

HAN DYNASTY'S MAINTENANCE AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE SILK ROAD

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Abstract: After Zhang Qian's expedition to "open up" new routes, the ancient Silk Road gradually developed. In order to safeguard the development of the Silk Road, the Han Dynasty made a series of efforts and implemented various measures. These included military actions to establish border defenses and ensure safety along the route, diplomatic measures to communicate with countries along the way, administrative management to maintain order, and infrastructure development such as road construction. These measures collectively contributed to the prosperity of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty.

Key words: Han Dynasty, Silk Road, routes, Western Regions Protectorate, Great Wall

Introduction: The exploration and development of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty were crucial for the overall construction and advancement of the ancient Silk Road. Zhang Qian's two expeditions to the Western Regions facilitated communication between the Han Dynasty and the countries in the Western Regions, leading to a continuous flow of envoys and merchants on the Silk Road thereafter. During the Han Dynasty, this route was not yet referred to as the Silk Road, and it lacked the scale and technology seen in later periods. It faced security threats and various challenges. In order to safeguard and promote the Silk Road, the Han Dynasty made a series of efforts. The Han Dynasty undertook multiple military actions to repel the Huns, established border defenses, and constructed the Great Wall to ensure safety along the route. Diplomatically, the dynasty actively sent envoys to communicate with countries along the route and even engaged in marriage alliances to maintain friendly relations. The establishment of the Western Regions Protectorate in Wulei City served as an administrative center for managing and ensuring order along the route. Additionally, the Han Dynasty engaged in road construction in certain sections to make the route more convenient and suitable for travel. It was these effective measures that brought prosperity to the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty.

Research Methodology: This paper explores the secrets behind the smooth operation of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty by reviewing Han Dynasty literature and the studies conducted by later scholars. Through scenario analysis and material comparisons, we have conducted a systematic examination and research on how the Han Dynasty maintained and constructed the Silk Road, drawing on a clear and organized presentation of historical documents and scholarly findings.

Analysis and results.

The Silk Road gradually developed after Zhang Qian's groundbreaking expedition, but despite the Han Dynasty using military force to push the Huns northward, the Huns did not face extinction. The Huns persisted, and the threat was not completely eradicated. Moreover, more efforts were needed to ensure the smooth communication of this East-West route. Many scholars often mention Zhang Qian's diplomatic missions and the various measures adopted by the Han Dynasty after his expeditions, contributing to the gradual prosperity of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty. However, most works do not delve into the specific details of these so-called "various measures" taken by the Han Dynasty. Through research, we know that the measures adopted by the Han Dynasty included military actions to address security threats

along the Silk Road, the construction of the Great Wall to safeguard the safety of trade caravans, political governance to ensure order along the Silk Road, the construction of watchtowers and fortifications to provide logistical support, and road construction to facilitate transportation, among many others. It was these measures that led to the flourishing of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty.

1. Military Actions and Border Defense. To ensure the safety of the Silk Road, the Han Dynasty took military actions, including military expeditions against the Huns, repelling potential threats. Simultaneously, a series of border military defense lines and fortresses were established along the Silk Road to ensure the smoothness of the trade routes.

The Han Dynasty and the Huns contended for control over the Hexi Corridor. Yangguan and Yumenguan, crucial passes established during the Western Han Emperor Wu's efforts to resist the Huns, played a pivotal role not only in military defense but also became key points for economic and cultural exchange between the Central Plains and the Western Regions. They served as vital gateways for commercial trade, communication between envoys, and traffic along the Silk Road, earning them the titles of "throat" and "gateway." West of the Han capital Chang'an, the region firmly under Han control extended only to Longxi (modern-day Linxia, Gansu). The Hexi Corridor leading to Yangguan and Yumenguan was of utmost importance. Only by controlling the Hexi Corridor could the Han Dynasty continue westward and establish connections with the various countries in the Western Regions. Therefore, during the Han period, numerous wars were fought between the Han Dynasty and the Huns to vie for control over the Hexi Corridor. The renowned military commanders of the Han Dynasty, Wei Qing (Wei Qing (? - 106 BC), courtesy name Zhongqing, born in Pingyang County, Hedong Commandery, present-day Linfen City, Shanxi Province, was a military strategist during the Western Han period. He was the younger brother of Empress Wei Zifu, the wife of Emperor Wu of Han, and the uncle of the General of Chariots and Cavalry, Huo Qubingⁱ). Wei Qing conducted seven campaigns against the Huns. Huo Qubing (Huo Qubing (140 BC - 117 BC), born in Pingyang County, Hedong Commandery, present-day Linfen City, Shanxi Province,ⁱⁱ was a distinguished military strategist and national hero during the Western Han Dynasty. He was the nephew of Empress Wei Zifu and the General of Chariots and Cavalry, Wei Qing, as well as the half-brother of the General-in-Chief, Huo Guangⁱⁱⁱ) conducted six military campaigns against the Huns. After the opening of the Silk Road, the Huns repeatedly invaded, but were consistently repelled by the Han Dynasty. During the reign of Emperor Xiaowu, there were strategic initiatives against the Huns to prevent them from forming alliances with Western regions and southern Qiang tribes. This led to the establishment of four commanderies along the Yellow River, the opening of Yumen Pass, and the connection with the Western Regions. These measures served to sever the right arm of the Huns, isolating them from the southern Qiang and Yuezhi tribes. As a result, the Chanyu lost support and retreated far away, leaving the southern territories without a ruling court^{iv}. In the fourth year of Emperor Wu's Zhenghe era (89 BC), Han forces, led by General Kaolinghou, defeated the states of Loulan, Wuli, and Weixu, and subdued Cheshi.^v In the second year of Emperor Xuan's Dijie era (68 BC), Han dispatched Zheng Ji and Sima Xi to lead an army of over ten thousand men, along with fifteen hundred tenant farmers, to jointly attack Cheshi and capture Jiaohe City, achieving victory^{vi}. Through these repeated military campaigns, the Han Dynasty gradually gained control over the Western Regions.

At that time, northern nomadic tribes were moving southward, and the Great Wall played a crucial role in obstructing the nomadic cavalry. During the Han Dynasty, north of the Great Wall was the Shule River, effectively forming a defensive system with a protective moat and a segment of the Great Wall, safeguarding the territories of the Central Plains within the Great

Wall. From Dunhuang westward, the ancient Silk Road generally followed along the southern side of the Great Wall. Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty undertook two expansions of the Great Wall. In 102 BC, he extended the Qin Great Wall from Lingju (present-day Yongdeng County, Gansu) westward to Dunhuang. Additionally, to the west of Dunhuang, he constructed Yumen Pass as a key northwestern defense gateway, thereby extending the Han Great Wall "from Dunhuang to Liaodong, covering a distance of over 15,000 li." The Han Great Wall, together with the peripheral watchtowers, garrisoned towns, and signal beacons, mutually reinforced each other, making the northwestern defense line even more robust.

Diplomatic Means. During the Han Dynasty, diplomatic efforts were employed to establish friendly relations with the Western Regions. By sending envoys and entering into treaties, the Han Dynasty encouraged the support and protection of the Silk Road by the Western Region countries. The initiative of sending envoys to the Western Regions, starting with Zhang Qian, was a proactive measure taken by the Western Han to facilitate communication and interaction with the Western Regions. "From Marquis Bo of Bowang opening foreign roads to transmit treasures, thereafter, officials and soldiers all competed to submit memorials discussing the strange advantages and disadvantages of foreign lands, requesting missions."^{vii} Starting with Zhang Qian, the number of officials requesting to go on diplomatic missions gradually increased. To further advance relations with the Western Region countries, emperors of the Han Dynasty dispatched numerous officials on diplomatic missions, leading to various-sized delegations with "several hundred to over a hundred people" meeting along the way. These diplomatic missions engaged in foreign affairs and trade activities during their journey. "The Han would send missions numerous times in a year, with larger ones having over ten, smaller ones around five or six delegations. Some would spend eight or nine years on the journey, while others returned after a few years of playful activities."^{viii} Over the course of several years, even more than a decade, these Han envoys became intermediaries for communication between the Han Dynasty and the countries along the Silk Road, establishing positive diplomatic relations and stable trade interactions. The Han Dynasty also engaged in marital alliances with Western Region countries. "The Wusun people sent a thousand horses as a gift to marry a Han princess. The Han sent a princess from the imperial family, Jiangdu Weng Princess, to marry the Wusun, and the Wusun king Kunmo regarded her as the Right Queen."^{ix} Even in the Eastern Han period, prominent generals like Liang Ji, who held high positions, "sent emissaries beyond the frontier, engaging with foreign countries, and extensively seeking exotic goods."^x The flourishing scene is depicted in the "Book of the Later Han, Volume 88, "Record of the Western Regions": "Orders to expedite the travel of couriers were incessant, month after month, and merchants and envoys gathered under the borders."^{xi}

Establishment of Administrative Institutions: During the Han Dynasty, specialized administrative institutions were established to oversee the operation and maintenance of the Silk Road. For instance, frontier governance institutions like Jiuquan Commandery, Wuwei Commandery, Zhangye Commandery, and Dunhuang Commandery were established in the Western Regions to more effectively manage and control the transportation and trade activities along the Silk Road. Even before the formal establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions, the Western Han had already begun supervising the Western Region countries along the Southern Route and coordinating joint military actions with them. In the second year of the Yuan Shi era (121 BCE), "Han Xing continued until the time of Xiao Wu, launching campaigns against the four barbarians, expanding prestige and virtue, and Zhang Qian began to open the way to the Western Regions. Following this, General of the Chariots and Cavalry defeated the right territory of the Huns, surrendering the Huns, and consequently, the land was emptied. The construction began west of Lingju (modern-day Yongdeng County, Gansu), initially

establishing Jiuquan Commandery, and later gradually moving people to populate it, subsequently establishing Wuwei, Zhangye, and Dunhuang, forming the four commanderies, and occupying both passes."^{xii} During the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, the Han Dynasty had already established the four commanderies of Jiuquan, Dunhuang, Wuwei, and Zhangye in the Hexi Corridor. These commanderies were crucial strongholds along the Han Dynasty's route to the Western Regions. In the third year of the Shenjue era (59 BCE), the central government of the Western Han established the Protectorate of the Western Regions in Wulei City in the Western Regions and appointed Zheng Ji as its first Protector-General. According to the "Shi Ji, Table of Officials and Nobility," it states, "The Protectorate of the Western Regions was newly established by Emperor Xuan in the second year of the Shenjue era (68 BCE). The Qijia Shangjun (Cavalry Captain) and Adviser Grand Master were dispatched to guard and oversee the thirty-six countries in the Western Regions, with a Deputy Colonel, a Chancellor, and a Thousand-man Commander, each of them two in number."^{xiii} The Protectorate of the Western Regions, directly governed by the central government of the Western Han, had the Protector-General appointed directly by the central government and generally served a term of three years. The Protector-General represented the central government in overseeing the Western Region countries under Western Han control, marking the beginning of "Han's commands reaching into the Western Regions." As the highest military and political official of the Protectorate of the Western Regions and the representative of the central government of the Western Han in the Western Regions, the Protector-General had the authority to manage, conquer, deploy troops, pacify, supervise, and exercise other powers over the Western Region cities and countries belonging to Western Han, with the Protector-General "pacifying and controlling the various countries, punishing and suppressing those who harbor rebellious intent." During the reign of Emperor Yuan, in the initial years (48 BCE), the Han Dynasty established the Wujicao Captain to assist the Protector-General in strengthening the administration of the Western Regions. According to the "Shi Ji, Table of Officials and Nobility," it states, "The Wujicao Captain, established during the initial years of Emperor Yuan, with a Deputy, a Chancellor, each one person, and five Marquises, with a salary equivalent to six hundred shi."^{xiv} The establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions led to the integration of the 36 countries in the Western Regions into the Han Dynasty, making the extensive region east and south of Lake Balkhash an inseparable part of Chinese territory.

Han Dynasty and the Construction of the Silk Road: After incorporating the Western Regions into the central government's control, the Western Han Dynasty brought the various countries in the Western Regions under its jurisdiction. Following Zhang Qian's pioneering journey to the Western Regions, the Han Dynasty, to ensure the smooth passage of the routes, constructed numerous beacon towers and checkpoints from Dunhuang to Yanzhe (modern-day Lop Nur) to prevent the southern invasion of the Huns. According to the "Shi Ji, Biography of Dayuan," in 111 BCE (sixth year of Yuanding), Emperor Wu of Han ordered Zhao Pono, a Marquis, to decisively defeat the Huns, and added the commanderies of Zhangye and Dunhuang to the Hexi Corridor. "Thus, the Jiuquan beacon towers extended to Yumeng." According to the "History of the Former Han, Biography of Zhang Qian," in 108 BCE (third year of Yuanfeng), Emperor Wu of Han ordered Zhao Pono and Wang Hui to "defeat the Gushi and capture the king of Loulan. The Jiuquan beacon towers extended to Yumeng." These so-called beacon towers not only served as navigation points for merchants and travelers along the way but also provided logistical support, making them advantageous logistics facilities on the Silk Road. In 101 BCE (fourth year of Taichu), after General Li Guangli led an expedition against Dayuan, Emperor Wu of Han constructed the Great Wall from Dunhuang to Yanzhe (also known as "Puchang Hai" in today's Lop Nur). The "Shi Ji, Biography of Dayuan" states,

"Dunhuang established a Jiuquan Commandant; westward to Yanshui, there were often beacon towers." The Western Han government built roads, relay stations, beacon towers, and other facilities within its territory to facilitate the transmission of central government decrees and strengthen communication between the central and local governments. This provided significant convenience for envoys and merchants traveling between the Western Han interior and the Western Regions, ensuring the safety and smoothness of the overland Silk Road within Chinese territory during the early Han period.

In order to facilitate commercial trade, the Han Dynasty constructed a series of roads connected to the Silk Road. The construction of these roads improved transportation conditions and strengthened the connection between the East and the West. During the periods of the Western and Eastern Han, the construction of roads followed certain standards and requirements, especially for the high standards of the constructed postal roads, as recorded in "Shi Ji" and "History of the Han Dynasty." Archaeologists, exploring the ancient city site of Liyang in northeast Lin Tong County, Shaanxi Province along the Silk Road, conducted surveys and identified a total of 13 roads, including six built during the Qin and Han dynasties and seven during the Han Dynasty.

The road remnants within the ancient city exhibited an arc-shaped profile, with a height difference of 20 to 30 centimeters between the road center and its two sides^{xv}. During the reign of Emperor Xiao Wen of the Western Han Dynasty, discussions on governing and maintaining order led to a desire to draw lessons from the experience of the Qin Dynasty. Jia Shan suggested to Emperor Wen of Han that the standard for building imperial roads should be "50 paces wide, with trees planted every three zhang, with a thick construction on the outside, hidden by golden stakes, and planted with green pines. This makes the imperial road magnificent to the point that those who come afterward cannot deviate from it or find shortcuts"^{xvi}. The standard proposed by Jia Shan should be regarded as the standard for the early Han Dynasty in building imperial roads. "San Fu Yellow Map" states: "Han law: if a vassal state has its own regulations for constructing roads, it can build side roads, but it is not allowed to build a central road within three zhang. If this is not complied with, it will be confiscated, including its vehicles and horses. This follows the Qin regulations." Although these constructions may not have connected the entire Silk Road at that time, Han Dynasty's actions had a positive effect on ensuring the smoothness of the Silk Road under the prevailing conditions.

Discussion.

The effectiveness of the Han Dynasty's maintenance of the Silk Road can be attributed to the comprehensive strengthening of its political, economic, and military capabilities. Faced with repeated threats from the Huns, the Han Dynasty recognized that any resurgence of Huns control over the Hexi Corridor or the Western Regions would lead to the interruption of the Silk Road. In response, the Han Dynasty mobilized its full strength to concentrate on countering the Huns, showcasing both political stability and the ruler's capabilities. The military victories during these campaigns demonstrated the formidable military strength of the Han Dynasty. The ability to secure triumphs in military operations validated the prowess of the Han military forces. The proactive stance of the Han Dynasty in dominating Silk Road trade aligned with historical trends and the desires of the people. It also underscored the wealth, economic prowess, and developmental capabilities of the Han Dynasty, meeting the needs of merchants and earning the admiration of the various Western Regions, thereby fostering a cohesive relationship.

The Han Dynasty implemented various measures, encompassing military, political,

economic, and cultural aspects, forming a cohesive strategy. Through multiple military campaigns, the Han Dynasty repelled the Huns, eliminating external threats. They established border defenses, constructed the Great Wall to ensure safety along the route, and actively pursued diplomatic initiatives by sending envoys to communicate with nations along the Silk Road. The Han Dynasty even engaged in diplomatic marriages to maintain friendly relations, providing a favorable external environment for the development of the Silk Road. The administrative management of the Western Regions was facilitated by the establishment of the Western Regions Protectorate in Wulei City by the Han Dynasty. This administrative center worked to maintain order and safeguard the route. The construction of roads in certain sections enhanced convenience and suitability for travel, creating a favorable internal environment for the development of the Silk Road. The combination of external security and internal stability contributed to the prosperity of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty.

The secret to the flourishing Silk Road during the Han Dynasty lies in the inherent necessity for exchange and communication between different production modes. This interaction addresses the inevitable demands arising from differences in production methods, aligns with the natural trend of human development, and satisfies the diverse needs of people's lives. The actions of the Han Dynasty were in harmony with historical demands and the aspirations of the people, igniting initiative and great enthusiasm among the populace. The opening and maintenance of the Silk Road became highly popular when people eagerly sought communication. As a result, the actions of the Han Dynasty garnered support and assistance from both the people of the Han Dynasty and the various nations along the Silk Road.

Conclusion. Surveying the entire development of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty, starting from Zhang Qian's pioneering expedition to the Western Regions, which "opened up a passage," the Han Dynasty consistently implemented a series of measures in politics, military affairs, and economic development. These actions ensured the smooth operation of the Silk Road, expanded its routes outward, gradually increased its scale, and transformed it into a crucial channel influencing not only the Han Dynasty but also the subsequent exchanges and developments between the East and West. The measures taken by the Han Dynasty were the efforts of a dynasty's rulers to maintain order, expand territory, and develop the economy. These efforts, coincidentally, aligned with the historical trends and met the needs of the people, resulting in significant positive effects.

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