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Sounds of the Silk Road: Musical Instruments of Asia
(review)

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Collectively, these essays contribute significantly to our understanding of the complexity of Bollywood's production and reception. Some are outstanding, such as Basu's in-depth analysis of the 1998 release, *Dil Se*, and Shresthova's excellent case study of the transformation of "Bollywood dance" into a performance art for young diasporic South Asians (and others). Also noteworthy are Bhattacharjya's and Mehta's examination of interactions among the culture industries and the state in relation to national identity and Armbrust's fascinating account of Bollywood's orientalized "silliness" in Egyptian culture. Other essays, however, needed more editorial input for various reasons. Morcom's condensation of a chapter from her 2007 volume on film music is available elsewhere. Sen's attempt to "trace the history of popular [film] music" reveals fatal weaknesses in historical and (ethno)musicological theory.

As with any edited volume, I could offer additional minor quibbles about redundancy, consistency in translation, connectivity, and some lacunae (dance and performance get short shrift here). These are minor quibbles indeed, however, for a volume that will contribute significantly to the study of Bollywood across a range of disciplines.

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Sounds of the Silk Road: Musical Instruments of Asia. Text by Mitchell Clark. Boston: MFA Publications, 2005. 168 pp., 100 color plates, color map.

Sounds of the Silk Road begins from the premise that musical instruments can tell a "particularly rich story" (4). One story that they may tell is the connection between music cultures and musical instruments in the areas along the ancient Asian trade routes known as the Silk Road. Thus, in a general sense, musical instruments are "among the world's most telling cultural artifacts, reflecting an elaborate marriage of technology, artistry, symbolism, and religious beliefs" (4). While this book does not attempt to investigate this nexus in a theoretical or detailed way—and one is tempted to ask in what myriad other ways musical instruments may be evocative—the book does cover a wide swath of attractively photographed and documented musical instruments from regions along the Silk Road.

The book's strong point is its combined breadth of coverage with narrative and visual documentation. This aspect reflects the book's genesis as a catalog for a 2005 exhibit of the same name at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA). Aside from the book's visual appeal and sampling of instruments, it will not likely be a source of new information or ideas for scholars or specialists in the region. It would, however, be a useful teaching resource for illustrating instrument types

and variations, and it would serve as a good starting point for those wishing to explore the variety of musical instruments over a broad swath of Asia.

The book opens with an introductory essay that provides vague overviews of Asian musical culture, touches on the Silk Road, and suggests the provenance of the MFA collection. The major part of the book presents the instruments in three major sections organized by regions: East Asia (China, Japan, Korea); Southeast Asia (Thailand, Burma, Java); and South, Central, and West Asia (India, Tibet, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey). The back matter includes endnotes, a rudimentary glossary, a clear map of the region, lists of suggestions for further reading and listening, and an index of instruments listed in the book.

The musical instruments featured in the book come from collections held by the MFA. Many of the instruments were donated to the MFA in the early 20th century by William Lindsey, who purchased them from collections of Francis Galpin. Gaps in the MFA collections explain notable omissions from the book, such as the Chinese *erhu* and *dizi*, Japanese *koto*, and Korean *taegŭm*. If the description of the MFA holdings as “one of the more extensive collections of non-Western musical instruments to be found in a Western museum” (17) is correct, then the book makes a significant instrument collection accessible to a wider audience.

Each instrument discussed in the book is accompanied by a clear, color photograph of a corresponding instrument held by the MFA, and in some cases multiple photographs. Each illustration is accompanied by a caption that lists physical descriptions and a catalog number for the instrument. For specialists who may wish to learn more about individual exemplars, it is unfortunate that multiple angles or detail views are not available for most of the illustrations. Reproductions of prints or carvings that illustrate historical contexts for musical performance or methods of playing also augment many of the instrument descriptions.

The illustrations and textual descriptions of individual instruments are the heart of the book. These short texts tell each instrument’s story. While there is not a consistent format to the texts, they often contain stories of origin, descriptions or explanations of typical decoration, and discussions of repertoires, training, ensembles, and playing technique. For example, the MFA’s elaborate 19th century *dung-dkar* (Tibetan shell trumpet) is “completely covered in silver, which itself receives elaborate decoration including both the eight Buddhist symbols (also known as the eight treasures, each symbolizing an aspect of Buddhist law) and the twelve animals of the Buddhist zodiac” (126). Another example is an engaging story about the name of the Korean *kōmun’go*: “One day when Wang Sanak was playing the new instrument [he had ordered], a black crane flew into the room, landed in front of him, and commenced to dance to his music. . . . This event was considered highly auspicious, and the instrument

was given the name *hyŏnhakkŭm*, meaning ‘black crane zither.’ . . . The more vernacular name of *kŏmun’go* (a purely Korean word that may also mean ‘black zither’) is most often used” (65). A number of obscure instruments are also included, such as the Chinese *geling* (pigeon whistles), *yaoqin* (wind harp), Korean *ogoryŏng* (Buddhist hand bell), and Turkestani *chang* (jaw harp). While the stories of these instruments do not usually explain their relationship to the Silk Road, they do provide engaging narratives.

The geographic organization of the book presents one impediment to revealing the story of the Silk Road. The theme of the book might have been more clearly demonstrated if organized by instrument type. A typological organization scheme would facilitate the comparative approach that the Silk Road theme suggests. Short-necked lutes provide a case in point: “One notable migration was that of the short-neck lute of Persia called the *barbaṭ*. As the *pipa*, this type of lute was to become one of the principal instruments of the Chinese. In turn, the Chinese introduced it to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Moving to the west, the short-neck lute entered other West Asian traditions, and with the Arabs it moved yet further west to the Maghreb (Arab northwest Africa) and finally, via Moorish Spain, into Europe” (16). The point would be more clearly illustrated if these instruments were presented in a group; instead, one must search China for *pipa* (32–4), Japan for *biwa* (51–3), and Turkey for ‘*ūd*’ (144–5). It is entirely up to the reader to find and connect these sections, since the introduction gives no cross-references and even the index does not include an entry for “short-neck lute.” Trapezoidal zithers like the *kanun* (146) and *yangqin* (18) offer another example. While this instrument type probably developed in West Asia, dispersed to Europe, and later came to East Asia along sea-based trade routes (17), the instrumental evidence for this is left to the reader to piece together. Further, East Asian long zithers, string instruments “primary to the music of East Asia” but “uncommon in other traditions” (14), are discussed individually rather than as a group (*koto*: 13; *qin* and *zheng*: 29–32; *kŏmun’go*: 65). These three examples also complicate the idea of migration along the Silk Road: only in the case of short-neck lutes did migration happen in a West–East flow; dulcimers moved along other routes at other times, and it seems that the long zithers did not travel at all.

It seems, in fact, that the book is more aptly described by its subtitle “Musical Instruments of Asia.” Perhaps the main title plays on Yo-Yo Ma’s *Silk Road Project*, which has recently popularized the Silk Road and its vivid music-cultural history. Diffusionist thinking, which in this case supports the idea that instruments have traveled or migrated along the Silk Road, has been commonplace in the study of musical instruments since at least Curt Sachs’s organological studies. Yet, the Silk Road itself receives only a few paragraphs of attention in the introduction (15–7), and the book does not take the chance to explore further

the idea of musical diffusion along the trade routes. Diffusion models tend to rely on single points of origin, but instruments similar in construction have also developed independently and in different places. The Japanese *wagon* (50–1) comes to mind: at first glance it appears to be related to the East Asian long zither group, but it is thought to have developed on its own in Japan. This is only one possible issue that bears out deeper consideration in a book ostensibly devoted to the idea that musical instruments moved along the Silk Road.

The book avoids discussing many interesting issues: the viability of the diffusionist paradigm, the significance of musical instruments along the Silk Road in studies of globalization, and deep questions about the nature of cultural contact and cultural change. Though the book does not seem to fulfill a theoretical niche in the cultural study of organology, it does present visual and print documentation of an existing and varied collection of Asian musical instruments. However, while specialists interested in musical details and more nuanced explanations of musical life along the Silk Road will undoubtedly want to refer to other, more focused, scholarly sources, this book disseminates knowledge about many obscure and not-widely-known instruments in a visually beautiful design.

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