

ONLINE MUSIC RESOURCES FOR TEACHING SILK ROAD HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

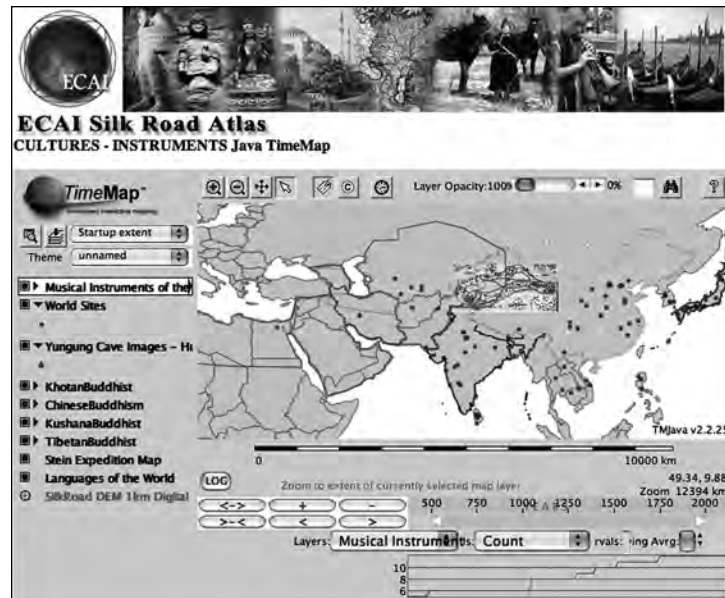
REVIEWED BY SARAH LIN BHATIA

Like a good story, music has the power to transport us to a different time and place. A music listening activity is a fun way to engage students in an exploration of geography and history, and fits especially well into a Silk Road unit emphasizing long-distance trade and cross-cultural interactions.

Orienting students in Silk Road geography makes for a good starting point before embarking upon a journey through the vast, complex cultural and historical territory of the Silk Road. The *Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI) Silk Road Atlas* provides interactive maps, images, and audio files for an exploration of the land, empires, routes, and cultures of the Silk Road.¹

Based at the University of California Berkeley, ECAI is a global consortium of scholars, information technology specialists, and professionals from museums, libraries, and non-governmental organizations, who work on a diverse array of projects that use interactive map software.² The interactive TimeMaps integrate different types of geographical, historical, and cultural data and are intended to convey a sense of time and space. Not all maps are user-friendly and some are too specialized to be useful to K-12 educators.

One useful ECAI map is the “Instruments—Interactive Java TimeMap.”³ With this map, musical instruments can introduce students to the geography of the Silk Road. Clicking on the map highlights different geographic regions of North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia whose peoples participated in Silk Road trade—and links students to instruments from these regions that appear in “Musical Instruments of the Silk Road,”⁴ another section in the *ECAI Silk Road Atlas*. “Musical Instruments of the Silk Road” corresponds to the Musical Instrument Glossary



ECAI Silk Road Atlas. ©2002 Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative.

found in the Silk Road Project’s *Silk Road Encounters Education Kit*,⁵ and can be used alone or in conjunction with the interactive map. By clicking on images of twelve different instruments, students can hear what each instrument sounds like, as well as read and listen to short descriptions of the instruments. The audio samples are just the right length—one to two minutes—and can be downloaded and saved to a student’s computer or MP3 player. While the musical instrument descriptions focus more on the instruments themselves and provide scant historical and cultural information, the *ECAI Silk Road Atlas* musical instrument pages are certain to help emphasize the expanse of the geographi-

cal terrain represented by the instruments and capture students’ interest in Silk Road geography.

To illustrate the extent of cross-cultural exchange among Silk Road cultures, students can watch two full-length concerts by the Vancouver, BC-based Orchid Ensemble, presented online by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Real Audio format.⁶ The Orchid Ensemble “blends ancient musical instruments and traditions from China and beyond,”⁷ and the trio, which frequently performs at schools and universities, specializes in presenting the history and cultural traditions behind its music. The Kennedy Center concerts, which took place in 2003



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The Orchid Ensemble. Photo by Don Xaliman.

and 2005, feature a number of pieces relevant to a lesson on Silk Road history. “Hujia,” a piece attributed to Cai Yan (Wenji) of China’s Later Han dynasty (25–220 CE), exemplifies the rich history found in the Orchid Ensemble’s music. The famous tale of Cai’s life among the Xiongnu, China’s nomadic neighbors and territorial rivals from the northeastern steppe, is probably a mixture of both historical fact and legend, but it depicts the complex situation faced by Chinese women liv-

ing across the border.⁸ Some women, such as Cai, were abducted, while others were ladies sent by the imperial court to the Xiongnu as “tribute” brides.⁹ Although they lived among non-sedentary “barbarians,” these women survived on the steppe and many raised families. At the end of Cai Yan’s story, she is ransomed by the Chinese and tearfully bids farewell to her children before a bittersweet homecoming.¹⁰

“The Winged Horses of Heaven,” another piece performed by the Orchid Ensemble, features a famous historical character. It tells the story of Zhang Qian, the famous Han dynasty official whose diplomatic mission to Central Asia is credited with initiating Silk Road trade.¹¹ In addition to “Hujia” and “The Winged Horses of Heaven,” other pieces in the group’s repertoire relevant to a lesson on Silk Road history and culture are: “Three Treasures,” “Maqam: Prelude and Dance,” “Ya Ribon,” “Bengalia,” “Meeting in a Yurt,” and “Road to Kashgar.” Each piece is preceded by an introduction placing it within a historical and cultural context. Both concerts are just under one hour.

Music can capture students’ imagination and turn a lesson on Silk Road geography and history into a fascinating exploration. Both the *ECAI Silk Road Atlas* and the Orchid Ensemble’s online concerts are free resources that can be adapted for different grade levels and work extremely well with units about long-distance trade and cross-cultural interactions. ■

NOTES

1. *Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative (ECAI) Silk Road Atlas*: <http://www.ecai.org/silkroad/>, accessed January 8, 2007.
2. *ECAI*: <http://ecai.org/>, accessed January 8, 2007
3. *ECAI Silk Road Atlas*, “Instruments—Interactive Java TimeMap”: <http://www.ecai.org/silkroad/cultures/mapspace.html>, accessed January 8, 2007.
4. *ECAI Silk Road Atlas*, “Musical Instruments of the Silk Road”: <http://ecai.org/silkroad/instruments/shakuhachi.html>, accessed January 8, 2007
5. Available free for download from the Silk Road Project Web site: <http://www.silkroadproject.org/teachers/index.html>.
6. Kennedy Center: Millennium Stage Artist Details for the Orchid Ensemble: http://www.kennedy-center.org/programs/millennium/artist_detail.cfm?artist_id=ORCHIDENSE#, accessed January 9, 2007.
7. Orchid Ensemble Web site: <http://www.orchidensemble.com>, accessed January 9, 2007.
8. For an accessible background essay on Cai Yan, see Irene S. Leung’s “Between Stories and Their Tellings: The Legend of Wenji’s Captivity and Their Historical Significance” at the Asia Society Web site, *Wenji: Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute*: <http://www.asiasociety.org/arts/wenji/historical/essay.html>.
9. Ideas for teaching about tribute princesses appear in Morris Rossabi’s essay, “The Silk Roads: An Educational Resource,” in *From Silk to Oil: Cross-Cultural Connections Along the Silk Road* (United States: China Institute in America, 2005): 5-6. A complete version of *From Silk to Oil* can be downloaded from the China Institute Web site: <http://www.chinainstitute.org/educators/silkguide.html>.
10. The story of Cai Yan has inspired countless adaptations. For one poem based on this saga, see Wilt Idema and Beata Grant’s translation of “Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute”: <http://www.radcliffe.edu/fellowships/profiles/idema/gallery/intro.html>.
11. Rossabi, *From Silk to Oil*, 6.

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SARAH LIN BHATIA is Outreach Coordinator at the University of Washington’s East Asia Resource Center. She graduated in 2006 with an M.A. in Chinese history from the UW History Department. Her research focused on the censorship of the performing arts and cross-cultural influences on Chinese music and dance. In her outreach work with K-12 educators, she is currently exploring ways of integrating the performing arts into subjects like geography and history.