

3. One Traveler Among Many

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The Silk Road that crosses Mongolia is unique in that it is the most northerly of all, skirting Siberia. Some authors call it the Altai Road, because it crosses the immense Altai mountain range which begins in western Mongolia and whose peaks, snow-covered and icy year round, rise more than five thousand meters above sea level. The official name of this fourth expedition of the Silk Roads project, which took place between 10 July and 5 August 1992, was "The Nomads' Road."

The account given below, although expressing only my personal experience, reflects, I believe, an experience shared by many of my colleagues.

The Mongolian Steppe: A Vast Reservoir of Human Experience

There were eighty of us, scientists and researchers representing almost all the major nations on earth. For a month we traveled together, some 3,000 kilometers in all, bumping along in jeeps and old buses, following roads that crossed streams whose waters rose above our axles and in whose mud our trucks sometimes got stuck. Imagine then this group of people, among whom were several academicians and many university professors, seated together in the steppe or queuing up three times a day to receive a meal from a giant kitchen mounted on trucks charged with feeding us. This spectacle would have been unthinkable only three years before, when Mongolia was a country completely closed to the western world! There was something strange, even amazing and surreal, about seeing this group of Western, Russian, Japanese, Chinese and other scientists seated together on the grass, especially when a group of Mongolian musicians would suddenly

appear and, without further ado, unpack their instruments and begin to play traditional Mongolian music for us.

A Crossroads for Scientific Exchange

Needless to say, there are numerous international scientific congresses, colloquia, and symposia; but there in Mongolia, with all of us – scientists of every stripe – gathered in a single country, we truly manifested UNESCO'S aspiration for the widest possible internationality. All the natural and human sciences were represented: geography, geology, zoology, botany, the spatial sciences; there was also prehistory, history, archaeology, ethnology, and even several very specialized sciences, all of them connected in some way to aspects of traditional Mongolian life. For example, there was an Englishman among us whose specialization was the bow and arrow, from the most ancient times to our day, in particular the Mongolian bow. He vied with the Mongolians not only in theoretical knowledge of the bow and its construction, but in the act of archery itself.

A Program of Study on the Ground

As scientists, almost all of us do our work in the laboratory, library and university office, with occasional trips to do study on the ground. In Mongolia we were able both to work and discuss our work, with the objects of our discussion right in front of us.

I will give several examples of this, the first being the study of petroglyphs. This term describes the wall and cave paintings that are found on the majority of rocks in the mountain ranges located not only in western Mongolia (the renowned Altai mountains) but also in the central and southern regions. The entire western part of the country was visited by us, and we saw dozens and dozens of petroglyphs. Our discussions took place in the company of our Mongolian colleagues and in the presence of these petroglyphs. Seated on piles of rock or in the grass nearby, we would attempt to authenticate our discoveries and determine exactly what they represented, at what period they were created and by whom. Obviously, it is not as

easy to carbon-date petroglyphs as it is wood or objects of bone, such as skeletons. With petroglyphs, dating can only be done indirectly, a fact that proved to be a catalyst for extremely far-reaching and sometimes acrimonious discussion, since points of view seemed to develop more freely here than would have been possible in a university classroom. Also, photographs and film, which are essential for the rapid dissemination of information, were taken. As a result of this activity, studies of the petroglyphs are currently underway in various locations throughout the world.

A second example is the khurgans, those huge tumuluses of stone and earth that served as tombs both for individuals and groups. Although they are found throughout Mongolia, they are also found in Siberia (particularly in the southern areas), in Kazakhstan, in all of Central Asia, and as far west as the Ukraine. Some of these tumuluses date to the Bronze Age, others are more recent. One can date the tumuluses on the basis of their shape, since they vary markedly from period to period: the Scythian, Xiongnu, Turkic and finally the Mongol period, which began in the thirteenth century. These khurgans are scattered throughout the steppe, some of them isolated, others grouped together by the hundreds. We had many opportunities to visit them, to discuss their origin and the results of various earlier expeditions, most of which were carried out by Soviet-Mongolian teams between forty and sixty years ago.

A third example: conference-style discussions, which took place almost every day and on a specific subject. I myself, seated on an immense dune at the edge of a lake – a feature unique to Mongolian deserts – , spoke on the formation of dunes, deserts and steppes. Some of us spoke about local languages, past and present; others about local inhabitants; and still others about nomadism. These discussions, some of which lasted three hours, were initiated by a discussant and everyone was welcome to ask questions in order to enliven the debate.

Some Results of the Expeditions

In my opinion, the key result of the expeditions, both for UNESCO, for the various Silk Roads projects and for the host countries, was

the initiation of several large undertakings, most of them international in nature. Several of these projects were proposed during the final conference in Ulan Bator, others in the months that followed. Now being implemented, these undertakings will be carried out over a long period of time. I will speak of the one I know best: an international archaeological and anthropological study, supported by several countries, whose long-term goal is to gain a better understanding of the origins of the Mongol people. This study is necessary because the origins of the Mongolians, who first became known to history in the thirteenth century during the unification of Mongolia led by Gínggis Khan, remains undetermined. The key to solving this mystery will not be found in the written documents alone, whether we are talking about the Chinese Annals or other written sources. Archaeology and funerary anthropology have a definite role to play. Therefore, beginning in 1994, an archaeological mission was formed, which is now known by the name "Mission archaéologique permanente France-Unesco." This mission, of which I am the director, has already carried out three expeditions in Mongolia.

During the expeditions of the summers of 1994 and 1995, both of which took place in Bulgan province, at the necropolis of Egin Gol ("gol" means river), we were able to locate sixteen skeletons in twenty different tombs. The study of the skeletons found in 1994 revealed that they covered a period lasting more than twenty-six centuries: the oldest dated from the thirteenth century B.C. (this was obtained by radio-carbon dating done at Oxford University), the youngest from the fourteenth century A.D. (this too was obtained by radio-carbon dating at Lyons University). The length of time that this necropolis "functioned," if I dare call it that, as a place for burying the dead is truly astonishing: for instance, it covers a much longer period of time than any necropolis we know of in Egypt's Valley of the Kings. Moreover, these temporal boundaries will only widen as a result of the discoveries made this year and in years to come.

In the spring of 1995 I participated in the Mission's second expedition. This one took place in western Mongolia, in Khvod (Kobdo) province, and was led by experts in the Paleolithic period. We visited seven sites in Khvod alone, four of which had been

inventoried by earlier expeditions, primarily Soviet-Mongol, and three of which we ourselves discovered. Hundreds of hewn stones were brought back to the Mongolian Academy of Sciences where a team of French and Mongolian scientists will make an in-depth study of them. We also opened a tomb, dating from the Bronze Age, whose exact age is currently being determined.

Many of the skeletons that we discovered were not of the Mongolian type; rather they were Europoid, or Caucausoid, as the specialists say. This discovery, which brings up the question of the successive population waves that inhabited Mongolia, is directly tied to our studies. Equally, thanks to recent advances, genetic studies based on certain skeletal fragments should allow us to determine with much greater precision the filiation among the skeletons: is such and such a person related by blood to someone else buried in the same necropolis or in another, in the same period or another? This is a totally new and growing field of scientific study, and one that will surely allow us in the coming decade to gain a much clearer understanding of the origins of the Mongol people. We are also very interested in the Turks and proto-Turks who, from the first centuries of the Christian era up until the arrival of the Mongolians as such, inhabited a large portion of the Mongolian territory. It is important in this regard to determine the exact genetic connections between the proto-Turk and proto-Mongolian peoples, which is a highly controversial subject.

Between ten and twenty Mongolian researchers, most of them members of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, took part in "The Nomads' Road" expedition. Thanks in large measure to the relations that were formed during this expedition, the permanent archaeological mission "France-Unesco en Mongolie" was started. It is my belief that without having shared experiences and having lived together in the steppe we would not have been able to advance beyond cordial but nonetheless distant relations. Having become friends in the steppe we are now very pleased to get together twice a year with our colleagues, both when they come to France and when we go to Mongolia for our annual expedition. We now have permanent offices in Ulan Bator where we can receive our Mongolian colleagues on both a scientific and social

basis. From our side, the offices of our friends at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences have become like a second home to us. These developments have played a crucial role in enriching our research. This is because things are said to us now that would not have been said as recently as 1992 or 1993. Even between scientific colleagues progress is gradual; as confidence grows more things are said and done together. For instance, it was only this year that we were allowed to make a several-day visit to study the cave of Khoit Tsenger, which is something like the Lascaux of Mongolia.

Contacts with the Local Population: Modernity and Tradition

Imagine this: in 1992, on a trail through the steppe, in extreme western Mongolia near the border with Kazakhstan, I took several photographs of a horseman who had a particularly interesting manner. Then, in May 1995, I was in the same region and saw the same horseman again. I photographed him once more. Although we could not speak to each other we exchanged smiles and other signals: I recognized him and he recognized me. Two thousand kilometers from Ulan Bator, and many thousands more kilometers from France, two persons had met again.

We often had contact with the local population. At a minimum we had to meet daily with the local nomads to purchase the unfortunate goat or sheep which was to feed us for the day. In order to obtain it we had to go to one of the nomad's yurts (*ger*), a round, tent-like dwelling which can be taken down in an hour or two and made of a lattice framework covered by large strips of a water-proof felt-like material that keeps the inside warm in winter and cool in summer. It was here that the sale of the goat or sheep would take place. Payment was in dollars. The nomads knew the value of the dollar and knew how its rate was fluctuating in New York or London. Here we had the chance to meet families. One member of our team was a doctor not only of archaeology and anthropology but of medicine; when we came to the yurts he would look after the sick. Although the purchase of the goat was accomplished rapidly, it sometimes took considerably more time

for the medical side of the visit: not only did he visit – and gladly – the sick, but he got news of those whom he had seen last time and would return to look in on them.

It sometimes happened that we were the first persons to open a tomb in a particular region. Mongolian horsemen, whose eyesight is quite acute, would spot us from the mountain tops. For a time they would remain immobile up on a crest, watching us from their horses. Then, suddenly, they would descend at rapid speed and leap to the edge of the tomb. In silence they would watch us from a distance of two or three meters. They would sometimes stand this way for an hour or more, watching as we removed the skeleton. Then they would give spur to their horses and ride away without having asked a single question ... Since they could see that we were here with Mongolians, they were satisfied that our intent was not to pillage the site. Sometimes one of the horseman would ask a question of one our Mongolian colleagues, who would explain exactly what we were doing. They were quite surprised, as this was undoubtedly the first time they had seen such an activity.

There were other striking images. At several places in the steppe we came upon Buddhist temples (it must be kept in mind that Lhamaic Buddhism, which came from Tibet, spread throughout Mongolia in the sixteenth century, and that Buddhist temples dot the steppe). It was quite moving to see, only three years after religious freedom had been granted here, both young and old monks (some of the older ones had hidden out as shepherds during the period when Buddhism was outlawed) engaged in truly impressive and fervent prayer.

In western Mongolia we had been told about a hermit who lived in a very small sanctuary up in the mountains. Several of us climbed up to this hermitage and the first three of our number quietly entered to watch the hermit in prayer. One of them, who spoke Mongolian, said a few words to him. The hermit, without responding, continued his prayer to the end. Then he gestured with his fingers to show that his lips and ears had been sewn shut. We slipped away, realizing that he had probably made a vow never again to express himself except through prayer.

Another memory of mine concerns the large gatherings of nomads that take place in certain villages in the west and center of the country, especially in the Altai. The nomads gather in the steppe on the grass, each one of them smoking a huge pipe some twenty to twenty-five centimeters long. The wealthier ones have their bowls made of silver, the poorer ones handmake their bowls from a bowl-shaped piece of hollow metal. The rich have the shaft made of a rare wood, with the sucking end dressed with a semi-precious metal, often jade, while the poor use a common wood. Everyone smokes, speaking in low voices, in groups formed of juxtaposed circles. It is an unexpected and quite beautiful sight.

The local population was very interested in us. Most of them had never seen Westerners, not to speak of Africans, as was the director of "The Nomads' Road" expedition; indeed it was so strange to them that some of the locals wanted to touch him in order to see if it were "true." They asked us what we were doing and we told them. To have visitors from another country visiting them made the local people very happy. It was like a holiday celebration for them, and they began to sing.

Another striking thing is the very rapid and strong economic development that has taken place in Mongolia over the past three years. The stores, which were poorly stocked in 1992, now have normal supplies of goods. The penury that was visible during the first two years after the change of regime has disappeared. In 1992 and 1993 it was almost impossible to obtain petroleum products; so much so that our 1993 expedition was nearly canceled. Since 1994, however, gas supplies have been plentiful, even deep in the steppe. Although the political changes currently taking place are not as spectacular as those that took place prior to 1990, nonetheless the opening in the economic sphere has made possible the improvement of the traditional trading network between Mongolia and the ex-Soviet Union, and especially with China.

In 1992 many Mongolians made known what was then a quasi-national determination not to work the land. Now, however, one sees in many places hundreds and thousands of acres of land being worked by large farm machinery. These are specialized crops, which can be grown in the three or four months that separate the melting of the winter snow in spring from the next snow-

fall in autumn. Clover, alfalfa, potatoes, barley, and some spring vegetables are the primary crops. These grow fast and one has the impression that a lot is being grown. If agriculture becomes profitable I feel certain that large agricultural concerns – now that the laws regarding agricultural cultivation have been liberalized – will be drawn in and that the harvest will be double what the traditional nomad style of farming produced.

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Our Mission now has offices, matériel, and portable lodging that can be transported across the steppe by truck. In three years we have been able to create the infrastructure for archaeological and anthropological research that the Director General of UNESCO requested of us. Although I believe it will be a decade before definitive results will be produced, in the meantime we have already begun to publish our findings annually. We are and will continue to do this work of information dissemination in three ways: through specialized French journals, in Hungary in Mongol translation, and finally in international journals in English, especially in the United States.