



The Silk Road Today

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For the two weeks of the Folklife Festival, the United States capital is the destination for an idea that began over 2,000 years ago, when the Silk Road became an economic thoroughfare, a conduit of knowledge and culture, a network, a myth perfumed by spices and resplendent in silk. When Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble perform, or when an unknown folk group from Kazakhstan plays to an American audience, we are moved because we understand, in those transcendent moments, how we all connect, and what our true responsibilities are to each other. We also feel a poignant anguish at the realization that, too often, we do not take these responsibilities to heart.

Those responsibilities go beyond music, of course — to make connections on the ground, to help societies reconstruct after being destroyed by war, drought, and famine. When the Aga Khan Development Network began work in the Central Asian part of the Silk Road in 1992, we needed to address the most immediate problems — food sufficiency and the repair of roads, bridges, and the electrical grid — but another pressing task was to help in the construction of pluralistic societies capable of dealing with age-old ethnic tensions.

It is not new to assert that a classical education should include more than the usual Great Books in the traditional Western canon, but perhaps it is new to suggest that a broad, inclusive humanities curriculum should be introduced in countries where no such program ever existed before. One of our programs in Central Asia, a region undergoing a period of transition, is the Humanities Project. The Project arose out of deep concern for the divisions that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the humanitarian crisis that followed. Ethnic rivalries surfaced, and the region was menaced by civil war. If the people of the region were to live in peace with their neighbors — who, by extension, include the rest of the world — then we needed ways to create an appreciation of other cultures and intellectual traditions.

The Humanities Project therefore aims to develop skills of cultural interpretation, independent thinking, reasoned debate, and open-ended curiosity. The Project, based in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, will eventually extend to many Central Asian universities. It is also intended to promote tolerance for pluralism in ideas, cultures, and peoples, and aims to develop the capacity for ethical reflection and aesthetic appreciation.

In 2000, we established the University of Central Asia, an internationally chartered private institution of higher education dedicated exclusively to education and research on mountain regions and societies. Mountain populations experience extremes of poverty and isolation as well as constraints on opportunities and choice, but at the same time, they sustain great linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and religious pluralism, and show remarkable resilience in the face of extraordinarily harsh circumstances. By creating intellectual space and resources, the university will help turn the mountains that divide the nations and territories of Central Asia into the links that unite its peoples and economies in a shared endeavor to improve future well-being.

Another related issue of concern in Central Asia, and one that the Aga Khan Development Network has been working to address, is the decline of musical traditions and activities that coincided with rapid changes occurring in the region. In response, we created the Music Initiative in Central Asia, which has been collaborating with the Smithsonian Institution and the Silk Road Project to put on this year's Festival. While the sounds of the Silk Road come to the National Mall in Washington, D.C.,

the Music Initiative is working to preserve and promote the musical traditions of the Central Asian portion of the Silk Road: in Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan — and now, Afghanistan.

The Initiative provides financial resources and technical assistance for the restoration of the great classics of Central Asian music and funds recordings, research, conferences, publications, and concerts of traditional music. The Initiative supports selected music schools that train students through oral-tradition transmission from master to disciple (*ustad-shagird*) and facilitates apprenticeships of promising students to master luthiers with the aim of improving the quality of musical instrument construction. A Multimedia Programme is producing an anthology of Central Asian music and promoting it through broadcasts and video and audio recordings. The Intra-Asian Cultural Exchange Programme organizes local festivals featuring a variety of repertoires and artists, supports educational activities, and facilitates exchanges of performers and teachers among music schools in different regions.

Under the aegis of the Initiative, Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble are performing in Central Asia in a series of concerts and master classes that feature specially written pieces by outstanding composers from the Silk Road region. The Music Initiative also worked with the Smithsonian and the Silk Road Project to produce the two-CD compilation, *The Silk Road: A Musical Caravan*.

I believe these efforts in Central Asia should be mirrored by a greater effort at cultural inclusion in the teaching of the sciences and the humanities throughout the world. If the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is about broadening our cultural and intellectual horizons, and I believe it is, then we should take this idea beyond the duration of the Festival and make it a feature of all our societies.

As we listen now to the harmonious conjunction of East and West, here on the National Mall, let us reflect on our responsibilities to remain curious and open to the world's riches. We may find our identities in our own cultures, but we gain nothing by exclusion. Let us all be moved by others' music, by their art, by the vast and myriad possibilities in the cross-fertilization of cultures that make up the world today.