

The Influence and Legacy of Old Shanghai Music

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Abstract

Old Shanghai music, a defining element of 20th-century Chinese culture, has significantly influenced the evolution of modern Chinese pop music while preserving vital cultural memories. Its legacy is reflected in contemporary musicians' adaptation of its stylistic elements, its representation of Shanghai's socio-historical transformation, and its role in fostering international cultural exchange across Southeast Asia, Japan, and beyond. Following China's reform era, Old Shanghai music has gained renewed attention as a key component of nostalgic culture and urban heritage. This study examines the extensive literature on Old Shanghai music, including seminal works like *The History of Modern Chinese Music* and *Yellow Music*, alongside scholarly articles that explore its cultural hybridity, societal implications, and historical significance. By analyzing these contributions, this research underscores Shanghai's pivotal role in modernizing and globalizing Chinese music, highlighting the enduring fusion of Eastern and Western styles and their profound impact on the development of contemporary Chinese popular music and culture.

Keywords: Influence; Legacy; Old Shanghai Music

Introduction

Old Shanghai music is mainly romantic and lyrical, and the lyrics are full of yearning for love, life and beautiful things. The songs usually impress the audience with beautiful melodies and affectionate singing. The singing style is greatly influenced by Western pop music. Singers usually adopt a delicate and affectionate singing style. Female singers such as Zhou Xuan, Li Xianglan, and Bai Guang have won the love of the audience with their sweet and soft voices and emotional expressions.

In terms of musical instruments, Old Shanghai music usually uses Western instruments such as piano, violin, saxophone, and drums, combined with traditional Chinese instruments such as erhu and pipa, so that the music has a modern Western feel without losing the oriental charm. The melody is beautiful and smooth, and the harmonic structure is complex and changeable. It often draws on the harmony of jazz, giving the songs a unique charm and appeal. Many old Shanghai songs use the rhythm of Western dance music such as tango, waltz, and quickstep, becoming an important part of people's social entertainment at that time.

Old Shanghai music is also closely related to movies. Many works are the theme songs or interludes of movies at that time. These movie music not only enhances the artistic value of movies, but also makes the songs more widely spread. For example, Zhou Xuan's "Tianya Songstress" is the theme song of the movie "Street Angel". In general, Old Shanghai music not only records the social outlook and cultural atmosphere of that era, but also shows the results of the integration of Chinese and Western cultures. It has important historical and artistic value.

Old Shanghai Music

Main characteristics of old Shanghai music

Shidaiqu is a musical style popular in Shanghai from the 1930s to the 1940s, which deeply reflects the integration of Chinese and Western cultures. Shidaiqu originated from the music creation and performance environment in Shanghai. It combines Western pop music elements with traditional Chinese music characteristics to form a unique musical style.

The musical form of Shidaiqu is deeply influenced by Western pop music, especially Western music elements such as jazz, tango and waltz are widely integrated into it. Its melody is usually infectious and the harmonic structure is relatively complex. Compared with traditional Chinese music, it pays more attention to the fluency of melody and the expression of emotion. This musical style is often used to convey the style of urban life and personal emotions, making it an important part of Shanghai's music culture.

In terms of lyrics, Shidaiqu is sung in Chinese, and the lyrics mostly involve urban life, love stories and social feelings. These lyrics often have a certain romantic color, and at the same time reflect the social outlook of Shanghai at that time. The lyrics of Shidaiqu vividly depict the city scene and people's living conditions at that time, and express the emotions of citizens and social changes.

Representative songs of the era include "Night Shanghai", "Rose Rose I Love You" and "Tianya Song Girl", which were not only popular at the time, but also continued to be sung in later years. Famous singers such as Zhou Xuan, Li Xianglan and Bai Guang made the era songs popular through their singing. Their music not only shows the style and characteristics of the era songs, but also promotes the popularization and development of this music form.

"Night Shanghai" is a classic old Shanghai era song created in the 1930s. It was sung by the famous composer Zhou Xuan and the lyrics were written by the lyricist Zheng Qiufeng. This song is one of the representative works of old Shanghai music, which deeply reflects the urban style and cultural characteristics of Shanghai at that time.

The melody of the song is beautiful and smooth, integrating Western pop music elements such as jazz and tango styles, while retaining the characteristics of traditional Chinese music. The song's harmonic structure is rich and infectious, making it a well-loved classic.

The lyrics of "Night Shanghai" depict the prosperous scene of Shanghai at night, expressing the emotion of urban life and the yearning for love. The description in the lyrics vividly shows the night scene, lights and social places in Shanghai, creating a romantic and emotional atmosphere. The melody and lyrics in the song together convey the unique charm of Shanghai as the "Oriental Paris" at that time.

The success of "Night Shanghai" lies not only in its music and lyrics, but also in its extensive use in movies. This song has become a classic interlude in Shanghai movies, adding emotion and atmosphere to the movie, and also promoting the spread of old Shanghai music. Through movies, phonograph records and radio, the song spread across the country and became an important symbol of Shanghai culture at that time.

"Night Shanghai" is a song of historical significance. It not only shows the style characteristics of old Shanghai era songs, but also deeply reflects Shanghai's urban culture and social emotions. The charm of this song lies in its beautiful melody and vivid lyrics. It has also left a profound impact in many fields such as music and film.

"Rose, Rose, I Love You" is a popular old Shanghai era song, composed by Chen Gexin, written by Chen Dieyi, and sung by Bai Guang. This song was created in 1940 and is one of the classic masterpieces of old Shanghai music.

"Rose, Rose, I Love You" combines the popular Western music elements of the time, with smooth melody and brisk rhythm, with obvious jazz and tango styles, and is full of the charm of traditional Chinese music. This fusion of Chinese and Western styles makes the song both fashionable and urban, and yet elegant and delicate in the East.

The lyrics use "rose" as a symbol to express the passion and beauty of love. The lyrics are concise and poetic, using the image of rose to convey the deep affection and attachment to lovers. The repeated sentence "Rose, Rose, I Love You" in the lyrics makes the song intimate and infectious, and easily resonates with the audience.

The singer of this song, Bai Guang, has a unique singing style. She interprets the song with a low and magnetic voice, expressing the emotions in it vividly. Her singing not only showed the beautiful melody of the song, but also gave it a strong emotional atmosphere, making "Rose, Rose, I Love You" a classic.

"Rose, Rose, I Love You" was popular in Shanghai in the 1940s and became one of the iconic songs of that era. It is not only popular in China, but also translated into many languages and sung all over the world. The most famous adaptation is the English version of "Rose, Rose, I Love You" sung by American singer Frankie Laine in 1950, which made this song the first Chinese song to enter the American pop music chart.

This song symbolizes the modernity and romance of Shanghai in the 1940s and has become one of the cultural symbols of that era. Its melody and lyrics are still loved by people today, and have been covered many times by later musicians and singers. Whether in nostalgic concerts or in film and television works, "Rose, Rose, I Love You" still maintains its immortal charm.

The era songs are not only popular in Shanghai, but also spread to other parts of China and overseas through media such as movies, phonograph records and radio stations. This musical style not only reflects the modernization and internationalization of Shanghai, but also reflects the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western cultures in that era.

"When Will You Come Back" is a classic old Shanghai song, born in the golden age of Shanghai jazz in the 1930s and 1940s. It is an interlude in the 1937 movie "Three Stars and the Moon". The song was composed by Liu Xue'an, written by Huang Jiamo, sung by Zhou Xuan in the movie and recorded into a record, which was released by Shanghai EMI Records. In January 1939, Japanese Li Xianglan recorded "When Will You Come Back" and released it in China and Japan. She only sang the first two verses of the original version, but it made the song popular throughout China and Japan. At the same time, she also recorded a Japanese version of the song. In 1978, Teresa Teng re-sang "When Will You Come Back". She retained the first and last verses and the narration of the original version, and released the Chinese and Japanese versions, which became the most popular version of this song in contemporary times. The song has a beautiful melody and poignant lyrics, capturing the themes of love, desire and the pain of separation, which resonated strongly with the audience.

Musically, "When Will You Come Back" skillfully combines the quintessential pentatonic scale of Chinese music with Western harmonic structures to create a cultural element that reflects the cosmopolitan character of Shanghai at the time. Rich, romantic harmonies add emotional depth, while the lyrics evoke a yearning for and hope for reunion. The song's poetic language and evocative imagery enhance its timeless appeal, making it an enduring expression of emotional fragility and resilience.

In addition to its musical qualities, "When Will You Come Back" has significant cultural value. It is often seen as a nostalgic symbol of the charm and elegance of pre-war Shanghai. Over the decades, the song has also become a metaphor for enduring hope in difficult times for individuals and the country, resonating with listeners in different historical contexts.

The enduring popularity of "When Will You Come Back" highlights its universal appeal. It remains an iconic piece of old Shanghai's musical heritage, frequently performed and adapted by artists of all ages. Its ability to transcend cultural and temporal boundaries has made it a touchstone for Chinese music lovers and international audiences alike, passing it down as a timeless classic.

"Unattainable Love" is a classic Chinese song that resonates deeply with themes of longing and heartache. This song was composed by Yao Min, written by Lu Li, and sung by the famous female singer Yao Li. It was born in the golden age of Shanghai's music scene and embodies the city's unique fusion of traditional Chinese melodic elements and Western harmony. Emerging from the golden era of Shanghai's music scene, this song embodies the city's unique blend of traditional Chinese melodic elements and Western-inspired harmonies. Its poignant lyrics and expressive melody capture the bittersweet emotions of unfulfilled love, making it a timeless piece of musical artistry.

Musically, "Unattainable Love" combines the lyrical beauty of Chinese pentatonic scales with the lush, romantic harmonic progressions characteristic of Western influence. The melody flows gracefully, reflecting the narrator's inner turmoil and yearning. The emotional weight of the composition is further enhanced by the sophisticated arrangement, which amplifies the sense of longing and emotional vulnerability.

The lyrics of "Unattainable Love" express the sorrow and helplessness of desiring something—or someone—that remains out of reach. Through poetic and evocative language, the song paints a vivid picture of unattainable love, a theme that has universal appeal. This emotional relatability, combined with the melancholic yet elegant delivery typical of Old Shanghai music, has cemented the song's place in the hearts of listeners across generations.

Beyond its musical qualities, the song also serves as a cultural artifact, reflecting the romantic ideals and social constraints of its time. During an era when personal emotions were often shaped by external circumstances, "Unattainable Love" gave voice to a generation grappling with the complexities of love and loss.

Decades later, "Unattainable Love" remains a cherished classic, performed and reimagined by various artists. Its enduring popularity is a testament to its timeless appeal and its ability to transcend cultural and temporal boundaries, securing its place in the legacy of Chinese music.

In summary, the old Shanghai era songs are a charming musical style. Through the fusion of Chinese and Western elements and the unique lyrics, it deeply shows the cultural features and social emotions of Shanghai in the early 20th century. The music and lyrics of the era songs together constitute the unique features of Shanghai music during this period and have left an important mark in the history of Chinese music.

Old Shanghai Movie music

Movie songs in the old Shanghai period are songs used in movies produced in Shanghai between the 1920s and 1940s. These songs not only played a role in expressing emotions and promoting the plot in the movies, but also became widely circulated in Shanghai and even throughout China at that time because of their beautiful melodies and moving lyrics. As the center of China's early film industry, old Shanghai attracted many film production companies such as Tianyi Film Company, Lianhua Film Company, and Dentsu Film Company. As movies became popular, movie songs gradually became an important part of movies. These songs were created by famous composers and lyricists at the time. After the movies were released, they were quickly spread through radio, records and other media and became popular songs loved by the public.

Old Shanghai movie songs have the characteristics of combining Chinese and Western music. They integrate Western music elements such as jazz, tango, waltz, etc., while retaining the traditional Chinese music charm, forming a unique music style. The lyrics of these songs are mostly based on themes such as love, separation, and homesickness. The content is concise and moving, which can resonate with the audience. The beautiful melody, smooth and pleasant sound make these songs easy to remember and sing, and they soon became popular in society.

Among them, classic movie songs include "Song Girl at the End of the World", "Night Shanghai", "When Will You Come Back", "Four Seasons Song" and "Rose Rose I Love You". "Song Girl at the End of the World" in the 1937 movie "Street Angel" was sung by Zhou Xuan. The melody is gentle and poetic, expressing the longing for future life and the desire for love. "Night Shanghai", the theme song of the 1946 movie "Night Shanghai", was also sung by Zhou Xuan. It depicts the prosperity and romance of Shanghai at night and has become a musical tribute to the city of Shanghai. Another classic song "When Will You Come Back" comes from the 1937 movie "Three Stars and the Moon". Zhou Xuan's affectionate singing expresses the reluctance to love and the expectation of reunion in the future. The melody is soft and the lyrics are touching.

"Four Seasons Song" is also an interlude in the 1937 movie "Street Angel". The melody is light and lively, and the lyrics are vivid and vivid, depicting the life scenes and inner emotions of the working people. "Rose Rose I Love You" comes from the 1940 movie "Waterloo Bridge", sung by Bai Guang. The song has a beautiful melody and romantic lyrics, expressing praise and desire for beautiful love. It is not only popular in China, but also widely spread internationally through covers (Wu, 2023).

These movie songs were an important part of urban culture at the time. They not only enriched people's spiritual life, but also made these songs popular nationwide through the spread of movies. Through radio broadcasts, record sales and live performances, these songs have profoundly influenced China's popular music and cultural life. Many songs are still loved by people today and have been covered many times by later singers. Old Shanghai

movie songs not only record the musical style of an era, but also leave a rich cultural heritage for China's music history. These songs reflect the unique charm of Shanghai as the center of the intersection of Eastern and Western cultures at that time. Whether in China or in the global Chinese community, old Shanghai movie songs have indelible historical and cultural value.

The influence and legacy of Old Shanghai music

Inheritance of musical style: Old Shanghai music has had a profound impact on later Chinese pop music. Many modern musicians and creators have inherited and innovated elements of Old Shanghai music in their works.

Cultural memory: Old Shanghai music has become an important part of modern Chinese culture, representing the historical changes and social development of Shanghai.

International communication : Through movies, records and radio, Old Shanghai music is not only popular in China, but also spread to Southeast Asia, Japan, Taiwan and other places, forming a cross-cultural music exchange.

Nostalgic culture: After the reform and opening up, Old Shanghai music has regained attention as a cultural heritage and has become an important part of nostalgic culture and Shanghai's urban memory.

Literature related to Old Shanghai Music

The cultural and historical significance of Old Shanghai Music has inspired numerous studies and publications. This section reviews the existing literature, highlighting their contribution and relevance to this study.

Books on Old Shanghai Music and Urban Culture

1) "The History of Modern Chinese Music"

Author: Wang, Yuhe (2002)

Description: This book is an authoritative academic work on the development of modern Chinese music, covering the transformation process of music from the late Qing Dynasty to the present. Special attention is paid to Shanghai's role as a center of music development, and the innovation and dissemination of "era songs" during this period. The book analyzes the Westernization characteristics and cultural significance of old Shanghai music, which is very suitable for studying the background of Chinese music history and its inspiration for modern music education.

2) "Yellow Music : Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age"

Author: Jones, Andrew F. (2001)

Publisher: Duke University Press

Description: This book focuses on the development of jazz in China and its impact on "colonial modernity", covering the music and media culture of Shanghai in the 1930s. This book analyzes the concept of "yellow music" in an interdisciplinary way, which is particularly suitable for studying the international influence and social and cultural background of old Shanghai music.

3) "Shanghai. Hong Kong. The Song of the Times"

Author: Chen Weishun (2021)

Publisher: Tangshan Press

Description: This book is an in-depth exploration of the "Shidaiqu" genre, which became iconic in Shanghai and Hong Kong in the 1920s to 1970s. Compiled and edited by Huang Qizhi, the book blends poetry, music history, and cultural reflection, focusing on the unique era songs of Old Shanghai. The book is divided into three sections: the first section offers 62 poems discussing the development of the genre and its major figures, including composers, lyricists, and singers. The second section focuses on 108 era songs, each presented with historical context and reflections. The final section touches on "Haipai" (Shanghai-style) music, highlighting its evolution when it moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong. This work is a blend of musical analysis and poetic tribute to the historical and cultural significance of Shanghai and Hong Kong's musical history.

4) "The Evolution of Chinese Popular Music Modernization and Globalization, 1927 to the Present"

Author: Chen Yahui (2023)

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Description: This book is a comprehensive study of the evolution of popular music in China from the late 1920s to the present day. This book explores the emergence and evolution of musical genres such as jazz, rock and roll, and hip-hop in Chinese society, examining how these musical genres intersect with historical, political, and cultural developments in mainland China and Taiwan. This book highlights the significant impact of Shanghai as a melting pot for Western music and Chinese cultural expressions in the early 20th century. It discusses how Shanghai's thriving urban culture and its role as a globalization center led to the fusion of Eastern and Western musical styles. This led to the birth of Shanghai pop music, which laid the foundation for the subsequent development of Chinese popular music. To gain a deeper understanding of how Shanghai played a key role in the modernization and globalization of Chinese popular music, this book provides an insightful exploration that connects political history, cultural identity, and musical transformation.

Scholarly Articles and Journals

Numerous academic articles explore Old Shanghai music's cultural hybridity, with studies focusing on its lyrics, melodic structures, and social implications.

1) Yang Qing (2021) wrote about the Characteristics and Influence of Shanghai Jazz in the Republic of China. This paper is an authoritative academic work on the development of modern Chinese music, covering the transformation process of music from the late Qing Dynasty to the present. Special attention is paid to Shanghai's role as a center of music development, and the innovation and dissemination of "era songs" during this period. The book analyzes the Westernization characteristics and cultural significance of old Shanghai music, which is very suitable for studying the background of Chinese music history and its inspiration for modern music education. Based on the historical records of Shanghai jazz in Shenbao, this paper deeply analyzes the commercial characteristics of jazz in the Republic of China, its combination with local music, and its profound influence on popular music and music education. It is suitable as an important reference for studying the integration of Chinese and Western music in old Shanghai and its cultural dissemination path.

2) Chen Xiao (2015) analyzed the social background and characteristics of the popularity of "Era Songs" in Old Shanghai. This paper aims to analyze the social background and the reasons why the "Era Songs" in Old Shanghai were so popular at that time and even have a profound impact on the current Hong Kong and Taiwan pop music, and try to analyze and summarize its characteristics in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the "Era Songs" music genre.

3) Mo Yan (2009) wrote the century-old charm of old Shanghai pop music. This article tells the reflection on Shanghai's century-old culture from a personal perspective, combining modern and historical music experience to analyze the charm and development process of old Shanghai pop music. The author takes Li Jinhui as the center and details his important contribution to the enlightenment period of Chinese pop music, as well as the background and methods of creating classic works such as "Drizzle". The article also describes the balance achieved by old Shanghai pop music on the road of integrating Chinese and Western cultures, how to combine folk melodies with Western jazz, and present the diverse cultural characteristics of the society at that time. In addition, through the narration of the musical "Street Angel" and classic movies of the 1930s, it shows the interactive relationship between music and social memory, and through the historical review of the Paramount Ballroom, it presents the profound influence of old Shanghai pop music on urban culture.

The article finally discusses how old Shanghai pop music explored the integration between Chinese and Western styles, showing its contribution and inspiration to the development of modern commercial music and culture.

4) Zhang Liwen (2018) wrote Popular Music Chronicles: Shanghai in 1933. This article explores Shanghai as the birthplace of popular music in the 1930s, and describes in detail the impact of the political background and cultural environment at that time on popular music. The book presents the rise of Shanghai popular music from multiple perspectives, including the rise of dance halls, the development path of musicians, and the future direction of popular music. The book deeply analyzes how the integration of Shanghai's diverse cultures gave birth to this unique musical phenomenon.

Conclusion

Old Shanghai music, a hallmark of 20th-century Chinese culture, has profoundly shaped modern Chinese pop music and preserved cultural memory. Its influence is evident in the inheritance of musical styles by contemporary musicians, its role as a representation of Shanghai's historical and social transformation, and its international dissemination to regions like Southeast Asia and Japan. With the revival of interest post-reform, Old Shanghai music has become an integral part of nostalgic culture and urban memory. Literature on this topic, including books like "The History of Modern Chinese Music" and "Yellow Music", as well as scholarly articles, delves into its cultural hybridity, social implications, and historical significance. These works collectively underscore Shanghai's pivotal role in the modernization and globalization of Chinese music, offering valuable insights into the fusion of Eastern and Western musical styles and their lasting impact on Chinese popular music and culture.

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