

THE WESTERN REGIONS UNDER THE HSIUNG-NU AND THE HAN*

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The triangular clash

The second century B.C. had a profound influence on the history of Central Asia.

This was the century in which the clash between two great powers, the Hsiung-nu and the Han, for the mastery of the Western Regions took place. The Hsiung-nu people originally lived in the northern part of present-day Shaanxi in China. During the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., faced with the northward expansion of the states of Ch'in and Chao, they were forced to migrate to the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, where they became a strong tribal confederation, and subsequently controlled many of the nomad peoples of Mongolia. Early in the second century B.C. the Hsiung-nu drove out the Yüeh-chih and took possession of their land. At that time there were several communities in the oases round the Tarim

* See Map 6

basin leading a sedentary life, occupied in agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry. In the Turfan basin to the west of Lop Nor and along the northern foot of the Kunlun and Altai ranges were scattered communities carrying on a semi-agricultural and semi-nomadic way of life. These groups had organized themselves around urban centres to form a series of petty kingdoms. The Han historians refer to these as the 'Walled City-States of the Western Regions'. There were some thirty-six of them, the more important being Chü-shih(Turfan), Lou-lan, Yen-ch'i (Qarashahr), Ch'iu-tzū (Kucha), Ku-mo (Aksu), Shu-lê(Kashgar), So-chü (Yarkand), Yü-t'ien (Khotan) and Chü-mi (Khema). Because of the great distances between them they were not integrated into one strong political unit, and were unable to offer any effective resistance to the Hsiung-nu.

Under Mao-tun, the Hsiung-nu consolidated their position. The land west of the Altai mountains, with the 'Walled City-States', was ruled by the Prince of Li-jhu. The Hsiung-nu under him were nomads living on the grassy plain around Lake Pu-li (modern Lake Bar-köl). A resident with the title 'general-in-charge of slaves' was installed to keep watch on the petty Walled City-States, with the duty of levying taxes from them. The Hsiung-nu clearly considered all the peoples living in the Walled City-States as slaves, but left their original political organization undisturbed. No doubt their princes had been sent as hostages to the Hsiung-nu. Taxes to the Hsiung-nu would naturally be paid in agricultural produce such as grain and fruit. The tribal confederation of the Hsiung-nu was prepared to challenge the Han in China, which suffered from political instability following the tyrannical rule of the Ch'in and the widespread civil war. The Chinese tried to appease the Hsiung-nu through intermediaries, by paying indemnity and providing gifts for several decades. Eventually, after forty years of peace during the reigns of Wen-ti and Ching-ti, the Han had sufficient economic and military power to confront the Hsiung-nu. Emperor Wu-ti, who ascended the throne in 140 B.C., proposed joint action with the Yüeh-chih against their common enemy, the Hsiung-nu, and sent a mission under Chang Ch'ien to the Yüeh-chih, in the Ili river basin, seeking an alliance. About 117 B.C. Chang Ch'ien was again sent on a mission to the Wu-sun, and dispatched deputy envoys to the countries of Ta-yüan, K'ang-chü, Yüeh-chih and Ta-hsia. The information he collected was recorded by the great historian Szü-ma Ch'ien in the *Shih-chi* the earliest reliable Chinese literary source for the history of Central Asia.

After Chang Ch'ien's first mission there was a long struggle for control of the Western Regions. In 121 B.C. one of the Hsiung-nu leading nobles ruling over the Gansu corridor surrendered to the Han, who set up the four prefectures of Wu-wei, Chang-i, Chiu-ch'üan and Tun-huang, the first step towards extending Han power over the Western Regions. After this the oasis kingdoms of the Tarim basin, previously dependants of the

Hsiung-nu, successfully transferred their allegiance to the Han. The campaign by the Han general Li Kuang-li against Ta-yüan (part of modern Ferghana) in 101 B.C. further increased the political prestige and influence of the Han.

The clash between the Han and the Hsiung-nu now focused on Chü-shih (the modern Turfan basin), an area of great strategic importance. During the first half of the first century B.C. internal rivalries greatly weakened Hsiung-nu power. In 60 B.C., the Hsiung-nu prince Jih-chu surrendered to the Han; the Hsiung-nu post of 'general-in-charge' was abolished. The eventual victor in the internal rivalries, *shan-yü* Hu-han-yeh, surrendered to the Han in 54 B.C. After this event the thirty-six states of the Western Regions came under the direct rule of the Han. They invested Ch'eng Chi as the first *hsi-yü tu-hu* (protector-general of the Western Regions), that is, the highest civil and military official in charge of the area. From then until the end of the reign of Wang Mang (c. A.D. 23), there was an unbroken succession of protectors-general, eighteen in all, of whom ten names have come down to us.¹ The last protector-general, Li Chung, died at Kucha and his personal seal has been discovered in Shaya County, Xinjiang.²

China and the Western Regions

The large-scale peasant uprising in the last years of Wang Mang's reign and the ensuing civil war left the Eastern Han dynasty too exhausted to regain control over the Western Regions. After a fierce war between the petty kingdoms, the state of So-chü (Yarkand) gained hegemony over the area for a few years. The Southern Hsiung-nu remained subject to the Han, and stayed within the northern prefectures; but the Western Hsiung-nu invaded the Western Regions, and the Walled City-States of the Western Regions fell once more into their hands.

In the first years of the Eastern Han period, three fierce battles were fought for the control of the Western Regions. Pan Ch'ao was the best-known Han general. His military career of thirty-one years (A.D. 73–102) was crowned with success, and he was popular with the people of the oasis states. He successfully averted the invasion of the army sent by a Kushan king who attempted to interfere in the affairs of the Walled City-States, and sent his envoy, Kan Ying, on a mission to Tiao-chih (the Persian Gulf). Kan Ying was, however, prevented from completing his journey by the Parthians.

¹ Huang Wenbi, 1981, pp. 310–14.

² Huang Wenbi, 1958, p. 113. The seal inscription is '*Li Chong shi yin xin*'. Huang inexplicably rendered '*xin*' as two separate characters and hence failed in its decipherment. See Ma, 1975, p. 29.

In A.D. 126 Pan Ch'ao's son, Pan Yung, again defeated the Northern Hsiung-nu and consolidated Han rule in the Western Regions. Instead of the protector-general the Han court now appointed a *hsi-yü chang-shih* (secretary-general), a post that was retained until the end of the reign of Ling-ti 'c. A.D. 188'. At least eight of these officials are recorded in documentary sources.

The protracted civil war in China towards the end of the Eastern Han severed links with the Western Regions, but the Northern Hsiung-nu also declined. One part migrated to the west, another part was dispersed over Gansu, Shaanxi and Inner Mongolia and, like the Southern Hsiung-nu, began to merge with the local inhabitants of China. Meanwhile, a new nomadic confederation, the Hsien-pi, took over the Mongolian plateau and the lands west of the Altai mountains. During the first half of the third century A.D., China proper was divided into three independent states, the Wei, Shu and Wu. Both the Wei and the Shu re-established relations with the Western Regions, the Wei reviving the post of secretary-general. A substantial number of wooden tablets with Chinese inscriptions belonging to the Wei and Ch'in periods have been found in the ruins of Lou-lan north-west of Lop Nor.³ They are official documents and archives from the office of the secretary-general, governor of the Western Regions.

The economy of the oasis states

The economic base of these oasis states was farming and horticulture, with irrigation and animal husbandry. Numerous dwelling sites have been discovered recently in the Tarim basin dating from the Han, the most famous being at Niya in the north of Minfeng County. The remains of houses are spread along both banks of the now dry Niya river, covering an area of 10 km (south to north) by 25 km (east to west). The houses had floors made from a mixture of wheat-straw, cow-dung and mud; their walls were made of wattle woven with tamarisk twigs daubed with mud, and fitted with fireplaces. Around the settlement were extensive orchards. This site and the economic life it reflects are representative of the oasis states in this area (Fig. 1).⁴ In places where the land was poor or sandy, as in Shan-shan, and it was impossible to rely upon agriculture, people reared animals and obtained cereals from the agricultural oases by barter.

The most outstanding handicraft product of the Western Regions under Han rule was probably textiles. Because herding was widespread, skins and woollen garments were used for protection. Many pieces of woollen cloth, brightly coloured and beautifully figured,

³ Luo and Wang, 1914; Huang Lie, 1981, pp. 58–63.

⁴ Shi, 1962.



FIG. 1. Ruins of a village. Niya.

have been found in ruins of the Han period. Fragments of woollen cloth with remarkably beautiful designs of men, animals, vines, tortoiseshell and petal patterns (Fig. 2) were found in a husband-and-wife tomb of the Eastern Han period in Minfeng County. Tapestries from the Western Regions used for bed coverings, carpets and hangings were held in high esteem by the Han people.⁵ Clothing was also made from linen, cotton and silk. Flax was extensively cultivated in the Western Regions and had quite a long history. Cotton perhaps first entered the area from India. Two pieces of dyed cotton cloth of this period have been found at Niya (Fig. 3). Using a white ground, the cloth is dyed with wax and indigo to form beautiful designs comparable in quality to modern products using the same technique in China today. One beautifully designed piece of dyed cotton has a head 'perhaps of Buddha' surrounded with a halo and the figure of a dragon. In terms of decorative style it has strong Indian characteristics, but the dragon is certainly Chinese in conception. It is not clear whether this material was imported or a local product, but it does show that the inhabitants of the Western Regions were using high-quality batik-dyed cotton clothes during the Eastern Han period. There is no doubt about the Chinese origin of silks. The Emperor Wu-ti and Chang Ch'ien had opened up the Silk Route, and the Han court regularly presented gifts of all sorts of silk. Many pieces of Han silk have been found in Xinjiang in the Wusun tombs at Zhaosu and in the Han sites at Lop Nor. Among the best-preserved pieces of silk are those from the tomb of a husband and wife at Minfeng. There is hardly any item of clothing in the tomb that is not of finely woven silk, with quality embroidery. One robe is decorated with Chinese characters wishing 'Good luck for 10,000 generations', while a 'crowing-cock' pillow suggests the idea of rising early in the morning. Other beautifully woven Chinese characters wish 'Long life and good fortune to you and your descendants'.

⁵ Ma, 1983*b*.

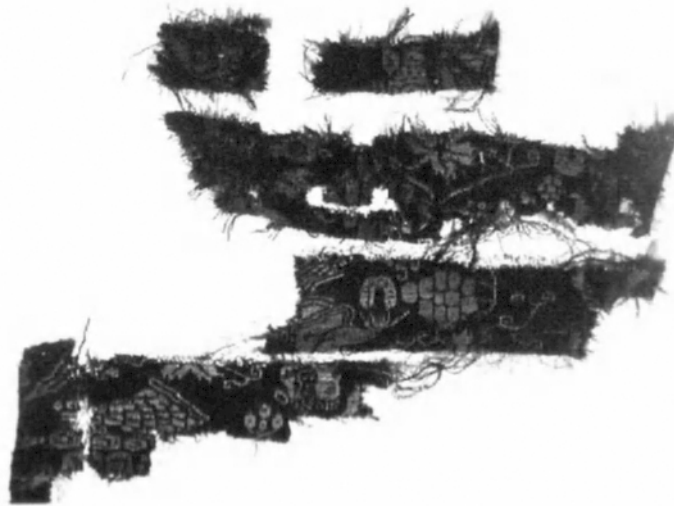


FIG. 2. Woollen cloth with figures of men, animals and grapes.



FIG. 3. Wax-resist dyed cotton cloth.

They were obviously in daily use in China proper, but the narrow sleeves of the brocade robe suggest a local fashion that was possibly tailored locally (Fig. 4).⁶

The Western Regions had already developed mining and metal casting techniques prior to the Han dynasty. The *Han-shu* description of the Shou-ch'iang states that 'there is iron ore in the hills; and they produce their own arms – bows, arrows, long knives, swords and armour'. The natives of Shan-shan were also skilled at making arms and in the states west of Ch'ieh-mo 'the arms made were like those of the Han'. So-chü (Yarkand) 'has

⁶ Ma, 1975, pp. 29–30.



FIG. 4. Brocade robe.

mountains containing iron ores' and in Ch'iu-tzŭ (Kucha) workmen were 'skilled at casting and had reserves of lead'. It is clear that iron-casting and steel-making were fairly widespread among the Walled City-States of the Western Regions, and were used in making both tools and weapons.

Mining sites of the Han period have been discovered at A'a Shan, Minfeng and Aqikê Shan. From A'a Shan the finds include crucibles, iron slag, ore and pottery like the bellows air pipe found in Shaanxi (Fig. 5). At Niya and elsewhere ore, sintered iron, slag, stone chisels, whetstones and fragments of iron shovels have been found; and houses there contained iron adzes and sickles with wooden handles. A copper-mining site has been located at Ka-ke-ma-ke. 'Wu-shu' coins of the Han period have been found at all these mining sites, suggesting that they were established after the beginning of Han rule in the Western Regions.⁷ From the Wu-sun tomb site in Zhaosu County dating from Han times comes an iron ploughshare, and tool marks found on a wooden outer coffin show that iron tools were in use.⁸ In the same context was found a strikingly beautiful gold ring set with precious stones, but it is not yet possible to determine whether it was imported or made locally.

The exchange of commodities between the Western Regions and the heartland of China expanded considerably during the Han period. At a number of Han sites in Xinjiang lacquerware, woven rattanware and bronze mirrors have been discovered, all imported from

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

⁸ Ma and Wang, 1978, pp. 11–12.



FIG. 5. Pottery bellows air-pipe.



FIG. 6. Toilet box and toiletries.

China proper (Fig. 6). It is especially worthy of mention that linen-made paper was discovered among Western Han remains at Lop Nor and paper of a similar kind has been found in Eastern Han tombs in Minfeng County.⁹ Paper is one of the most striking inventions of China, dating back to the Western Han period. Paper appeared in the Western Regions soon after it was first invented in China, showing the speed at which commodities were exchanged between the two regions. China imported from the Western Regions fine breeds of horses, grapes, alfalfa and, of course, jade, the famous product of Khotan. The name Yümen Kuan (Jade Gate Pass) may have been given by the Chinese merchants who imported jade from the Western Regions. Some post-Han sources mention Chinese imports of *hu* paper (flax), *hu* gourds, *hu* peaches and *hu* stallions. The term ‘hu’ means ‘Westernbarbarian’ and points to the area from which they came. Fine woollen and cotton textiles from the Western Regions also flowed into China in large quantities.

⁹ Huang Wenbi, 1948, p. 168, Plates 23, 24–25.

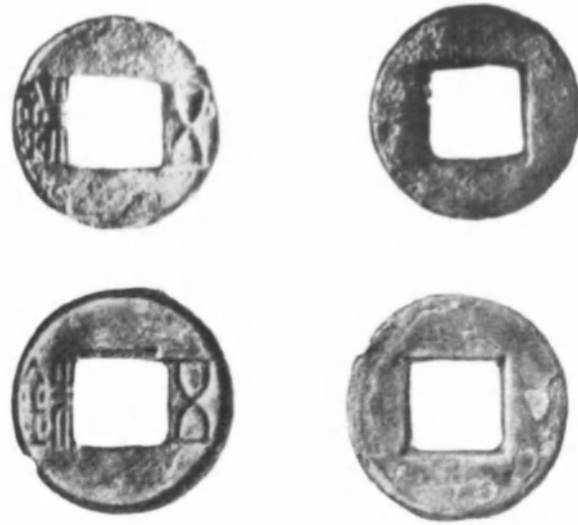


FIG. 7. Han 'Wu Shu' coins.

There is hardly one Han site in Xinjiang that has failed to yield a great number of Han coins, including varieties of all periods, clear evidence that under Han rule the coinage of China proper also circulated in the Western Regions (Fig. 7). The Walled City-States did not issue their own coins. The only exception was Khotan, which minted a small quantity of Sino-Kharoṣṭhī bilingual copper coins. They are round but, unlike Chinese cash, have no hole in the centre or trimmed line round the rim. The obverse has a legend in Chinese seal script indicating the value of the coin. On the reverse is a horse or camel surrounded by a Prakrit legend in Kharoṣṭhī script, giving the name and titles of the king. The coins were struck in two denominations, the larger with the legend 'bronze cash weight 24 shu', the smaller with 'shu cash'. Most of these coins were found at the oasis of Khotan and were early recognized as issues of the ancient state of Khotan. They were struck between A.D. 152 and 180, that is, in the last few decades of the Eastern Han period (Fig. 8), apparently not for economic reasons so much as for prestige. Consequently the quantity issued was small and circulation was limited. The use of Kharoṣṭhī script shows the influence of Kushan culture, but the honorific titles of the King of Khotan on the coins are on an equal footing with those of the Kushan kings, making it clear that at that time Khotan was not under Kushan rule. The fact that the legend indicating the value of the coin and the unit of value is in Chinese shows the strength of Chinese influence.



FIG. 8. Sino-Kharoṣṭhī bilingual coins.

Language, culture and religion

These Central Asian kingdoms had no script of their own; it seems that Chinese was well known, though the large number of Kharoṣṭhī documents found suggests that Chinese may have been used only for official purposes. In a number of Western Region states there were ‘directors of interpreters’, officials in charge of the translators, who had full knowledge of spoken, and probably also of written, Chinese because they were obliged to translate Chinese government documents. Some of the wooden tablets inscribed in Chinese discovered at Niya in Minfeng County are letters of the local nobility. The inscriptions on the tablets were in classical Chinese characters with very fine calligraphy, reflecting an excellent command of Chinese, which must have been their chief means of communication ‘Fig. 9’. During the last decades of the Eastern Han period, as a result of Kushan influence, Kharoṣṭhī script seems to have dominated the Western Regions; the Sino-Kharoṣṭhī bilingual coins struck by the King of Khotan are perhaps the earliest instance of this.¹⁰ Later, Kharoṣṭhī script reached the state of Shan-shan,¹¹ becoming the official script there for a period in the third and fourth centuries A.D.¹²

Besides using the Chinese script, some rulers of the oasis kingdoms also copied the Han court in other ways. Chiang-pin, King of Kucha during the late Western Han, took instructions of the Han court as his model in building his palace, setting his guards of honour and adopting the ringing of bells and beating of drums for court ceremonies. Yen, King of So-chü, also consulted and employed the ceremonial rules of the Han court.¹³

Our knowledge of burial customs is limited, except for Zhaosu County, where a number of Wu-sun graves have been excavated recently. The Wu-sun tombs with domed tumuli are found in groups, arranged in a row from north to south. Most contain wooden outer coffins, with inner walls decorated with felt hangings. Most are multi-chambered, with traces of wooden coffins, but sometimes the corpses were only wrapped in felt. The burials are in

¹⁰ Ma, 1983a; Xia Nai, 1962.

¹¹ Luo and Wang, 1914; Huang Lie, 1981, Tables 28–31.

¹² Ma, 1980b.

¹³ For King Chiang-pin of Ch’iu-tzū, see *Han-shu* 96; for king Yen of So-ch, see *Hou Han-shu* chapter on the Western Regions.



FIG. 9. Wooden tablets with Chinese text.

the extended supine position, with the head pointing west. Most tomb furniture is poor and simple, there being pottery vessels and iron objects such as small awls. In some large tombs more luxurious grave furniture has been found, including such beautiful objects as the gold ring discussed above.¹⁴ Near the Wu-sun area, a joint husband-and-wife burial has been found among the graves of the Eastern Han period at Niya, with their box-like wooden coffin standing on four feet, placed in a rectangular shaft with mid-coated tamarisk wattle; to judge from the covering and clothing of the deceased, these would seem to be the graves of the local higher nobility.¹⁵ Earlier it was suggested that the boat-shaped wooden-coffin burials found in the Lop Nor area were the graves of the Lou-Ian people during the Han dynasty, but similar remains have now been found on the lower reaches of the Kongque river, dated by Carbon-14 to around 1000 B.C., so the so-called 'Lou-lan graves' can no longer be ascribed to the Han period.

Many scholars believe that Buddhism was brought into China at the end of the Western or the beginning of the Eastern Han period, hence the Western Regions must have received Buddhism even earlier. The supposition is that if Buddhism spread north-eastwards from India, it must naturally have been accepted first by the peoples of the Western Regions before reaching central China. The *Biography* of Pan Ch'ao, in the *Hou Han-shu* however, mentions that when he arrived in Khotan in A.D. 73, the local people believed in Shamanism and a shaman tried to kill his horse to practise sacrifices and incantations. This could not

¹⁴ Archaeological Research Institute, 1979.

¹⁵ Wenwu, 1960.

have been Buddhism, and must have been a local religion practised among the oasis states. A greater part of the chapter on the Western Regions in the *Hou Han-shu* was copied from Pan Yung's original written record of the Western Regions, which was completed by the end of the reign of Emperor An-ti, that is, around A.D. 124. Pan Yung spent the whole of his youth in the Western Regions and was familiar with the local customs. He was also interested in the question of Buddhism. But it was only when he spoke about the state of T'ien-chu (India) that he commented that the country 'practises the Buddhist Way and does not take life, which has now become the order of the day'. From his records we can find hardly any trace of Buddhism in the Western Regions under Han rule. Moreover, from an art-historical point of view none of the Buddhist caves with murals in Xinjiang can be dated before the beginning of the Eastern Han. It may therefore be suggested that Buddhism reached the Tarim basin around the middle of the second century A.D. There is no doubt that Buddhism reached China proper a little earlier. This may be explained in two ways. The first hypothesis is that the people who first brought Buddhism to China were Buddhists from the Kushan Empire. Although they took the road through the Western Regions, the object of their mission was the Han court. The introduction of Buddhism was therefore not by a gradual expansion across the Western Regions as some scholars envisaged. The alternative is that the spread of Buddhism into China during the Eastern Han came another way, perhaps by the sea route.

Chinese administration

The *Han-shu* chapter on the Western Regions gives a fairly clear description of the sphere of jurisdiction of the Han protector-general. Wherever a state did not come under his control, it was always indicated that this particular state 'was not subject to the protector-general'. The official residence of the protector-general was located at Wu-li (east of Lun-t'ai County, Xinjiang).

Among the inhabitants ruled by the protector-general was, first, the so-called 'Tocharian' group.¹⁶ It is difficult to suggest a definite name for their language, which is, however, named after the ethnic group using it. Spoken by the Chü-shih, Yen-ch'i, Ch'iu-tzŭ and Lou-lan 'Shan-shan' peoples, it was Indo-European, though its relation with other languages of the family remains unclear. We can distinguish three dialects: (a) the Kuchean

¹⁶ The dispute about the term 'Tocharian language' is well known internationally so it is unnecessary to discuss it further here. In recent years most Chinese scholars have discarded this term and used the 'Yen-ch'i-Ch'iu-tzŭ language' in its place. Nevertheless, this language should also include the dialects of Chü-shih and Lou-lan (Shan-shan) area. Accordingly, the term 'Yen-ch'i-Ch'iu-tzŭ language' is not really appropriate. Therefore, for our present purpose we shall preserve the old usage and call it 'Tocharian'.

dialect, spoken by the Chü-shih and Ch'iu-tzŭ peoples (Tocharian B); (b) the Yen-ch'i dialect, spoken by the Yen-ch'i people (Tocharian A); and (c) the Lou-lan dialect, spoken by the Lou-lan people.¹⁷ This Tocharian group as a whole settled along the northern fringes of the Tarim basin and to its east in the Turfan basin as well as the vicinity of Lop Nor. The second was the Ch'iang language group, of tribes settled along the northern foot of the Altyn, Kunlun and Karakorum ranges, the major tribe being the Yüeh-ch'iang. The Hsi-yeh, Pu-li, Yin-ai and Mo-lu-ti peoples, who lived on the south-east of the Pamir plateau, also belonged to the Ch'iang group, but they may also have been intermingled with the Sakas.¹⁸ The language of the Ch'iang doubtless belonged to the Sino-Tibetan language family. They had close relations with the Ku-yang people in the Kui-lan mountain area and present-day Qinghai Province. The third was the Saka language group, spread over a broad area from south of Lake Balkhash to the south of the Pamir plateau, including such places as Shu-lê, Yü-t'ien, etc., in the western part of the Tarim basin. Except for the Wu-sun, who were mainly nomadic herdsmen, most of the population had formed themselves into the Walled City-States by the second century B.C., with agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry as the basis of their economy. Most of the city-states were very small. According to the population figures in the *Han-shu* the largest was Ch'iu-tzŭ 'Kucha' with a population of 81,317 and the smallest, Shan-huan, with only 194. It is clear that the kings of these oasis states were only rulers of a town or large village. For a time under the Eastern Han the thirty-six Walled City-States were divided further and became fifty-five. The *Hou Han-shu* records the population of some of these states at a later date, but in far less detail. Comparing the *Hou Han-shu* and the *Han-shu* we can see that the population in the Eastern Han period was about twice as much as in the Western Han period, but the total was still very small.

Under the rule of the protector-general and secretary-general of the Western Regions, all the kings of these states, large and small, were subject to the central government of the Han, as previously they had been subject to the central government of the Hsiung-nu. They had to send 'attendant sons' to the Han court. Their royal status, and the status of certain of their officials, was dependent on Han approval. According to the *Han-shu* the number of kings, aristocrats and ministers of the Walled City-States who had received seals of

¹⁷ The Kharoṣṭhī documents found in the Kingdom of Shan-shan in Xinjiang are written in Gāndhārī Prakrit, but some words borrowed from the local language reflect the Lou-lan dialect, which should come under the so-called 'Tocharian' category. See Burrow, 1937.

¹⁸ The *Han-shu* 96 alleged that the Hsi-yeh, Pu-li, Yin-ai and Mo-lu-ti were of the same nationality, 'differing from the Hu but similar to the Ch'iang and Ti'. 'Hu' here seems to belong to the east Iranian group. However, the archaeological remains we find in this area revealed that their culture had strong elements of the Sai (Saka) culture. (See Chapter 9 of the present volume.) The *Han-shu* notes that they were 'similar' to the Ch'iang or Ti, which shows that they were not of pure Ch'iang descent.



FIG. 10. Official seal of the 'Han Kuei I Ch'iang Chang'.

authority from the Han court exceeded 376 (Fig. 10). In certain states, the Han also set up new official posts and sometimes even appointed Han people as officials.¹⁹ For example, 'marquis to attack the Hu' and similar posts are obviously Han-conferred official titles. See *Han-shu* 96.

However, Han rule in the Western Regions differed from that of the Hsiung-nu. It only required the subject states to provide part of the military force needed to withstand the Hsiung-nu in time of war, and to accept responsibility for protecting communication lines along the Silk Route during time of peace.

Military and agricultural colonies

It was not enough to rely exclusively on the military strength of these small states for defence against Hsiung-nu incursions, therefore the Han government stationed some armed forces in the Western Regions. To avoid problems in supplying remote areas, and transporting provisions across the Gobi Desert, the *t'un-t'ien* (military agricultural colony) policy was adopted: the garrison troops were required to cultivate land on the spot. As early as the reign of Emperor Wu-ti, *t'un-t'ien* colonies were set up at Lun-t'ai and Ch'ü-li with an initial complement of several hundred farming conscripts led by envoy-commanders. During the reigns of Emperors Chao-ti and Hsüan-ti there were also *t'un-t'ien* colonies at I-hsun City (east of modern Ruoqiang County), Chü-shih 'west of modern Turfan County', Chih-ku (near the Issik-köl in Kyrgyzstan) and on the north-west bank of Lop Nor. The scale of the individual colonies increased and the number of garrison conscripts of Lun-t'ai alone rose to 1,500. During Eastern Han rule there was a *t'un-t'ien* colony at I-wu (in the area of present-day Hami) and a 'commander-in-charge of cereals' was posted there.²⁰

¹⁹ For example, 'marquis to attack the Hu' and similar posts are obviously Han-conferred official titles. See *Han-shu* 96.

²⁰ Ma and Wang, 1978, pp. 11–12.

Liu-jong in the east of the Turfan basin was the long-term central location for the garrison troops and farming colonies. These troops were under the command of an officer of higher rank called the Wu-chi commandant.²¹ The site of his headquarters was called Kao-ch'ang-pi, this being the origin for the use of the name Kao-ch'ang (Qocho) for the Turfan basin as a whole. During the latter days of the Eastern Han, the Wu-chi commandant had become the highest commanding officer of the Western Regions garrisons, comparable to the secretary-general, who held authority over the inhabitants of the Western Regions; duties were divided between the two.

Vestiges of the *t'un-t'ien* colonies of the Han period are still to be seen in Lun-t'ai, Shaya and Ruoqiang Counties, and the region close to Lop Nor, where traces of ancient irrigation channels and field ridges can be recognized on the red clay banks of the Qizil river. From the Tu-yin site on the north bank of Lop Nor large numbers of wooden tablets (Fig. 11) have been found, dating from the second half of the first century B.C., mostly official documents of the *t'un-t'ien* troops, reflecting their organization and original encampments, agricultural products, tools used, methods of cultivation, granaries and their daily life generally.²² From these tablets we learn that these *t'un-t'ien* soldiers came from all over China's inner prefectures, bringing their families with them and living there for long periods of time, engaging on the one hand in agricultural labour, and on the other hand in fulfilling the task of military defence. East of Lop Nor and in the Turfan basin were important military granaries for storing provisions. These *t'un-t'ien* districts gradually developed into fixed Chinese settlements in the Western Regions.²³

Closely related to the *t'un-t'ien* agricultural colonies was the work of irrigation. The Western Regions comprise a wide expanse of arid land with extremely low rainfall, where agriculture depends wholly on irrigation channels fed yearly by the melting snow. The construction of artificial irrigation systems is absolutely essential. Long before the Han dynasty, the local inhabitants must have constructed some irrigation channels, but the Han introduced the *t'un-t'ien* policy; there was a remarkable increase in irrigation construction due to the adoption of advanced technology from China proper. In Shaya County there are remains of an ancient Han irrigation channel more than 100 km long. Close to this channel Han coins and vestiges of cultivation were found. A Han irrigation system has also been discovered at Miran, following the course of the ancient Miran river, where main

²¹ Hou, 1980.

²² For the Lou-lan sites, see Huang Wenbi, *n.d.b*, pp. 181–4. For the latest investigations of the Lou-lan sites, see Hou, 1981. For the Tu-yin site, see Huang Wenbi, 1948, pp. 105–9. As to the remains of the ancient city of Kao-ch'ang (Qocho), reports and materials are abundant and so well documented that there is no need to cite them here.

²³ Ma, 1975, pp. 27–30.



FIG. 11. Wooden tablets relating to a Han *t'un-t'ien* colony.

floodgates, bifurcation gates, trunk and branch canals were constructed. Han tombs and other objects have also been found near by.²⁴ Nowadays in the Turfan basin the most famous and remarkable type of irrigation system is the so-called *kahrez* consisting of an underground channel descending the hill slope, which conducts meltwater on to the farmland. On the surface, walls are sunk at intervals, so that the underground channel passes through them. Some scholars think that the *kahrez* system was introduced from Iran during the Ch'in dynasty; on the other hand, a *Han-shu* chapter on irrigation records that during the Han dynasty there were already 'irrigation channels with wells' in Shaanxi, of a type found in the *kahrez* system. Perhaps we may therefore presume that the *kahrez* system of an 'irrigation channel with wells' was introduced there by the *t'un-t'ien* agricultural colonies during the Western Han period.²⁵

Another important measure implemented by the garrison troops in the Western Regions during the Han dynasty was the construction of a system of fortifications and beacon towers – a warning system in case of a Hsiung-nu attack. Each fort consisted of a small square encampment of rammed earth, surrounded by walls, within which stood a small building. In one corner was a rammed-earth watch-tower more than 10 m high. On top was a lever device holding a basket of firewood. The sentry on top of the watch-tower could observe enemy movements and send a warning signal – smoke by day and open fire by

²⁴ Ma, 1975, pp. 29–30.

²⁵ Huang Wenbi, *n.d.b*, p.89.

night. This signalling system could transmit messages in a very short time and get news to Chang-an, the capital, within the same day. Each *sui* (beacon fire) or *t'ing* (watch-tower) had its own name and number. The beacon network of the Western Regions began from Yü-men (the Jade Gate), west of Tun-huang, and passed through the desert and along the northern bank of the Lop Nor directly to Kucha and Pai-cheng. Along this route remains of ancient beacons can be found. The example at Qizil, west of Kucha County, is relatively well preserved (Fig. 12).²⁶ Carved on a cliff at the foot of the Kelatagh, north-east of Pai-cheng County, an inscription dating from the fourth year of Yung-shou during the reign of Emperor Huan-ti of the Eastern Han (A.D. 158) records that Lieutenant-General Liu P'ing K'uo, on assuming office at Kucha, led six Chinese men to construct a series of watch-towers (Fig. 13).²⁷ At strategically important centres, there were also fortified barracks, such as the ruins of Lou-Ian and Tu-yin on the north-western bank of the Lop Nor at the site of the ancient city of Kao-ch'ang in the Turfan basin and the site of Pochengzi at Banjiogou in Jimsar, all strategic centres where Han troops were garrisoned. The eaves-end tiles with cloud pattern, excavated at Qitai, are typically Han in style (Fig. 14).

The Silk Route

The object of the Han in posting garrison troops, establishing farming colonies, and building fortifications and signal beacons was not simply to avert incursions by the Hsiung-nu; they also had an important role in safeguarding traffic on the Silk Route (see Map 5). This road played a key role in the history of civilization, facilitating economic and cultural exchanges between East and West. Geographical factors had to be overcome, especially the obstacles presented by the Taklamakan Desert. As is well known, there were two routes circumventing this impassable sea of sand. The southern route ran west from Tun-huang, along the southern bank of the Lop Nor to Tashkurgan. Ascending the Pamir plateau, it went through the Wakhan valley to Balkh (ancient Bactra). A branch to the west of Tashkurgan passed through Gandhāra. As the Taklamakan Desert has been spreading south, this section of ancient road, with the Walled City-States along it, has been submerged in sand. Only in modern times have archaeologists discovered the ruins of Niya and Endere and their important remains. The northern route,²⁸ also starting from Tun-huang, ran north-west through Sanlongsha to Lou-Ian on the north bank of the Lop Nor, passing Qarashahr and Aksu before turning south-west to Kashgar. From the Ferghana

²⁶ Ma, 1975, p. 37.

²⁷ Ma, 1980a.

²⁸ The new northern route was opened up at the beginning of the Christian era according to the suggestion made by Hsü P'u, the Wu-chi colonel (see *Han-shu* 96).



FIG. 12. Remains of a Han beacon tower.

basin it made a detour around K'ang-chü, a region covering the Tashkent oasis and a part of the territory between the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya rivers (see Chapter 19) and turning south to join the southern route in Bactria. There were branches from K'ang-chü to Parthia and to the land between the Aral and Caspian Seas. Another road went northwest to Wu-sun, yet another going north from Lou-lan through Chü-shih close to Turfan, an extremely important strategic position. There was also a main line of communication connecting the northern and southern routes; and at the end of the Western Han period a new northern route was opened up giving direct access to Wu-sun.

Throughout the two Han dynasties, effective measures were taken to maintain and defend these important routes, using posthouses, sentry guards and interpreters to maintain communications between China and the West. When Emperor Wu-ti first sent Chang Ch'ien to the Yüeh-chih, the objective was a military one, but subsequently political and economic factors came to play the key role.

Before the Han established the post of protector-general of the Western Regions, there had been exchanges of diplomatic envoys who also served as merchants. Increasingly, traffic along the Silk Route flourished. Chinese silk products reached Parthia via the Walled City-States of the Western Regions and were sent on to Rome. Chinese silk soon became



FIG. 13. Rock inscription of Liu P'ing K'uo.



FIG. 14. Eaves-end tile with cloud design.

the most expensive luxury item in the Roman Empire and commanded high prices. But Han merchants were unable to overcome the monopoly of the Parthian middlemen and little Roman currency flowed into China. Virtually no Roman coins before the Byzantine period (c.A.D. 400) have been found in Xinjiang or China proper.²⁹

²⁹ Finally we should allude to the question of the relations between the Western Regions and the Kushan Kingdom during the Han period. Many works by European scholars on Central Asian history have given incorrect accounts of this episode, believing that, at the end of the Eastern Han period, Kanishka, king of the Kushans, had once conquered part of the Tarim basin, at least as far as Shu-lê and khotan; some scholars have even gone as far as to include Turfan and the Lop Nor region in the Kushan Empire. This erroneous conclusion resulted merely from the incorrect interpretation of the Chinese historical records. In fact, the *Hou Han-shu* faithfully records events of the Western Regions from the later period of the Eastern Han epoch and also mentions contemporary Sino-Kushan relations.