

The Role of Zhang Qian in the Opening of the Silk Road

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Abstract. The mission of Zhang Qian to the Western Regions was a strategic initiative undertaken during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty to address the border crisis posed by the Xiongnu. This involved establishing connections with the Western Regions and implementing a strategic plan to weaken the Xiongnu. In addition to its political objectives and impact, Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions made a significant contribution to the opening of the Silk Road.

Keywords: Zhang Qian; Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty; The Silk Road; Western Regions; Xiongnu.

1. Introduction

During the Han Dynasty, Zhang Qian embarked on two missions to the Western Regions in 138 BC and 119 BC, spending 13 years on the first expedition and 5 years on the second. His initial purpose was to assist Emperor Wu of Han in establishing contact with the Rouzhi, a tribe in conflict with the Xiongnu, thus implementing the Han strategy of weakening the Xiongnu. However, Zhang Qian's primary contribution during his missions to the Western Regions lay in the opening of the Silk Road. Zhang Qian's exploration paved the way for the Silk Road, as he navigated routes, fostered diplomatic ties between the Han Dynasty and Western Region nations, gained the trust of these nations, and conveyed the aspirations of the countries along the Silk Road. Additionally, he made early attempts at gift-giving trade, laying the groundwork for the conditions necessary for the opening of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty.

Zhang Qian's missions to the Western Regions stand out as a renowned episode in the history of the Han Dynasty, particularly gaining significant admiration in subsequent scholarly studies. Scholars, especially in later historical research, have increasingly recognized the value of Zhang Qian's journeys to the Western Regions. From a historical perspective, Zhang Qian's missions were a strategic move during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. They aimed to establish connections with the Western Regions as part of a broader strategy to address the border crisis posed by the Xiongnu, essentially implementing a plan to weaken the Xiongnu by severing their right arm, so to speak. However, this action, driven by political and military considerations, unexpectedly played a crucial role in the process of opening the Silk Road. The historical significance of Zhang Qian's expeditions goes beyond their initial strategic goals, making an unforeseen and lasting impact on the development of the Silk Road.

2. Zhang Qian's Basic Information

Zhang Qian, styled Ziwen, was born in Hanzhong (now Chenggu County, Shaanxi Province). [1] researcher Lin Shuo, in the article "Zhang Qian: A Historical Hero who Pioneered the North and South Silk Roads," described Zhang Qian's background as follows: Qian grew up in an ordinary peasant family and engaged in trade in his early years. He was known for his extraordinary courage, vision, and a spirit of exploration. [2] While there may not be concrete historical records supporting this description, accounts from "Records of the Grand Historian" "Shi Ji" and "Book of Han," such as in the biography of Zhang Qian, indicate that before his mission to the Western Regions, Zhang Qian was not an official of the Han Dynasty. Instead, after the Han court received information about

the need for diplomatic relations, Zhang Qian, with the opportunity arising, volunteered and was selected as an envoy to the Rouzhi tribe.[1]. Zhang Qian's subsequent actions indeed demonstrated outstanding qualities of courage and a pioneering spirit.

Table 1. Summary of Zhang Qian's Two Missions to the Western Regions

	Time	Scale	Destinations:
First Mission:	138BC to 126 BC	Over one hundred people	Xiongnu, Cheshi, Yanqi, Kucha, Shule, Dayuan (Fergana Basin), Kangju (southeastern Kazakhstan), Daxia (Amu Darya region), DaRouzhi, Shache, Yutan (present-day Hotan), Shanshan (present-day Ruoqiang).
Second Mission:	119 BC to 115 BC	About three hundreds people	Second Mission: Dayuan, Kangju, Rouzhi, Daxia, Anxi (Persia), Shendu (India), Yancai (between the Caspian Sea and Aral Sea), Tiaozhi (a vassal state of Anxi), Lixuan (the city of Alexandria in Egypt, a subsidiary of the Roman Empire).

3. Zhang Qian's Two Missions to the Western Regions

3.1. Zhang Qian's First Mission to the Western Regions.

The first purpose of Zhang Qian's diplomatic mission was driven by political considerations. Zhang Qian's initial journey to the Western Regions took place in 133 BCE, at a time when the Han Dynasty was preparing to counter the Xiongnu threat. Following periods of recuperation during the reigns of Emperors Wen and Jing, the Han Dynasty had accumulated economic strength to resist the Xiongnu. Emperor Wu, with his youthful vigor, deeply resented the continuous Xiongnu harassment and the submissive diplomacy, including the yearly tribute to the Xiongnu. He was determined to take military action against the Xiongnu. When a defector reported to Emperor Wu Liu Che that the Xiongnu had defeated the king of the Dayuan and used his head as a drinking vessel, causing resentment and a desire for revenge among the Dayuan, Emperor Wu saw this as an opportune moment to strike against the Xiongnu.[1] Emperor Wu believed it was an ideal opportunity to recruit envoys to the west to seek out the remnants of the Dayuan and collaborate against the Xiongnu. In this context, Zhang Qian, known for his talents, was selected. Although the success of Zhang Qian's mission to establish contact with the remnants of the Dayuan was uncertain, and the tension between the Xiongnu and the Dayuan was based solely on the information provided by defectors, Emperor Wu was resolute in his determination to confront the Xiongnu. Any action that could potentially establish contact with the remnants of the Dayuan was deemed imperative.

Zhang Qian's additional gains from his diplomatic mission were significant. In the third year of the Jianyuan era (138 BC), Zhang Qian volunteered to go on a mission to the Rouzhi, aiming to forge an alliance and jointly attack the Xiongnu. However, on his way through the Hexi region, he was captured by the Xiongnu, and he remained in their captivity for over 10 years. After escaping, he gradually made his way to Dayuan, Kangju, and finally to the Rouzhi. During this period, the Rouzhi were described as having fertile land, few disturbances, a peaceful and contented demeanor, and no intention of retaliating against the Han, [3] While Zhang Qian did not achieve his military objectives, he gained a genuine understanding of the Western Regions for the first time. Upon his return, when Zhang Qian reported to Emperor Wu, he conveyed what he had seen and heard, providing valuable information. For example, he mentioned that Dayuan produced excellent Ferghana horses, Yutan had abundant jade and stones, and Daxia was skilled in commerce and trade. Emperor Wu, known for his ambitious nature, was no longer satisfied with the mere military goal of repelling the Xiongnu. Instead, he became determined to actively open up the Western Regions and establish connections beyond the borders.

3.2. Zhang Qian's Second Mission to the Western Regions

Zhang Qian's second diplomatic mission to the Western Regions strengthened communication and trade ties. At that time, the Han Dynasty did not possess sufficient power for a comprehensive defeat of the Xiongnu. Therefore, Emperor Wu of Han dispatched Zhang Qian on two missions to the Western Regions from 139 BC to 119 BC. The primary, immediate goal of Zhang Qian's missions was to establish military alliances. However, the prolonged duration of his second mission had limited impact on the Han Dynasty's efforts against the Xiongnu. Nevertheless, it provided the Han Dynasty with a deeper understanding of the various countries in the Western Regions. During his second mission, the configuration was different from the first, as Zhang Qian was accompanied by "three hundred people, two horses each, and tens of thousands of cattle and sheep, carrying gold, coins, and silk worth thousands of giant wu" [1]. This altered configuration indicated a shift in the focus of the Han Dynasty during Zhang Qian's second mission—from military alliances to economic communication and development. Following Zhang Qian's missions, the Han Dynasty continued to send envoys to various regions in the Western Regions, and emissaries from Western Regions countries traveled to the Han Dynasty. Additionally, traders from different ethnicities frequently engaged in trade between the inland areas and the Western Regions.

4. The Role of Zhang Qian's Mission to the Western Regions

4.1. Zhang Qian's Journeys Propelled the Han Dynasty's Expansion Westward.

Before Zhang Qian's exploration of the Western Regions, the Han Dynasty's primary focus was on mitigating border threats and fostering prosperity within the inland regions. However, Zhang Qian's return undeniably disrupted the established trajectory of the Han Dynasty. The scope of its operations extended beyond the borderlands, looking toward the frontiers and beyond. The westward expansion became a crucial component of managing the Silk Road in the Western Regions. After Zhang Qian's return, he spoke of encountering Shu cloth and Qiong bamboo staffs in Daxia, indicating contact with traders from Shu, a region in present-day Sichuan, and describing the convenience of the route through the southwestern region known as Shendu [4]. At this time, the Xiongnu were still formidable, and the Han Dynasty had only achieved preliminary victories in the Han-Xiongnu Wars. The Hexi Corridor had not been fully opened, meaning that the crucial route to the Western Regions was still under Xiongnu control, making it a challenging and lengthy journey. Zhang Qian's observations undoubtedly provided Emperor Wu of Han with an alternative: why not venture westward through the southwestern region? Consequently, the Han Dynasty began the process of developing the southwestern region. While the Han Dynasty's efforts in developing the southwestern region were certainly related to addressing regional issues, in a broader sense, this development was primarily a measure taken to break free from Xiongnu invasions and to open up the Silk Road in the Western Regions.

4.2. Zhang Qian's Diplomatic Mission Successfully Established Communication between the Han Dynasty and The Various Kingdoms in the Western Regions, Paving the Way for Subsequent Interactions and Trade.

The Western Regions had long heard of the wealth of the Han Dynasty and expressed a desire for commercial exchanges. Zhang Qian's missions delivered the news of the prosperity of the Han Dynasty to the Western Regions, sparking interest and inquiries from the regional powers.[5] The king of Dayuan, upon hearing about the wealth of the Han Dynasty, inquired about the possibility of establishing trade relations. During Zhang Qian's first mission, he traveled the northern route, departing from Longxi (modern-day Linxia in Gansu), entering the Hexi Corridor, and being captured and sent to the Xiongnu court. He then proceeded through Cheshi, entered Yanqi, retraced the route along the western banks of the Tarim River, passed through Kuqa, Shule, crossed the Congling Mountains, and reached Dayuan in the Fergana Basin. From there, he continued through Kangju (southeastern Kazakhstan) to Daxia in the Amu Darya region. He also sent envoys to DaRouzhi. On

his return journey, he took the southern route, traversing the southern part of the Tarim Basin, following the "southern route" along the northern foothills of the Kunlun Mountains, passing through Shache, Yutan (modern-day Hotan), Shanshan (modern-day Ruoqiang), entering the Qiang territory, and finally returning to Chang'an. Zhang Qian's first mission successfully opened both of the Han Dynasty's routes to the Western Regions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the basic channels leading to the Western Regions and documenting the conditions along the routes. [4] He visited significant regions such as Dayuan, Daxia, Kangju, and others, and his reports laid the groundwork for the later Han Dynasty's development of the Silk Road.

4.3. Zhang Qian's Expedition Provided Insights into the Trade Aspirations of the Western Regions' Countries and Instilled Confidence in the Han Dynasty's Monarch to Open a Passage to the Western Regions. [1]

Zhang Qian's encounter with Shu cloth in Daxia indicates that, prior to his diplomatic mission, there were already established connections between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions, despite the intricate and indirect routes.[1] Daxia was situated around 12,000 li southwest of Han, and the region of Shendu was located east of Daxia, only a few thousand li to the south, with goods from Shu present in the area. This proximity suggested that the distance between Shu and the Western Regions was not considerable. Zhang Qian proposed a route through the Qiang territory, avoiding the hostility of the Qiang people, and argued against taking the northern route due to the threat of the Xiongnu. Instead, he recommended a direct route through the Shu region, which would be safer and free from disturbances. Emperor Wu of Han, upon hearing about the significant and prosperous countries like Daxia, Dayuan, and Anxi in the Western Regions, expressed joy and approval of Zhang Qian's suggestions. The emperor's support underscored the shared desire among various parties to establish a direct passage between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions, facilitating trade and diplomatic relations.

4.4. Zhang Qian's Diplomatic Missions Played a Crucial Role in Establishing a Positive Image for the Han Dynasty in the Western Regions and Gaining Trust.

His strength, generosity, and trustworthiness endeared him to the people of the various regions, earning the admiration and affection of the barbarian tribes.[1] Furthermore, the presence of a companion named Tang Yifu, who was originally a Hu (barbarian) person, facilitated communication with the local inhabitants. Therefore, wherever Zhang Qian went during his diplomatic missions, he was warmly welcomed and earned the trust of the Western Regions. However, upon his first return from the Western Regions, he was detained again by the northern Xiongnu. He seized the opportunity to escape when the Chanyu (Xiongnu leader) died, causing internal turmoil. Taking advantage of the chaos, Zhang Qian and his Hu wife, along with Tang Yifu, managed to escape and return to Han. Upon his return, the Han Dynasty conferred upon him a new official position, appointing him as "Saide Tai Zhong Daifu"[1] After his return, Zhang Qian was ennobled by Emperor Wu of Han as the "Marquis of Bowang." "Upon Zhang Qian's return, he was appointed as the 'Daxing' for over a year, after which he passed away. In the following years, those who were sent as envoys to communicate with the regions around Daxia often came with individuals associated with Zhang Qian. As a result, the communication between the Northwestern countries and the Han Dynasty began. Zhang Qian's legacy lived on, and subsequent envoys were often bestowed with the title 'Marquis of Bowang,' serving as a symbol of trust to foreign nations. Eventually, the Wusun tribe entered into a marital alliance with Han." [1]. Zhang Qian's personal character and reputation gained recognition and trust from the various nations in the Western Regions. The title "Marquis of Bowang" became a symbol of trust in the region, representing not only Zhang Qian but also the authority of the Han Dynasty in the eyes of foreign nations.

4.5. Zhang Qian's Second Mission to the Western Regions Marked the Beginning of Attempts at Tribute Trade

Zhang Qian's analysis of the situation between the Xiongnu and the Western Regions presented Emperor Wu of Han with a new strategic option. Consequently, Emperor Wu formulated a strategy to establish contact with the Wusun tribe and sever the right arm of the Xiongnu. Zhang Qian, on his second mission to the Western Regions in 119 BCE, carried a significant mission. "Leading three hundred people, each with two horses, and tens of thousands of cattle and sheep, along with a large quantity of gold and silver, and many deputy envoys, they were ready to be dispatched to neighboring countries. Zhang Qian arrived at the Wusun and presented gifts and messages, but a decision was not immediately reached. The details are recorded in documents transmitted from the Western Regions. Zhang Qian then dispatched deputy envoys to the Great Rouzhi, Kangju, the Rouzhi of the Moon, and Daxia, and the Wusun sent translators to accompany Zhang Qian. The Wusun also sent several tens of people and horses to express their gratitude. They were allowed to observe Han and understand its vastness." [1] However, during his second mission to the Western Regions, Zhang Qian, holding the official position of "Middle General," led a delegation of three hundred people. Especially noteworthy was the substantial wealth he carried, with "tens of thousands of cattle and sheep" and "huge amounts of gold and silver." This was not the typical scale of a political envoy. Carrying such immense wealth was a preparation for bribing the nobility of the Western Regions to garner their support. Simultaneously, it indicated Han's intention to explore commercial activities with the various Western Regions. Zhang Qian conveyed Han's intentions and strategies to the King of the Wusun. Although the Wusun king promptly expressed agreement, he dispatched a Wusun envoy with several dozen horses and some cattle and sheep as gifts to Han, expressing gratitude. This already resembled a form of exchange similar to "tribute trade."

4.6. Zhang Qian Provided Assistance to Han in Taking Military Action Against the Xiongnu

Having undertaken diplomatic missions, Zhang Qian possessed a deep understanding of the geographical environment and local customs along the route. "Zhang Qian served as a Colonel accompanying the Grand General in the campaign against the Xiongnu. He knew the locations of water and pastures, ensuring that the army did not suffer from shortages." In the sixth year of Yuanshuo, "Zhang Qian was appointed as the Marquis of Bowang." [1] After several years of military campaigns, Han finally achieved significant results, "expelling the Chanyu north of the Mobei region." [1]. This further addressed the most significant threat along the Silk Road, paving the way for its eventual establishment.

5. Summary

The opening of the Silk Road was an inevitable trend in historical development, driven by the progress of productive forces and the essential need for humans to expand their living space. Zhang Qian's two journeys to the Western Regions successfully established a positive image for the Han Dynasty, gaining support from various Western Regions countries. He effectively established connections with countries such as the Rouzhi and Daxia, increasing the interactions between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions. Zhang Qian's efforts played a crucial role in paving the way for the opening of the Silk Road. Therefore, it can be said that Zhang Qian was a powerful catalyst for historical trends.

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