MEDIATING THE REPATRIATION OF EARLY RECORDINGS

Xiao Mei, Hu Kailin, Yu Yafei

In October 2001, I attended the Asia-Europe Foundation's Seminar on "Music Industries in the New Economy" held in Lyon, France. I participated in a roundtable discussion on "Globalization and Artists".

As the only non-artist in the group, and a scholar without a background in economics, I talked about the experiences I then had so far with the Institute of Music at the Chinese Academy of Arts. The institute spent half a century engaging with traditional Chinese folk music through collection, classification and preservation work. It had also made a landmark deposition of the first educational audio recording in the archives of the United Nation's "Memory of the World" Register. During those times and in the speech I gave, I emphasized the importance of preservation work in keeping cultural diversity alive. At the end of my speech, I said with hope: "I look forward to the day when a young Miao (Hmong) person from Guizhou walks through my office door and says: 'I want to hear the voice of my grandfather.' " I had just returned inspired from a trip in 1999 to the Northeast and Northwest of Guizhou, where I was conducting research on Miao music. At that time, on a mountainside, a local guide had pointed out a dirt trace to me and said, "Look, this is the fork in the road they took all those years ago." He was referring to my predecessors – the music scholars Jian Jinhua, He Yun, and Zhang Shuzhen. I was deeply touched by being able to trace their steps. However, at that time, it did not occur to me to take the initiative to return any field recordings to the Miao. I had not yet thought about the relationship between archives and communities of the researched. I only focused on preserving music, and believed that whenever there was a need, people could find me later in order to get it.

Between 2004 and 2007, one of my students decided to begin a research project on bridging sound recordings, fieldwork, and ethnomusicology. Her study revealed that the Music Research Institute had embarked on a large-scale survey and amassing of data in Hunan Province. However, this data was not available in Hunan itself, and not accessible by local people. What, then, was to be the relationship between the fieldworker, and the recorded communities? How were these recordings used? What were the results of these projects? What kind of stories did these relationships tell about cultural change and respect for the 'Other'? Today, I would finally like to focus on the topic of repatriation. I tell two stories drawing on my own research.

Story 1: Mergen temple's audio-visual documents on Tibetan Buddhist Mongolian chant

The city of Urat in Inner Mongolia is home to the Mergen temple, birthplace of Tibetan Buddhist Mongolian chant. The temple is known as the only site where Mongolian is used in the delivery of Tibetan chant. In 1783, abbot of the monastery, Morgen Gegen, later given the title of 'Living Buddha Lopsang Tanbe Gyaltsen', had published 129 works in Beijing collectively known as the "The Complete Works of Lopsang Tanbe Gyaltsen." The scriptures contain hymns, eulogies, stories of Mongolian folklore, notes on astronomy, medicinal remedies, among other aspects of Mongolian culture. To the Mongolian people, it is a valuable legacy featuring chants in the Mongolian language.

In the summer of 1996 and all the way until 2002, I visited the monastery six times. In the early days of my fieldwork I met 15 or more lamas who could master the Mongolian style of Tibetan chant. However, the last time I visited, only 1 or 2 individuals could do this. In 2002, the Living Buddha of the monastery invited me to visit him. He had just established a scheme to train local orphans in singing Tibetan chant in Mongolian language. They were taught by the last lama who knew the style. Not long after my visit, this lama passed away.

In 2005, I received a call from Mergen's Living Buddha Mengkbatu, who asked if I could provide the complete audio and video recordings of the chants I had filmed. They were hoping to publish an anthology of Mongolian chant for the monastery. Also, they needed the recordings as an educational tool in instructing the chant technique to younger generations, now that the master had passed away. This set of audio recordings would become an important basis for the sustaining of tradition and lineage. My earlier visit to the temple had been made on commission from Phoenix Satellite TV, which held the master recordings. In order to

retrieve and reproduce the original recordings for the monastery, I drew 15,000 yuan from my own pocket, and obtained a full set for the repatriation to the monastery.

FIGURE 1: Overview about Mergen temple (photo by Mengkbatu).

In 2012, Mengkbatu visited me in Shanghai with thanks, bringing several volumes of Mongolian scriptures that had been republished alongside a mastered set of the audio recordings we had made earlier. Just last week, Mengkbatu wrote to me again, thanking me for the videos, telling me of the important role they played in passing on the tradition. Through this case of the Mongolian chant, I began to see the importance of taking into the account the needs of local communities. To say the truth, I was the one who first had not taken the initiative to repatriate my findings.

Story 2: "Bringing Jack's Recordings Home"

My second story is about the repatriation of recordings made by the New Zealander composer and ethnomusicologist Jack Body during his trip to China in the 1980s. As a "post-nationalist" composer, Jack maintained a strong interest in different musical cultures around the world. This was a key feature of his compositional style, which used transcriptions of material he collected, as seen for example in the multicultural work 'Three Transcriptions'. The first movement featured a Chinese jaw's harp of the Yi people; the second movement used the Madagascan valiha zither, and the third movement featured a Bulgarian village band. Conducting fieldwork and collecting musics around the world became an important resource for his creative approach. In his own words: "I would gladly share my experiences and the results of these collaborations, and what I have learned from these cross-cultural encounters."

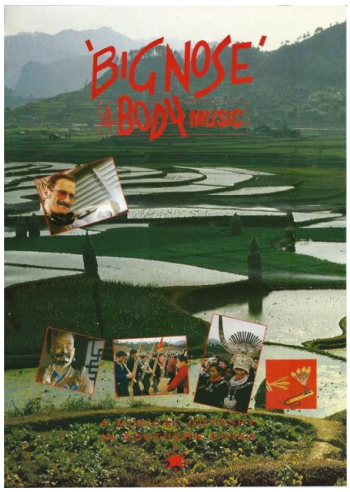

FIGURE 2: Film poster of 'Big Nose' and Body Music.

At the end of 2011, the scholar based in New Zealand Gong Hongyu wrote to me and conveyed Jack's hope of finding an institution which could receive his collection of Chinese recordings. I replied saying that our conservatory feels pleased to collaborate. This marked the beginning of my direct correspondence with Jack. On June 20 2013, Jack came in person to the Shanghai Conservatory to give a lecture, "Collaborating Across Cultures." He also visited our research institute and digital database. Over the next a year, as Jack's physical health destabilised, we began to organize and catalogue his data. In the fall of 2014, I went to New Zealand to give a lecture and formally accept his materials. One year later, Jack passed away. Two months after his dead, the Zhejiang Conservatory of Music held a commemorative symposium in his honour, in collaboration with the New Zealand Consulate in Shanghai and the Music School at the Victoria University of Wellington. At this meeting, I spoke about Jack's bequest and his cultural concern with "scapes." I noted that if Jack's donation was a kind of repatriation to China, then our task was to return the data back to where he had originally made these recordings.

Jack had made recordings in many sites, and we have first chosen to look at his recordings in Guizhou. Because his notes were not detailed, we could only pinpoint vague locations. So, looking for the original sites and the parties he had recorded became the first step in our mission. I summarise briefly:

1. The Search: In addition to sound recordings, Jack had shot a number of documentaries. Here, visual images proved to be important in identifying people and places. The group of re-researchers showed film footage of dance movements, local landscape, musical features such as the use of specific kinds of vibrato to local people. All these audivisuals provided clues towards distinguishing between different ethnic groups and clan lineages. For example, in this section of a lusheng (mouth organ) dance, one can find clues to the sites of his field recordings from the dance movements, the particular shape of the pipes, and the style of the music.

2. Historical memories: We also relied on images of landscapes to track down people – in particular, the instrument maker of the lusheng shown in the video. First, we visited the Kaili Cultural Center to conduct interviews, showing locals Jack's picture of a bridge, which was tracked to Danxi village. Here, we met with

the local director of the cultural centre. He led us to the home of Pan Tian Yuan, whose family had been making the lusheng for 17 generations. In the house of Pan, friends and family members identified the key character in the documentary as an uncle and grandfather. The young man in the original video is now an old man, and the grandfather in the original video has since died. Upon seeing their grandfather alive again on old footage, members of the Pan family were very touched.

3. Cultural Change: From the 1980s to the present, China has been undergone a huge transformation. Many of the scenes and circumstances shown in Jack Body's videos have changed dramatically. Musically speaking, the most obvious change is in the construction of the lusheng. The original instrument comprises six tubes, and uses a pentatonic scale. Today, the instrument has developed to feature 24 and 36 tubes, all tuned to 12-tone equal temperament.

4. Fieldwork Ethics: This is an issue which I want to emphasize. When we interviewed lusheng maker Pan's family, they only vaguely remembered a foreigner visiting their village in the distant past, but could not remember specific dates or names. However, they clearly recalled the visit of another interviewer from Japan. We discovered that this memory was vivid and entrenched because the Japanese scholar had sent some information back to the village from Japan; these were the published results of his research. The villagers have shown a letter and the original envelope from the Japanese scholar, as well as the title page of the publication, all of which had been saved from the 1990s. These artefacts were cherished by the villagers, and provided an anchor for the particular memory of the scholar's visit. Of course, Jack being a composer, we cannot expect him to think, then, of repatriating his recordings as Tanaka did. However, as ethnomusicologists today, the issue of repatriation is an important and a necessary task.

In addition, we encountered a new and specific problem in the process of retracing Jack's steps and beginning the repatriation process. As a result of tourism, many local villages have established museums. Upon knowing that we had a historic recording in our hands, many museums came forward to say that the footage was shot on their ground, each fighting for a claim to the data. This made me think about a new problem: If, 30 years ago, or even earlier, we had managed to return these materials to local communities, they would not have been able to listen to the recordings directly, because they did not have the equipment to do so. In today's digital age, where every household has access to digital equipment, will the return of these recordings lead to disputes between rivaling groups? How should we deal with such a situation? This question has to be left open.

Addition from the Discussion

Anthony Seegers asked two questions: 1) Do you have an answer to your own question? 2) What do you think the role of an archive might be?

In fact, the group that was visiting just recently the places of earlier fieldwork already identified some material. We also were forced to do some pre-researches to exactly find out to which village the recording belongs. Regarding this Lusheng dance, some people in area of earlier recordings claim the video. They even provide photos and say that the video must be taken in a certain village, then they wrote down specific names. However, as a result, our team found after careful investigation that the dance was actually a men's dance, and the photo provided shows a women's dance. Also, they said that a woman from that village was married in there. After repeated checking with informants, they admitted that it was indeed a men's dance. Therefore, it was very important to redo fieldwork and to study these details. This is the answer to the first question.

The answer to the second question is that we cannot just give these materials to individuals, though we still want to put them somewhere in the area they come from. Now, we are looking for someone in that province who is willing to accept the recordings as digital files and who give these files to those who really care about the contents and willing to work together with us in building a future archive. This is better than simply returning old recordings.

Notes

Bayly Watson (director). 1988. *'Big Nose' and Body Music.* Poster (public domain).

Mengkbatu ed. 2012. *The Collection of the Mergen Temple's Chanted Sutras in Mongolia*. Hohhot: unknown publisher.