



SILK ROAD
VIRTUAL MUSEUM



DIPLOMACY AND DESTINY IN THE HAN DYNASTY

by Richard Griffiths

Silk Road Diplomats - Part 1



THIS IS A PUBLICATION BY THE SILK ROAD VIRTUAL MUSEUM

On 23 September 2024, the Silk Road Virtual Museum officially opened its virtual doors, inviting visitors to wander through its interactive digital corridors. Far more than just a digital archive, the Silk Road Virtual Museum offers a dynamic experience, where users can engage with over 900 artefacts.

The museum is the vision of retired economic historian Professor Richard Griffiths, who has harnessed cutting-edge virtual technology to create an immersive and accessible experience. Users can navigate an interactive map interface that spans from China to the Middle East and beyond, discovering artefacts, artwork, and stories from the civilisations that lived along the Silk Road.

Since the artefacts are all available online, visitors are no longer restricted by location, finances or even political unrest to explore the rich history of the Silk Road. With future plans for expansion, including an underwater component featuring shipwreck artefacts, the Silk Road Virtual Museum is a constantly evolving platform. By making this cultural heritage freely accessible online, Professor Griffiths aims to inspire curiosity, learning, and a more nuanced understanding of humanity's shared past.

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THE HAN AND XIONGNU

The Silk Road was never a single road or path but rather a vast network of routes that crisscrossed the Eurasian continent. These routes varied by season and circumstance, carrying not only silk but also a wealth of other scarce goods and commodities.

Caravans of animals, managed by skilled drivers, made this exchange possible. Accompanying them were merchants, travellers, missionaries, and tradesmen, each with their own reasons for braving the long journey. Rarely did any of them traverse the entire route. It was the goods that travelled, not the people, increasing in value the further they moved from their source.

This magazine seeks to capture the adventures of three diplomats—Zhang Qian, Su Wu, and Princess Jieyou. Their stories are retold here. But first, we will look at the two main protagonists – the Han Chinese and the nomadic Xiongnu.

East Asia, where these stories unfold, is a region defined by dramatic climate and geological contrasts. The south is warm and wet, while the north is cold and dry. Fertile farmlands in the east gradually give way to arid deserts as one moves westward, where towering mountain ranges rise before merging with the vast grasslands stretching down from the north.

The societies living in these diverse regions adapted to their unique environments. By 200 BCE, the Han Chinese had developed a settled, agrarian society built on farming and handicrafts. In contrast, the Xiongnu maintained a nomadic lifestyle centred around livestock herding. Though each society viewed the other with suspicion and disdain, it was the Han Chinese who recorded the histories that shape our understanding today.

The Han civilisation of the time was a highly advanced and organised society, marked by its settled agrarian economy, a sophisticated bureaucracy, and a strong adherence to Confucian values, which stressed stability, hierarchy, and respect for authority. The Han often viewed the Xiongnu as “barbarians” (野蠻人) who lived beyond the bounds of what they considered civilised society. They saw the nomads as lawless, lacking the structured legal and moral systems central to Confucian thought.

These routes were not always open. Domestic unrest, dangers along the way, and international conflicts often increased the risks or closed the roads altogether. Yet, when the routes were clear, trade flourished, ideas flowed freely, and the Silk Roads reached their heyday.

Among those who did journey the length of the Silk Road were the diplomats, sent to maintain relations with neighbouring countries and competing rulers, both near and far. Some of these envoys became legends, etched into the lore and histories of their nations. Others remain nameless, overshadowed by the great events they helped shape.

The Xiongnu's tendency to raid, often in violation of treaties, and the brutal nature of these raids further solidified their reputation as savage and ruthless in Han eyes.

The Xiongnu's lack of a written language, their simpler material culture, and their different social customs were also seen as markers of cultural backwardness. This stood in stark contrast to the Han's pride in their sophisticated writing system, elaborate rituals, and advanced arts and crafts.

The settled, orderly Han civilisation could hardly have been more different from the nomadic Xiongnu, who lived a mobile, pastoral lifestyle, valuing freedom, martial prowess, and adaptability. Their social structure revolved around tribal alliances and the demands of a harsh environment. However, the Xiongnu voice is largely absent from the historical accounts we rely on.

Fortunately, a fragment of a conversation from the early second century BCE offers us a rare glimpse into the Xiongnu perspective.

Zhonghang Yue, a Han defector who had entered the service of the Xiongnu rulers, encountered a Han ambassador who criticised Xiongnu culture. In response, Zhonghang Yue launched into a spirited defence:

"The Xiongnu eat the meat of their domestic animals and wear their skins; the domestic animals eat grass and drink water, and they move around according to the season. When they are disturbed, they ride out and shoot arrows, and when they are at peace, they are happy and have no problems. Their rules are loose and easy to follow. Ruler and subject have an easy relationship, and governing the nation is like governing a single person. Compare this with these Chinese, who use their strength in ploughing and tending mulberry trees to clothe and feed themselves. They build city walls to be prepared. When the people face disturbances, they are not used to fighting, and when the crisis is over, they are too tired to work. Ha! The Chinese live in dirt houses and get all dressed up, but what good does it do them?"



Han Tomb Mural, Horses and Carts from Nei Menggu Helingeer Tomb in Inner Mongolia

ZHANG QIAN'S PIONEERING JOURNEY

The second century BCE was a transformative period for the Han Dynasty, marked by bold territorial expansion and new diplomatic ventures beyond its familiar borders. At the heart of this effort was Zhang Qian, a pioneering diplomat whose journey unexpectedly reshaped China's connection with the wider world. His mission was not intended to forge new trade routes, yet it became the catalyst for what would later be known as the Silk Road, introducing China to distant lands and opening channels that would change history.

The seventh Han dynasty ruler, Emperor Wu (ruled 141-87BCE) was plagued by the relentless attacks from the Xiongnu, a nomadic peoples whose territories today span parts of Mongolia, Inner Mongolia (China), and southern Siberia. Wu's plan was to forge an alliance with the Yuezhi people against the Xiongnu. They were another nomadic people who had migrated and settled less harsh and more diverse regions in what would be modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.

In 138 BCE, Zhang Qian, a military officer, was dispatched with one hundred men to reach the Yuezhi people and forge an alliance against the Xiongnu.

CAPTURE AND ESCAPE

The success of Zhang Qian's mission relied on passing through Xiongnu territory undetected. However, fate had other plans. Zhang Qian and his party were intercepted and captured, enduring ten years of captivity as slaves. During this time, Zhang Qian was compelled to marry and fathered a son.

Over the years, many of the captives acclimatised to their new lives, with some even assimilating into Xiongnu society. Zhang Qian, too, appeared to settle into his circumstances, and the vigilance of his captors likely waned as a result.





The Emperor Wu (mounted on his horse) dispatching Zhang Qian (kneeling on the left) on his mission. Detail from 8th century fresco Magao Cave 323, Dunhuang.

Yet, beneath the surface, Zhang Qian never wavered in his determination to complete his mission. Alongside his ever-loyal servant, Ganfu, he eventually seized the opportunity to escape. Their flight was fraught with danger—every step took them closer to recapture. For over a year, they navigated through desolate deserts and towering mountains, constantly battling the unforgiving elements in a desperate bid for freedom.

Eventually, Zhang Qian and Ganfu, reached the heart of the Yuezhi people in what is now Afghanistan. The Yuezhi had flourished in their new homeland, leading a peaceful and prosperous life.

Despite Zhang's efforts to persuade them into forming a military alliance against

the Xiongnu, the Yuezhi showed little interest in engaging in warfare with any nation. Zhang Qian spent a year among them, observing their way of life and taking a particular interest in their small but sturdy horses, which would later become a valuable resource in China.

When the time came, Zhang Qian and Ganfu began their long journey back to China, meticulously documenting their observations. But fate intervened once again. In a twist of misfortune, they were recaptured by the Xiongnu. For some reason, their lives were spared. Two years later, following the death of the Xiongnu leader, unrest spread across the region, creating an opportunity for Zhang Qian and Ganfu to escape once more.

In 125 BCE, after more than a decade of trials and captivity, they finally returned to China, completing a journey that would have lasting historical significance.

Zhang Qian may have failed to secure the military alliance he had sought, but his return to the Han court brought invaluable knowledge. He told the Emperor about the relatively small but prosperous civilisations to the west, which contributed goods to extensive trade routes that stretched even farther into unknown lands. These western territories were not only wealthy markets for Chinese products but also sources of supply, particularly the prized horses of the Fergana Valley. Zhang's reports hinted at even more distant realms—the

powerful Parthian Empire to the west and the vast riches of India to the south, lands he had heard of but never visited.

Intrigued by these discoveries, the Emperor sent Zhang Qian on a second mission to establish direct trade with India, whose products had captivated the Chinese court. However, this mission ended in failure.

Nevertheless, Zhang's contributions did not end there. In 119 BCE, he was sent on yet another mission, this time to the Wusun people, whose lands lay between the Xiongnu and the Yuezhi. The goal was to forge peaceful relations and secure access to this critical region.

Although it is unclear if Zhang Qian achieved all his goals, it does seem that the Silk Roads were opened to Chinese trade, marking the beginning of a new era of exchange between East and West.

THE STORY OF AN ACCIDENTAL HERO

Zhang Qian's story comes to us primarily through the writings of Sima Qian in the *Shiji* (史记), a monumental historical text completed within forty years of Zhang Qian's return. Sima Qian, writing at a time when the Han Dynasty was keen to assert its place in an expanding and interconnected world, portrayed Zhang Qian's journey as a testament to Confucian virtues. However, like many ancient texts, the *Shiji* blurs the line between historical fact and narrative interpretation.

While Sima Qian's account is an invaluable resource, it also reflects a broader effort to frame Zhang Qian's exploits within the Han Dynasty's imperial ideology and

worldview, underscoring the dynasty's mission to extend its influence beyond its borders.

Sima Qian enjoys shaping his histories around the actions of individuals, whether high-ranking officials or ordinary people, highlighting the idea that personal virtues and vices do play a role in determining the course of history. In Zhang Qian's story, Sima Qian focuses on the Confucian ideals of loyalty, perseverance, and duty. Through Zhang Qian's determination, despite tremendous hardships, he becomes a model for these virtues, and his personal journey is framed as a testament to their power.

Sima Qian also embeds Zhang Qian's mission within the traditional Chinese belief in the 'Mandate of Heaven' — the notion that the emperor has a divine duty to bring order and stability to the world. By sending Zhang Qian westward, the emperor is portrayed as fulfilling his imperial destiny. Zhang's observations of foreign peoples and cultures offered the Han Dynasty an opportunity to extend its reach, not just through conquest but through trade and cultural exchange, uniting diverse societies under a just and moral authority.

Zhang Qian's story is told as an epic of survival and resilience. His unwavering

commitment to his mission, despite being captured, enslaved, and facing insurmountable odds, paints him as an accidental hero. His tale serves a larger purpose: to illustrate how individual actions align with the broader forces of history.

REFLECTION

Zhang Qian's journey is framed as a powerful example of how individual effort can influence the direction of history. Though he failed to forge the military alliance he sought, his accounts of the western regions sparked the Han Empire's interest in new possibilities for trade and cultural exchange.

Sima Qian's portrayal of Zhang Qian celebrates his perseverance and loyalty, while simultaneously reinforcing the Han Dynasty's imperial narrative. The blend of historical fact and interpretive storytelling reminds us that history is shaped not only by those who live it but also by those who record it.

Ultimately, Zhang Qian's legacy is not just found in the routes he travelled but in the story of his journey itself. His vaunted bravery and determination turned the Han Empire's attention towards new horizons, opening the door to exchanges that would shape the future of empires for centuries to come.

THE EXILE OF SU WU

Twenty-five years after Zhang Qian's return, Emperor Wu launched another mission to the Xiongnu—nomadic tribes whose frequent cross-border raids posed a constant threat to the Han Empire's northern frontiers. Despite the periodic violence, the Xiongnu had little interest in conquering China or adopting its sedentary economic model. There was always a chance that diplomacy could prevent conflict, and in 100 BCE, such an opportunity seemed to arise.

The diplomat Su Wu (c. 140–60 BCE), accompanied by 100 soldiers and officials, was chosen to lead this vital diplomatic mission. The peace Su Wu was sent to secure was critical not only for stabilising the northern borders but also for preserving the trade routes and diplomatic relationships painstakingly established since Zhang Qian's time. Known for his wisdom, integrity and deep loyalty to the Han Dynasty, Su Wu was an experienced diplomat, and his primary goal was to negotiate peace and arrange for the release of Han prisoners held by the Xiongnu.

The journey to the Xiongnu court was challenging, traversing harsh terrain and entering a world where the customs, language and way of life were vastly different from those of the Han. Upon their arrival, Su Wu and his delegation were formally received by the Xiongnu leader, Chanyu Qiedihou, in a manner that befitted the status of Han envoys. However, trouble soon arose.

Su Wu's second-in-command, Zhang Sheng, felt that Qiedihou had shown insufficient respect and conspired with disgruntled members of the court to

assassinate the Xiongnu leader—a grave misstep in diplomacy. When the plot was exposed, Zhang Sheng sought to deflect blame onto Su Wu, causing the diplomatic mission to fall apart. Overwhelmed by the collapse of his mission and his tarnished reputation, Su Wu, in a moment of despair, attempted to take his own life but was saved by one of his men. This act marked the beginning of a long and painful captivity, testing Su Wu's resilience and loyalty to the Han cause.

THE TRIALS OF SU WU

The Chanyu ordered the arrest of Su Wu and his entire delegation. Zhang Sheng, who had instigated the plot (according to the Book of Han (汉书), written some two centuries later), and several of his companions defected to the Xiongnu, compounding their disgrace. In contrast, Su Wu remained unwavering in his loyalty. Despite severe interrogation, relentless pressure and even torture, he refused to break.

According to the Book of Han, Su Wu remained resolute even when facing execution, with the blade resting on his neck—a testament to his extreme



Su Wu tending Rams By Huang Shen (1687-+/-1770). Hanging scroll; ink and colours on paper, 94.2 × 101.2 cm, Shanghai Museum, China

loyalty, a virtue celebrated in Chinese historiography. Notably, the Book of Han was modelled on Sima Qian's Shiji (史记), which similarly emphasized loyalty and imperial destiny.

In a final attempt to crush Su Wu's spirit, the Chanyu ordered him imprisoned in a cellar without food or water. Su Wu survived by eating the wool from his coat and drinking the snow that fell into the cellar. When that failed to break him, the Chanyu exiled him to the desolate wilderness of Lake Baikal, a remote region marked by extreme cold and isolation.

There, he was tasked with herding a small flock of rams. "When the rams give milk," the Chanyu taunted, "you can return home."

Life in exile was a brutal struggle. With inadequate food supplies, Su Wu had to survive on wild grasses, roots, and whatever small animals he could catch. Legend has it that he used hair from his coat to weave makeshift fishing nets, hoping to catch fish from the frozen waters. Yet, despite these unimaginable hardships, Su Wu remained resolute.

On one occasion, a Han prisoner was sent to him with fabricated news intended to break his resolve—his brothers had been accused of treason and had committed suicide, his mother had passed away, and his wife had remarried. Even with these emotional blows, Su Wu remained unbroken, steadfast in his loyalty to the Han Dynasty.

The story tells us that throughout his exile, Su Wu never let go of his staff, the symbol carried by all imperial envoys. He used it to help rear his sheep, and it was by his side during his daily ritual. Each day, Su Wu would turn towards Chang'an, the Han capital, and bow in reverence to the Han emperor, to whom he had sworn his allegiance. Even when news arrived that Emperor Wu had died, Su Wu was reportedly so devastated that he vomited blood. Yet, despite his profound grief, he remained loyal to his oath, steadfast in his isolation, alone with his few sheep.

THE RETURN HOME

During Su Wu's years in exile, his fate remained unknown in China. Rumours circulated that he had died, but Emperor Zhao of Han, who succeeded Emperor Wu, never gave up hope. He believed Su Wu might still be alive. Diplomatic efforts to secure Su Wu's release continued sporadically, but the Xiongnu, fully aware of his symbolic importance, were reluctant to let him go.

It was not until 81 BCE, nearly two decades after Su Wu's exile began, that a shift in the political landscape created an opportunity for his release. A new Chanyu, more inclined towards peace with the Han, had come into power, opening the door for a possible exchange of prisoners.

Rumours had already reached China that Su Wu was alive, but the Xiongnu still insisted that he had long since perished.

To break the impasse, the Chinese envoys concocted a clever ruse. They fabricated a story that the emperor had been out hunting and shot a migratory goose, only to discover a note tied to its foot—a desperate message from Su Wu himself, pleading for rescue.

Though the tale seemed far-fetched, it compelled the Chanyu to admit that Su Wu was indeed alive. After 19 long years in exile, Su Wu, now a shadow of his former self, was finally allowed to return to his homeland. He was received with great honour, and the emperor rewarded his loyalty with a high-ranking position at court, allowing Su Wu to live out his remaining years in peace.

REFLECTION

The story of Su Wu has been immortalised in Chinese culture as a model of loyalty and perseverance. His refusal to betray his emperor, even under the most extreme hardship, has been celebrated in poems, paintings, and literature throughout Chinese history.

Su Wu's personal ordeal is compelling, but its resonance lies in how it reflects the Confucian ideals central to Han society. His tale embodies the core virtues of loyalty (忠, Zhōng), perseverance (毅, Yì), righteousness and duty (义, Yì), and moral integrity (仁, Rén). Su Wu's legacy was celebrated precisely because it mirrored the Confucian values that the Han Dynasty sought to promote, ensuring that his story would inspire generations to come.



Detail from advertisement for the TV series "Princess Jieyou" (解忧公主) released in 2016.

PRINCESS JIEYOU: STRATEGIC MARRIAGE

In the annals of Chinese history, the role of women is often overlooked, overshadowed by the towering figures of emperors and generals. Yet, among the quiet corridors of power, there were women who wielded significant influence, shaping the destiny of nations through their wit, intelligence, and diplomacy.

Two such women were Princess Jieyou and her servant Feng Liao, whose journeys as diplomats and negotiators stand as a testament to their indomitable spirit and the critical roles they played in the intricate web of ancient Chinese politics.

PRINCESS JIEYOU AS A MODERN HEROINE

Liu Jieyou (121–41 BCE) was beautiful, brave, intelligent and as resourceful and brilliant as the men who often dominate the pages of history. Though she descended from a royal lineage, her grandfather's failed rebellion had disgraced her family, forcing Jieyou to grow up away from the Han court. But in 105 BCE, when Emperor Wu sought to strengthen ties with the Wusun—whose kingdom centred around modern-day Yshtyk in Kyrgyzstan—Jieyou was called out of obscurity. Her royal status was restored, and at the young age of sixteen she was sent as a bride for King Kunmo of the Wusun.

Her journey was not only thousands of miles across treacherous landscapes but also a profound cultural and emotional odyssey. The Wusun court was vastly different from the Han, with its distinct customs, language and way of life. Despite these challenges, Princess Jieyou adapted swiftly, understanding that her success depended on her ability to navigate these differences. Armed with courage and a sharp sense of humour, she skillfully manoeuvred through the intrigues of the king's harem and escaped the schemes of a treacherous mother-in-law.

When the king died, she was forced to marry his cousin and successor, Weng gu, for whom she developed a deep love and

loyalty. It helped that in her back story they had met and fallen in love when she had been a young girl in a travelling theatre troupe.

Jieyou grew to love the Wusun people and earned their respect in return, becoming a pivotal figure in the court. Her keen political and military insight allowed her to shape critical decisions, always advocating for strong diplomatic and commercial ties with the Han while resisting pro-Xiongnu factions.

Such was the life of Princess Jieyou as depicted in the forty-one part Chinese television series first broadcast in 2016.

PRINCESS JIEYOU IN HAN HISTORY

In 105 BCE, Emperor Wu solidified the alliance between the Han and the Wusun through a diplomatic marriage, selecting Liu Jieyou, a member of the imperial family, for the role. Though not of the highest rank, Jieyou was chosen, marking the Han practice of heqin, or "marriage alliance," which aimed to secure peace and cooperation with neighbouring states. With the formalities in place, Princess Jieyou embarked on her journey, accompanied by attendants, valuable gifts, and an imperial edict, arriving at the Wusun court to marry King Kunmo.

Her union with Kunmo was more than a personal one—it had significant political ramifications for the Han Dynasty. The Wusun, strategically positioned between the Han Empire and the nomadic Xiongnu, were vital to Han foreign policy. By marrying Princess Jieyou to their king, the Han hoped to secure the Wusun as allies, creating a buffer against Xiongnu

incursions into their northern borders.

The marriage produced several children, further solidifying ties between the two states. After Kunmo's death, Princess Jieyou, following the custom of levirate marriage, was wed to his successor. This practice, while common among nomadic peoples, also ensured that the Han-Wusun alliance remained strong. The Chinese literature suggests that she was deeply unhappy. A poem (Song of Sorrow) attributed to her reads:

吾家嫁我兮天一方，
遠托異國兮烏孫王。
穹廬為室兮旃為牆，
以肉為食兮酪為漿。
居常土思兮心內傷，
願為黃鵠兮歸故鄉。

(My family married me off to the edge of the world; Far away in the strange land of the Wusun king; A domed hut is my chamber, the felt my walls; Meat is my food, fermented milk my drink; Living here, I long for my land, and my heart aches; Wishing I could be a yellow swan, and return to my old home.)

True or not, throughout her time in the Wusun court, Princess Jieyou maintained close communication with the Han,

sending reports that were instrumental in shaping the empire's foreign policy decisions. Her diplomatic efforts provided crucial intelligence, allowing the Han to monitor the evolving political dynamics between the Wusun and the Xiongnu.

REFLECTION

Princess Jieyou's diplomatic marriage had a profound and enduring impact on relations between the Han Dynasty and the nomadic tribes of the western regions. The alliance she helped forge with the Wusun lasted for several generations, contributing to both the stability of the northern frontier and the broader prosperity of the region. Her story, as told in the Book of Han, presents her less as an individual of resourcefulness and agency, and more as a symbol of sacrificial duty and loyalty to the state.

For the writer of this historical record, Princess Jieyou's life exemplified how marriage could be wielded as a tool of statecraft, with personal sacrifice often required for the greater good of the empire. Her willingness to leave her homeland, adapt to a foreign culture, and fulfill her diplomatic role is portrayed as a noble sacrifice, embodying Confucian ideals of duty, loyalty and sacrifice as virtues critical to the maintenance of societal and imperial order.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we trace the paths of Zhang Qian, Su Wu, and Princess Jieyou, we see how their individual journeys were not merely personal odysseys but critical threads woven into the fabric of Han Dynasty diplomacy. Each faced challenges that tested their resolve—whether it was Zhang Qian's years of captivity, Su Wu's endurance in exile, or Princess Jieyou's adaptation to a foreign land. Through their experiences, we gain insight into the complexities of early Han foreign policy, where diplomacy was as much about human resilience as it was about strategic alliances.

These stories remind us that the Silk Road was shaped not just by the exchange of goods but by the courage and determination of those who traversed its vast distances. In their dedication to duty, these diplomats helped to build bridges between disparate cultures, ensuring that the Han Dynasty could navigate the turbulent waters of international relations. Their legacies, preserved in the annals of history, continue to offer valuable lessons in the art of diplomacy.

In the end, the Silk Road was not just a route for trade—it was a testament to the endurance of those who sought to connect the world, one journey at a time.



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