

# Archives, Objects, and the Global History of Music

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*“The transformation of ‘archivistic’ activity is the point of departure and the condition for a new history.”*

— Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*<sup>1</sup>

Archival studies have been crucial to the production of knowledge in musicology that focuses on European tradition. Objects are typically used as evidence to support specific historical narratives, in particular objects such as documents and musical instruments. In classrooms, instructors encourage students to connect to music history by thinking through primary sources such as manuscripts, compositional sketches, personal correspondences, programs, and diaries, as well as musical instruments relevant to the music they study. Research questions may include: How do compositional sketches shed light on musical works? How do historical editions reveal their performing history? How do correspondences reflect relationships, musical ideas, influences, and inspiration? What do documents about singers and patrons say about canon building? Music history pedagogues have also incorporated organology in classrooms, as significant instrumental collections on many university campuses and museums offer stupendous opportunities for students to explore the practice of music-making from different historical periods, as well as a wide range of geographical locations and cultural traditions. Both the increased attention given to archival documents and the hands-on pedagogy in musicology have broadened the scope of learning and deepened the understanding of music history.

Writing about her experience in such pedagogy, Kristen Strandberg notes, “Introducing students to tangible historical objects and physical spaces helps to build an even more direct connection with the past. When students interact with pieces of history in the form of documents, objects, or historical buildings, they make a connection to the past that is far more direct than those generated

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Cloney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 75.

by classroom discussion alone.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, such studies help students engage at a personal level and understand better the role of music-making in relation to the historical context, such as the Civil War period.

For global music history pedagogy, the issue of the archive is ever more important. The archival activities that form the basis of knowledge production in musicology—which has focused on Anglo-European music traditions—need to be broadened and re-conceptualized. As the Mission Statement of the IMS Study Group “Global History of Music” notes, we have the aim of “examining the global musical repercussions of transcontinental exchanges, movement, and mixing of peoples, practices, ideas, and objects.”<sup>3</sup> As researchers of global musics, we must contend with this uneven playing field, and one way to contend is to make the problematics of archival work more apparent and palpable. English scholar Matt Cohen asserts that archives are not only “places where knowledge is produced,” but where that knowledge gains stature. Paraphrasing the anthropologist Ann Stoler, he claims that “what gets kept and how it gets marked as evidence gives form to power, shaping the imagination of those who use an archive.”<sup>4</sup> The archive, in other words, is not an impartial place. More often than not researchers are faced with the challenge of a lack of tangible connections to, and distorted accounts of, marginalized communities in music archives in the West.

Documentary heritage, as it turns out, is a privilege that belongs to dominating groups. Rather than being naturally generated as a depository of historical materials, archives exert oppressive power to make certain communities stay in the periphery. For example, the language barrier when working with global archival materials is an inevitable hinderance: most music history librarians in North America cannot read non-European languages to facilitate archival research beyond Anglo-European research topics. Yet the diversity of our student population and the increasing diversification of the subjects of our study require that we acknowledge the existing archival hierarchy and move toward redressing it. With increasing efforts in digitization of archival materials we may be in a good position to be engaged in primary materials that link to

2. Kristen Strandberg, “Music History Beyond the Classroom: Active Learning Through Local History,” this *Journal* 7, no. 2 (2017): 32. The use of museum objects, in particular the instrument connection, in music education is discussed in Elizabeth A. Clendinning and Andrew W. Gurstelle, “Object Lessons: Teaching Musicology through Museum Collections,” this *Journal* 11, no. 1 (2021): 22–45.

3. “Mission Statement,” IMS Study Group “Global History of Music,” International Musicological Society, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://www.musicology.org/networks/sg/global-history-of-music>.

4. Matt Cohen, “Design and Politics in Electronic American Literary Archives,” in *The American Literature Scholar in the Digital Age*, eds. Amy E. Earhart and Andrew Jewell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011): 231.

musical practices outside of the received canons and that are not yet collected by music archives.

In addition to the list of questions I mention above, one might also ask: What constitutes the objects of study? Where do we find the archive of objects that speak to our inquiry? How do we disentangle the impact of archival hierarchy and the ways that the denigration and, at times, criminalization of the peripheral in archival accounts of the past continue to shape our imagination today? In this essay, we will begin by considering the knowledge hierarchy and silence in archives. I will then discuss my experience teaching a workshop with the Chung Collection at the University of British Columbia, where I focused on three key pedagogical points to inspire critical thinking about the objects in the archive. In the conclusion, I reflect on the emplacement of the archive in Vancouver and its significance for both the transpacific history of American music and the participants of the workshop.

### Archival Hierarchy and Silence

Let us first examine the notion of the archive. Archives contain historical records or primary source documents that have been accumulated and are kept to show the activities, functions, or achievements, of persons or organizations. Collections in the archives are selected (appraised) and organized (catalogued) for preservation, based on their enduring cultural, historical or evidentiary values. Archives are a form of repository of knowledge, and the cataloguing process, as archivist Hannah Grout notes astutely, “creates the narrative and navigability of the collection.”<sup>5</sup> However, as sites of knowledge production, inherent biases and silences are built into archives. Every archive is embedded in systems of power that determine what counts as knowledge; documents and objects were collected accordingly. In all likelihood, documents and artifacts from and about peripheral groups have been traditionally deemed unworthy of collection and few documents would be collected and preserved from the perspective of historically marginalized groups. Even when they are collected, bias in cataloging could misrepresent them or render them neglectable or inconsequential to the dominating historical narrative or knowledge hierarchy. With the goal of teaching global history of music, it is important to help students understand the archival hierarchy, to help them navigate their way through existing archives, and to help them consider the construction of their own archives that can express the cultural frameworks relevant to their research topics.

An opportunity to explore these issues presented itself recently. In Spring 2022, I was invited to give an archival workshop on music history of early

5. Hannah Grout, “Archiving Critically: Exploring the Communication of Cultural Biases,” *Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal* 4, no. 1 (2019): 73.

Chinese Americans at the University of British Columbia based on my research for the book *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America*.<sup>6</sup> The pedagogical situation prompted me to thematize several ideas about archival approaches. I began with my own story about archives. Growing up in Taiwan, I was trained in Western art music and pursued postgraduate degrees in music theory in North America, with a focus on twentieth-century American music. I used archival research in my works on ultra-modern composers, such as Ruth Crawford, Henry Cowell, and Elliott Carter. When I first became curious about the topic of Chinese American music history twenty-five years ago, I used similar research skills: I consulted music bibliography and reference books and visited music archives in major libraries around North America, looking through card catalogs and finding aids for names of composers, compositions, musicians, and performing groups. Yet, it was a futile attempt and the project stalled. The music archives I was accustomed to using did not have the materials I needed. The implication of a vacuum of archival evidence is that the history simply does not exist.

However, by broadening my idea of the music archive and with the use of my Chinese-reading language skills, I was able to redress the knowledge hierarchy in music archival collections. First, following my interest in Chinese American history, I was led to a treasure trove of materials in the Chinese Exclusion File at the U.S. National Archives in Washington DC. Due to the Chinese Exclusion laws of 1882 that restricted the entry of people from China, and the resulting need for immigration control, the U.S. government has complete records of all the Chinatown theaters and the entry and departure of every opera performer, playwright, musician, and other multi-faceted opera personnel. They were responsible for creating and maintaining vibrant opera performances across America in the 1920s. In other words, performing arts libraries and archives that gathered the documents of composers, concert houses, musical institutions, ensembles, and organizations did not deem the music of Chinese immigrants worthy of collection. Yet, since they were unwelcome immigrants, their records were meticulously kept by the U.S. Department of Labor for government surveillance.

Second, I began looking for archives with Chinese language materials, such as historical Chinese-language newspapers published in the United States. I found them housed in several university and public libraries, such as

6. I am grateful to Hedy Sin Yan Law for the invitation and for organizing the three-event keynote series, sponsored by the Interdisciplinary Histories Research Cluster at the University of British Columbia, March 17–19, 2022. The first two events both focused on archives: keynote lecture, “Archive of the Invisible in American Music: Tracing Transpacific Crossing of Chinese Opera”; workshop, “Reading Archive—Against the Grain.” The keynotes series was an extension to my book. See Nancy Yunhwa Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2017).

several libraries at the University of California, Berkeley, and the New York Public Library. Studying these local Chinese-language newspapers from the 1910s to 1930s allowed me a window into the community and an opportunity to engage with voices and perspectives from within the Chinese community that had never been published in scholarly research on music. I also extended my Chinese-language archival search to materials outside of North America, to places such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong. There I was able to gain access to recordings, visual materials, and other documents that were relevant to my inquiry. In other words, I had to reimagine a mega-archive out of many libraries, museums, private collections, and archives for my research.

I began this workshop by sharing the personal story that demonstrates the archival hierarchy in music studies in North America, and to provide a framework in the hope of, to quote anthropologist Ann Stoler, cutting “across the strictures of archival production” and refiguring “what makes up the archival terrain.”<sup>7</sup> My goal was to open workshop participants up to a broad array of genres of historical documents and artifacts, to allow them to make connections to musical practices outside of the received canons, and to expand their imaginations to recall memories and images that have not been considered historical evidence.

### The Chung Collection

The workshop was held at the Wallace B. Chung and Madeline H. Chung Collection at the University of British Columbia Library, merely a five-minute walk from its School of Music. As noted on the university website for the Chung collection, it is a 25,000+ piece collection of documents, books, maps, posters, paintings, photographs, tableware, and other artifacts related to three broad themes: British Columbia history, immigration and settlement, and the Canadian Pacific Railway company (CPR). It has a significant amount of materials related to the immigration and settlement of Chinese people in North America. Growing up as a tailor’s son in Victoria, B.C., Wallace Chung began collecting when he was seven. As a highly respected surgeon, Wallace Chung was just as assiduous as an expert collector. He was joined in Victoria by his wife Madeline, an obstetrician who emigrated from Hong Kong in the 1940s.<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, the Chung Collection acquired the family and business papers of Yip Sang (1845–1927), a prominent Canadian pioneer. His company Wing Sang not only owned fishing boats, fish salteries, and canning plants;

7. Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 34.

8. “The Chung Collection,” Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia, accessed March 18, 2023, <https://chung.library.ubc.ca/>.

established import/export trade; and served as the Chinese Immigration agent in Vancouver, but was also the shipping agent for the CPR and partnered with Chinatown businesses from tailors to restaurants. The total impact of Yip's life on the social, cultural, economic, and political fabric of Canada and China is immeasurable, as his great granddaughter Linda Yip notes.<sup>9</sup> Little do people know, however, that the Yip family ran Chinese opera theater business over a long period of time.<sup>10</sup> In this massive collection of rare, unique archival materials of early B.C. history—which was by no means limited to Chinese Canadian history—one can find Chinese playbills, photographs of actors, stage productions, correspondence related to theater management, and numerous other items.

Having worked with the collection for my book, I know the sheer number of materials in, and the complexity of, the Chung Collection, which could be quite overwhelming. Working with the archivist, I selected both Chinese and English items in advance from both the business and family parts of the collection.<sup>11</sup> They were laid out on four large tables in the reading room, with easy access to an object for everyone when they sat around the table. The objects included maps, a community donation book (listing individual donations to benefit a school in southern China), theater playbills, theater company business records and correspondences, logs of passenger lists from a steamship company, personal correspondences, studio portraits of actors in costume, stage photos, telegrams, and more. Twenty students and faculty registered for the workshop. As we waited for people to arrive, they moved around the tables, reviewing the documents and artifacts.

### Three Pedagogical Points

One of the goals of the workshop was to introduce to the participants to the richness of materials related to music making of Chinese immigrants in the Chung Collection. But even more importantly, it focused on several key

9. Linda Yip, "Yip Sang, the Patriarch—Reflections on a True Canadian Pioneer," blog entry, June 26, 2020, <https://blogs.ancestry.ca/ancestry/2020/06/26/yip-sang-the-patriarch-reflections-on-a-true-canadian-pioneer/>.

10. Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Cantonese Opera in Turn-of-the-Century Canada: Local History and Transnational Circulation," *19th Century Music Review* 11, no. 2 (2014): 291–310.

11. Special thanks to Chelsea Shriver and Weiyan V. Yan at UBC's Rare Books and Special Collections for their expert and prompt help. The Chung Collection includes both Chinese and English materials. I discussed extensively the Yip Sang family materials in the Chung Collection. A significant amount of the Yip Sang materials is digitized, and even translated. "The Yip Sang Correspondence Project," Sue Bigelow, The City of Vancouver Archives Blog, April 17, 2014, <https://www.vancouverarchives.ca/2014/04/17/the-yip-sang-correspondence-project/>, and the "Yip Sang Collection," The University of British Columbia, Open Collections, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/yipsang>.

pedagogical points to inspire critical thinking about the objects, as well as encourage creative, resourceful, and imaginative consideration of the objects.

#### (1) *Make connections among seemingly unrelated materials*

The textual documents bear witness to the history of Chinatown theaters in the early twentieth century by providing the names of theater professionals, the titles of operas, and the travels of troupes. For example, theater playbills contain information about the cast, the repertoire performed, the date of the performance, a synopsis, and sometimes advertisements for local businesses or medicines. From a close study of them we learn the actors' names, roles, popular topics, performance practices, and many other aspects of the theater world. However, as promotion materials, the playbills' content cannot be taken at face value; we must read them within a broader context.<sup>12</sup> Performers' names in the theater company correspondence can provide details about their expertise and characteristics. This correspondence also gives insight into the logistics of theater management and the perspectives of the managerial team. From the community donation book for schools in China, we can find traces of the social standing and influence of theater sponsors and personnel. This information further helps us understand the roles of theaters in the community. By piecing together fragmented information from a variety of sources and connecting seemingly disparate dots, a rough sketch of the web of connections and daily life surrounding these theaters can emerge. This is by no means a small feat. Yu Ying-shih, the eminent historian of Chinese intellectual history, noted in his memoir that pondering the connections between seemingly unrelated materials constitutes one of the most important tasks for historians.<sup>13</sup>

After the brief introduction of the artifacts and possibilities of connections, workshop participants examined more closely the artifacts and documents displayed. When they flipped through the pages of the donation book, they could see the wide range of donation amounts (from CAD\$1 to 1,000) and how theater personnel and sponsors were placed within the economic and social strata of the Chinese community. When they looked through the long lists of passenger names meticulously written out in both Chinese and English in the log of records of steamship ticket sales, they could probably imagine Chinese opera performers among them. When they examined a playbill (Figure 1 and Figure

12. In my book, I discuss the interpretation of Chinese theater playbills from the early twentieth century. While it may be tempting to view the playbills as concrete evidence of the performance, I suggest that a more fruitful approach is to consider them as footprints of the theaters. During this time period, performance practices were often fluid and improvisational, making it difficult to view the playbills as a blueprint for the actual performance. See Rao, *Chinatown Opera Theater*, 103.

13. Yu Ying-shi, *Yu Yingshi hui yi lu* 余英時回憶錄 (Taipei Shi: Yun chen wen hua shi ye gu fen you xian gong si, 2018).



2), they could see the repertoire, cast list, and ticket prices, as well as highlights of the main attraction, praise of the lead performers, and highlights of the plot to pique the audiences' curiosity. These documents offer a vivid sense of busy transpacific movement in the early twentieth century that supported the transpacific music network of North America, which included Vancouver. In a vast archive such as the Chung Collection, a plenitude of connections could be made to inform the history of their vibrant musical life.



**Fig. 1.** A workshop participant consulting a playbill at the UBC Rare Books and Special Collections. (Photograph by Sonia Kung.)



**Fig. 2.** The playbill consulted by the workshop participant in Fig.1. Reproduced by permission from the UBC Wallace B. Chung and Madeline H. Chung Collection, cc-tx-123-5-國豐年班十月三十號.

### (2) Examine the materiality of the object

It was important for the workshop participants to experience first-hand the materiality of the objects (e.g., the size of the playbills, the colorations of the photographs, and the different techniques the photograph studios employed to mount photos onto paper). These might seem to be minute details, but they could be significant and telling. To this end, I urged the participants to consider the content of the archival document and its materiality separately. Such separation, I suggested, could lead to information about the object easily overlooked when we are engrossed by text and content. For example, all of the playbills were printed on newsprint paper, because, owing to the large number of characters needed to print Chinese and the complexity of typesetting, only theaters in cities with an adequate printing facility—typically a newspaper—could have their daily playbills professionally printed. Playbill printing was thus an extension of the Chinese newspaper business. Therefore, as objects, playbills helped us to make a connection between the history of Chinatown theater, print culture, and the social history of Chinatown journalism.

The photograph is another example. The durability of the cardboard papers that the portraits of actors were mounted to not only ensured the longevity of the photograph but also indicated the popularity of photography in the Chinese community and the success of Chinese professional photography studios. Indeed, the popularity of photographs of theater performers can be shown in the elaborate ways that they were encased or mounted by the photography studios.

### (3) Consider the Usage of the Object

Most importantly, however, I want the participants to consider how the objects were utilized by ordinary people of their time. What kind of “usage” might these artifacts have for people in the community? How, for example, might the playbill be used by opera fans? I received quite a number of answers. At first, most answers referenced information conveyed by the text on the playbills. Then a few volunteered answers about other possible uses of playbills that led to the key issue: their role in material consumption and exchange.

These archived objects were not simply historical props and paraphernalia, but how they were exchanged and used was extremely revealing. As Arjun Appadurai notes, “it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context... for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, objects are essential to disclosing how theatrical culture was created, shaped, and disseminated. In other words, the relationship

14. Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

between opera theaters and people was formed and mediated by these objects in the most fundamental ways. In the hands of fans, objects such as playbills could be artifacts stashed away in private treasure troves. Fans cropped out pictures of actresses from the playbills and pasted them into scrapbooks, and these visual images of their idols influenced their own identity formation. Considering the materiality of these objects is necessary to unseal the specific meanings embedded within them. Not only were significant meanings inscribed in their usage, but these meanings came to shape the community's everyday life. Exploring these objects as material culture and considering their usage leads us to a wide range of questions concerning social networks, human transactions, economic conditions, and human agencies.

Our exploration into their materiality can also contextualize these objects more fully as well. The social fabrics of Chinese community existed in the form of material culture through these objects. Exploring the material dimensions of historical artifacts can therefore transform our understanding of them and inspire a rethinking or reconceptualization of conventional knowledge about Chinatown theaters in North America.

Displayed on the tables, the objects and documents at first seemed cordoned off in their own objecthood. Yet with further discussion of how there existed an active and mutual contact between these things and people, we came to see them differently. When participants again milled around the room and asked questions, they began to think about the ways these objects might have been used during their life history. Questions about the materiality of the objects uncovered more layers of meaning regarding the ways that people inscribed meaning onto them and embedded them with significance that circulated and interacted with larger cultural and social concerns.

### Conclusion

To be sure, archives, and the objects collected within them, shape our imagination of musical history. For a pedagogy of global music history, then, this is an important conversation to have. As Michel de Certeau notes poignantly, "The transformation of 'archivistic' activity is the point of departure and *the condition for a new history*."<sup>15</sup> One of the most important tasks might be to reconfigure what constitutes archivistic activities and to reimagine and recreate new ones. To this end, understanding the problem of archival hierarchy, considering issues of archive, and learning different modes of reading its objects can be vital lessons for students of global music history.

Separating the content of an archival document from its materiality and the usage of the object is a key archival skill that would benefit students of global music history. This skill is crucial to the development of the frameworks and narratives of networks of cross-cultural relationships, addressing how musics have moved across different continents, intersected cross-culturally, and become entangled with each other. These archival skills are also crucial for the imagination of an archive that does not, and cannot, exist in one location.

The musical past unveiled by these archival objects in the Chung Collection is part of the Pacific-crossing story of Vancouver. These documents preserved in the Chung Collection offered the participants a vivid sense of busy transpacific movements in the early twentieth century that supported the transpacific music network of North America. In a profound way, these transpacific movements came to be essential constituents of the musical past of a significant group of people in Vancouver that the workshop participants were either a part of, interacted with on a daily basis, or newly joined. Indeed, many participants partook in the transpacific movement themselves. According to the 2016 census, about 20% of Vancouver's population now identifies as ethnic Chinese, and 42% as ethnic Asian.<sup>16</sup> This makes the archive workshop at the Chung Collection all the more meaningful. I can imagine workshops like this one could benefit not only music students but students in other disciplines, such as global history, migration studies, urban history, Asian studies, ethnic studies, as well as to those interested in public musicology.

In my own work, as a former student of American ultra-modernism, I found that it was apparent that the traditional music archive did not suffice when I embarked on the search for Chinese American music. In the end, I created a different kind of archive of my own that helped lead me to uncover the transpacific circulation of Cantonese opera in the 1920s. One of the aims for this workshop was to share the knowledge I had acquired and to help the participants realize the different ways they can create their own archive for the study of a global history of music.

15. de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 75. [Emphasis mine.]

16. "Data Products, 2016 Census," Statistics Canada, updated February 8, 2021, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/index-eng.cfm>.