



THE OPENING AND INTERRUPTION OF THE SILK ROAD WERE CLOSELY TIED TO THE SHIFT IN BORDER POLICIES DURING THE HAN DYNASTY

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ABSTRACT

After its initial establishment during the Han Dynasty, the Silk Road experienced three interruptions and subsequent reopenings by the Han Dynasty, reflecting several adjustments and changes in the border policies of that era. This clearly demonstrates that the development of the Silk Road's Chinese segment was deeply influenced by the border policies of the ancient central authority.

KEY WORDS: *Han Dynasty; Silk Road; borderlands; Western Regions; border policies*

INTRODUCTION

From 209 BCE to 220 CE, the Han Dynasty gradually transformed the Silk Road into a thriving trade route through continuous expansion and governance efforts. However, this development was far from straightforward and underwent several significant twists. Between 139 BCE and 119 BCE, Zhang Qian's two missions to the Western Regions, along with military actions by the Han Dynasty, established the Silk Road as a viable trade route for the first time. Under the stable governance of the Western Han Dynasty, the Silk Road gradually became an increasingly prosperous channel connecting the East and West. Toward the end of the Western Han Dynasty, during Wang Mang's rule, due to his inappropriate policies and unstable borderlands, Xiongnu incursions occurred in 11 CE, followed by raids by the Xiongnu's Left and Right Wings in around 23 CE. Turmoil in the Western Regions led to the disappearance of the Protector General, Li Chong, and the Silk Road was interrupted for the first time. Subsequently, the Silk Road experienced several interruptions and reopenings, with these fluctuations closely tied to the border policies of the Han Dynasty and the governance methods of the officials stationed on the border. Whenever the Han Dynasty was strong, maintained a lenient border policy, and had capable border officials, the Silk Road tended to flourish. Conversely, when the strength of the Han Dynasty waned, or when border officials were ineffective in their governance, the Silk Road was adversely affected, sometimes even disrupted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dong Lili, in her doctoral thesis titled "The Silk Road and the Prosperity of the Han Dynasty," attributed the development of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty to three periods of openness and three periods of interruption. This historical pattern is also sporadically documented in the works of famous Han Dynasty historians such as Sima Qian's "Records of the Grand Historian," Ban Gu's "Book of Han," and Fan Ye's "Book of the Later Han." Regarding the state of openness and interruption of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty, due to factors like political instability, rebellions, and invasions by foreign tribes, its development was not continuously prosperous. Instead, it underwent phases of growth and encountered obstacles. Among these interruptions, the most significant and prolonged can be identified as three distinct periods. Most of the existing literature analyzes the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty from the perspective of the route itself or the perspective of centralized imperial authority. This paper, however, seeks to examine the opening and interruption of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty from the standpoint of Han Dynasty border policies. Through this analysis, it aims to uncover the adjustments and fundamental characteristics of Han Dynasty border policies during this period.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs the method of historical document compilation and comparative research to organize and analyze the border policies adopted during the opening and interruption of the Silk Road in the Han Dynasty. It aims to study the adjustments and characteristics of Han Dynasty border policies. Additionally, this paper utilizes dialectical analysis based on political economics theory to examine the economic development of Han China and



its neighboring regions. It explores how economic and cultural needs drove the development of the Silk Road, influencing political governance, and the reciprocal impact of central political authority on socio-economic factors, especially the development of the Silk Road.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

As is well-known, the formal opening of the Silk Road within China occurred during the Han Dynasty. From 209 BCE to 220 CE, during the era of the Han Dynasty, through continuous expansion and governance efforts, the Silk Road gradually transformed into a fully functional trade route. However, it's important to note that the development of the Silk Road was not without its challenges during this process and underwent several significant twists.

Table 1. The four openings and three interruptions of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty¹

	Time	Reason
First opening	139 BC - 11 AD	Zhang Qian made two diplomatic missions to the Western Regions and participated in the military operations of the Han Dynasty.
Second opening	74AD-77AD	Economic development, strength enhancement.
Third opening	89AD-97AD	Dou Xian broke the Xiongnu, Ban Chao set the Western Regions, broke Yanqi.
Fourth opening	123AD	Han Emperor to Ban Yong as the long history of the Western Regions.
First interruption	23AD—74AD	Wang Mang's national policy aroused the rebellion of the surrounding nations and the crisis in the border area.
Second interruption	77AD—97AD	During the reign of Emperor Han Zhang, due to disasters and border disasters.
Third interruption	107AD	Ren Shang's improper governance measures have triggered conflicts and chaos in the border areas, The Yumen Pass and the Yang Pass were closed.

The various openings and interruptions of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty were all closely related to the border policies implemented during that time. Each significant shift in policy corresponded to these developments.

The first significant shift in Han Dynasty border policy coincided with the initial opening of the Silk Road. In the history of Western Han's development, the Xiongnu was an undeniable force. After emerging during the Spring and Autumn period, the Xiongnu, through long-term military campaigns, subjugated many northern tribes. Around the time of Qin unification, the Xiongnu unified the vast northern grasslands, becoming an incredibly powerful entity in northern Chinese history.

In dealing with the formidable Xiongnu, the Han Dynasty had always pursued a policy of tribute and intermarriage, maintaining the security and stability of the northwestern border in this relatively soft manner. However, as the Xiongnu continued to grow in strength, the threats they posed became increasingly severe.

After a period of consolidation and building up strength, the Han Dynasty, under the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, began to adjust its border policies. In the second year of Yuan Guang (133 BC), "More than 300,000 Han troops lurked near Mayi, Han Anguo served as the Protector General, guarding against the Chanyu with four other generals. Han China transitioned from the previous tribute and intermarriage approach to a policy of military counterattacks.

However, at that time, Han China's strength was not yet sufficient for a comprehensive defeat of the Xiongnu. Therefore, Emperor Wu of Han, from 139 BC to 119 BC, dispatched Zhang Qian on two missions to the Western Regions. Zhang Qian's primary mission was to establish military alliances, while the secondary objective was to establish communication channels with the Western Regions. Although Zhang Qian's first mission did not contribute significantly to Han China's efforts to strike against the Xiongnu, it did provide valuable information about the countries in the Western Regions. This included not only their locations but also knowledge of their resources. As a result, Zhang Qian was sent on a second mission, which was quite different from the first. "He led 300 men, each with two horses, and brought along tens of thousands of cattle and sheep, gold coins, and silks in

¹ Author's analysis.



the tens of thousands. This change in configuration for the second mission indicated a shift in Han Dynasty priorities, moving from military contacts to economic communication and development.

Afterward, the Han Dynasty continued to send envoys to various Western Regions and received envoys from these regions. Moreover, traders from various ethnicities frequently traveled between the interior and the Western Regions.

The second significant shift in Han Dynasty border policy coincided with the first interruption of the Silk Road. During the late Western Han Dynasty, Wang Mang overthrew the Han Dynasty and established his Xin Dynasty. Although his rule lasted for a relatively short period within the overall history of the Han Dynasty, its impact was significant. During this phase, Wang Mang implemented substantial changes in the border policies towards ethnic groups. Firstly, Wang Mang required neighboring ethnic groups to change their titles. In the first year of Shijian (9 AD), it is recorded in "Book of Han, The Annals of the Xiongnu, Part 2," that "Wang Mang ordered that China must not have two titles. Therefore, he sent envoys to adopt the Xiongnu style and they should inscribe 'Muhua' in their memorial to show the correctness of this single title.

Wang Mang proclaimed, "Heaven has no two suns, and the land has no two kings. The way of the hundred kings does not change. During the time of the Han Dynasty, various feudal lords used the title of king. The same applies to the four barbarians. This contradicts ancient classics and deviates from the principle of unity. Therefore, the titles of all feudal lords and kings should be changed to 'duke,' and those who assumed the title of king among the four barbarians should change to 'marquis.

Secondly, Wang Mang used derogatory and insulting terms when referring to neighboring ethnic groups. In the second year of Shijian (10 AD), in December, Wang Mang issued a decree stating, "Change the title of the Xiongnu Chanyu to 'Kuangu' and the term 'Chanyu' to 'Shanyu,' and grant them an imperial seal. In the second year of Tianfeng (11 AD), in May, Wang Mang further issued a statement, saying, "I hereby command to change their titles: Xiongnu to 'Gongnu' and Chanyu to 'Shanyu,' and they are given seals and ribbons. Thirdly, Wang Mang lowered the political status of kings of various minority ethnic groups by reducing their titles from kings to dukes. He sent envoys to the Xiongnu court, handed over the imperial seal to the Shanyu, and replaced the Han seal with a new one called 'zhang.' The Xiongnu Shanyu requested the old seal back, but Wang Mang refused, leading to incursions and attacks on border prefectures, resulting in the killing and plundering of officials and civilians. These unequal ethnic policies stirred discontent among neighboring ethnic groups. As a result, tensions escalated, and the Xiongnu began to harass the Han Dynasty's borders. Other ethnic groups in the vicinity of the Silk Road, such as the Jushi and various Western Regions peoples, gradually rebelled. Naturally, this led to the disruption of the Silk Road.

The third significant shift in Han Dynasty border policy coincided with the second reopening of the Silk Road. During the reign of Emperor Ming, the second emperor of the Eastern Han Dynasty, a series of policy adjustments were made. Emperor Ming, inspired by the spirit of Emperor Guangwu, who aimed to "harmonize all nations, show benevolence to the upper and lower ranks, win over the White Huns, and benefit the widows and orphans," continued to implement benevolent governance policies. He even reduced the sentences of prisoners from Longxi, exempting them from this year's tax and labor service. During the Eastern Han Dynasty's sacrificial ceremonies, various officials, imperial family members, representatives from various commanderies, and envoys from numerous tribal groups attended. Even the Wuhuan and Xianbei came to assist in the sacrifices. The sons of the Xiongnu Chanyu and the tribal leader Gudu Hou also took their places at the ceremony. In the sixteenth year of the Yongping era (73 AD), Emperor Ming ordered Dou Gu to campaign against the Northern Xiongnu. Subsequently, Ban Chao was sent on a mission to the Western Regions. In the following year, in November, Dou Gu, Geng Bing, and Liu Zhang were dispatched to Dunhuang and the Kunlun Pass, where they defeated the White Mountain Xiongnu on the Pu Lei Sea and proceeded into Cheshi. This marked the re-establishment of the Protector General of the Western Regions, and the Silk Road was reopened. During this period, Emperor Ming adjusted the ethnic discrimination policies from Wang Mang's era. He adopted a more tolerant and supportive approach towards tribes that submitted voluntarily while responding with military force to those who posed threats and disturbances. These adjustments effectively resolved the border conflicts instigated by Wang Mang's erroneous policies, leading to the restoration and development of friendly relations between the Han Chinese and various minority groups.

The fourth significant shift in Han Dynasty border policy coincided with the second interruption of the Silk Road. After Emperor Zhang ascended to the throne, there were several significant developments on the border front.



Yarkand and Kucha launched an attack and defeated the Protector General, Chen Mu. The Xiongnu and Cheshi surrounded the Wujjian. Domestic issues also plagued the empire. Natural disasters occurred frequently, causing economic hardships. There was a shortage of grain, primarily because the government officials had not yet arrived in the affected areas, and the provincial governors and officials were not willing to take responsibility for this problem. In terms of border issues, the Qiang people rebelled. For instance, in the second year of Jianchu (77 AD), the Qiang people in Shangdang rebelled. Hao Sui, the Administrator of Jincheng, was sent to suppress the rebellion but suffered a defeat, leading to Qiang incursions into Hanyang. The Northern Xiongnu also continued to raid the Han Dynasty's borders. After the rebellion in the Western Regions, Emperor Zhang, wishing to avoid exhausting the Chinese heartland in conflicts with foreign tribes, recalled the Protector General and discontinued sending envoys to the Western Regions. Emperor Zhang initially pursued a policy of reconciliation with the ethnic minorities. However, under the pressure of internal and external threats, he adopted a more defensive border policy, temporarily relinquishing control over the Western Regions. This led to the second interruption of the Silk Road.

The fifth significant shift in Han Dynasty border policy coincided with the third reopening of the Silk Road. After the death of Emperor Zhang, both Empress Dowager Dou, who held power for a time, and the new Emperor He adopted a policy of expansion and territorial acquisition in dealing with the Western Regions. They launched consecutive military campaigns in the Western Regions, reestablished the Protector General of the Western Regions, pacified various Western Region states, and subdued the Southern Xiongnu. In the year 89 AD, during the reign of Emperor He, the Grand General Dou Xian achieved a significant victory over the Xiongnu. In the following year, 91 AD, Ban Chao was appointed to manage the Western Regions, and the position of Wubu Hou (戊部候) was restored. The position of Wujixiaowei (戊己校尉) was also reinstated. In the sixth year of Emperor He's reign (94 AD), Yarkand was conquered. In the ninth year, Ban Chao dispatched Gan Ying to personally visit the Western Sea and return. After arriving in the Western Regions, Gan Ying worked diligently, achieving remarkable results. "He reached places that no one had reached before and investigated mountains that were previously unknown. He studied the local climate and geography thoroughly, documenting everything, including the local flora and fauna. As a result, distant countries like Mongolia and Dule submitted and sent envoys with tribute. This led to the third reopening of the Silk Road, and it was expanded further. During this period, the Han Dynasty adopted a more proactive approach to the Western Regions, leading to greater stability and prosperity along the Silk Road.

The sixth significant shift in Han Dynasty border policy coincided with the third interruption and fourth reopening of the Silk Road. As Ban Chao grew old and requested to retire, in the year Yongyuan 10 (102 AD), Ren Shang succeeded Ban Chao as the Protector General of the Western Regions. Ren Shang conducted multiple military campaigns in the Western Regions and attempted to bring order to the region but without much success. "The Book of the Later Han, The Annals of the Western Regions" records that "during the reign of Emperor Xiaohan and Yan, the Western Regions rebelled. In the first year of Emperor Andi's Yongchu era, they frequently attacked and besieged the Protector General Ren Shang, Duan Xi, and others. The court considered that due to the remoteness and difficulties of responding, it was difficult to provide reinforcements, so they issued an order to dismiss the Protectorate. Since then, the Western Regions were left open. This was the third interruption of the Silk Road, and it lasted until Emperor Andi's reign. Due to Ren Shang's mismanagement, conflicts and chaos erupted in the border regions. In the early reign of Emperor An of Han, the Yumen Pass and Yang Pass were closed, leading to the third interruption of the Silk Road.

The seventh significant shift in Han Dynasty border policy coincided with the fourth reopening of the Silk Road. In the year Yongguang 2 (123 AD), the Administrator of Dunhuang, Zhang Chang, submitted a memorial with a plan to reclaim the Western Regions. His proposal gained the support of the court officials. Zhang Chang's suggestion was well-received because he analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of reclaiming the border regions and developing the Silk Road. His plan was deemed feasible, leading to its acceptance by Emperor An of Han. Emperor An then appointed Ban Yong as the Chief Clerk of the Western Regions and sent 500 penal laborers to establish a base in Liumu. Ban Yong subsequently defeated the Cheshi, leading to the fourth reopening of the Silk Road.

DISCUSSION

The opening and interruptions of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty were closely linked to China's border regions. In 139 BC, Emperor Wu of Han sent Zhang Qian on a mission to the Western Regions to address the border issues faced by the Han Dynasty. The goal was to establish contact with Western powers to counter the pressure on the Han Dynasty caused by the Xiongnu. From this perspective, the communication of the Silk Road



during the Han Dynasty had its roots in the border regions. The first interruption of the Silk Road occurred due to Wang Mang's erroneous policies, which led to instability in the border regions and incursions by neighboring ethnic groups. This interruption was also related to border issues. When the Silk Road was reopened during the reign of Emperor Ming of Han, it was possible because of a stable border policy and the reestablishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions, which ensured the stability of the border. During the reign of Emperor Zhang of Han, the Silk Road was interrupted once again due to ongoing border issues. It was only restored when Emperor An of Han took measures to address these border problems. The locations of the Yumen Pass and Yang Pass, which were closed by Emperor An, were also situated in the border regions. The reopening of the Silk Road by Ban Yong after defeating the Western Regions was possible because he addressed the border issues. The interruptions and reopenings of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty were not only physically located in the border regions but were also caused by and had consequences for these regions. Therefore, the development of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty was closely tied to China's border regions.

The interruptions and reopenings of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty reflected the characteristics of border governance during that time. In the management and expansion of the Silk Road, the Han Dynasty prioritized the security and stability of the border regions. Additionally, it aimed to promote the economic and social development of these border areas.

The openings and interruptions of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty also illustrate the principles of political-economic relations. The emergence of the Silk Road predated Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions, indicating that there were earlier exchanges of goods driven by economic demand before political interactions. This economic interaction was a natural outcome of economic demand. Despite various factors affecting the Silk Road, it continued to develop, becoming more regularized and larger in scale. The sustained development of Silk Road trade reflected the natural economic demand and interactions among different social groups, which, in turn, influenced political changes. In summary, the Silk Road's development, interruptions, and reopenings during the Han Dynasty were intricately linked to China's border regions, and they reflected the complex interplay between political governance, economic needs, and social interactions.

CONCLUSION

The Silk Road played a significant historical role in the course of history, and its development and changes were influenced by various factors, among which the frontier is an important factor that must be mentioned. The opening of the Silk Road during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han had its origins in frontier concerns. However, due to the erroneous frontier policies implemented during Wang Mang's rule, the frontier became unstable, leading to the interruption of the Silk Road. The interruptions of the Silk Road during the periods of Emperor Zhang of Han and Emperor An of Han were also related to frontier issues at that time. It was during the reigns of Emperor Ming of Han, Emperor He of Han, and Emperor An of Han that the Silk Road was reopened, and this was made possible by adjusting frontier policies and achieving a strong state. The several interruptions and reopenings of the Silk Road were not only geographically located in the frontier but also closely tied to frontier-related factors. Therefore, the study of the Han Dynasty's Silk Road cannot be separated from an examination of the Han Dynasty's frontier.

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