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The Management of the Silk Road by the Han Court as Revealed in Excavated Manuscripts

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Abstract

To ensure the unimpeded operation of the Silk Road and facilitate East-West trade, the Han Court adopted different measures along the various sections of the Silk Road. In the eastern section, from Chang'an to Dunhuang, a network of courier stations was established along a largely set route to serve as resting points. In the Northern and Southern routes of the Western Regions, the Protectorate of the Western Regions was established; troops were stationed and agricultural colonies were established in Yixun in the south and Cheshi in the north. This ensured that each station would be able to fulfill its role as resting point for Sino-Western trade in a relatively stable environment. West of the Pamir Mountains, exchanges with Central Asia were strengthened, gradually pushing the western end of the Silk Road farther westward and southward, laying the foundation for its eventual extension to the Mediterranean coast. Without these resting points, and without the court's guarantee of security and supplies along the route, it would have been impossible for the Silk Road to operate normally. Consequently, the notion of the Silk Road as an unfixed, nebulous "network" is called into question. From its inception, the Silk Road was a direct product of the interaction between the Chinese civilization and the Western world (the Hellenistic world of Central Asia). The clearest evidence of this is found in Han dynasty slips that document direct diplomatic exchanges between the Han Court and various countries in Central, West, and South Asia. Notions that Silk Road trade was merely a short journey from

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one oasis to another, and that "only few people traveled from Samarkand across Central Asia to reach Chang'an," are unsustainable.

Keywords

excavated Han dynasty slips – Silk Road – civilizational exchange – ancient Central Asia – history and geography of northwest China

Since the early 20th century, numerous bamboo and wooden slips from the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Jin (265–420) dynasties have been excavated in Gansu and Xinjiang in Western China. These slips are almost all original records of the Silk Road and are of great significance for our understanding of the Silk Road route at that time, of the regions and countries along the route, as well as of the relationship between the Central Plains dynasties and ancient countries in Central Asia, West Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. An examination of the route of the Silk Road during the Han dynasty based on traditional documents and these wooden slips reveals that the Han Court, with its strong and far-reaching national power, adopted different measures for different sections of the route, so as to ensure the smooth and prosperous operation of the Silk Road and contribute to the progress of human civilization and society.

1 The Route and Stops of the Eastern Section of the Silk Road

The eastern section of the Silk Road, from Chang'an 長安 to Dunhuang 敦煌, is known as the Qin-Long 秦隴 section or the Shaanxi-Gansu section. Scholars generally believe that from Chang'an to Dunhuang, with the Yellow River as boundary, the east and west banks belonged to two distinct geographical areas. The Western Corridor is flanked by mountains on either side, and so the East-West road could only extend in one direction. But the Eastern Plateau was different: with its high mountains and deep rivers, and treacherous roads, the landscape would force people to choose different routes over different periods of time.

The most convenient route was the northern route, starting from Chang'an, going upstream along the Jing River 涇水, passing through the Longshan Mountains 隴山, Guyuan 固原, and Haiyuan 海原, crossing the Yellow River north of Jingyuan County 靖遠縣, and then reaching Wuwei 武威 via Jingtai 景泰. In the

1980s, Yan Gengwang 嚴耕望 made a detailed reconstruction of the northern and southern routes from Chang'an to Liangzhou 涼州 during the Tang dynasty (618–907):[1] the Tang dynasty essentially took over routes used during the Han dynasty. Yan's contemporary, Xian Xiaowei 鮮肖威, who studied the Silk Road in Gansu during the Han dynasty, also believed that the northern route was the most convenient choice during that period.[2] This indicates that, at least during the flourishing of the Silk Road in the Han and Tang dynasties, the northern route was the main artery from Chang'an to Dunhuang. This is substantiated by excavated Han dynasty slips. Two mileage records unearthed in 1974 at the Jiaqu Houguan 甲渠候官 site in Juyan 居延 and in 1990 at the Xuanquan Postal Station 懸泉置 site, respectively, when connected, record the mileage of the post stations from Chang'an to Dunhuang.[3] Based on the information on these Xuanquan Han mileage slips, we have designated the recorded routes as the Jingji 京畿 (Capital Region) section, the Anding 安定 Commandery section, the Wuwei section, the Zhangye 張掖 section, the Jiuquan 酒泉 section, and the Dunhuang section. The Jingji section of the Han slips records five locations: Chang'an, Maoling 茂陵, Cizhi 茨置, Haozhi 好止, and Yizhi 義置. This route essentially starts from Chang'an, passes through Maoling (now in Xingping 興平 County), then through Qianxian 乾縣, Yongshou 永壽, and Binxian 彬縣 counties into the Jing River basin, and then through Changwu 長武 into Jingchuan 涇川 and Pingliang 平涼 in eastern Gansu. This corresponds to the northern route from Chang'an to Wuwei during the Han and Tang dynasties, as described by Yan Gengwang and Xian Xiaowei. It is particularly noteworthy that these mileage slips primarily record post stations and towns (county towns), which functioned as nodes equipped with essential provisions and logistical support, rather than ordinary place names.

1 See Yan Gengwang 嚴耕望, *Tangdai jiaotong tukao* 唐代交通圖考 (Taipei: "Zhongyang yanjiu yuan" lishi yuyan yanjiu suo, 1985), 2: 416, 419.

2 See Xian Xiaowei 鮮肖威, "Gansu jingnei de sichou zhi lu" 甘肅境內的絲綢之路, *Lanzhou daxue xuebao* 蘭州大學學報, no. 2 (1980): 14–21; Xian Xiaowei 鮮肖威, "'Liangguan yi dong de sichou zhi lu' yi wen jiujing shangque le shenme? da Wu Rengxiang tongzhi" "兩關以東的絲綢之路" 一文究竟商榷了什麼？—答吳礽驤同志, *Lanzhou daxue xuebao* 蘭州大學學報, no. 2 (1981): 96–98; Xian Xiaowei 鮮肖威, "Tang Wulan xian he zai? jianlun Dunhuang yi dong sichou zhi lu" 唐烏蘭縣何在？—兼論敦煌以東絲綢之路, *Lanzhou xuekan* 蘭州學刊, no. 4 (1982): 39–41.

3 For the transcription, see Hu Pingsheng 胡平生 and Zhang Defang 張德芳, ed., *Dunhuang Xuanquan Hanjian shicui* 敦煌懸泉漢簡釋粹 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001), 56.

> These six routes, from Bin County in Shaanxi to Jingchuan in Gansu [nearly 90 kilometers] and from Guyuan in Ningxia to Jingtai in Gansu [200 kilometers], are partially interrupted due to the fragmentation of the slips, but the rest are connected. There are 35 stations in the four prefectures of Hexi, and 10 stations recorded in Anding and the capital region. Along the stretch from present-day Xi'an 西安 to Dunhuang, which is a distance of almost 2000 kilometers excluding the two aforementioned blank 300-kilometer sections, the remaining 1700 kilometers have 45 stops, with an average distance of about 38 kilometers between them. This is the clear and specific route of the eastern section of the Silk Road revealed by the Han slips.[4]

Our study of the Silk Road routes during the Han dynasty through the records on Han slips aims to demonstrate that the Silk Road during the Han dynasty had a fixed route, provided stations along the way equipped with the necessary support facilities, and received state protection and government support. Under the transportation conditions of the time, the entire route was dotted with places to rest and feed, with lodgings and supplies, including food for horses. Without these basic provisions, long-distance travel would have been impossible. Therefore, claims that the Silk Road had no set "route" but rather a "network of unmarked routes" is inaccurate.[5]

The Xuanquan Postal Station site is the largest, best-preserved, and most productive ancient postal relay station site excavated to date, boasting the most artifacts and largest amount of content in Han dynasty slips. According to the Xuanquan Slips, the station normally had a staff of thirty-seven people, forty horses, and over ten carriages.[6] There were nine such postal relay stations within a 300-kilometer radius of Dunhuang Commandery at the time, as clearly recorded in the Xuanquan Slips.[7] As mentioned above, 45 similar stopping points can be confirmed from Chang'an to the Dunhuang border. This defensive line extending all the way to the border demonstrates the high degree

4 Zhang Defang 張德芳, "Xibei Hanjian zhong de sichou zhi lu" 西北漢簡中的絲綢之路, *Zhongyuan wenhua yanjiu* 中原文化研究, no. 5 (2014): 26–35.

5 Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 22–25.

6 See Zhang Defang 張德芳, "Xuanquan Hanjian zhong de 'Xuanquan zhi'" 懸泉漢簡中的"懸泉置", in *Jianbo yanjiu 2006* 簡帛研究二〇〇六, ed. Bu Xianqun 卜憲群 and Yang Zhenhong 楊振紅 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008), 169–82.

7 Xuanquan Han Slip II 90DXT0II53:80 says: "The [Dunhuang] prefecture was located on a major transportation route to the Western Regions, and nine postal relay stations were set up." Gansu jiandu bowuguan 甘肅簡牘博物館 et al., ed., *Xuanquan Hanjian* 懸泉漢簡 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2024), 4: 73.

of political unity and comprehensive national strength of the Han Empire at that time, which ensured the smooth running of the Silk Road.

Besides the northern route, there was also a southern route, which started from Chang'an, traveled west along the Wei River 渭河, passing through present-day Xingping, Wugong 武功, Meixian 眉縣, and Baoji 寶雞, then northwest along the Qian River 汧水, passing through Qianyang 千陽, Longxian 隴縣, Tongwei 通渭, Dingxi 定西, and Lanzhou 蘭州. West of Lanzhou, it crossed the Yellow River, followed the Zhuanglang River 莊浪河 through Yongdeng 永登, crossed the Wushaoling Mountains 烏鞘嶺, and reached Wuwei. An early mention of this route was made already in Joseph Needham's 1954 publication, *Science and Civilisation in China*.[8] Li Bingcheng 李並成 used Han dynasty slips to conduct detailed research on the Southern route and carry out extensive field investigations, confirming its existence.[9] Some other scholars' research also confirms the existence of this route, with only minor disagreements regarding the river crossing points and the route into the Wushaoling Mountains.[10] One Han dynasty slip records the distances from Xuanquan to four locations: Yunwu 允吾 County in Jincheng 金城 Commandery, Pingxiang 平襄 County in Tianshui 天水 Commandery, the Regional Inspector's (*cishi* 刺史) residence, and Chang'an,[11] confirming the accessibility of this route across the Wushaoling Mountains. However, Jincheng Commandery was established in the sixth year of Emperor Zhao's 漢昭帝 reign (r. 87–74 BCE), and the Regional Inspector's fixed residence did not exist until the reign of Emperor Yuan 漢元帝 (r. 48–33 BCE). Therefore, this route likely did not fully become operational until the end of the Western Han dynasty (202–8 BCE). Once opened, however, it remained in use for a very long time. Yan Gengwang's meticulous research on this route shows that, by the Tang period, it had become, like the northern route, a major artery from Chang'an to Dunhuang, a status it maintained for over a thousand years. Only these routes, which gradually became fixed and

8 Li Yuese 李約瑟 [Joseph Needham], *Zhongguo kexue jishu shi* 中國科學技術史, trans. *Zhongguo kexue jishu shi* fanyi xiaozu《中國科學技術史》翻譯小組 (Beijing: Kexue chu ban she, 1975), 1.1: 122.

9 See Li Bingcheng 李並成, "Handai Hexi zoulang dongduan jiaotong luxian kao" 漢代河西走廊東段交通路線考, *Dunhuang xue jikan* 敦煌學輯刊, no. 1 (2011): 58–65.

10 See Xian Xiaowei, "Gansu jingnei de sichou zhi lu"; Wu Rengxiang 吳礽驤, "Liangguan yi dong de 'sichou zhi lu': jian yu Xian Xiaowei xiansheng shangque" 兩關以東的"絲綢之路"—兼與鮮肖威先生商榷, *Lanzhou daxue xuebao* 蘭州大學學報, no. 4 (1980): 44–52; Yang Jianxin 楊建新, "Sichou zhi lu dongduan shulüe" 絲綢之路東段述略, *Xibei shidi* 西北史地, no. 1 (1981): 19–20; Qi Chenjun 齊陳駿, "Silu kaocha jilüe" 絲路考察紀略, *Lanzhou daxue xuebao* 蘭州大學學報, no. 4 (1982): 37–47.

11 See Hu Pingsheng and Zhang Defang, *Dunhuang Xuanquan Hanjian shicui*, 59.

were supported by protective and logistical facilities along the way, truly show the smooth and prosperous functioning of the Silk Road during the Han and Tang dynasties.

The above discussion of the two routes from Chang'an to Dunhuang during the Han dynasty aims to illustrate that after Zhang Qian's 張騫 (164–114 BCE) mission to the Western Regions, the Han dynasty achieved, through a series of strategic westward measures, unprecedented heights in its relations and exchanges with the various countries of the Western Regions. Transportation between east and west also essentially followed fixed routes supported by corresponding logistical and protective measures. Of course, this does not exclude short-distance exchanges between various oases, whether east-west or north-south, but even so it cannot be concluded that the Silk Road was not a "road" but a network of free movement along criss-crossing paths.

2 The Han Dynasty's Administration and Management of the Central Section of the Silk Road: the Southern and Northern Routes of the Western Regions

The middle section of the Silk Road encompassed the regions north and south of the Tianshan Mountains, while in the Han period the term "Western Regions" in the narrower sense generally referred to the regions south of the Tianshan 天山 Mountains. The commonly used routes at that time were along the southern and northern edges of the Tarim Basin, the southern and northern routes described in the "Xiyu zhuan" 西域傳 chapter of the *Hanshu* 漢書. The grassland route north of the Tianshan Mountains only became accessible after the opening of a new northern route in the late Western Han period through early Eastern Han (25–220). Although the region north of the Tianshan Mountains was flat and lush with water and grass, much of it was still the territory of the nomadic Wusun 烏孫 people; throughout the Western Han dynasty, even exchanges between the Han and the Wusun had to pass south of the Tianshan Mountains and then turn towards Lake Issyk-Kul (Khotan Pool). This was because the nomadic areas north of the Tianshan Mountains lacked fixed stations such as settled agricultural areas, making long-distance travel impossible.

The "Xiyu zhuan" chapter states:

> The Western Regions began to have regular contact with the Central Plains during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝. They originally consisted of thirty-six states, which later gradually divided into more than fifty, all situated west of the Xiongnu 匈奴 people's territory and south of the Wusun people's territory.[12]

Besides the varying levels of detail in traditional texts such as the *Shiji* 史記 and the *Hanshu*, Han slips record 23 of these 36 kingdoms. These were mostly oasis city-states situated along the northern and southern routes of the Western Regions, playing a crucial role along the Silk Road during the Han dynasty.

First, let us look at the southern route of the Western Regions. The "Xiyu zhuan" chapter states:

> From Shanshan 鄯善, following the northern side of the southern mountains and traveling west along the Tarim River to Shache 莎車 constitutes the Southern Route. From the southern route, crossing the Congling 蔥嶺 westward leads to Dayuezhi 大月氏 and Anxi 安息.[13]

The Xuanquan Han Slips record ten kingdoms along the southern route of the Western Regions: Shanshan (Loulan 樓蘭), Qiemo 且末, Xiaowan 小宛, Jingjue 精絕, Yumi 扜彌, Yutian 于闐, Qule 渠勒, Pishan 皮山, Shache, and Puli 蒲犁. Especially after the establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions (*Xiyu duhu fu* 西域都護府) in 60 BCE, these kingdoms, as local governments under the Protectorate, were obligated by the Court to provide protection for envoys passing through. They were not only the main body of east-west exchanges on the Silk Road, but also safe stops for travelers in transit.

In the later Western Han period, the most important safeguarding measure for the southern route of the Western Regions was the establishment of agricultural garrisons (*tuntian* 屯田) at Yixun 伊循. The "Xiyu zhuan" chapter records that, in the fourth year of the Yuanfeng 元鳳 reign (80–75 BCE), the Han Court dispatched Fu Jiezi 傅介子 (d. 65 BCE) to assassinate the King of Loulan:

> Thereupon, Wei Tuqi 尉屠耆 was established as king, and the kingdom was renamed Shanshan. The king petitioned the Emperor, saying, "I have

12 *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 3871.
13 Ibid., 3872.

> resided with the Han for a long time, and now I return, weak and vulnerable. The former king still has a son, and I fear I may be killed by him. There is a city called Yixun within my kingdom, its land is fertile. I wish the Han might dispatch a general to cultivate the grain, so that I may rely on his authority and prestige." Therefore, the Han sent one Military Commander [*sima* 司馬] and forty soldiers to cultivate Yixun, so as to provide protection and peace. Later, the position was changed to Commandant in Chief [*duwei* 都尉].[14]

As to the Yixun military settlements, historical records only offer limited information about them. However, the Xuanquan Han Slips provide a wealth of material, allowing us to see the scale of the Yixun military settlement system from the rank of *sima* to that of *duwei*, as well as its subordination to the Governor (*taishou* 太守) of Dunhuang. For example, the Xuanquan Han Slips I90DXT0111②:73 and II90DXT0216③:111 both mention the "Dunhuang Yixun Duwei"; the fact that "Dunhuang" precedes "Yixun Duwei" indicates that the Commandant was under the jurisdiction of the Dunhuang Governor and had close administrative ties with the four commanderies of Hexi. Slip V92DXT1312③:44 is a record of documents sent by the Dunhuang Governor's office to its subordinate agencies, and includes the "Yixun City Duwei."

Evidently, the Yixun military settlement was not only a response to the request made by King Wei Tuqi (fl. 77 BCE) of Shanshan upon assuming office; it also aligned with the Han dynasty's broader ambition to expand its presence into the Western Regions. From the fourth year of the Yuanfeng reign to the end of the Western Han, the Yixun garrison remained a crucial political, economic, and military measure, by which the Han Court safeguarded the Silk Road along the southern route of the Western Regions, and was of vital importance to the route's smooth operation.

Let us next turn to the northern route of the Western Regions. The "Xiyu zhuan" chapter states:

> From the former royal court of Cheshi, following the southern side of the Northern Mountains and traveling west along the Tarim River to Shule 疏勒—this constitutes the Northern Route. From the Northern Route, crossing the Congling westward leads to Dayuan 大宛, Kangju 康居, and Yancai 奄蔡.[15]

14 Ibid., 3878.
15 Ibid., 3872.

This Northern Route also started westward from Dunhuang, following the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains and the northern edge of the Taklimakan 塔克拉瑪干 Desert, crossing the Congling Mountains to reach Central Asia. Han dynasty slips record the existence of ten states along this route: Cheshi 車師, Shanguo 山國, Weixu 危須, Yanqi 焉耆, Weili 尉犂, Quli 渠犂, Qiuci 龜茲, Gumo 姑墨, Wensu 溫宿, and Shule 疏勒. Except for Wulei 烏壘 itself, which was the residence of the Protectorate General of the Western Regions, the other oasis city-states along the route were important stops on the Silk Road. To enable these city-states to play their due role in facilitating the functioning of the Silk Road, the Han government adopted a series of important measures, foremost among them the establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions and the agricultural garrisons of the Wuji Commandant (*wuji xiaowei* 戊己校尉), both of which are well-documented in excavated Han slips.

The "Zheng Ji zhuan" 鄭吉傳 chapter of the *Hanshu* states:

> During the Shenjue 神爵 era, turmoil arose within the Xiongnu territory. The Rizhu 日逐 King, Xianxian Dan 先賢撣, wished to submit to the Han dynasty and sent envoys to make contact with Zheng Ji 鄭吉. Zheng Ji mobilized fifty thousand troops from various states including Quli and Qiuci to welcome the Rizhu King. The Han dynasty subsequently granted the Rizhu King the title of Marquis of Guide 歸德.[16]

The surrender of the Rizhu King to the Han dynasty and the establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions was a significant milestone, marking the complete decline of Xiongnu power and the Han dynasty's full control over the Western Regions. This event significantly reshaped the contemporary world order and the fundamental trends of the time. The Xuanquan Han Slips provide records of the Rizhu King's whereabouts and of arrangements made for his reception, corroborating the historical fact of his surrender to the Han dynasty.

> In the second year of the Shenjue reign, in the eighth month, on the *jiaxu* 甲戌 day—the first day of the month [the text is unclear], the Minister of Chariots and Cavalry, Han Zeng 韓增, informed the Censor General of an imperial order … [to dispatch someone] to Dunhuang and Jiuquan to

16 Ibid., 3005.

> receive the Rizhu King, and to provide one carriage of the *chengzhuan* 乘傳 grade for the relevant personnel. (II90DXT0313③:5)

Although much of the text on the slip is damaged and illegible, the date, the individuals involved, and the substance of the event can all be clearly identified. In the eighth month of the second year of the Shenjue (61–58 BCE) reign, the Minister of Chariots and Cavalry (*cheqi jiangjun* 車騎將軍), Han Zeng, dispatched court officials to Jiuquan to welcome the Rizhu King. A document issued by the Censor General (*yushi dafu* 御史大夫) required all jurisdictions along the route to provide vehicles, food, and lodging as part of the reception arrangements.

From Zheng Ji (d. 49 BCE), the first Protector-General of the Western Regions (*Xiyu duhu* 西域都護), to Li Chong 李崇 (fl. 16), the last Protector-General of the Western Regions during Wang Mang's 王莽 (r. 9–23) reign, a total of 18 people held this position over a period of 80 years. Representing the central government of the Western Han, the Protector-General exercised authority in the Western Regions, effectively ensuring close ties between the various regions and the central government, and maintaining the safety and smooth flow of the central section of the Silk Road. The Protector-General's duties were: "To supervise the movements of Wusun, Kangju, and other foreign states, and to report any disturbances. If pacification was possible, they were to proceed with it; if force was necessary, they were to attack."[17] Specific records in Han slips show that the Protector-General of the Western Regions was required to report any important military matters in the Western Regions promptly to the Court via the Hexi Corridor, and the Court in turn issued instructions to the Protector-General without delay.

> A memorial submitted by Zheng Ji, the first Protector-General of the Western Regions and Marquis of Anyuan 安遠, to the central government. It was delivered by the Zheyao 遮要 Post Station [Xuanquan Post Station] on the afternoon of the Gengchen day of the tenth month of the first year of [a certain reign]. (I90DXT0114③:62)[18]

This is a record of a memorial submitted by Zheng Ji, the first Protector-General of the Western Regions and Marquis of Anyuan, to the Court.

17 Ibid., 3874.

18 Gansu jiandu bowuguan 甘肅簡牘博物館 et al., ed., *Xuanquan Hanjian* 懸泉漢簡 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2019), 1: 228.

> An imperial edict bearing the seal of the Prime Minister [*chengxiang* 丞相]. Sent to the Protectorate of the Western Regions. Each county and post station dispatched riders to deliver the document. This had been approved by the Emperor. Issued by the Prime Minister's office on the day of *gengxu* 庚戌 in the fourth month of the first year of the Jianshi 建始 era, when the water clock read eighteen at midday. (I190DXT0115③:37)[19]

This is an imperial edict issued by the Prime Minister's office to Duan Huizong 段會宗 (84–10 BCE), the then Protectorate of the Western Regions. Such edicts were many, demonstrating the close attention paid by the central government and the Protectorate of the Western Regions to the Silk Road and the situation in the Western Regions.

The "Xiyu zhuan" chapter states: "During the reign of Emperor Yuan, the office of the Wuji Commandant was re-established, with agricultural garrisons stationed at the former royal court of Cheshi."[20] The same book, in its "Baiguan gongqing biao" 百官公卿表 chapter, says: "The Wuji Commandant was established in the first year of Emperor Yuan's reign."[21] In the late Western Han dynasty, the Han government established the Wuji Commandant to garrison and cultivate land at the former royal court of Cheshi 車師 (Jiaohe City 交河城), a significant measure to safeguard Silk Road transportation following the establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions. However, due to ambiguities in the *Hanshu*, the issues arising from these records have been continuously discussed since the Tang dynasty, starting with the historian Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645). Numerous records of the Wuji Commandant's military and agricultural activities found on excavated Han slips have led to new conclusions more recently. Han dynasty slips record the titles of "Wu Xiaowei" 戊校尉 and "Ji Xiaowei" 己校尉, refuting the confusion caused by the combined use of "Wu" and "Ji" in traditional historical materials. Both *xiaowei* 校尉 and *duwei* 都尉 were officials of the rank of 2,000 *shi*, equivalent to the Protector-General of the Western Regions. The Wu and Ji Xiaowei were directly under the leadership of the Imperial Court but subject to the control of the Protector-General of the Western Regions. The border guards under their command were rotated every three years. Under normal circumstances, the Wu and Ji Xiaowei commanded approximately one thousand men; they engaged in land reclamation in peacetime and in warfare in wartime. Therefore, the Cheshi land reclamation area was a strategic stronghold guarding the eastern gateway

19 Ibid., 4: 65.
20 *Hanshu*, 3874.
21 Ibid., 739.

to the Western Regions and ensuring the safety of trade routes between east and west. The Protector-General of the Western Regions governed the Western Regions and represented the Imperial Court politically; the Wu and Ji Xiaowei protected the Western Regions militarily and ensured the security of the Silk Road.

The middle section of the Silk Road, namely the Southern and Northern Routes of the Western Regions discussed earlier, was entirely different from the eastern section, the Qin-Long-Shaan-Gan Road 秦隴陝甘道. The Qin-Long-Shaan-Gan Road was distributed across the prefectures and counties directly under the central government, with 45 towns and post stations along the route serving as stops to ensure safe long-distance travel. The Western Regions were completely different. For example, the oasis city-states south of the Tianshan Mountains each represented a tribe or ethnic group, and regardless of size, they were all called "states" according to the customs of the time—a concept entirely different from the modern one. The Protectorate General of the Western Regions only represented the central government's control over the various states in the Western Regions; it did not alter their internal functions and systems. Therefore, a completely different policy was implemented to protect the Silk Road, namely the aforementioned military settlements, garrison troops, and the establishment of Protectorates General. Based on traditional documents, many Han slips further confirm that without the Han dynasty's strong protection of the Western Regions in terms of politics, military affairs, economy, and diplomacy, the smooth operation of the Silk Road during the Han dynasty would have been impossible. Of course, broadly speaking and from a long-term perspective, the Xiongnu people in the north, as a powerful enemy of the Han, also contributed to the prosperity of the Silk Road. Moreover, the Xiongnu later assimilated into the Han and other ethnic groups, becoming part of the Chinese nation. However, such specific issues must be considered and analyzed within their own historical context. Given the intense confrontations between the Han and the Xiongnu, the Han, as a unified and powerful political force at the time, were the natural representative of the Eastern civilization.

3 Direct Contacts between Central Asian Countries and the Han Court as Seen through Excavated Han Slips

According to Han slip records, the earliest western countries at the western end of the Silk Road to maintain direct contact with the Han dynasty included

Wusun, Dayuan, Kangju, Dayuezhi, Wuyishanli 烏弋山離, and Jibin 罽賓. Below, only the cases of Wusun and Kangju are cited as examples.

Wusun was an important country in the Western Regions and the destination of Zhang Qian's second western mission. According to the "Xiyu zhuan" chapter, "the King of Wusun ruled from Chigu City, 8,900 *li* from Chang'an. The state had 120,000 households, a population of 630,000, and an army of 188,800."[22]

Chigu City 赤穀城 was in the region southeast of Lake Issyk-Kul in present-day Kyrgyzstan, but its grazing area extended throughout the entire Ili River basin north of the Tianshan Mountains. According to population statistics from the late Western Han dynasty, the Wusun population of 630,000 was the largest among the Western Regions states for which such data are preserved.

From Zhang Qian's mission to Wusun in 119 BCE to 115 BCE, and continuing through over one hundred years of the Late Western Han and the Xin dynasty under Wang Mang, relations between the Han and Wusun included diplomacy (such as Zhang Qian's missions), politics (including the Han Court's enfeoffment of Kunmi 昆彌 and Kunmi's homage to the Court), military cooperation (such as the joint attack on the Xiongnu during the Benshi 本始 era), marriage alliances (two Han princesses married into Wusun), trade (such as tributes, betrothal gifts, and Imperial rewards), and the stationing of troops and agricultural garrisons to maintain order (such as the garrisoning of Chigu City by the Marquis of Changluo 長羅). During this period, the Marquis of Changluo, Chang Hui 常惠 (d. 46 BCE), visited Wusun six times, while the Protector-General of the Western Regions, Duan Huizong, went there five times. Princesses were married off to distant lands, and Lady Feng 馮 (fl. 53 BCE) served as an envoy between the Han and Wusun. These trips all involved long-distance travel from Chang'an to the Western Regions. This was not one-sided: the Han travelled to Wusun, and the Wusun people likewise travelled to the Han.

Historical records state:

> In the second year of the Yuankang 元康 reign, the Wusun king wrote a letter: "I wish to establish Yuan Guimi 元貴靡, the maternal grandson of the Han Emperor, as my heir, so that he may marry a Han princess, thereby forming a double marriage alliance and severing ties with the Xiongnu. I wish to offer a thousand horses and a thousand mules as a

22 Ibid., 3901.

> dowry." … The emperor praised the Wusun for their recent great achievements and, valuing the renewal of these marital ties, dispatched envoys to Wusun in advance to welcome and receive the dowry. The king, the crown prince, senior generals and commandants all sent representatives, over three hundred people in total, to the Han Court to welcome the new princess.[23]

The scale of this entourage of more than three hundred people coming to the Han Court to escort a bride vividly illustrates the prosperity and intensity of traffic along the Silk Road at the time.

Similar situations are recorded not only in transmitted texts but also, extensively, in Han slips.[24] One slip records:

> On the *bingxu* 丙戌 day in the second month of the second year of the Ganlu 甘露 reign, Yu 禹, magistrate of Yuli 魚離, sent a document to Xuanquan stating: "I will dispatch Zuo Guang with ten horses for Lady Feng, and request that she be provided with 32.7 *shi* of barley and 25.2 *shi* of hay. The tally has already been prepared. Please record this transaction in the ledger of the third month upon receipt, and do not make any mistakes." (II90DXT0115③:96)[25]

This is a document exchanged between the neighboring Yuli and Xuanquan posts on April 13, 52 BCE, regarding the reporting and reimbursement of accounts for the horses and fodder used in receiving Lady Feng. Another slip states:

> On the *xinhai* 辛亥 day in the tenth month of the third year of the Ganlu reign, Wang Peng 王彭, an official subordinate to the Chancellor, escorted Princess Wusun, on the road along with generals, nobles, and attendants. He requested two *yaochuan* 軺傳 carriages to be provided; his request had been approved by the Emperor. The Grand Censor, Chen Wannian 陳萬年, instructed Wei City 謂城 to provide carriages and lodging in accordance with the law. (V92DXT1412③:100)[26]

23 Ibid., 3905.

24 See Zhang Defang 張德芳, "*Changluo Hou feiyong bu* ji Changluo Hou yu Wusun guanxi kaolüe"《長羅侯費用簿》及長羅侯與烏孫關係考略, *Wenwu* 文物, no. 9 (2000): 91–95.

25 Gansu jiandu bowuguan, *Xuanquan Hanjian*, 4: 77.

26 Hu Pingsheng and Zhang Defang, *Dunhuang Xuanquan Hanjian shicui*, 138.

This is a document issued by the Grand Censor Chen Wannian on October 30, 51 BCE. The Prime Minister's subordinate, Wang Peng, escorted Princess Wusun and her entourage, providing them with food, lodging, and carriages along the way, starting from their first stop west of Chang'an. In another slip:

> Two *dou* 斗 and four *sheng* 升 of millet were distributed to three envoys of the Wusun King. Each ate two meals, four *sheng* each, and then they proceeded west. (V92DXT1611③:118)[27]

This record indicates that three envoys of the Wusun King ate two meals at the Xuanquan Relay Station in Dunhuang, each meal consisting of four *sheng*, for a total expenditure of two *dou* and four *sheng* of millet.

Other than this, there are many more examples, but due to space limitations, they will not be elaborated upon here.

From the numerous examples in the abovementioned documents and Han slips, it is easy to see that Wusun, as the largest country in the Western Regions, located far to the west and north of Lake Issyk-Kul in present-day Central Asia, maintained continuous contact with the Han Court, from the time of Zhang Qian's missions through to the Xin dynasty under Wang Mang, all invariably involving long-distance travel. These exchanges included political and marriage alliances, military and diplomatic activities, as well as commercial activities such as tributes, payments, and imperial rewards. All of these should be considered important aspects of economic and cultural exchange along the Silk Road.

If the Silk Road were not paved like the Roman Via Appia, does that make it not a road? Because the volume of silk trade was relatively small and there was no fixed road in the early days, should the idea of Silk Road trade be reduced to merely short-distance travel from oasis to oasis? Or again, the idea that "very few people travelled from Samarkand across Central Asia to reach Chang'an."[28] In the light of evidence from the materials cited above, these views are clearly worth revisiting.

Next, I propose to look at some examples from the Kingdom of Kangju. Historical records state that Kangju was "12,300 *li* from Chang'an. It was not under the jurisdiction of the Protectorate General of the Western Regions. It took seven days on horseback to reach the land of Yueni 越匿, and a further 9,104 *li* to reach the territory where the king resided in the summer. It had 120,000 households, 600,000 people, and an army of 120,000."[29] Kangju was

27 Ibid., 143.
28 Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road*, 5.
29 *Hanshu*, 3891–92.

a large state with a population of 600,000, whose main pastoral territory was on the north bank of the Syr Darya River and across the southern steppes of present-day Kazakhstan. At its peak, its power may have reached the Zarafshan River basin (the present-day Bukhara River).[30] Kangju had five subordinate kings: one was the King of Suxie 蘇薤, who ruled from Suxie City; the second was the King of Fumo 附墨, who ruled from Fumo City, in present-day Navoiy, Uzbekistan; the third was the King of Yuni 窳匿, who ruled from Yuni City, near present-day Tashkent; the fourth was the King of Ji 罽, who ruled from Ji City, in present-day Bukhara, Uzbekistan; and the fifth was King Aojian 奥鞬, who ruled from Aojian City, near present-day Urgench, the capital of today's Khorezm Region in the lower Amu Darya basin. In fact, this encompassed most of present-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

When Zhang Qian first arrived in Kangju, he received a friendly reception. Later, during the Taichu 太初 era (104–101 BCE), Li Guangli 李廣利 (d. 89 BCE) attacked Dayuan. Kangju, fearing for its own survival, provided support to Dayuan.[31] However, after the establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions, Kangju's relationship with the Han dynasty entered a phase of exchanging envoys. Kangju's stability and its close relationship with the Han were fundamental guarantees for the smooth operation of the Silk Road.

One Han slip says:

> On the *gengxu* 庚戌 day of the first month of the second year of the reign of Ganlu, Qianqiu 千秋, the Governor of Dunhuang, and He 賀, the Treasury Manager, who also served as Acting Assistant Administrator, reported to the officials of the Governor's Office of Jiuquan: Marquis Anyuan sent Zhao Qianqiu 趙千秋, the Military Advisor and Assistant Administrator, to submit a letter, bringing with him two envoys from the King of Kangju, ten nobles, and sixty-four attendants. They presented two horses and ten camels. They also presented nine private horses, thirty-one donkeys, twenty-five camels, and one ox. On the *wushen* 戊申 day, they entered Yumen Pass 玉門關; their identities, livestock, and goods have already been checked. (II90DXT0213③:6+T0214③:83)[32]

30 See Hao Shusheng 郝樹聲, "Hanjian zhong de Dayuan he Kangju: sichou zhi lu yu Zhong Xi jiaowang yanjiu de xin ziliao" 漢簡中的大宛和康居—絲綢之路與中西交往研究的新資料, *Zhongyuan wenhua yanjiu* 中原文化研究, no. 2 (2015): 59–69.

31 Ibid., 59–69.

32 For the content of this slip, refer to note above, 59–69.

This is a record of the Kangju King's envoys passing through Xuanquan Post Station on March 6th and 8th, 52 BCE. The delegation comprised 76 individuals, including the envoy, nobles, and attendants, and was accompanied by 78 head of large livestock. Among these 78 animals, there were several horses and camels presented as tribute, and several other privately owned horses, donkeys, camels, and cattle. The former were tributes to the Han Court, while the latter were likely the personal mounts and pack animals of the delegation members.[33]

There is also the famous "Record of the Envoys of the King of Kangju" (*Kangju wang shizhe ce* 康居王使者冊), which records that in 39 BCE, five envoys from Kangju—Yang Bodao 楊伯刀, Bian Tian 扁闐 (his deputy), Gu Mo 姑墨 (the envoy of the King of Suxie), Sha Qun 沙囷 (his deputy), and the noble Renni 為匿—came to the capital to offer tribute. Because they did not receive the proper ceremonial treatment from officials in Dunhuang, Jiuquan, and other places, they later appealed their grievances to the central court.

> On the day of *jiazi* 甲子 in the fourth month of the second year of the Yangshuo 陽朔 era, Xin 信, Mayor of the Capital City, and Yi 義, the Assistant Prefect, notified the General of the Left and the Colonel Leading the Mission to Kangju that they had received the official document and requested it be processed and forwarded to the relevant departments. On the day of *bingyin* 丙寅 of the fourth month, Dan 丹, the General of the Left, dispatched the document to the Chamberlain for Dependencies and the Governor of Dunhuang, requesting they process it and issue it to the appropriate departments upon receipt. (Yumen Pass Han Slips II 98DYT2:33)[34]

This indicates that, on 18 June 23 BCE, an official court document was first transmitted by Xin, Prefect of Jingzhao, and the Assistant Prefect Yi to the General of the Left and to the Envoy to Kangju. On 20 June, the General of the Left then forwarded the same document to the Grand Herald and the Governor of Dunhuang.[35]

The three Han slips discussed above show that during the 30 years from 52 BCE to 39 BCE, Kangju and the Han maintained friendly relations, and that the journey between them involved a long-distance trip along the Silk Road.

33 See Ibid., 59–69.

34 For the content of this slip, refer to note above, 59–69.

35 See Ibid., 59–69.

Therefore, the claim that "few people travelled from Samarkand across Central Asia to reach Chang'an" is unfounded.

In summary, both Han slips and other textual sources reveal that during the Western and Easter Han period, the Silk Road followed a broadly fixed route and a direction from east to west. From Chang'an to Dunhuang, the area encompassed prefectures and counties directly ruled by the Han, with a continuous and evenly distributed network of post stations and inns along the route. The efficient operation of these transportation facilities was a concentrated manifestation of the unified state's powerful comprehensive national strength. Without strong national protection, the Silk Road would not have been able to operate smoothly. The so-called "network" theory of the Silk Road is thereby not in line with historical evidence. The middle section of the Silk Road differed from the inland areas. South of the Tianshan Mountains were city-states, agricultural settlements; north of the Tianshan Mountains were nomadic grasslands. Traversing the Taklamakan Desert, the northern and southern routes, using oases as strongholds, were protected by various political, economic, and military measures implemented by the Han. The oasis states under the jurisdiction of the Protectorate General of the Western Regions fulfilled their obligations as host states according to the Court's will, thereby ensuring the normal operation of the central section of the Silk Road. West of the Pamir Mountains, the Han combined military and diplomatic means to maintain direct contact with Central Asian countries, as well as West Asia and the South Asian subcontinent. The idea that the Silk Road was merely a short-distance, indirect trade route between oases is likewise incomplete.

Ever since it was first proposed by Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, the concept of the Silk Road has been that of an open and evolving system. As history unfolded, it acquired different meanings and limitations in different historical contexts. One cannot deny the existence of the Silk Road simply because, during the Western Han period, it had not yet extended as far as Rome. Rome's expansion from a republic into an empire occurred after 30 BCE; prior to this, the Silk Road had in fact already entered a period of prosperity.

Translated by Caterina Weber