

**Andrew F. Jones. *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001. xi, 213 pp.**

*Reviewed by Dale Wilson*

*Mimi zhi yin*, meaning literally “decadent sounds,” is a classical Chinese expression dating to the Han dynasty that is used to denote music that is both lewd and harmful. In the ancient Chinese context, sound was viewed as a potential register of the moral integrity of the state, as well as a powerful tool to influence political stability and control. A reference to *mimi zhi yin* not only signified portentous or threatening sounds, but also served as a tacit reminder that sound is a power that may be harnessed for utilitarian ends.

In Republican China,<sup>1</sup> a China humiliated by colonization and oppressed by Japanese military aggression, highly charged political discourse about music was rife with references to *mimi zhi yin*. A frequent object of such labeling, and the center of vitriolic attacks from both the political left and right, was *shidai qu*, or “modern song,” a Mandarin vocal genre ubiquitous in dance halls and on the airwaves. Dismissed across the political spectrum as “yellow music” (*huangsi yinyue*), meaning pornographic music, *shidai qu* became the embodiment of *mimi zhi yin*, with all of its culturally embedded connotations. In his book *Yellow Music*, Andrew Jones details the history of *shidai qu* in Republican-era Shanghai and the media culture through which it was disseminated. Emerging from what is at once a musical, historical, and cultural discussion of China’s Jazz Age, *Yellow Music* is an elucidation of a musical genre that was simultaneously maligned and appropriated as part of a vision of national rebirth.

Jones describes *shidai qu* as “a hybrid genre of American jazz, Hollywood film music, and Chinese folk song” (6). The author places a discussion of *shidai qu*, as well as other Republican-era musical genres, in the context of colonialism, imperialist encroachment of China, national resistance, and the role of music in Communist and Nationalist nation-building agendas. Much of this discussion revolves around foreign-owned media industries in which Nationalist and Communist artists and producers constantly vied for dominance. In *Yellow Music*, Jones situates *shidai qu* next to a form of leftwing mass music, known as *qunzhong yinyue*, created specifically to contend with *shidai qu* in 1930s Shanghai’s media marketplace. *Qunzhong yinyue*, referred to by Jones as yellow music’s “ideological other” (8), was another hybrid musical genre, fused from elements of Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley music, Soviet choral music, and Chinese folk songs. In

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leftist films, composers and film directors utilized both *shidai qu* and *qunzhong yinyue*, performed by young starlets cast in roles of sing-song girls,<sup>2</sup> to metaphorically represent a socialist vision of China's redemption. In such instances, *shidai qu* became musical portrayals of ideological corruption and moral degeneracy, and *qunzhong yinyue* their morally and ideologically superior alternatives.

Jones's study is realized, to a large extent, through the careful dissection of Republican-era political discourses about music. In the wake of the Japanese military annexation of Manchuria in 1931, intellectual discussions about music and music making took on a heightened political tone and significance. Arguments about appropriate means of cultural expression through music often addressed urgent issues of the day, such as modernity, gender, class, and a politics of national salvation. Frequently, both rightist and leftist musical discourses were framed around condemnation of *shidai qu*, or "yellow music." Interestingly, as Jones reveals, *shidai qu* originated amongst historical entwinements with the very nation-building agendas that came to censure it.

While examining the history of yellow music, its social significance, and the cinema cultures of which it was a part, Jones considers its development within the transnational media corporations through which it was circulated. Jones's central argument is that Chinese popular music in the 1930s must be understood as a "musical, technological, financial, linguistic, and racial transaction conducted within the boundaries of the complex colonial hierarchies peculiar to that time and place" (7). The result of this multifaceted perspective is a rigorous and unprecedented transnational examination of Chinese popular music and modern Chinese history in the context of global media structures and colonial modernity.

The urban media culture of Republican-era Shanghai thus forms the backdrop for a discussion of *shidai qu* as well as the fetishized sing-song girls who sang them. The cinematic portrayals of sing-song girls and their lives formed a contested space for the projection of various ideologies. Jones argues effectively that the fetishized star appeal of sing-song girls presented in film was both exploited and mobilized as part of the same political agendas. The discussion is complicated further as the genre of *shidai qu* is shown to have been spawned by the May 4th movement, a nation-building project constructed around Chinese literary reforms.<sup>3</sup>

While unraveling webs of discourse surrounding *shidai qu*, Jones intentionally complicates an understanding of left and right, center and periphery, in Republican-era political and cultural thought. The examination affords multiple points of entry, and in it Jones finds a vehicle for straddling a number of academic domains. More importantly, however, via a discussion of the transnational record companies through which *shidai qu* were

propagated, Jones issues some compelling challenges to prevailing assumptions about transnationalism and globalization.

The story is set in pre-World War II Shanghai, a city once dubbed the "Paris of the East," and, according to Jones, a city that outrivaled Paris in its appreciation of jazz. The book's setting (between the wars Shanghai) and the subject matter (ballroom music and sing-song girls) is of timely relevance in the social sciences and humanities. *Yellow Music* is a more finely-tuned exploration of material introduced in recent volumes such as *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-43* (Zhang 1999), and earlier in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas* (Lu 1997). The appearance of these scholarly works has followed a latter-day nostalgia for things "old Shanghai" in East Asian popular culture. Chinese cities such as Hong Kong and Shanghai have, in recent years, witnessed a revisitation of Republican Shanghai themes in their nightclubs and restaurants. In her essay "Teahouse, Shadowplay, Bricolage: *Laborer's Love* and the Question of Early Chinese Cinema," Zhen Zhang notes, for instance, that during the late 1990s a number of unprofitable Shanghai cinemas were transformed into luxurious nightclubs or "teahouses" and given names reminiscent of old Shanghai (Zhang 1999:49). In Hong Kong, identification with 1920s and '30s Shanghai has found voice since at least the early 1980s in popular TV serials such as *Shanghai Tan*, and more recently in a cinematic release bearing the same title. This vogue, which is mirrored in contemporary mainland Chinese TV serials, was given a transnational cinematic stamp in the mid-1990s by leading Chinese directors Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, with their foreign-budgeted films, *Shanghai Triad* and *Temptress Moon*, respectively. More recently, in 2000, popular Hong Kong recording artist Roman Tam recorded *Shanghai New York*, a CD/DVD project devoted to *shidai qu*. Tam's CD, recorded in New York City with an American big band, features songs made famous by the "golden voice" of *shidai qu*, Zhou Xuan, and was conceived to evoke a musical image of Shanghai's Jazz Age.

The Shanghai of the 1920s and '30s was a thriving, multiply colonized treaty port carved from a land in abject poverty. It was a place where many of China's urban elite and bourgeoisie enjoyed quotidian lifestyles of Western opulence, while their own people endured systematic oppression at the hands of foreigners. In the interstices of this complex and highly stratified society emerged the sounds and images disseminated by a foreign-owned and dominated media industry—an industry that, as Jones shows, ultimately provided the very means of articulating nationalist political ideals.

The book opens with the arrival of African American jazz trumpeter Buck Clayton in Shanghai in 1935. Clayton, who would later join the ac-

claimed Count Basie orchestra, sought work in Shanghai's dancehalls—venues peopled at the time by white Russians, Filipinos, Japanese, and North American musicians. A description of Clayton's sojourn in Shanghai does more than offer a lens on the cosmopolitan social milieu in which the book is situated; it also does much to set the work on its intellectual trajectory. Clayton's duties in Shanghai dancehalls required him to have familiarity with *shidai qu* repertoire. His comments about the genre are used as a register of *shidai qu*'s accessibility to Western ears and its relatedness to American and African American musical forms. More important however, Clayton's presence in Shanghai highlights the city's widespread demand for Western jazz and dancehall music, resulting from a transnational traffic and exchange of recorded music.

One is reminded early on that the gramophone industry, as well as the film industry to which it is closely linked, were and have remained essentially transnational since their inceptions. Much of Jones's work centers on the activities of the French-owned recording conglomerate, Pathé Asia, a corporate ancestor of EMI. Pathé Asia was the foremost marketer of Mandarin pop songs (*shidai qu*) in China at the time as well as the principal organ for distributing Chinese-language popular culture abroad. Today EMI, its corporate heir, is a primary holder of copyrights for *shidai qu*. Studying the activities of some of Pathé Asia's key composers and staff musicians provides an account of how the politics of left and right vied for dominance in Shanghai's recording and film industries. At the same time, Pathé Asia's undertakings in Republican Shanghai offer an organic global perspective on the cultural and political life of the city. As such, it is a unique and previously unexplored window on China's engagement with colonial modernity.

While current reissues of immediate postwar "modern songs" are abundant, recordings from the period prior to Japan's all-scale invasion in 1937 are largely unavailable. A scarcity of prewar sound recordings on the one hand, coupled with a lack of musicological expertise on the other, offered Jones an incentive to pursue his study of *shidai qu* via "the discursive and social formations through which it was produced, understood, and deployed as agent of cultural struggle and ideological contention" (15). Jones's book is the result of extensive fieldwork and archival research in three major Chinese cities.

Lack of musicological emphasis does not detract from Jones's larger themes. By studying the mediation of the genre through radio, cinema, and print, the central issues of the book emerge with great clarity. Even some musical descriptions in layman's terms are effective. When the author describes Leftist anthems as Soviet-style mass music, there is a strong impression of the flavor and substance of the music—an impression that is

sustained when actually listening to the pieces to which he refers. There are times, however, when a more musically informed discussion could have been useful. This is particularly true of Jones's characterization of *shidai qu* and their relationships with other musical genres. *Shidai qu* are referred to in turn as "sinified jazz," "a combination of big band jazz and Chinese folk music," and "jazzy harmonies with pentatonic harmonies." Jazz is a word that is used throughout the book without a clear definition of its meaning being offered. For many, jazz signifies certain kinds of African American improvisatory musics. For others, it refers to many genres of African American-influenced dance music and songs popular during America's Jazz Age in the 1920s. Clearer relationships between terminology, sound materials, and genres could have elucidated assertions made about *shidai qu* and suggested connections with other musics—especially African American musics.

This is important, as the author draws some compelling links between notions of "yellowness" and notions of "blackness." Jones suggests that the objection of Chinese critics to the "yellowness" (i.e., pornographic quality) of *shidai qu* was more a problem with its "Chineseness," and "perhaps its Blackness as well" (102). It is a color-coded argument made by Jones, one claiming that there existed in Shanghai a conscious association between the idea of "black" (African American) and the idea of "yellow" (pornographic) that unconsciously linked them both with "Chinese." A dismissal of *shidai qu* was thus a relegation of things "black" and "yellow" (in its double sense) to the "lowest level of an evolutionary hierarchy dominated by European cultural forms." This is a valid point given that, as Jones states, denigrating discourse about jazz in the Republican era was often racialized.

Furnishing a clearer understanding of words such as "jazz" and "jazzy" would have strengthened what is a very compelling argument. Problems occur only when trying to understand the nature of the hybridity these terms imply, whose perceptions such characterizations represent, and their relationship to the larger argument. On the one hand, describing *shidai qu* as "pentatonic melodies with jazzy harmonies" belies the singularity of the *shidai qu* genre. On the other hand, locating a relationship between yellow music and jazz (and by extension, African Americanness) in the sound materials, Jones misplaces an understanding of their inherent "blackness" as well as inherent "yellowness." In discussing one of the principal composers of *shidai qu*, Jones refers to Li Jinhui's "appropriation of an African American musical form" (7). When listening to extant recordings of well-known *shidai qu*, such as Zhou Xuan's *Ye Shanghai* ("Shanghai Nights") and *Aishen de Jian* ("Cupid's Arrow"), there is a recognizable affinity with American popular musics in their instrumentations. However, one is struck by an absence of both swing and improvisation, two common

defining terms of “jazz.” Also, harmonically speaking, there is little of the chromaticism that characterizes Swing Era American/African American music. This does not mean that people of the day did not consider this music “jazz” or that there was no conscious connection made between these songs and African American musics. It simply would have helped to have a clearer idea of the nature of the transaction Jones describes as “an appropriation of an African American musical form.”

A particularly compelling component of *Yellow Music* is its detailing of Chinese activist infiltration of foreign-owned recording firms, such as Pathé Asia. Through it, the author lends understanding to the role of music in national mobilization against Japanese militarism and Euro-American colonial domination in the years preceding World War II. Jones’s interpretive framework is that of music as a technology of power. Needless to say, the idea of the political and social instrumentality of music is not peculiar to the Chinese. In fact, Jones’s emphasis is on music as a technology of power in the hands of Western regimes encroaching into China, and how China’s nation builders appropriated those technologies. While dissecting and complicating leftist and rightist rhetoric about music, Jones occasionally links fundamental ideological overlaps to previous Chinese modes of discourse. Perhaps in a wish to eschew any neo-Confucian interpretive model, most of these correlations are mentioned only in passing. However, one must acknowledge that “music as power” is a very old interpretive field in Chinese history. While Jones avoids truisms associated with Confucian analytical frameworks, he downplays analogies between the discursive formations he highlights and previous, distinctively Chinese modes of thinking about music. Are not the key links between leftist and rightist rhetoric about music in the Republican era cultural ones? Also, are not notions of music as a technology of power and as an index of moral decline far more culturally embedded than Jones implies here?

It would have been helpful for readers to have an historical understanding of relationships between sound and power structures in Chinese classical thought, and at the same time, an appreciation of how early-twentieth-century thinkers were still very much immersed in the classics. An opportunity to depict such relationships occurs on page 29, when Jones draws historical distinctions between common music (*suyue*) and refined music (*yayue*). Jones points out relationships between *yayue* and imperial rituals of state power. State ritual musics were predicated on a theory—the *bayin* instrument classification system—for harnessing natural sounds as a means of influencing political stability and control. Such ancient cosmological theories found their way into Confucian and neo-Confucian thought, and were transferred to ideologies surrounding the *qin*. Jones indicates the role of the *qin* in the intellectual life of the literati, but he does

not draw direct connections between *qin* ideology and the cosmological theories in which it was embedded.

Chinese political leaders, throughout the ages, have depended on classical expressions to capture the popular imagination. This would have been especially true during the 1920s and '30s, when many thinkers were products of early immersion in the classics. Mao Zedong's oral skills and literary prowess are often attributed to his being, at heart, a classicist. An abundance of classical references to music concern *qin* and *bayin* ideologies. These ideologies were undergirded by deeply-rooted notions of music as a technology of power and control. On the one hand, classical references to music were often about ancient musics that had little relevance to the daily lives of modern masses. On the other hand, the fact that they referred to "historical artifacts" (29), absent from everyday soundscapes, meant that their ideals of power and moral authority could be projected easily onto contemporary sound worlds. The classics imparted on the imaginations of educated people the very concept of healthy music vs. unhealthy music, music that is spiritually wholesome vs. music that is fundamentally corrupting. The fact that notions of *mimi zhi yin*, with all of its implications, found resonance in Republican-era political discourse may tell us less about menacing sounds than the degree to which intellectuals of the day were immersed in classical thought. Jones clearly delineates culturally embedded associations between moral degeneracy, music-making, and prostitution. In situating his discussion of music as a technology of power, however, some additional attention could have been given to the historical roots of such discursive frameworks.

Among *Yellow Music's* many merits is its contribution to contemporary discourses on transnationalism and globalization. As the author shows, early-twentieth-century transnational traffic in jazz, popular musics, and even Chinese regional genres provides a genealogy of all that is indelibly transnational about our contemporary mediascapes. This correlation of contemporary transnationalisms with previous transnationalisms argues that two of the cornerstones of Arjun Appadurai's theory of transnational culture (1996)—mediation and migration—were already structuring the growth of global media culture in the early part of the twentieth century. Other authors have assumed a non-analogous relationship between past and present transnational media cultures. Jones shows that there is much one can learn about turn-of-the-millennium global media industries by revisiting the sights and sounds of Republican-era Shanghai.

More than anything, this work stands alone in its sensitive portrayal of Li Jinhui, music impresario and progenitor of *shidai qu*, and the many starlets he trained. It is through the figure of Li and his songstresses (including Zhou Xuan) that the author locates and articulates affinities between

leftist and rightist politicization of musical life in the Republican era. Li's alleged cultural, social, and political compromises were analogous to the failings of the embattled nation, his songstresses to the country's anguished voices. Through the mediation of film, his songs and the women who sang them became instruments for articulating a discourse of national salvation.

The simultaneous denunciation and appropriation of Li and the entertainment world he inhabited introduces a complex of traditional associations between prostitution, musical professionalism, and music-making in China—all of which inform an understanding of gendered discourse within the context of nation-building agendas. As Jones demonstrates, linkages between notions of the feminine and notions of decadence and degradation were inscribed in the discursive arena. What he could have added was the etymological rootedness of these inscriptions: many words in the Chinese language with pernicious associations or negative meanings are formed from the ideogram *nu*, which signifies woman.

Jones's themes, refracted through a cinematic prism, overlap and dovetail with one another with the same clarity as the film bricolages he so effectively describes. The image of the prostitute as a redeemed subaltern is not unfamiliar in mid-twentieth-century Chinese cinema. What Jones offers, however, is a penetrating examination of how this theme found residence in the national psyche. Jones tells us that sing-song girls can be voices for national distress only in a nation that figures itself as a prostitute.

*Yellow Music* is singular as a multifarious study of *shidai qu* and represents what may be the most up-to-date study of music, politics, and popular culture in Republican China. It is an excellent tool for teachers and students of Chinese music studies, and will appeal to scholars of anthropology, cinema studies, cultural studies, Asian studies, gender studies, nationalism, and transnational studies.

#### Notes

1. Republican China refers to the period of China's history beginning with the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty, China's last imperial regime, and ending with the communist ousting of national forces from the Chinese mainland in 1949. Some authors, however, understand the era as stretching from 1912 to the present. Most of Jones's study relates to the period of China's history between the two world wars.

2. The term sing-song girls carries with it historical overtones of courtesanship and prostitution.

3. The May 4th movement began with a political demonstration on May 4, 1919 against the Chinese government's decision to comply with the terms of the Versailles Treaty, and thus surrender Shantung province to Japan. However, it developed into a literary, artistic and sociopolitical movement advocating cultural reforms that would lead to the development of a modern and independent Chinese state.

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