

*The Silk Roads, 300 BCE to 1700 CE: Connecting the World for Two Millennia*

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**Abstract**

The trade networks of the Silk Roads offered an impressive array of intellectual and cultural influences, which, through the exchange of knowledge and ideas, both verbal and written, still reverberate throughout our societal framework today. Science, arts and literature, textiles and technologies were shared and disseminated into societies along the lengths of these routes, and, through this exchange, languages, religions, and cultures developed and influenced one another. Our collaborative exhibition at the University of Southern California (USC) draws upon artifacts in our collections and those of partner institutions. This initiative includes two phases: First, working with faculty, staff, and students across USC departments, as well as external collaborators, we are focusing on written artifacts—the books, manuscripts, and other vehicles for nonverbal communication—that connected different Silk Roads communities and created entirely new cultures. Rather than impose chronological or historical divisions, the organization of our exhibition is based on geography. Visitors will walk through and view objects as they would travel along the Silk Roads. The aim is both to introduce visitors to specific peoples and places that mark the Eurasian land mass while at the same time preserving the sense of bewilderment that so many interlinked empires and ideas can cause for modern travelers. Secondly, a companion one-day event, *Borrowed Recipes: Migrant Food Worlds of the Silk Roads*, traces the hidden cultural exchanges underlying the foods originating along the Silk Roads and widely available to us in Los Angeles today.

Keywords: Silk Roads, Cultural Heritage, Culinary History

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## Introduction

The initial idea for this project was developed as a result of discussions, in February 2020, with Jay Rubenstein<sup>1</sup>, Director of the USC Dornsife Center for the Premodern World. Emerging from these discussions was our enthusiastic agreement to initiate a collaborative project between the Center and the USC Libraries (see “Acknowledgements,” below), focused on the Silk Roads (an ancient extensive system of pathways that originally linked many trade centers between China and the West) including an exhibition, *The Silk Roads, 300 BCE to 1700 CE: Connecting the World for Two Millennia*, and a one-day event *Borrowed Recipes: Migrant Food Worlds of the Silk Roads*, with the latter tracing the hidden cultural exchanges underlying the foods originating along the Silk Roads and widely available to us in Los Angeles today.

Our first collaboration with the Center (in Fall 2019) led to our project, *USC Illuminated Medieval Manuscripts*<sup>2</sup> which highlights our Special Collections’ primary and secondary sources, and make available a model of interdisciplinary collaboration, one that provides multiple levels of discovery so as to open new research perspectives on both Medieval Europe and antiquity, as evidenced by our collection of manuscripts which is quite diverse, including both religious and secular manuscripts, dating from the 13th-15th centuries.

Our three primary goals for our Silk Roads Exhibit and our one-day event, *Borrowed Recipes: Migrant Food Worlds of the Silk Roads*, are as follows:

1. First, to study the premodern cultures which led, as a result of the Silk Roads, to the development of cities and communities which became essential hubs of trade and cross-cultural exchanges for almost two millennia. Our exhibition will feature a range of written and artistic artifacts, as well as visual and pedagogical aids for visitors.
2. Our second goal is to highlight the multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism stemming from intellectual, artistic, and cultural knowledge which these urban centers exchanged and developed over time. Fortunately, recent archaeological discoveries in Central Asia, particularly in China’s Xinjiang region, has created a growing body of material evidence that offers tangible proof of the Silk Roads’ urban centers and their civilizations. Our exhibition will feature our rich collections of primary and secondary sources, as well as items from our USC Archaeology Research Center, and our USC Pacific Asia Museum as well as cultural institutions in the Los Angeles area.
3. Our third goal (similar to our *USC Illuminated Medieval Manuscripts* project) is to develop strategic alliances by bringing together scholars and students from different fields in the humanities and the social sciences to reflect upon the role that the Premodern period’s historical sources can play in contemporary humanistic and social sciences debates, and to engage students in multiple literacies and in evolving multi-modal forms of expression.

Our event, *Borrowed Recipes: Migrant Food Worlds of the Silk Roads*, takes the audience on a voyage of culinary discovery that stretches through time and across half the world, from China in the east to Persia and on to the Mediterranean in the west, along the Silk Roads’ ancient network of trading routes. Each distinctive place on the Silk Road had a common theme of cultural exchange that linked people from the desert and mountains to the sea and beyond. One way for us is to highlight this common cultural thread through the food we eat. From Xi’an to Samarkand, from

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<sup>1</sup> [https://dornsife.usc.edu/cf/hist/people/faculty\\_display.cfm?Person\\_ID=1091824](https://dornsife.usc.edu/cf/hist/people/faculty_display.cfm?Person_ID=1091824)

<sup>2</sup> <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/usc-illuminated-medieval-manuscripts/about-the-project>

Isfahan to Istanbul and then northwest to Italy. It was along the Silk Road trails and sea routes that vegetables, fruits, grains, and seasonings were shared, each transforming the food with their own cultural influence. This dynamic interaction of traditions and culinary culture led to a shared knowledge immersed in innovation and creativity that we still celebrate today (Batmanglij, 2002).

## **Background**

The German phrase *Die Seidenstrassen* (The Silk Roads) coined in the nineteenth century by a German geographer, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905) describes what for him was a specific route of east-west trade some 2,000 years ago. Richthofen was a German geographer and geologist. He contributed to the development of geographical methodology, and he also helped establish the science of geomorphology, the branch of geology that deals with land and submarine relief features. On a series of journeys, he visited almost every part of China, gathering material for his voluminous work, *China, Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien* ("China, the Results of My Travels and the Studies Based Thereon"), 5 vol. and atlas (1877–1912). (Britannica Encyclopedia, 2021).

Richthofen's original concept was limited in that he was primarily concerned about the movement of silk overland from east to west between Han China and Rome. The silk trade routes linked China, India, and the Mediterranean world, through central Asia (Kuz'mina & Mair, 2008). Today, the term, *Silk Roads* is used to refer to the paved roads, the mountain passes, the rivers and the grasslands that run across Central Eurasia, drawing connections between the Roman and Chinese Empires. It also refers to the diverse land and sea trade routes that formed an extensive network covering most of Eurasia and parts of Africa.

Sericulture, the cultivation of silkworms for the process of making silk was, according to Chinese tradition, developed sometime around the year 2,700 BCE. Regarded as an extremely high value product, silk was reserved for the exclusive usage of the Chinese imperial court for the making of cloths, drapes, banners, and other items of prestige. The methods of harvesting silk production were also a closely guarded secret for about 3,000 years with imperial decrees sentencing to death anyone who revealed to a foreigner the process of its production.

At some point during the 1st century BCE, silk was introduced to the Roman Empire, where it was considered an exotic luxury that became extremely popular, with imperial edicts being issued to control prices. Silks popularity continued throughout the Middle Ages, with detailed Byzantine regulations for the manufacture of silk clothes, illustrating its importance as a quintessentially royal fabric and an important source of revenue for the crown. According to legend, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, who reigned from 527 to 565 CE, paid two monks to smuggle to Constantinople cocooned silkworms hidden inside hollowed-out canes (Hunt, 2011). Additionally, the needs of the Byzantine Church for silk garments and hangings were substantial. This luxury item was thus one of the early driving forces for the development of trading routes from Europe to the Far East. (Federico 2008).

Though silk in the form of both yarn and finished textiles was always instrumental in the development of this trade network, there were other important goods as well, such as horses, incenses, spices, and later tea (Liu, 2010). Tombs in Hubei province dating from the 4th and

3rd centuries BCE contain the first evidence of complete silk garments (including brocade, gauze and embroidered silk) as well as outstanding examples of weapons, chariots, and many personal items, including furniture, musical instruments, as well as bronze ritual vessels.

Travelers along the Silk Roads were attracted not only by trade but also by the intellectual and cultural exchange taking place in cities along the Silk Roads (Juliano & Lerner, 2001), many of which developed into hubs of culture and learning. Since 1988, UNESCO sought to have a clear idea about the rich history and enduring legacy of the historic Silk Roads in connecting civilizations throughout history as well as the ways in which cultures have mutually influenced each other. This led to their Program, “About the Silk Roads” which extends these historic networks in a digital space, bringing people together in an ongoing dialogue and fostering a mutual understanding of the diverse and often inter-related cultures that have sprung up around these routes.<sup>3</sup>

Because premodern technology, such as paper production, stimulated the development of writing systems, it facilitated over time communication across cultures and continents. Knowledge in science, arts (Li & Hansen, 2003) and literature, as well as crafts and technologies, was shared and disseminated into societies along the lengths of these routes, and in this way, languages, religions (Liu, 1988; Klimkeit, 1993; Foltz, 2010), and cultures developed and influenced one another.

## **Purpose**

### **Our Project**

Our project, *The Silk Roads*, includes an exhibition and a companion one-day event, *Borrowed Recipes: Migrant Food Worlds of the Silk Roads*. Our exhibition is our second productive collaboration with Jay Rubenstein, Director of the USC Center for the Premodern World.<sup>4</sup>

Our first collaboration (2019) with that Center was based on our Project, *USC Illuminated Medieval Manuscripts*<sup>5</sup> which led to the creation of a program, “Prehistory of the Book Program”. It featured the inaugural invited lecture by Gregory Clark from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. He focused on the two Books of Hours included in our Project. He detailed the findings of his thorough investigation into the probable origins and dates of each manuscript.<sup>6</sup>

Our current exhibition and second collaboration with the Center for the Premodern world, includes two phases and is planned for Spring 2022. As stated by Jay Rubenstein on the Center’s website, “The goals of our project are twofold. First, we want to study the cultures of written communication that existed before the published book became both the norm and the highest expression of literate transmission. We do not ask where the book came from or highlight the limitations of the written word in a pre-publication world. Rather, we wish to examine strategies, technologies, and products of written communication as practiced in the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-roads>

<sup>4</sup> <https://dornsife.usc.edu/center-for-the-premodern-world>

<sup>5</sup> <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/usc-illuminated-medieval-manuscripts/index>

<sup>6</sup> <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/usc-illuminated-medieval-manuscripts/greg-clark-lecture>

pre-modern world: the pre-modern world widely conceived and a topic as well, besides calligraphy, political broadside to incunabula, you name it, whatever you can.”

Our first phase includes working with faculty, staff, and students across USC departments, as well as with external collaborators, we are focusing on written artifacts, the books, manuscripts, and other vehicles for nonverbal communication, that connected different Silk Road communities and created entirely new cultures. Rather than impose chronological or historical divisions, the organization of our exhibition is based on geography. Visitors will walk through and view objects as they would travel along the Silk Roads. The aim is both to introduce visitors to specific peoples and places that mark the Eurasian land mass while, at the same time, preserving the sense of disorientation that so many interlinked empires and ideas create for modern travelers.

Our second phase is a companion one-day event, *Borrowed Recipes: Migrant Food Worlds of the Silk Roads*, and it traces the hidden cultural exchanges underlying the foods originating along the Silk Roads and widely available to us in Los Angeles today.

## **Our Exhibition**

The Silk Roads today, or at any point in their histories, open a vista of cultures and empires whose histories, boundaries, and archaeological remains overlap one another: Roman, Persian, Chinese, Macedonian, Armenian, Scythian, Turkish, Sogdian, Iranian, Mongol, to name only some of the more prominent ones. Rather than to impose chronological or historical divisions upon the material to neatly delineate different Silk Road cultures, the organization of our exhibition is based on geography. Visitors will walk through it and view its objects as one would travel along the Silk Roads. The effect will be both to introduce visitors to specific peoples and places that mark the Eurasian land mass while at the same time preserving the sense of bewilderment that so many interlinked empires and ideas can cause for modern travelers.

Our goal is to promote both the USC Libraries’ vision<sup>7</sup> and the University’s mission<sup>8</sup>, and to that end our focus for the exhibition is on written artifacts in our collections—the books, manuscripts, and other media for nonverbal communication—that linked up different Silk Road communities and, as a result, created entirely new cultures as various groups interacted with one another. Visual materials from different parts of the Silk Roads will be included such as wall painting fragments from ruins of Buddhist temples in Central Asia and ceramic human sculptures found in Chinese tombs. Many of the objects to be featured in this exhibition will come from USC Libraries’ Special Collection. Highlights include a 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript, *De Officiis, (On Duties)* by Cicero; *The Travels of John Chardin* (printed in 1686); a 17<sup>th</sup>-century printed account of the journey undertaken by the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang to the Western Regions titled *Xiyou zhenquan*. We also plan to borrow from other units at the university (USC Archaeology Research Center and USC Pacific Asia

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<sup>7</sup> “The USC Libraries will be an integral, inventive, and inspiring partner in the scholarly and artistic enterprises of USC faculty, students, and staff. In so doing, we actively contribute to the development of knowledge and advancement of the global human community.”

[https://libraries.usc.edu/sites/default/files/usc\\_libraries\\_strategic\\_plan\\_june\\_2017.pdf](https://libraries.usc.edu/sites/default/files/usc_libraries_strategic_plan_june_2017.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> “The central mission of the University of Southern California is the development of human beings and society as a whole through the cultivation and enrichment of the human mind and spirit.” <https://about.usc.edu/policies/mission-statement/>

Museum) as well as local museums and cultural institutions such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and UCLA Libraries' Special Collections Department.

## **Collaborations**

We are working with faculty in USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences and several other colleagues in USC Libraries as we finalize the artifact list for the Spring 2022 exhibition, as well as develop a thematic program to organize the material. We are also conducting more in-depth research on the artifacts and working with Sonya Lee's (USC East Asian Studies Center) upper-level undergraduates to create an online catalogue for the exhibition in Scalar<sup>9</sup>; investigate the best practices in the handling, display, and conservation of paper products and other related materials from the ancient Silk Roads; and focus on developing effective media strategies to make the exhibition content accessible and engaging to different audiences. The goal is to produce a range of visual and pedagogical aids for visitors to the exhibition. The anticipated contributions for the two undergraduate researchers are to produce written reports on their respective research projects, which will form the basis for display labels, wall texts, information pamphlets, online catalogue, and social media posts for the Silk Roads exhibition. They are encouraged to produce photographic and video documentation of the research processes as well as the exhibition installation to be shared through the exhibition website.

## **Scalar: Media-Rich, Multimodal, Digital Platform**

Scalar is a USC based, open source, online publishing tool which was developed at our University by the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture for the electronic journal *Vectors*<sup>10</sup>. Using Scalar provides the opportunity for a strategic approach to not only the digitization of these selected artifacts, but will also allow us to share our research project and exhibition with international academic audiences and beyond via, publications, workshops, and conference presentations. By digitizing the research and artifacts for the exhibit and one-day event, we can preserve them, while providing ease of access and therefore fostering a more inclusive and collaborative community of engagement that includes faculty and students in multidisciplinary fields, as well as the public.

## **Phase 2: *Borrowed Recipes: Migrant Food Worlds of the Silk Roads***

*Borrowed Recipes*, a one-day event explores the history of food and its culinary and cultural exchanges. The event focuses on what might have been the foods exchanged along the Silk Roads in their ancient and modern, international incarnations that allow us to enjoy these foods in Los Angeles. The event includes a conversation between food archaeologist Farrell Monaco, who recreates ancient recipes for her blog *Tavola Mediterranea*<sup>11</sup>; Harvard University Irish studies professor and food historian Joseph Nagy<sup>12</sup>; LAist food editor Elina

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<sup>9</sup> <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/the-silk-roads-300-bce-to-1700-ce-connecting-the-world-for-two-millennia/index>

<sup>10</sup> "Scalar is a free, open source publishing platform that's designed to make it easy for authors to write long-form, born-digital scholarship online. Scalar enables users to assemble media from multiple sources and juxtapose them with their own writing in a variety of ways, with minimal technical expertise required. Scalar also gives authors tools to structure essay- and book-length works in ways that take advantage of the unique capabilities of digital writing, including nested, recursive, and non-linear formats. The platform also supports collaborative authoring and reader commentary." <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/guide/index>, <http://scalar.usc.edu>

<sup>11</sup> <https://tavolamediterranea.com/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://medieval.fas.harvard.edu/people/joseph-nagy>

Shatkin<sup>13</sup>, who can help USC students explore and taste these foods in Southern California; food historian and science writer Nicola Twilley, creator of the popular Gastropod podcast<sup>14</sup>; and an L.A.-area chef or restaurateur such as USC alum Bughra Arkin of Dolan's Uyghur Cuisine<sup>15</sup> in Alhambra who draws inspiration from one or more cuisines that originated along the ancient Silk Roads.<sup>16</sup>

## **Background for the Event**

The history of culinary cultural exchange is quite nuanced (Pullman, 2016; Everding, 2018; Spengler III, 2020; Ghattas, 2021). In Los Angeles and many other metropolitan cities, people can find culinary experiences from nearly every region of the world.

Oftentimes the origin stories of food and its cultural heritage are difficult to reconstruct. There are pervasive cultural myths about food origins. For example, the idea that 13th-century Italian merchant Marco Polo introduced pasta to Europe after his travels to China, contradicts the evidence that people have eaten pasta for thousands of years. In contrast, pasta has been documented in Italy since ancient times.

## **Then and Now**

Our panelists will explore and contextualize the historical roots of these Silk Roads foods along with their transformation into the foods we recognize today. The creative experimentation by chefs to innovate within the frameworks of these existing food traditions will be demonstrated during the event. In addition to tracing several of these cooking and eating traditions, our participants will contextualize them historically for USC students through overviews of how key ingredients like pepper and other spices were critical to the development of these ancient trade networks.

## **Anticipated Outcomes**

We are confident that USC students and faculty, as well as members of the Los Angeles community, will find this one-day event both engaging and enlightening. In particular, we think that the food tasting, and cooking demonstrations will attract a large audience. Our goal is to encourage them to reflect about food origins and cultural exchanges through the exhibition, public discussions, and other components such as research guides and digital resources that we are developing for *Borrowed Recipes*.

We will promote the event widely to USC students and faculty, drawing on the network of USC faculty involved in the planning of the *Silk Roads* exhibition, and conducting outreach to students and faculty in a wide range of departments, schools, and units in related disciplines including: American studies and ethnicity; archaeology; history; cultural studies; area studies fields focused on regions along the Silk Roads; arts and humanities fields; the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism; the USC School for Cinematic Arts; the USC Price School for Public Policy; and USC's arts schools. In addition, we will

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<sup>13</sup> <https://laist.com/people/elina-shatkin>

<sup>14</sup> <https://gastropod.com/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ladolans.com/>

<sup>16</sup> USC Visions and Voices Spring 2022 event:

[https://visionsandvoices.usc.edu/eventdetails/?event\\_id=37458745396289&s\\_type=&s\\_genre=](https://visionsandvoices.usc.edu/eventdetails/?event_id=37458745396289&s_type=&s_genre=)

conduct outreach to USC student organizations in related areas and via the USC Libraries' social media channels.

## **Conclusion**

Our exhibition and *Borrowed Recipes* will encourage USC students to think reflectively and critically about the hidden backstories to familiar foods at L.A. restaurants and food trucks, and gain a fuller appreciation for the many distinctive migrant food worlds that have found a home in Southern California. In this way, our exhibition and *Borrowed Recipes* will provoke reflection on several USC Core Values, including the values of the Trojan Family relating to consideration for others and appreciation for diversity. By asking USC students to look more closely at artifacts and food and how they are intertwined with immigrant experiences in L.A., we believe that students will gain a fuller and richer understanding of the cultural complexities of primary sources and most particularly of food as an excellent example of our world-wide cultural exchanges.

In addition, *Borrowed Recipes* will provoke reflection on the USC Core Value of free inquiry, since it will use everyday foods as a medium for thoughtful reflection on cultural influences and a number of related issues like globalization, foods as symbols of national identities, adaptations of food traditions by immigrant cultures, and the hidden histories underpinning basic features of our daily lives.

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