

Musical Aesthetic Tendencies and Group Psychology of the “Shidaiqu” in the Perspective of Cultural Resistance Theory

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Abstract. Within the specific historical context of modern Shanghai, shidaiqu—through its fusion of Chinese and Western musical elements and its metaphorical lyrical content—initiated the rise of popular music and explored the aesthetic modernity of musical creation. Beneath its surface-level entertainment function lay a creative attitude marked by imitation, resistance, and innovation toward diverse foreign musical cultures. The cultural resistance embodied in shidaiqu took shape not only through its imitation of and compromise with dominant cultures rooted in modern popular-music aesthetics, but also in its emphasis on urbanized, individualized, and emotion-centered musical narratives and its humanistic concerns. Moreover, certain works conveyed national consciousness and sentiment through metaphorical expression. This article argues that shidaiqu, by creating a musical community of urban emotions, responded to and articulated the psychological needs of the emerging Shanghai citizenry during the early development of a colonial, multi-political, and modern social environment, thereby revealing the relationship between aesthetic activity and group psychology within a specific historical context.

Keywords: cultural resistance, cultural innovation, shidaiqu, modern Shanghai, Haipai culture

1. Introduction

Using cultural resistance theory as its analytical framework, this paper examines the relationship between the musical aesthetic preferences of Shanghai shidaiqu produced between the 1920s and 1940s and the psychological expressions of the groups that created and consumed it. As one of China’s earliest treaty ports, Shanghai developed a unique pattern of coexistence between Chinese and foreign communities and a highly diverse cultural environment. Within this historical context, the emergence of shidaiqu was not only an innovation in popular musical style and cultural expression, but also a cultural reflection of the spirit of the age and the collective psychological state of its audiences. Born from the burgeoning psychological needs of urban residents and the development of modern urban culture, shidaiqu evolved through processes of conflict, fusion, and eventual innovation in relation to multiple and heterogeneous musical cultures, ultimately forming a distinctive sonic landscape and a recognizable musical memory of modern Shanghai.

From the standpoint of cultural resistance theory, subjugated or marginalized groups do not simply accept the dominant culture wholesale; rather, they use varied symbolic practices to

creatively seek spaces for self-expression and resistance against hegemonic forces [1]. The development of shidaiqu occurred within the intricate historical context of modern Shanghai. Its gentle, lingering musical language and its commercial success long obscured its significant role in cultural resistance, and for decades it was criticized as “decadent music” or even “yellow music.” However, when viewed through the lens of cultural resistance, the emergence and evolution of shidaiqu represented an effective strategy adopted by local musical culture when confronted with diverse and powerful foreign musical influences. It not only engaged in imitation and learning, but also avoided complete cultural assimilation and colonization, ultimately achieving cultural innovation and commercial success within a politically and culturally unfavourable environment.

2. Cultural resistance and the musical aesthetic tendencies of shidaiqu

The political and economic landscape of modern Shanghai was marked by constant instability and rapid change. Confronted with the cultural assimilation brought by Western music and the emergence of modern society, traditional Chinese music was no longer sufficient to address the emotional needs and expressive habits of newly formed social classes. Against this backdrop, shidaiqu emerged with a distinct set of aesthetic preferences that introduced an entirely new style of popular music through innovative hybridization of Chinese and Western musical elements.

2.1. Musical innovation and the modernity of aesthetic expression

Shidaiqu displays a pronounced hybrid character, most evident in its creative fusion of Chinese and Western musical elements. During this period, shidaiqu broke with the conventions of regional operatic traditions by adopting natural vocal production, incorporating Western harmonic techniques and instrumentation, and drawing on popular Euro-American dance rhythms. The result was a new form of popular song featuring smooth melodies, accessible lyrics, and hints of dance music. This “new sound” was neither purely traditional Chinese music nor a mere Western replica; rather, it was an innovation forged in the space between cultural assimilation and cultural resistance.

Composers such as Jinhui Li pioneered this new genre, combining rhythmic and harmonic features of Western jazz with melodic contours and scale patterns drawn from Chinese traditional music. The outcome was a listening experience both familiar and refreshingly novel. Songs such as *Ye Lai Xiang* (Evening Primrose) and *Meigui Meigui Wo Ai Ni* (Rose, Rose, I Love You) rest on the rhythmic foundations of jazz while incorporating elements of Jiangnan folk melodies, producing a distinctive hybrid musical style. This practice cannot be understood simply as “imitation,” but rather as *shifang*—a form of emulative learning that appears to mimic foreign cultural forms on the surface, but in fact resists assimilation through localized adaptation and re-creation.

2.2. Metaphorical lyricism and modes of resistance

The lyrics of shidaiqu demonstrate a more nuanced strategy of cultural resistance. On the surface, most songs avoided explicit political expression, focusing instead on themes of love, urban life, and personal emotion. Under the conditions of colonial warfare and civil conflict, coupled with strict political control over cultural production, shidaiqu—driven by commercial considerations—could not directly reflect the full social reality of its time. Its thematic focus on romance and everyday life was partly a pragmatic commercial decision and a method of risk avoidance. Yet this very avoidance also became a form of indirect resistance: by refusing to engage in prescribed political narratives, the songs safeguarded a degree of independence; by concentrating on private emotional life, they

affirmed personal value; through humanistic concern, they enhanced their universal resonance and cultural legitimacy. At a time when political forces employed cultural policies and colonial strategies to assimilate the public, shidaiqu's focus on individual emotions and personal fate became an expressive mode infused with humanistic care, awakening and consolidating a sense of shared feeling among urban residents in Shanghai and beyond.

More importantly, some shidaiqu embedded metaphorical expressions of national consciousness and resistance within seemingly apolitical lyrics. Symbolic and suggestive language allowed sentiments of national liberation to be discreetly woven into the framework of personal emotion. For example, Chen Gexin's *Passing Through This Cold Winter* (1939) appears to express longing for spring, but in fact conveys a hope for national salvation. In *An Unchanging Heart*, lines such as "You are as distant as a star, you are as small as a firefly, yet you always bring me a glimmer of light" have been interpreted as metaphorical references to the fragile yet enduring strength of the resistance movement. With the release of the film *Luan Feng He Ming*, the theme song *An Unchanging Heart* spread widely in Shanghai, Chongqing, and occupied territories, enabling people to voice their deepest hopes through seemingly innocuous lyrics.

2.3. Aesthetic practice as cultural resistance

From the perspective of cultural resistance, the aesthetic practices of shidaiqu were not merely artistic choices but acts of contestation over the listener's auditory attention—responses to the psychological needs of its audience.

Scholar Fangyi Hong argues that Shanghai popular music established its own musical subjectivity through what she calls the "false gestures of worshipping the West." [2] These gestures, although seemingly imitative in their pursuit of Western culture, in fact generated new cultural syntheses through processes of localization and reconstruction. Such aesthetic practice represents neither a simple defense of tradition nor a wholesale pursuit of Western modernity. Instead, it constitutes an active and creative engagement with cultural collision—an effort to translate and reconstruct disparate influences under the acknowledgment that cultural encounters are unavoidable.

The uniqueness of this form of cultural resistance lies in its refusal of direct confrontation or outright rejection. Rather, it absorbs, transforms, and reconfigures the elements of dominant culture, ultimately producing a new and autonomous mode of cultural expression. As Yong Wang notes, "The ultimate definition of Haipai culture is to identify points of convergence among diverse cultural characteristics; only because such convergence took shape in Shanghai can we speak of a distinct Shanghai cultural form." [3] This spirit of tolerance and inclusiveness is the essence of Haipai culture and the core of shidaiqu's cultural resistance. "Tolerance" entails broad learning, emulative adaptation, analysis, critique, and understanding of diverse cultures; "inclusiveness" involves a neutral and objective attitude toward evaluating heterogeneous cultural forms.

3. The emotional needs of emerging urban groups and the resonance of shidaiqu with its time

3.1. Social transformation and the intensification of urban loneliness

In *Shanghai Concessions and Cultural Integration*, scholar Yuezhi Xiong argues that the marginality of traditional Chinese culture and the rising influence of modernity weakened Shanghai's cultural resistance to the West. The traditional social structure of China was never fully established in this rapidly emerging metropolis, which became a new immigrant city composed of people arriving from all parts of the country and the world. For these individuals who had left their homes, life in

Shanghai meant becoming part of a new urban community marked by independence and mutual estrangement, devoid of the familiar social networks they once relied on. As a result, a historically unprecedented sense of loneliness pervaded the lives of modern urban individuals, prompting them to seek new forms of emotional solace.

In traditional Chinese society, the shishen (local gentry) played a central role in economic, local administrative, and ideological guidance. In modern Shanghai, however, this role was absent. Compounded by the constant shifts in political power—different forces repeatedly contesting and balancing one another—the psychological anchoring of urban individuals became unstable and at times entirely absent. This meant that individuals lacked the secure and predictable sense of belonging provided by traditional social structures, and they were likewise unable to form strong, meaningful connections within the emerging social hierarchy. Consequently, they turned to alternative ways of cultivating psychological belonging. Among such avenues, shidaiqu emerged as a crucial and effective form of cross-class cultural resonance that catered deeply to these needs.

3.2. Divergent aesthetic responses to shidaiqu across social groups

Although shidaiqu enjoyed widespread popularity in Shanghai, different social groups demonstrated distinct modes of reception and psychological engagement with the genre. For Shanghai's intellectual elite, shidaiqu embodied a cultural paradox. On the one hand, they appreciated the modern qualities and aesthetic innovations embedded in the music; on the other hand, they remained wary of its commercial nature and its focus on themes of romantic sentimentality. This ambivalence reflects the intellectual class's dilemma under the conditions of colonial modernity—desiring modernity while resisting its commercialization and secularized aesthetic forms. For the emerging urban middle class, shidaiqu served as an important form of cultural capital for constructing a modern identity and distinguishing themselves from traditional social groups. Through the consumption and appreciation of shidaiqu, the middle class signaled their integration into urban modern life and displayed their refined cultural taste and progressive lifestyle. This group also embodied the primary subjects depicted in the musical narratives of shidaiqu. For the working-class population, shidaiqu fulfilled a different function, primarily offering emotional comfort. Listening to and singing these songs provided a form of imaginative participation in urban modernity. For them, shidaiqu was both an escape from daily hardship and a symbolic construction of a better life. In this sense, shidaiqu transcended class boundaries to become a shared cultural symbol through which Shanghai's diverse urban population found emotional resonance.

4. The complexity of shidaiqu as cultural resistance

4.1. The interdependence between commercial imperatives and cultural resistance

The most prominent feature of shidaiqu lies in the coexistence of its commercial success and its function as cultural resistance. On the one hand, shidaiqu was a highly commercialized cultural product whose production, circulation, and consumption operated entirely under market logic. Its localized production strategies were driven not so much by cultural consciousness as by the pursuit of profit. From Li Jinhui's release of *Drizzle* (Maomaoyu) in 1927 to 1949, shidaiqu remained a central component of music production in Shanghai. The large-scale industrial manufacturing of shidaiqu, especially the vast number of records produced, vividly illustrates the commercial and profit-oriented nature of cultural commodities. On the other hand, it was precisely this commercial success that enabled shidaiqu to secure a space within mainstream cultural spheres and thereby

fulfill its function of cultural resistance. Commercialization thus became a double-edged sword—it diluted the purity of cultural resistance while simultaneously providing the channels and conditions necessary for its expression and survival. As Leo Ou-fan Lee argues in *Shanghai Modern*, the modernity of Shanghai's urban culture was established through the symbiotic relationship between commercial culture and modern media [4].

The cultural resistance embodied by shidaiqu did not exist outside the commercial system; rather, it gained wider dissemination and greater influence through the very mechanisms of commercial operation. For shidaiqu, its greatest significance lies in the fact that it achieved autonomous cultural expression and a degree of social critique within the logic of cultural-economic activities.

4.2. Political constraints and the need for concealed and metaphorical forms of cultural resistance

Another dimension of the complexity of shidaiqu lies in the concealed and multifaceted forms of its resistance. Unlike direct or manifesto-style political resistance, the resistance of shidaiqu unfolded primarily on micro-levels such as aesthetic form, individual emotional expression, and urban lifestyle representation. Shidaiqu did not simply abandon tradition; instead, it revitalized traditional elements by transforming them in accordance with the demands of modernity. Musicians such as Chen Gexin and Li Jinhui frequently drew inspiration from folk music and reorganized these elements using modern musical techniques [5], creating works that were simultaneously traditional and modern.

4.3. The complexity of group psychology and the narrative limitations of shidaiqu as cultural resistance

Following the peak of its development, the increasingly volatile political climate and the tightening psychological state of the Chinese social collective exposed the limitations of shidaiqu's musical form and expressive content. Social groups began to demand more direct, intense forms of emotional release, protest, and representation—needs that shidaiqu's metaphorical narrative strategies were no longer able to satisfy. As the tide of cultural resistance grew stronger and more explicit, shidaiqu gradually completed its historical mission and was eventually replaced by musical forms with clearer political orientations and stronger national sentiments.

5. Conclusion

In sum, shidaiqu created a new musical community of urban emotions through innovations in musical form. It responded to and articulated the psychological needs of the emerging Shanghai citizenry during the early developmental stage of a colonial, multi-political, and modern society, revealing the mutual influence between aesthetic activities and collective psychology within a specific historical context. Amid decades of war and turbulence, modern Shanghai's musical culture experienced several waves of disruptive innovation in creative practice. Among these developments, shidaiqu, with its distinctive artistic expressiveness, cultural value, and characteristics of collective memory, has persisted as a lasting component of popular-music memory and has become a unique sonic archive of "Haipai culture." The emergence of shidaiqu represented an active cultural response of Chinese indigenous musical culture to the transnational circulation of Western music. As political and economic circumstances shifted, the rise and decline of various styles and aesthetic tendencies in popular-music culture embodied the shared emotional climate of the groups living through these

changes. These emotions coalesced into a vivid “collective voice,” shaping a sonic landscape of collective memory.

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