

# The Reasons Why the Western Regions Were Valued by the Han Dynasty and Their Role in the Dispute between the Han Dynasty and the Hsiung-Nu

## -- Analysis based on the War the Han Set to Ta-Yuan from 104BCE to 100BCE

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### Abstract

In the confrontation between the Han Dynasty and the Hsiung-nu, the western regions were like temporary allies that could change the camp at any time. However, no matter which side is preferred, it would bring political, military, and economic backing to the party it supported. Therefore, the western region was the aim that both the Han and the Hsiung-nu wanted to fight for. With the point of penetration that the war the Han set to Ta-yuan from 104BCE to 100BCE, this paper discusses why the Han Dynasty paid so much attention to the western regions represented by Ta-yuan, and what role the western regions played in the Han and the Hsiung-nu disputes from multiple perspectives. The paper uses Selections from the Han Narrative Histories [1] as the main material to sort out clues, spreading evidence in detail, and integrate information, enriching the exploration of the relationship between the Han and other ethnic groups.

### Keywords

Emperor Wu-ti, the Han, the Hsiung-nu, Ta-yuan, the western regions.

### 1. Introduction

In 139 BC, to “cut off the right arm” of the Hsiung-nu, Emperor Wu-ti of the Han despatched Zhang Qian to the western regions to connect Wusun. Although failing to ally, it broke the wait-and-see attitude of the Han towards the western regions, and their communication became closer. Emperor Wu-ti was very glad to learn the news from the envoys who returned from Ta-yuan. They told him there had blood-sweating horses. Therefore, Emperor Wu-ti “sent certain strong men [sportsmen, turfmen?], Ch'o Ling and others, with a thousand pieces of gold and a golden horse in order to ask the king of Ta-yuan for the superior horses in the city of Ir-shi.”[1] Ta-yuan refused to hand over the horses for they thought China was so far away that the army could not reach it and cause harm to them. The Chinese emissary was angry for it and took back the gift with scathing words. Ta-yuan made those envoys killed and robbed on their way out of the country. After hearing this, Emperor Wu-ti was furious and ordered Li Kuang-li to attack Ta-yuan. The army failed because of the lack of supply for the first time. When the Han set the second attack on Ta-yuan, the army was in great scale: “When it left Dunhuang this army consisted of sixty thousand men, not counting those who followed as carriers of secret supplies of extra provisions; a hundred thousand oxen; more than thirty thousand horses; donkeys, mules, and camels numbering myriads, and a commissariat well stocked with provisions, besides arms and crossbows.”[1] It can be seen that Emperor Wu-ti spared no effort to win the campaign, taking the risk of the commotion of the whole country. Then why did Emperor Wu-ti so persistent to defeat Ta-yuan is worth analyzing.

Ta-yuan was an ancient country in Central Asia, parts of which were called the western regions, during the Han Dynasty. The continental climate of the basin gave Ta-yuan the conditions to carry out oasis agriculture. "The soil, climate, productions, and customs of the people are the same as those of the Ta Yue-she and Gan-seih. Round about Ta-wan they make wine from grapes. Wealthy people store up as much as 10,000 stone and over in their cellars, and keep it for several tens of years without spoiling. The people are fond of wine, and the horses are fond of medicago sativa. There are more than seventy other cities in the country. There is a numerous breed of excellent horses which perspire blood." [1] Ta-yuan could be regarded as the epitome of the living conditions of the western regions, which also represented the attitude of the western regions towards the Han. Therefore, the aim of Emperor Wu-ti was not Ta-yuan, but the whole western regions which had a very delicate position in the confrontation between the Han and the Hsiung-nu.

This study takes the war Han set to Ta-yuan from 104BCE to 100BCE as the cut-in point, does not only talk about the relationship between the Han and the western regions or the Hsiung-nu and the western regions but illustrates the tripartite interaction. The paper discusses why the Han attached significance to the western regions symbolized by Ta-yuan and its subtle situation in the conflict between the Han and the Hsiung-nu. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Politics and military analysis will be presented in section II. Section III contains the economic reasons and consideration, followed by the discussion of the ideological support behind the decisions on the actions of Han in section IV. The conclusion will be offered in section V.

## 2. For Politics and Military

Before the reign of Emperor Wu-ti, two obstacles prevented the early emperors from successfully fighting against the Hsiung-nu: the serious political divisions within the Han, namely disruption by the feudal lords, and the second was the absolute superiority of the Hsiung-nu in horseback combats. However, up to the reign of Emperor Wu-ti, these two handicaps had been greatly changed. [2] Firstly, with the promulgation of the order for counties, the power of the feudal lords was gradually weakened while the centralization was strengthened. Secondly, the cavalry in the period of Emperor Wu-ti had prospered in an all-round way, and their combat level had been greatly improved through the continuous accumulation of practice. Furthermore, with the wealth aggregation in the early Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu-ti more and more ambitious. He was eager to be respected by the whole world and win the long-run competition with the Hsiung-nu. The policy towards the Hsiung-nu was changed from mediation to conquest.

The reasons for the Han launching the war against Ta-yuan included the humiliation caused by the murder of envoys and the anger Emperor Wu-ti aroused for not getting the horses he wanted. However, these were not the main reasons. The Han set the war based on comprehensive consideration, with the targets for warning all the countries in the western regions, to prepare for defeating the Hsiung-nu. The first reason why Emperor Wu-ti marched into Ta-yuan was to make the western regions incline to the Han, willing to provide supplies for the Han Dynasty so that the Han could gear up for the later attack on the Hsiung-nu. This move could also reduce the supply of agricultural products from the western regions to the Hsiung-nu. This kind of supply included the reception of diplomatic envoys and merchants from the Han, and mainly providing food and feed of horses for the army. Emperor Wu-ti set two onslaughts to Ta-yuan. The first time he failed and suffered heavy losses, for the reason that the backing supply was insufficient: "When the army of General Ir-shi had crossed the Salt Lake [Lop-nor] the small states on the road were alarmed; they strengthened their city defenses and refused the issue of provisions .... When it came to Yu-ch'ong, the Chinese army consisted of not

more than a few thousand men, and these were exhausted from lack of food.” [1] The difficulty in guaranteeing the logistics was very disadvantageous for the Han to conquer the western regions and attack the Hsiung-nu from a long distance. Most of the scales of the troops sent out by the Han were large while the war usually lasted for a long time. Therefore it was impossible to meet all the food and feed supplies at one time. Besides, it also required a lot of manpower and material resources to transport a large number of materials, which was costly. Hence the best place to attain the material replenishment was in the vicinity of the battlefield, which could help reduce costs and ensure continuous supplies.

For the Han Dynasty, which wanted to counterattack the Hsiung-nu, the western regions consisted of agriculturally developed oasis countries were undoubtedly the best supply stations. The location met the conditions of close distance and sufficient material resources. Meanwhile, the Hsiung-nu also needed the replenishment from Central Asia. Before the reign of the Emperor Wu-ti, the Hsiung-nu obtained plenty of goods by the frontier market, invading Chinese territory and the tributes brought by the ho-chin policy. But with the offense of Emperor Wu-ti, the political center of the Hsiung-nu moved to the north. The acquisition of agricultural products and handicrafts of the Hsiung-nu began to rely on the western regions. [2] However, when the western regions chose one side that they were willing to provide backing supplements, the priority must be the Hsiung-nu, for the Hsiung-nu was their patron. For these small countries with a weak military force in the western regions, the Hsiung-nu, who was close to them with strong-armed power, could guarantee their common security. Compared with the Hsiung-nu, the Han was too far away to give them protection or military threats. The second war Emperor WU-ti set to Ta-yuan gave enough deterrence to the western regions, forcing them to cooperate with the Han and provide supply. The agricultural products were not only provided by the countries in the western regions, but also by stationing and cultivating in the western regions and the border areas of the Han. The soldiers who had the status of peasants were also responsible for monitoring the actions of the enemies and transmitting the information. In addition to solving the problem of logistics for some troops and envoys passing by the western regions, they were important forces to expel forces of the Hsiung-nu and make the situation in the western regions under control. [3]

The contempt of the western regions for the Han and their closeness to the Hsiung-nu brought by the distance were also reflected in other aspects. For example, in political ho-chin, the princess sent by the Han was appointed as the right consort of the K'un-mo, the king of Wusun, while the princess sent by the Hsiung-nu was appointed as the left consort, which was the most honored. [1] In terms of diplomacy, the attitude of western diplomatic envoys gradually deteriorated, “they imagined that a Chinese army would not be near enough to reach them, and that they were free to annoy the Chinese ambassadors by cutting off their food supplies. The ambassadors were thus reduced to a state of starvation, and their exasperation took the form of actual hostilities.” [1] But in sharp contrast, “it was still a fact that if an envoy of the Hsiung-nu, armed with a letter of the Shan-yu, were sent abroad, all the countries en route would give him safe-conduct and provisions without daring to make trouble of any kind, whereas the ambassadors of China could not obtain provisions without a money payment, nor could they continue their journeys on horseback without buying the necessary beasts.” [1] The offense of Emperor Wu-ti to Ta-yuan was undoubtedly a warning for other countries in the western regions: the Han Dynasty had enough strength to intervene in the western regions, equal with the Hsiung-nu and even more impregnable. This deterrence successfully changed the once unfriendly attitude of the western regions towards the Han. The situation of Wusun could explain the alternation: when Chang K'ien was dispatched to the western regions for the second time, the Han wanted to “cut off the right arm of the Hsiung-nu” together with Wusun, but was rejected; when Li Kuang-li attacked Ta-yuan for a second time, 2000 cavalry Wusun sent “wavering between two courses of action and being unwillingly to proceed” [1]; After the Han

defeated Ta-yuan, "Wu-sun with its dependencies, and the other kingdoms have all become subject to it." [1]

The successful deterrence of the Han depended on the powerful military power and the training of cavalry in the Han for many years. During the decades of rehabilitation and grooming with the aim at the northern cavalry of the Hsiung-nu, their combat capability was constantly improved and the scale expanded rapidly. In the period of 129B.C.-119B.C, a large number of horsemen of the Han contribute their effort to the ten vital expeditions of Emperor Wu-ti. Except for 119B.C., foot-soldiers had not been mentioned up to 110B.C. During the period of 120B.C.-90B.C., trained cavalry was the key factor to resist the Hsiung-nu. Therefore, the cavalry and horses were extremely important for Emperor Wu-ti.[4]

The Han Dynasty always attached great significance to horses. In addition to the official horse raising, private breeding was also encouraged. In 178 B.C., Emperor Wen ordered that if a family sent a horse to the government, three men could be exempted from enlisting in the army after taking the suggestion of Ch'ao Ts'o. Emperor Ching forbade the trade of horses satisfied with certain terms in 146B.C.[4] During the reign of Emperor Wu-ti, the scale of horses was already massive, but the number of horses decreased sharply due to a large number of wars. The urgent need for horses and that requirement rejected by Ta-yuan became the direct cause for the Han setting the war. After the Han won the campaign, "The Chinese army took away several dozens [shu-shi,'several times ten'] of superior horses, besides more than three thousand stallions and mares of inferior quality." [1] Although "when the army passed the Yu- mon Gate there were left of it scarcely more than ten thousand men and a thousand horses" [1], Emperor Wu-ti was still excited, and "all acts of bravery were rewarded by official positions exceeding the expectations of the recipients." [1] The number of these horses was small, but they could be used as breeding horses to improve the quality of the domestic horses.

The purpose of the Han setting the war to Ta-yuan can also be regarded as to strengthen the circulation of horses with the western regions. Such circulation included the trade and the tributes in exchange for luxury goods. The horses attained from the western regions could solve the shortage of domestic horses, as well as reduce the pressure of horse breeding, so that the daily training and combat of the cavalry could be better guaranteed. The circulation of horses stimulated the further development of the cavalry, set a steady foundation for the Han to hold sway over the western regions, and led to the surrender of the South Hsiung-nu.

### 3. For Luxury Goods and Trade

Both the rulers and nobles of the Han and the Hsiung-nu liked to use exotic and luxurious commodities to show their unique political status or political finance based on wealth. In the estimation of William Honeychurch, "the western desire for eastern materials and goods was originally cultivated through a Xiongnu model of political prestige symbolized by these very products." [5]

The Hsiung-nu had various approaches to the luxury commodities from the Han and western regions. Firstly, after several wars, the army of the Hsiung-nu "effected the complete reduction of the Yue-te; while Lou-lan, Wu-sun, Hoo-kee and the adjacent kingdoms, to the number of twenty-six in all, without exception, submitted to the Hsiung-nu" [1]. so it was easy for the Hsiung-nu to get luxury goods in the western regions. The western regions also provided knowledge of the Chinese products, with a system connecting these commodities with high political status. The two-way interaction between them can be confirmed by material evidence in archaeology.[5] Secondly, the appeasement and ho-chin policy of Han enabled the Hsiung-nu to get abundant tributes, even without tributes, the Hsiung-nu still had other ways to attain them. At that time, the market demand for the luxury goods of both the Han and the western

regions was flourishing, added the strong deterrence of the Hsiung-nu, perhaps the Hsiung-nu already had a complete trade system in the western regions.

However, the luxuries of the Han could be directly sold in the western regions without being disseminated via the Hsiung-nu, which could compress the market of the Hsiung-nu and make more profit. The Han had realized that it could exchange the goods which had a surplus but worthless on the domestic market for valuable objects in the western regions.[2] During the journey of Chang K'ien, he "had actually seen some of the products of south China on sale over in northern India." [3] The Han entered the western region trade system not only for seeking profits for itself and intensifying the market of the Hsiung-nu, but also for regulating some acts of diplomatic envoys that damaged the profit of the court: "The ambassadors, being mostly sons of poor families, appropriated the gifts sent by the government, and would undersell them for their private benefit." [1] The trade and the circulation of commodities could also satisfy the desire of the exotic luxuries of Emperor Wu-ti, with a wish to get the treasure and show his political status.

The onslaught the Han launcher to Ta-yuan could be regarded as another exploration after the dispatch of Chang K'ien to the western regions for gaining the economic profit. Though the aim of Chang K'ien was totally for politics, he opened up the traffic, which made the Han no longer only had a wait-and-see attitude towards the western regions. This campaign can be considered as the consolidation for the achievement received by Chang K'ien. It might send a warning to the western regions. Except for displaying the political attitudes of the Han towards the western regions, the large scale of the troops also showed its economic strength, which proved the Han a reliable trading partner. The attack also suggested that if the Han wished to trade with the western regions, the western regions should adopt a friendly and welcome attitude.

#### 4. Ideological Support

The attitude of the Han towards the western regions and the Hsiung-nu, including the actions it took, all originated from a kind of conquering mentality. Compared with the simple and crude occupation, the practice of the Han was more like swallowing, wanting to gradually bring the western regions and the Hsiung-nu into their system to form a subordinate relationship. Except for political attachment, this kind of relationship also required their worship of the Han in culture and thoughts. It transcended the geographical regions and constructed the world order, which the Han was the center. The thought supported Emperor Wu-ti was an extension of the Yi-Xia concept, a kind of view about how the Han group treated the minorities.

The Yi-Xia concept was the cultural connotation that the Han followed when dealing with the relations with other ethnic groups: its construction went beyond the regions, and put the Chinese nation in the center of the world through culture worship. Such superiority was given by consanguinity and geographical location suitable for agriculture, which the ancient country relied on. It was also approved by the Confucianists who attached great importance to hierarchy, blood kinship, and stability.

The mode about judging the nations by the degree of the civilization, which the Han inherited, extended to that the Han was the most advanced country and others were relatively crude. During the reign of Emperor Wu-ti, Tung Chung-shu brought up an idea about the heaven and human having a mutual response, "he heard the warning voice of Heaven everywhere, in a clap of thunder, or in the floods that burst out in east China all too often." [3] In his opinion, the rulers against morality and humanity would be punished by heaven with natural disasters; those who took care of their people would be rewarded with favorable weather benefits for agriculture. Heaven, who bestowed power to the emperor, was sacred. This view offered a more reasonable interpretation of the domination status of the emperor, as well as the honorable position the Han had over the world. Following this thought, the Han should protect the nobility of its own

culture from interference and destruction, and it should make surrounding tribes accept the culture of the Han or cultural sinicization. There were two ways to realize this kind of cultural output: one was the compulsory war. This seemed contrary to the pacifism of Confucianism, but in fact, Confucianism did not give up the reasonable explanation of punitive expeditionary war. Moreover, Confucianism in the Han paid more attention to practical utility and was not as peaceful as expected.[6] The campaign the Han set to Ta-yuan could be used as an example: the rejection Ta-yuan took towards the request of the Han for horses, represented disdain for the superiority of the Han, which could also be regarded as the contempt of barbaric culture to the civilized court, hurting the self-esteem of the nation. Therefore, it chose to use force to prove its aggressive stance and regained the dignity, forming a psychological and cultural relationship of subordination through sanctions. Therefore, the failure of the onslaught towards Ta-yuan of Emperor Wu-ti was a kind of a shame, and he must spare no effort to succeed in the second time. After all, "The Son of Heaven [thought that] having sent a punitive expedition against Yuan, a small country, without bringing it to terms would cause Ta-hia [Bactria] and the like countries to feel contempt for China, and the superior horses of Yuan would never be forthcoming; also Wu-sun and Lun-t'ou would make light of harassing the Chinese ambassadors, [and China] would thus become the laughing stock of foreign countries." [1] The failure of the war could make the cultural exportation failed and hurt a nation with strong self-esteem. Therefore for the Han, attacking the Hsiung-nu was not only for the need to safeguard national security but for vying and confirmation of the unique superiority of the nation.

Another way to realize the cultural output was gentle appeasement, directly showing the finance power to other ethnic groups, which reflected the advantageous culture and policy. When the envoys of the western regions came to the Han, Emperor Wu-ti "often made tours of inspection to the seaside, when he was generally accompanied by numbers of foreign guests, upon whom he would bestow abundant provision, in order to impress them with the wealth of China. On such occasions crowds of onlookers were attracted by the performances of wrestlers, mummery, and all such wonderful entertainments, and by lavish feasts of wine and meat, by which the foreign guests were made to realize China's astounding greatness." [1] In 51B.C., Hoo-han-seay Shen-yu came to the Han to visit the Son of Heaven, Emperor Xuan, receiving lots of gifts: "The imperial gifts were presented, consisting of a cap, a sash, a suit of garments, the gold seal of investiture with an azure ribbon, a jade-ornamented sword, a dagger, a bow, four arrows, ten lances in covers, a chariot, saddle and bridle, fifteen horses, twenty pounds weight of gold, two hundred thousand coins of the realm, seventy-seven suits of inner clothing, eight thousand pieces of embroidered, figured, and variegated silk, and six thousand pounds of raw silk." [1] The Han showed the prosperity to the world through the gifts sent to Hoo-han-seay Shen-yu, reflecting the Han at the peak of civilization, to make more nationalities submit to it.

The Yi-Xia concept and its extension provided ideological guidance for the Chinese nation to deal with the relationship with other ethnic groups. It also offered reasonable reasons for the military and diplomatic decisions of the rulers. The Yi-Xia concept was not only the birthplace of ambition but the shield used by careerists to develop the future.

## 5. Conclusion

This study researches why the Han attached great significance to the western regions represented by Ta-yuan, and also explores the role of the western regions in the conflict of the Han and the Hsiung-nu. Using the onslaught the Han set to Ta-yuan as the cut-in point, the paper is no longer limited to the relationship between any two of the Han, the Hsiung-nu, and the western regions, but illustrates the interaction and connection of these three at the same time, answering the questions from the perspectives of politics and military, economics and the ideological support. The analysis of the paper is more multiple than the past and is the few who

consider ideological support. By spreading the details in Selections from the Han Narrative Histories[1] and sorting out the information, the points could be concluded as follows: after a period of recuperating, the strengthening of centralization and the accumulation of wealth provided the conditions for Emperor Wu-ti to gain advantages in the battle between the Han and the Hsiung-nu. The main reason why Emperor Wu-ti sent troops to attack Ta-yuan, was not the anger aroused by the murder of the envoys or the rejection of the requirement for horses but the comprehensive consideration of targeting the Hsiung-nu. The aim of Emperor Wu-ti was the whole western regions represented by Ta-yuan, which despised the Han but submitted to the Hsiung-nu.

As a group of oasis countries, the western regions were the supply base of agricultural products and handicrafts of the Hsiung-nu, and were also the ideal location to obtain supplementary materials when the Han attacked the Hsiung-nu. If the Han could get the logistics from the western regions, the Han could gain advantages in the future confrontation with the Hsiung-nu, while compressing its reserve resources. Besides, the western regions had abundant horse resources. The Han could make up for the shortage of horses by the circulation of horses, including tributes and trade. The fabulous breeding horses obtained by the circulation were able to improve the quality of domestic horses of the Han. Also, the market of luxury goods in the western regions was relatively broad, but it was under the distribution system of the Hsiung-nu. The Han could show their economic strength by the war, suggesting the western regions that it was a reliable trade partner, which could directly sell own products and get the exotic luxuries in the western regions without via the Hsiung-nu. The Han wanted to get its business benefit in the western regions. Therefore, the attack of the Han on Ta-yuan was to suppress the western regions with powerful military forces, so that it could achieve multiple political, military, and economic purposes.

The Yi-Xia concept and its extension, which born from the agricultural civilization, was a kind of abstract and continuous thought supported the Emperor Wu-ti to make decisions and carry out actions on the Hsiung-nu and the western regions. This paper did not discuss the Yi-Xia concept more deeply. However, in my opinion, it is a topic worthy of further study in the future. Because it not only provided ancient China with pioneering ambition in different periods but also became the umbrella for careerists to have legitimate reasons for expansion. Though there were various expressions and forms the Yi-Xia concept in different dynasties, its essence of conquering and unifying the world, as well as confirming the supreme authority of China remained unchanged. A further study of the Yi-Xia concept will help the historians and researchers understand the actions and attitudes the Chinese nation took towards other ethnic groups before modern times.

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