

Xuanquan Manuscripts: Han Dynasty Women's Role in Fostering Exchanges in the Western Regions Through Marriage Alliances and Attendant Service on the Early Silk Road

Hongyu Quan

*Department of History, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
hquan1@Sheffield.ac.uk*

Abstract. This work examines the Xuanquan Manuscripts from Dunhuang to explore the significant role of Han Dynasty women in fostering exchanges in the early Silk Road. Through marriage alliances and attendant diplomatic activities, Han princesses and their maidservants not only weakened the Xiongnu's influence in the Western Regions but also consolidated the authority of the Han Dynasty. Princess Jieyou of the Wusun, in particular, established a pro-Han network through marital and political strategies, strengthening ties with states such as Wusun and Kucha. Her maidservant Feng Liao also acted as a female envoy, mediating conflicts and maintaining frontier stability. Meanwhile, women such as the Lady of the King of Kucha, who came to other Western Regions for marriage alliances also continued their pro-Han policy, promoting friendly exchanges between these Western Regions and the Han Dynasty, and constantly expanding the Han Dynasty's influence and control in the Western Regions. The Xuanquan Manuscripts provide valuable first-hand evidence that compensates for the neglect of women's diplomatic contributions in traditional historiography. By highlighting women as key participants in early Silk Road exchanges, this paper offers a new perspective on Han foreign relations and the role of gender in diplomacy.

Keywords: Silk Road, Foreign Exchanges, Xuanquan Manuscripts

1. Introduction

During the Han Dynasty, Zhangqian, a Han envoy, was sent to the Western Regions and opened up the Silk Road, which facilitated exchanges and connections between the Han Dynasty and the various countries in the Western Regions. The Xuanquan Manuscripts were unearthed from the Xuanquan Post in Dunhuang, which was one of the important post stations on the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty. A great number of the Xuanquan Manuscripts have been discovered, with valuable content. They recorded a wide range of diplomacy and national defense events, including envoy exchanges and military activities along the Silk Road between the late Western Han Dynasty and the early Eastern Han Dynasty [1]. After Emperor Wu of Han dispatched Wei Qing and Huo Qubing to

battle the Xiongnu in the north, significantly reducing the Xiongnu's power and influence in the Western Regions [2]. Following that, the ties between the various Western Regions and the Han Dynasty grew stronger, and some Western Regions' countries even went to pay tribute to the Han Dynasty. During the process of promoting the friendly exchanges between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions, the women from the Han and their maidservants for accompanying also made significant contributions. They primarily continued to reduce the Xiongnu's power over the Western Regions while consolidating the Han Dynasty's authority through marriage alliances, in line with the Han Dynasty's policy regarding the Western Regions. This essay will argue that the women of the Han Dynasty promoted the exchanges in the Western Regions through marriage alliances and accompanying, by researching the evidence from the Xuanquan Manuscripts.

2. Jieyou Princess of the Wusun

Marriage alliances were one of the most important diplomatic means during the Han Dynasty. Among the Han princesses who travelled to the Western Regions for marriage alliances, Jieyou Princess, who visited Wusun, is regarded as the most important and made the most significant contributions. When Jieyou Princess raced for a marital match, the Western Han Dynasty was at its height of strength. The Xiongnu found it impossible to compete with the Han Dynasty, so they decided to consolidate their control over the Western Regions, aiming to counterattack the Han Dynasty in this manner [3]. As a result, in order to further weaken the Xiongnu's dominance and influence in the Western Regions, the Han Dynasty needed to form an alliance with the various nations of the Western Regions. The Wusun were the most powerful of the Western Regions' states, rivaling even the Xiongnu [4]. Jieyou Princess, following Xijun Princess, married the Wusun and shouldered the political mission of winning over the Wusun and resisting the Xiongnu. There are several manuscripts from the Xuanquan Manuscripts which recorded events related to Jieyou Princess, one of them reads as follows:

Two letters were sent. One of them is from the Marquis of Changluo, while the other is from the Wusun Princess. On the evening of the twenty-ninth day of the second month, in the second Ganlu year (52 B.C.E), [the two letters] were received by the courier Dang Fu from the Pingwang Station; Zhu Ding, courier from the Xuanquan Station, handed [the two letters] over to the courier from the Wannian Station.

(In Chinese: 上書二封.其一封長羅侯,一烏孫公主.甘露二年二月辛未日夕時受平望驛(驛)騎當富,縣(懸)泉驛(驛)騎朱定付萬年驛(驛)騎.(IIT0113③:65) [5])

The content of this manuscript is Wusun Princess, as well as Jieyou Princess, When submitting a letter to the Han Dynasty, it was passed through the Xuanquan Station and handed over to the next post station by the courier Zhu Ding. Jieyou Princess returned to Chang' an from Wusun in the third Ganlu year, which means the details of her letter were highly likely her request to Emperor Xuan of Han to return to her native land of Chang' an. Jieyou Princess lived in the Wusun for nearly half a century, while living through the reigns of three successive Kunmo 昆莫 (kings) of the Wusun [3]. She actively participated in Wusun politics and was committed to preserving the relationship between the Han Dynasty and Wusun.

Jieyou Princess's influence among the Wusun gradually expanded, and she provided military assistance to the Wusun, promoting military cooperation between the Han Dynasty and the Wusun. Throughout the conflict between the Wusun and the Xiongnu, Jieyou Princess repeatedly submitted memorials to the Han Dynasty to support of the Wusun [6]. In 71 BCE, the Xiongnu attempted two invasions against the Wusun but were decisively defeated. According to the Book of Han, the campaigns resulted in the loss of nearly 30% of the Xiongnu population and 50% of their livestock

within a single year [7]. Therefore, the Wusun could not have achieved victory without the help of the Jieyou Princess. When the Xiongnu started their first invasion of Wusun, Jieyou Princess appealed to the Han Dynasty for assistance and the Han Dynasty dispatched 150,000 elite troops, successfully deterring the Xiongnu [7]. The power of the Xiongnu was vastly weakened due to the two campaigns, which deprived them of the ability to command the Western Regions, and laid the foundation for the establishment of the West Region Protectorate in 60 BCE. The establishment of the Western Region Protectorate symbolized that the Han Dynasty exercised full sovereignty over the Western Regions, where it officially entered the territory of China [8].

Jieyou Princess not only profoundly influenced the political situation of the Wusun but also deepened the close ties between other countries in the Western Regions and the Han Dynasty. Several of Jieyou Princess's sons and daughters went on to become prominent pro-Han leaders, expanding Han-aligned power in the Western Regions. For example, her eldest daughter, Dishì, became the queen of the Kingdom of Kucha 龜茲, while her second son, Wannian, was later honored as the King of Shache 莎車 [3]. In this way, Jieyou Princess and her children established a relatively extensive and stable pro-Han network in the Western Regions, which extensively strengthened ties between the Han dynasty and the Western Regions and facilitated their eventual submission to Han authority.

3. The queen of the Kucha

Under the promotion of Jieyou Princess, other countries holding a pro-Han attitude in the Western Regions began to make a friendly relationship with the Han in succession, especially Kucha and Shache. In the process of learning and imitating the culture and customs of the Han Dynasty, Kucha and Shache were at the forefront among the countries in the Western Regions [9]. Under the influence of his wife, King of Kucha, Jiangbin 絳賓, made an effort to study and absorb Han culture. According to the Hanshu 漢書, he admired Han Dynasty attire and procedures and learned about the construction of palaces by the Han Dynasty, the striking of bells and drums, and the imitation of Han etiquette [6]. Following his demise, Kucha's successive King and his wife continued his traditions while maintaining close links to the Han Dynasty. One of the Xuanquan Manuscripts is recorded as follows:

When the Right Envoy arrives at the county post station, [he] will be accommodated in the best post house [by the post station]. In large counties, a separate station shall be used, and meals provided according to standard regulations. The king and the queen of Kucha's post house follow the same standard as the one where the envoys resided. (The first column)

There is an eight-chi bed with dark blue or black curtains in the main hall. Within the inner chamber, four beds with curtains are set up, all of which have been fully laid out. (The second column)

Inside the entrance of the house, a curtained area shall be arranged for the seating of distinguished guests.

In Chinese: 右使者到縣置,共捨弟一傳,大縣異傳食如式.龜茲王,王夫人捨次使者傳(第一欄)
堂上置八尺床臥一張,卓若青帷.閣內□上四臥皆張帷床內置(第二欄)
傳捨門內張帷,可爲貴人坐者.(I90DXT0114①:112A) [10]

This bamboo slip records the reception standards and related rituals that the King and his wife of Kucha received when they passed through the Xuanquan Station. Yansheng Yuan believes that, based on the dates of other dating manuscripts unearthed from the exploration square, they should be the next King of Kucha and his wife, succeeding Jiangbin and Dishì [11]. After Jiangbin married Dishì, they traveled to Chang'an to express their congratulations and visited the Central Plains

several times to undertake cultural exchanges with the Han Dynasty [6]. This demonstrates that following Jiangbin's death, his successor Chengde 丞德 upheld his legacy while maintaining amicable relations with the Han Dynasty. At the same time, it validates records in the Hanshu that Chengde claimed to be the grandson of the Han Dynasty and frequently visited Chang'an during the reigns of Emperor Cheng and Emperor Ai of Han [6]. The above Xuanquan manuscript can be proved to be the reception record left when Chengde and his wife passed by Xuanquan Station on their route to Chang'an to pay tribute. Jieyou Princess and her daughter, Dishu, were always mindful of their political mission, remained loyal to the Han Dynasty, and worked tirelessly to maintain peace and stability in the Western Regions, as well as foster and advance the Han Dynasty's relationship with the Western Regions.

4. Lady Feng of the Wusun

In addition to the princesses who came to the Western Regions for marriage alliances, which played an important role in solidifying the frontier and sustaining ethnic connections, the accompanying maidservants were also active participants in frontier matters. Fengliao 馮嫪, Jieyou Princess's maidservant, is a talented helper as well as the wife of Wusun's right general. She frequently represented the princess on diplomatic missions to Western Regions countries, and all of them held her in high regard [6]. This impressive diplomat made significant contributions to the stability of the Western Regions. Wujiutu 烏就屠, the son of the Wusun ruler known as the Kuang Wang 狂王 and a Xiongnu woman, assaulted and killed the Kuang Wang and crowned himself Kunmi at the start of the Ganlu year, putting Jieyou Princess's firstborn son at risk [11]. As a response, the Han Dynasty sent an army of 15,000 men to prepare to attack Wujiutu [6]. When war was about to break out, Fengliao intervened to mediate and persuade Wujiutu. Wujiutu eventually succumbed to fear and consented to reconcile, stating simply his desire to keep his title of Lesser Kunmi 昆彌 [6]. Under Fengliao's mediation, the Han army did not send troops. A war was successfully prevented while also stabilizing the political situation in the Western Regions.

Fengliao's intervention, which helped resolve Wusun's internal conflict, was also recorded in the Xuanquan Manuscripts:

On the eighteenth day of the fourth month of the second Ganlu year, the Magistrate of Le Guan County, Chong, reports: As instructed by imperial edict, privately owned horses have been requisitioned to assist the post-station mounts in escorting the General Poqiang, the Colonel in Charge of Canal Works, and the imperial envoy Lady Feng with her entourage. Some of the accompanying officers are required to travel as far as Dunhuang County. The party has been travelling day and night. Along the way, the officers responsible for handling and driving the horses became separated from one another, making it impossible to provide mutual support. The horses, exhausted beyond endurance, have in some cases been abandoned on the road. We have made repeated searches for these lost horses, but none have yet been recovered. [I am therefore] dispatching the cavalryman Zhangshi and others to track them down, using the descriptions provided in the attached memorandum. I respectfully request that the Commandant's Office notify all subordinate divisions, counties, government bureaus, and neighbouring commanderies: if any of the missing horses are found, they should be handed over to Zhangshi and his team. Respectfully submitted.

(In Chinese: 甘露二年四月庚申朔丁醜,樂官(涇)令充敢言之:詔書以騎馬助傳馬,送破羌將軍,穿渠校尉,使者馮夫人.軍吏遠者至敦煌郡,軍吏晨夜行,吏禦逐馬前後不相及,馬罷亟,或道棄,逐索未得,謹遣騎士張世等以物色逐各如牒,唯府告部,縣,官,旁郡,有得此馬者以與世等.敢言之. (VT1311④:82) [5])

According to this bamboo slip, the magistrate of Le Guan dispatched people to help look for the horses lost by Lady Feng and others while passing through Xuanquan Station. Lady Feng was in a hurry to run around because of the urgency of the situation, and she lost her horse in the process. Lady Feng was so concerned in the second year of Ganlu that she may have gone to Wusun to resolve the split of the Greater and Lesser Kunmi [11]. To keep the border areas under control, the Han Dynasty sent a large number of diplomats to the Western Regions. For example, Suwu's, Zhangqian's, and other male diplomats' deeds have gained widespread attention. However, Fengliao, the female diplomat, was no less courageous than a man. She successfully strengthened the alliance between the Han Dynasty and the Wusun, while also maintaining stability in the Western Region.

5. Conclusion

The significance of this research will be analyzed from both the perspectives of importance and limitations. First of all, there is the importance of this research. It fills the gender gap in traditional male-dominated diplomatic and military narratives by emphasizing research on non-power-centered people, such as marriage princesses and maidservants. It also provides a gender perspective on the early Silk Road exchange history. Female envoys and ambassadors are rarely mentioned or described in detail in traditional historical records, resulting in many women's accomplishments being buried in multiple ancient works [12]. This represents the phenomenon of 'collective aphasia' among women in the old historical biographical system, and it also has an extended effect on people's perceptions of women's engagement in foreign affairs activities [12]. By promoting women's diplomatic activities, the academic community not only enriches its understanding of ancient Chinese diplomatic history but also investigates the crucial historical role that ancient Chinese women played in the early history of ethnic relations in East Asia. Secondly, this research is based on the archaeological artifacts of Xuanquan Manuscripts, which complements the content recorded in historical books such as *Hanshu*, further restoring the factual details of personnel exchanges and diplomatic events along the Silk Road.

There are also several limitations in this research. Judging from the selected research subject, the content of Xuanquan Manuscripts is almost entirely official documents, which is difficult to understand women's personal experiences and feelings due to the lack of direct female perspectives. The main time recorded in Xuanquan Manuscripts is 111 BCE-107 CE, which cannot comprehensively study the activities of women along the entire early Silk Road. Therefore, it is necessary to combine it with other archaeological evidence, such as the Yumen Pass Manuscripts, as well as historical documents like the *Hanshu* to do further research.

In conclusion, the Xuanquan Manuscripts are valuable physical evidence for researching the early history of the Silk Road's development, as they document numerous military and diplomatic events in the Western Regions during the Han Dynasty. During the Han Dynasty, foreign exchanges were frequent. Among the many diplomats, women also accounted for a considerable proportion. Women primarily served as central diplomats to stabilize the political situation on the frontier through marriage alliances and accompanying attendants. By employing transmitting intelligence and mediating conflicts, women continuously strengthened the alliance between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions, promoted the submission of the Western Regions to the Han Dynasty, and weakened the influence and control of the Xiongnu. Jieyou Princess of the Wusun, her descendants, and maidservant Fengliao served as the most important bridge between the Wusun and the Han dynasty. The children Jieyou Princess gave birth to created pro-Han forces in neighboring Western Regions counties, establishing the foundations for the Western Regions Protectorate. Representing Jieyou Princess on a diplomatic mission to the Western Regions, Fengliao mediated the domestic

conflicts of the Wusun, restored regional stability, and strengthened their alliance with the Han dynasty. An examination of how women on the early Silk Road facilitated peaceful exchanges between the Western Regions and the Han dynasty provides a new gendered perspective that addresses a gap in mainstream Silk Road historiography. Nevertheless, the Xuanquan Manuscripts are incomplete and ought to be supplemented with further archaeological discoveries and relevant historical records when employed as primary sources.

References

- [1] Muzi, Li, and Ma Li, 'The exchanges and interactions between Chang'an and the Western Regions as seen in the Xuanquan Manuscripts', *Western Literature and Art Studies* 5 (2009), pp. 160-164.
- [2] Hanshu, *The Annals of Emperor Wu*.
- [3] Jingzhou, Yao, and Li Yanhua, 'The First Exploration on Jie You Princess and Xiyu of Han Dynasty', *Southeast Culture* 3 (2000), pp. 88-91.
- [4] Hanshu, *The Biography of Zhang Qian and Li Guangli*.
- [5] Pingsheng, Hu, and Zhang Defang (eds.), *The Interpretation of the Xuanquan Manuscripts from Dunhuang*. Shanghai Chinese classics publishing house, 2001.
- [6] Hanshu, *The History of the Western Regions*.
- [7] Hanshu, *The History of the Xiongnu*.
- [8] Xiaoyan, Liu, 'On the Guardian of the Silk Road in the Western Han Dynasty - the Protector of the Western Regions', *Research Center for Zhou-Qin Ethical Culture and Modern Moral Values*.
- [9] Ningsheng, Wang, 'The Western Regions of the Han and Jin Dynasties and the Civilization of Motherland', *Acta Archaeologica Sinica* 1 (1977), pp. 23-42.
- [10] Gansu Bamboo Slips Museum, Gansu Antique Archaeology Institute, Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities, SNNU, Research and Conservation Center for Unearthed Texts, Tsinghua University (eds.), *Xuanquan Manuscripts*.
- [11] Yansheng, Yuan, 'The Women from the Western Regions during the Exchanges of Envoys from the Xuanquan Manuscripts', *The Western Regions Studies* 02 (2021), pp. 11-24.
- [12] Birong, Li, and Li Si, 'Special Missions and Historical Contributions of Han Dynasty Female Diplomats', *Xiangtan University*, 2016, pp. 36-40.