
YO-YO MA AND THE SILK ROAD ENSEMBLE DOCUMENTARY, *THE ROAD TO BEIJING*

Organizing Questions

- What is the Silk Road Ensemble?
- What can the Ensemble teach us about present-day Beijing?

Introduction

In this lesson, students examine a documentary, *The Road to Beijing*, that features Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble. Students learn about the Silk Road Ensemble and the Ensemble’s musicians. Students also consider some of the musicians’ reflections on Beijing and China, examine some key themes of the documentary, learn about a musical piece called “Ambush from Ten Sides,” and view some historic sites of Beijing.

Objectives

In this lesson, students will:

- learn about the Silk Road Ensemble;
- learn about some of the Silk Road Ensemble musicians;
- analyze some of the key themes of a documentary that features Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble;
- consider some reflections from the Silk Road Ensemble musicians on Beijing and China;
- learn about a musical piece called “Ambush from Ten Sides”; and
- learn about some historic sites in Beijing.

Materials

Handout 1, *Quotes from Silk Road Ensemble Musicians*, pp. 5, 30 copies
 Handout 2, *Quotes from Yo-Yo Ma*, pp. 6–7, 30 copies
 Handout 3, *Ambush from Ten Sides*, pp. 8–9, 30 copies
 DVD, *The Road to Beijing*, by Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble

Equipment

DVD player
 Computer with Internet access

Time

Three 50-minute class periods

Instructions and materials are based on a class size of 30 students. Adjust accordingly for different class sizes.

- Teacher Preparation
1. Make appropriate number of copies of the handouts.
 2. Prepare DVD player.

- Procedures Day One
1. Ask students for personal examples of performing or working with a group. Groups can include sports, after-school clubs, orchestras, ensembles, bands, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, church groups, etc. Ask students the following:
 - What are some of the group’s core values, for example, teamwork, cooperation?
 - What personal adjustments do you have to make to help the group to be successful?
 - Has the group traveled abroad or to another state in the United States to perform, work, or play? If so, what were some of the rewarding experiences and challenges?
 - What adjustments did the group have to make while traveling?

Mention to students that they will be viewing a documentary called *The Road to Beijing*, which features world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma and the international musicians of the Silk Road Ensemble. In fall 2007, Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble embarked upon a two-week concert tour of China. The documentary, *The Road to Beijing*, was filmed during this tour.

2. As background information, read to the students the following vision statement of the Silk Road Project and the descriptions of the Silk Road and the Silk Road Ensemble. These were taken from The Silk Road Project’s website, <<http://www.silkroadproject.org/>>.

Vision Statement:

The Silk Road Project is a not-for-profit arts, cultural, and educational organization founded in 1998 by cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who serves as its artistic director, and led by Laura Freid, executive director and CEO. The Project has a vision of connecting the world’s neighborhoods by bringing together artists and audiences around the globe. Inspired by the cultural traditions of the historic Silk Road, the Silk Road Project is a catalyst promoting innovation and learning through the arts.

The Silk Road:

The “Silk Road” refers to a series of routes that crisscrossed Eurasia from the first millennium BCE. through the middle of the second millennium CE. The best-known segment of the Silk Road began in the Chinese capital of Chang’an (Xian), diverged into northern and southern routes that skirted the Central Asian Taklamakan Desert, converged to cross the Iranian plateau, and ended on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean in cities like Antioch and Tyre.

The Silk Road Ensemble:

The Silk Road Ensemble is a collective of musicians interested in exploring the relationship between tradition and innovation in music from around the world.

3. Point out that Yo-Yo Ma narrates the documentary. His comments and those of the other Silk Road Ensemble musicians focus on five main themes. Before showing the documentary, divide the class into five groups and have each group focus its viewing on one of these five themes. Tell students to take notes on their theme. The themes are:
 - General thoughts on China, for example, population, geographic area
 - China, a changing landscape, for example, presence of multinational corporations
 - Core values of the Silk Road Ensemble, for example, generosity
 - Coexistence of new and old, for example, an ancient temple standing next to a modern building
 - Evolving traditions, for example, new arrangements of ancient songs
4. Show *The Road to Beijing*, which is approximately 20 minutes long.
5. Following the documentary, allow each of the five groups to discuss its group theme and to identify a reporter to provide a two-minute summary of the group's discussion. Distribute copies of Handout 1, *Quotes from Silk Road Ensemble Musicians*, for reference. Students should reference one or more of these quotes in their summaries.
6. Have each reporter share a two-minute summary of his/her group's discussion. Encourage a whole class discussion after each presentation. During the discussion of "China, a changing landscape" and "coexistence of new and old," you may want to ask students to name some of the historic sites that were shown in the documentary. Some of these sites in China include:



- **Temple of Heaven**—built in 1420, the Temple of Heaven and its surrounding area were designed to be more than twice as large as the Forbidden City to show respect to the heavens. It served as a place for emperors to worship, perform ceremonies, offer sacrifices, and pray for rain and good harvests. There are also Temples of Earth, Sun, and Moon, each located in different sections of Beijing.
- **Forbidden City**—also called, the Imperial Palace, where emperors and families from two dynasties, the Ming and the Qing, lived and ruled the country.
- **The Summer Palace**—a royal garden during China's Qing Dynasty, with classic Chinese landscaping. The garden features a large lake, a hill, palaces, pavilions, temples, halls, and bridges.
- **Tiananmen Square**—a large, open square in the center of Beijing surrounded by government buildings and monuments.



- **Hutong**—a narrow street or alleyway between courtyards; many hutongs were built in Beijing from the 13th century through the early 20th century.

Day Two

Distribute copies of Handout 2, *Quotes from Yo-Yo Ma*, to each group. Assign one of the five quotes to each group. Allow the groups a class period to work on their group tasks. Groups will also require after-school time to work on them. They should prepare 5-minute presentations of their group task.

Day Three

1. Have groups make their 5-minute presentations of their group tasks.
2. A key focus of the documentary was the song, “Ambush from Ten Sides.” Distribute copies of Handout 3, *Ambush from Ten Sides*, to each student. Assign students to write individual poems about “Ambush from Ten Sides.” You may want to compile these poems or post them in the classroom.

Optional Activities

1. Each group can be assigned one of these seven topics as a research project.
 - Battle of Gaixia (the battle in 202 BCE that resulted in victory for the Han forces led by Liu Bang over their Chu opponents)
 - Beginning of the Silk Road
 - Government of the Han Dynasty
 - Science and Technology of the Han Dynasty
 - Confucianism and the Han Dynasty
 - Art of the Han Dynasty
 - Fall of the Han Dynasty
2. Encourage students to explore <http://www.silkroadproject.org/> to learn more about the Silk Road Ensemble. Have students develop research projects on a specific musician or instrument.

Assessment

The following activities may be used to assess students’ work in this lesson:

1. Summaries of group discussions based on the documentary and Handout 1, *Quotes from Silk Road Ensemble Musicians*.
2. Group tasks from Handout 2, *Quotes from Yo-Yo Ma*.
3. Poems about “Ambush from Ten Sides.”

QUOTES FROM SILK ROAD ENSEMBLE MUSICIANS

The following quotes were taken from the documentary *The Road to Beijing*. Consider these quotes as you prepare a two-minute summary. You should reference one or more of the quotes during your summary of your group's theme.



Silk Road Ensemble in Beijing; photo credit: Xuhua Wang 2007 opening itself up for something fantastic.

Nicolas Cords, viola, USA

... China, as a place, has so many different cultures within it; there's old, new, sort of everything in between.

There really is a tangible sense of excitement brewing here, working up to the Olympics. It's as if this whole city is

Eric Jacobsen, cello, USA

Where we come from in New York, you pass by a building made ten years ago standing next to a building made 200 years ago... But here [in China] you pass by a building made 15 minutes ago and a building made a thousand years ago. It's really mind-boggling.

Colin Jacobsen, violin, USA

The sense of a country that has such an ancient history... but obviously in a way, is having its own rebirth. The energy of having been closed off to the world for a while in the last century, but now just sort of an explosion of commerce."

Joe Gramley, percussion, USA

I was shocked at the amount of construction, just incredible amounts... the building and sprawling out.

Da-Xun Zhang, contrabass, China

For people who have not traveled to China, just keep in mind that [China is] a country trying to adjust to the rest of the world.

I am really hoping to share [with students of his former school in Beijing] what I have learned about music, about what it is like to be a professional musician.

Liu Lin, guitar, China

Beijing has the Great Wall, Summer Palace, and the Forbidden City. There are so many stories. There's so much old and new Chinese culture.

Wu Tong, sheng, China

The old and modern together; a fusion city.

Kojiro Umezaki, shakuhachi, Japan

If I can study and play my traditional music, and I get a chance to play with my friends ... coming together—that's what sometimes creates a new idea.

QUOTES FROM YO-YO MA



Your teacher will assign one of the following quotes by Yo-Yo Ma to your group. These quotes were taken from the documentary *The Road to Beijing*. A group task follows each quote.

1. China is huge. Everything is on a bigger scale. When you're actually in China, you see how large the boulevards, the avenues are, because they have to move that many people. My name is Yo-Yo Ma. I play the cello. I live in Boston, which is a city of a couple million people [greater Boston region], and in China, a small-sized city is five million people. China and America are about the same size, approximately, but there are four times more people [in China].

Group task: Research some of the challenges that are facing China. How difficult is it to feed a population of 1.3 billion people? What are some of the environmental concerns that China faces? What are some of the benefits and trade-offs to hosting the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing? Develop a two-page "Current Events Newsletter" on Beijing. The newsletter can include any or all of the following: lead article (with headline) about Beijing, op-ed articles, political cartoons, letters to the editor, photographs.

2. The conservatory we are going to in Beijing has both classical music and traditional music. And the question that we always ask is "How do these things interact?" One of the core values that we really actually practice is virtuosity (and generosity)—virtuosity not in terms of how fast you can play, how far you can jump—but it's more how deeply you know something... and are you willing to share how you do it.

Group task: Think about the interaction of cultures in your lives. Some examples might be in the area of religion (for example, Buddhist temples in the United States), food (for example, California sushi rolls), music (for example, Latin rap), language (for example, Arabic loanwords in English), and art (African influences on modern art). During the time of the ancient Silk Road, there was constant interaction of cultures. Take photographs of images in your neighborhood that illustrate the interaction of cultures. For each photograph, develop a caption that includes some core values that you feel are important for different cultures to coexist.

3. The best thing we can do in music is to constantly learn. We're always learning. The best way we can teach is to show how we learn and it never ends.

Group task: Discuss opportunities that you have had to teach and work with others. Incorporate some of this information into a 2-minute song (a cappella). Each student may want to develop one verse for the song. Prepare to perform the song for the rest of the class.

4. I learned a lot from traditional musicians. Different pieces of music seem to have their own worlds. If you're completely inside the world of a piece of music, you can't go wrong.

Group task: Visit the Silk Road Project website to learn about some of the traditional musicians in the Silk Road Ensemble and the instruments they play. Capture the essence of Yo-Yo Ma's quote and the vision of the Silk Road Ensemble musicians into an artistic image.

<<http://www.silkroadproject.org/>>

5. I've never met a tradition that is not the result of successful invention. As soon as you invent something that everybody wants, unless you evolve that tradition, it starts to get smaller. I think of the Silk Road, in many ways, as the Internet of antiquity. Today it's much faster but we had essentially the same results. When people met at the borders, you traded; you figured out who you are; do I trust you? Can we do business together? Can we be friends?

Group task: Draw a cartoon strip or create a PowerPoint presentation of a tradition that has evolved through the years. You can either use large sheets of paper (so the rest of the class can see it) or a computer with an LCD projector. The cartoon strip or PowerPoint presentation should have at least three sections.

AMBUSH FROM TEN SIDES

A key focus of the documentary is the piece, “Ambush from Ten Sides.” The following text and quotes are taken sequentially from the documentary. After reviewing this text and the quotes, write an individual poem that captures your feelings about “Ambush from Ten Sides.”



Silk Road Ensemble musicians: Nicolas Cords, Wu Man, and Kayhan Kahlor; photo credit: Xuhua Wang 2007

“Ambush from Ten Sides” is a well-known traditional Chinese piece for pipa, depicting a battle that took place in the year 202 BCE and that led to the beginning of the Han Dynasty.

Wu Man, pipa, China:

When I was twelve, I already started to play this piece.

Yo-Yo Ma, cello, USA:

The story of “Ambush” is actually a story that’s over 2,000 years old. “Ambush” was the battle after which the Han Dynasty was founded.

Wu Man:

It was 202 BCE. There’s a kingdom called Chu; there’s another kingdom called Liu Bang [Liu Bang led the Han forces against the Chu]; so they are fighting to establish the country.

Yo-Yo Ma:

There were all kinds of calamities, all things broken down, but there was not one ambush or two but ten. So, people would talk about it, would write poetry about it, and there was a piece of music about it.

[Note: The fighting ended with the victory of Liu Bang, who proclaimed himself emperor and established the Han Dynasty. The Han Dynasty lasted more than 400 years (until 220 CE). This was not mentioned in the documentary.]

Colin Jacobsen, violin, USA:

Sometimes, something that’s really, really old can sound really fresh and new.

In 2005, sheng player and vocalist, Wu Tong brought a new version of the traditional pipa piece “Ambush from Ten Sides” to the Silk Road Ensemble. This new arrangement combined traditional Chinese instruments with classical Western instruments.

Nicolas Cords, viola, USA:

We have this version of “Ambush” for the Silk Road Ensemble that is casting yet another light on it.

Yo-Yo Ma:

We are taking an ancient story [“Ambush from Ten Sides ”] and contemporizing it. It’s still great as a pipa solo piece. And in fact, of the 1.3 billion people in China, a large portion actually know that piece [“Ambush”]. You hear the beginning in our version, they immediately know that’s the piece; that’s “Ambush.”

Wu Tong, sheng, China:

It [“Ambush”] is not from China but from the world.

Wu Man:

It’s a different piece now. It’s a different color.

Eric Jacobsen, cello, USA:

It’s very programmatic. It’s an onomatopoeia of a piece. It says exactly what you should feel. You know there’s a battle going on in this part. You know that there’s a love story somewhere.

Nicolas Cords:

You also have beautiful depictions of nature, ocean waves. You have all these things that sort of depict not only what’s happening but it puts you in a context.