

Zhang Qian's Western Expedition

by Sima Qian, Grand Historian of the Han Dynasty

Background

In 138 B.C.E. the Emperor Han Wudi sent General Zhang Qian on a diplomatic mission to the Yuezhi in Daxia, a region in the Central Asian steppes also known as Bactria (modern day Afghanistan). Han Wudi hoped that the Yuezhi would enter into an alliance with the Han against the Xiongnu. After he returned, Zhang Qian convinced the emperor that trade with the west would be beneficial to China. You will find below excerpts from Sima Qian's history of the Han dynasty in which he recorded the opening of the Silk Road by General Zhang Qian.

Text

At this time the emperor questioned various Xiongnu who had surrendered to the Han, and they all reported that the Xiongnu had defeated the king of the Yuezhi people and had made his skull into a drinking vessel. As a result the Yuezhi had fled and bore a constant grudge against the Xiongnu, though as yet they had been unable to find anyone to join them in an attack on their enemy.

The Han at this time were engaged in a concerted effort to destroy the Xiongnu, and therefore, when the emperor heard this, he decided to try to send an envoy to establish relations with the Yuezhi. To reach them, however, an envoy would inevitably have to pass through Xiongnu territory. The emperor accordingly sent out a summons for men capable of undertaking such a mission. Zhang Qian, who was a palace attendant at the time, answered the summons and was appointed as envoy.

He set out...accompanied by Kanfu, a Xiongnu slave.... They traveled west through the territory of the Xiongnu and were captured by the Xiongnu and taken before the Shanyu (Xiongnu King). The Shanyu detained them and refused to let them proceed. "The Yuezhi people live north of me," he said. "What does the Han mean by trying to send an envoy to them! Do you suppose...the Han would let my men pass through China?"

The Xiongnu detained Zhang Qian for over ten years and gave him a wife from their own people, by whom he had a son. Zhang Qian never once relinquished the imperial credentials that marked him as an envoy of the Han, and after he had lived in Xiongnu territory for some time and was less closely watched than at first, he and his party finally managed to escape and resume their journey toward the Yuezhi....

Since the king of the Great Yuezhi had been killed by the Xiongnu, his son had succeeded him as ruler and had forced the kingdom of Saxia to recognize his sovereignty. The region he ruled was rich and fertile and seldom troubled by invaders, and the king thought only of his own enjoyment. He considered the Han too far away to bother with and had no particular intention of avenging his father's death by attacking the Xiongnu....

After spending a year or so in the area, Zhang Qian began to journey back...but he was once more captured by the Xiongnu and detained over a year. Just at this time the Shanyu died and the King of the Left (a subservient prince of the Xiongnu) attacked the Shanyu's heir and set himself up as the new Shanyu. As a result of this the whole Xiongnu nation was in a turmoil and Zhang Qian, along with his Xiongnu wife and the former slave Kanfu, was able to escape and return to China.

The emperor honored Zhang Qian with the post of palace counselor and awarded Kanfu the title of "Lord Who Carries Out His Mission." ...When Zhang Qian first set out on his mission, he was accompanied by over one hundred men, but after thirteen years abroad, only he and Kanfu managed to make their way back to China. Zhang Qian in person visited the lands of Dayuan, the Great Yuezhi, Daxia, and Kangju, and in addition he gathered reports on five or six other large states in the neighborhood. All of this information he related to the emperor on his return....

Southeast of Daxia is the kingdom of Shendu (India). "When I was in Daxia, Zhang Qian reported, "I saw bamboo canes from Qiong and cloth made in the province of Shu (Qiong and Shu were Chinese provinces during the Han dynasty). When I asked the people how they had gotten articles, they replied, 'Our merchants go to buy them in the markets of Shendu.'" Shendu they told me, lie several thousand li southeast of Daxia. The region is said to be hot and damp. The inhabitants ride elephants when they go into battle. The kingdom is situated on a great river.

"We know that Daxia is located twelve thousand li southwest of China. Now if the kingdom of Shendu is situated several thousand li southeast of Daxia and obtains goods that are produced in Shu, it seems to me that it must not be very far from Shu. At present, if we try to send envoys to Daxia by way of the mountain trails that lead through the territory of the Qiang people, they will be molested by the Qiang, while if we send them a little farther north, they will be captured by the Xiongnu. It would seem that the most direct route, as well as the safest, would be that out of Shu.

Thus the emperor learned of Dayuan, Daxia, Anxi, and the others. All great states rich in unusual products whose people cultivated the land and made their living in much the same way as the Chinese. All these states, he was told, were militarily weak and prized Han goods and wealth. He also learned that to the north of them live the Yuexi and Kangju people who were strong in arms but who could be persuaded by gifts and the prospect of gain to acknowledge allegiance to the Han court. If it were only possible to win over these states by peaceful means, the emperor thought, he could then extend his domain ten thousand li, attract to his court men of strange customs who would come translating and retranslating their languages, and his might would become known to all the lands within the four seas.

The emperor was therefore delighted, and approved Zhang Qian's suggestion. He ordered Zhang Qian to start out from...Shu on a secret mission to search for Daxia. The party broke into four groups....All the groups managed to advance one or two thousand li, but were blocked on the north by the Di and Tso tribes and on the south by the Sui and Kunmung tribes. The Kunmung tribes have no rulers but devote themselves to plunder and robbery, and as soon as they seized any of the Han envoys they immediately murdered them. Thus none of the parties was ever able to get through to its destination. They did learn, however, that some one thousand or more li to the west there was a state called Tianyue (Burma) whose people rode elephants and that the merchants from Shu sometimes went there with goods on unofficial trading mission. In this way the Han, while searching for a route to Daxia, first came into contact with the kingdom of Tian.

Earlier the Han had tried to establish relations with the barbarians of the southwest, but the expense proved too great and no road could be found through the region and so the project was abandoned. After Zhang Qian reported that it was possible to reach Daxia by traveling through the region of the southwestern barbarians, the Han once more began efforts to establish relations with the tribes in the area.