

# Performing Arts of Asia

Presented by The Seattle Times and the University of Washington Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies outreach centers in partnership with the UW World Series and the UW Ethnic Cultural Center & Theater. For more information please visit online at [jsis.washington.edu/eacenter/exploringasia](http://jsis.washington.edu/eacenter/exploringasia).

2 Every Wednesday, our in-paper series **Performing Arts of Asia** focuses on one style of performance art in a specific region of Asia, exploring the cultural context that continues to shape it. A complement to the *Exploring Asia: Performing Arts* project, our series runs through March 5.

## The Silk Road in Seattle

by Sarah Lin Bhatia, M.A., Outreach coordinator, University of Washington

In 2007 and 2008, Seattle will be filled with Silk Road music! Several Silk Road-inspired musicians will perform in Seattle. But what is the Silk Road?

The physical Silk Road was a network of trading routes stretching west from China all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. We call these routes the Silk Road because Chinese silk was one of the most important products traded by merchants. Cultural traditions (such as music and dance), ideas and religions were also shared along the Silk Road.

China influenced its neighbors, but it was also very much influenced by outside traditions. It interacted with a part of the world that it called the “Western Regions.” The Western Regions were the part of the world that we know today as Central Asia, India and the Middle East. Over 1,000 years ago during the Tang dynasty (618 – 907 CE), music and dance from the Western Regions was very popular in China’s capital and major cities. At that time China’s capital city was Chang’an (it is now called Xi’an). It was a major entry point and trading center for the Silk Road.

Chang’an was a cosmopolitan city with a population of over 1 million people. To the north of the city was the palace where the emperor, who controlled all of China, lived. Outside the strong palace gates, the city was divided into square, walled districts. One district was home to the thousands of merchants, politicians, musicians, dancers, artists and missionaries from the West. They governed themselves and worshipped their own religions.

Chinese residents shopped in the Western Market for products like indigo (for makeup), deerskin (for boots) and blue-eared-pheasant feathers (for military costumes). Here they watched performances by roving acrobats, dancers and musicians. During festivals, large crowds gathered in the market to watch Western dances. One popular dance was “Praying for Cold”

from Samarkand (a city in today’s Uzbekistan). It was usually performed during the winter solstice. A favorite version involved a group of dancers wearing animal and ghost masks, jumping and splashing about in muddy water.

Wealthy, educated people hired Western music teachers and learned how to play instruments such as the pipa (a lute-like, pear-shaped string instrument). The pipa possibly originated in Iran. It became so popular that today it is known as a “traditional” Chinese instrument and many people still play it. During the Tang dynasty, the pipa was played horizontally, but today it is held upright on a musician’s lap.

The palace, especially during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong, was the best place to experience Western music and dance. Neighboring rulers sometimes sent master performers as gifts to the emperor. Xuanzong also employed thousands of other musicians and dancers. They lived in a special compound and performed Western-influenced music and dance at banquets. Xuanzong’s friends also performed for him his favorite dances, such as the “whirling” dance from Samarkand. It required a lot of balance because the dance floor was covered in small balls!

Although Western music and dance were popular with Tang dynasty emperors, their openness towards Western culture and Westerners often depended on how stable they felt their control of China was. During periods of instability, the emperors sometimes banned Western music and dance or placed tight restrictions on Westerners living in China.

We cannot travel back in time to visit the Western Market of Chang’an or the court of Xuanzong, but we still find evidence of Western influences in Tang dynasty music and dance. There are Tang dynasty tomb figurines and the colorful cave paintings of Dunhuang (a former Silk Road trading post in Western China). In these, we find musicians playing the pipa and dancers dressed in Western fashions.



During the Tang dynasty, the pipa was played horizontally (see A above), but today it is held upright on a musician’s lap (see B above).

We can also hear present-day musicians (such as the Orchid Ensemble from Vancouver, British Columbia) perform melodies inspired by Silk Road musical traditions.

We live during an era of intense globalization where you may connect with people on the other side of the planet through countless ways (such as air travel, telephone and the Internet). Do you see any similarities to the Tang dynasty? Any differences?

## Expand Your World

- ❖ Research the characteristics of some of America’s early ethnic neighborhoods, such as Seattle’s International District, and compare and contrast them with Chang’an’s international district. Have ethnic neighborhoods in America changed over the years?
- ❖ Think about the ways that China’s performing arts were influenced by the Western Regions during the Tang dynasty. Seattle is home to many performers who are influenced by a rich array of performance styles and traditions. Identify some of these local performers and discuss the approach they take to making music or choreographing dance.
- ❖ In addition to being a place to purchase rare goods, the Western Market was also a place to see performers. Why might someone perform in a marketplace? Where can you see performances in Seattle? How might the experience of watching an outdoor performance be different from watching a performance in a theater?



Inspiring Students To Learn

NIE offers FREE and engaging school programs. Chapter locations vary and are posted online each day at [seattletimes.com/nie](http://seattletimes.com/nie). To register for NIE, visit us online or call 206/652-6290.

