

HOME-COMING: THE REPATRIATION OF HISTORICAL RECORDINGS

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Abstract

This article deals with the provocative questions of repatriating recordings stored in large and small archival institutions, mainly audio or video recordings, to source communities.

While this topic is often, disputed within the framework of sound and audio-visual archivists, it is rather rarely, investigated with academic vigor based personal experience in the field of music research. This paper attempts to start closing the knowledge gap and exchange ideas between those with practical experience and those with musicological background but not necessarily intense experiences.

The article provides an in-depth understanding of the term 'home-coming' and how this term relates to future activities and directions to be considered by museums and archival institutions. These insights might be of great benefit in sustaining and developing today's archival institutions in Asia and Europe.

Keywords

Repatriation, Archives, Historical audio recordings, Community connections, Global musicology

THE REPATRIATION OF THE 'SECOND MUSEUM AGE'

Unprecedented private and public collecting activities have been an important part of museum construction in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This process even 'empties' many important items of local communities, including living items, handicrafts, musical instruments, recordings, photos, human remains, which are just the key to the continuation of their ancestral traditions and local historical memory.

By putting forward the 'First Museum Age' in 1969, Sturtevant pointed out that public museums were emerging in Europe, North America, and in colonies from 1840 to 1920, and they were the landmark buildings and institutions of western modernization. If the traditional museum is a symbol of power and prestige rooted in the Western knowledge tradition, then from the beginning of the 21st century, the museum has gradually entered the 'Second Museum Age' (Phillips, 2005). At the end of the 20th century, with the reflection and evaluation of post-colonialism and post-structuralism in academia, material and visual culture began to be re-theorized by anthropologists, historians, and cultural researchers, the image and practice of museums are changing as well.

Michael Rowlands interprets the 'Second Museum Age' as: In this era, ethnographic museums would change to concerns for cultural restitution, source community origins of collections, as well as cultural diversity.¹ In this regard, museums and archives around the world are trying to establish cooperation and partnership with the source communities. One of the most important assignments is to return the cultural property and assist the construction of local archives or museums in the source community.

¹ Michael Rowlands, Reconsidering Heritage, Memory and Postcolonial Museum, online lecture, sponsored by Quanzhou Institute of Cultural Heritage, 10 October, 2020.

The development of technology, especially digital technology, has changed the methods and approaches to preservation, control, application, and consumption of audio-visual archives. It is enlivened in a wider context and space, and plays an important role in different communities. The repatriation of historical archives is a heated topic in the field of audio-visual archives and Ethnomusicology in recent years. People begin to find that the audio-visual heritage has such a wide range of application space, life value, and attraction through different ways and methods of repatriation practices. However, the task of repatriation is far more complicated than simply returning the collection to the community. Whether it is for conducting of researches or re-researches based on the collection, promoting new dialogues around archives, or trying to retrieve or construct cultural memory through old recordings, it requires the actors to carry out this work discreetly.

In this article, I attempt to discuss the issues related to historical recordings and their repatriation, as well as the contemporary value of it, by sharing two cases that I have come across.

THE INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY OF AFRICAN MUSIC AND THE REVITALIZATION OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC

Founded in 1954 by Hugh Tracey, The International Library of African Music (ILAM) is one of the world's greatest repositories of African music, today located in Grahamstown, East Cape Province, South Africa. It preserves a large number of books, musical and technical instruments, and historical recordings of African music. The main audio-visual collection is Hugh Tracy's counting more than 25 000 recordings from 19 field-recording tours between 1929 and 1977. It also includes his record series 'Sound of Africa' and 'Music of Africa', which is globally well known among all researchers and students in the field of ethnomusicology, and musical anthropology.

I was able to visit ILAM for a two-month internship and fieldwork at the beginning of 2019 and I am very impressed by the efforts of generations of archivists in preservation and especially repatriation in ILAM. From the time of Hugh Tracey to Andrew Tracy, Diane Thram, Lee Watkins, Elijah Madiba, and others, all colleagues constantly tried to repatriate through various ways and means. Although their choices are different, the core is to let the source communities, musicians, and their descendants benefit from ILAM's audio-visual heritage.

Since the mid-20th century, Hugh Tracey implemented some practices aiming at 'repatriation' but not in a typical sense, which he consciously returned to the communities he visited and whose music he recorded. He then records the scene of 'reunion' and the changes of local music culture.

During his 40 days Nyasaland recording trip in 1958, Tracy intentionally passed by two districts of Southern Rhodesia he visited in 1931, Chibi and Gutu, when he first started recording. He met two singers, who performed for him back then. Consequently, he found out that not only their singing was not as good as before but the overall music quality of both regions could not be compared with that recorded in the 1930s. (Hugh Tracey, 1958).

We can see that Tracey, on the one hand, developed the academic concept of 're-research'. Archives can be 'sustainably growing'. On the other hand, although he did not give back the recordings to the local people during this revisit, from the emotional and cultural memory perspective, Tracey maintained the relationship or say 're-connection' with the source community through his revisits. In my opinion, his action, to a certain degree, entails the meaning and value of repatriation.

Inherited from Hugh Tracey, many ILAM archivists are making continuous efforts in this direction through cooperation with other archives, projects, teachers, students, and scholars. They already launched diverse repatriation projects sending back recordings to Tanzania, Malawi, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa. These actions suggest this gesture toward

decolonization of ILAM serves as a model for the decolonization of ethnomusicology at large. (Thram, 2018). Meanwhile, they also encountered many problems. For example, when the archivists occasionally return to the source community to which they sent back the historical recordings, meaning repatriated, they realize that the local people neither have the required equipment nor enough technical knowledge to play back the recordings.

One of my supervisors at ILAM, Elijah Madiba, emphasized that when doing repatriation, active people must be able to improvise, it is not as simple as sending an object back to someone's home and putting it on their desk and shelf. Local people cannot play back the recordings they receive and so if you do not address that issue then repatriation becomes useless.

Therefore, Elijah decided not just to 'send back' the recording like before, but also to directly deliver it to musicians. Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, the nearby King William's Town and their ports create opportunities for Kossa musicians, poets, and artists in areas such as Elizabeth, to connect with the music in Tracy's archives.



FIGURE 1: Elijah Madiba encouraging young musicians through his work with historical recordings. (Photo by courtesy of Elijah Madiba).

Therefore, Elijah selected 16 Xhosa music albums from the Sound of Africa series, a total of 201 recording tracks, brought and played these recordings to the hip-hop musicians from King William's Town, Peddie, Grahamstown, and Port Elizabeth which are in proximity to the ILAM, it stimulated their creative use of the historical recordings. He recorded the whole process of the repatriation project in detail and further analyzed whether it is possible and if so, how traditional music can be revitalized through the creation of new music styles based on audio-visual archives? (Madiba, 2017).

From Elijah's repatriation project, it becomes visible that he attempts to link the repatriation practice with the revival of traditional music culture. He does not just send the historical recordings back to the 'locker' of culture bearers, but truly stimulates the younger people's interest in the musical heritage of their ancestors. While repatriating the audio-visual archives in his practice, also enables the old recordings to be activated and recirculated in a new narrative and performance. Therefore, I think, his efforts are valid and it may achieve a state of the real 'living archives'.

HOME-COMING OF THE LAUFER COLLECTION

Under the promotion of anthropologist, Franz Boas (1858-1942), German American anthropologist and historical geographer, Bertold Laufer (1874-1934), once considered to be the most outstanding Sinologist of his time, presided over the 'Jacob Schiff China expedition' (1901-1904) and more than 7500 items he thought could represent and symbolize Chinese culture were sent back to the United States. It included a quite many clothing, paintings, musical

instruments, shadow puppets, drama puppets, and other items. In addition, he recorded representative sound of China in 502 wax tubes, of which 399 are currently, collected by the Archives of Traditional Music (in the following ATM) at the Indiana University and becoming the Laufer Collection, generally considered as the earliest musical field sound recordings that heard in China at present times.

Since the spring of 2019, the Asia Europe Music Research Center (in the following AEMRC) of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music formally collaborates with the ATM regarding the project of ‘First Recordings’ from China: The 1901-1902 cylinders of Berthold Laufer’, which initiated the home coming journey of the Laufer Collection. I am also involved as a project assistant in this undertaking.

In this project, AEMRC has a very special role, which is not only the receiver of these precious early recordings but also undertakes the task of making the recordings heard and recognized by the knowledgeable people as a ‘transfer station’. We have gathered many experts and scholars from different disciplines and brought folk scholars and folk record collectors into the team. On the one hand, we have explored the significant value of the Laufer Collection for the research of traditional Chinese music and Chinese music history from different perspectives. On the other hand, we are trying to achieve the real ‘Home-coming’ of the special collection.

From the perspective of research, through the identification and analysis of the collection in the past two years, we found out that the recordings not only contain many lost plays, such as the *jingju* (京剧)² ‘*Da xiang shan*’ (大香山), but also involved varieties of Chinese music genres. This includes *tanhuang* (滩簧), *qinqiang* (秦腔), *guci* (鼓词), *chuida* (吹打), and nationwide folk songs that were popular in Shanghai and Beijing. Meanwhile, we took a closer look at some early forms and historical development of some genres from the recordings. For example, we discovered that the performing forms of *Jingju* (京剧) were not completely fixed back then. Many prominent performers would combine some local folk tunes within a *Jingju* (京剧) (张玄, 2021). In other words, the Laufer recordings present a glimpse of ‘pre-history’ of many contemporary *xiqu* (戏曲) and *quyi* (曲艺) genres in Shanghai.



FIGURE 2: Photography from the Laufer Collection adding up to the material of the audio recordings at hand (open source).

² *jingju* = opera

Based on years of *erhu* (二胡), playing experience and the academic background of musicological studies, team member Jinqiao realized that a *huqin* musician (胡琴) recording (ATM recording No. scy2931) in this collection, shows exquisite and mature composition and performance skills. He combined a notation-analysis with his practice of restoring the musical instrument performance (can be called HIP practice). It deepened mainly the academic understanding of the development of instrumental music at that time. (Jinqiao [金桥], 2020).

Regarding the dissemination of recordings, in addition to selected recordings and related academic research publications planned by the ‘First Recordings from China’ project, we also released some recordings to the general public through social media, which caused some heated discussions on the title, genre, lyrics and musical instruments of each recording very soon. For example, the *huqin* (胡琴) recording analyzed by Jinqiao has aroused a series of debates, is it *erhu* 二胡 or *banhu* 板胡? Is it an instrumental solo piece or developed from a *xiqu* (戏曲) accompaniment? One expert proposed it came out of the *jingju* (京剧) of the opera *Shiyuzhuo* (拾玉镯) and provided detailed information about the tunes.

Just as some of Hugh Tracey's old recordings did not specify all performers, there is almost no information about the performers in the Laufer Collection, so we can't find the specific owners of the recordings. What we can do is to return this important heritage of Chinese traditional music culture to the public and back to its ‘home’, instead of allowing the repatriation task to take place by any Chinese academia.

WHERE IS THE HOME? HOW TO GET HOME?

At the SEM conference of 2020, Xiao Mei and I introduced the Laufer repatriation project. After listening to the presentation, Anthony Seager came up with a series of questions: Where is the home of the Laufer Collection? Is Shanghai Conservatory of Music its home? Is academia its home? Whether it is valid to repatriate just digital files instead of physical items?

This also reminds me of the problems encountered in ILAM's repatriation works and inspires me to think further: how can repatriation be valid? It is not a one-way hand over but a practice process of joint efforts of people, institutions, and communities. In this process, everyone involved is socially active and a practicing subject capable of injecting a new life and narrative into historical archives.

In my opinion, the above two cases are typical for the work of the ‘Second Museum Age’. Scholars, archivists, and curators should recognize and understand that the real significance of archived items is not achieved by trying to fix the constant position of an object in the continuous change of time and space, but by recognizing that collections can produce and stimulate more practical significance through their own characteristics and interaction with different subjects. Museums and archival institutions have gradually transformed from the role of a ‘storehouse’ to a subject and place of cultural practice, becoming an open platform or a cultural space for knowledge reproduction and multiple interactions. Archived items are, therefore, ‘sites’ where people connect with each other, with different times and spaces. It will generate new meanings and establish new relationships in diverse contexts. The life of archived items is constantly written and updated during the interaction among archivists, archival institutions, entire societies, and the source community. At the crossroads of history and present times, archived items are constantly interpreted and its new life shoots are growing.

Repatriation of historical recordings has become an important issue of great concern as involved in our discipline, especially in the field of ethnomusicology, library science, and folklore. As Xiao Mei emphasized in the International Workshop on Repatriation: History and Significance of Early Sound Recordings in 2017, it is an emotional feedback from the scholars to the cultural bearers when talking about bringing historical recordings home. The word ‘repatriation’ itself

relates to the overtones of colonialism or post-colonialism. Hence, due to these thoughts, we prefer to use the term ‘home-coming’.

In other words, the concept of home-coming emphasizes the emotional meaning aroused by the old recordings, and equally importantly, the reverse nourishment of scholars to local communities. It also prepares to consider the similarities and differences between the repatriation of audible recordings and other antiques. Why should we bring the old recordings home? What should we do with them? Where is their so-called ‘real home’? How to go beyond repatriation of physical items, and truly achieve emotional, spiritual and cultural feedbacks? How to make the archives truly ‘living’ possessing their own vitality, and then make it grow in the ontological sense in its interaction with people (whether it is research or consumption), is the problem that every archivist should think about.

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