Hello, I'm Clement Paligaru, and welcome to Ear to Asia, where we talk with researchers who focus on the region, with its diverse peoples, societies and histories. Ear to Asia is a podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

In this episode: saving the songs of the Yangtze. When one thinks of China’s 21st century megacities, with their crowds and congestion, their glitz and cutting edge technologies, it’s Shanghai 上海 that typically first comes to mind. Shanghai sits at the mouth of the Yangtze River 長江, the longest river in China, and indeed all of Asia. Except for a brief period in the 20th century, Shanghai and its hinterland have made up the wealthiest region of China.
But before the advent of high-speed trains and the network of motorways that resulted from economic reforms begun only four decades ago, Shanghai’s hinterland was a fabric of rice paddies, punctuated with numerous rivers, streams and lakes. The peoples of this region, although ethnically Han Chinese 汉人, had their own languages, folklore and moral code. That culture has all but disappeared, in the wake of China’s relentless march to modernisation.

In this episode of Ear to Asia, we speak with Chinese literature expert Anne McLaren about her research into what she calls the folk ecology of the lower Yangtze delta, including the folk songs of this fascinating region. And she explains how these vanishing oral traditions shed light into how people of a bygone era lived. Anne McLaren is Professor of Chinese Literature at the University of Melbourne and is based at Asia Institute. Anne, welcome.

Anne McLaren:

Thank you, it’s lovely to be here.

Clement Paligaru:

Let’s set up the landscape first. Now the Yangtze River is the third longest river in the world, it begins in the Tibetan plateau and flows in an easterly direction and then the Yangtze empties in to the China Sea, right after passing through the metropolis of Shanghai. Your research looks into the oral traditions of the peoples of the lower Yangtze delta. So, tell us about the geography, the landscape of this region before this era of industrialisation, urbanisation and development?

Anne McLaren:

Well if you can imagine a giant bowl about oh how many miles away from Shanghai, and at the edges, you have paddies, rice paddy files. The giant bowl is where Lake Tai 太湖, so Lake Tai is south of the Yangtze River, it’s the third largest fresh water lake in China. Provides water for living and eating and fish for millions of people, living around the shores of Lake Tai. This is the major sea of water that you find in this region, as well as the Yangtze River. As well as that, you find tributaries and canals, and you'd see a wonderful chessboard of interlocking waterways.

That’s how it used to be. This was the China that I saw from a train window, slow train window when I first came to China in the 1970s. I’d look out, both sides there’d be rice
paddies. Rice paddies are set in very low-lying fields, they’re full of water, full of mud, and by the side there would be fairly simple cottages, walkways and people would be taking themselves around the waterways by boat. So, I didn’t see the highways and the railways then.

Clement Paligaru:
What does this region look like now?

Anne McLaren:
Well, these days you could go out from Shanghai on the Gaotie 高铁 which is the high rapid rail, which could take you in very rapid transit, an hour or two and you’re in Wuxi 无锡 or Suzhou 苏州 or Hangzhou 桐州 any of the numerous townships dotting the area. It’s very advanced.

Clement Paligaru:
Not many people outside China think of China as an ethnically homogenous nation, with a single language Mandarin, or Putonghua 普通话. What language did the people of the lower Yangtze speak?

Anne McLaren:
The people of the lower Yangtze, still speak one or more variant[s] of a language grouping called the Wu 吴吴语 in Chinese, W-U language, and this is one of the six major language groupings found in South China. The big divide in China’s geography is along the Yangtze River, between the north and the south. So, Wuyu’s one of the six southern very big language groupings, and there are approximately 80 million native speakers of Wuyu. Shanghainese 上海话 a variant of this.

Clement Paligaru:
Your work though, delves beyond the spoken word?

Anne McLaren:
It does.

Clement Paligaru:
So, In your current research, you study folk songs of the region, song cycles in particular?

Anne McLaren:
Yes.

*Clement Paligaru:*

What are song cycles?

*Anne McLaren:*

Well a song cycle is a group of songs attached to a particular figure. Often the figure is someone that the singer believes to have been a real historical person, who lived in the region in the past. And for various reasons, this person is a hero or sometimes the can be a victim that you might feel sorry for. But they're very special, they've had a very special life outcome, and a group of songs attach themselves to this individual.

*Clement Paligaru:*

And where were these songs performed?

*Anne McLaren:*

The songs were sung by everyone in the village, so generally speaking you wouldn’t find them on a stage. They were sung during labour in a village for example, just about everyone would be able to sing something. You’d learn how to sing a song from your mother’s knee. When you went in to the rice paddy you’d be working with a group of people, and you’d very likely sing a song about how to plant the rice seedlings which you’ve nurtured carefully. You want to plant them in a row, and you would start off with one line, your friend working with you would start the second line, the third person the third line, and then a fourth one. Most of the songs are in stanzas of four, and they could readily be sung by four people. There were refrains as well from a chorus. So the labouring songs were sung by farm labourers, ordinary people.

*Clement Paligaru:*

Men and women?

*Anne McLaren:*

Men and women, and it’s interesting, in the 19th century landlords notice that their workers in the rice fields worked harder, if they had teams of folk singers. They would hire the local farmers who had the best songs and train them up in the longer songs, and they would sing in the fields. That was one thing. There were song competitions, and there’s not a lot of flat land in this area, so they would erect stages on poles over the waterways, and
people would come in their boats, and they'd sit there and they'd watch people sing in competitions. Competing to sing the best songs, the most interesting songs, and the longest songs, and this is one reason why we have long songs now, from the Yangtze Delta.

*Clement Paligaru:*

What were the themes that came through? What did they sing about?

*Anne McLaren:*

They sang about mythical figures from the past, for example the story of Shen Qige 沈七哥, who is a figure who they believed lived in a mysterious lake called Dongting 洞庭湖, right in the heart of Great Lake Tai. He went to this island, this magical island, he learnt how to sing folksongs from the birds. So birdsong taught him how to sing. There was a Daoist (Taoist) 道士 magician who taught him how to grow rice, especially the daughter taught him how to grow rice. He brought these skills back, the singing, and the rice planting, back to his homeland, on the banks of Lake Tai and taught his people how to grow rice. This was one of the most popular song cycles of the region.

*Clement Paligaru:*

Anne, you’ve recorded a rice planting song, which is sung by two conservators, I understand?

*Anne McLaren:*

Yes.

*Clement Paligaru:*

We’ll play an excerpt in a moment, but please tell us about this song?

*Anne McLaren:*

Well this song is the type of song that was sung in the rice paddy fields, so here we are to imagine you have row upon row of rice planters, knee deep in mud, bending over in the hot sun, inserting the rice seedlings. As they do this backbreaking work, they are singing a rhythmical song, so this is known as planting of the rice shoots. They'd be singing it in two’s or in three’s or in four’s.

*Clement Paligaru:*
Well let’s hear some of this.

[The Rice Planting Song plays]

Clement Paligaru:

That’s a rice planting song of the lower Yangtze River region of China, which is among songs Chinese literature expert Professor Anne McLaren is researching. Anne, this one, you can feel even though it’s not done by the original singers, you feel that passion coming through. The voices are soaring there. How were these song lines passed down? Because this is an oral tradition then isn't it?

Anne McLaren:

Well there were often different forms of them, and most were quite short, most were fairly episodic. Just supposing if you take a long song cycle, where you’re talking about a love scandal, there are lots of love scandals in this and they love gossiping about oh who’s having an affair today, you know, that sort of thing. But there’d usually be one favoured episode, and so most people would know that favourite episode. But a singer who was a bit more talented, or who made it his or her job to learn more, could sing thousands of lines, could tell you what happened after that and how they were punished or did they flee, did they manage to get away from the forces that were out to punish them, what happened in the end.

Some people chose to provide off a very long song cycles, people with the good voices, who kept people entertained. But just about everyone knew something, even a stanza or two. These are songs sung by everybody, not just by specialist singers.

Clement Paligaru:

And the way it would have been passed down, and passed on, you’ve got surrounding villages, transportation and the proximity of people in communities. Tell me about that? How did the older modes of transportation influence the development of these region’s oral traditions?

Anne McLaren:

Well two things were very important, one was the transportation by boat along the waterways, this was the most important way that you could travel from A to B. You either walked along the narrow paths, as I did when I was there in the 1990s, when they hadn't
built the highways. Or you went by boat and the boats tended to be very slow, there’s a lot of mud, there was sludge and so on, they were always dredging up the waterways. Singing by boat was a very important medium of transmission. If you were a ferryman, or a ferrywoman, you would keep your passengers entertained with the wonderful songs. The other way that the songs were transmitted, actually is by married women. Because in China women were married out of the family and almost invariably married to another village somewhere else. And when they were married out to that village, they’d bring their songs with them. You can trace where the songs go by the boats and by the marriages.

Clement Paligaru:

So how much is the natural environment actually portrayed in the songs of the region?

Anne McLaren:

Well there’s a very intimate link between them. For example there’s a whole subcategory of songs known as boating songs. They're all about people in boats doing things, and often it’s young men looking at the windows as they pass, looking out for lovely young ladies that they can chat up. But the rhythm of the song matches the rhythm of the rocking movement that’s required when you move that boat along. Because the rudder was a rocking motion. The songs had a very intimate relationship with the movement through the water. Actually prostitutes used to also ply their trade on the waterways, and sometimes they would ferry people, and they’d sing rather sexy songs on the water.

Clement Paligaru:

You’re listen to Ear to Asia brought to you by the Asia Institute, and our guest on this episode is Chinese literature expert Anne McLaren, with us to discuss her research in to the linguistic traditions of Shanghai’s hinterland, that are on the brink of extinction, as a result of China’s incredibly rapid modernisation. Now let’s move on to one of these songs that you're referring to and one that I understand is quite well known, is called The Fifth Daughter 五姑娘. We’ll hear an excerpt of a recording of this song in a bit. But first, tell us about this song?

Anne McLaren:

Well Fifth Daughter may well have lived in the mid-19th century, the singers, the audience, all believe she's a real woman. She is orphaned, she’s living with her older brother, he’s married, and his wife is in charge of everyone, including her, and she’s not a very nice
person. She’s living with a rather brutal and nasty sister-in-law and her parents who would normally look after her, and cherish her have died. And she’s set to do a lot of housework and part of the housework includes taking lunch out to the workers in the fields. It’s here that she spies the very handsome young hired hand.

Here’s a young man who’s been brought in from a neighbouring area, he’s poor, he doesn’t own land, and he’s working for hire. She gives him lunch and they spark up a love interest and she’s quite active in pursuing this, and she falls pregnant and that’s when disaster strikes, when the sister-in-law finds out. And usually what happens, sadly in these circumstances in the mid-19th century, would be that the young woman concerned would be bullied into taking her own life.

This is indeed one of the variants that you find in the story, they’re very sad and very grim episodes where there’s a noose hanging in a barn and she’s been locked in the barn. Then there are other episodes where the older brother is instigated by the sister-in-law, urged and egged on, to the point where he says, well you’ve got a choice. Here’s a knife you can cut your throat and here’s a rope you can hang yourself.

_Clement Paligaru:_

It is quite tragic as well?

_Anne McLaren:_

It is tragic.

_Clement Paligaru:_

They’re based on love, but there’s tragedy at the end of some of these?

_Anne McLaren:_

There’s tragedy, because from the singer’s point of view, this is a real person, it’s a real story and it doesn’t have a happy ending generally.

_Clement Paligaru:_

A lot of the early work in capturing and preserving _The Fifth Daughter_ folk song, seems to be centred around the rendition by one singer, and that’s Lu Amei 陆阿妹 Tell us about her?

_Anne McLaren:_
Fortunately we know quite a lot about her, she had a great voice and she was the singer of the longest version of this song, who could sing up to about 3000 lines. She learnt her song from her father, and she was born in the early 1900s, so her father would have been born in the 1880s. And her father learnt it from someone from the 1850s, but she died in her 80s. I didn't get to meet her, but I read all about her and I know people who knew her. And she was illiterate, she was married in to the region of Luxu 芦墟 which is on the shores of Lake Fen 汾湖 Later on in socialist China she was a local cleaner at a school. But she transmitted the longest version of this song that we know about. When her lengthy version of *Fifth Daughter* was discovered by folklorists in the early 1980s, there was great excitement. Hers was the first one to be found in fact.

*Clement Paligaru:*

And you mention in your writings that this process of learning songs and singing the songs, could take almost a year. So can you explain what you mean by that, how did that work?

*Anne McLaren:*

Well actually, it really could take a lifetime, not just a year.

*Clement Paligaru:*

One song?

*Anne McLaren:*

Oh yes, not many people could sing the longer songs, and certainly by the 1980s and ‘90s, only a handful could. But we know a lot now about the epical traditions of Yugoslavia, of Finland, of Turkey, of Africa, and people who are not literate do not rely on written records. But they rely on memory tactics in their brain to encode, record, remember, create, compose, vast epical songs, and this sort of phenomenon is known around the world. We don't know much about the Han Chinese and their folk epics, I hope to make it much better known.

*Clement Paligaru:*

Okay, well let's listen to one version of this song.

*[The Fifth Daughter plays]*

*Clement Paligaru:*
And that’s *Fifth Daughter*, a folk song of the lower Yangtze River in China. Professor Anne McLaren, can you please tell us a little about this rendition of *Fifth Daughter*?

*Anne McLaren:*

Sure. Well, first of all I'm having lunch and we’ve been drinking some rice wine, we’ve had some lovely hot food, and suddenly one of the singers pushes the table away, gets up and starts singing, just like that. Without any by your leave. He’s singing *Fifth Daughter*, he’s singing the opening stanzas there, one of the favourite sections. It’s where Fifth Daughter goes out to the field and meets the man that she’ll fall in love with, Atian 阿天

*Clement Paligaru:*

Always the best bit.

*Anne McLaren:*

Always the best bit…

*Clement Paligaru:*

Where they fall in love.

*Anne McLaren:*

…where they fall in love yeah.

*Clement Paligaru:*

Now you’ve explained the context there, and the meaning, what are your sources of this information?

*Anne McLaren:*

Well, apart from some video tapes which I've made of singers who I've met, my major source, especially for the older more authentic songs, comes from transcripts made in the 1980s and 1990s. And many of these are available in mimeographed form for limited circulation, I have some of these. These are often very important, and a number have been published in volumes of the cultural treasures from the region.

*Clement Paligaru:*

So there are quite a few approaches used there to capture this. While working on this, did you pick up any problems in the way the transcripts were gathered or compiled?
Anne McLaren:

The kind of problems that people face with conservation of folkloric artefacts around the world, is that you want to preserve something that can be rendered special and appropriate for a national audience. And sometimes things that come from the people can be a bit embarrassing, and this is really true of these love songs, because the original singers when they had the opportunity, when they were just singing to their friends, would put in juicy bits about how the lovers had a bath together, or how she lured him in to the bath. Their love making and things like that, which when you’re transcribing and editing and publishing something for a national audience, even for kids at school, you might think well I don’t really want that bit do I. So there were various things in the editing process that were cut out, that were bowdlerised.

Clement Paligaru:

Yet the people who wrote these songs, included these aspects of life and romance and the like. Were the peoples of this region quite uninhibited about their sexuality and expression?

Anne McLaren:

Look, I really think that the elites of the region were embarrassed at the vulgarity of the ordinary people of the region. And for this reason, I think they overlooked a lot of their songs. They've only come in to their own in the 1980s as a part of the regional culture of Wu. But it has been at a cost. They feel that they have to get rid of the embarrassing bits, the obscene bits as they see them, although they're not really that obscene, and the superstitious parts, that deal with faith systems. And my own feeling, as a western scholar, is that I don’t have to be bound by strictures like that. So I'm always going to aim at bringing out the entire song cycle.

Clement Paligaru:

And yet, what’s remarkable is the inclusion of these aspects of life, and the stories, ran parallel to a time of confucianist morality. How is it that that happened and that there was limited influence of Confucianism on this community?

Anne McLaren:

It’s interesting. When we western scholars and we Chinese scholars examine Confucianism in late imperial China, for example, we always assume that these ideas,
Confucian ideas of morality, how to act in a family and a rigid hierarchy in the kinship system. We always assume that it trickled down to everybody. But in reality the ordinary people had their own system and code of morality. Some interesting things that I have found when I've gone in to the villages, when I've looked at the songs, is that we often think of a Confucian patriarchy, but inside the households, it’s women against women. It’s women in charge and it’s women who are victims of other women, which is not a very nice thing to think about, but is something which I've noticed in laments, funeral laments, bridal laments and in the long songs of the region.

Clement Paligaru:

What inspired you to make this study of Chinese languages, the songs and the like, part of your life’s work?

Anne McLaren:

Well I find the songs really quite beautiful, not just how they sound, but also the words. And so I'm trying to make those words come alive for a western audience, and I wonder if I can conclude by stanza, reading out a stanza about Lake Tai, which I particularly like. So I'm now going to read out from my translation one of the opening stanzas from the song about Shen Qige who brought rice cultivation to the lower Yangtze Delta. Most people would be singing near water, so it’s natural that they would be thinking of water when they start a long song.

So they’re going to start with the big body of water, then they’re going to the Yangtze River, then they’re going to move to Lake Tai where they’re probably standing, and then they're going to move to one of the little bays where they live. This is one of the opening stanzas, it’s a story of Shen Qige.

The Yangtze River flows east night after day, a huge dragon in the east flickers then vanishes.
Tai Hu Lake gleams white as silver, like a sparkling pearl shining brightly.
Lake Tai is broad and vast, blue green pure and bright.
Sky meets water, cloud follows cloud.
The sun shines on the jade green water,
as golden fins bob up.
72 peaks suddenly emerge then vanish,
coming to view then fade from sight.

I love these songs. This song conveys not just the majesty and beauty of Lake Tai, but it also conveys its magical quality, it’s like a huge dragon. Dragon’s in China, live in rivers, have long fishy tails. The waves of pure and gleam blue green, the lake is vast, you see the horizon where sky meets water. It’s full of fish, hence the golden fins, and fish is of course vital to the life of the people here. Then there are the hills and the peaks you can see in the water. I have visited Lake Tai many times, but what we see today is something quite different to what we hear in this song.

So Lake Tai is China’s third largest fresh water lake, industrial run off has made it highly polluted, in fact in May 2007, a very bad algal bloom erupted, that made the water undrinkable, and greatly affected the two million people in the nearby town of Wuxi. So this is one of the reasons why I want to make these wonderful songs known in the modern day.

_Clement Paligaru:_

It sounds all very straight forward, but what have been some of the greatest challenges that you have faced when it comes to this area of research?

_Anne McLaren:_

People like myself... I trained as a sinologist, my original work was in fiction, writings of the final dynasties. The greatest problem really is that we think of China and we ignore the regions. We think of China as being monolithic, as having one written language. We don’t realise that China’s really like Europe, it has many different regions, it has enormous environmental variants. Too often sinologists, people in China studies, look at China and just see one country, when what you should be seeing is a whole civilisation.

_Clement Paligaru:_

Professor Anne McLaren, it’s been a pleasure having you on Ear to Asia, such insights and such fascinating stories you’ve had for us today. Many thanks for joining us.

_Anne McLaren:_

Thank you.
Clement Paligaru:

We’ve been speaking with Anne McLaren, who is Professor of Chinese Literature at the University of Melbourne and is based at Asia Institute. Anne’s research focuses on the literature and oral traditions of China. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute, you can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on iTunes, Stitcher or SoundCloud. And if you’ve enjoyed this or other episodes of this podcast series, it would mean a lot to us if you could give us a generous rating and write a review in iTunes or like us on SoundCloud. And of course let your friends know about us on social media. Ear to Asia is licensed under Creative Commons copyright 2017, the University of Melbourne. I'm Clement Paligaru, thanks for your company, and bye for now.

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