

Han Empire's communication with Central Asia

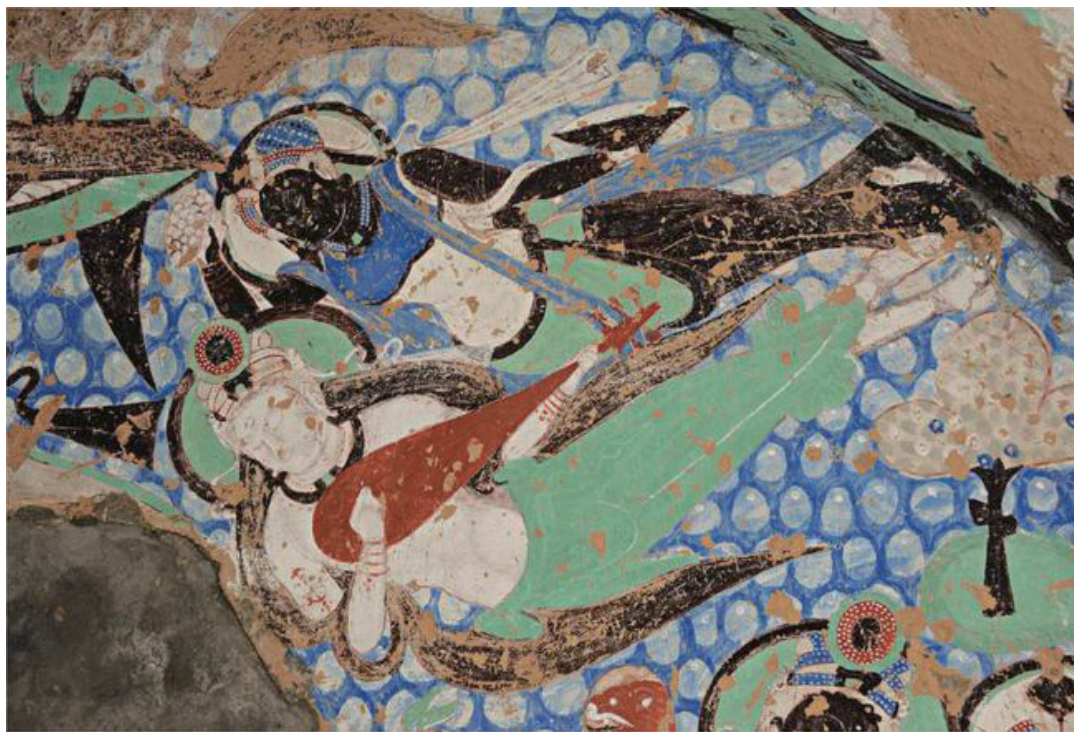
By ZHANG DEFANG

Based on the information provided by the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) wooden slips, after the missions of Zhang Qian (c. 164–114 BCE) [an imperial envoy to the Western Regions in the late 2nd century BCE] opened trade routes between the East and West, the kingdoms at the western end of the Silk Road that initiated the earliest contact with the Han Empire included Wusun, Dayuan, Kangju, Darouzhi, Wuyishanli, and Jibin [all were ancient kingdoms in Central Asia]. Based on historical documents and unearthed wooden slips, this article looks into the diplomatic relations between the Han Empire and the kingdoms of Wusun and Kangju.

Kingdom of Wusun

Wusun was an important kingdom in the Western Regions and the destination of Zhang Qian's second diplomatic mission to the West. According to the *Book of Han*, the Royal Court of Wusun was situated at the city of Chigu [in present-day Yshtyk, Kyrgyzstan], about 8,900 *li* [in the Han Dynasty, *li* was standardized at 415.8 meters] away from the Han capital Chang'an; Wusun had an estimated population of 630,000, with 120,000 families and 188,800 men capable of bearing arms. Among all the kingdoms in the Western Regions with population statistics preserved, Wusun had the largest population.

Since Zhang Qian's return from his final expedition to Wusun in 115 BCE, the Han Empire maintained ties with Wusun for over 100 years until the end of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE). The relationship between Han and Wusun included diplomacy (e.g. Zhang Qian's missions to Wusun), politics (e.g. the Han bestowed Wusun rulers with noble titles), military (e.g. both jointly attacked the Xiongnu nomads), *heqin* (a practice for the Chinese imperial court to foster alliances with other kingdoms via marriage; two Han princesses were married away to Wusun), business, and sending an army to practice *tuntian* (a state-promoted system of agriculture, through which land was farmed by and for the military; Marquise Changluo led an army to practice *tuntian* in the city of Chigu), etc. During this period, Chang Hui, whose title was Marquise Changluo, visited Wusun six times. Duan Huizong, protector general of the Western Regions, visited Wusun five times. Feng Liao [who married an influential Wusun general and was a maidservant of Princess Jieyou, who was herself married off to a Wusun king], also known as Lady Feng, travelled to and fro between Han and Wusun as a Han official envoy. According to the *Book of Han*, in 64 BCE, the



FILE PHOTO: This ancient mural was found in the Kizil Caves in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Dated to the 3rd century, the Kizil Caves are China's earliest Buddhist cave complex and played an important role in the transmission of Buddhism along the Silk Road.

Wusun ruler wrote to Emperor Xuan of Han (91–48 BCE) through Chang Hui: "I'd like to make the Han emperor's grandson Yuan-guimi [Princess Jieyou's son] the heir to the throne, let him marry a Han princess, and sever the relations with the Xiongnu. I would send 1,000 horses and 1,000 mules to the Han as a betrothal gift." The Wusun king led a mission of more than 300 people to meet the princess in the Han Empire. Such a large mission to receive the Han princess reflected the prosperity of the Silk Road at that time.

In addition to handed-down documents, there are similar records in a large number of the Han Dynasty wooden slips. For example, an inscribed slip served as a document in 52 BCE for the neighboring Yulizhi and Xuanquanzhi relay stations to negotiate over how to report and write off the accounts of horses and fodder consumed when receiving Lady Feng. Another wooden slip was issued in 51 BCE by Chen Wannian, the imperial counsellor of the Han, requiring all the relay stations, starting from the first stopover west of Chang'an, to provide accommodation and vehicles for the Wusun princess and her entourage.

Some slips provide many details about how the relay stations along the Silk Road received travelers and envoys. For instance, a wooden slip recorded that three Wusun envoys enjoyed two meals at the Xuanquanzhi station, consuming two *dou* and four *sheng* of foxtail millet [both *dou* and *sheng* are Chinese units of volume measurement, derived from standard vessels used for measuring grain]. Another slip recorded that in 9 BCE, a Han official escorted some Wusun guests as they passed by the Xuanquanzhi station, where they consumed 18 *dan* of foxtail millet and used 60 horses.

It is not difficult to see from the above documents and many examples of the Han wooden slips that Wusun, as the largest kingdom in the Western Regions and far to the west and north of present-day Lake Issyk-Kul, had kept contact with the Han Empire since Zhang Qian's visit until Wang Mang seized the Han imperial throne from the Liu family and founded the Xin Dynasty (9–23). Both sides communicated with each other through long-distance travel.

In her book *The Silk Road: A New History*, Valerie Hansen writes that when the silk trade volume was very small and there was no single, continuous road, the so-called trade through the Silk Road might only be achieved by short-distance travel from one oasis to another, and few people traveled from Samarkand across Central Asia to Chang'an. However, judging from the materials cited above, these views are open to discussion.

Kingdom of Kangju

According to the *Book of Han*, the king of Kangju spent his winter in Yueni [in present-day Otrar, Kazakhstan] and his summer in Fannei [in present-day Kultobe, Kazakhstan]. The capital of Kangju was the city of Beitian [probably located along the Syr Darya River]. Kangju was about 12,300 *li* away from Chang'an, and was not within the compass of the Protectorate of the Western Regions. Kangju was a nation of some 600,000 individuals and 120,000 families, with 120,000 men able to bear arms. Its range of herding mainly covered the north bank of the Syr Darya River and the grasslands of southern Kazakhstan, and may have reached the Zeravshan River basin (in present-day Bukhara, Uzbekistan) at its peak.

When Zhang Qian arrived at Kangju for the first time, he was

kindly received by the Kangju people, who helped him to the land of Darouzhi. When the Han army led by General Li Guangli attacked Dayuan [Kangju's neighboring state] between 104–101 BCE, the Kangju, fearing the same fate would befall itself in the future if Dayuan was defeated, allied themselves with the Dayuan and helped them against the Han. However, after the establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions, the relationship between Kangju and the Han Empire developed to the point of dispatching envoys to each other. The stability of Kangju and its close ties with the Han guaranteed the smooth flow of the Silk Road.

There is a record of the Kangju king's envoys passing by the Xuanquanzhi station in 52 BCE, found on unearthed wooden slips. The mission consisted of 76 people, with 78 large livestock. Among the 78 large livestock, there were some tribute horses and camels, which might be offered to the Han court. There were also some private horses, donkeys, camels, and cattle, which might be ridden by the mission staff.

The "Document of Kangju Envoys" unearthed from the Xuanquanzhi Site consists of seven wooden slips and includes 293 characters. It recorded that in 39 BCE, there were five emissaries from Kangju to Chang'an to pay tribute, including Yang Bodao, envoy of the Kangju king; Bian Tian, deputy envoy of the Kangju king; Gu Mo, envoy of King Suxie; Sha Qun, deputy envoy of King Suxie; and Wei Ni, a nobleman. They appealed to the Han imperial court because the local Han officers at Dunhuang and Jiuquan [both in present-day Gansu Province] didn't accord them due courtesy.

As recorded on the wooden slips, it was not the first time that those emissaries had come to offer

tributes. They had done it many times before. Every time they entered Dunhuang and headed to Jiuquan, the local authorities of the Han provided accommodation for them along the way. After arriving at Jiuquan, the Prefect and subordinate officials, together with the tributaries, evaluated the tribute camels according to their gender, fur color, figure, age, etc. However, things were different this time. These five emissaries didn't receive accommodation along the way from Dunhuang to Jiuquan. After arriving in Jiuquan, the Prefect and his subordinates evaluated the tribute camels in the absence of the Kangju emissaries, and made a unilateral evaluation. Furthermore, there was something wrong with the evaluation: the camels brought by Yang Bodao were fat and strong, but they were assessed as weak and thin by the Prefect and his subordinates. Gu Mo offered three white camels, which were identified as "yellow" by the local officers. Therefore, the Kangju emissaries wrote to the Han imperial court, and the Han imperial court ordered a strict investigation of this issue. Unfortunately, there is no record of the result of the investigation.

The unearthed Han slips prove that Kangju had a friendly relationship with the Han Empire, and people from both sides travelled over long distances from one end of the Silk Road to the other. The statement that few people traveled from Samarkand across Central Asia to Chang'an is untenable.

In short, in light of the unearthed Han Dynasty slips and handed-down documents, the Silk Road in the Han era was composed of roughly fixed routes from east to west. The section between Chang'an and Dunhuang was directly under the Han Empire. There were continuous and evenly distributed relay stations along the routes. The efficient operation of these stopovers represented the Han Empire's composite national strength.

Regarding the Silk Road as a "network" of trade routes does not conform to the facts. At the middle section of the Silk Road, the oasis states within the compass of the Protectorate of the Western Regions fulfilled their obligations as the host states to ensure the normal flow of the middle section of the Silk Road. To the west of the Pamirs Plateau, the Han used both military and diplomatic measures to keep direct contact with Central Asia, West Asia, and the South Asian subcontinent. The argument that the Silk Road was composed of short-distance indirect trade from one oasis to another is also unsupported.

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