



爵士系在中国

# Jazz

## *In the Land of the Dragon*

*Jazz arrived in China quite quickly after becoming popular in the United States. Colonial dominance in Shanghai—aided by such technologies as the steamship and the gramophone—made it happen.*

BY Eugene Marlow

Jazz—America’s indigenous classical music—arrived in China, specifically Shanghai, in the late 1910s. The music was phenomenally popular there: by the early 1930s, the city boasted several hundred dancehalls, including the legendary Paramount, which stands today. These venues featured live music played by bands of various nationalities. One such was the Harlem Gentlemen, a 13-piece ensemble led by famed American trumpeter Buck Clayton. Whatever musical styles were popular in America and Europe were popular in Shanghai’s dancehalls as well, whether orchestrated for big band or small ensemble.

More remarkable is that jazz—at that time still relatively new on the American cultural landscape—was within a couple of decades not only the music of Shanghai, it was global. How did it get half way around the world to China (and in the other direction, to Europe) so quickly? And how did the non-American musicians in Shanghai

(Russians, Filipinos, Chinese) learn to play the music for dancehall purposes?

China’s relationship with jazz in the 20th century paralleled the ups and downs of the country’s political and social evolution. The music arrived shortly after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, as the imperial period gave way to a republic under Sun Yat-sen. The rest of the century was turbulent: the republic was followed by a warlord period, occupation by Japan, Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist movement, and the 1949 Communist Revolution that established the People’s Republic of China of today. Most recently, an aggressive economic culture has emerged in the context of the nation’s one-party political structure.

Jazz was a steady presence until the 1949 revolution, when Mao Zedong emerged as China’s leader. And during the infamous Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, when everything Western was systematically suppressed, it disappeared. With Mao’s

Shanghai’s Paramount Theater today



**The Buck Clayton ensemble in Shanghai's Canidrome Ballroom, circa 1935**

death in September 1976, however, the new leadership began to open the door to the West, and to permit an economy today that boasts high (some say too high) rates of growth. In parallel, today in Beijing and Shanghai, and even in some smaller cities, jazz performance, not only by local musicians, but also by expatriates and visiting jazz artists from all over the world, has re-emerged in large venues and numerous jazz clubs.

## *Before Mao*

In the first quarter of the 20th century, the steamship was a key technology bringing jazz to China, not only in the transport of sheet music, gramophone and phonograph records, early Hollywood films, and non-Chinese musicians, but also by facilitating the influx of Europeans, Russians, and Americans who constituted a dominating presence, especially in Shanghai.



Fact is, Shanghai in the 1910s and 1920s was largely owned and occupied by non-Chinese cultures. Whoever dominated Shanghai—a major port city—also dominated China. This blatant imperialism dated back to the late 1790s, when an ambassador from England refused to *kowtow* (that is, bow) to China’s emperor. That diplomatic impasse, coupled with England’s desire to control the opium trade, resulted decades later in the two so-called Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60. With their superior steamship and cannon technology, British and French forces easily prevailed over the medieval weaponry—bows and arrows, swords and spears—of the Chinese army. The victorious colonial powers (including Germany, Russia, even the United States) divvied up Shanghai and brought their collective culture with them. In the 20th century, jazz was to become an important element of the city’s nightlife.

As early as 1922, journalist Burnet Hershey, writing in *The New York Times Book Review and Magazine* (the two sections were then a single weekly supplement) traced jazz around the globe from its meridian in Tin Pan Alley eastward to Monte Carlo and the French Riviera, Egypt and Palestine, and west to the Barbary Coast in San Francisco, the Hawaiian Islands, Japan, the Philippines, Siam, India—and China. Hershey wrote that “Jazz follows the flag. Ships freighted with jazz. . . form the newest product of export to the Orient. Cargoes of jazz are laden on all vessels passing through the Golden Gate. To the Orient they sail, carrying the jazziest song hits, the latest dance steps and the phonograph records. . . .”

With particular reference to Shanghai, Hershey observed,

*Shanghai without jazz, without its night clubs, without its ballrooms crowded with diplomats, business men, tourists and that ever picturesque rabble of European fortune hunters, adventurers and derelicts cluttering the gay cities of the East, would not be Shanghai. Jazz is the very essence of its existence. An American post office, an American Tribunal of Justice, American banks and shops, a real soda fountain and a place where they serve honest-to-goodness griddle cakes—and jazz.*

He adds, “The sale of American jazz records in the Far East is enormous. . . . Jazz has now supplanted a number of peculiarly Chinese vices. It is ‘all the rage.’ If you’ve heard the crash of Chinese cymbals and tintin-

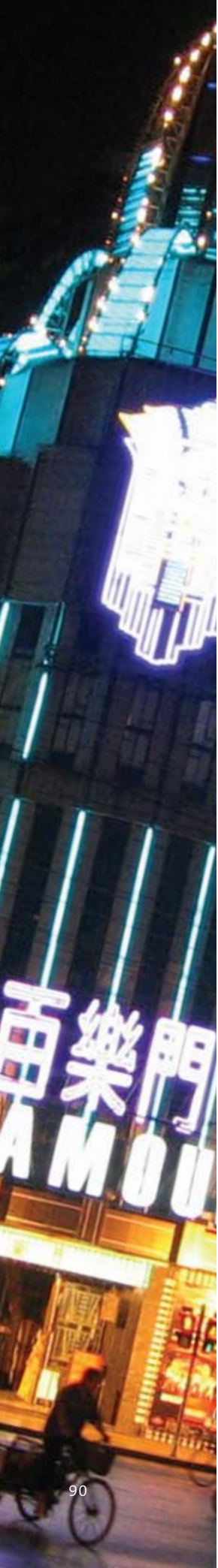
nabulation of their gongs, you will understand the popularity of jazz.”

An early example of jazz in China is “Nighttime in Old Shanghai,” a piece recorded in that city circa 1928 by the Whitey Smith Majestic Hotel Orchestra. The opening section is imitative of Chinese folksong, but the music eventually morphs into a dancehall piece typical of the day: an instrumental section, followed by a vocal, and then a section hinting at swing, with the emphasis on beats one and three. This piece is, to my knowledge, is one of very few extant jazz recordings done in the Far East during that era. Smith, born into a family of Danish immigrants, was a drummer and bandleader who came to China from San Francisco via steamship in 1922. He helped popularize American music with his Westernized arrangements of Chinese folksongs and in 1956 published an autobiography, *I Didn’t Make a Million*.

On both sides of the Pacific, jazz was the music of modern life. Thus, the locomotive was a common theme. Two jazz pieces—one Chinese, the other American—are exemplary of the train’s presence as an international reference point. The first is “Express Train.” I came by a recording courtesy of Andrew F. Jones, a professor in the department of East Asian languages and cultures at the University of California at Berkeley, and the author of *Yellow Music*, a definitive book on media, culture, and colonial modernity in the so-called Chinese Jazz Age. Jones writes that he discovered the track in 2001, on a “dusty gramophone record in a Beijing antique stall.” “Express Train,” written in 1928 by Li Jinhui, a pioneering composer who is often called the father of Chinese popular music, the tune is performed on the recording by Zhou Xuan, the most famous chanteuse of the era. In the song, the train symbolizes rapid social change and satirizes the breathless pace of modern courtship by way of the story of a couple who are engaged, marry, and have two children—all within five minutes of having first met. Li Jinhui’s music—influenced by his relationship with Buck



**Buck Clayton in Shanghai, circa 1935**



Clayton—was immensely popular, so much so that he was persecuted and died during the Cultural Revolution.

Strikingly similar to Li's "Express Train" is Duke Ellington's "Daybreak Express," which has a 1933 copyright date. Ellington never traveled to China; Li, never to the United States. Yet both cuts reflect the speeded-up pace of life that got started back in 1844, when the commercial introduction of the telegraph inaugurated the era in which information could move around the planet at the speed of light. As Prof. Jones puts it, "both composers were participating in a globalized musical idiom for which the speed of modern transport (trains and ocean-going vessels) and modern communications (gramophones, radio, and cinema) were a fundamental condition of possibility."

## *Jazz after Mao*

Since 1979, when the post-Mao Chinese leadership began in earnest to open up China to the rest of the world, jazz (starting with French horn player Willie Ruff's sojourn in Shanghai in the early 1980s) began to trickle back into China. Since then, a steady stream of touring jazz musicians from all over the world has flowed into China, primarily to perform in the major cities. This trend accelerated in the early 1990s with the founding of the Beijing Jazz Festival by German entrepreneur Udo Hoffman. Today, Shanghai itself hosts what is called a jazz festival, although it trends more toward pop and rock.

Rock music invaded the Chinese mainland in the 1980s. An interesting personal and musical relationship emerged between trumpeter/songwriter Cui Jian, the so-called father of rock in China, and tenor saxophonist Liu Yuan, the country's so-called father of jazz. In their early years, they played together. Cui Jian became immensely popular in China because he used rock lyrics as protest against the government. Liu Yuan has been less politically assertive; he is now part owner



**Zhang Xialou, saxophonist and professor of Jazz Performance at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, performs at the JZ Club, Shanghai.**

of one of Beijing's leading jazz clubs.

Today, a relatively small, but growing cadre of indigenous jazz musicians can be found in Shanghai and Beijing. The styles of jazz they play range from blues to swing, to bebop to contemporary. The pianist Kong Hong Wei, for example, plays virtually every jazz club in Beijing, including the East Shore Club, partly owned by Liu Yuan, and the CD Cafe. His pianistic dexterity recalls that of Oscar Peterson. A saxophonist—who goes by the

English name "Kenny"—with American expat trombonist Matt Roberts' AhQ Band, was born in Mongolia and is self-taught. Close your eyes and "Kenny" reminds you of Charlie Parker. In Shanghai, the major jazz venue is the JZ Club, founded by virtuoso bassist Ren Yuying. The city also boasts The Cotton Club, Wine Red, and the Peace Hotel, among others.

The airplane, radio, television, movies, CDs, and the Internet succeeded the steamship as technologies that influenced the growth of jazz in China. Even Internet2 is contributing to the jazz/technology landscape; in 2007 a multi-hour teleconferencing link between Shanghai University and the Manhattan School of Music (New York City) jazz program, led by MSM's Justin DiCioccio, offered coaching and counsel to jazz professors and students on the China side.

Jazz is inherently a form of aesthetic democracy. Without any prompting, the vast majority of indigenous jazz musicians I have interviewed in China have told me that they were drawn to the art form because it offered an opportunity for individual freedom of expression. In a country where this is a relatively new value, the appeal of jazz is understandable. Kabir Sehgal, in his 2008 book *Jazzocracy*, links jazz with democracy in two ways: "First, jazz is music of negotiation, conversation, reconciliation, and making. . . . The second reason . . . is the invitational spirit of jazz." Indeed, jazz is unlike most other musical styles because it invites artists not only to play with the group, but also to solo and to improvise with a group backing

*Continued on page 139*



Jazz In the Land of the Dragon, *continued from page 90* them up. This is the musician’s chance to make an individual statement. That opportunity is rare in classical genres, except perhaps in aleatoric music.

China’s inexorable economic expansion has also had a role in fostering jazz. Westerners traveling by plane to do business in China are often sophisticated travelers who bring with them an expectation of hearing “their” music—an echo of what happened a century and a half ago after the Opium Wars. Further, as China’s own middle class expands, more are listening to Western music and beginning to appreciate America’s unique contributions.

Like previous generations of jazz musicians in the U.S., most Chinese jazz artists have had no formal training in the jazz idiom. Most are either self-taught or started out being educated formally in classical music. But this, too, is beginning to change. An interesting case is the Beijing-based “cool” pianist Xia Jia, who studied at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester. If you listen to Xia’s music, you can hear not only the American influence, but also the multi-dimensionality and multi-culturalism characteristic of today’s Western jazz, as well as some forms of pop music. (Unfortunately, Xia is not commercially recorded, but samples of his playing can be found on the Internet at <http://english.cri.cn/4026/2007/05/26/269@231714.htm>.)

Today’s Chinese jazz musicians benefit from listening to recordings and to hearing the touring jazz artists who arrive by plane from all over the world. The

**Liu Yuan performing at his club the Dongan Club (aka East Shore Club) in the Dong Cheng District, Beijing China**



Internet, of course, is also a major influence. China has one of the fastest Internet growth rates on the planet; yet Internet penetration of China’s 1.3 billion population is still only about 36 percent, compared with 78 percent in North America.

Nonetheless, jazz occupies much the same position in Chinese culture as it does in the United States: in visibility, it ranks below Western classical, rock, and popular music, including Chinese folk music. As in the West, jazz appeals to musically educated and appreciative ears, and is accessible in live performance mainly to an economically capable populace.

It’s likely then, that as China’s middle class expands, jazz will have an opportunity to reach a larger public. The economic entrepreneurial opportunities supported and encouraged by the current government offer a new context for individualism—and thus for jazz. So don’t be surprised if one of these days you hear a Chinese jazz musician performing in an American venue—and offering a new wrinkle in jazz’s continuing evolution.



**Regular performers at the “Ice House” in the Dong Cheng District, Beijing China**

*Eugene Marlow, Ph.D., writes jazz and classical music for solo instruments, chamber groups, small jazz combos, and jazz big band. A former member of the BMI Jazz Composers Workshop, he is a founding member and current co-chair of the Milt Hinton Jazz Perspectives Concert series at Baruch College (CUNY) and founder/leader of The Heritage Ensemble, a quintet that performs and records original compositions and arrangements of Hebraic melodies in various jazz, Afro-Cuban, and Brazilian styles. He is in the throes of completing a book on jazz in China.*

