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Linguistic artifacts: UCSB Library acquires rare Chinese audio recordings

Widely considered to be the earliest form of audio recordings, wax cylinders offer rare glimpses into how the world sounded in the distant past.

Indeed, a unique collection from China, recently acquired by UC Santa Barbara Library, provides an elusive glance into the history of the Chinese language and some of its dialects that are now considered critically endangered or extinct.

The recent acquisition brings the Paul Georg von Möllendorff Chinese cylinders, a collection of 16 recordings from the late 1800s. A German linguist, Möllendorff (1847–1901) recorded recitations of a popular, celebrated poem “Returning Home"' by Tao Yuanming, in various Chinese dialects reflecting the differences in regional languages at the time.

The acquisition was made through the library’s early recordings initiative (ERI), a public–private partnership to ensure that cylinders like the ones in the Möllendorff collection are preserved and made accessible to future scholars. “The Möllendorff cylinders are essentially a sonic Rosetta Stone that holds the key to understanding past cultures,” said John Levin, a cylinder collector and ERI co-founder. “Just as the visual arts give us a glimpse into our collective history, audio recordings can offer insight into the history of a specific time and place that is invaluable to researchers.”

The cylinders could have easily been lost to obscurity if not for the curiosity of collector Charley Hummel and the sleuthing work of two distinguished musicologists, added Levin. In the early 2000s, Hummel, a renowned American collector of phonograph machines and records, came across a mysterious hide-covered box of Chinese cylinders in a phonograph shop in Paris and was instantly intrigued. The cylinders appeared to have Chinese content on them and the box was conspicuously labeled “MÖLLENDORFF.”

Hummel purchased the cylinders intending to research their history and asked historians Patrick Feaster and Xiaoshi Wei to help him unravel the mystery of their provenance. When Hummel passed away in 2023, the cylinders became of interest to the library because of the historical research provided by Feaster and Wei, who identified the recordings and initiated research about their history with Möllendorff.

In the 1890s, while in East Asia serving as a diplomat and commissioner of customs at Ningbo, China, Möllendorff undertook an ambitious project to document and classify Chinese languages for the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris. He asked speakers representing various Chinese languages to recite the same poem into a graphophone and then transcribed the results phonetically. He then sent the cylinders to Léon Azoulay, a prominent figure in the Société d’Anthropologie de Paris, to feature at the exposition as part of a “phonographic museum” where visitors could take an audio tour of cultures around the world. Azoulay later published a full catalog of the contents of the phonographic museum, including the donated Chinese cylinders, which were explicitly identified as Möllendorff.

The collection’s history after its exhibition in 1900 was unknown until Feaster and Wei pieced together a theory hypothesizing that “Möllendorff intended to send additional sets of cylinders to London, Berlin, and St. Petersburg, to complement the set he had sent to Paris, but that his unexpected death on April 20, 1901, derailed these plans, such that the cylinders instead ended up being disposed of in some other way—i.e., passing into the possession of his daughter Dora.” The location of the cylinders in the following 100 years until they were acquired by Hummel is unknown.

A Newton International Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, Wei plans to publish the content along with other materials

from the collection that are currently in private hands to create a box set with scholarly notes to contextualize their value. “The recitations on these cylinders are very musical — almost performances — and are ripe for research,” he said. “Some of the dialects are unknown and the language varies by region, even down to a localized area in China that is specific to the identity of the people in that community.”

Only some of the recordings have been transferred and digitized with many more to be restored. Now, as part of the Performing Arts Collection at UCSB Library, the cylinders’ long-term preservation and accessibility is ensured. As part of ERI, the Möllendorff cylinders will likely receive more scholarly attention and online publishing. The cylinders are also unique to the Performing Arts Collection because unlike most of the recordings in the collection which were published for entertainment purposes, these cylinders were created as linguistic artifacts.

“The Möllendorff cylinders are undoubtedly more valuable as part of the public domain rather than a private collection, where they would have remained largely unpublished," said David Seubert, performing arts curator. “At UCSB, they have the potential to influence scholarship and research with partners in France, where the remaining cylinders live, and with other international centers of musicology. This is exactly the kind of effort that is supported by ERI, which strives to prevent valuable early recordings from disappearing into obscurity.”

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