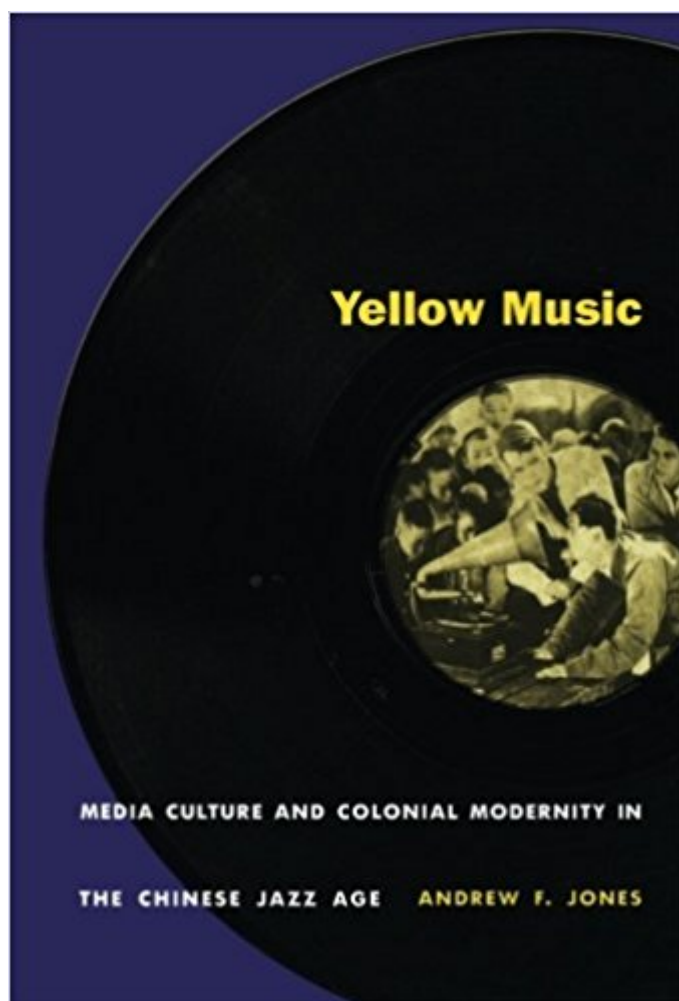


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# Yellow Music: Media Culture And Colonial Modernity In The Chinese Jazz Age



## Synopsis

Yellow Music is the first history of the emergence of Chinese popular music and urban media culture in early-twentieth-century China. Andrew F. Jones focuses on the affinities between "yellow" or "pornographic" music—as critics derisively referred to the "decadent" fusion of American jazz, Hollywood film music, and Chinese folk forms—and the anticolonial mass music that challenged its commercial and ideological dominance. Jones radically revises previous understandings of race, politics, popular culture, and technology in the making of modern Chinese culture. The personal and professional histories of three musicians are central to Jones's discussions of shifting gender roles, class inequality, the politics of national salvation, and emerging media technologies: the American jazz musician Buck Clayton; Li Jinhui, the creator of "yellow music"; and leftist Nie Er, a former student of Li, whose musical idiom grew out of virulent opposition to this Sinified jazz. As he analyzes global media cultures in the postcolonial world, Jones avoids the parochialism of media studies in the West. He teaches us to hear not only the American influence on Chinese popular music but the Chinese influence on American music as well; in so doing, he illuminates the ways in which both cultures were implicated in the unfolding of colonial modernity in the twentieth century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Yellow Music pushes commonsense presumptions forward by complicating theory with solid empirical study. Jones weaves rich information and intriguing conclusions throughout this

historically grounded book. — Miriam Silverberg, author of *Changing Song: The Marxist Manifestos of Nakano Shigeharu* — “Yellow Music is a fantastic, one-of-a-kind read: a beautifully written, theoretically rich, and empirically grounded story about the relationship between American jazz music and the politics of colonialism and modernity in China during the interwar years. Andrew F. Jones puts the question of music at the center of debates about the role of the popular in the making of modern China. — Ralph Litzinger, author of *Other Chinas: The Yao and the Politics of National Belonging* — “Jones illuminates Chinese cultural and political history from an unknown angle — that of popular music and an emergent transnational mass culture. In doing so, he not only enriches our understanding of this history but also makes an original contribution. — Prasenjit Duara, author of *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*

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In *Yellow Music*, Andrew Jones blends post-colonial discourse with theory drawn from culture studies and other fields to tackle the complex subject of the rise of modern Chinese popular music. In the process, he lands a well-placed jab in the jaw of the dinosaur known as area studies. Jones makes an ambitious effort to historicize his study of modern Chinese music through a detailed account of its rise as an industry within a global context of technological and cultural change. His analysis of major figures in the modern Chinese musical world makes a substantial contribution to a neglected field of cultural enterprise in the study of modern China, while his focus on the music

industry and musical culture of Shanghai, including records, cinema, cabarets, revues, and popular magazines and journals, sheds additional light to the growing field of Shanghai cultural history. Jones places the history of modern Chinese music within the frameworks of global capitalism, Euro-American colonialism, and the American "culture industry" that came to influence so many different parts of the world during the twentieth century. Even so, *Yellow Music* reminds us that China's own film industry, beginning with the first cinematic exhibition in a Shanghai teahouse in 1896, kept pace with Hollywood and eventually began to exert a significant ideological power of its own upon the Chinese movie-going and record-playing public, especially during the 1930s when the ideologies of nationalism became imbricated in the film music and content of Shanghai's leftist film studios. The advent of songwriter Nie Er--whose film song "March of the Volunteers" eventually became China's national anthem under the P.R.C.--on the Chinese stage and screen thus marks an important turning point in the history of modern China. Jones is at his best when describing the careers of musicians Li Jinhui and Nie Er, both of whom worked in Shanghai's burgeoning musical scene during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Li Jinhui established a blend of Chinese folk and Western jazz music to create the sounds of modern Chinese pop. He commercialized his music through song-and-dance troupes, one of which included his daughter Li Minghui. Although his efforts to nationalize his music through the use of Mandarin was a valid contribution to the project of modern Chinese nationalism, the contents of his music and dance programs were deemed prurient or "yellow" by both conservative and leftist Chinese nationalists. Nie Er began his career as a songwriter working under Li Jinhui. Following the attack by Japan on the Zhabei district of Shanghai in 1932, and in the context of heightened Chinese nationalism that followed Japanese aggression during the 1930s, Nie Er turned away from the "yellow" music of sinified jazz and began writing "revolutionary" music for leftist films. His efforts to infuse a sense of heroic Chinese nationalism into his music through strident marches and patriotic lyrics earned him fame among leftists and communists. Today, a statue of Nie Er in a small park on the corner of Fuxing and Huaihai Roads attests to his status as a revolutionary hero in the communist pantheon. That Nie Er's "March of the Volunteers" became the anthem of a totalitarian regime is an irony that is apparently lost on Jones, as are the hegemonic tendencies of Han Chinese nationalists, who even during the height of European colonialist endeavors were bent on disciplining, subjugating, and suppressing other ethnicities within the Chinese geopolitical sphere, not to mention their own people. Jones's attempt to explain the fascist tendencies of Chiang Kai-shek and his Blue Shirts as naïve strikes one as unnecessarily apologetic. Nor does Jones fully explore the implications of the imposition of a national language via music and film on the ethnic and regional identities of hundreds of millions of

people in China who did not speak Mandarin as their native tongue. One is also skeptical at times about the quality of the research that went into this slim volume. For instance, Jones begins his study with an anecdote about the African American jazz musician Buck Clayton, who traveled to Shanghai in the 1930s to play in the city's nightclubs. Jones uses anecdotes drawn from Clayton's autobiography to illustrate "truths" about the complex racial hierarchy that characterized the polyglot city of Shanghai. The story of Clayton's dismissal from the Canidrome Ballroom, told briefly from the point of view of Clayton himself, is actually far more complicated than Jones makes it out to be. In fact, it was not Caucasian American managers and Marines who engineered his dismissal, but rather the club's Chinese managers, who themselves were under the influence of the notorious mob boss Du Yuesheng. The man who attacked Clayton was not a Marine but rather an American mobster named Jack Riley who was probably paid by the Chinese management to start the fight. The real objective was to fire the band for causing a disturbance, since the band had become too expensive to maintain and since there was no other way to legally sever their contract. This is just one of many topics in the book whose nuances could have been explored more fully. For a study of an academic topic as serious and complex as the rise of modern Chinese music, Jones's book is refreshingly short. Moreover, despite numerous references to cultural and critical theory and the liberal peppering of his text with theoretical jargon, the book remains highly readable, engaging, and stimulating throughout. For these reasons, *Yellow Music* may serve well as an addition to any college course on modern China, colonialism, music history, or globalization.

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