

# REPATRIATION OF INTANGIBLE HERITAGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MAINTAINING CULTURAL RESOURCES

Gisa Jähnichen  
Shanghai Conservatory of Music

## Introduction

Cultural Resources play an important role in the future. They not only deliver information but also personal relatedness that is not replaceable by artificial intelligence. The maintenance and creative development of cultural resources is actually crucial to not only serve identity features of an ethnic group, a nation, a region, or whatever group of people. Maintaining cultural resources help sustain human individuality and human diversity. Musicology or anthropology are often seen as professions that cannot provide for a family since studies in these fields are exactly that part of humanities and social sciences which seem to have the worst reputation in real academic settings (Warner, 2015). Fortunately, current thoughts on repatriation show clearly that research about cultural resources will have to be increasingly supported. Only with a deeper knowledge if not with at least some better knowledge about cultural resources, human society can balance further developments which were possible through new technology that allows for moving on socially.

At this point of history regarding recorded sound, the field of cultural resources gets more than ever in the focus of knowledge accumulation. However, the transition period from simply shelving analogue recordings to making purposefully use of advanced technology in sound and audiovisual archiving shows bizarre features of understanding the matter of repatriation of early sound recordings. Some small mindedness among not a few highly capable decision makers can be observed. This small mindedness can be found among those who feel professionally responsible for the preservation of early recordings which are placed in the center of this important workshop held in Shanghai 2017. Without claiming for completeness, the following list shows a few of these “understandings” to just start a serious discussion:

- 1) There is no real need of old sound recordings because old sound recordings are for weird people who do not have any other problems. That means, only a few freaks are interested in but not the people who should be keen to get the old recordings back.
- 2) It is too expensive in terms of time and manpower to do anything with them unless someone pays properly for that effort. Keeping these recordings is horribly expensive. So, if anyone wants to do something about them, then it should be paid for already conducted maintenance first.
- 3) Actually, those people to whom the recordings supposedly belong should be happy that these recordings exist. Otherwise, nothing much would be known about their past. However, we don't know enough about the recordings to be sure of their meaning, so it is not worth to be too excited.
- 4) Why these people don't wait for the downloadable experience? Is it really that important to return old recordings as a digital file put on a nice tangible carrier to just have the feeling of getting “something lost” back? That seems to be ridiculous. Also, the people did not lose old recordings. On the contrary, the people should be thankful that these old recordings were safely kept.

The expressed opinions above were exchanged with the staff of one of the largest phonogram archives of Europe. They are audio-visually traceable but not publicly accessible (Author's notes and recordings, June, September, 2017, ASHCoM). They were collected in an open discourse and represent a part of professionals dealing with repatriation. Expecting a discussion of issues while repatriating or the matter of culturality in cultural resources, which seems to be important for future undertakings, the how and why of repatriation is questioned in some currently working institutions with important collections. As a sign of irony, this discourse is also a cultural resource that may play a role in future human development.

In the following, the 4 issues will be discussed one by one taking an example of the Weiss Collection as an example to demonstrate further questions.

## Issue 1

1) There is no real need of old sound recordings because old sound recordings are for spleeny people who do not have any other problems. That means, only a few freaks are interested in but not the people who should be keen to get the old recordings back.

Listening to how the world sounded in the past is undoubtedly inspiring. The worst part of being knowledgeable today is that many people cannot imagine the state of “unknowing” present time achievements in industry, culture, or generally in human society. Noise, man-made or nature sound, changed and is out of any imagination. To say it simply: we cannot imagine the sound of the past without all the sounds we added in the course of time and with the many sounds we silenced. Therefore, any recorded sound of the past can be enriching and eye opening. Though the recording quality is obviously poor, the imagination of its occurrence is overwhelming if supplied to a professional listener. Those who are familiar with sound studies or audio facilities, are the first being interested in listening to early recordings. However, the people who feel a cultural belonging—and these people may have rapidly changed over the times—may follow soon as they will explore their environment through means of modern technology. Political ambitions may be the smallest motivation in getting old recordings.

A more serious issue is the fact that people who collected sounds in the past transmit not only the physical carrier with intangible information but also the attitude of collecting. A collector of the past was often a person of power with a technology unavailable to the collected. The collector was acting on behalf of an institution or a government; they had privileges in doing so granted by the superiors of the collected and supported by the wealth attributed to these superiors. Many collectors seemed to look down to what they collected and did not bother to not take notice of the performers' names or individual personalities since the recorded persons were just items belonging to a species, a practice, a place, or a single event. This seems to be cruel and yet, it is still an issue as vividly described by Smith (1999) and Ortner (2006). The magic term ‘methodology’ requested throughout all professional ways of knowing is rooted in a colonizing attitude. Passing on this still unrevised methodology comes with the prize of re-colonizing knowledge on a different level, not between West and East, but between majority and minority, between powerful minority and less powerful minority, between men and women, between young and old, between modern and traditional, and between those who implement the methodology first and those who come too late. Though this discussion is not in the scope of this article, power relationships substantiated by the way how early recordings came into being could in some cases continue in difficulties with repatriation. The study of agency (Ortner, 2006:137) in this regard is highly recommended.

Yet there is a strong need in old recordings. Possibly everybody who can afford thinking of their future beyond the personal horizon, old recordings make new recording achievements somehow more “historical”. By experiencing the difference in quality, the future change of current quality will be more realistically anticipated. By knowing what was recorded in past times, present time recordings become less mind dominating. Saying that only some freaks would be interested in early recordings continues the colonial pattern of divides in the elite and the crowd, the educated sub-being that is affected by one's own role model and the dumb rest who just imitates the outer appearance without showing any true interest.

## Issue 2

2) It is too expensive in terms of time and manpower to do anything with old recordings unless someone pays properly for that effort. Keeping these recordings is horribly expensive. So, if anyone wants to do something about them, then it should be paid for already conducted maintenance first.

This argument is rather disturbing as it comes out of a complete detachment from any responsibility for historical facts but with the experience of economic pressure caused by an obviously irresponsible system of historical continuity that makes so many efforts appearing just unsolved ethical issues.

It is a question of applied ethics in a world of rapid globalization and amalgamation in working processes that overlaps with the demand of culturally patterned differences in ethical approaches to each other taking religions, traditions, and individuality as a valid justification. Who is the maintenance party to demand this? To whom is it horribly expensive? Who is in the end the party that invests or profits? Isn't everybody investing as well as profiting? Again, the study of social agency in detail would be very helpful (Ortner, 2006: 137).

Only after answering these questions, the given argument can be analyzed. The cost-sensitive administration of an archive is surely not the final decision maker in this regard as the whole issue is rather an aspect of global conflicts beyond any archival horizons. For the meantime, the simple ethical education of the archivists, the people who maintain the recordings and invest their human intelligence should have been made stronger. Much could be done if people would not be ridiculed when striving for a responsible dealing with old recordings though there might be a lack of established rules in important institutions. Rules are often shaped through practice. Most of the complaints, as they have been observed, come from parties who will be undoubtedly able to decide otherwise. However, this should not spare a wider movement reaching political decisions on higher level. In line with this may be developed a strong and openly promoted new approach to a decolonizing methodology as suggested by a number of scholars (Carpenter & Riley 2014, Meskell 2013, Soderland & Lilley 2015, Smith 1999). Such a changed approach also decolonizes academia in itself and changes finally the perspective of economic effects.

Interestingly, there is a mirror of the problem: When I finished working for a archiving project in a remoted, land-locked area far from not only former colonizers but also far from academia and anything close to it. The project money run out but many tasks were still under the way. I decided to sponsor the most necessary expenses personally. Not much later, the administration of the attached institution asked for proper sponsoring of facilities as the project could only be continued as planned if these costs are covered. I was unfortunately upset about this request. But I should have thought deeply about it. It was my understanding of the matter and that of my students and trained staff to continue with the working task. Being in need of help and standing up for the right perspective does not always mean being in the right perspective of others. This has to be learned and negotiated all along the culturally interactive way regarding old recordings. However, I am not surprised anymore about those being 'helped' seeing themselves as helpers.

The second argument is closely related to the third argument:

### Issue 3

3) Actually, those people to whom the recordings supposedly belong should be happy that these recordings exist. Otherwise, nothing much would be known about their past. However, we don't know enough about the recordings to be sure of their meaning, so it is not worth to be too excited.

This argument uttered by professionals and enthusiasts being involved in preservation and description seems to be indeed an outcry for help. Their work is based on other anthropologists' or ethnomusicologists' experiences accessible in various ways and under different conditions such as secondary sound recordings, hand written notes, letters, or simple forms filled in under time pressure (Ziegler, 2006).

Also, looking at the process of repatriation, there might be some truth on both sides of the negotiation table as some administrators of cultural institutions or village heads wish to overrule public interest by superficial enthusiasm and goals serving other purposes than cultural knowledge building. And then, again, the question arises whether the descendants of the powerful collectors are just opinionated and do not consider their own academic history in the light of the requests for repatriation. The ethic issue evolves in combination with the vulnerable academic approach.

For example, while accessing one of the recordings in the collection of Weiss. Everything known about this early recording is taken from descriptions in the language of the collector, widely inaccessible to people outside the collector's world. Operating with the little information given and figuring out what might have been the context of the recording, local people had to be contacted and the recording had to be compared with other old recordings, experts and cultural representatives consulted. The result is discouraging as the information given through the collector and the recently provided information is so far apart from each other that creates doubts about other collections of the same archive or at least about any other item of the same collection.

Also, and that is a point important to the process of repatriation, the author did not take part in the archival institutions' search for more information through experts in the collectors' cultural and academic circles. The results might be less influenced by the diachronically approachable background.

The recorded sound was the most significant source of information. The second step, recently less widespread as a method, was the depiction of the musical interpretation. The sound is transcribed as an excerpt using traditional 5 line staff notation and structured in musical phrases of different length in order to visualize the way of shaping the musical idea. The result looks like this:

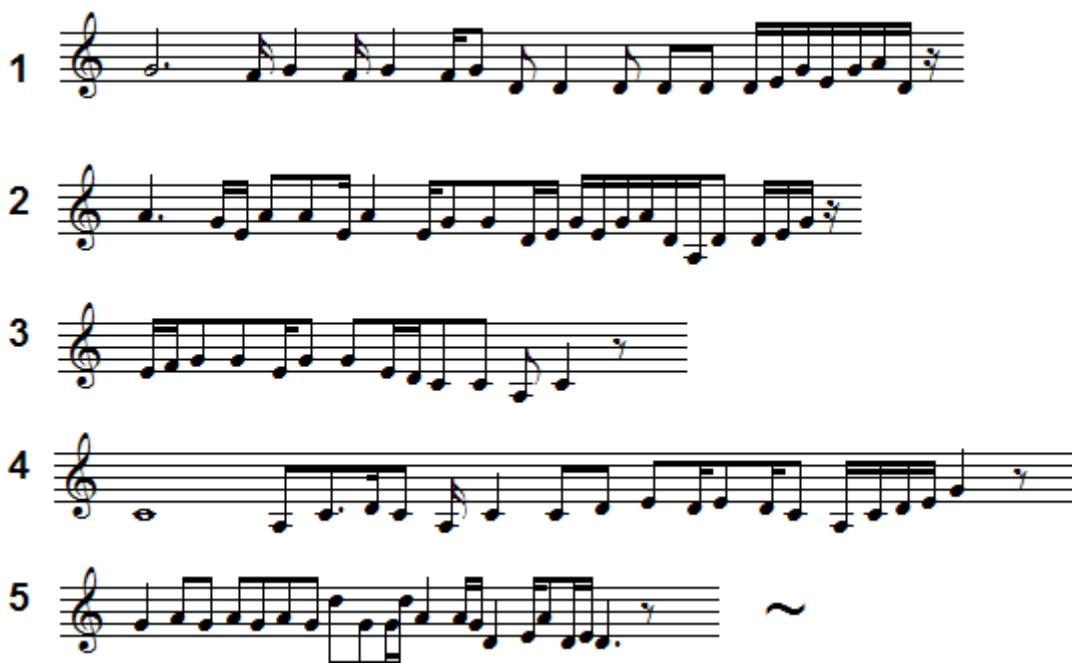


FIGURE 1: Transcription of a recording found on cylinder 13 of the Weiss Collection Südchina, the beginning until 0:00:40:02 (it is sung on vowels without word meaning).

<p>VII_W_6341_Weiss_Südchina_13_NK  from Wave Sound, 0:02:23, 12372 KB  Date modified 29 May 2006</p>	
<p>Yi "song" in the intonation of a wind instrument  in a dialect used north of Yunnan  free metric, with inserted words</p>	<p>Aufgenommen bei dem Stamme der Wu Pao Chia (Lolo)  November 1913. Yangtse s Min (Szechuan)  Imitation des Flötengesanges auf einem Stück Holz  rhythmische Sprache</p>

FIGURE 2: Information available through the published catalogue of cylinder recordings (Ziegler 2006) and a first listening considering some dialect experiences in the originating area.

A bit like Bimo's tone in a Yi-like intonation, Human voice (one person). The text is just simple, but in the middle of the song, the singer asks for putting the light on (the fire) around 41 seconds into the song. Atieshuori, an informant coming from an Yi-group in Sichuan, confirms that this melody is representing another music usually produced on a wind instrument called buma which denotes supposedly a vertical flute. Despite not being sure of this by investigating the musical structure later, Atieshuori can understand parts of the text he listened to: “哼唱，学当地的马布曲。越西和甘洛一带。“我会学唱马布曲，马布曲的意思是：把火烧起来，我要烤火。把火烧起来，我要烤火”[humming.../ I learn a melody from the buma, in Yuexi and Ganluo, light on the fire, I need to warm up myself, light on the fire, I need to warm up myself... ]. He identifies the song according to the text as the buma tune, which consists of repetitive parts about making a fire. There seems to be a contradiction to what the original recordist noted. The call for making light or fire is part of the song text and not a literary request. Interestingly, the text identification dominates the process of identifying the represented practice of the buma playing. The only hint of dealing with a representing sound is the remark that the singer is shouting noisily, which would not be tolerated by today's villagers. The 'shouting' might be a hint of imitating a reed instrument rather than a flute. Generally, the practice of representing wind instruments onomatopoeically or through whistling is not surprising. However, the recordist did mention this case as something outstanding since it was due to the given circumstances. It can be concluded that there were no instruments other than those imitated and the singer, who could have been the bimo of the village, who just wanted to show the sound and possibly imitating a sound like a wind instrument. Doing so, might not have been a practice but an outstanding behavior of this one person towards the stranger.

The information is so vague and inconsistent that the recorded item is hard to define. From today's viewpoint, the exact meaning might be the most interesting. However, from the viewpoint of an archivist or a recordist, this example shows that this old recording is anything but a clear case and that the whole recording situation might have been put up in representation of absent possibilities. Consequently, the description of the source as well as the sound has to be critically approached at any time. Being an early recording does not mean being the most "original" recording.

In the said collection, this song is followed by another song executed by the same singer (cylinder 14 of the Weiss Collection Südchina). However, this recording represents a wedding song that is never sung alone but in a group of people as this is a wedding song .

The problem with old recordings is indeed a missing reliability of any accompanying documentation. However, it is the recording itself that shows the facts. The cylinder 13 recording supposes to be an imitation of an instrument. But right in the beginning, when properly analyzed, for example by transcribing a short part of the sound, it is obvious that here are imitated at least two instruments, It could be a pair of melody instruments and not only one. In the fifth line, the second higher pitched instrument comes in, which marks the conclusion of the rather free metric introduction. Shortly after that, the singer arrives at the repetitive call for making a fire to warm up himself as part of a traditional text identified as the buma tune.

The result is that one sole singer could represent more instruments that are possibly often used together in various events. He never claimed of delivering an authentic musical item. The supposed 'performer' already summarized, 'translated', and 'packed' the information into something that is hard to recognize later through means of a description. Nobody can be sure about anything as there is always a detachment from knowledge regarding space, time, or agents. But, does it mean that it is not worth to look into the details and recover the conditions? Kahunde (2012) tried to get to a similarly rhetoric question though coming from another perspective when reviving a court tradition with the help of old recordings made available through the British Library.

To deliver another striking example currently experienced: In search of the various ways in making a lusheng, a mouthorgan made mainly by Miao people in Guizhou and Guangxi to be used in large sets by Dong, Yao, and Miao people, an idea developed. What if researchers use social media in order to find past instrument makers by spreading insufficiently documented pictures from items collected in various folklore museums? Discussing this issue in a serious way among scholars in Guangxi, it was concluded that it is not the belief in discovering the truth about these items through crowdsourcing but the belief that this method could stimulate the awareness of historical developments and communal knowledge in remote areas among those who are widely alienated from it through exactly those social media. A question that sounds like searching for information can have a great impact on the connectedness between generations and recently shifted communities. Sometimes, as it seems, the method is the goal. This search movement started already. Now, many people know about the few still living lusheng makers and young villagers think of participating in the reconstruction of past skills.

This example guides directly to the last argument:

## Issue 4

4) Why don't these people wait for the downloadable experience? Is it really that important to return old recordings as a digital file put on a nice tangible carrier to just have the feeling of getting "something lost" back? That seems to be ridiculous. Also, the people did not lose old recordings. On the contrary, the people should be thankful that these old recordings were safely kept.

A proverb says that only two things can always be given without losing them: kisses and songs. Pondering about this encouraging saying, the reality shows that only in case of a cultural conditioning based on similar values is given, this idea can be valid. If with every kiss – let's say – a marble would be created and got into the pocket of the kiss receiver, kissing would not be seen as something that stays with the giver. It would be seen as producing something, which is no matter how economically invaluable of personal interest to someone else. So it is with songs, with music, with sound of any kind if being recorded. If the product would have been digital in past times, the download may work fine. But it is not. The past is, so to say, not the past in this regard. It is a time in which something got lost by ways of producing this something out of what was done.



Of course, the digital experience may help to improve empowerment and control about intangible items. However, there was a time of non-digital items. The awareness of this time symbolizes the imagination of gaining back control over items that could produce any type of knowledge engraved on any type of carrier. It seems legit to ask for a non-digital way of return of something being lost in course of this practice. Seen from the viewpoint of the inherited skills, this is undoubtedly a “non-alternative” fact. Still, compromises could be negotiated. The carrier returned carries digital data and is materially completely different from the one who once carried the given information. This negotiated result shows that the act of giving is more important than the shape of the given item. In fact, the conscious doing is the point, not the technically done. Again, this points towards the study of agency and intentionality (Ortner, 2006) in the context of repatriation.

Though people do not lose experiences and skills, they may feel a loss. And if not a loss, they may feel being exploited. Seen in this light, the request of getting a digital copy back in a way of a material transmission that may include a ceremony and a direct approach to the community that is considered to be the source of the collection is not surprising. Meskell’s (2013) indication that intangible culture is difficult in this regard finds its very simple solution: all intangibility has a tangible environment from where people set off.

The maintenance of cultural resources includes its detailed understanding from more than one perspective. The future will add yet another one. Arguments which are used in order to defend the current state of dealing with early recordings have to be critically studied. Not all aspects of these arguments are easily to oppose. Nevertheless, future studies within the requesting cultures can help explain necessities of balancing power on every single level in the process of repatriation and maintaining cultural resources.

## References

- Atieshuori & Xiao Mei. 2018. Personal communication. 14 January, 2018.
- Carpenter, K., and A. Riley. 2014. “Indigenous Peoples and the Jurisgenerative Moment in Human Rights”. *California Law Review* 102 (1): 173–234.
- Chuzhuo and Gisa Jähnichen (2017). Personal communication, 4 September, 2017, Nanning, Guangxi.
- Kahunde, Samuel. 2012. “Repatriating Archival Sound Recordings to Revive Traditions: The Role of the Klaus Wachsmann Recordings in the Revival of the Royal Music of Bunyoro-Kitara, Uganda”. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 21 (2): 197-219.
- Meskell, L. 2013. “UNESCO and the Fate of the World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Council of Experts (WHIPCOE)”. *International Journal of Cultural Property* 20 (2): 155–174.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 2006. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwa I. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press.
- Soderland, Hilary A. & Ian A. Lilley. 2015. The fusion of law and ethics in cultural heritage management: The 21st century confronts archaeology. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 40 (5).
- Su Yi Miao and Gisa Jähnichen. 2017. Personal communication, 30 September 2017, Vientiane.
- Taking It All Back Home, Sun 3 Apr 2016 18:45, BBC Radio 3, Fri 4 Aug 2017 22:15, BBC Radio 3, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b075p6n9>. Last accessed 1 Oct 2017.
- Warner, Marianne. 2015. “Learning my Lesson”. *London Review of Books*, 37 (6) [19 March 2015]: 8-14.
- Zheng and Tian Jindi. 2017. Personal communication, 3 Sep 2017, Sanjiang, Guangxi.
- Ziegler, Susanne. 2006. *Die Wachszylinder des Berliner Phonogramm-Archivs*. Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. Bd NF 73. Abt. Musikethnologie, Medien-Technik und Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv Bd XII. Berlin: Staatliche Museen.