

Lucette BOULNOIS (1931-2009)

by Sushila Manandhar and Marie Lecomte-Tilouine

Lucette Boulnois, both parents of whom enrolled in the French army, travelled extensively during her childhood and developed a taste for foreign languages at an early age. She later devoted her time to studying Russian and Chinese at the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales*, Paris, where she passed her degree in 1953. She first worked as a librarian at the Documentation Centre on Contemporary China at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* and she entered the CNRS in 1963 as a research engineer. In 1965, she joined the documentation centre at the new “RCP Népal” team (headed by J. Millot), housed at the *Musée de l’Homme*. As Corneille Jest recalls, one of the founding members of this team, “at the time the centre only housed a few books taken from the museum’s main library”. From its inception, Lucette Boulnois therefore supervised the design and organisation of the Centre for Nepalese studies (later: Centre for Himalayan Studies). She managed it remarkably well for nearly thirty years, helping to make it one of the most important centres in the world in this field at the time of her retirement in 1992. Lucette Boulnois not only carefully catalogued all the documentation she was responsible for, but also indexed a whole set of older publications related to Nepal in a near exhaustive manner and identified the places where they were available in France and abroad. This work, the importance of which cannot be stressed enough, has benefited researchers and students using the Centre for Himalayan Studies at the CNRS, in the form of a file (which unfortunately has not yet been computerized as far as the references of publications not owned by the centre are concerned), but also the entire international community, through the publication of *La Bibliographie du Népal*. Organized thematically, the first volume of this bibliography is devoted to the humanities. Published by the *Editions du CNRS* in 1969, it lists all the references related to Nepal in European languages that were published up to 1966. Lucette Boulnois added to this volume in 1977 with a large supplement covering the period 1967-73. In Tome 1 of Volume 3 of the Bibliography of Nepal, published in 1973, Lucette Boulnois provided another valuable tool that is worth mentioning: an index of all the maps of Nepal kept in libraries in both Paris and London. It is worthwhile noting here that Lucette Boulnois’s interest in cartography led her to make an important contribution to our knowledge of the war between Nepal and Tibet (“Chinese maps and prints on the Tibet-Gorkha war of 1788-92”, *Kailash*, 1989, vol.15, No 1/2, p.83-112).

Thanks to her hard work, Lucette Boulnois offered specialists of Nepal a real search engine well ahead of its time, and she organized disciplines by classifying and indexing them using keywords. She pursued this line of work in a more comprehensive way over subsequent years by publishing numerous articles in English on literature related to the Himalayan area and on French research conducted in this region (several of these articles, written by her or in collaboration with others, were published in this journal, see *EBHR* 1981, vol.1, No. 3, p.23-33, 1986, vol.6, No.1, p.51-75, 1992, No. 3, p.23-39, 1992, No. 4, p.22-31, 1996, No. 11, p.77-80).

Lucette Boulnois was not only an outstanding librarian and research assistant, but she also juggled with a remarkable career as a researcher. In her free time, during her holidays and week-ends, but also, as mentioned by Katia Buffetrille, every morning before going to work, she spared some time for her own research. Her first book, *La Route de la soie* (The Silk Road), was published by Arthaud in 1963. Twice reissued, and completely revised in its edition published by Olizane (*La Route de la soie : Dieux, guerriers et marchands*, Genève : Olizane, 2001, 558p), the book has been translated into nine languages (English, German, Spanish, Polish, Hungarian, Portuguese, Italian, Japanese and Chinese). She explained the genesis of this book in an interview to A360: “It is not the revelation of any old travel book that drew me to these regions, but reading Soviet newspapers on a regular basis. Out of family loyalty maybe —with respect to my remote Russian ancestors, and also because they made me read the great writers of the nineteenth century— I had learned Russian at the *Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales*. In the 1950s, I regularly went through the press from the five Soviet Republics of Central Asia; more than literature, reading newspapers gives a vivid picture of countries and their people. I also frequented good Russian bookstores in Paris, including the *Maison du livre étranger*, rue de l’Eperon. One day, carrying a book I wanted to translate, I introduced myself to Sylvain Contou of *Editions Arthaud*. He declined my offer to translate the book, but made another offer: he planned to publish a book on the Silk Road in the series “Signes des temps”. It was an adventurous idea, since the areas in question were closed to foreigners because of the Cold War. The image Westerners had was closer to legend than reality: like children who, when reading Jack London, imagine the great north teeming with trappers, we had an image of these countries similar to *A Thousand and One Nights* ... I myself was drawn to the East and the Far East. Having spent two years in Hanoi, I had been enthralled by the fascination and the dominance of Chinese civilization. I can tell you that I accepted this offer and immediately set to work.”

La route de la soie revealed Soviet and Chinese Central Asia to the French readership, as her friend and colleague, Jacqueline Thevenet recalls.

In 1972, Lucette Boulnois completed a thesis at EPHE in Paris on the trade route between Nepal and China and its socio-economic consequences on Nepal since 1950 (“Les échanges entre le Népal et la Chine et leurs implications socio-économiques au Népal depuis 1950”).

All in all, Lucette Boulnois’s contribution to the study of Tibet has been just as remarkable. Rémi Chaix, who is pursuing certain avenues of research initially explored by Lucette Boulnois, offers this assessment, which underlines their importance and relevance:

“Lucette Boulnois’s contribution to Tibetan studies is characterized by her unique approach to economic facts in the Himalayan world. The quantitative approach to the economic history of this region remains an area totally neglected in Tibetology. The work of L. Boulnois has still not had as much exposure as it deserves, both insofar as the use of the data she so meticulously collected and interpreted and the methodological approach she adopted are concerned. Her research, based on Chinese, Nepalese and Western sources, related to gold powder and silver coins in Tibet (published as *Poudre d’or et monnaies d’argent au Tibet*, Paris, CNRS, 1983) is a call for Tibetologists to pursue their collection and use of data in Tibetan, now punctuated by the brilliant demonstration made by L. Boulnois of the communications networks and exchange of goods, as well as for their production and their uses.”

The list of publications by Lucette Boulnois is available in the catalogue of the documentation centre she created and managed:

<http://www.vjf.cnrs.fr/clt/html/doc/catalogue.htm>.

All members of the team “Milieux, Sociétés et Culture en Himalaya”, with whom she worked for almost 30 years, wish to express their gratitude to her here.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine

Lucette BOULNOIS: A Major Contributor to Oriental Studies and Research

Sushila MANANDHAR (Fischer)
Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies

On 26th July 2009, I lost one of my friends who was the person closest to me at the Research Unit *UPR 299 Milieux, Sociétés et Cultures en Himalaya* within the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research). She was an intelligent lady who lived a strict and disciplined life, with great moral values and courage. She contributed greatly to oriental studies in various ways. She carried out some remarkable research on the history and geography of oriental countries.

She used to work as an *Ingénieur de Recherche* whose role was to help researchers.



Mme. BOULNOIS in her office, 1989 (Courtesy of Prof. Nirmal Tuladhar)

To devote herself fully to her academic activities, she resigned from her post at the CNRS at the end of 1992. Since then she had been concentrating full-time on her research. She pursued her intellectual life till the very end and enjoyed sharing her knowledge either in written form or by expressing her views at conferences.

I was greatly saddened to lose my friend who had been a modest and well-known academic, as well as a disciplined, responsible and courageous

person, always ready to help students and researchers who came to the research unit in search of information.

Her memory, knowledge and dedication were incredible. I doubt whether any (French or foreign) student or researcher could forget her name or her contributions to maps, bibliographies, the history of relationships, commerce, material and technical exchanges, means of transport and communication, East-West link routes, etc. I am in fact one of those researchers and students who benefited from her contributions.

I first met her on 2nd January 1991 when I arrived in her office as an associate member of UPR 299 *Milieux Sociétés et Cultures en Himalaya* and thereafter we became very good friends. Neither the geographical distance nor the barriers of countries' frontiers, nor the age difference became an obstacle to our friendship.

She had a good command of various languages, for instance: she was fluent in Russian and Chinese, she could read and analyse documents written in Latin, English, Italian or German. All those qualities made her an independent or "autonomous" researcher in history and geography. Her publications gained popularity. Her book *La route de la soie (The Silk Road)*, met with a huge success, and she was recognized as a celebrated author in the field of commercial events. *The Silk Road* was published three times in French (1963 Arthaud: Paris/1986 Olizane/1992 Olizane: Geneva), and was translated into nine different languages: German (1964), English (1966), Spanish (1967), Polish (1968), Hungarian (1972), Japanese (1980), Chinese (1982), Italian (1993), Portuguese (1999).

She has left various manuscripts which are in publishable form. I hope that any editors interested in publishing her finished manuscripts, will indeed take the decision to publish them.

Once published, this store of knowledge would benefit many people, while at the same time it would be a lovely way of honoring her contribution. Therefore, I would like to urge all those concerned, her family, her friends and her colleagues, to try to preserve her manuscripts and have them published. I hope that we will thus all be able to pay real tribute to her by our actions, not merely by pronouncing a few words and respecting two minutes' silence.