

# THE SINICIZATION OF JAZZ: EXPLORING THE RISE AND FALL OF JAZZ CULTURES IN SHANGHAI FROM THE COLONIAL TO THE COMMUNIST ERAS

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## ABSTRACT

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Compared with the numerous historical analyses of the development of jazz in the United States, few such accounts retell the history of jazz in Asia. Addressing this gap, this paper investigates the jazz culture of Shanghai between 1920 and 1950, drawing on records of foreign jazz musicians who traveled to Shanghai to perform and the academic literature on the development of jazz in Shanghai, with a primary focus on the contemporary social practice of jazz in Shanghai. Jazz culture entered Shanghai as a result of Western colonialism, prompting an influx of foreign musicians. The travel journals of international jazz performers Whitey Smith and Buck Clayton provide valuable documentation of two musicians who had a significant impact on Shanghai's jazz culture. Another significant figure is Chinese musician Li Jinhui, a pioneer of "yellow music," a hybrid genre combining features of jazz and Chinese folk songs. This music came to be considered "decadent sounds" and was banned in 1949 when the Chinese communist regime came to power, a moment perceived as marking a decline in Shanghai's jazz culture. Yet with the introduction of the "Open Door Policy" in 1978, Shanghai witnessed a resurgence of jazz as restrictions on other cultures—particularly Western cultures—were eliminated. This paper demonstrates how Shanghai jazz developed from its early stages under the colonial economy to become a distinctive musical form that suited the tastes of the city's audiences before disappearing due to political upheaval throughout the country.

**Keywords:** Jazz studies; Jazz in China; Shanghai jazz; Sinicization of jazz; yellow music; colonialism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Jazz has no universal style, because wherever jazz culture has occurred, it is interpreted differently according to the local context (Nicholson, 2014, p. 105). Nicholson (2014) further notes that jazz was able to spread across the world as a result of globalization, which originated in the United States during the early 20th century. This process later developed into a form of cultural extension called "glocalization" as a result of other nations absorbing jazz culture from the United States and adapting it to fit their local cultural practices.

One such example is Scandinavian jazz, or Nordic Tone, which is a product of the application of jazz culture from the United States to local Scandinavian cultural practices. Manfred Eicher, founder of the

renowned ECM record label and influential proponent of jazz culture in Europe, attributes the differences between the Nordic Tone style and jazz in the United States to the solitude of jazz musicians who must endure the harsh Scandinavian winters in isolation. Ironically, for most of the year, their perceptions of blues, a musical culture with its origins among African Americans, were different from that of jazz musicians living in the United States (Cooke & Horn, 2002, p. 241). Jazz in Asian countries follows a similar pattern to that noted by Nicholson. For example, Japanese jazz, also referred to as "J Jazz," expresses the beliefs and ideologies of Japanese musicians.

Jazz was first introduced to Asian countries as a form of entertainment for the Europeans and Americans who lived there at the time of Western colonization. The hiring of Western jazz musicians to perform music contributed to the early development of jazz culture in a number of Asian cities that were also under the authority of Western governments, such as in the Philippines. Between 1898 and 1946, the Philippines was a colony of the United States, leading to an American influence on the music that was commonly performed in its major cities (Keppy, 2019, pp. 19–22). As a result, the Philippines became the first Asian nation to produce a large number of jazz musicians who later traveled to perform in other nations of the region. Luis Borromeo is a standout example of a Filipino jazz musician who traveled Asia performing jazz music and acquired the title "King of Jazz" (Marlow, 2018, p. 40).

Frederick J. Schenker (2022), an expert on jazz in Asian countries, described the development and early spread of jazz in Asia as a result of the practice of hiring foreign jazz musicians. The majority of these were Filipinos who traveled to perform in other nations, many of them former Western colonies. This is evident in the travel records of Burnet Hershey (1896–1971), a journalist who visited many Asian nations between 1920 and 1930. Jazz performances could be heard at the time in many Asian nations, including China, Japan, Singapore, India, and the East Indies (Indonesia), with most jazz bands being made up of foreign performers, primarily from the United States, Russia, and the Philippines.

Jazz culture in Shanghai between 1920 and 1950 was heavily influenced by Western colonialism in Asia, which led to the recruitment of foreign musicians to perform. In this paper, two travel records by foreign musicians, Whitey Smith's *I Didn't Make a Million* (2019) and the autobiographical *Buck Clayton's Jazz World* (Clayton, 1986), help paint a picture of the jazz scene in Shanghai at that time. Drawing on Nicholson's concept of cultural extension, the paper discusses how jazz was culturally adapted to appeal to Chinese audiences by exploring the development of Li Jinhui's work, a musical hybrid of American jazz and traditional Chinese music. This music would be given the disparaging label "yellow music" as the result of anti-Western ideology, which also led to a ban on the performance of such music during the 1950s, the early years of Communist Party rule in China.

## 2. THE SINICIZATION OF JAZZ (1920–1950)

To provide a comprehensive discussion of Shanghai's jazz music scene and its cultural development between 1920 and 1950, the author has divided the significant occurrences into four categories. These include 1. the phenomenon of jazz as labor in Shanghai, 2. the musical practice of Whitey Smith, known as old Shanghai jazz, 3. the rise of the Canidrome Ballroom made popular by Buck Clayton, and 4. the birth of the musical fusion of jazz and Chinese music called "yellow music" by Li Jinhui.

### 2.1 Jazz as labor in Shanghai

As a result of the Treaty of Nanking, which the Chinese government of the Qing dynasty signed in 1842 after defeat by the British Empire in the First Opium War, Western powers began to dominate China's politics, society, and economy. Port cities like Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai became popular with Western visitors, leading to rapid expansion in the Chinese economy. Many hotels and residences were constructed to accommodate foreign visitors, who traveled for government business and individual trade, particularly in the Shanghai International Settlement, a largely Western residential area. As shown in Figure 1, these hotels also served as entertainment venues, including theatres and dance halls, which frequently hired jazz bands to perform at social dance events.

Da Ren Zheng, a Chinese jazz double bass player, made a significant contribution to the development of jazz in Shanghai. In an interview, he described the conditions in these early days of Shanghai jazz:

In the city of Shanghai, there will be fifty to sixty places, entertainment establishments, most of which are part of hotels. These entertainment businesses usually hire a jazz band to perform at social dances for Western audiences. But nevertheless, in these bands are hardly any Chinese jazz musicians; in fact, most of them are foreigners. In addition, these jazz bands have five or six musicians for smaller dancing venues and ten to fifteen for larger venues, comparable to a big band. (Marlow, 2018, p. 39)

Da Ren Zheng's account underlines the way in which the early growth of jazz in Shanghai was dominated by mainly foreign musicians playing for audiences composed largely of Westerners. The majority of these contract musicians were American, Austrian, Gypsy, Jewish, Russian, and Filipino. Among these overseas performers, two of these foreign jazz musicians played particularly important roles in the early development of the jazz scene in Shanghai: Whitey Smith and Buck Clayton.

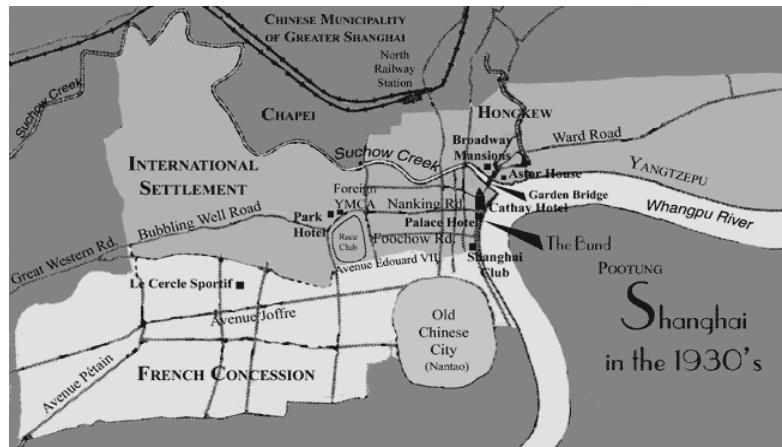


Figure 1: Shanghai's international settlement in the 1930s (Hackett & Kingsepp, 2012)

## 2.2 Whitey Smith—Old Shanghai jazz

Whitey Smith was an American drummer of Danish descent whose family immigrated from Europe to Oakland, California, in 1906. Smith started playing the piano with the support of his father before switching later to the drum set. He began his professional music career performing at several music venues in San Francisco and Oakland before deciding to relocate to Shanghai in 1922. In his memoir, Smith later gave two reasons for moving to China. First, foreign musicians who performed jazz in Shanghai were paid significantly more than they would have in the United States. Moreover, the 1920s were the Prohibition era, when the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages were largely banned by the United States government, adding to the uncertainty of making a living as a musician in the United States at the time (Marlow, 2018, p. 43).

Indeed, Smith's account makes the working conditions of foreign musicians in Shanghai appear much more desirable than those of jazz musicians in the United States. For example, Smith claimed that when his band first arrived in Shanghai, jazz aficionados and general audiences alike welcomed them with open arms, treating him and his band like celebrities. His band, typically consisting of at least six members, specialized in playing jazz in a style appropriate for social dances, such as the Charleston and foxtrot. Whitey Smith's band may have been the most popular foreign jazz ensemble in Shanghai at the time. At the height of his success, 400 people are said to have lined up outside the Sunday afternoon dance at the Majestic Hotel (Smith, 2019, p. 33). This led to high praise from Shanghai's jazz audiences and journalists, who dubbed him "The Man Who Taught China to Dance" (Field, 2017).

In order to attract Chinese audiences, Whitey Smith started writing jazz songs that merged the melodic aspect of jazz with the pentatonic scale, which has a similar sound to Chinese folk music. Additionally, "Night Time in Old Shanghai," which appeared on a 1928 Victor recording, was well-known among both Western and Chinese audiences in Shanghai (Smith, 2019, p. 32). Smith also makes specific reference to the jazz tunes that the ensemble typically played for both Chinese and Western audiences:

We calmed down the Charleston and brought out the melody in it. We played "Dardanella" and "The Missouri Waltz", "Stumbling All Around," "Somebody Loves Me," and "Who." We alternated with our Chinese adaptations and gradually got something of a dance beat into them. The Chinese liked it and clamored for more. Before long they began to dance. They liked "Singing in the Rain," "Parade of the Wooden Soldiers," and "The Doll Dance." Once in a while, we would really let go with "the St. Louis Blues" and you could feel the younger Chinese begin to catch fire with it (Smith, 2019, p. 34).

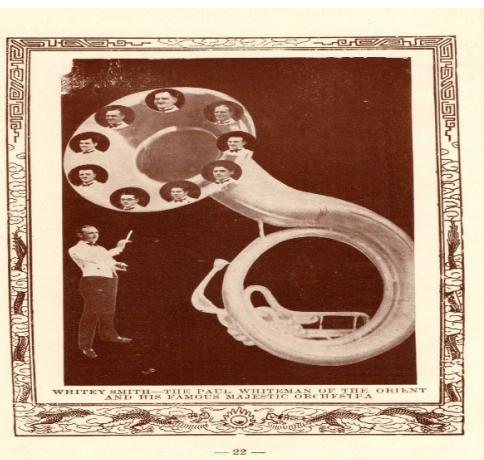
In his travel account, however, Whitey Smith suggests that he was not entirely satisfied by this musical hybridization process. He later described the process of presenting jazz as heavily influenced by Chinese music, describing such compositions as "monotonous torture" (Li, 2018, p. 104). Smith explicitly explains:

Jimmy Elder was our piano player and a good one. Poor Jimmy. He tried hard to work the piano in somehow, but pianos just don't fit Chinese music. Nine trained fingers became useless. Only one was needed. It drove Jimmy nuts (Smith, 2019, p. 32).

Nevertheless, the music of Whitey Smith, which draws inspiration from Chinese music, is still considered as the forerunner of "Old Shanghai jazz."

Additionally, Whitey Smith's European-American ethnic background inevitably affected his social status in Shanghai, where the colonial hierarchy was evident. The majority of the audience for Whitey Smith's band in Shanghai was composed of upper-class Westerners or the Chinese elite who had also received a Western education. For instance, according to Li (2018), Smith had a close relationship with General William, a graduate of Notre Dame and a regular patron of the Majestic Hotel. Not only did this make Smith aware of the movements of China's politics during that time, but it provided his band with the opportunity to meet other members of the upper class while they were living in Shanghai. Notably, Whitey Smith and his band had the privilege of playing music at the wedding of Chiang Kai-shek, who had served as the leader of the Republic of China and the Generalissimo from 1928 to 1975, providing further evidence of the privileged lifestyle that Smith's band enjoyed while on tour in Shanghai.

As a result, Whitey Smith decided to live in Shanghai to perform jazz for both upper-class Westerners and Chinese elites from 1922 to 1937. Numerous music venues where Smith's band had performed also evolved into historical sites that are crucial for understanding how jazz in Shanghai flourished. These important locations include the Edgewater Mansion Hotel, the Old and New Carlton Café, the Majestic Hotel (see Figure 2), the Paramount Night Club, and the Cinderella Club. Whitey Smith later made the decision to cease his sojourn in Shanghai and left the country in 1937 as a result of the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. As recounted by Marlow (2018), Smith then was captured by the Japanese and kept as a prisoner of war in the city of Los Baños, Philippines, until the Second World War ended in 1945. While he would resume working as a performer and a music entrepreneur, he never achieved the level of popularity he had achieved in Shanghai. In 1972, he finally passed away in the Philippines.



**Figure 2:** Promotional image of Whitey Smith's band labeled "Whitey Smith—The Paul Whiteman of the Orient and His Famous Majestic Orchestra" (Field, 2017)

### 2.3 Buck Clayton—The rise of the Canidrome Ballroom

Buck Clayton is another American jazz musician who traveled to Asia and made a significant contribution to the growth of jazz in Shanghai. Clayton began his musical career at the age of seventeen in Kansas City before relocating to Los Angeles in 1933 and was hired to perform in Shanghai the following year. Buck Clayton's band for this overseas journey was made up of African-American jazz musicians and called "The Harlem Gentlemen" (see Figure 3). The well-known artists in this 12-piece band included trumpeter Teddy Buckner, trombonist Duke Upshaw, drummer Baby Lewis, and violinist Joe McCutchin (Clayton, 1986, pp. 66–69).

Having arrived in Shanghai, Clayton and his band had their first performance at the Canidrome Ballroom, where Clayton spoke of the magnificence of the venue. In his travel journal *Buck Clayton's Jazz World*, he noted with admiration that "the dance floor alone may be greater than the total building area of all dance venues in the United States" (Clayton, 1986, p. 70). In addition, while performing at the Canidrome Ballroom, Clayton had the opportunity to meet Teddy Weatherford (1903–1945), an African-American jazz pianist who made an important contribution to jazz music in Asia. While traveling in Asia, Teddy Weatherford traveled as a jazz soloist to cities such as Bombay, India, Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Batavia (now Jakarta), Indonesia.

Additionally, Weatherford's performances introduced the stride jazz piano style of Fats Waller—a well-known American pianist and composer from the ragtime era—to other Asian nations.

Later, Clayton emphasized the wide spectrum of nationalities that he experienced in Shanghai:

We went farther downtown in the business district and found many foreigners there doing business. Companies from all over the world did business in Shanghai and you could see all kinds of nationalities—Indians, French, Russian, English, Americans, and people from all comers of the world. We lived in the international settlement where most people were English, French, Russian, and American (Clayton, 1986, p. 68).

Buck Clayton also often mentions the foreign jazz musicians who came to play music in Shanghai at that time. These foreign musicians were Filipinos, Russians, or, in the case of East Indian bands, Indians from the British colony. This provides further evidence of the influence of colonialism on the early Shanghai jazz scene.

However, the Harlem Gentlemen's contract to perform at the Canidrome Ballroom was terminated due to the racism still prevalent at the time. Objections were raised by Clayton's primarily white audience because of the band's all-African-American lineup. When performing at the Canidrome Ballroom, Clayton later described the verbal and physical abuse he endured:

"Turn your eyes the other way, you black son of a bitch." I was so surprised. The guy had said it in such a loud voice, such language in such an elegant club like this, and in front of so many respectable people... Then, I decided to go over to this cat's table and ask him what was wrong or ask him to go outdoors. Before I could get to his table he took a Sunday punch on me and hit me right between the eyes. I didn't know that this guy had been a marine prizefighter or else I would have taken a little more precaution in going over to his table. I didn't expect a Sunday punch (Clayton, 1986, p. 75).

After being terminated from their contract with the Canidrome Ballroom, some of the musicians from the Buck Clayton band decided to return to the United States. Buck Clayton himself decided to continue performing in Shanghai until the Japanese invasion of China, returning to the United States in 1936 (Wilson, 1991). Racism meant that Buck Clayton did not achieve the same high status in the colonial hierarchy of Shanghai as Whitey Smith's band. Soon after the contract at the Canidrome Ballroom was terminated, Buck Clayton was hired to perform jazz at Ladow's Casanova, a dance venue popular among Westerners such as sailors, soldiers, or laborers, as well as the middle-class Chinese who had received a Western education. The racial prejudice still prevalent in the United States at the time was also very evident in Shanghai's jazz culture.

However, echoing Whitey Smith's strategy for attracting Chinese audiences, Buck Clayton also chose to write jazz dance music with pentatonic melodies reminiscent of Chinese folk music. In addition, between 1934 and 1936, Clayton had the opportunity to work with Li Jinhui (1891–1968), who would subsequently be known as "the father of popular music in China." Unlike Whitey Smith, Clayton generally found this music interesting, noting similarities between Chinese music and his own American music:

We found that on this new job. We were obliged to play Chinese music so we began to learn how. I sketched out some of the most popular Chinese songs at that time and after a few rehearsals we were playing it like we had been doing it for a long time. It wasn't too much different from our music except the Chinese have a different scale tone, but as it could be written in American scale it could be played (Jones, 2001, pp. 5–6).

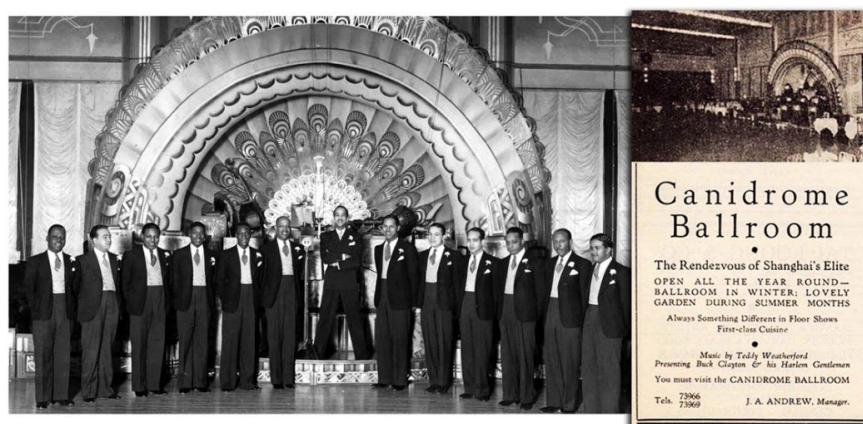


Figure 3: Buck Clayton's band "The Harlem Gentlemen" (Radlauer, 2021)

## 2.4 Li Jinhui—The birth of “yellow music”

Chinese composer and musician Li Jinhui was born in Xiangtan, Hunan province, in 1891 (Ding, 2015). Growing up in a wealthy family, Li had the chance to pursue a Western education. In 1921, he started to make a living as a musician by composing songs for children, some of which were later recorded and released. Li Jinhui went on to play an important role in the development of Chinese theatrical performances, founding the Chinese Song and Dance Institute, a well-known theatrical and music institute, in 1927. He also formed a band and a theatre troupe that toured both within and outside of China to do musical performances, primarily in countries still under the influence of Western nations, such as Singapore, Malaysia, the East Indies, and Indonesia (Chen, 2005, p. 110).

However, due to financial difficulties and the increasing influence of theatrical performances from the United States, Li Jinhui modified his troupe’s performances to more closely conform to the Hollywood-Broadway style and keep up with global trends. In this new style, the lyrics were frequently drawn from love poems drawn from Western literature or Chinese poetry from the Tang Dynasty. Additionally, he used a pentatonic scale similar to that used in Chinese folk music when composing melodies for the majority of his songs. These were usually sung by a female singer with a small, high-pitched voice similar to the style of traditional Chinese Opera. In terms of harmony and rhythm, however, Li Jinhui’s music is most heavily influenced by jazz, as evidenced by his use of syncopated rhythm and harmonies that sound similar to the Tin Pan Alley music from the same era. In addition, Li had the opportunity to meet Clayton in the 1930s, and it was Clayton who helped Li arrange his musical scores with American jazz rhythms and harmonies (Radlauer, 2021).

This fusion of jazz and Chinese music brought commercial success to many of Li Jinhui’s works. His music also gained popularity among wealthy Chinese and foreigners who lived in China, both in Shanghai and other cities. Additionally, many of the talented singers who received their training at Li’s musical institutions went on to become a number of the stars that dominated Shanghai’s music scene from the 1930s to the 1940s. Many of Li Jinhui’s compositions were also recorded by well-known record companies of the time, such as Pathe-EMI or Great China Records, and included well-known songs such as “Drizzle” (1927) and “Express Train” (1928). These musical fusions were also seen on well-known dance floors and in popular entertainment establishments, earning Li Jinhui the title of “father of Chinese popular music.” In addition, this musical hybridization gave rise to distinctive musical styles of Chinese jazz that differed from the American model.

However, later in the era of the Republic of China, the nation was repeatedly invaded by the Japanese Empire, suffering national humiliation by ceding territory as well as economic and political power to Western nations. This led to an expansion of nationalism and communism among many Chinese people, the majority of whom were excluded from the colonial economic system. These two political beliefs had a direct effect on the reception of Western culture in China, leading to prejudice against non-Chinese cultural groups. For this reason, Li Jinhui’s music, which combined Chinese and jazz music, was immediately targeted by nationalist groups. Different genres of music were labeled in accordance with the new hierarchical cultural classification. One of these to which Li Jinhui’s compositions unquestionably belong was termed *mimi zhi yin*, Chinese for “decadent sounds,” and was categorized as a morally backward musical genre. “Yellow music” and *shidaiqu* were two other terms used to denigrate Li Jinhui’s musical fusions.

Additionally, Chinese communists harshly criticized Li Jinhui’s “yellow music,” claiming that it solely benefited China’s aristocracy and capitalists rather than the working class, who suffered from the results of socioeconomic inequality and Western imperialism. Even Clayton, who was present when the social disparity in Shanghai arose, says that “You were not allowed in the Canidrome unless you had some kind of stature. You had to be either rich or be a dignitary of some kind. Poor people couldn’t even look in the Canidrome” (1986, p. 74).

As a result, the Chinese population continued to have a negative perception of jazz, viewing it as an extravagant and corrupt culture imported by cruel foreign invaders. Furthermore, both nationalists and communists accused the sing-song girls (see Figure 4), a group of vocalists who performed Li Jinhui’s music, of sexual impropriety, the word “yellow” in these musical genres denoting pornography. For example, two of Li Jinhui’s songs, “Express Train” and “Peach Blossom River,” expressed temptation-driven love that did not adhere to China’s traditional morals and cultural context. This led to accusations that Li Jinhui’s music was both politically ideological and morally degenerate.

Eventually, Li Jinhui’s music, with its combination of jazz and traditional Chinese music, would be strictly forbidden by the Chinese Communist Party, which took power in 1949. This also marked a downturn in the fortunes of jazz in Shanghai. Unlike Smith and Clayton, who were able to leave the country, Li Jinhui remained in China until his death by torture in 1967, the era of China’s Cultural Revolution (Cheng & Athanasopoulos, 2015, pp. 41–42). Despite ongoing controversy surrounding the political resonances of Li Jinhui’s style, his music eventually returned to popularity in the 1960s among the overseas Chinese community,

who may have held pro-democracy, pro-Western views. The Chinese in Hong Kong refer to his works as “songs of the times,” while in the Republic of China (Taiwan), they are called “Mandarin Chinese old songs” (Chen, 2005, p. 114).



**Figure 4:** The bright moon song and dance troupe (sing-song girls) founded by Li Jinhei (Counterguy, 2019)

After the introduction in 1978 of China's economic reform program, known as the “Open Door Policy”, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), China's government loosened its grip on popular culture. In addition, this policy changed China's growth strategy from the Maoist focus on self-sufficiency to one of involvement in the global market, which led to rapid growth in China's foreign commerce. Culminating in a substantial agreement signed by Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and US President Jimmy Carter in 1979, the policy eventually resulted in the normalization of relations between China and the United States (See Figure 5). As a result, jazz music, with its African-American roots, and the hybrid works of Li Jinhui, once disparaged as “yellow music,” started to return to Shanghai.



**Figure 5:** Jimmy Carter and Deng Xiaoping signed the significant diplomatic agreement in 1979 (China Mike, 2020)

### 3. CONCLUSION

Western colonialism in Asia, where jazz musicians would travel to provide entertainment primarily for Westerners and the Chinese upper class and bourgeoisie, was the driving force behind the development of jazz in Shanghai from the 1920s to the 1950s. Jazz performances at that time were held in dance halls or ballrooms in hotels that were constructed to assist the expansion of Shanghai's colonial economy. However, to appeal to Chinese listeners, prominent musicians, including Whitey Smith, Buck Clayton, and Li Jinhui, created hybrid musical works that fused jazz and Chinese folk music. This led to the jazz cultures in Shanghai developing their own distinctive musical genres that set them apart from jazz in the United States.

Anti-colonial and anti-Western ideas, however, gave rise to many divergent viewpoints on Chinese politics throughout the 1930s. Consequently, some declared the musical fusion of jazz and Chinese music to be morally degenerate, leading to the total ban on such music at the start of the Chinese Communist Party's reign in 1949. Consequently, a large number of foreign musicians left the country, while several local jazz musicians fled to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the West. However, following the implementation of the "Open Door Policy" in 1978, jazz began to reappear in Shanghai. The political climate has had a clear impact on how jazz is performed in China. The history of jazz in Shanghai presents further confirmation of the global diversity of the social practices of jazz. From its early development under the colonial economy, Shanghai jazz evolved into a distinct musical style to suit the tastes of the city's audiences before diminishing due to national political unrest.

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