

Songs they're afraid to sing in China

JC Museum debuts resident's documentary on country's dying political folk music

By Ricardo Kaulessar
Reporter staff writer

Meera Jaffrey teaches in the Music Department of the Learning Community Charter School in Jersey City. But on Saturday, Feb. 10 at 2 p.m., she will make her directoral debut in a screening at the Jersey City Museum of "Fine Rain: Politics and Folk Songs in China."

The film spotlights the history and politics of China from pre-Communism to the Cultural Revolution through the country's folk songs, with archival footage of live performances, photographs, and interviews.

There are songs that Chinese residents may sing only softly, as they are songs of resistance or history.

"Fine Rain" has its origins in a trip to China that Jaffrey took in 1980 while she was a Chinese major at Oberlin College in Ohio. Years later, Jaffrey returned to the country to understand more about the folk songs that first piqued her interest.

"The first time I went, I started engaging in conversation with complete strangers, and I

Japanese occupied China during World War II.

The wish to unravel the songs' mysteries and bring them into the open stayed with Jaffrey.

In 2004, Jaffrey received a grant from the Dodge Foundation to embark on the documentary. Through referrals from friends and her own research, Jaffrey started interviewing Chinese natives who settled in Queens and a doctor in the New Jersey suburbs. All of them who would recite songs they had not sung in years.

"A lot of songs, these people kept to themselves over the years but never forgot, because it spoke to a particular moment in their lives," said Jaffrey.

'Howard's End' connection

Jaffrey continued making her documentary with the help of some major figures in the film business. Ismail Merchant, who, along with his filmmaking partner James Ivory, produced such classics as "A Room with A View" and "Howard's End," heard about Jaffrey's project and invited her to travel to China while they

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would ask them to teach me a song," said Jaffrey. "And there was this old man I met on a train who taught me this one song, and I wanted to know what the meaning was."

That song was "Fine Rain," and its meaning is revealed in the documentary.

Singing a song in secrecy

Jaffrey taught the song to students, friends, and family – but in China, people sung it covertly.

"To sing a song in secrecy was disconcerting, shocking, and very puzzling to me," said Jaffrey.

The folk songs Jaffrey learned during her 1980 trip would be sung very softly, often followed by the comment that they were forbidden to be sung in public under the tenure of the late Chinese leader Mao Zedong.

Some of the songs are familiar to the public, but their purpose has been obscured over the years. The Chinese National Anthem "Arise, Arise, Arise" was actually a song of resistance that helped boost people's spirits when the

were on location for their film "The White Countess."

The trip also provided funding for the documentary.

Merchant would not live to see the film done, as he passed away in May 2005.

The trip enabled Jaffrey to interview elderly Chinese residents who survived the Japanese occupation and Mao's years of repressive rule. Jaffrey met a professor who tearfully recalled the brutal Japanese invasion and the songs that sustained him, as well as Lady Fen, a retired performer who recited folk songs from the era of the Japanese occupation.

"Kids in China are listening to Rock n' Roll and other modern music and these folk songs are dying along with the people who remember them, and they need to be preserved," said Jaffrey.

Sneak preview

Jaffrey said the movie will eventually be shown in film festivals across the United States, and she hopes to have it shown on pub-