

## New Discoveries on Ancient Silk Road

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An ancient south-north silk road between China and central Asia - from Kashgar in Xinjiang to Bactrian, a part of ancient Persia in central Asia had existed before the westward expedition of Zhang Qian, an envoy sent by Chinese Emperor Wu Di (140 B.C.- 87 B.C.) of the Han Dynasty to the Western Regions 2,100 years ago. This trade route came into existence in the Bronze Age approximately in 1,500 B.C., according to archaeologists. The ancient Silk Road had hitherto been regarded as a trade route running only in the east-west direction, for carrying China's silk cloth to the western countries.

This new discovery was disclosed at an international Silk Road symposium held in Urumqi, capital of northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, in August 1990, sponsored by UNESCO.

The symposium was held after a month-long international Silk Road Expedition by some 100 scientists, archaeologists, historians, ethnologists, geographers, linguists and journalists from 20 countries under the auspices of UNESCO to retrace the footsteps of their ancestors along this ancient road. They came from China, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Pakistan, India, Iraq, Iran, Japan, Mexico, Mongolia, Thailand, Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union.

They departed from Xi'an, the starting point of the Silk Road, and crossed the loess plateau and the Gansu Corridor in motor vehicles, on camels or by horse-drawn carts. They trekked more than 3, 000 miles in the vast desert area and finally arrived in the ancient city of Kashgar (present-day Kashi) at the foot of the Pamirs. Kashgar is regarded as a commercial center on the old Silk Road.

This is the first international expedition permitted by the Chinese government to conduct a survey along the heartland of the ancient Silk Road in Chinese territory. As a Chinese member of the expedition, the writer has learned from on-the-spot investigations and the symposium held in Urumqi that scholars from various countries have made many new discoveries on the ancient Silk Road that linked China with central Asia, west Asia, south Asia, east Asia and even Siberia. Studies of these new discoveries in connection with the archaeological findings of scholars of various countries in their own countries provide new grounds of argument concerning the directions of the Silk Road.

## **SOUTH-NORTH SILK ROAD LEADING TO SIBERIA**

Academician A.A. Askarov of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan said that the Silk Road was an exceedingly ancient trade route. In different periods of history many routes closely connected with the Chinese Silk Road passed or cut deep into the present territory of the Soviet Union. They included the "green metal and stone road," "the jade road," "the Mediterranean Road", "Road on the Steppe" and the "Uighur Road". To the south of Uzbekistan in the northern part of ancient Daxia (Bactrian), Academician A.A. Askarov had earlier excavated an ancient settlement. Among the finds in this settlement were 138 tombs. Scraps of silk clothes were found in 25 tombs. They were made approximately between 1,700 B.C. and 1,500 B.C.

Where did these silks come from? Were they local products or did they come from elsewhere? After long years' studies, Academician A.A. Askarov finally found the solution in the West Gate Tower Museum and Zhouyuan Bronze Museum (Zhouyuan means the Zhou plain at the foot of Mt. Qishan, now Qishan County in Shaanxi Province, northwest China.) It testifies the relationship between China and the Central Asian region in the Bronze Age.

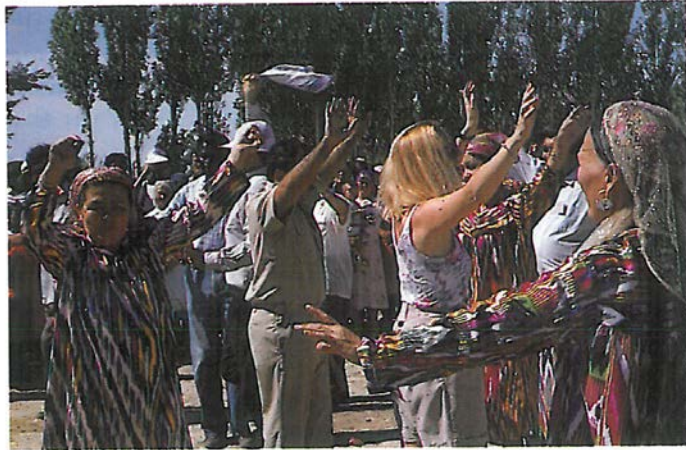


Members of the International Silk Road Expedition arrived in Longxian County, Shaanxi Province, to make a field study in Longshan mountainous area.

Photo by Li Xiguang

Two dark colored vases with high bases from central Asia are stored separately in two museums of Shaanxi Province. They are entirely identical to the find at the site of that settlement in southern Uzbekistan. According to the research of Chinese experts the two vases made between 1,200 B.C. and 1,100 B.C. are also identical to that vase found at the ancient site of Uzbekistan.

"These vases and pieces of silks prove that early before the departure of Zhang Qian, an envoy of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. -A.D. 220) to the Western Regions, ties had already been established between China and west Asia. Such ties began in the Bronze Age. It also testifies to a south-north Silk Road in



Members of the International Silk Road Expedition have a gather-together with local people in the ancient city of Kashgar in Xinjiang, northwest China. Photo by Dai Weiyu

history, that is, a trade route leading from Kashgar to Bactrian." Academician A.A. Askarov said.

With the opening of the south north Silk Road in the Bronze Age, trade and cultural ties between China and southern Siberia became increasingly penetrating and stable. Former soviet archaeologists found Tang Dynasty mirrors, Chinese coins, lacquer ware, Chinese

utensils and ploughshares in the archaeological data between the sixth and tenth centuries. In Tuva and Yenisei area former soviet scholars also discovered that all commodities imported from the Central Plains and Xinjiang of China came through the Altai area in central Asia. "This proves that there were a number of different routes of the Silk Road leading to southern Siberia. One of these routes led from northwest across mountains located in Tes and Yenisei valleys or the great lake region to Xi'an," Eugeni Lubo, Research Fellow of the Winter Palace Museum of Saint-Petersburg in Russia, said.

The former Soviet archaeologist also discovered an ancient route of the Silk Road leading from Siberia to southwest China and northern Viet Nam. In an ancient tomb of the fourth century B.C. in southern Siberia he discovered Chinese bronze mirrors and pieces of colored silk fabrics with rhombus patterns, which are similar to that of the fabrics found in Mawangdui No. I Tomb of the Western Han excavated in Changsha, capital of central south China's Hunan Province.

In another ancient tomb in southern Siberia two cotton shirts of men were discovered. These shirts of cotton cloth were "textiles coming from Shu (present-day Sichuan Province)". According to researchers, all these textiles and colored silks, embroideries and bronze mirrors came from southwest China to southern Siberia along the southwest trade route.

## **NEW DISCOVERIES ON LOULAN, "FAMOUS LOST CITY ON THE SILK ROAD"**

More than 2,000 years ago, there was the Kroraina State (now known as Loulan) in Lake Lop Nur area in Xinjiang. The city was a thriving trading center on the ancient Silk Road. The earliest route west, some believe, ran out of Yumen Pass in the present Gansu Province straight west to Loulan, on the shores of Lake Lop Nur. During the Han Dynasty the

Great Wall extended to Loulan. Then, suddenly, this important city disappeared mysteriously from history in the fourth century and reverted to desert. The secret of Loulan is tantalizing. During this international survey some Chinese and foreign scholars disclosed their latest findings concerning the ruins.

In order to ascertain the race of people of the Kroraina State and the races of ancient inhabitants of other regions in Xinjiang, Chinese scholars studied the morphology of the skulls of 186 ancient corpses unearthed in Lop Nur, middle and eastern Tianshan Mountains, the upper reaches of the Ili River and the Pamirs. They discovered that as early as in the Bronze Age some proto-Caucasoid elements with meso-dolichocrany and low facial features appeared in Lop Nur area. General morphological characteristics of these inhabitants were comparatively close to the human bones in the Bronze Age found in central Asia, Kazakhstan, southern Siberia and even Volga River Valley.

Approximately, in the last few centuries B.C. or earlier, elements of another Dolichoacranial Caucasoid appeared in southwestern Xinjiang. They were similar to Indo-Afghan type of Mediterranean sub-race in the Mediterranean region. Such elements might have possibly entered Lop Nur area from central Asia across the Pamirs and along the southern rim of the Tarim Basin and met aborigines there. This formed the basis of the Kroraina State.

Scholars of the expedition reported that clues about early economic, political and cultural contacts between the Western Regions of China and ancient central Asian countries and Indian Sub-continent were also found at the Kroraina ruins.

An archaeological team led by Professor Nakao Otani of Toyama University in Japan excavated a well-preserved Virna Kadphises bronze coin at the Ranigat Site in Pakistan in 1989. This bronze coin was identical to one of the Kusana Dynasty discovered in 1980 in ancient Kroraina city by a Chinese Loulan Investigation Team. According to Professor Nakao Otani the Virna Kadphises bronze coin found at the Kroraina ruins is a proof of economic contact between the famous Kusana Empire and the Western Regions of China in the early second century.

Judging from the Kroraina ruins so far excavated, this ancient city has clearly discernible traces of regularly arranged streets, good houses and a flood-prevention dam surrounded by trees. Inside the rooms were different sorts of farm tools, and in grain-storing jars were seeds. It looks as if the city was submerged when a sudden disaster came upon it such as the invasion of an alien national and people had no time to flee for life and take away their possessions.

But, based on his own studies of Taklimakan Desert in earth science and ecology, Zhang Qingsong, a scholar in the expedition and associate research fellow of the Institute of Geography of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, believed that the changes of climate and natural environment were the basic factors of the prosperity and decline of the ancient Kroraina State. He pointed out that the thriving period of ancient Kroraina city corresponded precisely to the second cold episode (2,000 - 1,700 years ago) of the neo-glaciation period. At that time the annual average temperature was about two degrees Centigrade lower than today and there was more precipitation and greater glacial expansion. Such natural conditions were favorable to the development of agriculture and human activities in Kroraina. After the second cold episode (approximately 1,600 years ago), the temperature rose drastically and the annual average temperature was two to three degrees Centigrade higher than today. There was less precipitation and large numbers of glaciers melted and this led to severe flood and drought and forced local inhabitants to migrate from Kroraina.

### **RUINS OF MANKIND ON SINO-PAKISTAN ROAD**

The section of Sino-Pakistan Road that winds in the region of Karakorum Mountains has been regarded as "Silk Road" since ancient times. Many ruins of ancient sites have been dug up in this section of the route in recent years.

Professor Hasan Dani, head of the Central Asian Civilization Research Centre of Pakistan, served as Science Director of the Expedition surveying the desert part of the Silk Road. In the past decade an international investigation group led by him discovered many inscriptions carved on rocks in Gilgit area in the Indus River Valley along the Sino-Pakistan Road. What astonished people were inscriptions in Chinese language carved on stone, apart from hundreds in Kharosthi (an early but now dead Indian language once used in Kroraina) of the Kusana Period and Sogdian (an Iranian language of the Sogdians) inscriptions and late Brahmi inscriptions.

These difficult-to-discern rock inscriptions carved in Chinese language consist of one to twelve words. The longest inscription on one tablet reads: "Gu Wei Long, envoy sent to the mysterious Da Wei Kingdom." This shows that the Indus River was also part of the magnificent communication system. Other inscriptions are each composed of one to three Chinese characters most of which can be deciphered as names of men or places. This illustrates that it is a short cut to go from Kashgar across the convergence of Gilgit and the Indus River to Buddhist sacred place. Evidently, the Indus River Valley formerly was the main route that Chinese pilgrims passed through, Professor Dani pointed out.

After crossing the famous Khunjerab Pass that connects China and Pakistan and stands 5,000 m above sea level in the Pamirs, there appears the Chinese section of the Sino-Pakistan Road. Located in this section, Kashgar has always been an important communications and trade center leading from China to central Asia, south Asia and west Asia in the past 2,000 years. However, archaeologists and linguists had been unclear over a long period about what the language ancient Shule State (ancient name of Kashi) used. Lin Meicun, young scholar in the expedition and assistant research fellow of the State Administrative Bureau of Museums and Archaeological Materials, unravel this mystery in history with the help of ancient manuscripts and books in Chinese language discovered at the ruins in Kashgar.

In the summer of 1989, while conducting an archaeological survey at Tumshug Ruins in Kashgar area Lin Meicun discovered that historically this place belonged to the Shule State. Shule was a famous kingdom in the Western Regions between the Han and Tang dynasties (between the second and eighth centuries). So he studied records and fragments written in a mysterious unknown language found at the ruins and all data concerning the Shule State in books on the Chinese language. Many facts convince him there is the greatest possibility that this archaic language written in alphabets of ancient India was the language of people of the ancient Shule State.

### **RELICS ON THE SILK ROAD SPREAD INTO JAPAN AND THAILAND**

Japan was influenced by the Silk Road in diverse ways. Takayasu Higuchi, Director of the Nara Institute of Archaeology in Japan, said: as early as in the late fourth century ornamental plates with designs of dragons and phoenixes appeared in Japanese tombs. Such tombs ought to have been influenced by China.

An ancient tomb of the sixth century was recently discovered in Nara, Japan. There were a corridor-chamber and a sarcophagus in the tomb. Funerary objects in the sarcophagus include a gilt-bronze royal crown decorated with two stylized tree attendants and with small birds and small boats perched on the tips of trees. This crown is very similar to that excavated by a Soviet expedition in northern Afghanistan.

These objects and designs were obviously introduced to Japan through the Silk Road, Takayasu Higuchi said.

The latest relics unearthed at an archaeological site in Thailand verified the following centuries-old hypothesis: as a land bridge Thailand was a route for migration between the continent and Indonesian Archipelago. It was also a link between the Silk Road on land and the maritime Silk Road. Similar prehistoric vessels such as tripods and bronze drums

discovered in China, Thailand, Malay Peninsula and Indonesian Archipelago verified this hypothesis.

Thai scholar S. Tharapang said: A Chinese "Shovel" coin and three Han Dynasty bronze mirrors were discovered in Thailand a short time ago. This shows that as early as in the Han Dynasty there were already the footprints of Chinese people in Thailand. In addition, many Chinese porcelain vessels of the early period, glass ware and glazed pottery vessels of the Middle East were found in two ports of Thailand. This testifies that marine trade between China and Middle East via Thailand – maritime Silk Road - already appeared as early as in the ninth and tenth centuries.