Document 18.2

Excerpt describing the diplomatic efforts of Zhang Qian (张骞) on behalf of Han emperor Wudi (汉武帝) from Records of the Grand Historian (史记, 《史记》) by Sima Qian (司马迁), written between 105 and 90 B.C.E.

Sima Qian (145–90 B.C.E.) worked as court historian during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), and compiled Records of the Historian, the first official history of China. The work of 130 chapters was based on all the documents recording Chinese traditions and legends that were available to him at the time.

Zhang Qian was the first person to bring back a clear account of Dayuan. At this time [139 B.C.E.] the emperor questioned various Xiongnu who had surrendered to the Han, and they all reported that the Xiongnu had defeated the king of the Yuezi people and had made his skull into a drinking vessel. As a result the Yuezi had fled and bore a constant grudge against the Xiongnu, though as yet they had been unable to find anyone to join them in an attack on their enemy.

The Han at this time were engaged in a concerted effort to destroy the Xiongnu, and therefore, when the emperor heard this, he decided to try to send an envoy to establish relations with the Yuezi. To reach them, however, an envoy would inevitably have to pass through Xiongnu territory. The emperor accordingly sent out a summons for men capable of undertaking such a mission. Zhang Qian, who was a palace attendant at the time, answered the summons and was appointed as envoy.

He set out, accompanied by Kanfu, a Xiongnu slave. They traveled west through the territory of Xiongnu and were captured by the Xiongnu and taken before the shanyu [king]. The shanyu detained them and refused to let them proceed. “The Yuezi people live north of me,” he said. “What does the Han mean by trying to send an envoy to them! Do you suppose . . . the Han would let my men pass through China?”

The Xiongnu detained Zhang Qian for over ten years and gave him a wife from their own people, by whom he had a son. Zhang Qian never once relinquished the imperial credentials that marked him as an envoy of the Han, and after he had lived in Xiongnu territory for some time and was less closely watched than at first, he and his party finally managed to escape and resume their journey toward the Yuezi.

After hastening west for twenty or thirty days, they reached the kingdom of Dayuan. The king of Dayuan had heard of the wealth of the Han empire and wished to establish communication with it, though as yet he had been unable to do so. When he met Zhang Qian, he was overjoyed and asked where Zhang Qian wished to go.

---

1 A Central Asian steppe kingdom to China’s northwest located in a region that today encompasses portions of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.
“I was dispatched as envoy of the Han to the Yuezhi, but the Xiongnu blocked my way and I have only just now managed to escape,” he replied. “I beg Your Highness to give me some guides to show me the way. If I can reach my destination and return to the Han to make my report, the Han will reward you with countless gifts!”

The king of Dayuan trusted his words and sent him on his way, giving him guides and interpreters to take him to the state of Kangju\(^2\). From there he was able to make his way to the land of the Great Yuezhi.

Since the king of the Great Yuezhi had been killed by the Xiongnu, his son had succeeded him as ruler and had forced the kingdom of Daxia [Bactria] to recognize his sovereignty. The region he ruled was rich and fertile and seldom troubled by invaders, and the king thought only of his own enjoyment. He considered the Han too far away to bother with and had no particular intention of avenging his father’s death by attacking the Xiongnu . . .

After spending a year or so in the area, Zhang Qian began to journey back, . . . but he was once more captured by the Xiongnu and detained over a year. Just at this time the Shanyu died and [a subordinate prince] . . . attacked the Shanyu’s heir and set himself up as the new Shanyu [126 B.C.E.]. As a result of this, the whole Xiongnu nation was in turmoil and Zhang Qian, along with his Xiongnu wife and the former slave Kanfu, were able to escape and return to China.

The emperor honored Zhang Qian with the post of palace counselor and awarded Kanfu the title of “Lord Who Carries Out His Mission.” . . . When Zhang Qian first set out on his mission, he was accompanied by over one hundred men, but after thirteen years abroad, only he and Kanfu managed to make their way back to China. Zhang Qian in person visited the lands of Dayuan, the Great Yuezhi, Daxia, and Kangju, and in addition he gathered reports on five or six other large states in the neighborhood. All of this information he related to the emperor on his return.


\(^{2}\) A steppe kingdom located southeast of the Aral Sea and directly north of Bactria. Today the region forms part of Kazakhstan.