

Decorating the Bund: Semi-colonial Ideology in the Early History of the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra

Irene Pui-ling PANG

Abstract

The New Culture Movement, the Chinese enlightenment or intellectual revolution, called for the modernization of China in the early twentieth century. In music, modernization involved adopting Western symphony orchestra as a model for the large Chinese instrumental ensemble. Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, which was one of the earliest Western orchestras in China, took an important role in the reformation. Originally formed by a group of foreign dilettanti residing in the International Settlement of Shanghai, the orchestra began in 1879 as the Shanghai Public Band. Two years later, the Town Band Committee, under the control of the Municipal Committee of the International Settlement, was set up to take over the management of the band, which was later known as the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra.

Scholars in China and abroad generally discuss the history of the orchestra after World War I but overlook the colonial ideology behind its inception. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the historical and social background associated with the establishment of the orchestra, focusing mainly on its early decades. My discussion will revolve around the wide range of people affiliated with the orchestra (management committee members, conductors, players, and audience), as well as its programs and performance venues in order to demonstrate how the orchestra symbolized colonial power in fin-de-siecle Shanghai and how the Western musical culture was introduced to the Chinese so that Western symphony orchestra was considered paradigmatic to them.
