

Love and the Cosmos: Costume and Set Design for Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*

Yong (Daniel) Shen

Comparative Literature 152

Professor: Prof. Gregory Nagy

Teaching Fellow: Zhe (Carrie) Geng

Turandot

One of the overarching themes behind my costume design is the concept of representation of the cosmos through poetry and opera, which manifests perfectly in *Turandot*. The princess becomes the personification of the moon and a part of the cosmos in the opera. For instance, as the crowd sings about the moon in Act I (Puccini, 72), hailing the moon as the “bleak one”, the “pale lover of the dead”, a procession of boys comes by, singing (Puccini, 73):

...a thousand voices sigh:

“Princess, come down to me!

Everything will bloom,

everything will shine! Ah!”

The boys are pleading for the icy cold *Turandot* to come down to the mortal world from the heavens. When the crowd sings about the moon as the “pale lover of the dead”, they really are singing about *Turandot* as she is the one responsible for the death of all those suitors.

Turandot is the moon, the daughter of the heavens, and the great executioner. To properly dress her, I want to take into account both her beauty and her cruelty. She wears a long robe with white/pale blue as base color to represent her cold beauty; the robe is red on its edges, as if she has dipped them in blood. Beauty and blood form the basis of her costume. On the back

of the robe is a crescent underneath a toad, both of which are symbols of the moon in ancient Chinese philosophy. This design is inspired by a painting from Ma Wang Dui (马王堆), a Han dynasty tomb. See the top left corner for the crescent and the toad:



(http://www.sohu.com/a/222832246_100028727)

Turandot also has a yellow disk in the shape of the moon's crescent behind her head, from which rays emanate. The disk symbolizes divinity and by donning her with the crescent and the rays, I transform her into the moon (See figure below for a headdress from the Miao people that inspired Turandot's moon headdress). While the opera uses words to transform her into the moon and a part of the cosmos, I transform her visually to be one with the universe.



(http://www.dianliwenmi.com/postimg_3437886_8.html)

Turandot also wears a crown of gold and red roses. Rose is the symbol of love and desire and there is no other crown more fitting for Turandot than a crown of roses. A prominent feature of the crown of roses I designed for Turandot is the thorns protruding from the crown. If the gold and red roses represent Turandot's beauty and love, then the thorns are the cruelty and violence also present in her character. The crown of roses warns everyone that Turandot cannot be possessed easily, however desirable she may be. In addition, Turandot's crown of roses is significant in that it is both an embodiment of Turandot's character and a physical representation of the opera's music. The motif that ties together the entire opera's music is a tune borrowed from a popular Chinese folk song called 茉莉花 (Mo Li Hua, or Jasmine Flower)¹. One version of the song includes the following (from:

<http://www.people.com.cn/GB/yule/1085/3038971.html>):

¹ To listen to a modern version of Mo Li Hua, click this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nejbWTcuJwc>. The singer in this video is none other than the First Lady of China, Peng Li Yuan.

好一朵玫瑰花，
好一朵玫瑰花，
玫瑰花开碗呀碗口大，
奴有心采一朵戴，
又怕刺儿把手扎。

What a beautiful rose,
What a beautiful rose,
The blooming rose is as big as a cup,
I have the desire to pick one to wear,
But am afraid of being pricked by the thorns.

The subject of the folk song is a prickly rose; as the subject of the opera is Turandot, she is that prickly rose whom those attempting to possess fear. Therefore, the crown of roses is particularly fitting for her as it provides a union between the physical costume, Turandot's character, and the music of the opera as a whole.

As a finishing touch, I chose a section from an ancient Chinese poem to accompany the costume and the painting (every costume panel is paired with a selected section from a poem). The poems, written in the “seal script” (篆体) style of calligraphy, are meant to highlight aspects of the character. I chose to use the seal script because to me, this type of script is a bridge between the visually realistic oracle bone script and the more abstract and evolved characters of Chinese language (see below for a progression of Chinese scripts through time;

the seal script is the third row). Since my goal for the entire project is to visually represent the opera and its poetry, I want to make the language used for poetry quite visual as well.

甲骨文	日	月	車	馬
金文	日	月	車	馬
小篆	日	月	車	馬
隶书	日	月	車	馬
楷书	日	月	車	馬
草书	日	月	車	馬
行书	日	月	車	馬

(<http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/232079096.html>)

Turandot's excerpt comes from a poem titled 如意娘 (pinyin: Ru Yi Niang), written by Empress Wu Zetian. Here is the excerpt (with my English translation):

不信比来长下泪，开箱验取石榴裙。

You who do not believe that I often cry in yearning for you, open my chest and see the dried tear drop marks on my red pomegranate dress.

I found the above excerpt suitable for my vision of Turandot not only because the poem mentions the red dress, which is what Turandot wears as her costume, but also because of the significance behind the poet. Wu Zetian was incontrovertibly the most powerful woman in Chinese history, having the distinction of being the only legitimately recognized female emperor. In this poem, we see the romantic side of Wu Zetian: weeping for love and yearning for her reunion with her loved one. Turandot is similar to Empress Wu in that both, as women,

hold incredible authority and are extremely cruel (Wu is believed to have executed many of her relatives and dissidents to secure her rule), yet are still subject to love's trifles. Cruelty and love intertwine in the two women's lives.

Prince Calaf

Prince Calaf hails from Tartar and wants to conquer Turandot, her love, and win eternal glory. He boldly falls in love with Turandot at first sight, despite warnings from everyone around him. What I find interesting about our protagonist is how he rebels against the cosmos and his fate of doom. If Turandot is the moon and the cosmos, then Calaf, despite warnings from the world (e.g. Liù, the three ministers, the emperor), attempts to conquer the cosmos. He and his all-consuming and all-encompassing love are like beasts, voraciously trying to swallow the entire universe while fully aware of his impending doom should he fail to solve the unsolvable enigmas. Towards the end, he forced Turandot into his arms and kissed her, consummating his swallowing of the moon and the cosmos. Calaf's costume represents his voracious love and his Tartar origins. Calaf wears something the ancient Chinese would call 胡服 (hu fu), which refers to any dress worn by a foreigner. For inspiration, I browsed through Tang dynasty tomb frescoes and found a fresco showing a procession of foreign diplomats to greet and give gifts to the emperor. The foreigner with the purple dress (third figure from the right) serves as the inspiration for Calaf's costume.



(https://www.chiculture.net/index.php?file=beautiful_china_content&beautiful_china_id=1)

Calaf also wears a silver pendant of a snow leopard. The snow leopard symbolizes Calaf's Tartar origins, as the snow leopard has traditionally served as an emblem of the Tartar people in Russia ("The Coat of Arms of the Republic of Tatarstan"). More importantly, the snow leopard is a fierce predator and represents the voracious love of Calaf. On the back of Calaf's robe is a snow leopard encircling the crescent moon, its tail attempting to hook the crescent. This imagery is a visual representation of the opera's plot: the snow leopard (Calaf) surrounds and conquers the crescent (Turandot). Under the full body figure of Calaf, I wrote *Nessun Dorma*, imagining what the scene would have looked with Calaf dressed in his costume while I painted him. In other costume panels, one could also find short sentences and phrases, the significance of which will be discussed.



(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aq_Bars#/media/File:Coat_of_Arms_of_Tatarstan.svg)

Calaf's poetic excerpt comes from 长恨歌 (Chang Hen Ge), written by 白居易 (Bai Juyi), a poet of the Tang dynasty. Here is the excerpt:

天长地久有时尽，此恨绵绵无绝期。

The heavens and the earth have an end, but our love and our regrets have no end.

I chose this excerpt to accompany Calaf as I see it reflecting the story of Calaf. He rebels against the world to pursue Turandot, out of his all-encompassing, boundless love and will to conquer. The poet Bai Juyi here describes love outlasting even the heavens and the earth. To both Calaf and the poet, love is indefatigable and is the only truly eternal part of the cosmos.

Liù

Liù, the innocent slave girl who kills herself to save Calaf and secure his happiness, is the character with the lowest status in the opera. To reflect her low status, she does not wear a long robe like Turandot and her dress is a simple one. She wears a pink undershirt and green

long-sleeve top, with green pants painted pink near the ankles. Despite having a low birth, her actions make her the most admirable character in the opera. Having fallen in love with the prince after he smiled at her, she first tries to persuade him to give up Turandot in fear of losing him, and when all else fails, she kills herself to prevent Turandot from learning the prince's real name. In Liù's body lives a strong spirit and a fervent love that is quite different from that of Calaf: her love is innocent and strong, but not voracious like Calaf's all-devouring love. Liù cannot conquer like the prince does, so she sacrifices herself to show her love. If Calaf represents the passionate monstrosity that is love, then Liù represents the sweet and pure innocence of love.

Symbolizing sweetness and innocence, the lotus flower inspires Liù's costume. Her green shirt and pants are the lotus leaves, and her pink undershirt is the lotus flower itself, revealing itself timidly under the long-sleeved top (the lotus leaves). Liù also dons a hairstick in the shape of a lotus flower. This sharp lotus hairstick is significant in my vision for the staging of the opera (if I am allowed to alter slightly directions set in the libretto) as it will be used by Liù to kill herself instead of the dagger from Turandot's guards (Puccini, 103). The act of the sharp hairstick piercing the body of Liù performs an important function. As the sharp lotus hairstick pierces and becomes one with Liù's body, she begins her transformation from an abstract lotus into a physical, objective lotus. After Liù dies, all that remains of her is her eternal and sweet love, encapsulated in the forever blooming lotus flower of her hairstick.

The scene of Liù's death is depicted in the bottom right corner of the costume panel. After she says, "Per non...verderlo più!" ("To not ... see him any more"), she yanks the lotus hairstick from her bun, loosening her hair. This act of pulling the hairstick away and loosening her hair is symbolic of her impending freedom via death. At this point, Liù no longer has to

restrain her hair to follow the cultural bounds of human society² and is prepared to let her body and spirit go free. Her self-sacrifice is not only made to declare her love for Calaf, but also to free herself. Liù leaves her slave status behind in the mortal world and enters the heavens. In a way, she also wins like Calaf did: she wins her freedom, whereas Calaf wins Turandot. It is her sweet and innocent love that frees her ultimately.

Liù's love also helps thaw Turandot's icy heart. In my opinion, Calaf's all-devouring love conquers Turandot's heart, while Liù's sweet love thaws Turandot's heart. The prince forces himself onto Turandot, brutishly kissing her (Puccini, 106). To Turandot, this act is rightfully sacrilegious as she is the daughter of heaven, and any act against her will is a sacrilege. She clearly does not want to be possessed by Calaf's love, saying "Non profanarmi! No! Mai nessun m'avrà!" ("Do not profane me! No! No one will ever possess me!"). So, what made her change her mind later, when she exclaims "Il suo nome è Amor!" ("His [Calaf's] name is love!") (Puccini, 109)? The Turandot the audience sees in the end is drastically different from the cold Turandot in the beginning of the opera, and it is hard to believe that she would suddenly acknowledge her love for Calaf after such an inappropriate behavior made by the prince. However, an important interaction happens between Liù and Turandot before Liù's death. A troubled Turandot asks Liù, "Chi pose tanta forza nel tuo cuore?" ("Who placed such strength in your heart?"), to which Liù says, "Principessa, l'amore!" ("Princess, love!"). Turandot then follows up with a question, "L'amore?" ("Love?", 102). That question marks the beginning of Turandot's thawing, as Liù's love removes the fear and doubt in Turandot about her

² In Chinese society, a person with loose hair would be considered uncivilized, thus outside the bounds of society. However, this also means that the person is free from most restraints. The cultural importance of proper clothing and headdress can be seen even today, where some restaurants or hotels would put a sign that says "衣冠不整者, 不能进入", which means literally "Those without proper clothing and headdress cannot enter".

capacity to love and her willingness to love. Liù's words and ultimately her actions show the princess what love means and the power of love.

The excerpt that accompanies Liù is from a short essay titled 爱莲说 (Ai Lian Shuo), written by 周敦颐 (Zhou Dunyi). Here is the excerpt:

出淤泥而不染

Born out of dirt but untainted

The poet Zhou praises the sweet purity of the lotus flower in his essay and the phrase above epitomizes the lotus flower's qualities. The lotus flowers bud out from lotus roots, embedded in the dirt, and break the water to blossom with a pure pink and white, untainted by the dirt they have originated from. Liù is exactly the lotus flower as described by the poet Zhou: she may be born of low birth, but her words and her actions are pure.

Ping, Pang, Pong

Though Ping, Pang, and Pong are not the main characters in the opera, they do serve an important role as the ministers of the realm and act as advisors to Calaf at various points. They are loyal and serve the imperial family wholeheartedly yet reveal their longings for home and a life away from the court in *Ho una casa nell'Honan* (Puccini, 84). They are stuck in a predicament: they are bound by oath and loyalty to serve the princess and China, but they know fully that by serving the princess, they may bring an end to the royal family and China as the princess will not be possessed by anyone.

The costumes of Ping, Pang, and Pong in my version of the opera is more modest and more realistic than the costumes in some other productions such as the one staged at the Forbidden City in 1998. In the Forbidden City production, Ping, Pang, and Pong dressed in brightly

colored costumes and wore a butterfly, a *yuan bao* (a type of currency used in ancient China), and a stylized gourd as their headdresses. No minister in ancient China would wear something like that worn by the three ministers in the Forbidden City production as it would be deemed too gaudy and immodest for a civilized and cultured minister to wear. I want to provide a set of more realistic costumes for the three ministers as I do not want them to be dismissed as merely a set of accessories to the opera (their stereotypically Chinese sounding names already do not serve them justice). Thus, I took inspiration from real life ministers to design the costumes for Ping, Pang, and Pong.

Ping is dressed in a blue robe, wears a green headdress with red stripes and two flowing tassels down the sides. He also wears green shoes. The inspiration for Ping's costume comes from a fresco in 永乐宫 (Yongle Gong), a Taoist temple in Shanxi province, that depicts a procession of minor deities worshipping the major Taoist gods (see figure below for the minor deity that inspired Ping's costume).



(<http://www.lvyongl.com/Item/326508.aspx>)

In both the fresco painting and the costume panel, Ping and the minor deity carry a 笏板 (hu ban), a plank-like instrument used by the imperial officials when they are summoned by the emperor to give reports of their duties. On the back of the hu ban are usually inscribed details of the report to help the official's presentation. The hu ban carried by Ping is depicted in the bottom of the costume panel. It is brown and made of wood. In the center of the hu ban is a purple bat and a crane encircling the sun and the crescent moon. Ministers in ancient China frequently use animals to indicate their rankings. Since the emperor is the heavens and the cosmos, then the ministers are the animals and live by the grace of the emperor and the heavens. The bat and the crane are auspicious animals used frequently as motifs in designs in

ancient China and on the hu ban, they represent Ping, Pang, and Pong who serve the sun and the moon—Emperor Altoum and Turandot.

Pang's costume is inspired by clothes from the Han dynasty, when black and red are the most prevalent colors used in the court and beyond. He wears a long black robe with red marking the outermost rims of the sleeves and the bottom. He also wears a pair of red shoes and a red sash to keep the robe together. On his head he wears a simple headdress that resembles somewhat like the one below:



(http://www.sohu.com/a/154993594_528906)

A painting of Sima Guang from the Song dynasty inspired Pong's costume. Sima Guang was a high-ranking official of the imperial court, celebrated in China for authoring the historical chronicle *Zizhi Tongjian*. Pong, like Sima Guang, wears a long red robe with black outlining the rims of the robe. He also wears a headdress like Sima Guang does.



(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/08/Sima_Guang_of_Song.jpg)

The short excerpt that accompanies Ping, Pang, and Pong says:

鞠躬尽瘁，死而后已

Bend one's back to duty, until death

The poet who wrote this line is 诸葛亮 (Zhuge Liang), a legendary minister of the Three Kingdoms period. Heavily romanticized in later literature, Zhuge Liang was a shrewd minister who served his lord loyally. Unfortunately, despite all his efforts and his brilliant management of his lord's lands, his lord could not claim the throne and was defeated due to a lack of leadership and talent. Like him, Ping, Pang, and Pong are loyal, but feel incapable of securing a good future for China and the royal family due to the unyielding princess Turandot.

Emperor Altoum

Emperor Altoum is the light of the heavens and the son of heaven. He is cloaked in a lavish yellow robe with dragon designs on both the front and the back, borrowed from Han dynasty dragon imageries (see figures below for examples).



(<https://www.zhihu.com/question/35135459/answer/310742921>)

Emperor Altoum, like his daughter Turandot, also wears a disk behind his head. His disk, however, is circular as it represents the sun. Large and bright rays emanate from the circular sun disk. Together, the sun disk, the rays, and the yellow imperial robe are meant to dazzle the audience. Emperor Altoum's costume transforms him into the sun and a part of the cosmos, much like how Turandot's costume morphs her into the moon. In Chinese, the character 明, which could mean light, bright, wisdom, or understanding of the truth, is composed of 日 and 月, the sun and the moon. Thus, the combination of Emperor Altoum as the sun and Turandot as the moon creates 明: as the divine pair, they give light to the world. Furthermore, Emperor Altoum also wears a 冕冠 (mian guan), a special headdress that symbolizes his status as the divine emperor (see below for an example of the emperor's headdress).



(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liu_Bei#/media/File:Liu_Bei_Tang.jpg)

Despite the Emperor's divine authority, he surprisingly does not have a lot of power in the opera. He serves mainly as a judge of Turandot's enigma challenge and is troubled by Turandot's cruelty and unwillingness to yield to love. He exclaims, upon learning that Calaf challenges Turandot, "E il santo/ scettro ch'io stringo, gronda/ di sangue! Basta sangue!" ("And the holy scepter/ that I clasp streams with/ blood! Enough of blood!") (Puccini, 89). The character of Emperor Altoum is reflected by a piece from a poem called 虞美人 (Yu Mei Ren)³ written by 李煜 (Li Yu), the last king of the Southern Tang kingdom, before his death:

问君能有几多愁？恰似一江春水向东流。

How much sorrow and worry do you have my dear? Like a river of Spring water running towards the East.

³ The name of the poem in Chinese is 虞美人·春花秋月何时了.

Li Yu was defeated by the Song dynasty and was given the death penalty by poison. Once a powerful king, he was, as he composed the poem, near the verge of death and utterly powerless, full of worries and sorrow. Emperor Altoum, albeit not as desolate as Li Yu in the opera, resonates with Li Yu as he too also feels powerless and distraught in face of his daughter's cruelty.

Timur

Timur is the father of Prince Calaf and was deposed from his throne as the Tartar king (Puccini, 68-71). He wears a brown dress inspired by traditional Volga Tartar dresses (see figure below).



His costume mirrors that of his son, Calaf. On the front of his robe is a white snow leopard with the same design as Calaf's. He also carries a cane to support himself with a leopard as the cane's head.

The section of the poem, called 垓下歌 (hai xia ge), that accompanies Timur is found below:

力拔山兮气盖世，时不利兮雅不逝。

Strength to lift a mountain and spirit covers the world, but if fortune is unfavorable even a noble steed cannot run.

The poem is written by 项羽 (Xiang Yu), a famous warlord who lost his entire kingdom and his claim to the emperor's throne to 刘邦 (Liu Bang), who would later establish the Han dynasty. Xiang Yu wrote the poem before his death; his poem shows his pride in his abilities, as well as his regret and sorrow that fortune did not favor him. Much like Xiang Yu, Timur was once a king of Tartar and powerful. Now, he is like the noble steed in Xiang Yu's poem, unable to exert his powers because fortune did not favor him.

The Heavenly Palace (set design)

As aforementioned, an overarching theme of my costume design for *Turandot* is the representation of the cosmos and nature via poetry and opera. Since *Turandot* essentially becomes the moon and a part of the cosmos in the opera, and the emperor is the personification of the heavens, I thought to design a set for the palace that also blurs the line between the mortal world and the heavenly world. I painted the stage blue so that it becomes the sky and decorated it with various constellations. I also placed 祥云 (xiang yun), or “auspicious clouds” around the stage. These stylized clouds appear frequently as decorations in traditional Chinese culture and are ridden by deities in folktales.



(<https://baike.baidu.com/item/祥云/990830>)

To further enhance the notion that the imperial palace is truly in harmony with the cosmos, I added a large structure that functions as the throne or the support for a throne. The structure is composed of protruding angular structures that resemble crystal shards (see figure below for an example):



The crystal-like structure embodies the earth since crystals are found in the earth. Thus, when Emperor Altoum and/or Turandot stands in the crystal-like structure, the earth and the heavens become unified into one. In addition, the protruding shards mirrors the emanating

rays from the disks of the emperor and the princess. Earth and the heavens are in harmony in this set design for the palace.

Bibliography:

Puccini, Giacomo, et al. *Turandot*. J. Calder; Riverrun Press, 1984.

Zhang, et al. *Turandot: At the Forbidden City of Beijing*. RCA Victor Red Seal: Distributed by BMG Entertainment, 1999.

———. “The Coat of Arms of the Republic of Tatarstan” *National Library of the Republic of Tatarstan*. kitaphane.tatarstan.ru/eng/state_symbols/gerb_rt.htm.

Ancient Chinese poems:

如意娘 Ru Yi Niang: 周懋昌 “ ” 的魅力——武则天 《 》 赏读” *阅读与写作* no. 12, 2000, pp. 阅读 - *Reading and Writing*, 2000, Issue 12.

长恨歌 Chang Hen Ge: 长 （白居易长篇叙事诗_百度 . <https://baike.baidu.com/item/长/22524>. Accessed 6 May 2018.

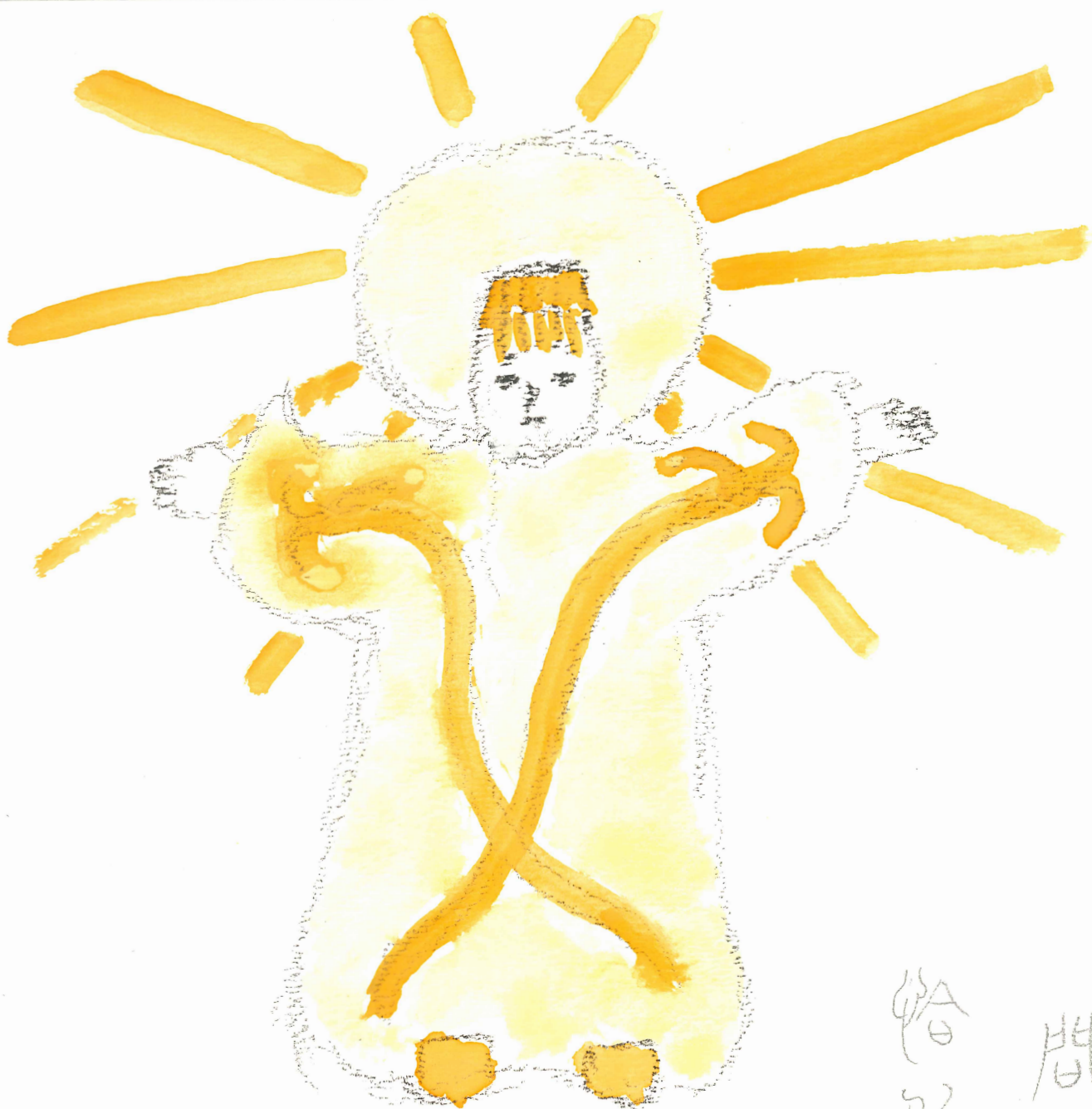
爱莲说 Ai Lian Shuo: 刘红 “爱莲说 ” 中学语文教 no. 8X, 2016, p. 46.

虞美人·春 时了 Yu Mei Ren: 虞美人·春花秋月何时了_百度百科. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/虞美人·春花秋月何时了> Accessed 6 May 2018.

垓下 Hai Xia Ge: “ ” 语 师版 no. Z2, 1995, p. 15.

老音乐人何仿谈《茉莉花》从乡野小调到中国经典--人民网娱乐频道--人民网. <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/yule/1085/3038971.html>. Accessed 8 May 2018.

Appendix: Costumes



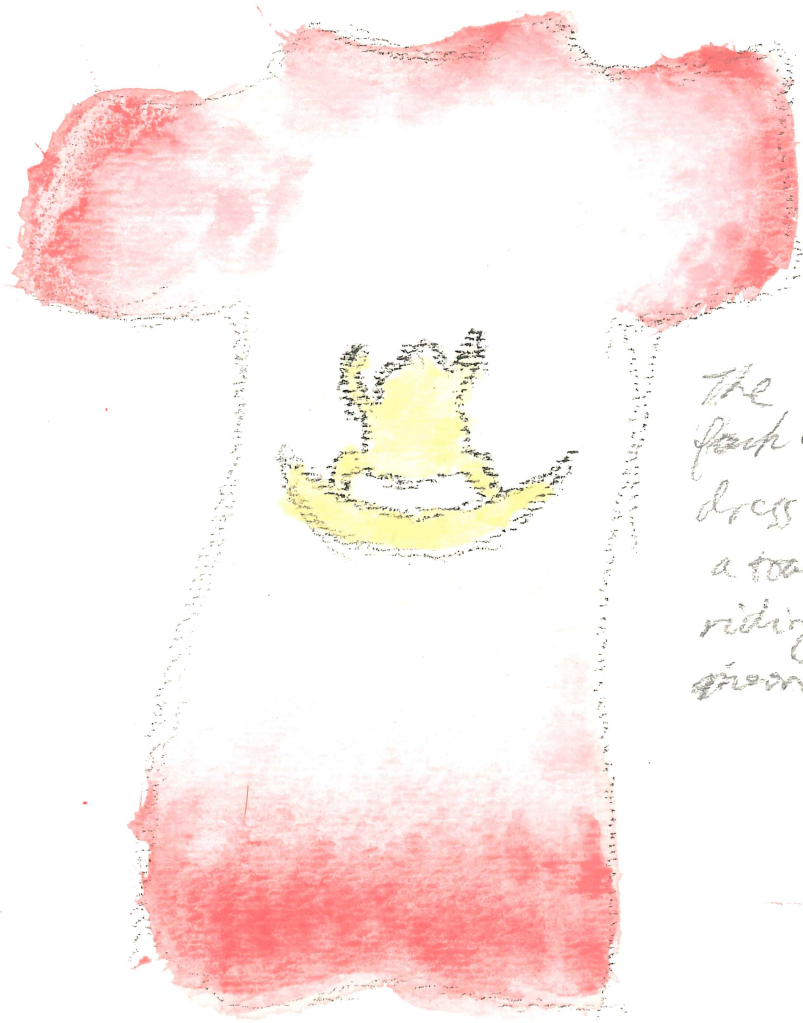
Imperial Altar



back of
the imperial
robe

問君
龍
衣
何
如
也
恰
如
一
紅
紫
司
向
東
山
山

Turandot



The
back of the
dress features
a toad
riding the
green

不
福
來
最
下
開
相
給
野
石
槽



the crown of
roses and
cherry Turandot
wears on her
head

Ping

Pong

Pong



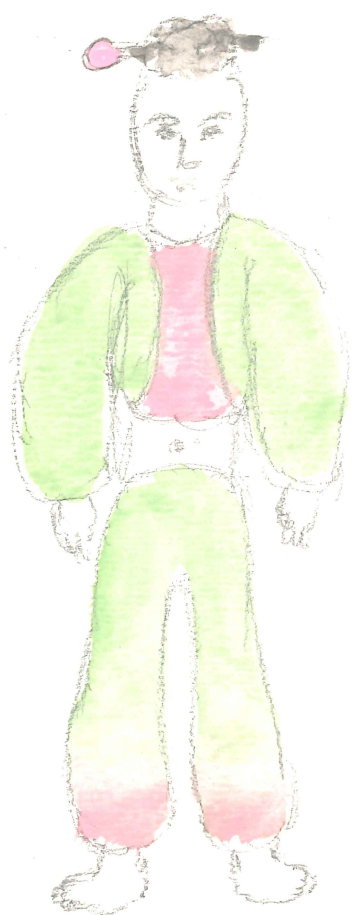
Ho una casa nell'Honan



The crane and
bat surrounds the
sun and moon.



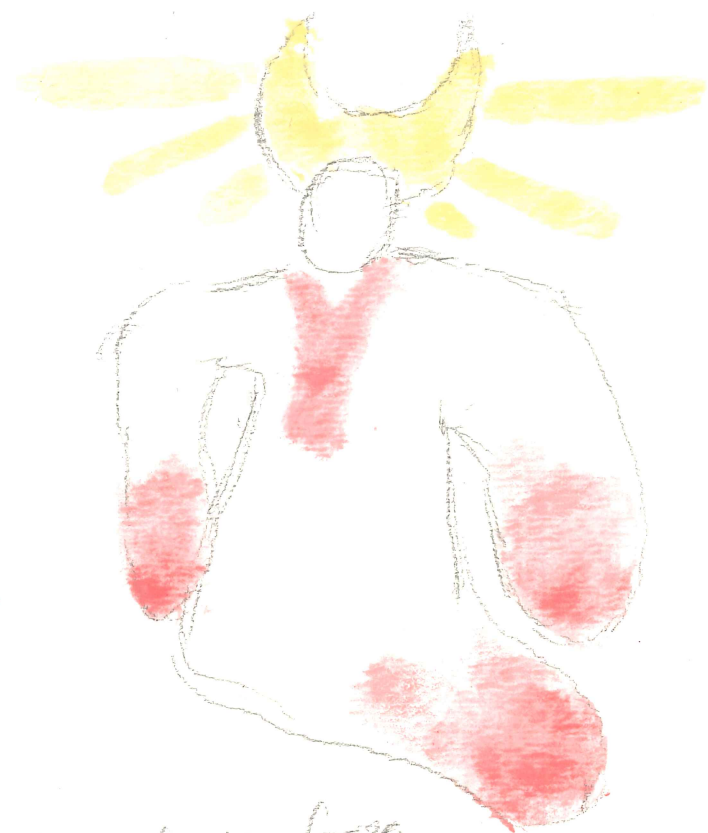
朝
而
夕
已
朝
而
夕
已



Liu's lotus
flower hairstick

Liu

世
微
風
天
不
靜



Chi pose tanta forza
nel tuo cuore?
Principessa, l'amore!

Prince Calaf



Calaf's
snow leopard
pendant



On the back of Calaf's
robe is a snow leopard
encircling the moon.

Nessun Dorma



Timur



Timur
wears a
Brown
robe with
a snow
leopard



Timur's
Cane with
a leopard's
head.

力拔山兮
氣蓋世
時不勢兮
雄不御

The Heavenly
Palace

Set design
for the
palace.

