “However, we postulate that there are several different intersecting regimes of mobility that normalize the movements of some travelers while criminalizing and entrapping the ventures of others” (Schiller and Salazar 2013, 189).

Mobility of people and mobility of ideas and imagination are strictly connected. Appadurai (1996), for example, explores the concept of imagination in a global migration context. He argues that “the work of the imagination is a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity” (Appadurai 1996, 3). Imagination is described through three important distinctions:

1. Imagination is not just practiced by artists but, when linked with new media diffusion, is a constitutive feature of everyday life. “The imagination has broken out of the special expressive space of art, myth, and ritual and has now become a part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people in many societies” (Appadurai 1996, 5);
2. Imagination is also important in distinguishing between fantasy (seen as a private act) and imagination, which is viewed as a starting point of action;
3. Imagination is a property of collectives, and not only considered a faculty of the individuals close to a romantic vision. Thus, imagination is a social practice.

Cultural production is also a social practice. Bourdieu (1993) argues that when writers or artists produce work, they always do so within a context structured in specific ways. Artistic production is not necessarily autonomous, but is instead a result of a specific set of historical conditions. This does not mean that artists have no function and thus cultural products are just determined by structural forces.

The work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art. Consequently, in order to escape from the usual choice between celebratory effusions and the reductive analysis which, failing to take account of the fact of belief in the work of art and of the social conditions which produce that belief, destroys the work of art as such, a rigorous science of art must, pace both the unbelievers and iconoclasts and also the believers, assert the possibility and necessity of understanding the work in its reality as a fetish; it has to take into account everything which helps to constitute the work as such, not least the discourses of direct or disguised celebration which are among the social conditions of production of the work of art qua object of belief (Bourdieu 1993, 35).

Observations in my analysis lean towards the process of cultural production, not only cultural products. Points taken into consideration include how the international mobility of Chinese students can influence cultural production, looking for a connection between these two fields. The risk of this perspective is in portraying Chinese international students as an undistinguished monolith, or in a culturalist view (Xu 2022). To avoid this, I connect the themes stemming from literature review with the opinion of three students who returned to China after

studying Italian opera in Italy. Interviews¹ may be useful in outlining a few main points for this paper and forthcoming research, although they must be considered in their own singularity. These do not indicate any standard experiences or common opinion of international students, but rather offer a few subjective positions that may reveal how mobility and cultural production affect each other.

2. Chinese students and international mobility

2.1 Historical outline

In 1847, the first documented group of Chinese students was sent to the United States (Dervin 2015, 216). They were students of a Missionary school—quite widespread in China in that period—and were led by the pastor of the Mission (Rhoads 2011). It represents the first step of a collective program of student mobility, even though it was not under State control but instead motivated by personal initiative.

The Chinese Empire's defeat during the Opium Wars exposed the military and technological gap with Western countries. Many intellectuals adopted the idea of “Chinese learning as foundation, Western learning for application” (*Zhongxue wei ti, Xixue wei yong* 中学为体, 西学为用), which meant maintaining the Chinese traditions and vision of the world while using scientific and technological Western knowledge. Mobility of students was identified as a tool to reduce this gap: students went abroad to learn from Western countries and then came back to China to innovate Chinese infrastructure, factories and the Chinese army. Rong Hong² 容闳 (1828–1912), also known as Yung Ming, became the first Chinese graduate of Yale University in 1854 after attending missionary school in China and later migrating to the United States. He was also the first returned student who committed himself to growing student exchanges between the two countries. Yung Ming pushed for the approval of the Chinese Educational Mission (C.E.M.) in 1871, which resulted in 120 young Chinese going to the United States to study Western science, engineering and technologies with the Chinese government's approval, all while attempting to avoid Western culture. In the last half of the 19th century, only a few students could go abroad, due in part to the hesitation of conservative Chinese families who felt afraid of the cultural differences of foreign countries (Liu 2021). The program, in fact, was criticized by conservative groups because of the influence of Western ideas and customs on Chinese students. In 1881, all students had to return to China and the program ended. The returned students went on to work

¹ Interviews were released online in Italian or Chinese according to the preferences of interviewees. The interviewees are Italian opera students who returned to China after graduation and now work in the music field. The English translation is by the author.

² In this chapter, the Pinyin system is used for words and names in Chinese language. The only exception is for those names commonly recognized by using other systems, such as Sun Yat-sen or Chiang Kai-shek.

in education, diplomacy, administration, business, the Navy, telegraph operation, mines, and railroads in China (Hu 2004, 93; Liu 2021).

In 1905, the abolition of imperial examinations was declared, and the Qing government required all regions to set up new kinds of schools to reform their education to match that of the West. A large number of Chinese people planned to study overseas at their own expense because students who had returned from studying abroad could typically obtain important positions in civil and military administration (Liu 2021), which were considered the most prestigious positions for the Chinese upper class for centuries. Many students chose to go to Japan due to proximity, cultural similarities and the conservative nature of Meiji education. In 1904, there were 1,400 Chinese students in Japan. By 1906, there were more than ten times more, with 15,000 reported Chinese students in the country (Pepper 1996, 57–8). In the following years, many students moved to America or Europe to learn not only technical knowledge, but also philosophical, artistic, pedagogical and political issues. Many of them returned with the primary purpose of influencing Chinese culture and politics. In the first part of the century, the influence of returnee students on the Chinese political, cultural and social landscape was relevant. The May Fourth Movement is only one example (Wu 1988). Among the main promoters were some of the most important intellectuals of Chinese modern history: in literature there were Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962) and Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936); in politics there was Sun Yat-Sen—also known as Sun Zhongshan 孙中山 (1866–1925); in education there were Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) and Tang Guo'an 唐国安 (1858–1913); in art there was Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿 (1895–1953); in law there was Tu Tingfang 伍廷芳 (1842–1922). Even Chiang Kai-Shek 蒋介石 (1887–1975), Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898–1976) and Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904–1997) spent time abroad.

During the 1950s, after the foundation of the People's Republic of China, students could move to other communist countries to study engineering in a state agreement framework. During the 1960s and 1970s, after the break of China-USSR cooperation and during the Cultural Revolution, all kinds of “Western tide” (Chiang 1947) ceased. This meant that the flow of returnee students also stopped (Liu 2021). In 1978, on the eve of the resumption of diplomatic relations between China and the West, Deng Xiaoping's strategy was once again to directly involve students in the modernisation of China. Educational exchanges with the West, like the Westernisation movement a century before, aimed to introduce modern technology to China's context and thus improve Chinese social and economic conditions. Similar to a century before, Chinese university students abroad were a key feature in opening China up to the international landscape. In 1979, the Ministry of Education, the National Science Committee and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China issued the first document regarding the regulation of Chinese students overseas and established strict rules according to which those who did not return on time would be punished (Xiang and Shen 2009, 515). The reform and open-up policy of China began by adopting a new economic development strategy. During the early 1980s, it also involved cultural fields. Beyond technical knowledge, Chinese students studied and dis-

cussed Western artists, philosophers, writers, and musicians. The 1980s, “cultural fever” or *wenhua re* 文化热 created an open space for cultural exchange and a renovation of Chinese art, literature and music (Zhang 1994). In these years, the communist State’s changed stance on legitimate ideology coincided with the expansion of university student enrolment, the growing cost of living in Chinese cities and the increasing difficulty for young urban postgraduates to get a job (Zhao 1996, 149–50; Cheek 2008). These social and economic conditions contributed to pushing many students abroad. For example, the number of mainland Chinese students in the United States increased from nearly zero at the beginning of 1978 to a total of approximately 20,030 by 1988 (Kun 2017, 8; Xiang and Shen 2009, 515). Mobility also was encouraged by new policies. At the end of 1984, the State Council of China stipulated that anyone who had been admitted by a foreign institution and had received foreign financial support or any other kind of assistance was eligible to apply to go abroad self-funded. Since then, the number of non-government-sponsored Chinese students has rapidly increased and now represents a large majority of the Chinese students on American university campuses (Kun 2017, 11).

Haigui 海归 is a term that modernly refers to a person who has returned to the country after having studied or worked abroad. In English, such people are called “sea turtles,” using *haigui* 海龟, a homophone. Between 1978 and 2006, those who returned to China on a long-term basis accounted for less than 26% of all people who went abroad (MOE 2007). A new policy focused on encouraging Chinese people abroad to return home is summarized as the ‘Twelve-words Approach’: *zhichi liuxue, guli huiguo, lai qu ziyou* 支持留学, 鼓励回国, 来去自由, “support study overseas, encourage returns, guarantee freedom of movement” (Xiang and Shen 2009, 516). In 1992, during the 14th Congress of Party, Jiang Zemin’s speech was clear:

We appreciate it when our people studying abroad show concern and support for the drive to modernize the motherland and become involved in it in various ways. When they come back to participate in socialist construction, they will be warmly welcomed no matter what their political attitudes were in the past; proper arrangements will be made for their employment, and they will be allowed to come and go freely and easily (Jiang 1992).

Many members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, academic leaders of universities under direct control of the Ministry of Education and academicians at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, participated in international educational experiences (Welch and Hao 2017). Gradually, the Chinese strategy regarding students abroad shifted and became more complex to match to global changes (Wang 2020, 89–98). Even though an increasing number of students chose to return to China, since 2001, the State policy has encouraged Chinese people who remained abroad to engage in several types of activities that could help China from afar (Zweig et al. 2008, 9–11; Lai 2015, 87–91).

Even in the last decade of the 20th century, Chinese students continued going abroad. Young Chinese people stepped away from politics and looked to-

wards material wealth. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education of People Republic of China, about 90% of internationally mobile students from China are self-funded; in 2018, those who returned to China on a long-term basis accounted for 84.49% of all of those who went abroad (Yang 2022, 313). The growing number of returnee students in recent years is likely due to many factors. Undoubtedly, there are also individual reasons due to personal, family and psychological experiences, but there are also common factors: returnee post-graduates have advantages in terms of work opportunities, salary and careers (Du et al. 2021); graduate students can find haigui-friendly regulations, such as household registration (Xiang and Shen 2009, 520); and a rising numbers of graduates who inevitably cannot all be absorbed by the host country labor markets (Yang 2022, 314). The diffusion of Covid-19 also caused many students to come back to China (Qi et al. 2020).

2.2 Mobility to Italy: Chinese music students

At the beginning of the 20th century, the first Chinese sellers, originating from the Zhejiang province, arrived in Milan and Bologna by way of France. Some of them married Italian citizens, opened their own enterprises and put down roots in Italian society (Brigadoi Cologna 2017; Chang 2012). Despite the number of Chinese people living in Italy remaining only in the double digits, they were able to improve their social and economic position in Italian society due to their hard work in growing their economic activities. Between the foundation of the Chinese People's Republic in 1949 and Deng Xiaoping's "open door policy" in 1979, formal relationships between China and Chinese immigrants in Italy were interrupted, even though family and informal relationships never completely broke off. At the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, due to globalization and favorable conditions of Chinese and Italian law, many Chinese people came to Italy. Leveraging family networks, enterprising capability and world trade flow, Chinese immigrants further enlarged their economic activities. In 1998, there were 70,000 Chinese people living in Italy. By 2011, there were 300,000 (Latham and Wu 2013, 27). During the 2000s and 2010s, the social and economic conditions of Chinese immigrants diversified in terms of geographic origins, work activities and socio-cultural milieu. Workers came from several provinces, including Zhejiang, working not only in manufacturing, but also in trade and services (Ceccagno 2017, 171). Many of them came for family reunification or to study at Italian Universities (ISTAT 2018, 18).

The category of university students represents one of the more innovative groups in Chinese mobility to Italy. According to the Statistics Office of the Ministry of University and Research of Italy, from 2010 to 2021, there were 663,506 Chinese students in Italian universities; among them, 57,459 were in the AFAM network.³

³ AFAM (*Alta Formazione Artistica e Musicale*) is part of the Italian higher education system and includes: state and public Academies of Fine Art (*Accademie di Belle Arti*); state Music Conservatories (*Conservatori di Musica*) and other public Music Institutes (*ex Istituti*)

In the 2020–21 academic year, there were 1,793,210 total students in Italian universities. Among them, 101,091 were foreign students, of which 8,319 were Chinese students, 8.2% of the enrolled students. Likewise, in the 2020–21 academic year, there were a total of 80,671 students in the Italian AFAM institutes network. Among them, 12,587 were foreign students, and 7,873 were Chinese students, 8.2% of the enrolled students.

Table 1 – University and AFAM students in Italy

2020–21	University students	AFAM institute students
Total number of students	1,793,210	80,671
Number of foreign students	101,091	12,587
Number of Chinese students	8,319	7,873
Percentage of Chinese students among total foreign students	8.2%	15.6%

Chinese students can apply as ordinary foreign students or participate in the Marco Polo and Turandot programs. To apply for a student visa, there are a list of conditions that must be met:

1. B2 level competency in the Italian language according to QCER;
2. Economic resources to live in Italy (467.65 euros per month, or 6,079.45 euros per year) and the availability of the necessary sum for repatriation;
3. Suitable accommodation;
4. Insurance coverage (Naldi et al. 2022).

The Marco Polo Programme was launched in 2004 by the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) at the direct request of the Presidency of the Italian Republic to strengthen scientific collaboration with China and increase the presence of Chinese students on Italian campuses. With the same aim, the Turandot Programme was launched for art, music, design and ballet students in 2009. Due to an intergovernmental agreement between the two countries, Chinese students who apply for pre-enrolment in a Bachelor's or Master's degree programme at an Italian university or an Italian performing arts academy and music institute can more easily obtain a student visa to Italy and earn a degree recognized both in Italy and China. In 2005, only 32 Universities participated in the Marco Polo programme. However, by 2021–22, there were 65 universities, 15 higher schools of language mediation, and 108 AFAM institutes (Naldi et al. 2022, 18).

Marco Polo and Turandot students must abide by specific conditions. For example, while they are not obliged to obtain an Italian language certificate prior

Musicali Pareggiati); state Design colleges (*Istituti Superiori per le Industrie Artistiche – ISIA*); the National Academy of Dance (*Accademia Nazionale di Danza*); the National Academy of Drama (*Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica*); Private institutions authorized to award qualifications of Higher Education in Art, Music and Dance.

to going to Italy, they can attend an Italian course while in Italy and obtain an Italian language certification six months before starting academic courses. They must also have earned a *gaokao* 高考⁴ score of at least 400/750. Turandot students, in particular, must earn a *gaokao* score of at least of 300/750 and a *yikao* 艺考⁵ score of at least of 100/750 (Naldi et al. 2022, 18–19). These programs represent an opportunity to simplify access to Italian universities, but they are not without their critiques: the gap between growing numbers of students and the quality of the accommodations provided to them; the connection between degrees and job opportunities in the Italian labor market; and the bureaucratic and institutional complexities of the Italian university system (Bagni and Scibetta 2018, 61–5). According to the ‘VII Convegno sui Programmi Governativi Marco Polo e Turandot’ from the 2013–14 academic year, the number of Turandot program students was higher than that of the Marco Polo students (Naldi et al. 2022, 5). This often depends on the attractiveness of Italian art and music (which are very well-known in China), the lack of high-level institutions in these fields in China, and the growing cultural and entertainment sector in the Chinese economy that require professionals with international level competences (Naldi et al. 2022, 7). The flow of Chinese art and music students in Italy grew continually until 2017 when, due to the opening of university courses in China and the new ranking of *gaokao* required to access these programs, there were roughly 10% less students.

When the Marco Polo program was first launched, Lavagnino (2005) cited an article by Shi Kedong 史克栋 (2005), a Chinese journalist working in Italy, in a paper about this program. Shi Kedong explained the advantages of moving to Italy to study to Chinese students: low university fees, low living costs expenditure, and students can both study and work; the author also outlined the best Italian degree courses: design, architecture, fine arts, music, and visual arts.

This short list can be seen as an example to divide the connection between mobility and cultural production into two dimensions: structural dimension and imaginative dimension.

The structural dimension is linked, for example, to economic resources. Most Chinese students abroad are ‘*zifei* students’ (*zifei liuxuesheng* 自费留学生). In other words, they receive strong family economic support (Li 2021, 30–1). The China Scholarship Council (CSC) has identified key funding areas for overseas study with priority support including communication, information technology, agricultural, new technology, life science, population health, material science, new materials, energy, environment, and engineering science (Li 2021, 113):

⁴ *Gaokao*, or National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), is a standardised college entrance exam held annually in mainland China. It is required for entrance into almost all higher education institutions at the undergraduate level.

⁵ *Yikao*, or National College Entrance Exam for Art Students, is a parallel to *gaokao*. *Yikao* tests students on their artistic skills through three main subjects: graphite drawing, acrylic painting, and fast sketch.

Among college students, those who have the intention of going abroad have stable incomes of their parents, and the majority of them live in cities. This shows that although the big prospect of studying abroad is very good, individuals are still closely related to their family economic situation and ideology. Among college students who do not want to go abroad, the cost of studying abroad is the key to hinder them from going abroad (Li 2021, 29).

Even if the appreciation of RMB represents an incentive worth mentioning, social and economic backgrounds still represent a key element for Marco Polo and Turandot students. In fact, most parents of these students have a high or medium-high level of education (Scolaro 2020, 143). Comparing domestic and international students' mobility, it's easy to see that mobility patterns are influenced by and contribute to China's growing inequalities. International graduate students generally had more privileged family backgrounds, coming from China's highly developed core cities, while domestic graduates tended to work and live in less affluent medium-sized cities around these regions (Zhai and Moskal 2022). Mobility, in this case, has a strong connection with Chinese economic development and the privileges—and discrimination—that it inevitably produces.

The second dimension pointed out by Shi Kedong's paper can be seen as the “transnational construction of the imaginary landscape:”

The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense); the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson's sense), and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations, which is no more and no less real than the collective representations of Emile Durkheim, now mediated through the complex prism of modern media (Appadurai 1996, 31).

Art, music, design, and fashion are considered as symbols of Italian and Western culture. Chinese middle-class families, and especially young people, look at these symbols that contribute to establishing “a constructed landscape of collective aspirations” in terms of consumption, and cultural choice.⁶

It is also noted that many middle class individuals embrace and appreciate Western high culture, such as opera, art, and classical music as they swarm to exhibitions of French Impressionists, Italian Renaissance, and American Art in China. The inclination for materialistic possession and cultural consumption of middle-class cultural forms confirms their social status and cultural tastes (Hulme 2014, 18).

⁶ The definition of middle class in the Chinese context is a complex operation that cannot be explored at length in this text. The chapter does not refer to “middle class” as a determined social group, but rather as a heterogeneous and dynamic group that organizes and shares consumption styles as a result of recent economic development (Tsang 2014).

3. Cultural production and Chinese returnee opera students⁷

The two levels of analysis —the structural and imaginative one— may be connected through the concept of mobility. Urry notes that there are four main interpretations of the term ‘mobile’ or ‘mobility’:

1. something that moves or is capable of movement, objects and people included;
2. mobile as a mob, a rabble or an unruly crowd. It is not fully fixed within boundaries and therefore needs to be tracked and socially regulated;
3. social mobility as a vertical hierarchy of positions where individuals may be situated by comparison with other positions within such hierarchies;
4. mobility in the sense of migration or other kinds of semi-permanent geographical movement through a country or continent, often in search of a ‘better life’ or to escape from drought, persecution, war, famine and so on (Urry 2007, 7–8).

In the case of international music students, it is possible to notice how the different interpretations interact with each other.

3.1 Mobility and social hierarchy

ZY is a 34-year-old tenor⁸ from Henan, a province in the center of China. ZY studied at Henan University for his Bachelor’s degree and later came to Italy in 2010. After many bureaucratic challenges, he obtained a Bachelor’s and master’s degree in opera from the Conservatory of Palermo. In 2018, he returned to China and began working as a singer, opera producer and is presently a chorus director of an important theater in Shaanxi. ZY began studying music at 14 years old. His father, a lawyer, is a non-professional but highly talented multi-instrumentalist of Western and traditional Chinese instruments. When ZY told his parents that he wanted to study opera, they supported him. He had a promising voice and they had the necessary economic resources, unlike his father’s family. After several years of private lessons, during the last academic year before concluding his Bachelor’s degree in music at Henan University, ZY attended a master class with a Chinese singer who had graduated in Milan and now works in the National Centre for the Performing Arts of Beijing, the most important opera house in China. In ZY’s story, this was the first time that he had thought about going to Italy. At the time of the master class, the Chinese teacher asked ZY two questions: “What would you like to do after your degree? What about your family?”

⁷ In this section, the text will cite interviews with three Chinese students who have graduated from an Italian conservatory: ZY, a male who lived in Italy from 2010 to 2018; LC, a male who lived in Italy from 2013 to 2018; and XM, a female who lived in Italy from 2013 to 2019. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online in Italian and Chinese languages according to the preferences of the interviewees.

⁸ Tenor, baritone and soprano are types of classical singing voices of opera.

ZY: He meant, is your family rich or poor? I said, “I came from a small city, my family is normal, neither rich nor poor.” He told me, “I suggest going directly to Italy, because the truth is there. There is the home [of opera, N.d.A], there is opera, and original technique. Don’t study any further in China. Here, it is difficult to study with a good teacher. Italy is the home of opera, the home of technique, there is a world!” At that moment, I hadn’t thought about going abroad. I had never thought about leaving China, ever. My dream was to attend a Master’s program at a conservatory or my university. After that, I could find a job at a university. Even if it were not at the highest level, I would still be able to find a job. I could marry and have a child. You know, being a university teacher, all over the world it’s a good job, so that was my idea [...] This teacher gave me this idea: if your family can support you every year for 6,000 yuan, the expenses aren’t too much. In Italy, university is also free. You only have to pay a tax. It’s different from England or the USA, where it is more expensive. Every city has a theater, and every city has a conservatory. Also, you have to study the Italian language because it’s the mother tongue of opera, so you have to choose Italy. Don’t think about other countries. Italy is your dream. Italy is your future.

ZY’s family “is normal, neither rich nor poor.” They belong to the new Chinese middle class. His parents studied at a university just after the Cultural Revolution and, through hard work, built a solid economic and social position in society. Even though ZY’s voice was suitable for studying opera, going abroad was only possible with financial support from his family. Mobility to Italy also means social mobility, as Urry suggested, as it is a sign of position in a social and economic hierarchy where some students can go, while others cannot (Yang 2022, 310). Schiller and Salazar argue that mobility may be understood in the connection between mobility and immobility, as ‘motility’ scholars outline (Flamm and Kaufmann 2006; Tomlinson 2001): freedom of movement of people, objects, and ideas that characterized globalization influence and is influenced by a nation-state’s international order. Going beyond the distinction of opposites—mobility versus sedentism—could help in the understanding of social, cultural and identity change.

3.2 Mobility, imagination, and consumptions

LC is a 34-year-old baritone. He was born in Ningbo, in the Zhejiang province. Since childhood, he has studied music as a personal passion. His school results were better in music than other subjects, thus he prepared for admission to the Tianjin conservatory, where he studied to earn a Bachelor’s degree. In 2013, he traveled to Italy to study opera at the Conservatory of Parma, where he lived for four years. In 2019, he then moved back to China, but returned to Italy many times to study, work or for leisure activities.

LC: Gradually, more and more people are interested in opera music.

Interviewer: Why?

LC: Because we are richer than before. If you have no money, how can you study music? You must have money. This is a very simple problem. If you have money,

you can study music, you can buy a piano or a violin, or you can go to the theater to listen and watch a piece.

Chinese economic development, in LC's view, is directly connected to the spread of interest in music. Public investments sustain music consumption by new theaters. In fact, there are estimated to be roughly 50 new theaters in the last ten years (Giordano 2017, 29). The Chinese investment in new theaters, located in first-level cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, or Hangzhou, represents a new image of society in architecture—cosmopolitan and of high culture—as opposed to a small town with a less fashionable appeal. In the last twenty years, home ownership has been the most effective symbol of social status (Tsang 2014, 39–44). Likewise, living in a city with an opera house and consuming opera music could project symbolic wealth and social status.

“The imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between agency sites (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1996, 31). Thousands of returnee Chinese music students back in China contribute to building this imaginary landscape via their jobs or sharing experiences online, as in the words of ZY, CL and XM.

XM: Opera in the past was not very popular in China, maybe because on the Internet there are not so many things about it. Now, there are many students who have studied in Italy and are back in China. They bring Italian music to China. They can put this stuff online.

The growth of the Chinese economy drives the growth of cultural consumption, such as music, based on the ‘work of imagination’ and pragmatic reasons. If people have more economic resources, they can study music as a personal passion. It can also become a profession in the entertainment market, as emerged from the interviews. These experiences, shared also on the web, help to build a favorable cultural environment for new students who aspire to follow the same way. Interviewees confirm that before leaving, international students have different aims: to find a creative and expression space, artistic success, job assurance or social hierarchy climbing. The music education market is one place where these ideas may be converted into reality.

3.3 Mobility and music education market

XM, 33 years old, was born in Liaoning, in Northeast China. Today, she is a soprano despite never wanting to study music or opera before turning 17 years old. During secondary school, she looked at other school subjects as “too normal,” and she wanted to study something different from other students. A teacher suggested studying music. When XM met a student who had just come back from Italy, she likewise chose to go to Italy to attend university, where stayed from 2013 to 2019 at the Conservatory of Parma, obtaining both a Bachelor's and Master's degree. Now she is a soprano in the chorus of an important theater in Shaanxi, where she found the job a few months after returning to China. She spoke to me the opportunities for Chinese opera students to find work in Italy:

Interviewer: For those who studied in Italy, is it easy to find a job?

XM: It is not difficult, but finding a good job is difficult. There are so many opportunities, but not every opportunity is good. [...] Some of the students [who have studied in Italy], like me, work in theater. Also, there are many people who work in conservatories in China. For example, in Zhejiang, Wuhan, Beijing, Many, many people do this. Others work at secondary schools. Not just as singers, but also as pianists.

In fact, according to Daxue Consulting, the music education market is on the rise: “With a market size of 75.7 billion RMB in 2016, China is a rising market for music education. This may be attributed to government support, China’s booming economy, and the upgrading of citizens’ consumption. Another factor not to be overlooked is the importance of music certifications to Chinese families” (Daxue consulting 2020). In other words, studying music abroad is a private investment (Tsang 2014, 63), and students, after completing their degree in China or other countries, can more easily find a job in schools or universities.

LC: Now it is more difficult to find a job in music. Big cities—for example Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Ningbo—are very rich. There are so many people and there are so many musicians that want to come here to work. But in other cities that are not so big, rich and important, there is still a lack of music teachers and musicians.

Interviewer: Would a student who graduated in Italy and one who graduated in China have different opportunities in finding a job?

LC: This is difficult to explain, because musicians or singers have to sing well. It does not depend on whether you studied in Italy or China. If you sing well, or if you teach well, you can find a job. There are so many students who went to Italy, graduated in Italy and then came back to China but they cannot speak Italian. I cannot understand how they graduated! Not all students went to Italy to study, others also went for shopping or traveling reasons.

The consumption of music and its market follow the dynamics of Chinese urban development (Wang 2016). The biggest and most important cities have a good music market, but a more competitive one, as XM and LC say. Not every degreed student—including those who have degreed abroad—have enough skills to enter these music markets but they have the opportunity to find jobs in second or third level cities. In this sense, the music market and interest in music reach its public in smaller urban contexts. Musicians follow this market evolution.

3.4 Mobility and performance

Interviewer: Would a student who graduated in Italy and one who graduated in China have different opportunities to find a job?

XM: Those of us that came back from Italy have the advantage of the Italian language.

The Italian language is not just a factor that helps to find a good job, but it is also, in this specific cultural and artistic context, an element that influences musical performance. It is because of the phonetic structure of the Italian language—specifically, vowel stress and few oxytones—and the repertory of opera that Italian operas hold such an important position.

ZY: The first difficulty, and the most important one, is the language. If you can speak Italian, you can study and pass exams. It is not so difficult. At that moment, for me the biggest difficulty is the language because I cannot understand it. When studying history, I have to use grammar points I've never used before.

Interviewer: But today, knowing Italian, does it help you in your job?

ZY: It helps me so much! My Italian, [it helps me] chant and know about Italy. I won't say that I'm better than others. There are so many better than me, but I know many people who have been in Italy many years and they cannot speak Italian, nor do they know Italian traditions. [Italian people] tell me the importance of their culture in opera. If you don't understand these things, even if you speak Italian, you can not sing opera well. It is because the roles of opera are Italian, French or German. There are no Chinese roles—ok, there are some—but they don't matter. For me, I speak Italian, I know Italians, and I have an Italian friend who explained a lot to me. I know what you [Italians] think, your philosophy, how people are in relationships. On stage you are no longer Chinese. [...] On stage, the movement that you have to do, you must be Italian, not French.

Learning Italian, for my interviewees, is a great obstacle. However, back in China, it is an important resource. Italian language competency directly influences artistic production: Italian opera has Italian rules. Singers who have a kind of familiarity with Italian culture—thanks to mobility—can better interpret certain roles. The singers on stage “are no longer Chinese.” In this interpretation, there are two premises. On the one hand, opera singers must have the ability to overcome national identities. On the other hand, this vision is supported precisely on a culturalist perspective of opera. Italian opera has ‘typical’ national characteristics, and its roles express their own ‘Italianness.’

The Chinese technique for singing Italian opera is different from the Italian one. Learning a new technique is an obstacle and, at the same time, a resource for students. It depends on the influence of Chinese music technique and knowledge sharing from the West to China. In my interviewees' words, they can find the original and pure technique of voice in Italy. This impression is confirmed as soon as they arrive in an Italian conservatory, where they must start studying music again. In that moment, they understand the perception of the gulf between Italian and Chinese opera. This view could be seen as a ‘pedagogic’ relationship in which Chinese singers lack knowledge while Western ones have knowledge (Xu 2022, 152). But if opera in China is seen as a complex and multi-level process, the condition of Chinese students abroad becomes part of a bigger frame. The innovative impact of this process is due to Chinese public investment in terms of new theaters and conservatories, the private investment in studying music in China or abroad and the new productions of opera by Chinese compos-

ers in the Chinese language. An example of this process is the “I sing Beijing”⁹ program *Guoji qing nian shengyuejia hanyu gechang jihua* 国际青年声乐家汉语歌唱计划, which is financed by the former Hanban¹⁰ and promoted by the famous Chinese singer Hao Jiangtian 田浩江 who studied in the United States and performed in many important theaters in America and Europe. The program, launched in 2011, included scholarships for young European and American opera singers who came to China to study opera in Chinese with Chinese maestros. The project can be easily inscribed in Chinese soft power strategies because of its content and because it was planned and organized directly by the Chinese government through Hanban.

The aforementioned four main interpretations of the concept of mobility can also be found in the personal stories of the interviewees. ZY, LC, and XM physically moved to Italy and spent some time there. After that, they returned to China with new relationships, knowledge, skills, and intercultural competencies. All these acknowledgments are important to work in music and to be competitive in a growing market. Mobility is governed and promoted by international state agreements, also in the university context. XM has been a student in the Turandot program, which gave her favorable conditions to study abroad. On the other hand, mobility is pushed by social and labor conditions, as LC described in his personal relationships with music and teaching. Personal attitude and wishes are also involved in this process. Social hierarchies are conferred or built according to these mobility flows, as in the case of ZY’s family, which could financially support their child’s desire to study and work in music.

Connecting all of these levels may outline a field of practice that, in this new perspective, can change the opera world landscape. The case of Chinese opera students challenges the subjective and national identity in the experiences of international mobility, performing and public cultural policies.

4. Conclusion

In China, students in international mobility have been a tool for cultural and social innovation for over a century. In some cases, it was a process organized and planned by the government, while in others it was promoted by social and economic changes. In general, the returnee students were called upon to make a contribution to the modernization of China. A work of art, like opera, is the result of a series of conditions of possibility (Bourdieu 1993, 30).

My analysis has outlined two main dimensions which describe the connection between mobility and cultural production: structural dimension and imaginative dimension. The structural dimension is composed of State international

⁹ <<https://www.isingfestival.org/>>. (Accessed September 11, 2020).

¹⁰ Now Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEd) *Zhongwai yuyan jiaoliu hezuo zhongxin* 中外语言交流合作中心, till 2020 also known as Confucius Institute Headquarters or simply Hanban. <http://www.chinese.cn/page/#/pcpage/mainpage> (Accessed November 28, 2022).

agreements and general mobility law conditions. Institution is an important stakeholder. For example, it operates through the Marco Polo and Turandot programs, state-national agreements that improve mobility towards Italy in both an Italian and Chinese higher education strategy in a worldwide market, or through the number of government policies promulgated between 1986 and 2003 to attract the return of Chinese students (Xiang and Shen 2009, 520). This level is also compounded by social and economic changes in the Chinese context. The highly educated middle class can invest large sums of money into the education of their children to cultivate ‘human quality’ (*suzhi* 素质) and ‘civilization’ (*wenming* 文明), which are considered two key elements in securing the feeling of belonging by the middle-class in China (Ponzini 2020; Tsang 2014, 69–73). Human capital, as an individual attribute, can be converted to financial, social and political capital (Xiang and Shen 2009, 520–21). Going abroad to study is one way to accumulate the needed cultural capital to produce, or reproduce, certain social structures and experiences (Yang 2022, 311). Music, in Confucian tradition, is an indispensable way to train cultivation of self (Hao 2011, 172). It could also be a way to obtain university access more easily. Students who achieve the high-level certificates in music are regarded as ‘special-skill students’ and are given priority for university admission with a gaokao score lower than other majors, including in high level universities (Xie and Wah 2011, 63; Bai 2021). Social class, then, uses education to preserve its class position.

The second level is shaped by the lifestyle, work activities and cultural consumption of middle-class families. Education, both formal and informal in nature, may shape taste, consumption, behavior, social differentiation and class boundaries that are also based on the sharing symbols that portray an imaginary landscape (Tsang 2014, 31–2; 63–9). After the Open Door policy, and specifically in the last ten years, consumption patterns have changed, going in the direction of recreation and cultural services like musical ones (Daxue consulting 2020), including Western opera (Giordano 2017, 29).

In 1986, Luciano Pavarotti with the Opera House of Genoa went on tour to Beijing.¹¹ It is not the first time that an opera singer has visited China since 1979, but the event was regarded and represented as extraordinary. In a documentary of the tour,¹² two frameworks may summarize the two levels identified in this analysis.

The first one involved Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915–1989), the secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, who personally invited Pavarotti to give a concert at the Great Hall of the People, the first time for a Western artist. Pavarotti’s tour in China shows how the work is produced within a Chinese national cultural policy plan that invests resources in productions and study in China. Opera became an

¹¹ <<https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1986/07/01/pavarotti-conquista-la-cina.html>> (Accessed September 11, 2020).

¹² <<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/04/movies/film-pavarotti-in-china-in-distant-harmony.html>> (Accessed September 11, 2020).

instrument of national representation, with the production of ‘Chinese’ works to be combined with Western works. Chinese students abroad are among the protagonists of this transition, as many famous Chinese opera singers have all studied abroad, such as Gregorio Wu Pak Chiu, Yang Yang and Hao Jiangtian.

The second framework regards the final concert. On the evening of Pavarotti’s concert at the Great Hall of the People, the inhabitants of Beijing attend the show in short sleeves and shorts. The organization had some trouble due to the enthusiasm of Beijing inhabitants who, in the previous days, filled the theatres even for rehearsal sessions. The warm response of the audience to Pavarotti’s visit may also represent a non-institutional level of production. The work spreads to a new audience that identifies with high-level consumption in which to cultivate *suzhi* and *wenming*, or consumption with which to be able to distinguish oneself in social hierarchies and create belonging with other high social groups. Studying abroad is one of the ways to achieve this. In addition to social prestige, studying abroad may contribute to integration in the labor market, training activities or teaching.

In this chapter, cultural production is understood as a field of practice, not as an individual artistic act. In the same way, mobility is not understood as a romantic ideal, even if motivated by music interests or an artistic dream, but rather as the result of complex social, economic and cultural dynamics. The cultural production of opera is therefore a collective phenomenon in which the singers and listeners (consumers in the global market in which opera lives) both participate in the production.

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