

# 'Soundscapes and Folklore in East Asia'

The Eighth 'Folklore and Anthropology in Conversation' Joint Symposium of The Folklore Society  
and The Royal Anthropological Institute

24 October 2024

At 50 Fitzroy Street, London W1T 5BT, and online via Zoom



## PROGRAMME AND ABSTRACTS

Tea / Coffee

**10:00-10:15: Welcome and Introduction to the Day:** by Emeritus Prof. James H. Grayson (University of Sheffield) and Prof. David Hopkin (University of Oxford)

**10:15-11:45            Session 1:    China**

**Presentation 1:        Igor Iwo Chabrowski (University of Warsaw)**  
**'Reading Folklore for Social History: Cases and Reflections from Late-Qing and Republican China'.**

This paper will explore the usefulness and complications of studying the social history of soundscapes in China. Or, in other words, it treats the sonic aspect of societies as a historical source for the analysis of social processes and transformations. I shall focus on two examples: one in which soundscapes were formative for particular social groupings, and thus they are the best key to analyze them. And the other, in which sonic realities are indivisibly entangled with social, economic, political, and cultural aspects of communal social organization; therefore, studying soundscapes helps unravel the process of diachronic transformation.

My first example will relate to the world of labor in the late Qing and early Republican China, namely the Yangzi boatmen of Sichuan. These sphere of labor, which at least until the 1950s occupied hundreds of thousands people, is most often referred to as "traditional," but in reality, being technologically pre-industrial and not bureaucratized, often escapes the analysis of labor historians. By accessing the boatmen through the perspective of "folklore" traditions, however, we are able to reconstruct the ways these communities continued to reinvent themselves in front of the political and socio-economic changes in early 20th century China. My second example will look at the manner in which institutional changes, legal environments, as well as socio-economic transformations fundamentally altered the urban soundscapes in Republican China being conducive to significant cultural reinvention of China's foremost art

form—regional opera. Here, I will focus particularly on the change of opera’s location within the urban space and on the emergence of urban zoning that obliterated the world of broad, communal access to opera typical to the late-imperial China, substituting it with class-inflected entertainment districts. My final reflections will attempt a reflection on the potential problems with treating sources related to Chinese folklore in reading various complex issues related to social and communal history of this country.

*Igor Iwo Chabrowski (PhD, European University Institute, 2013) is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of History, University of Warsaw and a Part-time Professor at the Department of History and Civilization, EUI. Previously he worked at the University of Oxford and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Igor’s research concentrates on the late Qing and modern Chinese history, history of Southeast Asia and Overseas Chinese, and global history. Igor published two books on Chinese cultural and social history: Singing on the River: Sichuan Boatmen and Their Work Songs (Brill, 2015) and Ruling the Stage: Social and Cultural History of Opera in Sichuan from the Qing to the People’s Republic (Brill, 2022). Currently he is a Principal Investigator of the National Science Centre’s (Poland) financed grant titled ‘The Foothold: China, Southeast Asia, and the Global Revolution at the Margins, 1945-1954’.*

**Presentation 2: Yuan Zhang (University of Oxford)**  
**‘Divine Resonances: Soundscapes and Spatial Hierarchies in the Pan-Spiritual Homes of Rural China’.** Via Zoom

This paper explores the intricate relationship between soundscapes and the spatial organization of deities in the homes of Xuhao village, Shanxi Province, China. Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2021-2024, the study argues that the auditory dimension of domestic religious practice is crucial to understanding how villagers navigate and reinforce a complex pan-spiritual cosmology within their living spaces.

Central to this analysis is the concept of ‘sonic cohabitation,’ which I introduce to capture how the sounds associated with different deities create a dynamic auditory hierarchy that complements and sometimes challenges the visual and spatial arrangement of gods within the home. The paper provides rich ethnographic descriptions of domestic soundscapes, focusing on how various ritual sounds—from the crackling of incense to the murmur of prayers and the rhythmic chanting of sutras—create a multisensory environment that mediates between the human and divine realms.

The study pays particular attention to the sonic aspects of worshipping the paper representations of ‘da xianye’ (big immortal gods) found in nearly every Xuhao home. These syncretic assemblages, incorporating figures from various religious traditions, are analyzed not only for their visual and spatial qualities but also for the distinct soundscapes associated with their veneration. The paper argues that these domestic soundscapes are not merely background noise but active participants in the construction of spiritual efficacy and cosmic order. It examines how villagers manipulate sound – through the use of specific instruments, the modulation of voice, or the timing of rituals – to attract the attention of certain deities, to demarcate sacred time and space, and to reinforce the hierarchical relationships between different gods and spirits.

Theoretically, the paper engages with recent anthropological work on the anthropology of sound (Samuels et al. 2010), Chinese folk cosmology (Feuchtwang 2001), and sensory approaches to religion (Meyer 2009). It contributes to these debates by demonstrating how auditory practices intersect with spatial arrangements to create a multisensory religious experience within the home. The concept of ‘sonic cohabitation’ challenges visual-centric approaches to domestic religion, revealing instead a dynamic process through which villagers orchestrate complex soundscapes to maximize spiritual protection, prosperity, and well-being.

Moreover, the paper situates these domestic soundscapes within broader discussions of religious change and cultural preservation in contemporary China. It argues that the aurally rich, spatially-enacted pan-spirituality observed in Xuhao homes provides villagers with a means of maintaining traditional cosmologies while adapting to rapid social and economic transformations. By focusing on the auditory and spatial dimensions of belief, the study offers fresh insights into how rural Chinese negotiate between competing religious and secular ideologies in their everyday lives.

*Yuan Zhang is a DPhil (PhD) candidate in Anthropology at the University of Oxford, specializing in the anthropology of architecture and religion. Her research explores the lived experiences of house and infrastructural transformations. Yuan holds an MPhil in Social Anthropology from the University of Oxford, as well as a Master's degree in Global Affairs and a Bachelor's degree in Architecture from Tsinghua University.*

**Presentation 3:        Li Mingming (Northwest Minzhu University, China)**  
**‘Cultural Interpretation of the Multi-voice Phenomenon of Shadow Play in Gansu and Qinghai Provinces in China’.** Via ZOOM.

Shadow play is an important part of folk culture in the ethnic regions of Gansu and Qinghai provinces of China; it is a symbol of Chinese culture shared by various ethnic groups. Voices are the core element of operas and are the key factor used to distinguish different types of operas. In the long-term transmission and evolution of this folk art, shadow play in the ethnic regions of Gansu and Qinghai has absorbed different voice styles and melodic patterns, which has resulted in the coexistence of single-voice and multi-voice shadow plays. In the context of the theatrical and opera, such coexistence represents a broader phenomenon of the multi-voice style operatic performance. As the inevitable result of cultural exchange and integration of various ethnic groups, the multi-voice style of shadow play displays a unique cultural landscape in the Gansu-Qinghai ethnic corridor and reflects the cultural diversity, openness, and inclusiveness of the Gansu and Qinghai ethnic regions.

*Li Mingming is a Ph.D. candidate of Northwest Minzu University and a lecturer at Aba Teachers College. He is a member of the Association of Traditional Music in China, the China Society for Anthropology of Arts, the China Nuo Opera Research Institute, and the Musicians Association of Sichuan. He earned his Bachelor's degree in Musicology from Tianjin Normal University and his Master's degree in Arts from Northwest Normal University. His research focuses on ethnology and ethnomusicology.*

11:45-12:15    Tea and Coffee

**12:15-12:45      Session 2      Northeast Asia**

**Presentation 4:**      **István Sántha** (Hungarian Research Network, Budapest)  
**'The Shamanic Soundscape of the Russian Far East'**. Via ZOOM.

This paper aims to reinterpret the ethnographic field materials collected by the Hungarian proto-anthropologist Benedek Baráthosi Balogh (1870-1945) in the Russian Far East (Manchuria, the Amur region and Sakhalin) before the First World War. These materials (diaries, photographs, grammatical materials, shamanic songs (texts), and drawings), perhaps except the Ainu objects, have never been used as scientific materials and have been stored in the depths of the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest.

What is the scientific value of the linguistic material of the Manchu-Tungus languages with very few speakers (5 Ulta, 15 Ulcha, and 30 Nanai people)? In 2019, we, a Hungarian social anthropologist, and a linguist, with the financial support of the Japanese National Ethnological Museum (MINPAKU in Osaka), decided to repeat Baráthosi's travels in this region and try to give voice (sound and noise) to his manuscripts. We wanted to repeat his route, to find the descendants of his informants, and, above all, to give life and sound to his ethnographic materials. We also aimed to share these materials with the local indigenous peoples, so it was a journey of repatriation.

The presentation will show the double bind situations. How did the local indigenous people try to help us because of Baráthosi's detailed materials (including photographs) about their ancestors? And what does it mean if today's local people do not have enough practical knowledge to present the shamanic materials collected hundreds of years ago? For example, our local colleagues were enthusiastic about translating these shamanic texts but hesitant about singing or dancing them. The proposed paper presents this experimental soundscape project based on the travels of a Hungarian anthropologist in the Russian Far East between 1909 and 1914.

*István Sántha is a senior researcher at the Research Centre for the Humanities at the Hungarian Academy of Science. He was the recipient of a Marie Curie Fellowship (2012-2014), held at the University of Cambridge, for a project focusing on the indigenous nephrite business in Russia. He is currently investigating the process of negotiation between indigenous people and the Russian state for nontraditional activities such as jade mining.*

12:45-13:30    Lunch (on site)

**13:30-14:30    Session 3:      Korea and Japan**

**Presentation 5:**      **Niki J. P. Alford** (University of Central Lancashire)  
**'Haenyeo Sirens: A Sonic Window into Jeju's Female Divers' Sumbisori Soundscapes'**.

This paper examines the unique soundscape of the haenyeo, the female divers of Jeju Island, South Korea, through the lens of their *sumbisori*, the breathy whistle produced during their diving activities. The *sumbisori* is not merely a functional breathing technique but is tied to a

rich oral folklore that encapsulates the cultural, social, and ecological ethos of these women. Through ethnographic fieldwork, this study explores how the *sumbitori* functions as a form of communication, a mnemonic device for knowledge transmission, and a means of communal bonding among the haenyeo.

Situated within the broader context of East Asian soundscapes and folklore, this research highlights the interplay between the haenyeo's acoustic environment and their subsistence practices. The *sumbitori*, performed both above and below water, serves as an auditory marker of their identity and resilience, echoing themes of survival, environmental stewardship, and intergenerational solidarity. By examining the *sumbitori*'s acoustic properties, contextual variations, and the haenyeo's vocal techniques, the paper reveals the intricate ways in which this sound contributes to the haenyeo's cultural heritage and their community's socio-economic dynamics.

This paper contributes to new approaches in social, cultural, and political interpretations of East Asian folk music and oral folklore. It underscores the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage in the face of modernisation and environmental change. The haenyeo *sumbitori*, as a living tradition, offers valuable insights into the symbiotic relationship between humans and their natural environment, and the role of sound in sustaining cultural memory and identity. Attention to this is important as research into the haenyeo *sumbitori* fosters a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of these sounds and their implications for contemporary anthropological discourse.

*Niki Alsford is Professor of Anthropology and Human Geography, and Director for the Institutes for the Study of the Asia Pacific (ISAP), and the Institute for Area and Migration Studies (AMIS) at the University of Central Lancashire. He is a Research Associate at the Centre of Taiwan Studies at SOAS and an Associate Member of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford. In 2023, he was selected as the Ewha Global Fellow at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, South Korea. Alsford's research focuses primarily on Taiwan, Korea, and the Pacific Islands. He is the book series editor for the Taiwan Series at Brill, the Korean series at Routledge, and a new series on Asia Pacific Cultures, Communities, and Landscapes at Palgrave Macmillan. Alsford is the author of Taiwan Lives: A Socio-Political History, published by the University of Washington Press in 2024.*

**Presentation 6: Luca Proietti (SOAS University of London)  
'Resounding Buddhism and Shinto in Japanese Noise Music'.**

Since the first experiments in the 1960s, noise music in Japan may be seen in a superficial view as a disruptive element that is not related to preserving cultural belonging despite the influence of John Cage's production which in turn was inspired by Zen Buddhism and Ma, the concept in which it is described the emptiness in space whose influence is evidenced in the silent song 4:33. Hence, it is important to consider noise music not just as the desire to create a destructive action within a musical and cultural context, but also an element that can fit into culture to preserve and transmit cultural heritage, providing a link with the spiritual and folkloristic

aspects of a country. This can be confirmed by considering the most recent production of Japanese noise music which addresses the need to refine a cultural relationship through the noisy element.

By focusing on distinct performances and works inspired by elements belonging to Buddhism and Shinto such as matsuri, bodhisattva and yōkai, traceable in artists like Ōtomo Yoshihide, Endō Kazumoto and Banetoriko, this paper addresses the persistent cultural linkage in noise music and how the noise element emphasises the relationship with Japan's culture as its universality transcends national boundaries to reinforce the relationship with distinct cultural aspects related to history, religion, and folklore.

*Luca Proietti worked in theatre for eight years, further developing his interest in Japanese culture. He received a BA in East Asian Languages and Civilisations at the Sapienza University, Rome with a dissertation on the graphic signs used in manga to represent the incommunicability between Japanese and Western speakers. He completed an MA in Japanese Studies at SOAS University of London with a dissertation on the role of rock culture in Japanese theatre. Currently, he is researching for a doctoral dissertation in Japanese Studies at SOAS focused on Japanese noise music and how it works as a form of cultural engagement tied with historical and cultural aspects from traditional folklore to contemporary pop culture. This project received support from SOAS Japan Research Centre, Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, and the British Association for Japanese Studies. He is a member of the British Association for Japanese Studies, Japan Anthropology Workshop, and the Association for Asian Studies*

14:30-15:00 Tea / Coffee

**15:00-15:30                      Session 4                      A Comparison**

**Rawan Alfuraih** (University of Oxford)

**'The Space of Tales: Ecologies of Bodily Movement in the Performance of Najdi *sibaheen* Folktales in Saudi Arabia'**

This paper highlights the ecology of our world as a contributor to the active bodily performance of folkloric genres. It is an ethnographic study focusing on the environment and mud architecture of villages in the central region of Saudi Arabia, known as Najd, during the early twentieth century. By observing the daily movement and social interactions of women and children, this study analyses the Najdi mud village as dynamic lived space, constituting a habitat and a fertile environment for the constant performance of sibaheen folktales. Sibaheen, meaning 'praising' in Arabic, is a genre of folktales traditionally performed and passed down through generations of women in Najd before the migration of dwellers to cities like Riyadh.

While folklorists have recently begun to shift their epistemological focus to the contexts in which folkloric performances occur, the significance of embodied spaces as a causal factor has not been adequately emphasised. I explore how Najdi villages played a pivotal role in the flourishing of sibaheen by highlighting the ecological foundations of relationships among unrelated dwellers. Social interactions and gatherings between Najdi neighbours reveal the impact of the environment in building intimacy beyond blood kinship networks. The ecological design of performance spaces, such as streets and rooftops, enabled repeated sibaheen performances. The mud architecture of villages had tight spaces bringing bodies closer, short

permeable walls on roofs allowing bodies and sound to cross between homes, and open doors facilitating spontaneous visits. Performance space cosmologically exists alongside imaginary space in tales. Storytelling produces lived space and lived space fosters sibaheen performance.

*Rawan Alfuraih is an anthropologist, folklorist, oral historian, and former producer, currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Anthropology at the University of Oxford. She spent six years conducting fieldwork in the Najd region of central Saudi Arabia, focusing on the environmental changes from urbanisation in the early twentieth century and their impact on folklore. Her earlier work examined bodily performances of folktales, poetry, and dance in the ecological contexts of pre-urban mud villages. Rawan was trained at SOAS University of London in 2022 and at the University of Aberdeen in 2023, where she combined folklore studies with anthropology of the environment and geographic approaches. Alongside her ethnographic research, she is involved in open science and data reproducibility, with a focus on ethical and sustainable archiving. With 10 years of experience in information systems in the corporate sector, she is exploring digital infrastructure solutions for archiving in the social sciences.*

### **15:30-16:15: Session 5: Audio-Visual Session**

**Anna Sowa** (Chouette Films) and **Richard Widdess** (SOAS)  
**‘Gülā – Music for a Sacred Time’**. Film.

This film introduces the rich and varied religious and ritual musical heritage of the ancient royal city of Bhaktapur, Nepal as it survives today. It draws on Richard Widdess’s research over three decades and focuses on two genres of religious music: Hindu-Buddhist temple singing, and processional music for the Buddhist festival of Panchadān.

*Anna Sowa is a documentary film producer and a PhD by practice candidate at the London Film School/ University of Exeter. Building on her understanding of the barriers to delivering films for social change and her first-hand experience researching and working in international development, she launched a filmmaking social enterprise with a social documentarian Remi Sowa. Chouette Films is a green film production company producing films for social change with the smallest possible environmental footprint. Based at SOAS, it draws stories from the world of academia and extends the reach of their impact to wider audience and has been recognised for its contribution by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Best Film by Research award 2015), BAFTSS, the Al Jazeera International Documentary Film Festival, the IBC Social Impact Award for Ethical Leadership in Filmmaking amongst many others.*

*Richard Widdess is Emeritus Professor of Musicology in the Department of Music, School of Arts, SOAS University of London. He is the author of three books and many articles on the history, theory and practice of music in South Asia. He has conducted fieldwork in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, since 1990, particularly in the city of Bhaktapur. This research resulted in his third book, Dāpha: Sacred singing in a South Asian city, published in 2013. He is a Fellow of the British Academy.*

### **16:15-17:00: Plenary Discussion**