

Behind “Pop Songs Between 1930s and 1940s in Shanghai”—Aesthetic Release of Eros Utopia*

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“Pop Songs between 1930s and 1940s in Shanghai” contains the artistic phenomenon with the utopian feature. Its main objective lies in the will instead of hope. The era endows different aesthetic utopian meanings to “Pop Songs between 1930s and 1940s in Shanghai”. After 2010, the utopian change of such songs is closely related to the contradiction between “aesthetic imagination and reality”, and “individual interest and integrated social interest” that are intrinsic in the utopian concept. To sort out the utopian process of those songs, it is helpful for correcting the current status about the weakened critical realism function of the current art, and accelerating the arousal of the literary and artistic creation, and individual consciousness, laying equal stress on and gathering the aesthetic power of these individuals, which provides solid foundation for the generalization of aesthetic utopian significance.

Keywords: Shanghai Oldies (Pop Songs between 1930s and 1940s in Shanghai), aesthetic utopia, internal contradiction

Introduction

“Shanghai Oldies” refers to the pop songs that were produced and popular in Shanghai, sung widely over the country from 1930s to 1940s. It presents the graceful charm related to the south of the Yangtze River between grace and joy feature. It not only shows the memory of metropolis (invested with foreign adventures) in Old Shanghai, but also creates “Eros Utopia” based on presenting the ordinary love, instead of perfect political institution planning. The main objective is will instead of hope—the citizens living on in degradation in the old Shanghai before liberation prefer to dwell on the Eros Utopia so as to restrain painful memory of the war.

Precondition Formed by Utopian Planning of “Shanghai Oldies”

Before liberation, Shanghai was regarded as a foreign settlement of the extraterritorial places. Its transcendent status “a state within a state” endowed Shanghai with political environment dissociating in the old system. To some extent, it provided reliable system guarantee for the freedom of the thought and expression required by the cultural development, and even the personal safety. Therefore, it attracted and gathered many

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scholars and new intellectuals, which provided important political conditions for the formation of “Shanghai Oldies” Utopia. From “Drizzle”¹ publicized by Li Jinhui in 1927 to 1949, around 8,000 pop songs that were named as “Popular Songs”² came into being, with various types, which made Shanghai become one of the important headstreams of the actual world pop songs. Eileen Chang once praised “Popular Songs” as “fantastic wisdom”. Most of them were love songs, which were close to the people’s life in Shanghai, and vividly reflected the appearance of all citizens’ life in different classes in Shanghai at that time. Besides, with the promotion from the broadcasting stations and record companies, “Shanghai Oldies” became quite popular in the whole metropolis (invested with foreign adventures). The following pop songs were quite popular during that period: “Endless Love”, “Girl in First Love”, “Picking Areca”, “I Have Some Love”, “Regretful Misalliance”, “Cordate Telosma”, “Flesh and Flame”, “The Wandering Songstress”, “In Spring”, “The Umbrellas of Cherbourg”, “Seasons Song”, “Shangri-La”, “Flying Together”, “Evening Bell at Nanping Hill”, “Lover’s Tears”, “Wind in May”, etc.

Main Approaches for Realizing Utopian Planning of “Shanghai Oldies”

Firstly, realize the utopian planning of “Shanghai Oldies” by virtue of “audience awareness” clarified by many composers and writers in Old Shanghai from 1930s to 1940s. At that time, there were not only many small common manufacturers, but also many refugees or gold diggers from other places. Their knowledge was weak and they had limited acceptable ability. Therefore, the “popular songs” mainly showed the love between the man and woman, were unrelated to the politics of current events, with brisk rhythm, rich production and many varieties. They presented the people’s psychology of escaping the politics and war. Besides, due to the promotion of the record companies (e.g. Greater China, Victory, EMI, etc.), these songs became popular all over the country, and also became the best recreational tool and “spirit anesthetic” for the people, especially the young people. They imagined the happy love and the good life in the virtual space created by the songs, which provided solid foundation for the further generalization of aesthetic utopia. However, such “soft voice” with magic power was strongly criticized by the culture critic who advocated “salvation”, “enlightenment”, and “social redemption”. Long-time after the foundation of the country, Shanghai Oldies disappeared from the scene in China Mainland.

Secondly, the pop music circle in old Shanghai cultivated and introduced many composers, writers and singers with great talent. Besides, they integrated the Chinese music with the western music. Therefore, it gave contribution to the first peak for the Chinese pop music. At the same time of pushing forward the urbanization progress of Shanghai in modern times, and the formation of the public culture consumption space, the pop songs fostered the public’s citizen consciousness during the old Shanghai time, which is favorable for making the individual spirit not only limited to the private perspective, and also simulating the “Shanghai Oldies” to build aesthetic utopia in the acoustical way. For instance, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Jazz music came into being, while the work created by Li Jinhui (the pioneer of the Chinese pop music) in 1927 already skillfully absorbed the brisk and enthusiastic Jazz rhythm. He is acknowledged as the founder of the Chinese pop music and the founder of the Chinese light music.

¹ The academic circles commonly hold that “Drizzle” created by Li Jinhui (a musician in Shanghai Bund) in 1927 symbolizes the birth of the Chinese pop music. 1912 is the first year of the Chinese pop music.

² Just as its name implies, “popular song” refers to the songs that are fashionable and adapt to the time tide. Therefore, such songbooks published in the streets at that time were named as “new songs in the era”, “famous songs in that era”, or “modern songs”. (Retrieved from <http://baike.baidu.com/view/1266506.htm>)

Thirdly, realize the utopian planning of “Shanghai Oldies” by virtue of the emerging media technology. During the period in Old Shanghai, the broadcasting station was the most important media. The successful commercial radio stations almost had a set of quite similar operation mode. They utilized the audience rate to absorb high-cost advertising investment. In this way, even for the free broadcasting stations, they also had stable and strong economic support, so that they could spend much money inviting popular superstars to give performance in the station at that time. The audiences could choose the songs by telephone. The more popular singers gained higher appraisal. Therefore, the advertising business became more prosperous, as well as the economic benefit of the broadcasting stations. Furthermore, the stations strengthened their capability to cultivate new singers and promote the new works. The singers, broadcasting stations and pop music enter into a virtuous circle through such operation mechanism.

Aesthetic Utopia Process and Internal Contradiction of Shanghai Oldies

After 1949, the Chinese pop music center represented by “Shanghai Oldies” was transferred to Hong Kong. The Chinese pop music tradition once broke in Chinese Mainland. However, in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, etc., “Shanghai Oldies” are still quite popular and have left deep impression on many people. These songs wandering at abroad give out rich style of Song Poems, with deep feeling. Besides, they build traditional and typical Chinese ancient artistic conception. For instance, Teresa Teng, Tsai Chin, and Fei Yuching’s performance have generated the greatest influence power. They maintain the early style of “Shanghai Oldies”, with deep love, sincerity and geniality. They use their voice to maintain the sentiment of “Old Shanghai” for overseas Chinese of many generations, and continue the Eros Utopia with civilianization color.

Before and after 1980, when “Shanghai Oldies” sung by Teresa Teng spread in Chinese Mainland, people found their internal “complex for the oldies” did not pass into silence. Afterwards, “Shanghai Oldies” showed up with many media, such as concerts, karaoke, MTV, etc. It became the most popular “golden song”. Especially in Shanghai, some famous singers from Taiwan, such as Tsai Chin, Fei Yuqing, etc., sing the rhythm of Old Shanghai in Shanghai every year. Even, the jazz legend Laura Fygi obviously prefers “Shanghai Oldies”. She specifically sings “Rose Rose I Love You” in Chinese in her album. In different eras and same fashion, “Shanghai Oldies” as the public art classics is eternally renewed, with considerable circulation. It continues to write the history that the Chinese pop music was interrupted, and reconstruct the public memory of different eras. Moreover, it endows “Shanghai Oldies” with different aesthetic utopian significance.

Since 1990, with the acceleration of the social urbanization advancement in China, the ethic relationship among the families, friends, relatives, and neighbors in the traditional society has become more and more unstable. Besides, the consumption desires the metropolis society constantly produces have enabled the people to generate the floating sense towards the life in the soul. People increasingly long for quiet and simple dwelling places—the tranquil space created by the Shanghai Oldies, such as “Shanghai at Night”, “Forever Smiling”, “Picking Areca”, etc. They coincide with the psychological needs of the urban “hollow man”, and present their active significance of the aesthetic utopia.

However, after 2000, as “flattering” taste gradually became a common public aesthetic experience. The desire style in the pop music circle fell and raised alternatively, which brought negative impact on Shanghai Oldies, or regarded “Shanghai Oldies” as a way for the individuals to give vent to the frustration and show narcissistic personality; or imitated the style of some singers’ singing songs for the foreigners, compradors, bosses or whoremasters in Old Shanghai, which means it distorted the pure, simple, and soft sentiment of

Shanghai Style into coquetry; or completely became the way of presenting the technological invention, doing lip-synching, or greatly depend on the later-phase production of the MIDI technology and MIDI synthesizer. All of them deviated from and cleared up the utopian aesthetic value of “Shanghai Oldies”, and greatly weakened the artistic expression space of “Shanghai Oldies”.

Conclusion

As the “model” work during the emerging period of Chinese pop music, “Shanghai Oldies” extended and sublimated the theme of citizens’ seeking for joy amidst sorrow in Old Shanghai, and deeply developed the ideological layer under the deformed prosperity of metropolis (invested with foreign adventures), and aesthetically presented the confrontation between different classes in the old foreign settlement colony, and imaginatively provided spiritual shelter for the people who survived on the islands and endured humiliation in order to carry out an important task. In early 1980s, “Shanghai Oldies” sung by Teresa Teng passed to Chinese Mainland through Hong Kong. At that time, the young people at the age of about 20 felt so great when listening to Teresa Teng’s songs, such as “When Will You Return”, “Tasty Wind and Coffee”, etc. Their shock power and intimacy was beyond words, which was the same feeling in the intellectual circles and in the public. However, at that time, these songs were named as “decadent music of the bourgeoisie” by the mainstream media. They came into being as the opposite of the extreme “public culture”, such as model opera of the Cultural Revolution, etc. The great significance of the aesthetic utopia lies in greatly adjusting the poor spiritual culture life of the Chinese ordinary people at that time. With regard to breaking through the taboo of the Cultural Revolution, awakening the humanity recovery and cultivating the independent personality, it echoed and pushed forward the new enlightenment and humanitarianism thought of the thought circle and theory circle in 1980s. After 1990s, especially after 2000, with the acceleration of the socialistic market economy progress, “Shanghai Oldies” became the consumption myth day by day, and created incomparable economic value. However, the tension of the internal aesthetic modernity and social modernity (technology) of the aesthetic utopia that Shanghai Oldies built became smaller and smaller. “Shanghai Oldies” not only discharged the function of the people’s spirit shelter in Old Shanghai, but also did not positively respond to the new era ideological trend (e.g. humanism, etc.) advocated by the realm of thought.

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