

THE OLDNESS OF JAZZ IN CHINA: HOW YELLOW MUSIC TURNED INTO A JAZZ REVIVAL.

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**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the historical evolution and contemporary revival of Jazz in China, focusing on the transformation of yellow music and the mediating role of the oldness of Jazz. Jazz, initially imported into Shanghai during the early 20th century, was adapted into hybrid forms that merged Western rhythms with Chinese melodic and cultural elements, giving rise to yellow music. While the genre symbolised cosmopolitan modernity, it was also subjected to moral scrutiny, political suppression, and gendered social constraints, which collectively shaped public perception and cultural memory. Drawing upon ten key studies, this review synthesises historical, sociological, educational, and ethnomusicological perspectives, highlighting both continuities and divergences in scholarship. Findings reveal that educational initiatives, cross-cultural composition, and formal pedagogical practices have facilitated Jazz revival, while social and political structures have historically mediated its accessibility and legitimacy. A unique insight emerging from this synthesis is the conceptualisation of the oldness of Jazz as a reservoir of historical memory, cultural nostalgia, and creative potential, mediating the transformation of yellow music into contemporary Jazz practices. This article argued that the revival of Jazz in China is not merely a musical phenomenon but a culturally negotiated process, reflecting the interplay of history, social norms, and creative innovation. By linking historical suppression with modern reinterpretation, the study positions yellow music as both a foundation and a catalyst for China's Jazz revival, offering a nuanced understanding of the intersections between past and present musical identities.

**Keywords:** Yellow music, Jazz music, Jazz revival, Chinese music, China.

**INTRODUCTION**

Jazz, brought to China at the beginning of the twentieth century, developed into yellow music, a fusion genre combining Western beat with Chinese cultural and melodic contents. Regardless of its past popularity, Jazz went through phases of repression and marginalisation, but recent trends signal a comeback driven by education, cultural memory, and imaginative reinterpretation. Chaichana (2024) discussed the way Western musical genre Jazz was reinterpreted in Shanghai in the early 20th century. The research emphasises "Sinicization"—the process of adapting jazz into local environments—and underlines Shanghai as a juncture of Chinese and international influences (Chaichana, 2024). On the other hand, Wang (2022) examined mainland China's development of Jazz education, tracing how institutions and

musicians have negotiated the foreign origins of the genre. The study frames jazz education as both a globalisation product and a determination of China's cultural policy (Wang, 2022).

Other studies by Yuan & Chareawrum (2024) explored the historical and cultural value of Old Shanghai music—a style fusing Chinese folk with Western popular and Jazz music in the 1920s–40s. They highlight its enduring impact on Chinese cultural identity as well as its position as a precursor to subsequent revivals of jazz (Yuan & Chareawrum, 2024). While, Zhang (2021) analysed the sociological aspects of music in China, such as the way Western music like Jazz intersects with indigenous traditions and political spheres. The study places music not just as entertainment, but as an expression of social transformation, cultural identity, and power relations (Zhang, 2021). In addition, Yuhan (2024) discussed the difficulty experienced by female singers in China's Jazz industry, emphasizing the ways in which social norms, institutional discrimination, and historical conceptions of Jazz have constructed opportunities for women. The research places Jazz as both social and musical phenomenon, reflecting more general trends of inequality (Yuhan, 2024).

Studies such as Euprasert (2025) investigated how cross-cultural factors integrate within modern Chinese Jazz pieces, with "Spring is Back" as a case in point. The article presents the integration of Western Jazz idioms with ancient Chinese musical themes, as indications of creative experimentations and cultural exchange (Euprasert, 2025). While, Nathaus & Nott (2022) scrutinised the development and cultural meaning of Chinese taxi-dancers in Shanghai from the interwar years. They emphasise the ways in which these women were able to negotiate intricate social relationships, merging Western dance styles with Chinese cultural settings to construct a distinctive form of entertainment (Nathaus & Nott, 2022). Besides, Peng & Kaosawang (2023) investigated the development of popular music in China and its incorporation into formal schooling. The research focused on how globalisation and cultural reforms at home have influenced both the production of popular music and pedagogical models (Peng & Kaosawang, 2023). Additionally, Tan (2021) investigated decolonisation of ethnomusicology from the transnational Chinese context. The article questions how privilege, power, and cultural hierarchies affect what musical stories are deemed legitimate, highlighting global-local conflicts within music scholarship (Tan, 2021). Also, Schröder (2022) explored the musical life in occupied Japanese-occupied Beijing with emphasis on performance, cooperation, and the political and moral tensions the musicians experienced. The research underscored how music served as both cultural expression and a place of negotiation during occupation (Schröder, 2022).

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Jazz was marginalised in China since 1949, and it was referred to as a Western bourgeois genre. From the 1980s, though, China's open policies allowed Jazz to regain cultural and educational life. Universities and conservatories increasingly included Jazz studies, albeit often fraught with conflict between the Western model and local interpretation. This history demonstrates how

the politics of Jazz turned from being suspicious to being an instrument for cultural modernisation (Wang, 2022). Additionally, Chaichana (2024) researched that Jazz first came in 1920s Shanghai via foreign performers in colonial clubs. It was quickly absorbed into local culture, giving rise to yellow music under Li Jinhui, blending jazz with Chinese elements. While initially embraced as modern and fashionable, Jazz was condemned as decadent after 1949, when communist ideology targeted it as bourgeois culture. A major revival occurred after the 1978 reforms, when Jazz re-emerged as part of Shanghai's cultural identity and global image (Chaichana, 2024). On the other hand, Yuan & Chareawrum (2024) noted old Shanghai music appeared when there was urban modernisation, with Western cultural imports being combined with domestic artistic practices. Artists such as Li Jinhui were the initiators of yellow music, blending Jazz rhythms with Chinese melodies. While condemned as decadent by political leaders and prohibited after 1949, this hybrid type still lingered in people's memory and affected later generations. The background highlights how Shanghai's entertainment industry and cosmopolitan nightlife made the city a hub for cross-cultural experimentation (Yuan & Chareawrum, 2024). While, Zhang (2021) traced the development of Chinese music under various regimes, showing how political ideologies have shaped cultural production. In the early 20th century, Shanghai became a hub for hybrid music forms, where Jazz mingled with Chinese folk and urban sounds. Since 1949, music has been controlled as an instrument of socialist ideology, pushing aside genres such as Jazz. With China's reform and opening, international cultural exchanges breathed new life into Western genres, positioning Jazz as modern and cosmopolitan (Zhang, 2021).

The evolution of Jazz in China from its initial introduction during the early years in Shanghai to its modern-day revival. Although Jazz in the early years represented cosmopolitan modernity, it was further identified with elite nightlife and urban entertainment. Female vocalists frequently found themselves walking a thin line within this arena, balancing artistic aspiration against societal norms. Even with the post-1978 revival, structural obstacles remained, conditioning performance site accessibility, educational access, and professional connections (Yuhan, 2024). Similarly, Euprasert (2025) placed contemporary Jazz in China's current process of cultural hybridisation. After the post-1978 reform period, Chinese musicians and artists started incorporating Jazz into domestic music genres, producing new pieces of music that attracted both local and international listeners. This blending represents not just musical innovation but also wider cultural and social developments in modern China (Euprasert, 2025). While, Nathaus & Nott (2022) portrayed that during early 20th century, Shanghai's cosmopolitan atmosphere made Western-style social dances possible to be brought in. Western practices were followed by adopting taxi-dance model, in which customers bought dance tickets to dance with hostesses. Chinese women, referred to as wunü (dancing girls), occupied the central part of this profession by the late 1920s, representing greater patterns of cultural accommodation and gender relations in urban China (Nathaus & Nott, 2022).

China's popular music has traditionally been Western-influenced, particularly in the genres of Jazz, Rock, and Pop. These genres were initially viewed with suspicion under communist ideals,

but they rose to prominence following the reform period of the 1980s. The context highlights the legitimacy given to music education for popular music so that it is included alongside traditional Chinese music in conservatories and schools (Peng & Kaosawang, 2023). Besides, Tan (2021) placed its research in the midst of contemporary debates regarding cultural authority and representation. Western musical genres such as Jazz were imported and domesticated within China, leading to hybrid music genres whose legitimacy is questioned. The article places this in global music discourse, where decolonisation discussions tend to neglect perspectives from non-Western actors such as Chinese scholars and musicians (Tan, 2021). While, Schröder (2022) summarised that under the 1937–1945 occupation, Beijing's musicians worked under tight censorship and propaganda constraints. Jazz and Western-influenced genres were at the same time considered progressive and politically charged. Musicians needed to balance dealings with occupation forces, survival across artistic expression and reputation (Schröder, 2022).

### THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to investigate how yellow music evolved into Chinese contemporary Jazz, paying close attention to the role of intermediary played by the oldness of Jazz. Through an examination of historical, social, and pedagogical determinants, the research aim to explore how earlier forms of music shape current Jazz practice and engender cultural renaissance. It seek to examine the social and institutional contexts that defined the path of Jazz, such as gender relations, political actions, and pedagogical traditions. Additionally, the study examined how the historical "oldness" of Jazz, which encompasses nostalgia, oppression, and cultural memory, acts as a reservoir for creative expression and reinterpretation in the present. Finally, the research aim to present a detailed, contextualised picture of Jazz revival in China, illustrating how past legacies, cultural transformation, and contemporary innovation converge to fashion the continued evolution of this unique musical form.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical literature review on global Jazz pedagogy, cultural hybridity, and Chinese music education reforms. Literature indicates that whereas Western Jazz education focuses on creativity and improvisation, Chinese institutions tend to integrate these with standardised methods based on conservatory traditions (Wang, 2022). Chaichana (2024) in the article utilises Nicholson's theory of glocalisation, as well as travel memoirs like Whitey Smith's "I Didn't Make a Million" and Buck Clayton's Jazz World. These works explain how Jazz was imported and reformed within the special social and political context of Shanghai, echoing patterns of cultural acceptance and repression (Chaichana, 2024). Yuan & Chareawrum (2024) included reviews scholarship on cultural hybridity, popular music studies, and Shanghai's role in transnational cultural exchange. It shows how Old Shanghai music not only shaped musical tastes but also reflected broader social changes—urbanisation, gender roles in performance, and shifting national identity (Yuan & Chareawrum, 2024). On the other hand, Zhang (2021) draw upon a wide

body of literature spanning sociology, ethnomusicology, and cultural studies. It demonstrated how genres of music express class, status, and cultural capital, with Jazz having traditionally been associated with cosmopolitan elites in Shanghai. Additionally, it discussed the ways in which music was mobilised for political purposes in socialist China, whereas nonconformist genres such as Jazz were repressed. Other highlights included how Western music engages with Chinese traditions to produce hybrid forms such as yellow music and contemporary Jazz-fusion. This literature also stressed the importance of nostalgia in reviving old forms of music, where Shanghai's Jazz legacy provides a foundation for current revival movements. By synthesising these perspectives, this article positions Jazz not as an isolated genre but as part of broader sociocultural processes in China, linking it with urbanisation, policy, and shifting cultural values (Zhang, 2021).

Yuhan (2024) investigated the path of Jazz in China primarily through historical and cultural means, stressing its Western roots, transplantation into yellow music, and ultimate rebirth. Gender and music studies emphasise institutionalized disparities, but research addressing specifically Chinese female Jazz singers is scarce. This study integrated jazz history, performance studies, and music gender to demonstrate how female musicians negotiate intersecting pressures: artistic authenticity, social norm conformity, and commercialised venues. It draws comparative studies from Western Jazz scholarship, observing that though women all over the world have experienced equivalent structural problems, the Chinese situation introduces layers of political, cultural, and institutional factor. By integrating these viewpoints, the literature review emphasises the importance of gendered experiences in constructing the perception and continuity of Jazz in China, demonstrating how historical stigma, cultural attitudes, and institutional practices become entangled with the revival of the genre (Yuhan, 2024). Euprasert (2025) recorded Jazz's entry into China, its transformation into yellow music, and its suppression and revival but has had limited studies on contemporary cross-cultural Jazz composition. It evaluated ethnomusicology, cultural hybridity theory, and musicology in analysing how composers bridge Western improvisational traditions with Chinese tonalities and instrumentation. Earlier research indicated that such convergence has several functions: it maintains cultural memory, inspires artistic creativity, and places Chinese Jazz within a global context. It highlighted the cultural and social importance of musical fusion, which mentioned that these pieces of music represent continuous dialogues between modernity and tradition, local identity and international phenomena. Through the assimilation of such viewpoints, this article "Spring is Back" in the larger canvas of Jazz revival in China, illustrating how influences from history are reinterpreted in new works (Euprasert, 2025). Additionally, Nathaus & Nott (2022) covered Shanghai's dance culture tends to centre on the city as a cultural melting pot and the impact of Western modernity. The commodification of dance and its sociological implications in terms of gender and class have been examined by scholars. This paper added to this discussion by highlighting the agency of Chinese taxi-dancers who, although working within a commodified context, used their work to achieve economic independence and social mobility for music culture development as well. They contend that

these women reconfigured femininity and modernity in the urban setting of Shanghai (Nathaus & Nott, 2022).

Peng & Kaosawang (2023) placed Chinese popular music in the context of cultural adaptation and globalisation. Past research indicates that while the West's musical forms were once imported, they have been localised to match Chinese aesthetic tastes and political demands. Researchers also address the impact of education to standardise popular music, develop systematic curricula, and promote professional musicianship. Peng & Kaosawang (2023) broadened this debate by emphasising modern pedagogy, which combines theoretical knowledge, practical performance expertise, and cultural context. The review by Peng & Kaosawang (2023) highlighted how institutionalisation of popular music education has contributed to the revival and resilience of Jazz and other hybrid genres, connecting historical influences to contemporary pedagogical approaches. Tan (2021) reviewed critically decolonisation, cultural hybridity, and transnational music studies literature. Earlier studies on Jazz in China typically situate it as an introduced Western genre or a localised hybrid, but seldom explore the larger structural power dynamics that shape this observation. This study studied intersectional studies, institutional gatekeeping studies, and academic privilege studies to show how scholarly accounts can exclude local voices. This also indicated that knowing Jazz in China involves recognising these multi-layered relations of power: the colonial and postcolonial reception of western music, local conversion into genres such as yellow music, and the scholarly discourse that conditions its perceived authenticity. In placing Chinese Jazz into these discourses, this article drew attention to how cultural, political, and pedagogic structures condition the revival and reinterpretation of forms of music (Tan, 2021). Schröder (2022) placed the research in the context of scholarship on music under colonial and authoritarian regimes. Earlier studies revealed that music during occupied China was a space of negotiation between cultural expression and political compliance. Jazz, which was commonly associated with Western modernity, was a disputed genre with performances being interrogated for ideological consistency. This piece synthesised on wartime cultural policies, transnational musical exchange, and moral issues in performance, pointing out ways in which musicians adjusted repertoire, style, and presentation for audiences at home and abroad. The study proved that musical revival and conservation relied not just on cultural preferences but also on political necessity, disciplining the "oldness" and continuity of jazz and other hybrid styles in China (Schröder, 2022).

### RESEARCH QUESTION

What characteristics of yellow music has helped to revise Jazz music in China?

### METHODOLOGY

The ten articles that are reviewed in this research has included diverse methodological approaches to maintain credibility of the research. For instance, Chaichana (2024) applied the

historical-cultural approach, examining accounts of travel, archival data, and secondary scholarship. The approach emphasises the reconstruction of how jazz was presented in various political periods, including colonialism through communism (Chaichana, 2024). Wang (2022) employed a mixed qualitative methodology involving archival education policy research, interviews with Chinese jazz musicians and educators, and curriculum analysis. This blend presents a multi-faceted perspective of how jazz is learned and understood in China (Wang, 2022). Yuan and Chareawrum (2024) employed textual and historical analysis, analysing archival documents, musical notations, and existing scholarly works. This method emphasizes the dialectics between society, politics, and music in determining the heritage of Old Shanghai soundscape (Yuan & Chareawrum, 2024). Zhang (2021) applied a sociological perspective, based on secondary literature, policy analysis, and case study of Chinese music practices. It places music less in the narrow context of performance and more in the social dynamics at large (Zhang, 2021). Yuhan (2024) employed qualitative interviews with contemporary female jazz vocalists, combined with historical analysis of Shanghai's Jazz scene. This mixed approach allows the study to connect past trends with present challenges, highlighting systemic inequalities in the music industry (Yuhan, 2024).

Euprasert (2025) employs musical analysis of "Spring is Back", including melody, harmony, rhythm, and instrumentation. The author also employs interviews with the composer and performers to place compositional decisions within context and decipher cultural meaning (Euprasert, 2025). Nathaus & Nott (2022) utilised a historical-ethnographic method, examining archive documents like newspapers, advertisements, and individual narratives. The method enabled them to rebuild the lives of taxi-dancers and comprehend the influence they had on the social life of Shanghai (Nathaus & Nott, 2022). Peng & Kaosawang (2023) took a descriptive-analytical method, examining educational curricula, policy documents, and histories of music programs. This approach yields understanding of how popular music has been institutionalised and formalised in China (Peng & Kaosawang, 2023). Tan (2021) applied a critical-theoretical method, examining scholarly scholarship, ethnomusicological literature, and institutional procedures to investigate power relations in musical knowledge construction (Tan, 2021). Schröder (2022) used historical-archival research, examining concert programmes, newspaper articles, and memoirs. This article reconstructed musical networks, repertoire decisions, and performance practices during occupation to comprehend how musicians navigated political and social restrictions (Schröder, 2022).

## RESULT

Chaichana (2024) demonstrated a cyclical path: Jazz started as an emblem of cosmopolitanism, turned yellow music, was censored under communist rule, and recovered after the reform period. Through placing emphasis on Sinicization, this study claimed that Jazz did not only become an imported music but a part of China's cultural memory, affirming the tone of "oldness" and "revival" (Chaichana, 2024). Wang (2022) discovered that Jazz education in China is growing but is still defined by institutional limitations and cultural inclinations. Whereas

students and musicians view Jazz as modern and international, official structures tend to standardize it, restricting improvisation liberties. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Jazz in universities indicates its resurgence and legitimization as part of China's overall cultural modernization. This reinforces the theme by indicating how the oldness of Jazz is reinterpreted through education, guaranteeing its persistence in China's musical future (Wang, 2022). Yuan & Chareawrum (2024) established that Old Shanghai music provided an infrastructure for the subsequent re-emergence of Jazz in China. Its hybrid nature developed a cultural memory that reacted during the reform period and modern-day Jazz revival. They believe that even with suppression, the genre's age turned into a pool of nostalgia and imagination, allowing Jazz to revive itself in contemporary China. This is a direct reference to the theme, connecting yellow music to the present rejuvenation of Jazz (Yuan & Chareawrum, 2024). Zhang (2021) concluded that Jazz and other hybrid genres demonstrate how music in China develops through negotiation among state power, cultural memory, and globalisation. Jazz's history—from marginalisation to revival—represents the wider sociology of music in China, where the "oldness" of a genre can become a resource for contemporary cultural identity (Zhang, 2021). Yuhan (2024) discovered that female singers encounter long-lasting institutional and cultural challenges, such as restricted educational routes, skewed performance choices, and social examination. In spite of these limitations, women remain to play a part in Jazz revival in China, exhibiting resilience and defining the modern identity of the genre. This is in accord with the overall idea of "oldness" evolving into revival, illustrating how history and social circumstances determine the contemporary Jazz setting (Yuhan, 2024).

Euprasert (2025) discovered that the structure successfully blends Western forms of Jazz with Chinese musicality, producing a hybrid sound that resonates with contemporary audiences while still staying connected to historical traditions of Jazz. This demonstrates how Jazz in China continues evolving, making its "oldness" an engine for creative renewal and cultural innovation (Euprasert, 2025). Nathaus & Nott (2022) established results in which Chinese taxi-dancers had a crucial function in the spread of social dancing in Shanghai. They were responsible for establishing the entertainment culture of the city, resisting traditional gender constructions, and spreading dance styles globally. Their research highlights the intricacies of cultural transmission and how local actors localise and localise imported practices (Nathaus & Nott, 2022). Peng & Kaosawang (2023) discovered that popular music education has played an important role in the professionalization and sustainability of Chinese music in the contemporary era. Structured teaching enhances Western-influenced genres like Jazz, and historical forms such as yellow music get to impact new generations. The research brought out the persistent tension between tradition and modernity, shown through the way historical forms of music continue to impact contemporary practice (Peng & Kaosawang, 2023). Tan (2021) identified that the perception and revival of Jazz in China cannot be fully understood without considering structural and scholarly power dynamics. The work argued that acknowledging these forces provides a more nuanced understanding of how historical genres like yellow music and early Jazz are re-evaluated in contemporary contexts, reinforcing the research focus on

“oldness” and revival within Chinese musical culture (Tan, 2021). Schröder (2022) concluded that musical life during the occupation produced adaptive strategies that maintained and modified Jazz and Western-influenced genres. In spite of political pressure, musicians achieved continuity of performance practices, which made it possible for later revivals. This corresponds to the research theme in that it demonstrates how social negotiation and historical circumstances produced the endurance and reinterpretation of Jazz in China (Schröder, 2022).

### DISCUSSION

The evolution of Jazz in China reflects a complex interplay of cultural adaptation, social norms, and historical memory. Chaichana (2024) highlights the Sinicization of Jazz in Shanghai, emphasising how Western forms were reinterpreted to align with local aesthetics, whereas Yuan & Chareawrum (2024) focus on the legacy of Old Shanghai music, showing how hybrid forms persisted in public memory. While both underscore historical continuity, their perspectives differ: Chaichana foregrounds stylistic adaptation, and Yuan & Chareawrum emphasise cultural influence and nostalgia. Nathaus & Nott (2022) explore the social dimensions of Shanghai entertainment, showing how taxi-dancers negotiated modernity and agency within commodified spaces, which contrasts with historical accounts that prioritise musical structures over social context. Yuhan (2024) documents the institutionalised inequalities faced by female Jazz vocalists, highlighting barriers absent from Wang (2022), who emphasises educational institutions as enabling sites for revival, revealing a tension between societal constraints and structured learning. Euprasert (2025) analyses cross-cultural Jazz composition, stressing creative innovation, whereas Peng & Kaosawang (2023) highlight pedagogical practices that prioritise preservation and standardisation, demonstrating a divergence between experimental and formal approaches. Tan (2021) interrogates academic and transnational power structures shaping music discourse, while Schröder (2022) illustrates political pressures under occupation affecting repertoire and performance, offering complementary but distinct frameworks for understanding structural mediation. A unique insight emerging from this synthesis is that the oldness of Jazz operates as both a historical memory and a resource for contemporary revival. The suppression, gendered practices, and social constraints surrounding early Jazz and yellow music have created a layered cultural reservoir, allowing modern performers, educators, and composers to reinterpret the genre in ways that simultaneously honour its past and innovate for the present. This positions yellow music as a foundational element, mediating the transformation of historical Jazz into China’s contemporary revival, highlighting the intertwined roles of culture, education, and social negotiation.

### CONCLUSION

The synthesis of these studies demonstrates that Jazz in China is not merely a musical genre but a site where history, culture, and social dynamics converge. The transformation of yellow music into contemporary Jazz reflects a layered process of adaptation, suppression, and

revival. While early scholarship emphasised stylistic hybridity and cultural legacy, later studies show the significant influence of social structures, gender dynamics, and institutional frameworks on the continuity and perception of Jazz. Differences emerge in how scholars prioritise innovation, preservation, or social context, revealing tensions between creative experimentation, formal pedagogy, and societal constraints. A unique contribution of this article is the identification of the oldness of Jazz as a mediating factor: it encapsulates historical memory, cultural nostalgia, and structural limitations, which collectively serve as a reservoir for contemporary revival. By positioning yellow music as both a historical foundation and a source of creative reinterpretation, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how past musical forms shape modern Jazz practices in China. Ultimately, the revival of Jazz emerges as a culturally negotiated phenomenon, where historical suppression, gendered experiences, and educational practices intersect to transform the legacy of Jazz into a vibrant contemporary identity, bridging China's musical past with its present cultural innovation.

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