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Zhang Qian & The Silk Road

Looking back in history, China has not often had a stable relationship with its neighbors. Sometimes, the relationship was calm and harmonic. Other times, it was tense and edgy. Of all its neighbors, however, those that dwelled north of China were the most



threatening. To fend them off, Chinese emperors tried various approaches, such as ordering the construction of the Great Wall of China, waging wars, and giving away money and valuable goods. Interestingly, it was through one of those tactics undertaken by Zhang Qian that led to the establishment of the Silk Road.

Emperor Wu of the Western Han dynasty was a great ruler. Under his reign (141 B.C. - 87 B.C.), the economy was booming and the society was prosperous. Things were great! But Emperor Wu was concerned. He was worried about a nomadic tribe called Xiongnu living in present-day Mongolia. Every now and then, the Xiongnu people would cross China's northern border to harass local residents. Their aggressiveness threatened the prosperity that the Chinese had grown to enjoy.

Emperor Wu wanted to address the issue and get rid of the Xiongnu once and for all. But he didn't want to commit his troops without a solid strategy. One day in 138 B.C., he received a very interesting intelligence report. Emperor Wu learned that the Yuezhi people, another nomadic tribe, held a deep grudge against the Xiongnu. Not so long ago, the Xiongnu had defeated the Yuezhi and had forced them to move westward. He heard that the Yuezhi people wanted to avenge the Xiongnu for the brutal death of their king. Right away, Emperor Wu had an idea. He wanted to build an alliance with the Yuezhi. He wanted to use the allied forces and open two war fronts - one to the south with Chinese forces and another to the west with Yuezhi forces - both against the Xiongnu. He figured that the Xiongnu could not sustain attacks from both sides, and victory would be a sure thing. To convey his proposal, Emperor Wu needed to send an envoy to the Yuezhi. He asked for a volunteer, and Zhang Qian came forward.

Zhang Qian took about 100 people with him, including a Xiongnu guide named Kanfu. The journey didn't go quite as planned. En route, the delegation ran into the Xiongnu. Suspicious of Zhang Qian and his men's intent, the Shanyu (a title the Xiongnu used for their ruler) refused to let the group go. He detained them and placed them under surveillance. The Shanyu tried to subdue Zhang Qian, so he gave him a Xiongnu wife with whom Zhang Qian had a son. Zhang Qian, by all accounts, never forgot his mission. On the surface, he appeared content in his family life. Secretly, he was waiting for the first chance to escape. That chance, at last, came ten years later!

After Zhang Qian left the Xiongnu, he traveled across several small countries before finally reaching the land of the Yuezhi (near present-day Uzbekistan). To his disappointment, the new king of the Yuezhi was no longer interested in seeking revenge. He told Zhang Qian that he and his people were happy in their new settlement. He saw no reason to go to war with the Xiongnu. After spending a year or so traveling around the area, Zhang Qian

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headed back to China. On his way home, he once again was captured by the Xiongnu. Fortunately, his detention this time lasted for only about a year. When the Shanyu died, a power struggle broke out, and the country fell into turmoil. Zhang Qian took advantage of the situation and escaped with his Xiongnu wife, son, and the guide Kanfu. They arrived in China in 125 B.C. (Some historians maintained that Zhang Qian's first expedition was from 139 B.C. to 126 B.C.)

Zhang Qian gave Emperor Wu detailed accounts of what he had seen. His insights were invaluable. Before Zhang Qian's historical journey, Chinese emperors had only had scant knowledge of the vast area lying west of China. Now, Emperor Wu got a good idea of the political, economical, and cultural dynamics in that region. He was very happy with Zhang Qian's report; furthermore, he was very impressed with Zhang Qian's determination and loyalty.

In 119 B.C., Zhang Qian undertook another diplomatic mission and went to visit the kingdom of Wu Sun (near the present-day Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, northwest of China). Just like the last expedition, this one also bore the hope of building a military alliance. Yet, just like the last expedition, the king of Wu Sun wasn't interested and declined the proposal. Zhang Qian returned from the kingdom of Wu Su in 115 B.C. He died two years later.

Though Zhang Qian never successfully completed his diplomatic missions, his profound knowledge of the western region (or "Xi Yu" in Chinese) helped establish trading routes later known as the Silk Road. The Silk Road extended from Xi'an (the capital of the Western Han dynasty), through Central Asia and the Middle East, to the Mediterranean Sea. For the next thousand years, caravans trudged along the Silk Road. They brought silk, paper, and other Chinese inventions to countries along the way. They also brought spices, exotic fruits, and other interesting items to China.

As for the Xiongnu, Emperor Wu eventually launched his own military assaults -- without any outside help -- and drove them away!

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Questions

_____ 1. Where did the Xiongnu live?

- A. Uzbekistan
- B. Kazakhstan
- C. Mongolia
- D. India

_____ 2. With whom did Emperor Wu want to build his first military alliance?

- A. the Dayuan people
- B. the Yuezhi people
- C. the Xiongnu people
- D. the Wu Sun people

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- _____ 3. What dynasty was Zhang Qian from?
- A. the Eastern Han dynasty
 - B. the Western Zhou dynasty
 - C. the Western Jin dynasty
 - D. the Western Han dynasty
- _____ 4. How many years did it take Zhang Qian to complete his first diplomatic mission, albeit unsuccessfully?
- A. 13 years
 - B. 10 years
 - C. 20 years
 - D. 4 years
- _____ 5. Which of the following was a product that the Silk Road merchants brought from China?
- A. ivory
 - B. silk
 - C. exotic fruits
 - D. spices
- _____ 6. Where did the Silk Road end?
- A. the Black Sea
 - B. the Caspian Sea
 - C. the Mediterranean Sea
 - D. the Aral Sea
- _____ 7. What was Zhang Qian's biggest accomplishment?
- A. Persuaded the Yuezhi people to eradicate the Xiongnu
 - B. Persuaded the Wu Sun people to eradicate the Xiongnu
 - C. Brought back first-hand information about Xi Yu
 - D. Launched military assaults and drove the Xiongnu away
- _____ 8. Among the initial delegation to the Yuezhi, how many people made it back to China?
- A. one
 - B. four
 - C. two
 - D. three
- _____ 9. How many times did Zhang Qian lead delegations to Xi Yu?
- A. one
 - B. two
 - C. four
 - D. three
- _____ 10. Which of the following about Zhang Qian is INCORRECT?
- A. Zhang Qian managed to persuade the Xiongnu to eradicate the kingdom of Wu Sun.
 - B. Zhang Qian helped establish the Silk Road.
 - C. Zhang Qian had a Xiongnu wife.
 - D. Zhang Qian was a Chinese diplomat.

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Suppose you were asked by Emperor Wu to lead the expedition to the Yuezhi. You were aware of the danger involved. Would you go? Explain your reasons.
