

Project for a Comprehensive Study of the Silk Roads

From time immemorial the Silk Road, with its hundreds of byways, was considered the highway that linked the worlds of East and West. In the middle of the twentieth century, scholarly research revealed the crucial role played by oases in linking the North to the South; these oases, even more than the transversal lines of the Silk Roads, played the role of crossroads where successive waves of nomads, farmers, pastoral groups and city dwellers met. Today, thanks to UNESCO, we are working on land and sea to secure a different destiny for this network of roads. By balancing warp and woof, each side can give back some of its native wealth and help realize the ancient dream of peace.

Vadim Eliseyev

President of the International Consultative Committee on The Silk Roads

The aim of the UNESCO project “The Silk Roads” is to study the cultural exchanges that took place between East and West in order to stimulate both sides to find new paths of dialogue. Using a variety of approaches, researchers, political authorities, media outlets, artists and others, in collaboration with UNESCO, are helping to elucidate – through expeditions and seminars, scientific studies and exhibitions – the nature of these exchanges, with the goal of building together a culture of peace.

The Expeditions: A Synergy in Service to the Dialogue of Cultures

In the summer of 1990, at the invitation of China, the first expedition of “The Silk Roads” project took place. Entitled “The Desert Road,” it followed a route that led from Xian to Kashghar. In October of that same year, and for a period that lasted four months, “The Sea Road” expedition took place. On board the *Fulk al Salamah* (The Ark of Peace), the participants traveled from Venice to Osaka. In April of 1991 the expedition called “The Steppe Roads” took place, crossing Central Asia from Ashkhabad to

Almaty. The fourth expedition, "The Nomads' Road," crossed Mongolia in the summer of 1992.

The aim of these expeditions was to mobilize the international scientific and university community; to stimulate research; to reveal the shared heritage and manifold identity of the peoples in the countries traversed; to plan and promote cultural projects that would promote development; and to confirm the visibility and strengthen the image of UNESCO throughout the world.

A fifth expedition, "The Buddhist Road," will take place in the fall of 1995. It will cross Nepal from China and then on to India, Pakistan and Central Asia.

First Expedition – The Desert Road China July 20 – August 23, 1990

Xian (formerly Chang'an), capital city of several Chinese dynasties, was the eastern-most starting point for the great caravans heading west on the Silk Roads. After passing along a narrow corridor through Gansu province, which stretches some eight hundred kilometers to the city of Dunhuang, itself a flourishing oasis at the western edge of the Great Wall, the road continues through the Tarim Basin. There it skirts the Taklamakan Desert, both along the north and south edges, from oasis to oasis, before reaching Kashghar, which was a key meeting point along The Silk Road. Leaving from Kashghar, which is located in the foothills of the Pamir mountains, the caravans would then have to traverse the highest peaks before continuing their westward advance.

This region, which was a crossroads for all the Silk Roads, was the site of a succession of brilliant civilizations, stretching back to deepest antiquity, but whose importance only became known at the beginning of this century, thanks to the pioneering studies of Sir Aurel Stein, Paul Pelliot, Albert von Le Coq, and the Count Otani. Originally an area of Indo-European settlement that included both the Saka nomads and the "Tokharians" of the empires of the Tarim Basin and reached even as far as Gansu, the region was, after the sixth century, subject to the expansion of turkophone

tribes that assimilated the existent populations. The Uighur empire, particularly in the period from the ninth through thirteenth centuries, was an important agent of Turk influence; here local Indo-European, Manichaeian, Buddhist and Nestorian Christian cultures harmoniously combined and flourished. Besides the Chinese, whose Empire of the Middle Kingdom subjugated this region on several occasions, there were other peoples who left traces of their influences on these lands: the Tibetans and their Tangut cousins, and also the Mongolians, initially the descendants of Gínggis Khan and later the Jungars whose empire fell to the Manchu Dynasty of the Ming.

The International Consultative Committee for the Silk Roads project recommended that this first expedition retrace the ancient Silk Roads on the route that linked Xian to Kashghar. 33 specialists and 16 media representatives, from 18 different countries, participated in this expedition, which lasted 33 days.

Some of the results:

- International seminars: "Land Routes and Cultural Exchanges before the Tenth Century" held at Urumchi; and "Dunhuang and the Silk Roads"
- Program of International Research: "Languages and Scripts along the Silk Roads"
- Hirayama Scholarships: Ten scholarships per year, given to young scholars whose research is related to the Silk Roads (1990-1998)
- Initial concept for the exhibition "Sérinde, Terre de Bouddha. Dix siècles d'art sur la Route de Soie," to take place at the Grand Palais, Paris, in October of 1995
- In the collection UNESCO/Fleurus, several children's books, including "Exploration à travers les terres lointaines"
- The founding of the "Association of the Silk Roads in China," which resulted in a festival in 1992 that was held in Lanzhou
- Co-production, by the UNESCO-Kitai group, of a documentary film entitled "China and the Silk Roads"

Second Expedition – The Sea Road October 1990 – March 1991

The term “The Spice Roads” designates the sea route linking the west coast of Japan to Western Europe: it passes through Indonesia, then circumnavigates India before reaching the Middle East and on to the Mediterranean Sea. Two thousand years before the birth of Christ, cinnamon from Ceylon and senna from China reached the Middle East by these Spice Roads. Exotic goods and spices passed between China and Africa. Over centuries, without sextant or compass to help them, mariners risked their lives to make these perilous crossings. This situation changed when the Romans learned how to make use of the monsoon in navigation, a technique discovered by a sailor named Hippalus at the beginning of the Christian era. This advance reduced the number of intermediate stops that the ships were required to make on their voyage between India and the Middle East. As a result, the price of goods transported along this route dropped sharply. Eastern silks, spices, and luxury goods flooded Europe, while from Europe came metals, dyes, crystal, and drugs.

The Sultanate of Oman, a country with a long maritime history, provided the expedition with the loan of a fully-equipped ship and sufficient fuel for the voyage. An international team, comprised of ninety specialists, crossed by sea the 27,000 kilometers separating Venice from Osaka. The expedition, which lasted from October 1990 to March 1991, stopped in 21 ports in 16 countries.

Some of the results:

- 19 international seminars and colloquia in the course of the expedition
- An international research project, entitled “The Epics of the Silk Roads,” which gathered and preserved oral epic and other semi-literary traditions by means of seminars, publications, work-shops, and local fellowships
- The establishment, at the Academy of Sciences in Northrhine-Westphalia, of an international audio archive for oral traditions, under the auspices of UNESCO

- The creation of "The Chinese Center for the Study of the Maritime Silk Road" in Fuzhu, and "The Buddhist Research and Information Center" in Sri Lanka
- Cooperation between Japanese and Brunei specialists in the study of ceramics and porcelains
- The publication, in the collection UNESCO-Fleurus, of children's books: "Exploration à travers les mers et les océans" (1993/1994) and "Inventions et commerce" (1994)
- The publication of "Les coureurs d'épices" by E. and F.B. Huyghe (J.C. Lattès, Paris, 1995)
- Educational publications for elementary and secondary schools in Sri Lanka and Thailand

Third Expedition – The Steppe Roads Central Asia April 18 – June 18, 1991

In the ancient, Iranian-speaking Sogdian lands (called Transoxania by the Greeks), which were located in the southern steppes of Central Asia and traversed by incessant waves of invading nomads, a succession of empires sprang up.

In about 160 B.C., following the Saka Scythians, the Yüeh-chih or Tokharoi came from the east. Then, in 440 A.D., the Turko-Mongolian Hephtalites invaded, followed in the sixth century by the western Türks. In the seventh century, from the west, came the Arabs of the Omeyad Caliphate. The Omeyads fought against the Chinese T'ang dynasty, ultimately converting the area to Islam. The tenth century Iranian emirate Samanids were overthrown in the next century by another group of Muslims, the Turkish Karakhanids, who themselves soon became vassals of the Turkish empire of the Seljuks. It was during this period that Turkish influence took hold. This profound impregnation by Turkish and Muslim culture was challenged neither by the invasion of the Kara-Kitai, a proto-Mogolian Buddhist group (these were emigrés from the north of China, where they had reigned under the name of the Liao Dynasty) against whom the Khwarizmian shahs fought; nor by the later conquests of Gínggis Khan. Mongolian influence proved to be ephemeral.

On 10 April 1370, the man history knows by the name of Tamerlan (*Timor lang*, which in Persian means "The Lame One") "took the throne, put the golden crown on his head, and himself put on and girded the imperial sash in the presence of princes and emirs who fell to their knees," as the historiographer of Zafer-nameh tells us. Tamerlan, the last great conqueror of the steppes after Attila the Hun and the Mongol Ginggis Khan, was the Turkish founder of the Timurid Empire, whose capital was Samarkand. He remains to this day an object of profound veneration in Uzbekistan.

The expedition "The Steppe Roads" traversed the five republics of the former Soviet Central Asia, stretching from Ashkhabad to Almaty. This expedition was comprised of 46 specialists hailing from 23 countries. Among the cities visited were Merv, Khiva, Bukhara, Termez, Samarkand, Osh, Tashkent, and Bishkek. In Khiva an international seminar was held, entitled "The Importance of Caravansaries and Cities along the Northern Silk Roads." Another was held in Almaty, entitled "The Interrelations between Nomadic and Sedentary Cultures on the Great Silk Roads."

Some of the results:

- The creation, in Samarkand, of an international institute for the study of Central Asia, which opened in August 1995
- An international research project devoted to spatial archaeology: the study of potential sites by tele-detection
- An international research project on the petroglyphs of Central Asia. The creation of an inventory of these works of outdoor art in order to conserve and safeguard them. An international colloquium on "Petroglyphs in Central Asia; Study Methodology of a Cave Art," UNESCO, April 1995
- An international research project entitled "The Study and Preservation of the Caravansaries." Its aim is the restoration and conservation of this cultural legacy in the context of contemporary society
- The launching, in conjunction with the World Tourism Organization, of a program of cultural tourism along The Silk Roads of Central Asia: the restoration of monuments, traditional crafts, promotional films, etc.

- The publication of a book, “Les Empires du mirage”, by E. and F.B. Huyghe (Robert Laffont, 1993)
- A film, “Les Potiers de Samarkand,” co-produced with “Institut du monde arabe,” Paris

Fourth Expedition – The Nomads’ Road Mongolia July 10 – August 5 1992

In the thirteenth century, after uniting all the Mongols, Genghis Khan and his army of horsemen conquered the world’s largest empire. At its height the new empire ruled over all the Silk Roads. From Korea to the Byzantine Empire and on to Hungary, across China, Central Asia, Persia and Russia, the “Pax Mongolica” held sway, based on the rigorous code decreed by the conqueror himself. By unifying all the Turko-Mongolian tribes, Genghis Khan had put an end to the state of perpetual inter-tribal warfare and provided a degree of security to the caravans that had never before been known. In order to control and administer such a vast territory, Khan and his successors needed to create a means of rapid and secure communication. Setting in motion an enormous construction project, they had caravansaries and posting-houses built whose efficiency was praised by contemporary travelers and which allowed both men and ideas to circulate from one end of the Eurasian continent to the other.

In July 1992, led by UNESCO, a contingent of 55 specialists and 28 media representatives set off to retrace the ancient routes leading through the steppes of Mongolia. In a long motorized caravan the expedition traveled some 3,000 kilometers, from the city of Khovd in western Mongolia to its capital in the east, Ulan Bator, known in ancient times as Uрга.

Some of the results:

- An international seminar in Ulan Bator entitled “The Nomads of Central Asia and the Silk Roads”
- The creation of an international research institute on nomadic cultures (currently being finalized in Ulan Bator)

- Excavation of the burial site of Egin Gol (carried out by the Institut du Désert, Paris, and the Mongolian Academy of Sciences)
- An inventory of the petroglyphs of Mongolia
- The establishment of an audio archive and the recording of a CD of religious music
- The publication of a children’s book, in the collection UNESCO/Fleurus, entitled “Cultures et civilizations” (1994)

Fifth Expedition – The Buddhist Road

The expedition “The Buddhist Road” will follow the land route along which Buddhism was propagated, studying the exchanges between Buddhism and other religions in regions as diverse as India, Pakistan, and China. The first stage of this expedition took place in Nepal, from 21-30 September 1995. In Lumbini, the site of Buddha’s birth, an initial international seminar was held, entitled “Lumbini: Site of Buddha’s Birth.” After visiting the principal Buddhist sites in the Lumbini region and the Kathmandu valley, the specialists took part in a second seminar, in Kathmandu, entitled “Buddhism in the Himalayas: Its Spread and its Contemporary Condition.” The second stage of this study is to take place in India, Pakistan, and China, where the expedition will skirt the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert before reaching Dunhuang, then to Lanzhou, Xian and Luoyang.