Reviving Lost Voices: Digital Archiving of Indigenous Folk Song Field Recordings from 1960s Taiwan

Abstract

This project presents the digital restoration and preservation of nearly 3,000 field recordings from Taiwan's 1960s Folk Song Collection Movement, initiated by Shi Wei-liang and Hsu Tsang-Houei. Many recordings were later compromised, but duplicates preserved in Germany enabled a 2013 digitization and revitalization effort. We highlight how digital libraries support language preservation, ethical engagement, and indigenous education, offering a scalable model for sustaining intangible musical heritage in minority communities.

CCS CONCEPTS
• Information Systems → Digital Archives • Applied Computer → Digital Presentation • Human-centered computing → Cultural Heritage.
KEYWORDS
 Digital music libraries, Ethnomusicology, Indigenous archives, Metadata modeling, Cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

In 1964, Hsu Tsang-Houei and Shih Wei-liang launched the "**Folk Song Collection Movement**," conducting large-scale fieldwork on Taiwan's indigenous and Han traditional music.
Nearly 3,000 folk songs were collected across the island. The project brought national attention to artists like Chen Da (folk songs), Liao Qiongzhi (singing traditional opera), and Li Tianlu (puppet theatre), and advocated for cultural preservation policies.
Though the archive deteriorated over time, recordings safeguarded in Germany by Alois Osterwalder were returned in 2013.
In collaboration with NTNU, they were digitized, verified, and partially released in 2020, preserving their original order and historical soundscape.

Timeline: Preservation of Taiwan's Indigenous Music Recordings

OBJECTIVE

Every research done requires archives and documentation. Especially in the ethnomusicology section, some aspects of ethnomusicology require fieldwork or interviews. So, is it necessary to archive and digitize the data from these fieldwork and interviews?
What are the classifications and differences between digital collections and digital libraries? What is the significance and contribution of digital libraries to the study of musicology?
That's what this article is about.

METHODOLOGY

- Digitization: 24-bit/96kHz audio transfer from analog tapes
- Platform: Omeka-based digital archive supporting multilingual access
- Community Collaboration: Tao community workshops for content validation, translation, and cultural review
- Field Techniques: Semi-structured interviews, transcription, participatory metadata annotation

CURRENT ISSUES AND DILEMMAS

Reviving traditional songs—such as the Tao people's clapping song—involves complex challenges.

Many lyrics are in ancient or ceremonial languages unfamiliar to modern speakers. This requires deep linguistic reconstruction, including phonetic transcription and meaning interpretation.

Even when translations are complete, recruiting performers and ensuring rehearsal continuity is difficult, especially with generational gaps in musical literacy and memory. Additionally, post-performance transmission Recognition remains a concern without structural support.
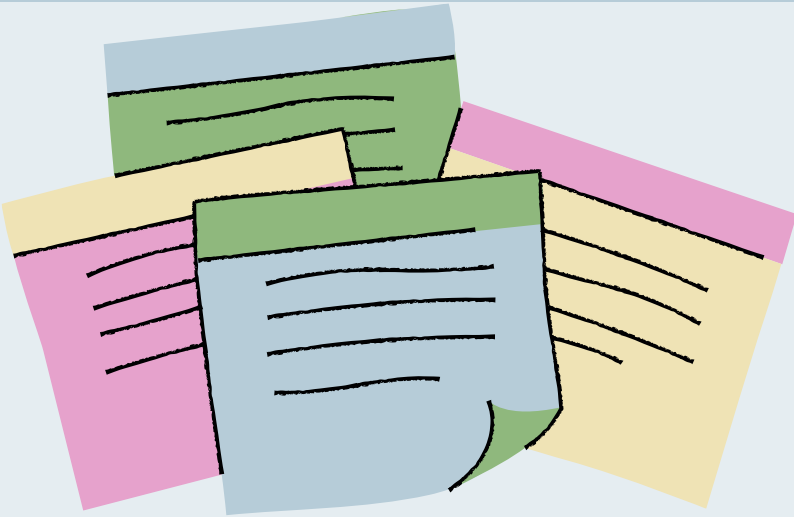
## SOLUTIONS AND RESPONSES

Cultural Revitalization Strategies
This project proposes a multi-pronged approach:
- Linguistic digitization: Creating digital archives of ancient languages with pronunciation guides and semantic glosses, ensuring their long-term accessibility.
- Audio-visual preservation: Retaining both archival recordings and contemporary reperformances, annotated with contextual and ceremonial functions.
- Educational integration: Embedding digital content into Taiwan's Indigenous Education Act curriculum, linking audio-visual archives with classroom instruction and cultural literacy initiatives.

Challenge	Solution
Ancient Language	Digitize ancient texts with pronunciation guides
Comprehension Gap	Translate and annotate lyrics for youth
Personnel Shortage	Community-based performance training
Classroom Disconnect	Integrate content into Indigenous curriculum
Public Access	Open-access platforms with rich media

The Role of Digital Libraries

Digital libraries serve as critical infrastructures for cultural continuity:

- They reduce spatial and temporal barriers, making Indigenous resources instantly accessible in classrooms and community centers.
- They provide richer media formats—beyond static archives—using annotated audio, video, and semantic metadata to support active learning.
- In alignment with Taiwan's Education Act for Indigenous Peoples, digital libraries can supply the mandated Indigenous content required by national curricula, transforming preservation into pedagogy.
- Unlike standard databases, digital libraries emphasize curation, multilingual navigation, and public interpretability, fostering broader cultural engagement.

1. Field Recording → 2. Digitization → 3. Translation and Annotation → 4. Curriculum Integration
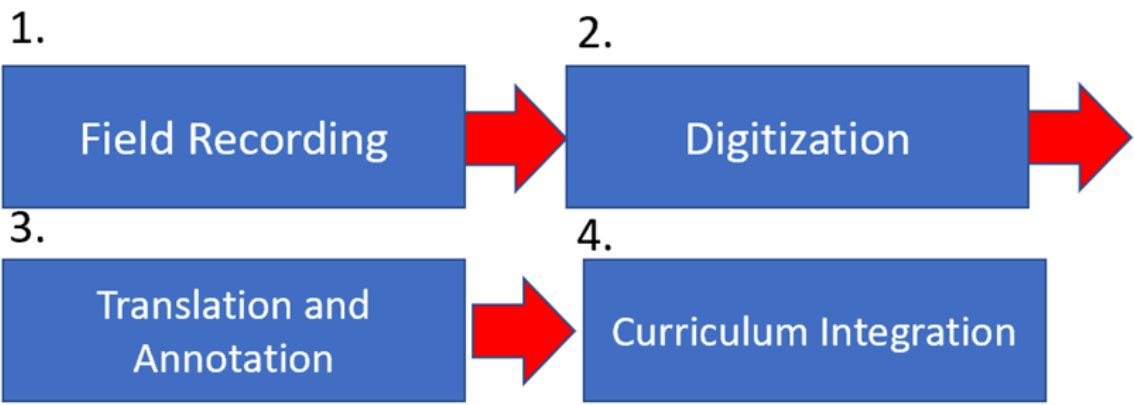
CONCLUSION

This project has completed several foundational stages of its implementation, including the restoration and republication of early field recordings. Physical copies have been returned to the original Indigenous communities, while digital versions are preserved in a research archive. Unlike countries with centralized cultural databases, Taiwan still lacks a national digital music library. This case highlights the need for culturally responsive frameworks that combine linguistic translation, community validation, and public access. It also demonstrates how archival folk music can support Indigenous language revitalization and cultural continuity.

FUTURE WORKS

Looking forward, the project will focus on designing a national-scale digital infrastructure for music heritage preservation in Taiwan. Key goals include:
- Developing AI-assisted transcription tools for archaic dialects
- Establishing co-governance models for Indigenous cultural data
- Creating a public-facing digital music library with educational features
- Publishing additional albums with full lyrics, metadata, and contextual histories
These actions aim to transform passive archives into dynamic, community-centered platforms for cultural sustainability and education.

URL LINK

https://gpi.culture.tw/Search?q=%E8%81%BD%E8%A6%8B1967

The image shows the published audio recordings;
subsequent albums are currently under research and verification

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