

WAX CYLINDER RECORDINGS OF CHINESE MUSIC IN THE BERLIN PHONOGRAM ARCHIVE COLLECTION

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A brief history of the Berlin Phonogram Archive

The wax cylinder recordings of the Berlin Phonogram Archive,¹ consisting of – recordings made between 1893 and 1954, belongs to one of the oldest sound recording institutions of the world. Since 1999, these cylinder recordings are part of the UNESCO memory of the world. The importance of the collections of this archive e Berlin Phonogram Archive is should primarily mainly to be considered from seen in the its historical dimension. In using the technology developed by Thomas A. Edison for sound recording sound, unique recordings were made could be made to documenting musical cultures worldwide in during the first half of the 20th century.

The history of the Berlin Phonogram Archive began in 1900 when Carl Stumpf recorded a Thai music and theatre ensemble in Berlin with an Edison phonograph. With this collection of recordings, Stumpf laid the foundation of the ethnomusicological sound collections in the Ethnologisches Museum which belong to the most important collections worldwide in view of their historical and regional scope. Not much later, the Berlin Phonogram Archive was institutionally embodied, at first attached to the psychological institute, where Carl Stumpf worked as a professor. Already in 1905, Stumpf handed over the direction of the Berlin Phonogram Archive to his assistant Erich Moritz von Hornbostel, who became a central figure, on the one hand concerning the destiny of the Berlin Phonogram Archive, and on the other hand in view of the beginnings of a new research discipline: Comparative musicology (Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft). A main concern of Comparative Musicology of that time was to collect and compare as many different examples as possible of so-called “traditional” musical forms in order to create general theories on the origins and evolution of music. Through the recording activities of von Hornbostel and of others associated with the Phonogram Archive in Berlin, and additionally through recordings that were made by researchers, missionaries, and private individuals in many parts of the world, the holdings in Berlin increased and so did the material basis for comparative research. In 1923 the Berlin Phonogram Archive was incorporated into the Hochschule für Musik (Conservatory of Music) before it became part of the Museum für Völkerkunde (today: Ethnologisches Museum) in 1934 after Hornbostel had emigrated from Germany. From 1934 on Marius Schneider took over the direction of the archive. Shortly before the end of World War II major parts of the then approximately 14.000 cylinder recordings were evacuated, brought to Russia, and from there finally reached the former Eastern part of Berlin. They finally returned to the Museum für Völkerkunde in 1991, where they were preserved and analyzed within the scope of a project. In the course of this project, the conservation and digitization of these historical cylinder recordings got started and still continues. Meanwhile, the major part of the cylinder collections could be transferred into digital formats.

¹ Today part of the Media Department – Berlin Phonogram Archive, Ethnomusicology, Visual Anthropology of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin.



FIGURE 1: Wax cylinders and Galvanos (copper negatives). Foto: Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

Altogether, the Berlin Phonogram Archive encompasses 351 wax cylinder collections. They vary greatly in size, quality given the conditions of available documentation as well as recordings. Among the approx. 30.000 sound carriers of the Berlin Phonogram Archive (2,749 original cylinders, 14,065 Galvanos/copper negatives, 15,214 historical copies) are recordings from all continents. Some collections were recorded in Berlin during guest performances of mostly non-European musicians or at so-called “Völkerschauen”. Other recordings were made in situ by academics, missionaries, or travelers with an interest in “exotic” music and later were given to the archive by these collectors.

Wax Cylinder Collections – Overview

At this point, it is impossible to give a detailed review on the relevant historical collections from the Berlin Phonogram Archive. Therefore, I subsequently summarize some basic information about the wax cylinder collections containing Chinese music.

Collection Archiv China

The collection consists of only four cylinders recorded in Berlin, probably at the Phonogram Archive, in 1909 and 1911. A list in the recordings of the archive gives some information on the content of the material, the hymn of Confucius in different dialects (1.-3.), whereas one recording consists of vocal music. The document also provides the names of the musicians involved in the recording.

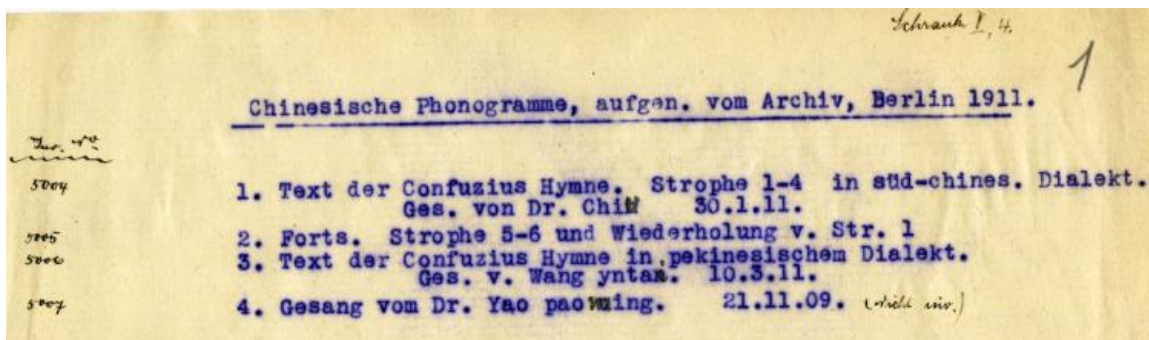


FIGURE 2: Document from the Berlin Phonogram Archive records that lists the recordings belonging to the *Archiv China* collection.

Collection Beschnidt China

The collection consisted of 71 cylinders, two of them are lost today. Margarete Beschnidt (1868-1954) stayed in China as a Christian missionary for several years. Between 1912 and 1932 she recorded children's songs and traditional vocal music in the Shansi province and sent this collection over to the Berlin Phonogram Archive.

Collection DuBois-Reymond China

Marie DuBois-Reymond was born in 1864 in Germany and married to Claude DuBois-Reymond, who was lecturer for European medicine in China. The originally 51 cylinder recordings (two are lost today) were made by Marie DuBois-Reymond between 1908 and 1914, when the couple lived in Shanghai. She sent the recordings from China to the Berlin Phonogram Archive together with some written commentaries.

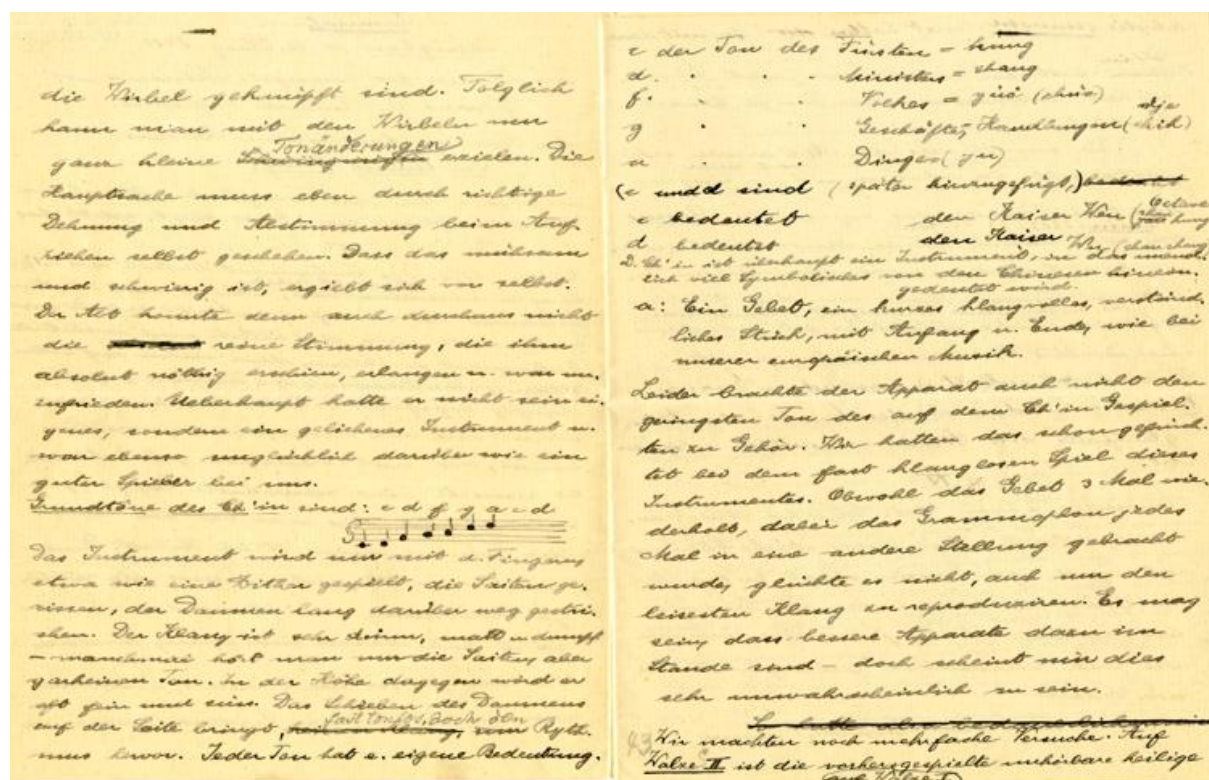


FIGURE 3: Excerpt from a notebook Marie DuBois-Reymond used to document information on the recordings she took. Subsequently, she sent her notes to the Berlin Phonogram Archive together with her recordings.

Collection Mueller China

Herbert Mueller (1885-1966) studied jurisprudence, linguistics and anthropology and after finishing his doctoral dissertation, he became assistant at the East Asia department of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin (today Ethnologisches Museum Berlin). In 1912/1913 he travelled to China for the first time. During his stay he recorded approximately 100 cylinders, but only 47 cylinders still exist today. He recorded traditional as well as ceremonial and Buddhist and theatre music. While in China, Mueller stayed in touch with Erich Moritz von Hornbostel at the Berlin Phonogram Archive keeping him updated about his recording activity. Interested in Chinese music, Hornbostel and other scholars used the recordings later on brought to Berlin by Mueller, as an important source and published transcriptions and analyses of some pieces. Mueller not only recorded music, he also took photos of musicians and musical instruments and collected ethnographic objects.

Collection Oost China

The collection Oost China consists of 10 cylinders and was recorded in 1909 by Josef van Oost (1877-1939). Van Oost was born in Belgium and spent several years in China as a Christian missionary. Within this framework he recorded Chinese music and published a paper on this topic in 1912². Until today it is not exactly known how the recordings became part of the Berlin Phonogram Archive collection.

Collection Waldeyer China

Anton Waldeyer (1901-1970) was a medical doctor, who spent some years in China to teach at the university in Shanghai. In 1935 he made music and language recordings and send them to the Berlin Phonogram Archive after his return to Germany. He originally recorded 21 cylinders, but according to a written list three of them already were missing when the collection arrived at the Phonogram Archive.

Collection Weiss Südchina and Weiss Westchina

Fritz Weiss (1877-1955), who spent several years in China as an interpreter and later as counsel in Western China, recorded two collections of Chinese music for the Berlin Phonogram Archive. He was often accompanied by his wife, Hedwig M. Weiss-Sonnenburg. In 1912 he recorded a collection of nine cylinders that was registered as collection *Weiss Westchina* at the Berlin Phonogram Archive. The recordings contain vocal music. In the next two years, 1913-1914, he continued recording and send another collection of 40 recordings of traditional vocal and instrumental music to Berlin. This collection is referred to as collection *Weiss Südchina*. Three cylinders of this collection are lost today.

Current perspectives on historical cylinder recordings

Research on collections has always been an important topic for all kinds of museums. The research on an object's provenance³, the exploration of an "object biography", and in some cases the consequential restitution or repatriation of objects are key issues museums deal with every day. This is also true for the sound collections of the Berlin Phonogram Archive. Nevertheless, when it comes to repatriation there exist similarities, but also differences between sound recordings and, for example, ethnographic objects⁴ or pieces of art. As Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub put it in the introduction to their article on repatriation of recordings made by Klaus Wachsmann to Uganda: "The recording represents a moment in time rather than an object in space" (2012: 207). Lancefield (1998) argues that with regard to sound recordings, the "objects",

² Oost, Josef von: "Chanson populaires chinoises de la région Sud de Ortos. Sur la listière de la grande muraille entre Ju-lin et Han-ma-tch'e". In: *Anthropos*, Vol. 7 (1912), Nr. XXVI der Mitteilungen der Phonogramm-Archivkommission der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien.

³ In Germany, „Provenienzforschung“ (provenance research) for a long time at least in the public perception was immediately connected with a clarification of ownership with regard to pieces of art that potentially have been illegally acquired or dispossessed during the national-socialist regime between 1933–1945. Although this is a highly important issue, provenance research, especially within the framework of ethnological collections, means much more than a clarification of ownership, see e.g. Feigenbaum (2012). An overview of activities and a general statement of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (of which the Ethnologisches Museum is a part) with regard to provenance research can be accessed here: <https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/priorities/provenance-research-and-issues-of-ownership.html> (last access 18.10.2017).

⁴ See Lancefield (1998: 50), Nannyonga-Tamusuza, Weintraub (2012: 207-208).

i.e. the sound carriers, are not so much in the center of interest, but “their cultural value inheres in (or is constructed from) the replicable sounds they carry” (Lancefield 1998: 50). Therefore talking about repatriation of sound recordings usually means the repatriation of copies, nowadays usually digital audio files of the original wax cylinders or tapes. Consequentially, digitization is a core task with regard to preservation and safeguarding of recorded sound. At the same time digitization is an important premise for repatriation⁵. Digitization of historical wax cylinder recordings is for various reasons a challenging and time-consuming business⁶. The short collection descriptions above show that most collections also contain more or less extensive written documents (lists, notebooks, correspondence) that complete the sound recordings. These written sources are enormously important and need to be digitized as well. Above that, it often is necessary to transcribe and translate them to facilitate an examination.

Since the 1990s, the Ethnologisches Museum constantly works on the digitization of the wax cylinder collections. About 3/4 of the wax cylinder recordings have been transferred to digital format until today, as well as 1/2 of the written material belonging to these collections. Within the framework of opportunities of digitization, the role of ethnomusicological sound archives has changed, as well as expectations with regard to access and visibility⁷. The Berlin Phonogram Archive in the past years has conducted different forms of collaboration with so-called heritage communities: Shared publications (usually CDs with an extensive commentary of content and collection history), online publication of collections via the museum’s online database smb-digital, repatriation of a depositum of digital audio files of a collection to an archive or institution of heritage communities. These activities continue constantly and aim at making all historical sound collections accessible, as well as all available information and interpretations that are essential for an understanding and evaluation of these historical sources. As the case in many archives, museums and other cultural institutions, activities are often limited by human and financial resources. Apart from that, an engagement with the historical collections of the Berlin Phonogram Archive is a task that unconditionally requires collaboration with people from the heritage communities (i.e. musicians, ethnomusicologists, archivists). Nannyonga and Weintraub write that “Repatriation is a form of cultural critique: a critical and reflexive discourse about the social relations of power in cultural representations, and a model for dissembling and potentially undoing those relations” (Nannyonga-Tamusuza, Weintraub 2012: 209). This presupposes collective research and shared knowledge. With regard to the collections mentioned above, I hope that this short outline can be a first step towards a shared exploration of these unique historical sources.

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⁵ With regard to chances and challenges of “digital repatriation” see Christen (2011).

⁶ For a general introduction see the chapter “Conservation and Digitalisation of the Holdings of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv” by Albrecht Wiedmann in Ziegler (2006).

⁷ See e.g. Landau, Topp Fargion (2012).

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