

Withered Rose Petal, a Scent Still on the Early Chinese Popular Song “Rose, Rose, I Love You” and Others

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Abstract: “Rose, Rose, I Love You” is a very important representative of early Chinese popular music. This paper applies the method of historical research to analyze “Rose, Rose, I Love You” in a specific historical and cultural context through four dimensions: song background, songwriter, music analysis, and historical evaluation. This paper tries to partly reflect the creation ecology, creation style, and characteristics of early Chinese popular music through the case of “Rose, Rose, I Love You.”

Keywords: “Rose, Rose, I Love You”, Chen Gexin, Integration of Chinese and Western, Chinese Popular Music

1. Introduction

Chinese popular music was born in the late 1920s. After its birth, China experienced such major historical events as the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1931–1945), the founding of the People’s Republic of China (1949), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Such a special experience doomed it to a bumpy fate. Chinese popular music originated from “Li” school songs and “times music.” Since its birth, it has been accused in a large number of articles of being “spiritual corrosive” and “vulgar urban music.” Popular music has been forcibly branded as “vulgar music” and “decadent sounds” by society [1]. The historical record of popular music is almost nonexistent. Therefore, the study of early popular music is difficult for scholars, and China’s early popular music is always in a relatively backward state in the whole study of Chinese music history. At the end of the 1980s, popular music was officially recognized and was able to move from semi-underground distribution to a spacious public stage. Following that, popular music was gradually integrated into the teaching and research fields of a few higher music colleges, and formal academic investigation and research into Chinese popular music began.

In the study of China’s early popular music, Shanghai’s “Time Music” undoubtedly occupies a pivotal position, especially the song “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” which once swept the streets of Shanghai and went through the turbulent society there but was not forgotten. It was sung all the way to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, and was ranked among the top three in the pop music charts of the United States. At present, there are only 5 articles focusing on “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” from the perspective of the analysis of the work, relevant background, version comparison, and author Chen Gexin. There are also a few articles concerning the modern dissemination and adaptation of Rose. There are more than 70 articles about songwriter Chen Gexin; almost every article mentions

the song “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” and nearly 30 of them have a partial discussion on “Rose, Rose, I Love You.” In addition, the 2007 master’s degree thesis of the China Conservatory of Music, “Flowers Are Still Fragrant, Songs Are Still Pleasant: Chen Gexin and His Popular Music Creation,” launched a comprehensive and objective character analysis of Chen Gexin. Chen Gang, Chen Gexin’s eldest son, compiled the book “Rose, Rose, I Love You -- Song Fairy Chen Gexin’s Song,” which provides a detailed historical restoration of the composer and the development of the song from the perspective of witnesses.

The above data depict the development of “Rose, Rose, I Love You” in the first half of the 20th century and the appearance of The Times to varying degrees. Based on existing historical materials and previous research results, this paper will place the research object in a specific historical and cultural context for analysis. From the background of the song, the introduction of the songwriter, the analysis of the works, and the historical evaluation of the four aspects of the Chinese popular song “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” which is popular in the international music circle, historical comparison and music analysis and interpretation are carried out in order to uncover the story behind “Rose, Rose, I Love You.”

2. Songwriting Background

The predecessor of Chinese popular music can be traced back to “Xuetang Yuege”¹ in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, which was a singing culture that emerged with the establishment of new schools. In 1927, “Drizzle” opened the door for Chinese people to enter the world of popular music [2]. This pioneering work of the Chinese popular music industry is a great attempt by Mr. Li Jinhui, the father of modern Chinese song and dance, to turn from children's songs to love songs. It not only integrates with Western music but also sticks to the characteristics of national music. This combination of Chinese and Western creative techniques laid the foundation for the later localization of popular songs. Since then, songs featuring Chinese traditional folk tunes combined with western music features have continuously emerged, of which “Rose, Rose, I Love You” is a very representative one. In the early 1940s, “Rose, Rose, I Love You” was introduced to the public as an episode of the progressive film “The Daughter of the World” and was quickly spread by the famous singer Yao Li in Shanghai karaoke halls, beginning its first major popularity in China. It is worth noting that at that time, China was in the midst of the Anti-Japanese War. As a special haven at that time, the Shanghai Concession was naturally a place where dignitaries flocked. As a result, the demand for entertainment at the concession grew steadily [2]. This abnormal cultural prosperity provided a platform for the development of early Chinese popular music, and “Rose, Rose, I Love You” was one of the leading representatives of the rapid spread and popularity of the prosperous song and dance hall culture and commercial film economy at that time.

In 1941, Japan declared war on Britain and the United States. The Pacific War broke out, and Shanghai fell completely. At that time, under the control of the Wang Jingwei government², the

¹ The “singing culture” that arose with the establishment of the new school generally refers to the music (then called “singing” or “music songs”) classes set up in the school or the songs composed and created for the singing of the school. It is a kind of song with selected songs and lyrics. At the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, political reformers advocated the abolition of the old educational system, such as the imperial examination, and the establishment of new schools following the example of Europe and America. As a result, a number of new schools were gradually established. At that time, such schools were called “Xuetang,” and the music lessons offered in schools were called “Yuege” classes. Therefore, “Xuetang Yuege” generally refer to the school songs (similar to today's school songs) that existed in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China.

² The Wang Puppet Nationalist Government (March 30, 1940—August 16, 1945), also known as the Wang Puppet Government, was established under the leadership of Wang Jingwei (real name Wang Zhaoming) and other members of the Chinese Kuomintang who defected to Japan during the Anti-Japanese War. In the name of “the Nationalist

Shanghai Concession strictly controlled patriotic songs with positive thoughts and anti-Japanese propaganda content. On the contrary, popular music was widely promoted, which the Japanese puppet forces wanted to use to numb the public's sense of social crisis [2]. As a result, progressives referred to popular music at the time as “music of joy.” However, from another point of view, popular music does play a role in letting people temporarily vent their anguish. Music allows people to convey and express their inner emotions in a subtle way [2]. As a result, popular music continues to evolve and spread in the ruins of Shanghai. Popular music was regarded as “vulgar music” after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, and a large number of popular musicians and their creators were ruthlessly suppressed. The composer of “Rose, Rose, I Love You” also died in this struggle, and popular music suffered an unprecedented blow. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Shanghai “Times Music” continued to develop with the outflow of singers to Hong Kong and Taiwan (first Hong Kong and then Taiwan) and spread all the way to Southeast Asia and Europe. In the early 1950s, “Rose, Rose, I Love You” was performed by the American jazz singer Frankie Laine and quickly became popular in the United States. In 1951, it reached the top three of the American popular music charts and was included in the “125 Best Old Songs” in the United States. Later, it was used as the opening and closing songs in the American film “Pillow Book,” directed by Greenway and starring Wu Jun. At the time, Americans didn’t know where “Rose, Rose, I Love You” came from, so “Rose, Rose, I Love You” earned millions of dollars in U.S. royalties but went unclaimed [3].

“Rose, Rose, I Love You” was produced in the most turbulent period of Chinese society, but it did not disappear with the passage of time like most works; it has been spread several times with its own unique charm across the ocean and became the first Chinese popular song to break into the US popular music charts. So far, it is one of the few popular songs in China that has spread and reached such a wide range. It not only realized the leapfrog from China to the world of Shanghai’s “Time Music” in the 1930s and 1940s but also left a profound mark in the history of Chinese popular music.

3. Songwriting Writers

Chen Gexin, the composer of “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” was born on September 19, 1914. As a child, he was gifted with a culture and language that exceeded those of his peers. Chen Gexin worked as a music and English teacher at Fudan High School and Shanghai Women’s High School. It was during this time that he met his future wife, Jin Jiaoli, a student three years younger than him and a wealthy girl with a huge family gap and different religious beliefs [1]. This unworldly love would later become the inspiration for Chen’s songs, many of which were written for his wife. He composed more than 200 songs in more than 20 years, from the early 1930s to the late 1950s, and was a veritable prolific composer. Among them, the well-known songs include “Night Time In Shanghai,” which brings people into the bustling streets of Shanghai; “Congratulations,” a New Year greeting song that has been engraved in the minds of Chinese people; and “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” which immerses people in the beautiful love of flowers and knots. However, such a master who influenced the Chinese popular music industry, due to the Chinese society’s suppression of popular music during that period and the Japanese occupation of Shanghai after the creation of inappropriate works, was criticized during the anti-right movement and eventually died in a foreign country.

The lyricist of “Rose, Rose, I Love You” was Wu Cun, born in 1904 in Xiamen, Fujian Province, and one of China’s early film directors. The Tianya Songgirl was the work of Wu Cun at the peak of his creative career. However, during this period, he encountered a series of social conflicts, such as the “July 7” Lugou Bridge Incident, the “August 13” Incident, and the Japanese bombing of Shanghai, and the literary and art circles encountered unprecedented difficulties. Despite this, Wu’s heart

Government of the Republic of China,” it was actually one of the puppet governments supported by Japan during the war of aggression against China.

remained in filmmaking, and he directed a variety of films during this period. It is worth noting that among all the types of works directed by Wu Cun, singing films³ are highly sought after by the masses, and every piece of music becomes popular once it is broadcast. This is because, compared with other singing film directors, each episode of Wu Cun's singing film is carefully selected by him, and the director has independent lyrics and composition ability and is especially good at lyricism. All this is due to his early music learning experiences and his first career in film music. It is not difficult to find that almost every film directed by Wu Cun has music content or lyrics composed by Wu Cun. Therefore, Wu Cun is known as the "director of poetry." In this sense, Wucun did play a crucial role in the birth and dissemination of "Rose, Rose, I Love You [4]."

3.1. Work Analysis

According to the content, Chen Gexin's songs can be divided into four categories⁴, of which love songs account for the largest proportion. In all his works praising love, "spring" and "flower" have profound meanings, which are his yearning for beautiful things and a sea of flowers hidden in his heart. He composed a song called "Rose, Rose, I Love You" to praise a period of strong love that never breaks, blossoms, and brings comfort to people in a turbulent society. Since there are many accompaniment versions of "Rose, Rose, I Love You," the version chosen in this paper is Chen Gang's piano accompaniment version for the convenience of analysis. "Rose, Rose, I Love You" is a standard single trilogy with a return (see Figure 1). The melody of Section A is based on the Chinese pentatonic scale, and the seventh Western scale is introduced in Section B. Section A' is the reappearance part of Section A. The composer skillfully integrated the continuous syncopation and point rhythm common in the American jazz style into the Chinese national mode, which made the melody catchy and the tune fresh and original without losing the national flavor, which was deeply loved by the people everywhere.

A		B		A'			
引子	:a+b:	c+c'	间奏	a+b	间奏	:a+b:	Coda
1-21	22-29	30-40	41	42-49	50-61	62-71	72-80
(21)	4+4+4+4	4+7	(1)	4+4	(12)	4+4+4+5	(9)
D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D

Figure 1: The Musical Structure of Chen Gang's piano accompaniment version.

Segment A is a closing segment composed of two square integral phrases (see spectrum 1). It adopts the D-Gong mode of Chinese folk music. The "a" phrase begins by presenting the subject material in an ascending scale, with the first half falling on the "A zhi (徵)" note, the second half developed from the musical thoughts of the first stanza, and the end on the "E shang (商)" note. The first half of the phrase "b" is new material. The sixth section adds the "variant zhi (徵)" note (the second minor degree below the zhi (徵)). The second half returns to the theme material and finally ends on the "gong (宫)" note. The "ab" phrase forms a sharp contrast while maintaining a close echo relationship.

³ Chinese singing films are a film genre that emerged during a specific historical period. It was born on the basis of the Hollywood singing and dancing film, but it is different from it because of the difference in time and region.

⁴ Love, optimism and confusion, country and society, and others.

B is the chorus of the music, with a contrasting nature (see spectrum 2). The author ingeniously adds continuous second-degree modularity here. The beginning of two parallel phrases is presented in the way of smooth quarter notes with a second degree downward. The continuous syncopated, zigzag, and fluctuating melody lines of segment A are changed, giving people a soothing feeling. It is worth noting that paragraph B no longer follows the law of Chinese pentatonic mode, and the seven notes in the D major scale are added to the two phrases at the beginning, creating a strong charm by combining Chinese and Western.



Spectrum 1: The melody of Segment A.



Spectrum 2: The melody of Segment B.

Paragraph A' is the reappearance of “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” and it echoes with paragraph A. In Chen Gang’s version, the recitals are repeated twice, each with the same melody and different lyrics (see Table 1), which further emphasizes the theme, strengthening the listener’s memory and giving the impression of endless memories. The first verse and song in Section A are reproduced for the first time. In the second repetition, with the melody remaining the same, the praise for the rose is further refined, from the beauty and growing environment of the rose to the details and spiritual qualities of the rose. An interlude featuring B is cleverly added between the two recapitulation segments (see spectrum 3). The accompaniment textures of the high and low voices cooperate with each other to create a new and natural transition, and together they draw the familiar yet novel melody lines of the chorus, bringing echoes, symmetry, and stable auditory feelings to the whole piece.

Table 1: The song lyrics.

The song lyrics of Paragraph A	玫瑰玫瑰最娇美,玫瑰玫瑰最艳丽,长夏开在枝头上,玫瑰玫瑰我爱你. 玫瑰玫瑰情意重,玫瑰玫瑰情意浓,长夏开在荆棘里,玫瑰玫瑰我爱你.
The first recapitulation segment	玫瑰玫瑰最娇美,玫瑰玫瑰最艳丽,长夏开在枝头上,玫瑰玫瑰我爱你.
The second recapitulation segment	玫瑰玫瑰枝儿细,玫瑰玫瑰刺儿锐,今朝风雨来摧残,伤了嫩枝和娇蕊. 玫瑰玫瑰心儿坚,玫瑰玫瑰刺儿尖,来日风雨来摧毁,毁不了并蒂枝连理.



Spectrum 3: The interlude.

“Rose, Rose, I Love You” is a typical piece of Chen Gexin’s combining Chinese and Western works. The use of syncopated rhythm, triplets, and double meters all highlight the Western characteristics of jazz. The composer deftly blended urban feelings with national tones. It makes the song vivid and poetic, revealing the author's infinite yearning for beautiful love. “Rose, Rose, I Love You” has long been popular in almost all film and television works with the background of old Shanghai. Now it has become a symbol of the times. It depicts the urban scenery of Shanghai Concession in the 1940s as well as cultural features of old Shanghai. This is definitely a successful exploration of the combination of Chinese and Western music by composers in the early stage of the development of Chinese popular music.

3.2. A Historical Evaluation of “Rose, Rose, I Love You”

Throughout the course of China’s modern history, “Rose, Rose, I Love You” has crossed the other side of the ocean and entered the international singing circle, becoming one of the few Chinese popular songs that go abroad and are frequently sung. All these are closely related to the cultural background of the 1930s and 1940s. The Rose is the product of the social history of the period and the mutual promotion and interaction between the culture of song and dance halls and the economy of commercial film. Similarly, “Time Music,” represented by “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” in a sense

also promoted the rapid development of entertainment and commerce in the Shanghai concession and brought spiritual comfort to people in the turbulent society. The study of the song “Rose, Rose, I Love You” directly presents the social outlook and historical background of the early development of Chinese popular music to readers. We can see that although early Chinese popular music grew up in the historical environment of the Japanese Army’s full-scale invasion of China, it showed a reverse prosperity in the Shanghai concession. The national culture was neither engulfed by the surging foreign culture nor stagnated as a result of the war’s influence. Instead, it changed direction and integrated with the local culture, created a new combination of Chinese and Western music, which is known as the Shanghai “Time Music.” These “Times songs,” represented by “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” along with other art forms, comprised the famous Shanghai culture of the time, earning the indelible label “Night Time in Shanghai.” Nowadays, it is not difficult to see “period songs” such as “Rose, Rose, I Love You” and “Night Time in Shanghai” in film and television works set in the old Shanghai in the 1940s, because these songs have become cultural symbols for people to recall the old Shanghai. Thus it can be seen that the influence of this kind of Shanghai “Times music,” represented by “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” on the modern history of China cannot be underestimated.

From the perspective of Chinese modern music history, the early popular music seems to be much inferior to the current popular music in terms of melody, accompaniment, and orchestration. However, in less than a century after the introduction of pop music into China, Chinese composers quickly realized the importance of localizing foreign culture, actively tried to create, and made impressive achievements in the exploration stage, which is commendable. It can be said that at that time, “Time music,” represented by “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” was quite successful in the exploration of music localization because this “new music” with a strong Chinese and Western flavor was more easily accepted by Chinese people from both sensory and psychological levels. Compared with the early “Li School” songs, the “Times Song” represented by “Rose, Rose, I Love You” is more mature in the application of Western musical elements, more natural in the combination of Chinese and Western modes, richer in rhythmic changes, and cleverer in the handling of offsets [5]. As it turns out, people not only accept them, they love them. People are beginning to re-examine China’s modern popular music and pay attention to and attach importance to the contribution of these “Times Music,” represented by “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” in the history of Chinese music as scholars gradually intensify their research on Shanghai “Times Music” and its composers and continuously collect and supplement historical materials of China’s early popular music.

From the perspective of communication, although “Rose, Rose, I Love You” has been around for more than half a century, it has always been active in music activities and on film and television stages. It spread to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and even across the ocean to major European countries. The composer Chen Gexin certainly deserves a lot of credit for the remarkable achievement of “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” but the lyrics of “poetry director” Wu Cun, the hit of the film *The World’s Singer*, and the singing of the popular singer Yao Li in the Big Four karaoke halls all created conditions for the popularity of “Rose, Rose, I Love You” to varying degrees. In addition, the “discontinuation period” of Chinese inland popular music in the late 1940s also accelerated the spread of “Rose, Rose, I Love You” from inland to Hong Kong and Taiwan and from home to abroad to a certain extent. The song “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” which is loved by Chinese people and sought after by foreigners, was soon introduced to the United States due to its unique and natural combination of Chinese and Western characteristics and the high internationalization of the Shanghai concession. It gained international popularity in the 1950s and is still sung today. In the 1980s, the song was covered in Cantonese by Hong Kong’s famous singer, Anita Mui. In 1989, it was featured in Jackie Chan’s movie *Miracle*. In the early 21st century, Chinese accordion player Tan Jialiang adapted it for accordion performance, and Britain’s “King’s Singers” adapted it for male vocals. In 2004, the Hong Kong Orchestra’s encore, “Rose, Rose, I Love You,” for the audience at Shanghai Concert Hall, No.

323 Yan'an East Road, was met with loud and sustained applause. Edo de Waart, the conductor, repeated the curtain call until he could only play one more song, and Edo de Waart played "Rose, Rose, I Love You" again with enthusiasm. In addition, on the variety show "The Voice of China" in 2009, two young contestants stunned the audience with a modern version of "Rose, Rose, I Love You," accompanied by a folk song and rap. All these prove the unique value of "Rose, Rose, I Love You."

In conclusion, by combing the song background, author information, and musical characteristics of "Rose, Rose, I Love You," this paper partly reflects the historical environment of old Shanghai and the development of early Chinese popular music in the first half of the 20th century and comments on the research significance, historical influence, and the reasons why "Rose, Rose, I Love You" has been sung so far in the historical evaluation. However, due to the special historical background, a large number of records related to China's early popular music have been buried. What this paper can do is collect and identify the existing materials as much as possible in order to objectively analyze this classic "Time Music." The current situation of "Rose, Rose, I Love You" in the international music circle, the influence of "Times Music" on later Chinese popular music, and the real life of the composer Chen Gexin still need further study by scholars. It is hoped that the review of "Rose, Rose, I Love You" in this paper will contribute to the case study of Chinese popular music and show more aspects of Chinese popular music to scholars outside China.

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