The Silk Road

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The Silk Road: Crossroads and Encounters of Faiths

by Azim Nanji and Sarfaroz Niyozov

The Silk Road evokes images of places and peoples linked by the exchange of exotic goods and fabled treasures. This limited notion of commerce, however, overshadows the fact that the Silk Road as a network of trade routes also spread religious ideas and beliefs.

Communities of faith interacted, co-existed, competed, and influenced each other over long periods of time. These include local traditions that evolved in ancient China, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Korea and Japan, and the subsequent larger traditions that arose in the region — Judaism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam — as well as the shamanistic and animistic traditions of various nomadic peoples stretching across Central Asia, some of which still are practiced today. The history of religions along the Silk Road is a remarkable illustration of how beliefs and indeed civilizations often reflect a broad pattern of synthesis, rather than clash.

Zoroastrianism

Various accounts place Zoroaster's birth sometime between the 11th and the 6th century B.C.E. and somewhere between Mongolia and Azerbaijan. He taught belief in one God (Ahura Mazda), the Lord of Wisdom, and regarded the other Iranian gods (*daevas*) as demons. He also saw an evil force in the Universe called Ahriman (Angra Mainyu). Juxtaposing Ahura Mazda against Ahriman, Zoroaster viewed human life in a cosmology of an eternal dialectical struggle between good and bad. Through this approach emerged profound messages of realism and of a necessary struggle to sustain hope (good) by means of ethical action.

In the 3rd century C.E., long after Zoroaster's death, the Sasanian dynasty began its rule in Iran and embarked on a period of conquest and expansion. It sanctioned Zoroastrianism as the official religion of the state and supported the codification of its texts, practices, and doctrines. Even so, Zoroastrianism continued to interact with and be influenced by local traditions and practices in different regions, and there were a number of rituals that distinguished Central Asian Zoroastrians from their Western Iranian cousins. In Central Asia, for example, the moon was also seen as a divine force. The famous temple of the Moon (Mah) in Bukhara was devoted to its veneration. Similarly, the tradition of a New Year, Nawruz, is a regional ritual that predates Zoroaster.

Judaism

The Silk Road became a meeting point between Iranian religions and another ancient faith, Judaism. Judaism as expressed in both its ancient oral and written traditions was centered on the belief in one God, who revealed Himself to the people of Israel and made a covenant with them to live according to His will, as articulated in the Torah (the first Five Books of the Hebrew Bible) and concretized as Halakah, or "the way." Part of this ancient history is traced to Abraham, the great Patriarchal figure in Judaism, and his descendants, who were chosen by God to lead the people from slavery to freedom. The well-known event of the Exodus, under the prophetic figure of Moses (ca. 1200 B.C.E.), led to their eventual settlement in Israel, the emergence of a kingdom, and the writing down and codification of the first part of the Scriptures.

In 586 B.C.E., the southern part of the kingdom, Judah, was conquered by the Babylonians, and this led to many Jews being exiled to Central Asia. In 559 B.C.E., the Sasanian ruler Cyrus freed the Jewish population, and, while some returned to Israel, many chose to stay in Iran, where they continued to practice their faith. They also created Jewish settlements along the Silk Road, including in the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Jewish practices and beliefs were enriched by contacts with existing traditions and the intellectual heritage of Iran, and then Greece. Apart from the original community of exiled Jews, it seems that Judaism gained local converts, too, though these were not a result of proselytization. The Jewish presence in the region continues to the present.

Buddhism

The Silk Road provided a network for the spread of the teachings of the Buddha, enabling Buddhism to become a world religion and to develop into a sophisticated and diverse system of belief and practice. Of the 18 Buddhist schools of interpretation, five existed along the Silk Road. Among these was the less monastic but very significant tradition of Mahayana, which preached the continuity of the Buddha's compassionate nature through bodhisattvas — embodiments of love and teaching who became the bridge to local traditions, communities, and cultures. The tradition suggests that all bodhisattva Buddhist seekers are equal before the Buddha, have a Buddha-nature, and may aspire to reach Buddhahood through right ways of living.

In Central Asia, Buddhism is associated with the rise of the Kushan Empire, which lasted from the 1st to the 3rd century C.E. While Kushan rule marked a significant period in the growth of Buddhism, Kushan coins illustrate more than a narrow adherence to Buddhism. They show that along the Silk Road there were kings and rulers who sought to rise above certain groups, tribes, and religious traditions. Along with figures of their own kings such as Kanishka, Kushan coins depict Buddhist, Greek, and Iranian nobility. Statues made by the Gandharan school also feature a blend of Indian, Greek, and Iranian elements. The rulers built monasteries and temples along the Silk Road that were often used by the faithful of various religions. One such monastery is believed to have been in the famous city of Bukhara, which later

became a major Central Asian cultural center of Islam. The oldest manuscript of an Indian Buddhist text, the *Dharmapada*, has been preserved in the Central Asian Kharosthi script. This combination of patronage, the founding of monasteries, and the rise of Buddhist scholarship produced favorable conditions for the general spread of Buddhism. Rulers, missionaries, monks, and traders all contributed to make Buddhism a very significant presence all over Central Asia.

The greatest success of Buddhism came with its spread to China, where it reinvigorated the existing philosophy, culture, and literature. It also reached Korea and Japan. Its encounter with Daoism and Confucianism helped establish deep roots among the peoples of East Asia. Here Buddhism became a religious and spiritual presence as well as the catalyst for greater links with Eurasia. Thus, during the first millennium of the Common Era, Buddhism was the strongest influence among the peoples of the Silk Road. Great Buddhist scholars always looked at the Silk Road as a connecting thread with what they regarded as the founding values of Buddhism. Among them was the pilgrim-monk, Xuanzang (595–664 C.E.), who undertook a challenging 16-year journey (629–45 C.E.) towards the West, crossing the

Dunhuang was an important trading post along the Silk Road in western China for over 1,000 years and also was a center of Buddhist learning. Near the city are almost 500 caves that were hollowed from cliffs as dwelling places, meditation sites, and worship halls for Buddhist monks beginning in the 4th century. These caves house an unparalleled collection of ancient Buddhist art.

Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, China. Photo by Neville Agnew, May 1998.

Martial Arts along the Silk Road — from Bodhidharma to Bruce Lee

BY DOUG KIM

As a conduit for religion and commerce, the Silk Road was an important means by which Asian martial arts were nurtured and disseminated.

According to tradition, the process started with Bodhidharma, an Indian missionary who introduced Chan Buddhism to China in the 6th century. Called Damo, Tal-ma, and Daruma in China, Korea, and Japan respectively, this monk from India's warrior caste was the progenitor of Shaolin martial arts — many of which have come to be known as kung fu (*gungfu*). To improve the Shaolin monks' physical and mental ability to endure long meditation sessions, he is said to have taught them 18 exercises, probably derived from Indian yoga practices of the period. These "18 Hands of Lohan" were built upon and expanded into Shaolin "boxing." Shaolin temples, often remote and secluded, evolved into centers of meditation and martial arts training; they also attracted soldiers and professional warriors seeking sanctuary, who added their knowledge and skills to the training. Shaolin boxing strongly influenced indigenous martial arts styles as itinerant monks and Shaolin disciples spread religious and fighting principles throughout China and beyond.

It may seem curious that lethal fighting arts were elaborated and regularly practiced by religious orders. However, study and use of these skills were highly valued by the monks — to improve their ability to focus and meditate in their quest for spiritual enlightenment, and for self-defense against road bandits, would-be temple robbers, and, at various times, government persecution. Shaolin missionaries carrying Chan Buddhism eastward not only influenced Korean and Japanese martial arts but also provided the basis for Zen Buddhism, which itself became a fundamental part of the samurai tradition and bushido (the Japanese "way of the warrior"). Numerous guardian figures in fearsome martial poses can be found at Buddhist temples and shrines along the Silk Road, clearly demonstrating the intimate connection between Buddhism and martial arts.

Commerce played a crucial role as well in the diffusion of Chinese styles to neighboring areas: monks and mercenaries skilled in martial arts served as escorts for merchants traveling along the Silk Road, providing protection against attackers. The recent award-winning film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a classic Chinese tale about such "guards for hire."

Asian martial arts first came to the United States with Chinese immigrants in the mid-19th century but remained largely secret, guarded within their community. Although President Theodore Roosevelt took judo lessons from a Japanese instructor in the White House in the early 1900s, it was almost half a century before Asian martial arts started to attract widespread interest in America — the result of contact between American servicemen and Japanese practitioners during the occupation of Japan and Okinawa after World War II. The floodgates of interest burst open as Bruce Lee's kung fu movies hit the United States in the 1970s. Virtually overnight kung fu, judo, karate, tae kwon do, and wu shu schools, clubs, movies, and competitions became well-established parts of everyday American life. Martial arts techniques traditionally taught only to blood relatives or fellow members of religious orders — and never to non-Asians — can now be acquired openly by anyone who wants to learn. Asian martial arts have become staples of international competition; judo and tae kwon do are Olympic sports, and serious efforts are underway to add wu shu to this list.

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Takla Makan and Gobi deserts, the high Pamir Mountains, and also visiting Buddhist monuments in Bukhara, Samarkand, and Herat. Xuanzang returned to China laden with 650 books on Buddhism and provided a colorful account of his journey and the history of Buddhism in the region. He contributed greatly to the survival and spread of Buddhism in East Asia.

Christianity

Along with the growth of Buddhism, the Silk Road nurtured minority groups from other major faiths. Assyrian Christians, or more accurately the Church of the East, were one such group. Often mistakenly identified simply as Nestorianism, the Church was strongest in eastern Syria, where as part of the Persian Empire it gained recognition and subsequently flourished after the arrival of Islam. In Syria, this tradition is a visible presence to this day, attesting to the lasting influence of the Eastern Christian tradition in the region. The Assyrian Christians played a crucial role in the creation of an important intellectual center at Jundishapur, where study of philosophy, astronomy, medicine, and astrology directly influenced Muslim learning. Doctrinally, they shared with other Christian groups the belief in the foundational and redemptive role of Jesus Christ, but they also taught that Jesus Christ had two distinct natures, divine and human, a view that brought the then patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, into conflict with those who held to the doctrine of the inseparability of the two natures of Jesus. Subsequently, the followers of Nestorius were excommunicated and eventually became a separate church with its own distinctive hierarchy, liturgy, and theological tradition.

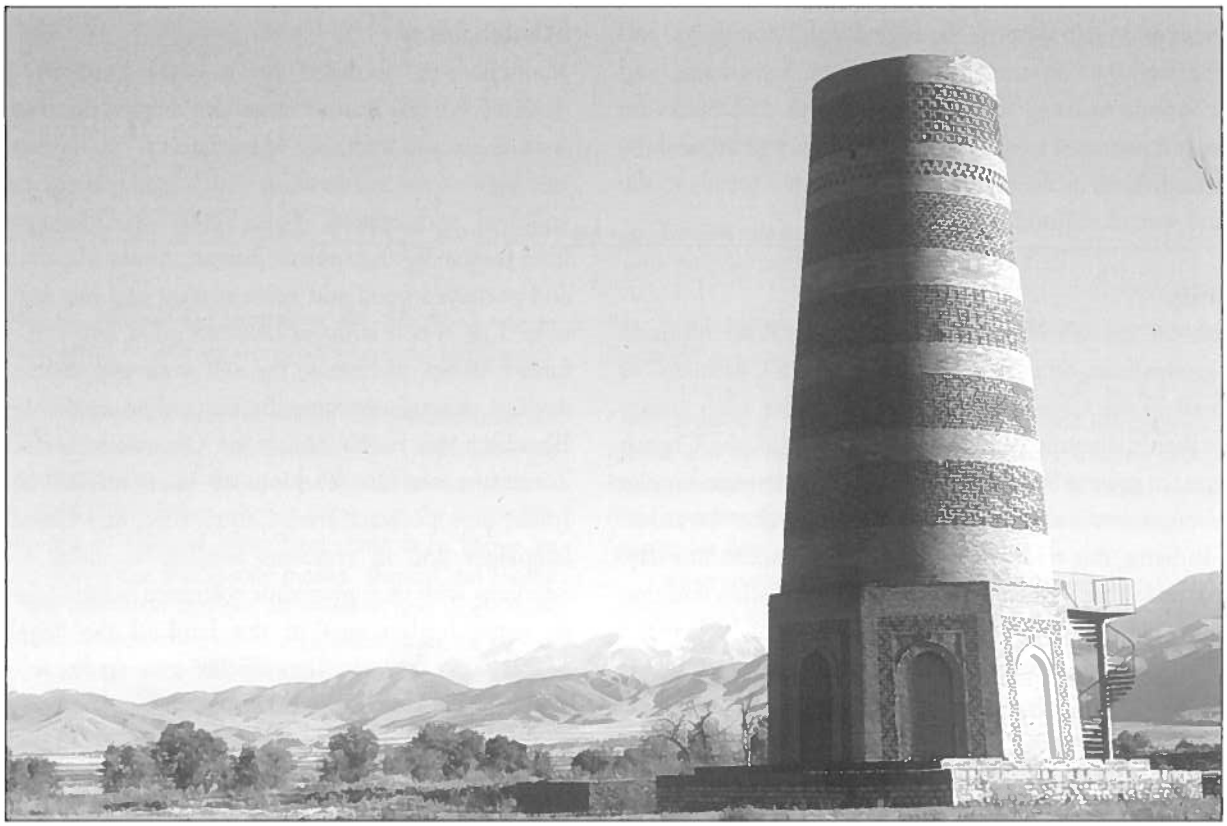
In Central Asia the Assyrian Christians influenced the Sogdians, who, due to their strategic location, had already become the commercial masters of the Silk Road and its cultural transmitters. Sogdian became the lingua franca of the Silk Road, spreading Christianity further east to China and north among the Turks. The Eastern Christians succeeded in three major mass conversions of Turks in Central Asia from the 7th to the 11th centuries. Despite being seen as a faith of foreign traveling merchants, Eastern Christianity gained acknowledgment as "the Brilliant Religion" (Foltz 2000: 72) in China, with Christian saints being referred to as Buddhas and their treatises as sutras.

Manichaeism

Manichaeism, founded by a royal Parthian called Mani (b. 216 C.E.), was another important religion that emerged in West Asia. A gnostic tradition, Manichaeism "posits a radically dualistic view of the universe, in which 'good' is equated with spirit and 'evil' with matter" (Foltz 2000: 75). The cosmology drew from Iranian figures such as Zurvan, Ahura Mazda, and Ahriman and portrayed good and spirit as light and fire and evil as darkness. Life was a struggle between good and evil in which the former strives to liberate the self from evil matter. Knowledge derived rationally became the basis of an awakening of the self. Blending the major beliefs of Christianity, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism, the teachings of Mani reached the peoples of India, Mesopotamia, Iran, Central Asia, and China in their own languages and in concepts familiar to them. Central Asian Sogdians with their pragmatic tolerance helped Manichaen ideas to move further east to the land of the Uyghurs, where Manichaean became the official state-sponsored religion for about 70 years. Its powerful appeal, offered as a significant alternative to the other major traditions, resulted in tension and conflict as it gained converts. Yet, despite its appeal, Manichaeism was not able to survive the arrival and dominance of new traditions and was eventually eradicated as a distinct religious tradition, though some of its ideas lived on, assimilated into other faiths.

Islam: Arrival and Diffusion

Islam became the faith of the majority of people along the Silk Road. The first Muslim community emerged in Arabia in the 7th century in a region dominated by ancient civilizations and empires. Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, a family man and a merchant by trade, was also committed to a life of contemplation. The revelations that came to him are recorded in Arabic in the Koran (Qur'an), the revealed book of Islam. It affirms a belief in one God, unique and merciful; in past messengers and scriptures sent by God to other societies; in the creation of a society ruled by compassion, charity, and justice that would be a model for all peoples. The initial establishment of Muslim rule in neighboring territories in the 7th and 8th centuries was a result of conquest, but the actual spread of Islam was achieved primarily by



preaching and conversion undertaken by scholars, merchants, and devout men and women. Muslims are taught by the Koran to spread the faith by example, not by compulsion.

The first Muslim expeditions to Central Asia were part of the general pattern of conquest and expansion of territory during the first centuries of Islam. The consolidation of these early attempts at conquest was continued under early Umayyad rule (661–750) and its successor, the Abbasid dynasty, which established its capital in Baghdad in 762. Muslim armies conquered territories beyond the River Oxus (Amu Darya), and by the end of the 9th century the Samanids emerged as the first of the local Muslim kingdoms in the area. The process of conversion and Islamization of Central Asia that accompanied this spread and diffusion of Muslim culture and influence lasted several centuries. As the Silk Road once again became a vital international artery of commerce and trade, Muslim travelers, preachers, mystics, and merchants acted as mediators of faith, enlarging the communities of Muslims in the various regions of Central Asia.

The famous North African traveler Ibn Batuta (1304–68?), taking advantage of a well-defended and secure pathway along the Silk Road, managed to travel from his hometown of Tangier to China and India, reporting on his travels and illustrating the burgeoning trade, social activity, and vital religious life in the region.

The history of the Silk Road under Muslim influence reveals a diverse religious landscape, among different faiths and also within the Muslim community. Sunni, Shia, and Sufi Muslim groups interacted and flourished together. Charismatic Sufi leaders such as Ahmad Yasawi (d. 1166) and Bahauddin Naqshband (1318–89) built communities that nurtured vernacular tradition and languages. The full diversity of Muslim law,

The Burana Tower in the Zhu River Valley, Kyrgyzstan, is a minaret from the 11th century, one of the first in Central Asia.

Photo © Hermine Dreyfuss

theology, culture, arts, and architecture spread across the Silk Road. This multidimensional world of Islam contributed to a broadly based society, bound by common ethical and cultural assumptions but differentiated in its practices and local traditions, that stretched from Afghanistan to Southeast Asia, China, and the Philippines. Some of the greatest scholars of Muslim science and technology lived in the region. The Ismaili Muslims who founded Cairo in the 10th century also spread along the Silk Road and with many other Muslims brought a tradition of philosophical inquiry and scientific knowledge across the Mediterranean to Iran and the Karakoram and the Pamirs (Daftary: 1990). The great Ismaili poet and philosopher, Nasir Khusraw (1004–88), traveled along the Silk Road on a seven-year journey from Balkh across the Middle East, North Africa, and on to his pilgrimage destination, Mecca. His *Safarnamah* (travelogue) describes in vivid detail his meetings with famous scholars and visits to the region's religious communities and sites.

Conclusion

A historical view of the Silk Road reveals a world in which religions were living traditions. Central Asia, then one of the most pluralistic religious regions in the world, has again become a center of attention, and perhaps the most important lesson learned on the Silk Road — the ideal of religious pluralism and tolerance — may yet enable it to become a bridge between cultures once more.

Some of the oldest inhabited places in the world can be found along the Silk Road. Each faith has left its signature there, in ideas, art, music, and buildings, and in traditions of learning, remembering, celebrating, and sharing. This cumulative resource from different traditions of knowledge and faith can still, as in the past, help us build trust, reinvigorate civilizational dialogue, and move away from the constraints and ignorance that exacerbate division and generate conflict.

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Visual Arts of the Historical Silk Road

by Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis

Although people, ideas, and goods had been traveling across Eurasia for millennia, the historical Silk Road is considered to have been established in the 2nd century B.C.E. when a Chinese envoy journeyed into Central Asia in search of horses and allies to fight marauders on the borders of China. Soon afterward, Buddhism began to spread from India north along Silk Road land routes to Central Asia, China, Korea, and Japan and south by sea routes to Southeast Asia. Buddhist art and architecture, of course, were transmitted along with the religious doctrines. One of the major architectural monuments of Buddhism is the stupa, in India a solid hemispherical mound signifying the death and final great enlightenment of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni who lived and taught ca. 450 B.C.E. Influenced by the shape of Chinese watchtowers, the stupa was transformed into a multistoried pagoda in China, Korea, and Japan, but it retained its original symbolism.

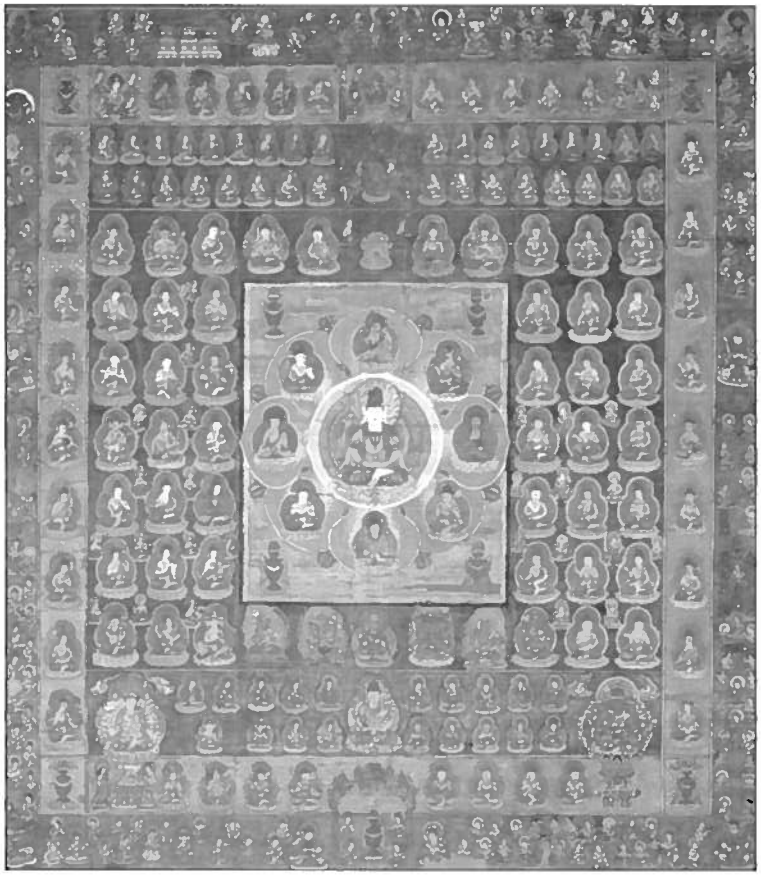
Until about the beginning of the Common Era, the Buddha was represented by signs such as the Bodhi Tree under which he experienced enlightenment and the Wheel of the Law, a term given to Buddhist teachings. By the time Buddhism was spreading to the rest of Asia, in the 1st–2nd centuries C.E., worship was aided by anthropomorphic images. The human image of the Buddha first developed in two places on the Indian subcontinent — in Gandhara (present-day northwest Pakistan) and in north-central India. The Gandharan figures were partly inspired by provincial Roman images, such as grave portraits produced in Palmyra on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, a trading terminus of the Silk Road. These Gandharan figures wear heavy, toga-like robes and have wavy hair. The figures from north-central India (particularly the city of Mathura) were partly modeled on indigenous Indian male fertility deities and wear cool, lightweight garments.

With the development of the tradition of Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) Buddhism from the beginning of the Common Era onward, the number of sacred Buddhist figures greatly increased. Devotion was focused not only on the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, but also on a growing number of celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas. (Bodhisattvas are agents of salvation who attend the Buddhas, postponing their own complete emancipation from the world of suffering until they can save all sentient beings.) The celestial Buddhas did not have historical biographies like Shakyamuni but, like Shakyamuni, were embodiments of the wisdom and compassion of the faith. The hierarchy of Buddhism includes many other angelic and guardian figures, all of whom were represented in painting and sculpture throughout South, Central, East, and Southeast Asia. Cave-temples were often carved out of rock escarpments to house these images in India, on the Central Asian Silk Road routes, and in China. Bamiyan, in Afghanistan, with its (now destroyed) colossal Buddhas was one such site. Another well-known site, comprising almost 500 cave-temples filled with some 45,000 wall-paintings and thousands of sculptures, is found near the town of Dunhuang in northwest Gansu province. Dunhuang was the first Silk Road oasis trading center within the borders of China proper, and merchants grown wealthy from Silk Road trade were among the patrons of the cave-temples.

Another visual form associated with Buddhism is the mandala, a representation of an enlightened realm where union between the human and the sacred occurs. Most often, for example in Tibetan Buddhist art or in Japanese Esoteric Buddhist art, the mandala is a circular or square configuration, with a center that radiates outward into compartmentalized areas. The deity at the center of the configuration, who signifies absolute truth, engages in reciprocal interactions with figures in the outer precincts, who signify manifested aspects of that truth. The practitioner unites the outer manifestations in the center of the mandala and then internally absorbs the mandala as a whole.

During and after the 8th century C.E., mandalas were drawn on paper or cloth through all of Asia. These two-dimensional

Fifty-three-meter (175 feet) Buddha at Bamiyan, Afghanistan, ca. 600 C.E. (destroyed 2001). Photograph © John C. Huntington
Photo courtesy The Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Arts



mandalas were hung on temple walls as focal points for veneration, for contemplation, and for rituals, or they were spread out on altar tops for specific ceremonies. A two-dimensional mandala, however, is meant to be transformed into a three-dimensional realm, usually a palatial structure, by means of contemplation and ritual. In their two-dimensional forms, these mandalas often look like architectural ground plans, seen from an aerial viewpoint.

Buddhism was well established in India, Central, East, and Southeast Asia by the 7th century C.E. when another religion, Islam, and its visual images began to spread across Eurasia on Silk Road routes. By the 8th century, just one century after the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E., Islam had spread from its homeland in Arabia west across Egypt and North Africa to Spain and east to Sasanian Persia. Early Islamic art showed a mixture of Roman, Coptic, Byzantine, and Sasanian styles. Although the holy text of Islam, the Koran (Qur'an), does not prohibit figural images, the non-figural character of Islamic decoration began early, based on traditional theological prohibitions against imitating God's creation. The earliest extant Islamic structure is the Qubbat al-Sakhra (often called the Dome of the Rock by Westerners) in Jerusalem. Built in 691–92 to commemorate the place from which Muhammad is believed to have ascended to heaven, this shrine with its golden dome displays vivid mosaics of scrolling vines, flowers, crowns, and jewel forms in greens, blues, and gold. Sacred calligraphy — writing from the Koran — also adorns this shrine, reflecting the importance of the Word of God in the Islamic tradition. The Koran was sometimes written in gold script on parchment decorated with floral interlaces. An interesting parallel to this form of sacred writing is found in East Asia where Buddhist scriptures were often written in gold characters on bluish-purple paper. The Buddhist tradition of sacred writing developed independently but reflected a similar yearning on the part of devotees to sanctify holy utterances with the color gold.

Many other religions were practiced in Silk Road lands — Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Assyrian Christianity, Manichaeism, Confucianism, Daoism, shamanism — but Buddhism and Islam spread most pervasively throughout this region, leaving the greatest imprint on Silk Road culture.

The Silk Road was at its height during the 7th through 9th centuries, when Muslims ruled in West Asia and the Tang dynasty presided over a cosmopolitan culture in China. Various land and sea routes stretched from the shores of the Mediterranean to Japan, the easternmost terminus of Silk Road culture. Ceremonies that took place in the year 752 at the Buddhist monastery of Todaiji in present-day Nara, Japan, provide a vivid testament to the internationalism of Silk Road culture. The occasion was the consecration of an enormous gilt bronze Buddha about 50 feet tall, weighing some 250 tons.

Womb world mandala, Japan, mid-13th century. Gold and color on indigo-dyed silk; hanging scroll; 90.3 x 79 cm. Collection of Sylvan Barnet and William Burto

Paper

by Valerie Hansen

Philosopher-statesman Francis Bacon (1561–1621) identified paper as one of inventions that separated the modern world from the traditional world: the others were the magnetic compass, gunpowder, and printing. He never realized that every one of them originated in China.

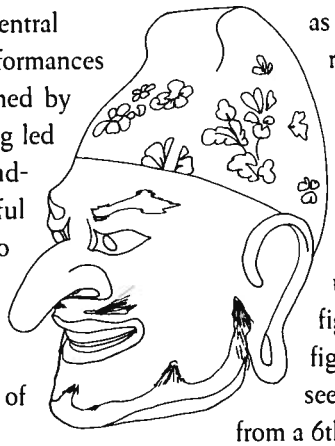
Chinese craftsmen first discovered the secret of making paper when they washed rags and left them out to dry on a screen. This new, flexible material could be used to wrap things, and indeed the first use of paper, in the 2nd century B.C.E., was as a packaging material for medicine. Within a century, paper had begun to displace bamboo strips as China's main writing material, and by the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E. the Chinese used paper for all their writing.

Chinese paper moved along the Silk Road into Central Asia before the technology of papermaking did. Archaeologists have found paper with Chinese writing on it as far afield as the Caucasus mountains (at the site of Moshchevaya Balka) on an alternate route to Constantinople. Similar paper was in use in the years before 712 at a small fortress on Mount Mugh outside Samarkand. There a local ruler imported Chinese paper that had already been used on one side — so that he could write on the blank reverse when the occasion arose.

From the writing on the back of one sheet of paper found at Mount Mugh we know that it came from Liangzhou, Gansu, an important city on the Chinese silk route, 2,000 miles to the east. Mount Mugh's

Those in attendance included monks from India, Central Asia, and China. Among the many rituals and performances that took place was a ribald dance-drama performed by masked and costumed dancers. A Chinese lion-dog led the dancing procession. He was followed by a handsome prince from South China and a beautiful Chinese maiden. An ugly, fanged lecher tried to seduce the Chinese lady but was restrained by two fierce, muscular Buddhist guardian deities. Then appeared Garuda, from Indian Hindu and Buddhist mythology, a mythical bird who obtains the elixir of immortality and devours his enemy, the dragon. Garuda was followed by an old Brahmin priest-sage from India and by another elderly figure wearing a Turkish hat. The dancing procession ended with a group of intoxicated, red-faced barbarians and their Persian king. Occasionally the Persian king and his drunken entourage are identified as the Greek god of wine Dionysus and his companions. Most scholars seem to feel, however, that this was really a group of Persians. Probably, for 8th-century Japanese, the distinction between Persians and Greeks was nebulous. They were all "barbarians" from the Western Lands.

Chinese Tang dynasty objects also attest to the cosmopolitanism of the era. Many textiles show Persian motifs, most notably the pearl-encircled roundel with figurative designs such as men on rearing horses facing backward to shoot rampant lions or two animals in ritual confrontation with one another. Another West Asian specialty, gold and silver metalwork, was also imported into Tang China. Metal bowls, plates, and cups, decorated with such West Asian motifs as griffins, mouflons, and deer, are found in the graves of the upper classes. These tombs also contain ceramic figures of foreign musicians and dancers. Other figures on horseback — both men and women — seem to be playing polo, a game that may be derived from a 6th-century B.C.E. Persian sport.



In 750, just before that festive consecration of the Great Buddha in Nara, the Muslim Abbasid dynasty established its capital in Baghdad, which became a fabled city of learning. The 9th century saw the building of the Great Mosque of Samarra and the Great Mosque of Cairo. It was during this period that lustre, an opalescent metallic glaze used on ceramics, was developed. The shimmering square lustre tiles set in lozenge patterns on the Great Mosque of Al Qayrawan (ca. 862) are a splendid example.

The 8th century saw the Muslim advance into Central Asia. One of the material results of this conquest was the Muslim adop-

Line drawing of an 8th-century wooden mask representing the drunken Persian king called Suiko-ō. Height of original: 37.7 cm. Shōsō-in Collection, Nara, Japan. Drawing by Linda Z. Ardrey

Imported paper was so expensive that the ruler used it only for correspondence. For his ordinary household accounts he used willow sticks, cut from willow branches with the bark removed. Other common writing materials were leather and, in the Islamic world at the time, papyrus.

Legend has it that the secret of papermaking entered the Islamic world with the 751 battle of Talas (in modern Kyrgyzstan) when Islamic armies captured several Chinese craftsmen, who taught their captors how to make paper. Most scholars today think the technology, which was not very complex, could have moved out of China into western Iran before 751, though no examples of early, non-Chinese paper survive. Embracing the new technology, the founders of the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258) sponsored a papermaking factory in Baghdad in 796. Soon all scholars in the Islamic world were copying manuscripts onto paper, which was transmitted to Europe via Sicily and Spain by the 12th century (Bloom 2001).

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tion of paper, a substance that had been developed much earlier in China. Muslims began to transcribe onto paper the knowledge that they had gained from many people — including Greeks, Central Asians, and Indians — and made these pages into books. Paper helped link the Islamic Empire across three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe), and paper itself, the process of making it, and the knowledge written on it were eventually transmitted to Europe, helping to inspire the European Renaissance.

Another great period for cross-cultural interaction along Silk Road lands was the age of the Mongol Khanate (13th and 14th centuries), when the Polo family traveled from Venice to China and back. In the 13th century the Mongols (Turkic-Mongolian nomads) conquered China and pressed as far west as the Ukraine. They entered Islamic Iran and conquered Baghdad in 1258. Although the Mongols massacred tens of thousands of Muslims, soon many Mongols converted to Islam. Within ten years of their conquests Mongol Muslims were building great mosques and stimulating arts and letters by their patronage. One way they encouraged and transformed the arts in West Asia was by importing Chinese artifacts, artisans, and styles. A group of Chinese workmen directed a papermaking establishment in

Islamic Sufi dance from a manuscript of the Divan by Hafiz, present-day Afghanistan, Herat, dated 1523. Opaque watercolor, gold, and silver on paper; 18.8 x 10.3 cm.

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Purchase F1932.54

Blue-and-White

by Robert McCormick Adams

It is commonly assumed that worldwide technology rivalries and the interdependence of trade are modern developments. But the history of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and its Middle Eastern, Japanese, European, and New World derivatives challenges this view.

Blue-and-white was traded southward and then westward late in the 14th century (about a hundred years after it was first introduced), although by that time other Chinese export wares were centuries old. They had long moved in both directions between China and the Islamic world (and its antecedents), along the ancient overland Silk Road through Central Asia and in the cargoes of Arab and Persian seafarers. Indirect though it was, this distribution system efficiently communicated back to the Chinese information on the tastes of their Muslim customers.

Meantime, there also developed in the Middle East a wave of cheaper local copies. When they began appealing to customers in their own right, these products no longer needed to be so strictly imitative.

Soon the West got into the act. After a resolute process of exploration at least as consequential in the eyes of contemporaries as the voyages of Columbus, the Portuguese finally rounded the Cape of Good Hope late in the 15th century, opening the Orient to sea trade. Quantities of blue-and-white were being shipped to Lisbon as early as 1530, becoming no less prized in European markets than they were elsewhere.

Once again the Chinese producers were quickly responsive to the changing demands, helped along in this case by painted wooden models that the Dutch sent along with their huge orders.

The Japanese part in all this is equally fascinating. Their taste for blue-and-white did not develop until they had begun to master the technology themselves, which they succeeded in doing about 1600. Not long afterward they made their own entry into world markets. Splendid Dutch records tell a story of massive shipments of Chinese blue-and-white into Japan at first, followed by a Japanese invasion of Southeast Asian and European markets when Chinese production was temporarily interrupted by a civil war. Only in the later part of the 17th century did the Chinese reemerge as competitors. By then the producers of Japanese Imari wares, originally crude and derivative, had developed their own vigorous, indigenous styles for which there was a secure niche in the upper tiers of European and Middle Eastern markets.

Then there is a New World element. Spain came comparatively late to the Pacific by way of the Philippines. Annual shipments of Mexican silver from Acapulco quickly followed, eventually reaching China in quantities sufficient to drive out Manchu paper currency and greatly

Samarkand under Mongol patronage in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Blue-and-white ceramics are a good example of East-West interchange along Silk Road lands during this period. Islamic potters had decorated tin-glazed vessels with cobalt from about the 9th century onward. Muslim merchants in South Chinese coastal cities introduced this ware to China where, in the late 13th century, it was copied by Chinese potters creating high-fired porcelain ware. The white porcelain vessels decorated with cobalt blue designs were then exported to West Asia and to Southeast Asia where they became enormously popular and were copied, although not in high-fired porcelain. A good example of cobalt-decorated ware inspired by the Chinese examples is Turkish stoneware from the Iznik kilns, dating from the late 15th century onward. In the 15th century the Chinese court finally began to patronize blue-and-white porcelain, encouraging domestic production and use of the wares, not just their export.

The importance of the historical Silk Road, with its emphasis on overland routes, declined after the 15th century, when Europeans began to dominate the sea routes connecting Europe, the New World, and Asia. These sea routes increased the ease of travel and the availability of goods. Objects and ideas continued to influence East and West as Westerners adopted Asian fashions and collected Asian objects, and, in turn, Asians developed a taste for Western fashions, food, and technologies. The exchange of objects continues today in the global marketplace at an accelerated rate, with camel caravans and clipper ships replaced by e-commerce and overnight air delivery.

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disrupt the internal economy. The return trade was in silks – and, of course, blue-and-white. Dispersed across Mexico, pieces found their way even to the rude northern frontiers of New Spain. Sherds still turn up from time to time in historic Indian villages along the upper Río Grande, just as they do more frequently along the Arabian coasts.

Initially imitative industries sprang up in northwestern Europe, in Italy, even in Mexico. Out of these, in time, came the splendid tradition of Delftwares and the English porcelains that still grace our tables. But what is most interesting is the antiquity as well as the worldwide range of the shifting patterns of supply and demand, stimulus and response. An ebb and flow of technological and trading leadership long antedates the modern era.

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Left: Plate. Turkish, Ottoman dynasty, ca. 1500–1525.
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Center: Dish. Chinese, Yuan dynasty, ca. 1350.
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Right: Dish. Japanese, Edo period, ca. 1690–1710. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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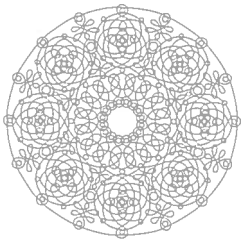


Silk Road Cooking: A Culinary Journey

by Najmieh Batmanglij

Join me on a voyage of culinary discovery that stretches through the ages and across half the world, from China in the east to Persia and on to the Mediterranean in the west, along the ancient network of trading routes known today as the Silk Road. Each place on the Silk Road itself, be it splendid city, rich trading town, or green oasis, has its own distinctive character and culture and yet is linked across desert and mountain to every other place. The same is true of salads, soups, breads, rice, kabobs, and pastries from Xi'an to Samarkand, from Isfahan to Istanbul and then northwest to Italy. It was along the caravan trails (and later the sea routes) that vegetables, fruits, grains, and seasonings — and the techniques for cooking them — passed from one civilization to another, to be absorbed and transformed into local specialties.

In markets in Uzbekistan, one finds huge melons of surpassing sweetness and vibrant orange carrots unlike any others. In Iran the familiar flat bread — also called *nan* in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, much of Central Asia and Western China and cooked in a *tandoor* (clay oven) or on a *saaj* (a convex cast iron plate placed over fire) — is offered on wooden carts, loaves scented with onion, garlic, and sesame, cumin, or nigella seeds. In Xi'an, stalls groan under bright persimmons, pomegranates, big red jujubes, and figs, peaches, and grapes. Aromatic ginger, onions, and leeks are everywhere to be found as well. I like to call these "Silk Road ingredients" — and the wonderful produce, fresh from the earth, stalk, vine, or branch, has come to the markets of America, too.

The dishes to be made from this rich bounty appear in infinite variety. Consider only that tempting assembly of little dishes found throughout the Middle East (*mezze*) and into Spain (where they are called *tapas*). In China they refer to a similar layout of little dishes as dim sum, while in Italy they are the antipasti.

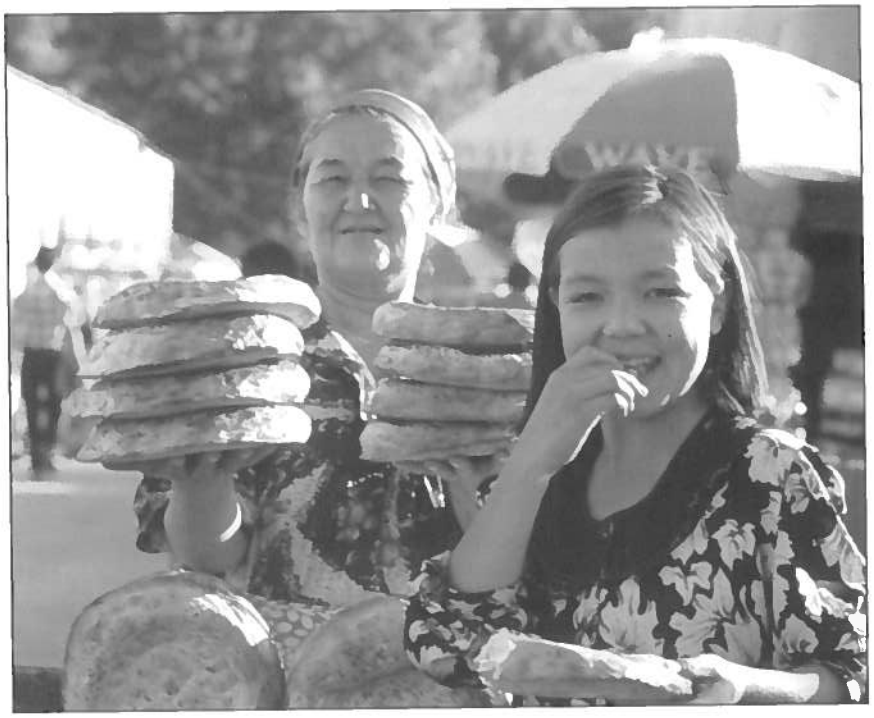
The noodles of my childhood are present in almost every country along the ancient Silk Road. In northern China a noodle master, in what looks like sleight of hand, can stretch and swing a lump of dough into perfect individual strands in 15 minutes. The sauces and soups that enhance these noodles exist in as rich a variety in China as they do in Italy.

Such mastery would seem to support the old legend that Marco Polo brought noodles from China to Italy in the 13th century. Recent archeological and linguistic scholarship shows, however, that the transfer was much earlier and in both directions. Today, culinary food historians agree that pasta probably originated in Iran. The first pasta dish is recorded in a 10th-century Arab cookery book, *Kitab al-Tabikh wa-islah al-Aghdiyah al-Ma'kulat*, which calls it by the Persian word *lakhshah*, meaning to slide, presumably because of the slipperiness of noodles. (The Russian *lapsha* and the Yiddish *lokshn*, for example, derive from *lakhshah*.) The same book also mentions that the dish was invented by the Sasanian Persian King Khosrow I (531–79 C.E.). It was probably the Arabs who introduced noodles, and the hard durum wheat necessary for making them, to Italy in the 9th century via Sicily (noodles) and Genoa (ravioli).

No one knows exactly how the technique for making pasta reached China. What is known is that before the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), China lacked the mills for large-scale flour grinding, which it acquired as she expanded to the west via the newly explored Silk Road. As soon as the mills appeared, however, Han cooks adapted or invented a vast array of "noodle foods," as they were called by writers of the time. By the end of the dynasty, China already had developed the technique for swinging dough into individual strands. These were boiled and served with a range of seasonings, and, although they were generally considered common food, they were so delicious that even the emperor ate them. Other pasta foods include dumplings, steamed buns, and little wheat cakes. Some were invented by ordinary people, a 3rd-century chronicler reports, and some came from foreign lands.

The many types and names of Chinese noodle food offer the sorts of clues that delight linguistic scholars, who find hints of food origins in the wanderings of words. Among the Chinese favorites, for example, is *mantou*, a steamed, sweetened, bread-like bun. The term appears in Japan as *manzu*, meaning steamed bread with a filling; and in Korea as *mandu*, a kind of ravioli filled with beef. Tibetans make stuffed dumplings in a variety of shapes and call them *momo*. In Central Asia, *manti* is a small steamed pasta that may contain meat, cheese, or vegetables and is served with yogurt or vinegar; in Turkey and Armenia the same word refers to a stuffed pasta shell steamed, poached in broth, or baked; and in Iran it is a wonton-like pasta cooked in a broth. Although some suggest a Central Asian origin for such dishes, no one knows for sure. What is more important than the origin is that the dishes and their names are all related. They form a culinary bond — a sign of early and peaceful communication — that links distant and sometimes hostile cultures.

It is a curious fact that the noodles that reached culinary heights in China and Japan, not to mention Italy, occupy only a humble place in the cookery of their Iranian home. Rice, on the other hand, is the same story in reverse. The grain, cultivated in China and India for at least 5,000 years, seems to have reached Iran only in the 4th century B.C.E. It did not begin to play an important part in Iranian cookery, however, until the 8th century. Since then, rice has become something special in Iran. It is not the anchor of a meal as it is in China, but the basis of festive and



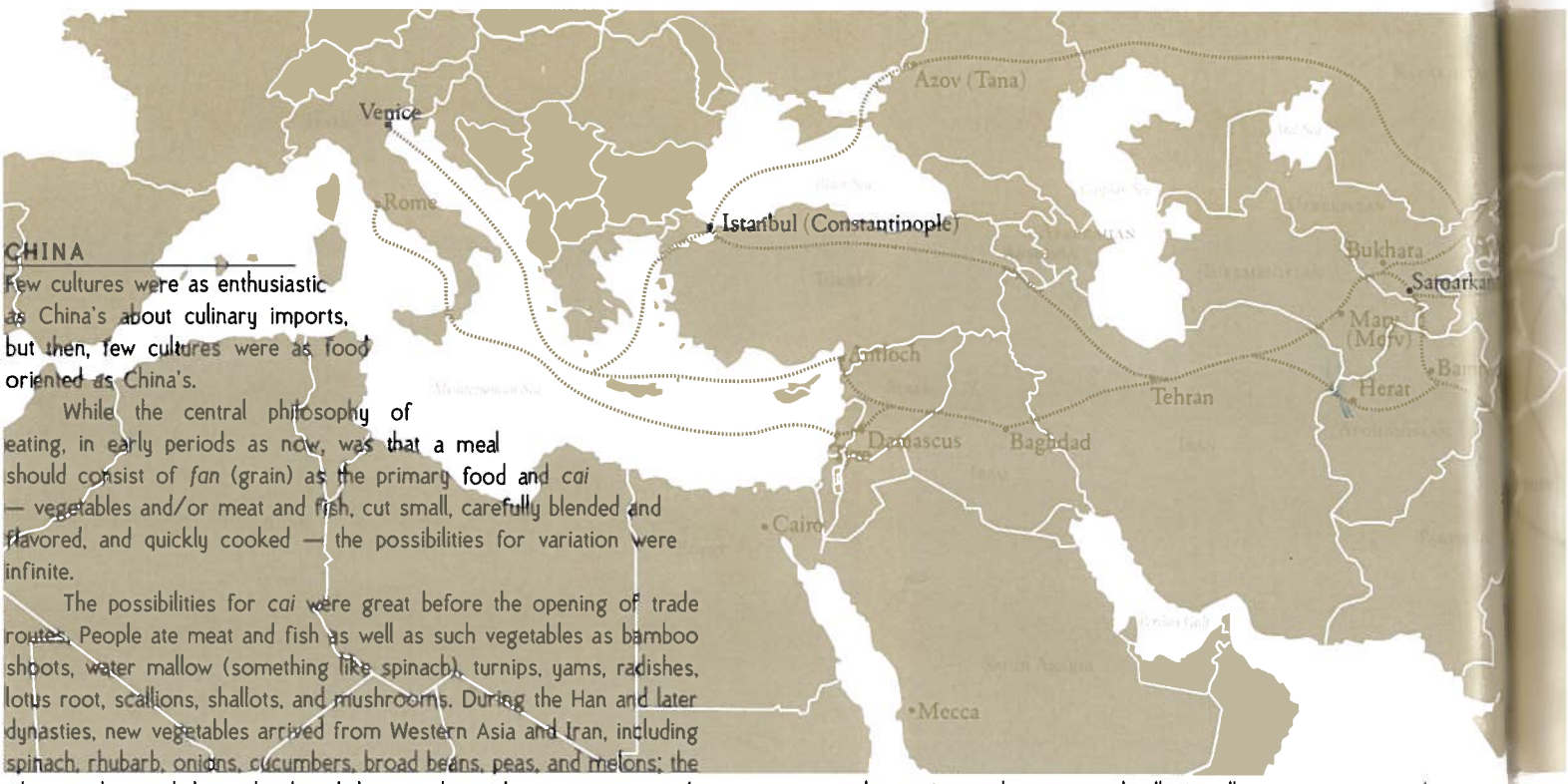
elaborate dishes called *polows* (parboiled and steamed rice). A *polow* may be cooked with a golden crust; it may be flavored with tart cherries, quinces, pomegranates, barberries, or candied bitter orange peel; it may include pistachios, almonds, walnuts, or rose petals. Like other good dishes, *polow* has spread far beyond its Persian source. Under such related names as *pilau*, *pilavi*, pilaf, paella, and *pullao*, and with such additions as chickpeas and raisins or onions and carrots, it graces celebrations from Afghanistan to Albania, and from India to Spain.

Similar tales linking east and west, north and south, could be told for rice pudding, for bread, and for dozens of other preparations based on vegetables, grains, fruits, herbs, and spices. This cuisine from the region that was once home to the Silk Road seems to have certain characteristics in common: foods and techniques that have been passed from region to region; a philosophy of healthy, balanced eating from China's yin-yang to India's *ayurveda* and from Iran's "hot and cold" to the Salerno Regimen of the Italian Middle Ages; and a particularly generous insistence on hospitality. That is the result of a long shared history, which began with an intrepid Chinese traveler of the 2nd century B.C.E., Zhang Qian.

Today, Italian and Chinese cooking together with Indian, Persian, Uzbek, and Turkish cuisine represent the tasty, inexpensive, down-to-earth, and cheerful food that is a lasting influence of the ancient Silk Road. And with the increase in culinary awareness and health concerns, and a trend toward simpler, more rustic ingredients such as flour with bran, brown rice, and fresh and seasonal food, America has become a kind of modern Silk Road entrepot where wonderful ingredients from all over the world — and instructions for cooking them — are available to everyone.

(Left) A girl sells scallion bread at a Xi'an market.

(Right) Flat bread is a staple at this market in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.



CHINA

Few cultures were as enthusiastic as China's about culinary imports, but then, few cultures were as food oriented as China's.

While the central philosophy of eating, in early periods as now, was that a meal should consist of *fan* (grain) as the primary food and *cai* — vegetables and/or meat and fish, cut small, carefully blended and flavored, and quickly cooked — the possibilities for variation were infinite.

The possibilities for *cai* were great before the opening of trade routes. People ate meat and fish as well as such vegetables as bamboo shoots, water mallow (something like spinach), turnips, yams, radishes, lotus root, scallions, shallots, and mushrooms. During the Han and later dynasties, new vegetables arrived from Western Asia and Iran, including spinach, rhubarb, onions, cucumbers, broad beans, peas, and melons; the Chinese classified them, developed them, and found new ways to cook them.

It was the same with fruits and nuts. China was blessed with superb produce, including peaches, plums, apricots, and persimmons, and from the south came mangoes, bananas, and citrus. The Chinese also carefully cultivated new fruits arriving from the Silk Road — figs and dates, cherries, melons, pomegranates, grapes, almonds, pistachios, walnuts, caraway, coriander, and sugar cane.

Then there were fermented and pickled foods, used for flavoring but also useful to travelers. The soybean was as central to Chinese cuisine, then and now, as ginger. It provided bean curd and soy sauce, among other preparations.

Still, the first rule of Chinese dining was "nothing to excess"; even children were admonished to eat only until they were 70 percent full. Thus gourmets developed the fashion for "natural foods," which fit China's Daoist roots as well as Buddhist precepts. What was natural food? It was food gathered in the mountains or woods — edible plants, herbs, mushrooms, and the like — cooked as simply as possible so as to reveal its unique flavor: It was the kind of culinary philosophy good cooks advocate today.

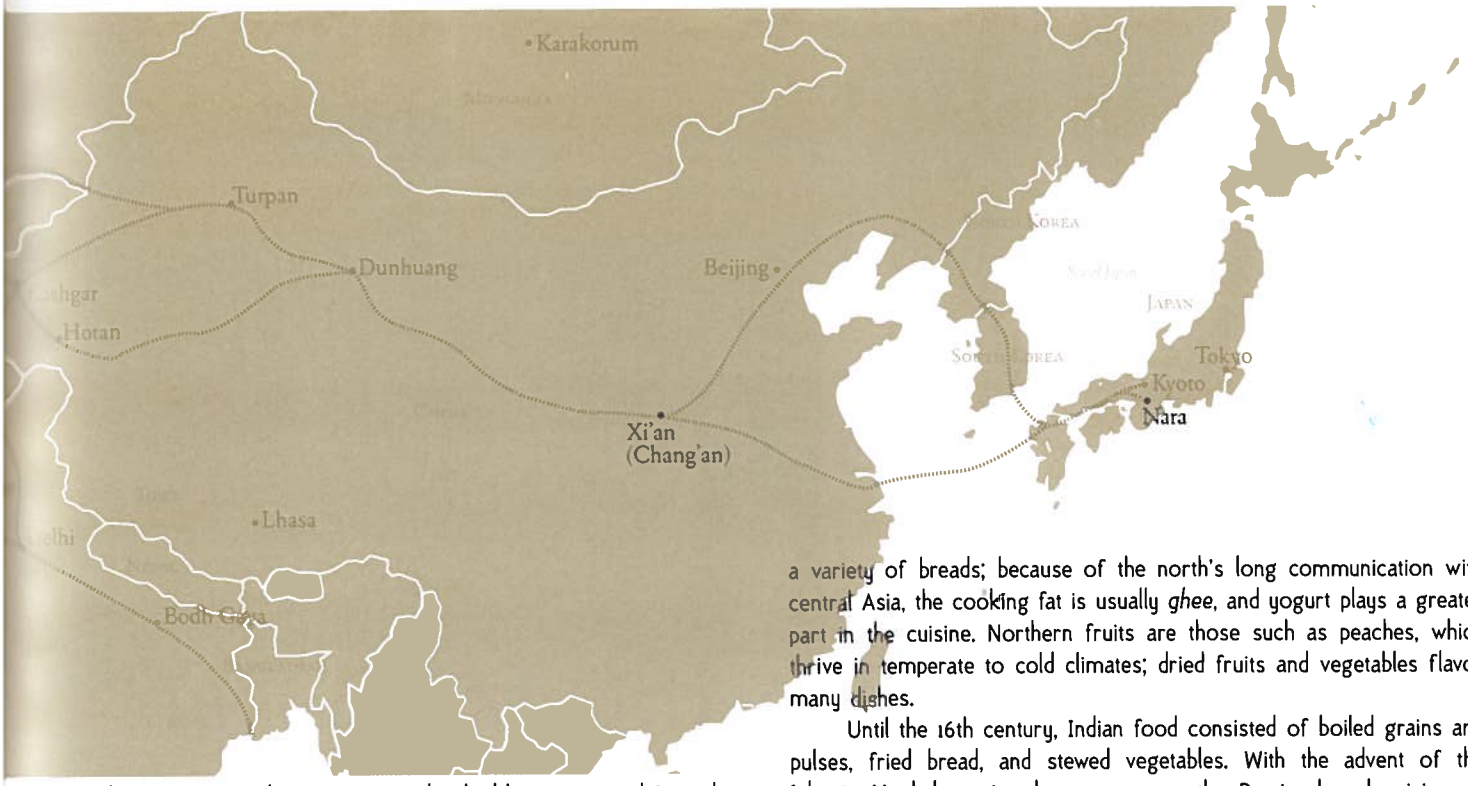
IRAN

The Persians had inherited a millennia-old tradition of Mesopotamian cookery from the empires of Sumeria, Babylon, Assyria, and Akkad, to name a few. Sumerian tablets record about 20 kinds of cheese, 100 soups, 300 breads. Their cooks dried grains, beans, dates, grapes, and figs; they preserved fruits in honey; they flavored their various stews with garlic, onions, leeks, and possibly mint, mustard, cumin, and coriander. The various Mesopotamian kingdoms borrowed dishes from one another, as recorded in their names.

According to Roman historians — hardly friendly commentators — the Parthians, who ruled an empire that at its height in the 1st century B.C.E. stretched from the Euphrates to the Indus rivers and from the Oxus (Amu Darya) to the Indian Ocean, were very fond of palm wine and ate lightly of grains, vegetables, a little fish and game. We may suppose that the later Parthians, originally nomadic horsemen, ate such dairy products as clarified butter (*ghee*, which keeps well in hot climates) and yogurt (often fermented with cracked wheat and still common in Kurdistan, where it is called *tarkhineh*). As the prime middlemen controlling the Silk Road, they taxed and no doubt enjoyed exotica arriving from east and west.

All these elements converged in the court cooking of the second Persian empire of the Sasanians (221–651 C.E.), whose magnificent capital, Ctesiphon, not far from what is now Baghdad, was the bustling entrepot of Silk Road trade. A 4th-century poem, "Khosrow and His Knight," outlines the most favored dishes of those with discriminating tastes; among them are desserts such as almond and walnut pastries, coconuts from India, and Iran's own dates stuffed with walnuts or pistachios.

Indeed, it was Persian cooking, already international, that helped to define the courtly cuisines of the conquering Arabs of the 7th century and the Mongols of the 13th. In medieval Arab cookbooks appear the Persian foods and preparations that were to travel with the conquerors far beyond Iran's borders. The herbs and spices are familiar: Iran's mint, coriander, saffron, and caraway, as well as cinnamon and ginger from Ceylon and China, and cloves from the East Indies. Ground almonds and walnuts thickened the rich sauces. Pomegranates and limes, combined with dates, honey, and sugar, produced the sweet-and-sour contrasts that characterize Persian cuisine today. Persianized Arabs adopted the braises, salads, breads, cheeses, and omelets of Iran, and



created magnificent *polows* from rice that had been imported for cultivation centuries before from the East.

Such classic Persian preparations spread throughout western Asia and into Europe with the Arab diaspora; the Mongols, like the Arabs before them, combined their own nomadic traditions with those of the Persian court and exported the new cuisine. It was the Mongols' descendants who helped shape the cuisines of India as we know them today.

INDIA

Successive waves of settlement as well as trade gave India early access to the fruits, vegetables, and spices of cultures both East and West. The Aryan invaders who came from Central Asia to India in about 1500 B.C.E. left in their Sanskrit language a number of clues to the origins of various foods. Foods native to India such as the eggplant, for instance, often have names derived from pre-Aryan languages. Imports are given prefixes that indicate their origins, and the names of later imports are often versions of the names from their home countries. Thus the stuffed pastries known as *samosa* in India are called (like Arab *sanbusaq*, Turkish *samsa*, and Central Asian *sambusai varaqi*) after their medieval Persian originals, *sanbosag*. And, especially in the southwest, there are dishes adapted from and named after those of the Portuguese, who ruled a colony at Goa for 400 years. Indian cooks gave their recipes complexity with the addition of such spices as cardamom, mustard seeds, cloves, cumin, and ginger, not to mention generous lacings of chili peppers, imported by the Portuguese from the New World in the 16th century.

Such a cosmopolitan past inspired as many cuisines as there are regions in India. As in China, a broad division exists between rice eaters in the south and wheat eaters in the north. Northern cuisine centers on a variety of breads; because of the north's long communication with central Asia, the cooking fat is usually *ghee*, and yogurt plays a greater part in the cuisine. Northern fruits are those such as peaches, which thrive in temperate to cold climates; dried fruits and vegetables flavor many dishes.

Until the 16th century, Indian food consisted of boiled grains and pulses, fried bread, and stewed vegetables. With the advent of the Islamic Mughal empire, however, came the Persian-based cuisine of Western Asia. The Muslims were meat eaters, and even today the north of India, where they were dominant, is known for its meat dishes. But Mughal innovations — including *polows*, pastries, stuffed vegetables, baked bread, sherbet, and such sweet confections as halvah — transformed Indian cookery. Indian cooks adapted the luxurious creations for vegetarian dining to suit their own tastes. Mughal cookery and later imports from the New World helped shape Indian cuisine into the rich tapestry it now is.

ITALY

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Italy became a series of city-states and remained so well into the 19th century. Nonetheless, from the 14th century on, it was the cradle of the renaissance of European arts, including culinary ones. This was in no small measure because of its contacts with Arab and Jewish traders through Venice, Naples, and Genoa. Arab traders excelled at absorbing and passing on local cooking styles and ingredients at each of their stops along the Silk Road. Italian upper classes were greatly influenced by Arab, Chinese, and Japanese courts and copied the dining style, refinement of cuisine, manners, and etiquette of the Arab courts. Exotic spices and sugar became symbols of their wealth. The great Italian court cooks discarded the techniques of purees and porridges as well as the tendency to disguise ingredients, common at the time, and brought out the flavor of individual ingredients by careful seasoning and moderate cooking. Historically, it was usually the upper classes that set culinary trends — cooking with rose water, saffron, orange peel, dried fruits, sugar, and the use of almond pastes were all picked up from the Arabs (who in turn had taken them from the Persians) and passed them on to the rest of Europe.

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