LIKE ancient Egypt, which buried its dead surrounded by their worldly goods, New York seems to nurture the most fabulous pack rats. The Collyer brothers famously perished after being sealed in their Harlem brownstone by 180 tons of ephemera.

But few have heard of Yoshio Kishi, a 74-year-old Japanese-American film editor, who has made up, perhaps, for his unheralded jobs filling union-mandated slots on films like "Raging Bull" by filling his apartment near Lincoln Center with a relentless abundance of Asian-American memorabilia. I collect, therefore I am.

In the dimly lighted apartment, thousands of books, sealed in yellowing Mylar bags, bristle from floor to ceiling shelves in every room. Paper bags stuffed with records, videos, sheet music, pamphlets, buttons and even dolls march along all but a narrow alley of floor. Since Mr. Kishi's mother, Haru, died in 2002, the collection has been inching into her once pristine bedroom.

He estimates that over 40 years, he has collected at least 10,000 items of Asian-Americana. Some universities have some of what he has, but experts say Mr. Kishi's collection is distinguished not just by its size but by the eclectic nature of his curiosity and tastes.

His compulsion started with Mark Twain. "I had a craving," Mr. Kishi explained, "not a craving, but I felt like rereading 'Huckleberry Finn.'" He went to the library, but "Huckleberry Finn" was checked out, so he bought a copy instead. And then he kept buying more books, so that, as he put it, "When I feel like reading, it's there."

Once he hatched a plan to write a best-selling novel. Figuring that crime, sex and murder would be essential ingredients, he collected dozens of books like "Eros and Evil" and "A Thief's Primer." He never wrote the best seller, but the collection remained.

In the mid-1960's, around his 30th birthday, he found himself in the throes of a classic identity crisis. He began to regret that he did not know more about his Japanese heritage. He had grown up in a predominantly Irish and Italian tenement neighborhood, about two blocks from where he lives now. During World War II, his immigrant parents avoided speaking Japanese, for fear of being labeled enemy aliens, and blended in by attending a Lutheran church.

In search of material that would explain his ethnic identity, Mr. Kishi began trolling flea markets in New York, Chicago and San Francisco. "For some reason I felt panic that if I didn't find the material and preserve it, it would be lost," he said.

With the help of his friend Irene Yah-Ling Sun, an actress and avid shopper, he collected arcana like a 1929 issue of the Master Detective, featuring an illustration of a long-nailed "Chinaman" threatening a blue-eyed blonde, the sheet music to "Chin-Chin Chinaman" from 1917, a set of Joe Jitsu and Dick Tracy hand puppets from 1961, and a Wheaties box decorated with a picture of the figure skater Kristi Yamaguchi.
Mr. Kishi is partial to stories of humble immigrants, like his father, a houseman, and his mother, a seamstress. "I'm not moved by I.M. Pei, who gets millions of dollars for building a house," he said.

By 1981, Mr. Kishi's apartment was so cluttered that, as he put it, "It was either my mother or my books." To relieve the pressure, he sold 1,500 items to the National Diet Library in Japan, the equivalent of America's Library of Congress.

Now he is slowly transferring cartons of memorabilia to New York University, where John Kuo Wei Tchen, director of the university's Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute, is trying to acquire Mr. Kishi's archives. Some of the material, including first editions of Asian-American literary classics, Charlie Chan comics and World War II propaganda posters, is on view in an exhibition called "Archivist of the 'Yellow Peril" at the institute's gallery, at 269 Mercer Street in Greenwich Village, through July 15.

Mr. Tchen, who organized the show, chose the demonization of Asian-Americans as a theme. To Mr. Kishi, who is proud of his range, that is "like talking about the black American experience and just talking about the Ku Klux Klan." As he divests himself of his collection, Mr. Kishi may lose some of his hard-won identity, but there are compensations. Already, he has gained enough space to be able to replace his single bed with a double bed.

And he still maintains a robust interest in all sorts of trivia. He admires the actress Bernadette Peters and the Italian novelist Italo Svevo. He is fascinated by pigeons and by the Japanese Zero, the World War II fighter plane. "I also like squirrels," he adds. Once the Asian-American artifacts are gone, the sky's the limit.

Drawing (Drawing by Lisa Haney)