



# The Festival and the Transnational Production of Culture

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*Who produced the Festival this year?* In the end, over a thousand people of good will from around the globe will join with a million visitors to produce the experience. The inspirational idea and genuine engagement of Yo-Yo Ma, a musical artist of Chinese parentage who grew up in Paris and studied at Harvard, has provided the vision. The support of His Highness the Aga Khan, the leader of the Ismaili Muslim community, who supports educational, health, architectural, and development programs in places ranging from Central Asia to Mali to MIT, has been crucial. The site was designed by Rajeev Sethi, South Asia's renowned scenographer, who is currently working on projects in several continents. It was curated by the Smithsonian's Richard Kennedy, whose English family long ago migrated to Berkeley, and who himself turned back east to specialize in the study of Tamil history and Cambodian dance; and by Ted Levin, a Dartmouth professor who has worked with Uzbek, Bukharan Jewish, and Tuvan musical traditions in the heart of Inner Asia. Alma Kunanbay, a scholar from Kazakhstan married to a prominent Russian musicologist, organized the area devoted to nomadic traditions, while Henry Glassie, a folklorist and material culture expert who has worked in Turkey, Japan, and Bangladesh, organized ceramic and textile artists. And so it goes, among the many members of our staff, our collaborators with the Silk Road Project, Inc., and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, our many volunteers, and, most of all, the hundreds of musicians, artists, storytellers, cooks, and performers who have come to the National Mall of the United States from all over the United States and from two dozen other nations. Artists from India have painted fabrics to simulate the great bell tower of Xi'an, and woven textiles to simulate the *ikats* of Japan. Japanese masked performers include in their troupe members from Senegal and Guinea. Of course, the Festival itself would not exist save for the Smithsonian, founded by an Englishman who lived mainly in France and Italy, and loved America without ever having visited.

Clearly we live in a transnational world, where people and ideas overflow the conventional boundaries of their birthplaces and birth groups. The Festival is a transnational creation, animated by artists from numerous and diverse communities but speaking a common language of cultural creativity and engaging in a joyful mission of encouraging cross-cultural understanding. The Festival is also a place to learn. Visitors, artists, and organizers alike share in the highly mutual, sometimes studious, sometimes serendipitous act of learning about people, traditions, and ideas that, seemingly distant, become quite familiar.

The Festival also exists within a framework in which knowledge rather than ignorance is valued; the dignity of representation is prized, not sullied; toleration and humility are virtues, not weaknesses; and the right to proclaim, shout, sing, dance, cook, and mold one's existence does not impede the rights of others to do so.

The Festival, it turns out, is a station on the Silk Road. Not the historical one of ancient, medieval, or early modern times, but rather the contemporary Silk Road that draws inspiration from the bountiful cultural interchange it represents. The Festival is a caravanserai in which people from different backgrounds, speaking different languages, and having varied interests can nonetheless stop for a moment on their life's journey, gather with others, trade and share their art, knowledge, and perspectives. We as a society, we as people of a planet, need spaces such as the one that the Festival on the National Mall of the United States provides to meet each other in a respectful way, to hear what our neighbors have to say, and hopefully be inspired to become better human beings as a result.

The Silk Road brought wondrous things — silks, porcelain, horses — to appreciative people. Music, song, instruments, and styles moved along the transcontinental byway, and our musical heritage is the better for it. Ideas about the heavens and cosmos, mathematics, physics, and the elements were carried with its caravans. Religions developed, spread, and thrived along the Silk Road, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in conflict. The Silk

Road did not always bring good. War, disease, and banditry moved along its networks. Those traversing it endured a variety of travails. Differences of values, languages, and interests sometimes closed the roads, cut off the exchanges, and destroyed communities. Yet by and large, the Silk Road proved beneficial to humanity; precisely because it brought diverse people into contact, it stimulated the development of foods, medicines, philosophies, religions, and the arts.

The Silk Road is an apt metaphor for our times; it speaks to the transnational creation of culture. We are all connected. The Festival makes that perhaps more obvious — it heightens our sensation of those connections. The question is what to do with them. Do we think of our connection as a rare moment to be forgotten, or as one that encourages us to explore our own potential to grow as human beings?

Very few Americans have met someone from Kyrgyzstan. At the Festival you can easily do so. Most Americans are unfamiliar with the culture of Central Asia. Now is a chance to change that. Many Americans have an open mind toward learning about the beliefs and practices of people who are Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu. Here at the Festival you have the opportunity.

Following the events of September 11, it seems clear to us that it is ever so important for people and societies the world over to take account of their neighbors, to come to know them and learn of and from them, to engage them in positive ways. Insularity and xenophobia, the fear and dehumanizing of "others" — even one's own neighbors — are recipes for disaster in a complicated world. It is better to do the hard work of fostering understanding and respect, for these often produce inspiration. So weather Washington's summer heat and humidity, don't be dissuaded by the dust, overcome your shyness, don't worry about the fact that you don't speak Uyghur or know the difference between Turk and Turkmen — embrace, engage, and enjoy the Festival journey. May it inspire you as it has us and the very fine community of cultural workers and supporters who have produced it.