

Chinese Opera and the International Market

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ABSTRACT

In 1983 Elizabeth C. Hirschman published what was to become a classic work on marketing strategies for aesthetic and ideological products. She constructed three circles, with the public in the outer circle, peers and industrial professionals in the middle circle, and artists in the inner circle. She stated that artists may hope or want to reach one or another of the three segments, or even all three at once. In 1994, based on Hirschman's three segment theory, François Colbert proposed that the product-centred marketing process is distinct from the traditional market-centred process of finding consumers who are likely to appreciate the product. Both Hirschman and Colbert offer a conceptual basis for analyzing the arts market. This article reports on a strategic analysis of the international market for Chinese opera based on experimental data. It extends Hirschman's analysis in several ways: (1) it introduces a quantitative element to support her three-circle classification; (2) it reveals the interactive relationship among the three circles; (3) it builds a potential strategic system for the development of an international market for Chinese opera. The article also offers insights into the Chinese government's policies on the export of traditional art.

KEYWORDS:

Strategic analysis, international market, audience segmentation, Chinese opera

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Introduction

Chinese opera is a traditional art form with a long history, but it is unknown outside China. One could argue that Chinese opera possesses both unique attraction and universal significance that can be shared by different cultures and nations. To present Chinese opera to a Western audience is not only an issue of audience development but also an issue of policy priority in resource allocation by the Chinese government. As China has adopted a top-down system of strategizing and policy-making, this is how the allocation and distribution of resources, capital and talent are decided.

In China, the national strategy for exporting Chinese arts has followed a Marxist view: *what is national is international*. This principle has been applied to every cultural good distributed internationally. Therefore, the central government invests resources for the promotion and presentation of Chinese opera in foreign markets. One might, however, wonder if it is always possible to export a traditional cultural product to foreign audiences. Chan et al. (2016) studied the behaviour of Chinese audiences watching Western performing arts productions. Their findings show that Chinese people appreciate Western plays on several dimensions, including cognitive. However, these productions were modern plays and shows, not traditional art forms. Our research considers traditional art forms and the “addiction” of Western audiences to them. It therefore advances our knowledge of consumer behaviour.

Background

Although all artistic products possess these qualities to some degree, live works are more abstract, subjectively experienced, non-utilitarian, unique and holistic (Becker 1978; Hirschman 1983; Hirschman and Wallendorf 1982; Holbrook and Zirlin 1983; Peterson 1979; Polanyi 1958; Prosch 1975). Also, artistic products in the high arts are complex products that require the right “keys” to be understood and appreciated (Colbert 1994, 2012). We also know that appreciation of high arts is linked to education (Colbert 1994, 2012), gender (Christin 2012; Gainer 1993), cultural transmission (Colbert and Courchesne 2012) and the “distinction effect” (Bourdieu 1984). Even among high arts audiences, satisfaction derived from a performance may be different for men and women (Voss and Cova 2006) and tolerance for dissatisfaction can be high for heavy users (Obaidalahe et al. 2017). Artistic products are experiential products that allow the viewer to experience something different from one’s everyday life (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Art also carries the meanings, symbols and soul of a nation (Colbert and St-James 2014). This is embodied in any cultural product from a given country, but particularly so for traditional art forms such as folklore or classical works. If a work of art is culturally charged and represents the soul of a nation, how can a traditional art form be transmitted to and appreciated by other cultures?

Traditional Chinese Opera

Chinese opera is an ancient theatre art that is unique both in its aesthetic standards and in its artistic system. It is deeply rooted in tradition and conveys Chinese culture. Synthesis, virtuosity and stylization are its distinguishing artistic characteristics. The performers are actors, singers, dancers and acrobats. They tell a story embedded in stylized movements and symbols that may not be understood by those unfamiliar with Chinese opera and its highly stylized symbols. However, there are instances of Western audiences being attracted by Chinese opera. Mei Lanfang¹ in the 20th century and Zhang Huoding² in the 21st are two outstanding examples of actors and actresses being acclaimed in the West. Other examples are plays such as *The Orphan of Zhao*³ and *The Peony Pavilion*.⁴

We are now in a period when China is opening up its borders to foreign tourists and wishes to promote its culture and traditions in other countries. The process of transmitting interest in traditional Chinese

culture to Western countries, whose artistic tradition is totally different, promises to be an interesting field of investigation.

Research Question

If high art consists of experiential and complex products that need “keys” to be understood, one may ask how Chinese opera, as a traditional art form, might be accepted and appreciated by foreign audiences. How can a complex and unknown product attract new audiences? Are there segments of the market that are more susceptible to becoming interested? We hypothesize that, as Chinese opera has very deep cultural roots, a complicated role system and a stylized performance technique, audiences from different cultures must possess special knowledge in order to understand and enjoy it.

Our tentative answer to this question is a work in progress. We discuss the results of a 10-year experiment. This is the first item on our research agenda.

Methodology

Guan’s (2012) “Chinese Cultural Soft Power” ranks international interest in various types of Chinese cultural products. In the United States, for example, interest in and access to Chinese opera ranks last in terms of Chinese cultural products (Table 1).

TABLE 1 FORMS OF CHINESE CULTURE OF INTEREST TO AND ACCESSIBLE TO US RESPONDENTS

Cultural form	Interest (%)	Access (%)	Difference value (%)
Chinese history	42.98	10.04	32.94
Chinese historic sites	32.85	3.91	28.94
Architecture and landscape	26.21	3.57	22.64
Traditional Chinese medicine	29.36	8.17	21.19
Chinese Gongfu	32.51	11.40	21.11
Chinese philosophy	26.38	7.83	18.55
Chinese food	64.94	47.15	17.79
Chinese religion	20.60	3.40	17.19
Chinese painting	20.51	3.40	17.11
Chinese crafts	18.89	2.98	15.91
Chinese-style clothing	15.83	1.28	14.55
Chinese characters (Hanzi)	18.04	4.43	13.62
Chinese dancing	15.15	1.79	13.36
Chinese New Year	13.79	1.79	12.00
Chinese acrobatics	11.57	1.28	10.30
Chinese literature	12.51	3.40	9.11
Chinese movie stars	15.91	6.98	8.94
Chinese music	13.28	5.11	8.17
Chinese books	9.11	2.38	6.72
Chinese movies	14.55	7.83	6.72

Animation and comics	11.32	5.11	6.21
Chinese sports stars	7.74	3.23	4.51
Chinese TV plays	7.66	4.17	3.49
Chinese opera	3.83	0.94	2.89
None of the above	13.79	39.06	-25.28

Source: Guan (2012), p. 75.

In response to the question “Which forms of Chinese culture are you interested in?”, 64.94% said food, followed by history (42.98%), Kong Fu (32.9%), historic sites (32.85%) and traditional medicine (29.36%). As for the question “Which forms of Chinese culture can you access in daily life?”, respondents most often engaged with Chinese food (47.15%), followed by Kong Fu (11.40%), history (10.04%), traditional medicine (8.17%), movies (7.83%) and philosophy (7.83%). It is interesting to note that only 3.83% of respondents were interested in Chinese opera and only (0.94%) had access to this form of Chinese culture.

This leads us to conclude that traditional Chinese arts and cultural products are not popular among foreigners, which contradicts the Chinese government’s assumption that *what is national is international*.

In order to explore this question, we conducted two studies. The first was with artists and arts-related groups in 14 world-leading arts schools in the period 2007 to 2017. We analyzed the actions that were taken to introduce Chinese traditional opera to these artists and arts-related groups as well as to general audiences. The study was carried out in England, Canada and the United States as well as at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (NACTA) in Beijing.

The second study investigated the consumption of Chinese traditional opera by foreigners working or studying in Beijing.

Study 1: Artists and Groups in Foreign Arts Schools

Appropriation

An individual attending a new performance will “investigate” to determine those elements that are new and different, and will then compare these elements with what is familiar (Nesting) in order to make the new elements part of one’s life (Stamping) (Carù and Cova 2005). Although the appropriate cycle concept is concerned specifically with an individual’s reaction to unfamiliarity when attending a performance, we use the concept as an analogy for how a group of individuals behave when faced with the unknown, in our case Chinese traditional opera.

During the 10-year ILSSA⁵ study (2007–17), we collected information on the amount of time participants spent exploring Chinese opera (Investigating), the extent to which they made new and unknown elements their own (Nesting) and whether or not their interest was sustained (Stamping). Table 2 outlines the project, which was divided into three types of event: plays (five), films (two) and others (three).

TABLE 2 ILSSA COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS 2007–12

Project type	Title	Collaborators	Date
Play	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Binghamton University	2007
	<i>Bankruptcy</i>	Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Scuola Sperimentale dell'Attore	2008
	<i>The Nightingale</i>	Karsten Gundermann, German composer	2008
	<i>Harlequins' Journey in China</i>	Theatre of Asphodeles	2010
	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Maryland University	2012
Film	<i>Anatomie Titus Fall of Rome</i>	Brigitte Maria Mayer, German director	2010
	<i>New Voice</i>	Dan Wolman, Israeli director	2012
Teaching/study exchange	Chinese Opera Teaching Exchange	Concordia University	2008
Workshop	Common Stage	Zurich University of the Arts	2008
Comprehensive collaboration	Confucius Institute of Chinese Opera	Binghamton University	2008

Three Markets

Three teams of authors have laid the groundwork in arts marketing. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) proposed that art is about “fantasies, feelings and fun,” leading to the experiential concept as applied to the arts. Hirschman (1983) proposed that an artist is addressing what can be seen as three segments of the market: himself, his peers and the general public. Hirschman’s classification led to the proposal by Colbert (1994) and Nantel and Colbert (1988) that an artist, and by extension an artistic company, can be either product-oriented or market-oriented.

We analyze our data using as references Hirschman’s (1983) markets and Carù and Cova’s (2005) appropriation cycle (Table 3).

TABLE 3 AUDIENCE CHARACTERISTICS AT THREE LEVELS

Audience characteristics	Investigating ARTL ^a (I:5)	Nesting ARTL (N:5)	Stamping ARTL (S:5)	Post-experiment ARD ^b (5+p) : 5	Audience segmentation
Artists	≤ 1/10	≤ 1/5	≤ 2/5	8/5	Self-oriented
Peers and industry professionals	≤ 1/5	≤ 2/5	≤ 3/5	6/5	Peer-oriented
Public at large	≤ 3/5	≤ 4/5	≤ 5/5	Still in continue	Market-oriented

^a Average Relative Time Length

^b Average Relative Duration

The results for our artist segment show that artists are very active in the exploration of and acceptance of Chinese opera. They believe that Chinese opera may provide new forms of artistic information and even promote innovation throughout Western culture. Their appropriation process runs as follows: soon after they enter the initial “touch/investigation” stage, they enter the Nesting stage, and then, around one year after the initial stage, the Stamping stage. This short appropriation cycle suggests that artists possess certain professional qualities or a pre-existing ability to communicate with art that allows them to relate, understand and accept Chinese opera, even though it is replete with cultural connotations.

Follow-up research conducted between 2008 and 2015 found that artists continued to explore innovative ways of incorporating elements of Chinese opera into their own art forms. Don Boros, a drama professor at Binghamton University in the United States, one of the schools involved in the research, said, “I think Shakespeare would be very happy if he saw our *Romeo and Juliet* played in the form of Chinese opera. In fact, the two drama forms speak the same language. If Shakespeare was still alive, he would drink coffee with Professor Chen Lincang [director of *Romeo and Juliet*] and chat in their common language.”

It is interesting to note that artists from Western countries taking part in the ILSSA research performed Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in North America and Andersen’s *The Nightingale* in Europe, both in Chinese opera style. *The Nightingale* had three successful performances on tour in Europe. The artists who integrated elements of traditional Chinese opera into the play can be considered a kind of “secondary communication medium” between the product and the audience. They became an important channel through which the third segment, “the general public,” to use Hirschman’s (1983) concept, were initiated into traditional Chinese arts and culture.

In 2008 a similar study was conducted at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, with an “arts-related group” defined as scholars engaged in research pertaining to an arts discipline, students majoring in an arts-related field, and individuals employed in the arts and culture sector. Not surprisingly, they showed a keen interest in exploring Chinese opera. For example, several students, after taking part in a short curriculum incorporating the study of Chinese opera (a one-week or one-month course in performance, makeup, fighting, etc.), either applied for a degree course in Chinese opera, took a role in a Chinese opera or attended Chinese opera as an audience member.

The establishment of the Confucius Institute of Chinese Opera at Binghamton University in 2009 had a profound influence on students’ exposure to the art form. In addition to Chinese-language courses, from

2009 through 2013 the Institute set up 21 courses around Peking opera. A total of 433 students learned opera gestures and movements, martial arts, makeup, music and so on. Recruits came from the Department of Theater, the Department of Sciences and Culture and other arts-related disciplines. Students from unrelated disciplines also showed a keen interest in participating.

In addition to providing students and educators in the arts-related group a platform for learning about Chinese opera, the Confucius Institute has facilitated the exposure of Chinese opera and Mandarin to the general public. In the period 2013 to 2017 the Institute reached more than 30,000 people with its cultural activities such as lectures, exhibitions and performances.

The Confucius Institute was selected as part of the US government's Star Plan for two consecutive years. The US government allocates \$90,000 every year to the Voice of China: Learn Chinese From Peking Opera Performance Summer Camp.

Further research with the arts-related group was carried out by NACTA in Beijing. This study, conducted over the period 2008 to 2013, interviewed 1,183 overseas students from 26 countries living in Beijing. The results of the face-to-face interviews showed that students with a background in arts and culture were willing to actively experience and even learn Chinese opera. Some of the more outstanding overseas students became an important force in facilitating the communication of Chinese opera in their home countries.

In addition to the work with students and educators, research with other members of the arts-related group, including arts managers, critics and scholars, was conducted at NACTA, with Professor Lin as principal investigator. The results (Lin and Ma 2009; Lin and Wang 2009) indicate that those with a career in the arts showed a willingness and desire to experience Chinese opera. During the study period (2007–13), the participants maintained an interest in Chinese opera and many of them continue to study, explore and enjoy Chinese opera today (Lin 2014; Lin and Hu 2011; Lin and Liu 2012).

In addition to dissecting the three audience segments' reaction to Chinese opera in those studies, this analysis also observes the relationships and communication flows between the segments.

Flow Effect Between the Three Segments

Guan's (2012) results and the results of the present investigation are consistent with others reported in the literature (Colbert 1994; Nantel and Colbert 1988). Traditional Chinese opera can be classified as a high art and, as such, cannot be appreciated without adequate preparation. Those who are exposed to an art form must follow a path similar to the appropriation cycle in order to access it.

The findings of the 10-year ILSSA study suggest that the artist audience segment possesses a desire to learn and accept Chinese cultural products, such as Chinese opera, and therefore can be a powerful force in the communication and dissemination of Chinese culture to the public. In addition, artists often become a means of facilitating cross-cultural communication. For instance, overseas students from Finland, Germany, Korea and elsewhere have established cultural organizations in their home countries for the purpose of encouraging cross-cultural creative exchange with respect to Chinese opera. After his four-year program of study at NACTA, a German musician, Karsten Gundermann, wrote the Chinese opera music for *The Nightingale* and successfully toured the production in Europe. In another example, after graduating from NACTA, an American student, Liu Suying, founded the Sino US Performing Arts Organization. Hence, in the context of developing strategies to increase public exposure to Chinese opera, the interaction between the three audience segments is clearly important.

Study 2: Foreigners Working or Studying in Beijing

The objective of the second study was to investigate the consumption habits, regarding Chinese cultural products, of foreigners in Beijing. This work, conducted in 2014–15, consisted of face-to-face interviews with 1,076 respondents randomly selected from among the foreign population of Beijing. We found that 65.3% did not participate in any Chinese arts and culture offerings during their stay in China. This finding is consistent with that reported by Guan (2012) (see Table 4). However, when we analyzed the differences in consumption habits between levels of audience segments, we found that 69.03% of respondents with a work background in arts organizations regularly consumed Chinese arts and culture in Beijing while 31% did not. In addition, of those respondents who had learned Chinese culture or had taken arts courses, 61.99% consumed Chinese art products (see Table 5).

TABLE 4 CROSS-ANALYSIS OF WORK BACKGROUND AND CONSUMPTION PREFERENCE FOR CHINESE ARTS ACTIVITIES

		<i>Have you ever participated in Chinese art activities in China?</i>		Total
		YES (%)	NO (%)	
<i>Have you ever worked in culture or art related organizations (or similar)?</i>	NO	291 (34.68)	548 (65.32)	839
	YES	107 (69.03)	48 (30.97)	155

TABLE 5 CROSS-ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND CONSUMPTION PREFERENCE FOR CHINESE ARTS ACTIVITIES

		<i>Have you ever participated in Chinese art activities in China?</i>		Total
		YES (%)	NO (%)	
<i>Have you ever studied Chinese culture or art (or similar)?</i>	NO	189 (28.90)	456 (71.1)	654
	YES	212 (61.99)	130 (38.01)	342

Further analysis shows that 78.57% of respondents who were employed in the arts and culture sector did consume Chinese arts and culture. This proportion is far higher than those for overseas students (40.9%), company employees (31.85%), embassy employees (27.27%) and tourists (26.83%). Therefore, the two groups of data not only confirm that a pre-existing affinity for the arts has a positive effect on willingness to experience Chinese arts and culture, but also suggest mutual influences and interactions among the different audience segments similar to those evidenced in the Binghamton Confucius Institute research.

Further Research and Policy Implications

Exploring the targeted Western audience for Chinese opera is not only an issue of audience development in this art form but also an issue of policy priority and resource allocation. Success in building appreciation for Chinese opera in foreign countries means sound allocation of resources, capital and talent. Therefore, strategic analysis of the targeted international audience for Chinese opera will help to define the top-down strategy and policy-making. Such research will also contribute to the literature and broaden our knowledge concerning the international market for national arts.

The international market can be seen as a complex system of interacting hierarchies (Checkland 1999; Lin 2006). The international audience for Chinese opera can be regarded as a system with a succession of interacting markets (artists, arts-related audience, the general public). Research on the penetration of Chinese opera on a small scale, as in the present study, appears to confirm the Marxist world view: *what is national is international*.

Therefore, policy-makers need to look not only at the system itself but also at the interactions among its hierarchies as well as at the dynamic changes within the system.

According to complex system theory, the effectiveness and efficiency of a system's resource allocation depends on the synergy of the system as a whole, rather than the results for its parts (Lin 2006; Qian et al. 1990). This means that, when targeting an audience for Chinese opera one must first determine the hierarchies within the audience and then explore the interactions between them in order to optimize and maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the system as a whole.

Notes

1. A Chinese opera star popular in the United States in the 1930s.
2. A Chinese opera star who performed in the United States in 2015.
3. An early Chinese opera, translated into many languages.
4. A Chinese opera that met with great success in the United States a few years ago.
5. ILSSA (International Laboratory of Sister School of Arts), established in 2007, has conducted 12 case studies in collaboration with 14 world-leading universities.

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