**Research Project**

**Brief Synopsis**

**Project title: Religious Symbolism in the Central Asian Art (III millennium BCE – I millennium CE)**

**Proposed Dates:**

Early September – Middle October 2023 (6 weeks)

**Project Goal:**

I plan to explore the following research question - how symbolic representations relating to various religions and beliefs that flourished in the region during the bronze, iron ages and early mediaeval periods co-existed and even intertwined with each other.

**Project Description:**

Specificity of the region was that not only one, but many religious symbolic representations existed, co-existed and intertwisted. Their range was wide. This plurality of religious beliefs in the “pre-historic” and ancient Central Asia, and dynamics or evolution of their symbolic representations presume their interaction and interrelation. To what extent the symbols of some religious beliefs could be found in other ones? Was this interconnectedness a regular or a unique feature? If this was a regular feature, then what was the logic behind it?

The project proposes that every artistic style can reflect (to varying degrees) elements related to a most diverse multitude of belief systems. For example, several beliefs – solar cult, cults of heaven, ancestors, zoomorphic cults, totemism, and shamanism – could be found in the zoomorphic style. The poli-religious multitude could be found in other styles such as in the Gandharan art, as well.

Therefore, the art of Central Asia will be explored not from a descriptive perspective. Rather, the project will discuss how the codified meaning imbedded in religious symbols shaped the cultural milieu and representations through the plural forms of artistic expressions. The representation of the sacred through images, symbols related to nature and environment, animal/ornithological, floral worlds, gods/goddesses, deities, and ritual practices of many religions acquired various forms and generally reflected the broad cultural milieu marked by intense and fertilizing cross-cultural exchanges. The project is an attempt to outline these symbolic representations.

**Project Methods and Methodology:**

Theoretically, the research question will be discussed applying the semiosis concept of the semiotic approach in culture (Yu. Lotman), and semio-pragmatic concept of R. Odin, taken in relation to religious beliefs and art.

The methods include literature search, content analysis, field research (at the museums’ collections/expositions), semi-structured in-depth interview with French scholars, and thematic analysis based on the interview results.

**Project Tasks:**

The project is two-fold. From analytical perspective it has two aspects: historical and contemporary digital. It is also planned to conduct project in two places: in Paris and Aix Marseille.

In Paris I plan to work in the libraries - BnF, BULAC and of the Musee Guimet – to collect and study materials and work at the ground in the Musees. Project duration in Paris – 4 weeks.

In Aix I will be affiliated with the CGGG, where I would give an open lecture/Talk and have discussions with scholars and specialists regarding the digitalization aspects of the art – Digital Art of Ancient Central Asia as an open knowledge, how it could be further implemented, with partnership with French scholars. Project duration in Aix – 2 weeks.

Therefore, the project tasks will be as the following:

1) To explore the existing research literature (publications, exhibition catalogues, other resources) relating to theoretical approaches, as well as the history of Central Asian (including Afghanistan), Inner Asian art, in the following libraries - BULAC, BnF (Bibliotheque Nationale de France), Library of the Musee Guimet, etc.

2) To research Central Asian, Inner Asian, China collections/exhibitions of the Musee National des Arts Asiatiques - Musee Guimet, Musee Gernuschi, Musee Louvre. The artifacts from these museums’ collections/exhibitions could form a basis for analyzing the above-mentioned concepts.

3) I also plan to have consultations with scholars and experts in the field, to take an in-depth semi-structured interview, and to establish/continue research contacts for future collaborations.

Particularly, I would like to discuss the theme of religious beliefs of the Xiongnu people with Prof. Pierre-Henri Giscard (Directeur Scientifique de l’Institut des déserts et des steppes, Directeur des Missions Archéologiques de l’Institut) who conducted several expeditions in Mongolia; with Prof. Jacque Legrand, specialist on Mongolia and Central Asia (former INALCO Director).

Discussions with Prof. Francis Richard (former Scientific Director of BULAC) will be of a great value for the research, bearing in mind his extensive expertise and deep knowledge on both religious and artistic aspects of culture of Central, South, West Asia.

It will be also an honour for me to discuss the theme of Gandhara art with Prof. Pierre Cambon, Chief Curator of the Afghanistan-Pakistan and Korea sections of the Guimet Museum.

4) To have discussions with scholars and specialists at the Aix CGGG regarding the digitalization aspects of the art – Digital Art of Ancient Central Asia as an open knowledge, how it could be further implemented, with partnership with French scholars. Particularly, this I plan to discuss with Prof. Pascal Taranto, Head of the CGGG who is a renowned specialist in the field of knowledge and digital platforms.

I plan to have discussions with other scholars as well.

The above-mentioned scholars are well renowned maîtres in their respective fields who significantly contributed to the Central, South, Inner Asian, epistemology, open knowledge studies. They should not only be consulted, and their views and approaches should not only be researched and discussed but popularized as well. Therefore, with the scholars’ agreement and permission, I would like to video-record in-depth interviews for further open dissemination on the online platform and YouTube channel, where to attribute the DEA Programme of the FMSH.

On the one hand, this could contribute to popularizing research, particularly, French intellectual tradition and cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, French archaeological missions, as well as the funding institutions. The other aspect is the expanding knowledge on Central Asian art, history, and culture. As a result, a high cumulative effect on cross-cultural links and mutually beneficial knowledge construction could be expected.

5) Within the frameworks of the research, I would like to contribute to the scientific life by giving an open lecture/talk on the proposed research theme.