Asian Collections at the American Folklife Center Archive

Nora Yeh
Folklife Specialist, nyeh@loc.gov

The American Folklife Center (AFC) Archive holds sound recordings of music and other performing arts from all over the world. Since the contents of AFC’s Asian collections are diverse in every way imaginable, this survey will attempt to focus on Asian music traditions and folk arts, and to achieve a balance among the various cultural areas.

Geographically, the countries of Afghanistan, Armenia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Borneo, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, China, Georgia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea (North and South), Laos, Lebanon, Libya, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of China (Taiwan), Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibet, Turkey, Vietnam, and Yemen are represented in the Archive’s sound recordings. [1]

Culturally, Asia is extremely complex and most countries embody deep cultural stratifications. Populations have shifted, assimilated, become isolated, and/or been forcibly mixed over time. Linguistic, social, political and economic impacts have all determined which materials have come to the AFC Archive. It is challenging even to define what “Asian collections” mean, for AFC collections include recordings of bluegrass collected in Japan, Chinese folk tunes accompanied by classical piano, and an Anglo-American performer singing Hindu music in Europe. However, I have chosen to highlight those collections most important to recent scholarship.

One historically significant collection is the 1919 version of the Hornbostel Demonstration Collection (AFS 10053-10054) [2] from the Berlin Phonogram-Archive. Two ten-inch tapes copied from 120 cylinders, recorded in the early 1900s by collectors in various parts of the world, comprise Sinhalese, Indian, Siamese, Burmese, Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian music. The accompanying folder provides detailed information in both English and German. Another early sound recording is a seven-inch tape in the John Schwarz / 1900 Paris World’s Fair Recordings (AFS 14300), duplicated from three cylinders in the Musée de l’Homme, which documented delegations from Hanoi and China.

Two excellent collections recorded at the Library of Congress Recording Laboratory are the Chinese flute and ch’ in [3] pieces played on October 16, 1945 by the master Zha Fuxi of Soochow, China, called the Chen-hu Cha Recordings of Ch’in Music (AFC 1968/006); and the Dorothy M. Spencer Recordings of Gujarati Bhajans and Hindu Chants (AFC 1968/004)[4], recorded on May 24, 1946.

A thoroughly documented collection of seven wire recordings comprise the Peter, Prince of Greece Recording Projects (AFC 1952/003), which contain field recordings [5] collected in India at a Nestorian church service in Kerala in 1949 and among Tibetan lamas in Kalimpong in 1950.

Many Asian materials are embedded in larger collections that contain multiple cultural groups. In the extensive Laura Boulton Collection Part 20 (AFC 1973/028) [6], sound recordings (AFS 18107 – 18146) were made and annotated during her expedition to Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Borneo, Cambodia, Bali, Sarawak, Thailand, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal [7], Iran, Iraq and Turkey in the 1950s. The Sam Eskin Collection (AFC 1999/004) contains 16,568 items collected between 1953 and 1969, when Eskin recorded local music and lore in the United States, Mexico, Jamaica, Cuba, England, Scotland, Spain, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, Hong Kong, the Philippines, India, and Thailand. Among his manuscript materials is a Japanese song book.

The Wayland Hand Collection of Songs and Lore of Urban California (AFS 11859-11864), collected between 1956 and 1960 by Hand, D.K. Wilgus and their students, recorded Japanese children’s songs and political campaign songs from the Philippines. A collection containing mostly Armenian folk tales...
and songs, the *Thelma James Recording Project* (AFC 1950/003), consists of thirty twelve-inch records collected by James in the late 1940s.

The American Folklife Center loaned recording equipment to Dr. Karl Signell, which enabled him to collect music and interviews of first generation Japanese, Chinese, Laotian, Hmong, Khmer (Cambodian) and Vietnamese immigrants. Using the materials in the *Asian Music in the New World Collection* (AFC 1981/003), Signell produced a series of radio broadcasts.

*The Pete and Toshi Seeger Film Collection* (AFC 2003/027) contains approximately seven hundred film and audio elements. In addition to the folk-revival materials of the 1950s, the majority of these films document the Seeger family's ten-month performing tour of Japan, Indonesia, India, East and West Africa, Israel, the USSR, and Ireland during 1963 and 1964. The Seegers filmed traditional music and dance in all of these nations.

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*The Chicago Ethnic Arts Project Collection* (AFC 1981/004) documented the community activities, music and dance performances, food habits, religious celebrations, textile arts, and wood carvings among Chinese, Japanese, Jewish, and Korean immigrants. Another example is the *Lowell Folklife Project Collection* (AFC 1987/042) [8], which examined folklore subjects, including recreation, religious rites and ceremonies, textiles, organization, belief and behavior systems, urban development, arts, attitudes, neighborhoods, relations, festivals, and food habits among the Cambodian American and Vietnamese American communities.

More Asian materials can be found in:
- *Sidney Robertson Cowell Collection of Folk Music Recorded in Ireland, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaya* (AFC 1959/004)
- *Fahnestock South Sea Collection* (AFC 1986/033)
- *Metropolitan Atlanta Folklife Project Collection* (AFC 1991/016)
- *International Storytelling Collection* (AFC 2001/008)
- *Local Legacies Collection* (AFC 2000/001)

In the 1980s, the American Folklife Center conducted fieldwork in various parts of the United States and created several large collections. For example, the *Chicago Ethnic Arts Project Collection* (AFC 1981/004) documented the community activities, music and dance performances, food habits, religious celebrations, textile arts, and wood carvings among Chinese, Japanese, Jewish, and Korean immigrants. Another example is the *Lowell Folklife Project Collection* (AFC 1987/042) [8], which examined folklore subjects, including recreation, religious rites and ceremonies, textiles, organization, belief and behavior systems, urban development, arts, attitudes, neighborhoods, relations, festivals, and food habits among the Cambodian American and Vietnamese American communities.

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Since 1977, the American Folklife Center’s Concert Series has often presented performances of Asian music and dance as they continue to be performed in the United States by immigrant populations. All of the concerts are recorded for the collections. Asian programs have included the following:

- May 25, 1978: Arabic Dancers (Middle Eastern) of Virginia
- September 3, 1981: Khmer (Cambodian) Classical Ballet of Maryland
- June 17 and October 19, 1982: the Washington Toho Koto Society
- June 18, 1987: Afghan and Iranian traditional music

Many AFC Homegrown Concerts are available for viewing online as webcasts. The concerts are enhanced with contextual information provided by scholars. Three of the webcasts featuring Asian artists are:


AFC lectures are also recorded and some can be accessed online. On February 5, 1997, AFC featured a presentation by Nora Yeh, Southern Sound: The Nanyin Performing Tradition of China (AFC 1997/029). This talk was connected to the Nora Yeh Kemeny Family Collection (AFC 2000/018), which contains documentation during her research trips to Taiwan, China, and Southeast Asia since 1981. On August 23, 2005, Sara L. M. Davis presented a lecture about her book, Song and Silence: Ethnic Revival on China’s Southwest Borders [9]. The lecture, together with original field research materials, formed the Sara L. M. Davis Collection on Tai Lue Culture (AFC 2006/004) [10].

The Marjory Bong-Ray Liu Collection (AFC 2003/053) is related to Liu’s lecture, Total Theater—The Art of Kunqu, China’s Earliest Classical Opera, (AFC 2008/029) as well as an interview on September 4, 2008. Margaret Mills’ lecture, Afghan Women’s Stories: The Problematics of Cover on September 19, 2007, made use of the Margaret Mills Collection (AFC 2008/022), which includes 527 tapes recorded from the 1970s to the 1990s.


Chinese opera collections at the AFC have been greatly enhanced by the Chang Yu-Chen Chinese Opera Video Collection (AFC 2005/003) from Chang Yu-Chen, a long-time director, producer, choreographer, and instructor to the Chinese Opera Society of Greater Washington, D.C. Of special value among 757 VHS and BETA videocassettes are videotaped performances of Mei Lan-fang (1894-1961), the Grandmaster of both Peking and Kunqu operas.

In addition, the following collections are unique primary resources for scholars:

- Roy Mitchell (Dr. and Mrs.) and Seamus Doyle New York City Recordings (AFC 1942/020) containing Armenian songs
- Chinese Music Recording Project (AFC 1943/014)
- Four Masters of Chinese Storytelling Video Collection (AFC 2004/021)
- Lee Hye-gu Collection of Korean Folk and Classical Music (AFC 1959/014)
- Alice C. Fletcher Collection of Korean Cylinder Recordings (AFC 1948/079)
- Russell Coile Collection of Ainu Dances of Japan (AFC 10496)
- Tu’er Ye (Rabbit Deity) Image and Manuscript Collection, 2003-2004 (AFC 2004/009)
In recent years, numerous visiting Asian scholars and artists have been interviewed at the Library. These videotaped interviews include discussions on Asian martial arts, lacquer ware art, Huangmei opera, folk songs, musical instruments, paper cut art, and traditional finger paintings. The interviews are archived to supplement the published CDs, DVDs, books or artistic creations donated to the AFC by the artists, and each has resulted in a small yet valuable collection.

To summarize, the Asian collections of the American Folklife Center offer a wide range and large variety of formats, topics, and cultures. In the past twenty years, due to accelerated conversion from analog to digital formats, greatly improved catalogs, more subject expertise among staff, expedited distribution through the internet, and the increasing convenience of conducting oral histories, informative details about many Asian collections can be easily accessed by anyone in the world who has a connection to the Internet.

Endnotes
1 Among these, those with searchable finding aids available online are underlined: http://www.loc.gov/fo.../findaid-geographical.html. Finding aids of other countries are not yet available.
2 Every item or physical sound recording was assigned an “AFS” number beginning with the establishment of the Archive in 1928. The numbering system was changed to “AFC” in the late 1980s to accommodate multiple formats, such as manuscripts, graphic images, moving images, electronic media and artifacts in the collection materials.
3 Ch’in is a seven-stringed scholar’s instrument with a unique tablature and repertoire. Known as a lute or a zither in the West, its Romanization based on the current Pinyin System is “qin” or “guqin.”
4 This collection contains Gujarati bhajans (“devotional songs”) and mantras (“chants”) sung by Mr. Pandit; passages from the Bhagavad Gita sung by Dr. Haridas T. Mazumdar; and Kusti (Zoroastrian) prayers sung by Mrs. C. E. Nonavutty, a Parsi residing in Bombay, Maharashtra. The collection includes nine pages of correspondence and engineer’s notes.
5 Wire spools were provided by the Library of Congress.
6 Laura Boulton (1899-1980), an ornithologist and ethnomusicologist who spent 50 years travelling and collecting materials from all over the world, donated parts of her collections to several major institutions. The AFC Archive holds wax cylinders, aluminum discs and reel-to-reel tapes of Boulton’s field recordings of traditional vocal and instrumental music worldwide, with accompanying catalogs and commentaries.
7 For example, Boulton listed for Nepal: “Solo male, female, children’s songs, Tibetan songs, melodies on clarinet, tabla and trumpet, game songs, Royal Wedding with female chorus and priests chanting.”
8 The Lowell Folklife Project was conducted in cooperation with the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission and the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities in the late 1980s.
9 The talk and book were based on her fieldwork in the border region of Sipsongpanna (Xishuangbanna), Yunnan Province, China, and in Kengtung, Shang State, Burma, between 1997 and 2003.
10 The collection contains original research on Tai Lue religious rituals, epic oral narratives, popular songs, and performances for tourists, as well as interviews with poets and singers. Also included is an interview with her about the collection.