



Exploring Gender Disparities in the Chinese Jazz Community

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INTRODUCTION

Jazz, a genre originally rooted in the United States, has traveled beyond national borders to influence diverse global communities, including China. While jazz education in Chinese international schools shows a balanced male-to-female student ratio, the professional landscape starkly contrasts this equilibrium. Among Chinese jazz musicians, particularly instrumentalists, women are notably underrepresented—with there only being three or four in total. Why is this disparity evident, and what factors contribute to it?

On the website World of Jazz (2020), Joe Paice, an experienced jazz consultant, traces the emergence of jazz in China to the 1920s, specifically in Shanghai. The genre then faced a hiatus following the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 due to its Western origins. However, the 1980s saw a jazz revival in China, replete with innovative blends of traditional Chinese instruments and jazz elements. Despite this, jazz in China remains an overlooked niche, less popular than other genres such as pop and rock (Paice 2020).

From its inception, jazz was predominantly a male domain, a trend that extends to its Chinese iteration. Although the concept of gender equality has gained attention, the professional jazz circle in China still largely comprises male musicians. Women, when they do feature, are usually vocalists rather than instrumentalists. Interestingly, once these women enter the realm of jazz as instrumentalists, they receive significant attention, thereby influencing discussions about gender within the genre. While the subject of women in jazz is extensively debated in the U.S., it merits greater exploration in the Chinese context.

Scholarly Framework and Methodologies

Elsa Barkley Brown, a scholar in history and women's studies, suggests that jazz serves as a metaphor for "writing multilayered and multiphonic histories" (Rustin and Tucker 2008: 3). Jazz music generates a rich sound that allows the musician to narrate multifaceted historical stories through its multiphonic improvisation, complex harmonies and strong rhythms. In this way, jazz has allowed Chinese musicians to enter into a dynamic interplay of cultural exchange and adaptation with musicians from around the world, and will continue to do so as this genre continues to evolve with the passage of time.

Likewise, Nicola Dibben underscores the importance of

examining the social dynamics and contexts that influence gender roles in music, arguing that a deeper understanding of gender-related aspects in music can be gained by looking at specific social dynamics and contexts in which these preferences and engagements occur (2002: 121). Inspired by these academic perspectives and supplemented by my own experience—having studied jazz for over a year under Dr. Chang Su, a Chinese musician who has a PhD in jazz studies from University of Northern Colorado—I aim to delve into the complex intersections between gender and creativity in Chinese jazz.

For this paper, I conducted interviews with my former teacher Chang Su and an 18-year-old alumna of my school, Kashmir Tai, who has played jazz bass and guitar and is about to be a freshman in the U.S. Both people shared insights from their own encounters with gender in Chinese jazz. Together with other articles about intersections between gender and jazz, along with my personal observations, I will address this complex interaction between gender stereotypes and their influence on musical creativity in Chinese jazz, which offers valuable insights into the evolving path of contemporary Chinese jazz. These methods offer a comprehensive look into the gendered dynamics affecting the development of jazz in China, emphasizing the need for further transformation and empowerment. By exploring these issues, this paper seeks to address an understudied but essential aspect of Chinese culture and music, one that invites us to question the existing norms and encourages an inclusive future for jazz globally.

Jazz & China: A Tale of Adaptation and Cultural Fusion

The roots of jazz can be traced back to African American communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Celebrating improvisation and collective creativity, the genre has evolved over time, assimilating influences from blues, gospel, and European classical music. Jazz has left an indelible mark on modern genres like R&B, hip-hop, and pop, underscoring its significance within the broader musical landscape (Garlock 2020).

To address more about the Chinese jazz scene, here are some notes taken by Weihua Zhang, who has a PhD in musicology, about the Beijing jazz scene in the late 1980s and 90s:

Although each of the four jazz venues in Beijing presented mainstream bebop jazz, most of the performers are not simply copying American players but are making serious



attempts to create new sounds [...] My husband, Royal Hartigan, played at various venues and noted that the Chinese jazz players have “good ears,” reacting to each other and succeeding in creating melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic dialogues spontaneously. (Zhang 270-271)

Beijing lacked an extensive jazz history background at the time. Paradoxically, it is this absence of jazz history background that provided Beijing’s musicians with unprecedented freedom.

This freedom led to the emergence of a distinct playing style, emphasizing on the city’s creative potential in jazz. Distinct from other urban centers such as Shanghai, Beijing lacked an extensive jazz history background at the time. Paradoxically, this absence of historical baggage provided Beijing’s musicians with an unprecedented freedom. Liberated from traditional jazz norms, they approached the genre through their own cultural lens, which results in the emergence of a unique playing style. This phenomenon reveals the potential for jazz’s growth and evolution within the city. Given that this text was written in the late 20th century, it is important to provide some recent personal observations of the Beijing jazz scene.

Based on my own observations at the Blue Note Beijing lounge, to watch a tribute concert of a famous bossa nova musician Antonio Carlos Jobim. The show featured five men, with a white keyboardist and trumpeter, along with a Chinese guitarist, bassist and drummer. The performance was really successful, and the improvisation of different musicians exhibited different styles: for instance, the Chinese guitarist improvised in a more traditional way, utilizing classic bebop licks and scales, whereas the white keyboardist incorporated more modern fusion harmonic theories and techniques in his performance. Having explored the landscape of jazz in China, it is imperative to delve into the impact of gender dynamics within this musical context. Gender roles not only shape the reception of this genre but also influence participation and performance.

Jazz & Gender: Addressing the Disparities

A 2006 study aimed to investigate gender differences in various aspects of jazz improvisation, such as confidence, anxiety, and attitude. The research included 137 participants—83 men and 54 women—from multiple jazz programs. The study considered gender, school level, and instrument choice as independent variables. Its findings revealed significant gender disparities in confidence, anxiety, and attitude toward jazz improvisation, with women generally reporting lower confidence and higher anxiety (Wehr-Flowers 2006: 341).

These gender differences suggest that societal influences and expectations play a significant role in how individuals approach jazz improvisation. It is also worth noticing that there are also gender-based disparities in music education, and a more gender-inclusive environment should be promoted. Returning to the results of the study, what might be some factors that lead to the situation of male superiority in jazz improvisation, and how can it be changed?

Instrumental Genders in Jazz: A Complex Intersection

To delve into gender dynamics within the world of jazz, it’s critical to explore the perceived gender associations of jazz instruments. A typical jazz band includes instruments like the upright bass, drums, trumpets, trombones, and saxophones. A 1978 study by Harold F. Abeles and Susan Yank Porter aimed to categorize various instruments from most feminine to most masculine. The sequence produced—flute, violin, clarinet, cello, saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and drum—largely aligns with societal stereotypes (Abeles and Porter 1978). Several factors contribute to these perceptions, such as musical range; for example, flutes and violins yield higher pitches, while trombones and drums produce lower tones. Timbre and the gender of performers may also influence these perceptions—with higher-pitched instruments being more heavily associated with female performers, while lower-pitched instruments are usually considered more “masculine.” In this case, trumpets, trombones and drums are often labeled as masculine, whereas flutes and violins are considered more feminine.

Veronica Doubleday, an author and ethnomusicologist, elaborates on the gender complexity of saxophones, in particular:

The saxophone is another instrument with complex levels of gendered meaning... its hybrid status straddles the categories of woodwind and brass, which Adorno termed ‘*zwischen-geschlechtlicher*,’ or ‘between genders.’ As for performance, both men and women have historically played the saxophone, which has been symbolically linked to both male and female sexual allure (Doubleday, 2008: 14).

Kashmir Tai, in a recent interview, echoed the masculine perception of bass instruments, stating “bass has the lower frequency that makes it like a sign or a characteristic of a male” (Interview, Kashmir Tai, Ten cent Meeting, August 3, 2023). Such associations contribute to the male-dominated nature of jazz, where men often play instruments considered to be ‘masculine.’ Doubleday further asserts that musicians usually opt for “same-gendered” instruments (Doubleday 2008: 14), which reinforce the idea that female instrumentalists are less common than their male counterparts.

Yet, it’s essential to note that these gender associations are not static; they can evolve over time through social interactions (Doubleday 2008: 6). Creating more cross-gender relationships (those considered uncommon from the present perspective) will in turn help reshape audiences’ associations with the gender of these now-masculine-signified instruments. An increase in the number of female jazz instrumentalists could contribute to challenging existing stereotypes, offering a broader range of performing opportunities and enriching the discourse on gender identities within jazz.

Stereotypes about Gender and Instruments in the Chinese Jazz Scene

The broader challenges of the jazz industry become even more

multifaceted when considering the unique obstacles faced by female artists. This holds true in the context of China's jazz scene, which poses various challenges to musicians. Kashmir Tai shared her perspective in the Tencent Meeting interview, saying, "My parents have no real understanding of music. They know I play something called a guitar but can't distinguish it from a bass." This illustrates the generational gaps and limited musical spreading among older generations. The fact that her parents can't differentiate between a guitar and a bass reveals the broader issue of limited music education and awareness in society. "My friends think it's cool for girls to play the guitar," she continued in the interview. "At first glance, it seems like a compliment, but it actually reinforces a gender stereotype."

Here, Kashmir reveals another layer of complexity around gender stereotypes. Her friends' reactions inadvertently imply the notion that playing the guitar is a male-dominated activity, reinforcing existing gender stereotypes. Her insights extend to the challenges female jazz artists face in China, where the genre itself is relatively unfamiliar. The limited visibility of jazz in China mirrors broader cultural preferences and unfamiliarity with the genre.

Jazz scholar Suzuki Yoko adds another layer to this discussion by recounting a story involving Canadian trumpeter Ingrid Jensen. After a performance, renowned trumpeter Bobby Shew remarked, "Damn, girl, I thought you were an old black guy playing like that. What a surprise to see a young white chick." Jensen, who was only fourteen at the time, initially took this as a compliment. However, her perspective has evolved; she now views it as a complex intersection between musical expression, race, and gender stereotypes (Suzuki 2013). This demonstrates how breaking stereotypes is a complicated process with multiple aspects such as race and gender. Her experience in the United States, where some white musicians often emulate African American performing styles for 'authenticity,' reflects the intricate relations of identity and societal perceptions in transforming cultural norms.

Returning to Kashmir, her experiences epitomize challenges faced by female jazz musicians in China, a country yet to fully embrace the genre. Her story shows how cultural and gender-based stereotypes can impact the recognition and acceptance of artists in a landscape unfamiliar with their musical form. By engaging in these situations, we can better understand the multi-layered challenges that women face in the jazz industry, both in China and globally.

Challenges for Women in the Professional Jazz Scene

Some of the under-representation of women in jazz can also be attributed to specific characteristics of the genre and its performance settings. Jazz teacher Chang Su elaborated on these points in an interview. "The working environment for jazz music," Chang told me, "is usually in the evenings. Performances might start at around 9 PM and go until midnight. If jazz shows were scheduled earlier, say from 7 to 9 PM in a concert hall, perhaps more women would be inclined to participate." (Interview, Chang Su, Ten cent

Meeting, August 16, 2023) Here, two significant barriers were mentioned by Chang Su. First, the late-night timing of jazz performances poses a unique set of challenges for women. Traditional expectations in China often place women in the roles of wives and mothers, responsible for family and household duties during evening hours. This makes late-night performances less accessible for them. Second, the venues themselves add another layer of difficulty. Jazz is often played in clubs, bars, and lounges, settings that may not always be welcoming or safe for women. The lack of gender inclusive environments—spaces as welcoming to women as they are to men—could expose female musicians to uncomfortable situations or even harassment.

A Changing Landscape

Given these factors, pursuing a career as a female jazz musician in China carries inherent risks and pressures. However, it's crucial to note that conditions are slowly evolving. Improved law enforcement and increased street safety in China are positively impacting the atmosphere for women. Additionally, progressive legislation is offering extra protections for women, complemented by a broader societal push towards gender equality.

These shifts, along with the growing awareness and push for gender equality, pave the way for more women to participate in the jazz scene. While challenges remain, especially in a cultural context where jazz is still a relatively unfamiliar genre, there are reasons to be hopeful. As societal norms and legal frameworks continue to change, the future may hold an increasing presence and recognition for female jazz musicians in China.

Gender Dynamics in Jazz Education

To boost the presence of women in jazz, educational institutions could play a pivotal role. Schools not only equip students with the required skills but also create an encouraging environment for their artistic growth. However, in China, the gender dynamics in jazz education are intricate and often shaped by the attitudes of the music teachers.

Kashmir Tai, shares her observations during an interview about her experience in her school's music program. Her school primarily employs teachers from the United States, such as Mr. Robert Sax, a seasoned jazz educator.

Kashmir notes, "Mr. Sax actually favors his female students more than his male students, which is unusual and has led to complaints from boys. On the flip side, some other music teachers at our school tend to favor male students, especially when selecting performers." (Interview, Kashmir Tai, Tencent Meeting, August 3, 2023)

Gender-based discrimination among students is a complicated issue that often mirrors the personal biases of the educators themselves. Studies by Cartwright (2001), Tucker (2002), and May (2003) indicate that there are significantly fewer women in university and conservatory jazz programs compared to men. For example, in the Birmingham Conservatory, only 3 out of 70 jazz students are female, according to instructor Jeff Williams (Shriver 2018).

This indicates that women also suffer discrimination in jazz programs in schools, which correlates with the second example, where Kashmir's new teacher tends to favor male students. This could be very damaging to female students, as they lose performing opportunities in class and in school, further eroding their motivation to engage with and excel in jazz, causing uncertainty in their beliefs and self-perception, solidifying the male-dominance in jazz. In contrast, Mr. Sax's favoring of female students is an interesting case which shows that discrimination isn't limited to a single direction; rather, it can manifest in various forms. While women are typically overlooked by teachers, especially those with outdated gender norms or traditional gender beliefs, men could also suffer from discrimination. Another intriguing detail to mention is that Mr. Sax belongs to the older generations of jazz musicians, while the other teacher is much younger than Mr. Sax, yet Mr. Sax is the one who favors female students. This detail further emphasizes the point that different teachers treat their students very differently, and the discrimination really depends on various factors of individuals such as personality and other preferences.

This further suggests that tackling gender biases in jazz education requires nuanced approaches, as discrimination could stem from a range of personal biases. An encouraging educational environment, consisted by fair and progressive educators, can significantly influence the future of women in jazz, particularly in settings like China where the genre is still gaining traction.

Family Influence and Gender Dynamics in Young Jazz Musicians

To examine the historical challenges that women have encountered in jazz, let's look into the narrative of Sathima Bea Benjamin, a South African jazz vocalist active from the 1960s through the early 2000s. She balanced her roles as a wife, mother, political activist, and big band musician while living in New York City. Benjamin found that her journey to recognition as a musician was fraught with challenges. During rehearsals and performances, she felt marginalized by a male trumpet player who appeared to question her capabilities. Whenever she started a solo or tackled a complex piece, he would roll his eyes or snicker—non-verbal cues. This subtle form of gender-based discrimination echoed the historical struggles that women have faced in the jazz arena, juggling societal norms, expectations, and their own aspirations.

An excerpt from a book detailing her experience states:

Sathima's days were filled with the mundane—caring for the family, supporting Abdullah [her husband], paying bills, sorting out taxes. Sathima's musical career was pushed to the sidelines, confined to the demands of her everyday life. (Muller 2013:163)

This account illustrates the complexities women face when they juggle multiple societal roles, a challenge that extends to female jazz musicians today. Despite the increasing social openness and equality, women still grapple with societal expectations that discourage them from dedicating

themselves fully to careers in music. Much work still remains to be done to ensure that talent—not gender—defines one's opportunities and success in the field.

However, things are quite different now in China. I asked my teacher, Chang Su, about the gender composition in his jazz band that mostly comprises Chinese children and teenagers. He observes:

Indeed, there are more boys than girls in our band. This could be influenced by our band's swing-oriented style, which parents of young boys might find cooler. However, among the standout musicians, family support for jazz seems to be the primary influence, regardless of gender. We have talented boys and girls, and there isn't a significant difference in their abilities. (Interview, Chang Su, Tencent Meeting, August 16, 2023)

Even though I'm not an official member, I've had the chance to play with Su's band once or twice, and my experiences playing with Su's band align with his observations. While there are more boys than girls, the gender difference isn't as obvious as it often is in professional jazz bands, and so as the technical level. It is true that as my teacher said, there are both talented boys and girls in the band. Another interesting experience is that during our full band rehearsals, parents are allowed to watch the entire time. This gave me an opportunity to catch a glimpse of what the parents of our band members were doing while I was performing on stage. Most parents were recording our rehearsals on their phones, which could be a sign of their interest in jazz, or, perhaps they just simply want to record their child's activities. Either way, the influence of parents is really significant in the case of China, as China is a country that doesn't have prolonged jazz traditions compared to other countries like the U.S. Those with parents that have great interest in jazz tend to be more motivated to learn jazz, thereby performing better. I can see that certain parents indeed fall into this category, as they seem familiar with jazz traditions—they give a round of applause after performers finish their solos, which is a common improvisational tradition in jazz. These individuals, who have a passion for jazz, might not have had the educational resources to learn jazz in the previous century, as jazz was even more unpopular back then. As a result, they are now guiding their children to learn jazz, aiming to bring them a sense of joy through this musical journey. In this regard, gender doesn't play a substantial role in influencing the musical proficiency of these Chinese teenagers and children when it comes to playing jazz music.

Chang Su's experiences with young musicians suggest that the situation might be evolving, especially in settings like China where the influence of family can be a decisive factor in fostering musical talent. In such environments, nevertheless, gender isn't really the primary concern, as what matters most is the collective family appreciation for jazz.

CONCLUSION

The Beijing jazz scenes consist of complex gender relationships, along with other factors such as cultural

dynamics, musical traditions and family influences in play. The journey of jazz and its evolution in China show how nuanced the genre has adapted and resonated within diverse contexts. Furthermore, within the context of China, jazz remains relatively unpopular, resulting in a limited pool of jazz musicians and an even smaller representation of female jazz musicians. There are multiple reasons that lead to this situation, such as the gender associations of jazz instruments contributing to the dominance of male musicians in the jazz scene.

Moreover, female jazz musicians face unique challenges related to performing environments that stem from societal expectations and safety concerns, impacting their participation in the Chinese jazz scene. The good news is, signs of change are evident, with shifting legal protections and social atmospheres providing greater potential for gender equality and inclusion in the jazz community, encouraging female musicians to engage in this musical form. The constantly changing musical environments could also lead to a greater popularity of jazz music itself here in China. From the jazz education aspect, gender biases of music teachers impact the experiences of female and male jazz students, which in turn influence their enthusiasm towards jazz and career choices. In this sense, the narrative of gender roles and expectations, both in the professional jazz circle and within jazz education, shapes experiences of female musicians.

These female musicians still face multiple harsh challenges due to complicated intersections of social and gender factors, but they have the potential to break stereotypes and make a change in the Chinese jazz community. The journey towards gender equality within Chinese jazz demands ongoing exploration and action, as the harmonious improvisation that defines jazz finds resonance in the harmonization of diverse voices and identities.

In this changing landscape, it is crucial to be conscious of the biases that persist and to actively challenge them, whether they exist in educational settings, performance venues, or societal expectations. Only by recognizing and addressing these barriers can we hope to foster a more inclusive and equitable future in the realm of jazz music.

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