QUIET ABOUT IT—JAZZ IN JAPAN

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Japan is the largest home for jazz outside the United States (US). Though the number of musicians and venues for jazz in Japan are as extensive as those of any country or region, how jazz is received, learned, practiced, and considered in Japan is much less known than in other countries. Stuart Nicholson’s (2005) thoughtful survey of jazz outside the US, Is Jazz Dead?, offers only two passing mentions of Japan. Alyn Shipton’s monumental and otherwise inclusive A New History of Jazz (Bloomsbury 2001) mentions Japan not once in its nine hundred-plus pages.

Yet Japan can boast of a century of jazz history and over one hundred active jazz clubs in Tokyo and Yokohama alone (“Zenkokuban Live House”). Jazz is a fully integrated, uniquely processed, and historically rooted Japanese cultural import. Stéphane Dorin argues that “the history of jazz can also be regarded as a multiplicity of stories, sometimes parallel, sometimes divergent, with different branches, linked to various places and social worlds in which jazz was listened to and played” (Dorin 2016). If so, Japan’s story is important in the larger diaspora of jazz.

A brief survey of the history and current scene in Japan shows how fully, if unexpectedly, jazz is importable, exportable, and capable of being treasured and created across cultures. Jazz became popular among Japanese for many of the same reasons as in other countries, though distinctively Japanese attitudes and practices contribute to its flourishing. Jazz, it seems, can be played similarly but felt differently. It can employ the same essential elements but generate quite different meanings. Perhaps no stronger argument for jazz’s universality can be found than in Japan’s vibrant jazz scene.

Several key institutions, social conditions, and cultural forces have secured jazz’s position in contemporary Japanese culture. First, the role of the jazz kissaten, or coffee shop, the past dance halls, and current jazz clubs all contribute powerfully to jazz’s enduring presence in Japan. Secondly, jam sessions, music schools, and amateur big bands, together with a vibrant jazz press, have kept jazz from losing cultural ground—even gaining some.

Several traditional cultural beliefs and practices, such as Zen and a strong craft tradition, have also contributed to jazz’s status and popularity. The Japanese attraction to complex art forms that display a human touch draws musicians and fans toward the virtuosity, creativity, and authenticity that is central to jazz. In that sense, jazz’s establishment in Japan as a cultural experience and dynamic practice is no surprise whatsoever.
Jazz Kissaten

Jazz coffee shops, or *jazz kissa* for short, have played an essential role in the unabated interest in jazz from the beginning of the twentieth century and are still central to Japanese jazz culture now. Eckhardt Derschmidt notes that jazz started to spread around First World War, but nowhere in Europe, and of course not in America, did an institution like the Japanese *jazu-kissa* evolve, a café, whose main, and as from the middle of the fifties, whose sole function was to provide a space in which to listen to jazz.

(Derschmidt 1998)

The *jazz kissa* have a long and influential history and are arguably the central space for jazz’s dissemination, study, and enjoyment. At *jazz kissa*, the music is the point, not the background to other activities.¹ There was never dancing and *jazz kissa* were always more affordable, costing the price of a cup of coffee for hours of listening.

One of the longest running *jazz kissa* is Chigusa in Yokohama. Founded in 1933, famed owner Mamoru Yoshida ran his place with dedication and passion. Chigusa’s history and space was, and still is, the standard for the hundreds of other *jazz kissa* throughout Japan.

Don De Armond, a serviceman stationed in Yokosuka during the American Occupation, knew Yoshida well, sending him vinyl records from America after his return to America. Armond noted how Yoshida’s and Chigusa’s fortunes followed the times:

Mamoru Yoshida and his Chigusa were in business from 1937 to 1941; closed by military direction during the war years; demolished by the allied forces bombing of Yokohama in May 1945; rebuilt and reopened in 1946; and continued under his management until his death in 1994.

(Pronko 2012)

Now, new owners run Chigusa, but the atmosphere is unchanged.

*Jazz kissa* provided fans and musicians access to rare and expensive recordings. The effect of having a place for learning and sharing the music, as well as foreign culture, cannot be underestimated. Toshiko Akiyoshi said she learned to play jazz at Chigusa from Yoshida’s records.

The only way to learn was to listen to records in those jazz coffee shops. If I asked Yoshida-san to play that particular little bit again, he would pick the needle up and drop it there again. So, on some Long Plays (LPs), that particular little place on the record would get worn out. Chigusa was a very important place for me.

(Pronko 2004)

Akiyoshi’s experience was not unusual.

In the 1960s, jazz vinyl recordings gained even higher prestige but remained too expensive for most fans. *Jazz kissa* became spaces for young people rebelling against the stifling conformity and social oppressiveness of the postwar Japan order. They increasingly turned to free jazz. Film director Koreyoshi Kurahara not only featured jazz soundtracks for his tales of youthful rebellion and social malaise but also used *jazz kissa* in the Shibuya area of Tokyo as settings for several of his films, including *Black Sun* (Kurahara 1964) and *The Warped Ones* (Kurahara 1960).
In his fascinating study of the cultural meanings of *jazz kissa*, according to Mike Molasky, there were over 500 jazz cafes reported in the magazine “Jazz Nippon-retto” of 1976. What’s more . . . the cafes which answered the questionnaire was 80 percent out of all cafes in Japan. There could have been over 600 jazz cafes in the middle of ‘70s. (Molasky 2010)

The numbers have fallen off from that peak, but ironically the international coffee shops edging them out now also play jazz as background music.

The *jazz kissa* that remain—and there are many—continue to be devoted to jazz. The walls of places such as Shinjuku’s Dug (opened in 1961), Yotsuya’s Eagle (opened in 1967), Kichijoji’s Meg (opened in 1970), Shinjuku’s Old Blind Cat (opened in 1965), and Samurai (opened in 1965) are all decorated with classic jazz LP covers, and the shelves are filled with CDs, vinyl records, and books and magazines about jazz for customers to read.

In a *kissa*, a select, high fidelity stereo system is central to the space. The “master” chooses works from his vinyl or CD collection, but customers can also request specific songs or recordings. Some *jazz kissa* welcome regular customers to bring in recordings to play on the system. Others host evenings that introduce recent releases. Every *jazz kissa* has a bulletin board with information about concerts, new releases, jam sessions, lectures, or other jazz activities, underscoring their community-oriented nature.

As in a library, customers can stay as long as they like. *Jazz kissa* were, and still are, privileged, dedicated spaces for listening to music on high-end sound systems. Under such conditions, *jazz kissa* are sanctuaries that inspire respect in customers, similar to the propriety shown inside a Buddhist temple.

**Dance Halls**

In early twentieth-century Japan, dance halls were the main jazz and dance venues. Jazz transferred easily to the wide-open entertainment districts of Tokyo, Yokohama, Kobe, Osaka, and other metropolitan centers—especially the port cities—in the 1920s and 1930s. Vera Mackie notes that “such cities as Shanghai, Yokohama, Nagasaki, Hakodate, and Kobe were linked with international trading routes. . . . Ocean liners plied these routes, transporting tourists and traders, jazz bands and dancehall girls between the treaty ports” (Mackie 2013).

As well documented in E. Taylor Atkins’s *Blue Nippon*, the jazz age in Japan started in the 1920s, a bit behind other world cities. Atkins notes that “the year of the stock market crash in America, which in many ways signaled the coda of Fitzgerald’s Jazz Age, was the same year that witnessed Japan’s most intense engagement with jazz to date” (Atkins 2001).

Ironically, at that time, Tokyo’s musicians appeared to have been too well-schooled to easily pick up the new music of jazz. Masahisa Segawa notes,

> Tokyo musicians played semi-classical music with a lack of jazz taste. One of the reasons for this was that Filipino musicians arrived at Kobe along with their ship and often stayed in the port. Young merchants in Kansai were modernized and liked jazz music and adopted it as the dance music.

*(Segawa 1981)*

Popular music, in particular the Takarazuka Revue and the Shochiku Revue, all-female musical groups, also influenced jazz in Osaka.³ Shuhei Hosokawa argues that early Dotonbori⁴
Jazz was deeply influenced by the musicians, singers, and popular style of these musical shows, and that musicians, Filipinos in particular, playing in the revues learned how to improvise from records and musicians sometime between 1925 and 1927 (Hosokawa 2013). Jazz was an imported music, but it quickly blended with other musical performance styles and entertainment practices of the time.

Military and conservative forces eventually brought an end to such westernized forms of music, leisure, and culture in Japan. According to Atkins, “by 1939 dance halls began closing for lack of business, as social censure effectively inhibited customers from patronizing them” (Atkins 2001). Jazz kissaten fell under surveillance by military authorities as potential breeding grounds of dissent, and by the mid-1940s, jazz was completely banned as a subversive Western influence.

Jazz was not heard again in Japan until the American Occupation, when it became the music played at dance halls. Later, at clubs, dancing started to take a backseat to performance. The American bases were a generator of all kinds of transformations. Shunya Yoshimi notes that, “Numerous powerful cultural influences—jazz, fashion, sexual culture—spread out from the American bases and took root very soon after the beginning of the occupation” (Yoshimi 2003). Jazz was again exciting and appealing to younger Japanese.

Japanese musicians started to play jazz under the tutelage of musicians stationed in Japan, and later they helped to transform it from dance music into an art form. Toshiko Akiyoshi, who started playing after the Second World War, had this to say about that transitional period:

In 1959, I was playing at a nightclub in Ginza. There were a lot of beautiful hostesses and everyone danced. I was one of the best-paid sidemen in Japan, but I just didn’t want to do it. So I quit, and formed my own quartet called the Cozy Quartet. There were only the American service clubs and also a place in Yokohama called the Seamen’s Club. It was a real rough place. Once a week they would have a fight. But it was a place where I could play whatever I wanted to play.

(Pronko 2004)

During and even after the American Occupation, much of the attraction to jazz was also an attraction to the newly imposed democratic institutions. Japanese values, which many felt led directly to the war, were rejected. As Yukiko Koshiro points out, “amid the cultural and intellectual impoverishment of the Occupation and their weakening sense of esteem for the nation, the Japanese were desperately turning to the United States for cultural and intellectual stimuli” (Koshiro 1999).

However, Japanese also became interested in jazz not just for its openness, otherness, and non-Japanese-ness but also as a musical form, style, and way of thinking that was valuable in and of itself. By the end of the American Occupation in 1952, jazz clubs had started to become a central place for jazz culture, and with the social strife of the 1950s and 1960s, with political turmoil and cultural rebellion, jazz became a place to escape conservative mainstream Japanese values.

Jazz Clubs

After dance halls disappeared, jazz clubs proliferated. Situated in small, underground spaces with casual interiors and excellent sound systems, jazz clubs thrived because of increasing interest in jazz itself. Jazz was a form of rebellion, and during the economic bubble years, jazz became a sophisticated backdrop for business entertainment.

Estimating the current number of clubs is difficult, but the website At Jazz lists 676 jazz clubs throughout Japan. However, that number includes many places that feature live music only occasionally. From a search of active websites, Tokyo and Yokohama are home to over one hundred
clubs featuring live jazz nightly. The sheer number is testament not only to the extensive nightlife of Japan’s densely populated cities and the sophistication of music consumers but also to the Japanese passion for jazz.

The club scene is extensive and complex, spread widely over the greater Tokyo area with a diversity of venues. Musicians can try out new styles and approaches for eager listeners. A typical Tokyo jazz musician might play with anywhere from six to ten different groups in a month, at just as many venues stretching from Tokyo to Yokohama, and out to the surrounding prefectures of Chiba, Saitama, and Kanagawa.

That level of collaboration and cross-pollination serves important functions. Musicians are able to hear others play and find like-minded colleagues. They must also stay flexible enough to fit into new groups with different leaders, styles, and approaches. Established musicians often lead “sessions,” which, though paid, serve as tryouts for a reshuffling of personnel. More formal gigs use the band’s or the leader’s name plus “trio,” “quartet,” or “quintet.”

Most of the better-known jazz clubs are found inside the central Yamanote train line loop in the major entertainment hubs of Kannai-Sakuragicho (in Yokohama), Shinjuku, Roppongi, and along the east-west Chuo Line. Many more clubs are located along the train lines that run out to the suburbs, with a friendly, neighborhood atmosphere.

Diverse locations allow musicians to play for different customers in each location. Of course, the individual character of each club, what types and genres of music they feature, also helps to ensure that fans hear a rotating diversity of jazz, while musicians have a chance to play for a different audience in different styles. Many clubs were hit hard after the earthquake in 2011, when many customers did not go out, but the majority have continued to do business as customers have returned.

What has dropped off in number are the jazz festivals, which used to draw large summer audiences to beachside and mountain resort areas, and large urban venues. The major festivals have all but disappeared. One enduring festival, the annual Yokohama Jazz Promenade, is now in its twenty-fifth year. Yokohama promotes itself as the home of jazz in Japan. In 2015, the port city’s festival drew over 150,000 people to fifty-one venues for 347 performances over two days.

Other smaller festivals have started to spring up supported by local businesses and governments, such as the Asagaya Jazz Streets, held around Asagaya Station, just west of Shinjuku in Western Tokyo. This cozy festival is truly of, by, and for the community. Students at the local elementary school design jazz-themed posters; mothers groups act as volunteers; local businesses volunteer their showrooms, and merchants set up tents for free shows. Famous musicians, like Yosuke Yamashita, play up close in the local school gymnasium, church, or community center. Jazz clubs and local festivals are deeply integrated into Japan’s nightlife and neighborhoods.

**Learning Jazz in Japan**

In the 1960s, many of Japan’s top players went to America to study jazz. Since then, with each returning musician, more and more opportunities for studying jazz developed inside Japan. By the late 1980s, schools such as Sengoku Gakuen School of Music, the first college to offer a jazz course of study, emerged. Following Sengoku, Koyo Conservatory in Kobe established a jazz program in conjunction with Berklee School of Music as Sengoku had done. Meanwhile, classical and traditional Japanese conservatories, such as Shobi Music University, Kunitachi College of Music, and Showa University of Music, developed full programs of jazz study.

Equally important to formal schooling are the nearly 200 different jam sessions throughout Japan. These range from once a week, open-mic opportunities to sessions run by professionals. One of the most famous clubs devoted to jamming is Jazz Bar Intro in Takadanobaba. The club offers instruments, equipment, and a rhythm section house band. Most jam sessions are
free, while others, especially those run with professionals, cost a nominal fee (“Zenkokuban Jazz Session”).

Learning about jazz is as important as learning how to play jazz. Japan’s jazz media remains dedicated, extensive, and influential. Three publications, Jazz Hihyo, Jazz Life, and Swing Journal, had impressively large readerships until the Internet pulled readers away. At the peak of readership at the turn of the century, Swing Journal had a circulation of 300,000 (The Asahi Shim bun). Add onto that the 70,000 readers of Jazz Hihyo and the 100,000 readers of Jazz Life (Ongaku Zasshi Ichiran), and those reading about jazz in Japanese at the peak of publication was much greater than the 70,000 English readers of Downbeat and 100,000 of Jazz Times in English (Mandel 2009).

Many other jazz magazines have come and gone in the past several decades. Though Swing Journal ceased publication in 2010, other periodicals such as Jazz Japan and Jazz Perspective are still dedicated to publishing reviews, histories, interviews, and other jazz-related articles. “Mooks” with a specific focus, such as Jazz Vocal, Jazz Bass Player, and Guitar Magazine continue to print on paper as other online jazz sites have sprung up. At Jazz is one of the most extensive, with listings of club date listings, jam sessions, and everything jazz-related. The Internet radio site jjazz offers streaming along with information and reviews. Jazz in Japan is the biggest English-language site, and Tokyo Jazz Site offers many different types of articles, as well as a podcast. Other smaller sites have begun to spring up, filling in for the decrease in paper-based magazines.

Estimating the number of books about jazz theory, scores and charts, playing techniques, history, interviews, and jazz-related topics is impossible due to the sheer volume. But the number published in Japanese is as significant as any online search or visit to a large Tokyo book, music, instrument, or CD and vinyl store will reveal. Brick and mortar book, music, instrument, CD, and vinyl stores are still prevalent throughout Japan.

**The Centrality of Big Bands**

Most Japanese first learn jazz playing in big bands. Japanese jazz musicians and fans alike often begin playing in their junior high or high school brass band before progressing to a jazz big band at university. That interest continues long past graduation. Many high schools formed jazz bands after the popular 2004 comedy film Swing Girls, directed by Shinobu Yaguchi, appeared in theaters. Nowadays, 70 to 80 percent of colleges and universities have jazz big bands or jazz study “circles.” The circles can be quite formal and disciplined and are given space and support at schools. Nearly every top Japanese jazz player would have participated in their university’s jazz circle. Alumni who become jazz professionals take pride in returning and helping to mentor their former circle.

Big bands offer a chance for a large number of students to participate and serve a social function, but they also focus intensely on performance. The annual Yamano Big Band Jazz Contest shows just how intensely. Now in its forty-eighth year, this year’s 2017 contest will feature thirty-five college jazz big bands, selected from all across Japan (Kaisai Gaiyo Dai). The contest auditorium is always standing room only. The winner is chosen by a panel of professional musicians, jazz critics, and teachers. Junko Moriya, longtime judge and leader of her own big band, said “every year, the contest is getting better and better because there are many more good teachers than ever before, who know what a great big band sounds like” (Moriya 2017).

After university, many shakaijin join local big bands and keep up their playing. The At Jazz site lists 591 shakaijin big bands all over Japan (“Gakusei Big Band”). Moriya, who often travels to small towns to play as a guest musician, holds workshops and helps the bands perform charts, including her own. She has said, “big places like Nagoya, Osaka, and Hiroshima have festivals with at least ten big bands per city, but the amazing thing is even small towns, with only 50,000 population, in Yamaguchi-ken or wherever, will have a big band” (Moriya 2017).
University alumni big bands are often formed so graduates can continue to play together long after graduation. Big universities would have five or six alumni big bands all at different ages from twenties to eighties. Big bands allow individuals to participate in a group unrelated to the pressures and relations of their workplace. Many of these amateur big band musicians only love big bands, but others are complete jazz fans who find it a pleasure to listen to the music and make it, too.

Big bands are appealing to the general Japanese social orientation toward groups, but they also reveal an abiding interest in personal pastimes that continue all through life. Japanese tend to like pastimes that require studying of specialized—even arcane—knowledge. Jazz serves as an engrossing, endless topic for leisure time, one that includes knowing history, culture, and music—and with big bands—performance.

Blending Cultures

Big bands are one of the most common lures for Japan’s many jazz fans, but the fascination with the music comes from cultural as well as historical forces, which go deep into issues of Japanese identity. As Yoshimi emphasizes, “during the course of postwar history, Japanese people reconstructed their own sense of national identity through the medium of desire and antipathy towards America” (Yoshimi 2003). That sense of identity was not based on totally discarding traditional values, but rather on a new blending of old and new, Japanese and Western values.

Zen Buddhism exerted an enormous influence over Japanese arts, aesthetics, and the daily life of present-day Japan. The Zen idea of art arising from a spiritual plane as a religious practice adapts easily to the complexities of jazz. The spare, spiritual nature of the traditional music of Japan, such as that accompanying Noh theater, rests on the Japanese concept of ma—the notion that sound can only exist in conjunction with silence. That may seem at odds with the often-densely complex structure of jazz, but at root, the idea is not far from the jazz concepts of playing the space between notes, of laying out, and of intricate rhythm.

Zen aims (without aiming) to establish a mindset in which selflessness allows genuinely natural movement. That is quite similar to the mindset needed for jazz improvisation. The attention to acting without conscious effort is both a Zen and a jazz ideal. Both Zen and jazz also depend on the body and breathing as a way of focusing, without effort, on creative, human action.

For many Japanese jazz players, the approach to jazz involves the same respect, devotion, and practice as Zen-influenced painting, flower arrangement, martial arts, and calligraphy. No Japanese jazz fan goes to a jazz show thinking they will be experiencing an exciting, new cosmopolitan form of music as they would have in the 1920s or that they are freeing themselves with a democratic American music as many would have in the 1950s. Rather, jazz is a very high-level art form that speaks deeply to the inner self, a self that is constructed through a confluence of traditional Japanese culture, international experience, and universal human values.

Another aspect of Japanese culture that contributes to the respect for jazz is the Japanese tradition of craftwork. The still-present traditional crafts of Japan such as pottery, lacquerware, woodwork, sword-making, weaving, or dyeing all demand an extensive period of apprenticeship under the supervision of a master. That these traditional crafts have survived at all under the pressures of a highly evolved consumer economy is a testament to the powerful forces of tradition. That force of tradition and personal artistic dedication transfers easily to jazz, with its similarly high demands for technical mastery and virtuosity.

As Denis-constant Martin argues, “the creative thrust that stimulated the invention and development of jazz and other African-American musics always operated as a practical negation of difference” (Martin 2008). Yet, at the same time, jazz for Japanese musicians and fans is less about transcending the particulars of jazz’s origins and more about meeting what Martin describes as
“the emotional and aesthetic needs of people living in diverse societies around the world” (Martin 2008). Jazz in Japan is an intense experience where free play, creative complexity, wordless expression, openness to universal values, and improvisation can be experienced, felt, and hoped for.

The Future of Jazz in Japan

Kiyoshi Koyama noted that Japanese jazz was in many ways imitative for the first half of its history:

The oldest jazz record in Japan, “Walla Walla” (Nitto/King) was recorded in 1925 by the Nitto Jazz Band, whose members are now unknown. From this incunabulum to “Blues Suite No. 3” (Victor), recorded in 1962 by the Hideo Shiraki Quintet, almost all of the jazz in Japan was more or less imitative of the jazz heard on records.

(Koyama 2000)

If that was the past, then the future looks much less imitative. While almost all musicians still want to spend time at the source of jazz, in America, the idea of originality and authenticity has evolved steadily since 1956 when King Records started to release full albums from Japanese jazz musicians. It is no longer so much “do I sound like Miles?” but rather “do I sound like I want to sound?” For Japanese musicians no less than for musicians in other countries, the drive to play well is an individual artistic one, even if tinged with collective cultural pride.

Because of that, the future of Japanese jazz looks bright. In the past two decades, several longstanding clubs have closed, but just as many new ones have opened. The audience is no longer chain-smoking, middle-aged businessmen with expense accounts. Instead, younger clientele interested in the music or a specific musician or a certain style has begun to fill clubs.

Jazz styles continue to diversify with unique combinations of elements melding into a vibrant approach to music. Small festivals are dedicated to jazz manouche, Hammond B3 organ, free jazz, and Latin jazz, as well as to big bands. Musicians acquaint themselves with many different styles before developing their own.

More women are playing jazz and leading their own bands. At the turn of the century, women primarily performed as singers or pianists. But now, musicians like trumpeter Hikari Ichihara and saxophonists like Ayumi Koketsu, Saori Yano, and Erena Terakubo are leading their own groups. Traditional Japanese koto player Michiyo Yagi plays electrified 21-string koto and 17-string bass koto complete with loopers and effects to expand the range of her sound.

Some musicians are turning to Japanese sources to find inspiration. Pianist Junko Moriya, who won the 12th Annual BMI/Thelonious Monk Jazz Composers Competition, released a CD based on the life and birthplace of Ieyasu Tokugawa on the 400th year anniversary of his rule. Pianist Yosuke Yamashita has blended his piano with shakuhachi and kodo drummers. Inspiration comes from outside Japan, too, as more percussionists go to study and play in South American and Caribbean countries to pick up clave and other Latin rhythms at the source.

Many more groups expand the range of their material outside the great American songbook. Free jazz and improvised music continue to be played by musicians as diverse as Satoko Fujii, Akira Sakata, and Eiichi Hayashi. Saxophonists Kazutoki Umezu and Naruyoshi Kikuchi, and pianist Takeshi Shibuya, are masters of recombining genres into intense new forms. The future may not see the development of a particularly Japanese style of jazz, but perhaps that’s more genuine. Jazz is now more than ever a multicultural music drawing on many sources and inspirations.

When considering the larger diaspora of jazz, it’s clear that innovation, individuality, and authenticity in jazz were never entirely exclusive to a particular area, subculture, or ethnicity. Japan is not so far away as it once was, either, with the opening of borders, the ease of travel,
and the global flow of information and culture. If thousands of people outside of Japan can become fans of Japanese *manga*, animation, design, sushi, films, and literature, will Japanese jazz be far behind?

Notes

1. Jazz was not the only music. Classical music *kissaten* are still running, along with a few tango and chanson *kissaten*. Blues and rock are available at evening bars.

2. “Master,” taken from English, is the word for the owner of small, individual shops, bars, or restaurants.

3. Takarazuka is still hugely popular.

4. Dotonbori is the central entertainment district in Osaka.

5. These are listed on the *At Jazz* online site.

6. “Mook” is a Japanese neologism combining the “m” from magazine with the English word “book.”

7. jjazz.net.

8. “Circle,” from English, is the name for college groups that focus on extracurricular activities.


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