

The Influence of Western Han Frontier Political Policy on the Formation of the Silk Road

Fengqing Chen

Guangzhou Railway No.1 Middle School, Guangzhou, 510000, China
Corresponding author: Email: 1241594020@qq.com

ABSTRACT

This paper begins with a study on the background of the Silk Road with a view to identify how the Silk Road was formed during the Western Han Dynasty and why the Western Han government promoted the Silk Road. The policy of peacemaking in the early Han Dynasty did not stop the invasion from Hsiung-nu. The counterattack against Hsiung-nu during the reign of Emperor Wu was the most important turning point in the Western Han's policy toward the Western Regions, as the Western Han government sent emissaries to establish amicable diplomatic relations with the Western countries and to defend against Hsiung-nu together. With such a policy, the Han Dynasty eventually achieved military victory in a long border war and reaped the unexpected blessing of the blazing of the Silk Road.

Keywords: *The Silk Road, policy, Western Han dynasty, Hsiung-nu*

1. INTRODUCTION

Rong Xinjiang believed that "The Silk Road meant a road not only of political diplomacy, but also of commercial trade, cultural and intellectual exchanges [1]." In the early period of Western Han Dynasty, there were many small countries along the passages connecting East and West, and they were blocked by Hsiung-nu, making it difficult to exchange cultures between East and West. It was not until the time of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty that the Middle Primitive was connected to the Western Regions and began to escalate the warfare of the Western Regions. In this article we discuss the political policies of the Han government regarding the Silk Road, why the government issues these policies, and how this policy contributes to the emergence and development of the Silk Road.

2. BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE OF THE SILK ROAD

2.1 Silk

The Silk Road, as its name suggests, is linked by silk. Silk was once thought to be cloth made by silkworms. Silk is a Chinese specialty; the ancient Chinese designed and produced a variety of silk items, as well as opening the world's first large-scale commerce exchanges

between East and West, known as the "Silk Road." Chinese silk had been exported in considerable quantities since the Western Han Dynasty and had become a world-famous product. The road between China and the West was known as the "Silk Road" in the period, and China was also known as the "Silk Country."

2.2 Silk Road

The Silk Road is referred to as the Silk Road in general. However, it fell into two parts: the "Land Silk Road" and the "Maritime Silk Road."

Emperor Wu ordered Zhang Qian to the West in the Western Han Dynasty (202-8 BCE) to blaze a trail from Chang'an (now Xi'an), through Gansu and Xinjiang, to Central Asia and West Asia, and linking Mediterranean countries. Its original purpose is to sell silk products manufactured in ancient China, but during the Ming Dynasty, it expands into a comprehensive commerce route.

The "Maritime Silk Road" is a maritime route through which ancient China communicated with other countries. The road was also known as the South China Sea Silk Road because it primarily focused on the South China Sea. The Marine Silk Road was the earliest known maritime route, established during the Qin and Han Dynasties, developed during the Three Kingdoms to the Sui Dynasty, and flourishing under the Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties.



Figure 1 Silk Road Scenery of Ming Dynasty [1]

2.3 Land Silk Road

It is difficult to define the origin of the Silk Road accurately in terms of time. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period, the silk deal between the East and West "had already being conducted along the road which is now named as the Silk Road and the Eurasian transport routes [2]". However, the official western transportation of silk began in the Western Han, the Silk Road essentially came into being in the Western Han. "Traces of Dawan, found by Zhang Qian [3]". In this period, the source of the spread of silk, the spread from the destination, the spread of the route was very clear, which was historically recorded and evidenced. The number of spreads was also very large. The East and West made silk deals in a planned and organized way, so the Silk Road was really put into operation in the Western Han Dynasty, while Europe was under the rule of the Roman Empire. The Tang Dynasty entered a period of prosperity, when Chang'an could be considered the capital of the world.

3. THE POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION OF THE SILK ROAD IN THE WESTERN HAN DYNASTY

3.1 Peace-making Marriage

Faced with the invasion of Hsiung-nu, Liu Bang, Emperor Gaozu of Han, who had not yet gained a firm foothold, had to resort to military defense. In the seventh year of the rein of Emperor Gaozu of Han (200 BCE), Hsiung-nu besieged Mayi, and Han Wangxin surrendered to Hsiung-nu, who led their troops southwards beyond Juzhi, attacked Taiyuan, and reached Jingyang. Han Dynasty sent 320,000 troops northwards to fight back. Liu Bang, Emperor Gaozu of Han, who arrived at Pingcheng early than the infantry, was besieged by 400,000 troops in Baideng for seven days. Later, Liu Bang, Emperor Gaozu of Han escaped because of Chen Ping's secret tactics, Han and Hsiung-nu's first military encounter ended up with the defeat of Han. "Emperor Gaozu of Han then assigned Liu Jing to send escort imperial princesses of Han for peace-making marriage with Shan Yu, Chief of Hsiung-nu, and offered Hsiung-nu silk, wine, rice and some other foods every year, making warfare less." [3] Peace-making marriage was a policy of the Han Dynasty to exchange women, wealth and goods for peace on the frontier, which is an unequal engagement. This policy lasted for a long time because of the disparity in military power between the Han Dynasty and Hsiung-nu on the frontier. In the early years of the rein of Emperor of Xiao-wei, Gao-hou, Xiao-wen, Xiao-jing, and Wu-ti of Han Dynasty, there are cases of peace-making marriage with Hsiung-nu until the Mayi Plot in 133 BCE, when the peace-making marriage policy is ended.

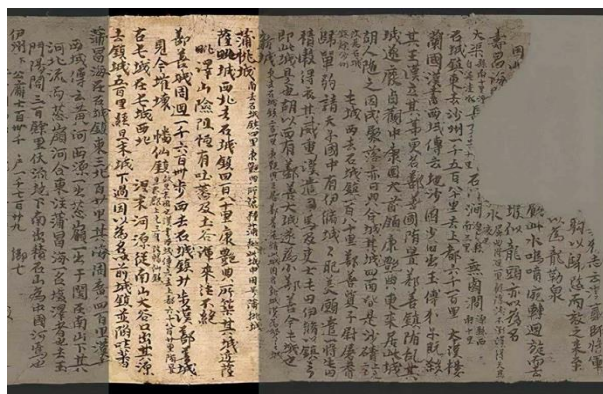


Figure 2 Biography of the Western Regions of the Han Dynasty [2]

3.2 The First Change in Policy: The Han Dynasty Began to Counterattack

“Emperor Wu of Western Han Dynasty ascended the throne in 140, and the early years of his reign was marked by occasional irruptions of his northern neighbors. In 135, however, they requested a renewal of the treaty of peace, which was agreed on by the emperor after some deliberation, and an explicit declaration as to the stringency of the stipulations. The Hsiung-nu were treated liberally; the market at the barrier was continued, and handsome gifts were forwarded; so that from the Shen-yu downwards, the Hsiung-nu all became firmly attached to the Chinese and confined their excursions to the outside of the Great Wall. An influence in an opposite

direction, however, was at work at court, and within two years of the signing of the treaty, a sophisticate plot was set on foot by the Chinese, for cutting off the great body of the Hsiung-nu [4].” Here we can see that they began to change their policy. The change of Han Dynasty’s frontier policy began with the Ma-ye plot in 133 BC. Han Dynasty sent Nie Weng Yi, a native of Ma-ye, to pretend to sell the city of Ma-ye to lure Shan Yu, who entered Wuzhou with only 100,000 horsemen, while Han tried to ambush Shan Yu with more than 300,000 troops. However, due to the informing of Han's Yanmen lieutenant, Shan Yu turned back, and Han's troops ambushed in vain. The Mayi Plot marked the breakup of the peaceful relationship between Han and Hsiung-nu. Afterwards, the Han Dynasty began a long military counterattack.



Figure 3 The present situation of western Regions in the Western Han Dynasty [3]

3.3 The Second Shift in Policy: Alliance

In order to effectively defend against the Hsiung-nu’s invasion, the Han dynasty also considered finding strategic partners to defend against the Hsiung-nu. During the reign of Wenjing period, there was no significant breakthrough in this area because of the Hsiung-nu dominance in the north and the Han Dynasty's policy of peace and moderate defense along the frontier. However, at this time, the Han dynasty attached importance to the absorption of Hsiung-nu surrenderers, which on the one hand weakened the enemy's power and on the other hand allowed it to learn about Hsiung-nu's internal situation so that it could adopt an effective defense strategy. In 147 BC, six persons including Wei Xulu, the Hsiung-nu kings, surrendered and were made marquis by Han. The absorption of the Hsiung-nu surrenderers provided an opportunity for Han to find strategic alliances.

The Han Dynasty initially chose the Yuch-chih for an alliance, sent Zhang Qian to Yuch-chih as an envoy. In 138 BC, Zhang Qian began his journey to the west. The Han Dynasty attached great importance to this mission. However, Zhang Qian was captured by the Hsiung-nu and detained for more than ten years. Later, Zhang Qian

escaped from Hsiung-nu and went through Ta-yuan and Ankang to the Yuch-chih, but at this time the people in Yuch-chih lived happily and peacefully and had no intention to fight against the Hsiung-nu, so the Han Dynasty’s hope of building a strategic alliance with the Ta Yue-she was dashed.

Zhang Qian's first mission to the West brought a wealth of information about the western countries and prompted the Han Dynasty to look for new alliances. Therefore, the second mission to the West was aimed at Wu-sun, which was also infested by the Hsiung-nu. However, Wu-sun was far away from Han and did not know the size of Han territory and had succumbed to Hsiung-nu for a long time, so it also refused the alliance request.

From Zhang Qian ‘s trip to the West, the Han Dynasty’s purpose was to unite with the Western countries to build an alliance against the Hsiung-nu. Living happily and afraid of Hsiung-nu, Wu-sun were not yet interested in an alliance with Han. Of course, the main reason was that the western countries did not know enough about the Han Dynasty currently. Later, when Wu-sun learned about the richness of the Han people, the country began to pay attention to the Han Dynasty. At the

same time, “[The Emperor of] China appointed Chang K'ien T'ai-chung-ta-fu [‘Imperial Chamberlain’] and conferred T'ang-i Fu the title Fong-shi-kun [‘The Gentleman attending the Embassy’]. The following countries were visited by Chang K'ien in person: Ta-yuan [Ferghana], Yuch-chih [Indoscythians], Ta-hia [Bactria] and K'ang-ku [Soghdiana]; there were additional five or six other large adjacent countries from which he gained information and on which he reported to the emperor in the following terms.” [4] These countries also sent envoys to communicate with Han, and in this way the northwestern countries began to communicate with Han. Thus, the diplomatic action started with the strategic placement of the frontier, and the Silk Road was opened for the exchange of Chinese and Western civilizations.

However, the western countries had not got rid of Hsiung-nu's control. With the instigation of Hsiung-nu, Shen-shen and Che Shi often plundered the envoys and caravans sent to the western region by Western Han. In order to secure the passage of the western region, in 108 BC, Han general Wang Cuo led the cavalry to defeat Shen-shen and Zhao Ponu led the army to defeat Che Shi. In 105 BC, Western Han again made peace with the king of Wu-sun and jointly defended against Hsiung-nu. At the same time, in order to break Hsiung-nu's control over Ta-yuan and obtain the excellent Akhal-teke horse breed of Ta-yuan, Emperor Wu sent Li Guangli to lead several attacks against Ta-yuan. And after paying heavy price, Li Guangli took the capital of Ta-yuan, which greatly boosted the prestige of Western Han in the western region and ensured the safety of the western passage. The "Silk

Road" to the West was thus made unblocked.

3.4 The Government Finally Set Up the Western Region Safeguard Command

In the fourth year of Emperor Wu's reign (101 BC), Emperor Wu set up military officers in Luntai (southeast of Luntai County) and Quli (southwest of Korla County) to manage the Western Region's cantonment affairs. This was the first official staffed by the Western Han government in the Western Region. Since then, the Western Han government established a base in the Western Region.

In 60 BC, Hsiung-nu was surrendered, and the Western Han government won the final victory in the war against Hsiung-nu and set up the Western Region Safeguard Command, which was the beginning of the formal setting up of administrative agencies by the Central Dynasty. From then on, the present-day Xinjiang region came under the jurisdiction of the central government and became an inseparable part of China. The Western Han government engaged permanent officials in the Western Region, had soldiers opened wasteland and grew grain food, and set up military officers for protection, which brought the Han people closer to the minority groups in Xinjiang. Han Dynasty' establishment of Safeguard Command in the Western Region marked the Silk Road' entering an era of the Silk Road, a road of exchanges between the East and West prosperity [5].



Figure 4 : The scenery of the silk road today [4]

4. Conclusion

Looking throughout the policies adopted against Hsiung-nu encroachment and the course of frontier development in the first and middle periods of the Western Han Dynasty, the change in the Han Dynasty's frontier policy played an important role in the opening of the Silk Road. At the turn of the Qin and Han dynasties, due to the turmoil in the Central Plains, the Hsiung-nu's forces rose to prominence, posing a threat to the emerging Han dynasty.

The Liu Bang, Emperor Gaozu of Han, who had first conquered China, did not know enough about the Hsiung-nu and took the risk of attacking, leading to the humiliation in Pingcheng, and the Han dynasty had to adopt the peace-making policy of sending women, gold and silk in exchange for peace on the frontier. Although the peace-making policy eased the situation on the frontier, it did not stop the invasion of Hsiung-nu. The Han Dynasty adopted a moderate defense against the Hsiung-nu invasion, and strengthened the frontier defense by building fortresses, migrating people to the frontier, bringing in grain growing to the frontier, and

raising horses in abundance. During the reign of Emperor Wu, the Han Dynasty made a fundamental change in its frontier policy and adopted a proactive counter-attack strategy against the Hsiung-nu. In terms of military defense, the Han Dynasty adopted a strategy of fighting on multiple fronts in the east, middle and west, especially the attack on the western part of the Yellow River, which laid an important foundation for the opening of the Silk Road. In order to effectively combat the Hsiung-nu, the Han Dynasty also adopted a major strategy of uniting the western countries. Although Zhang Qian's mission to the West did not achieve the goal of uniting with the Yuch-chih to fight the Hsiung-nu, the union with Wusun played an important role afterwards. During the reign of Emperor Xuan, the Han Dynasty and Wusun fought together against the Hsiung-nu and dealt a heavy blow to the Hsiung-nu. Consequently, the Western Region Safeguard Command was established, which opened the Silk Road between the Han Dynasty and the West. Therefore, the change in border policy in the first and middle Han dynasties, especially the adoption of the strategy of uniting the western states to fight the Hsiung-nu, was the fundamental reason for the smooth opening of the Silk Road in the Han Dynasty.

REFERENCES

- [1] Rong, X. (2015) How to Understand the Silk Road. Theory and Historiography, Vol 3: 13-19.
- [2] Zhang, G., Wang, B. (2009) The Silk Road and cultural exchanges between China and the West. People's Publishing House, Xinjiang.
- [3] Si, M. (1959) Shiji. Zhonghua Book Company, Beijing
- [4] Ban, G. (1962) Han Shu. Zhonghua Book Company, Beijing
- [5] Sun, Z. (2014) The Historical Evolution of the Silk Road. Longyuan Chunqiu, Total 282