

## Chapter II Sino-Foreign Cultural Exchanges

### Introduction

China is an ancient civilization with a long history and splendid culture. Since ancient China, frequent foreign cultural exchange activities have played a key role in promoting the exchange and mutual learning between Chinese civilization and other civilizations around the world. This chapter introduces the Sino-foreign cultural exchanges in both ancient and modern times.

### Lesson 1 Sino-Foreign Cultural Exchanges in Ancient Times

Ancient China mainly refers to the period of feudal society from Xia Dynasty to Qing Dynasty (2070 BC- AD 1912). In the ancient history of China, there have been various forms of foreign exchange activities throughout the dynasties, and the most influential activities include the activities of Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Region, Zheng He's voyages to the West, and monk Jian Zhen's voyages to Japan.

#### Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Region

##### Historical background

The term "Western Territory(西域)" was first seen in "Biography of western regions in Han Dynasty". In the Western Han Dynasty, the western region in narrow sense refers to the west of Yumenguan and Yangguan (now West of Dunhuang, Gansu), the east of Congling (Pamir Plateau), and the north of Kunlun Mountain, South of Balkhash Lake, the jurisdiction of the protectorate of the Western Region in the Han Dynasty, today's

Xinjiang region. The western region in broad sense includes Central Asia, West Asia, India, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea coast, Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan to the Mediterranean Sea coast, and even Eastern Europe and Southern Europe.

The western region is divided into north and south by Tianshan Mountains. Most people live around the Tarim Basin. In the early years of the Western Han Dynasty, there were "Thirty-Six Countries". The population of these countries is not large, generally 20,000 to 30,000, the largest Qiuci is 80,000, and the smallest is only one or two thousand. Residents are engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry. In addition to the production of cereals, some places such as Qiemo are also rich in grapes and other fruits and the best forage alfalfa. Animal husbandry includes donkeys, horses and camels. In addition, there are minerals such as jade, copper, and iron, and some local residents have learned to cast weapons with copper and iron. Although the countries in north and south of the Tianshan Mountains are small, most of them have castles. Under the kings of various countries, there is an army of officials and occupies a large proportion of the population. In the second century BC, before Zhang Qian was envoy to the Western Regions, the Huns aristocratic forces extended to the Western Regions. In Yanqi and other countries, there were Commandants who enslaved and exploited these small countries by imposing heavy taxes.

During the founding of the Western Han Dynasty, the north faced the threat of a powerful nomadic people. This nation is collectively referred to as the "Huns(匈奴)". After the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the Huns entered the threshold of class society. Each ministry formed a small state of slavery and its king

was called "Chanyu(单于)". During the Chu-Han War, Chanyu Modu took advantage of the opportunity to expand his power, conquer the surrounding tribes, destroy Eastern barbarian, and break the Rouzhi(月氏), control the vast areas of northeast, north, and west of China, and establish a unified slave-ownership regime and a powerful military machine. The nobles of the Huns and slave owners often led powerful cavalry, invaded the territory of the Han Dynasty, harassed and plundered the Central Plains residents.

Emperor Wu of Han Dynasty was a great man with great talents in Chinese history. When he ascended the throne in 140 BC, he was only 16 years old. At this time, the Han dynasty has been established for more than sixty years. After several generations of emperors in the early Han Dynasty, it pursued a policy of low tax and "rest with the people", especially in the rule of Emperor Wen and Emperor Jing. The social economy has been restored and developed, and it has entered an era of prosperity, and its national strength is quite abundant. Emperor Wu relied on this strong material and financial resources to counter the invasion of the Huns in a timely manner, fundamentally lift the historical mission of threats from the north. It is precisely this historical condition that has enabled a generation of talented people to show their ambitions and make contributions.

## Process of the mission



Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Region

In 138 BC, in order to jointly fight against the Huns, the Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty recruited Zhang Qian as an emissary and sent a mission to the Western Regions. Zhang Qian departed from Chang'an(now Xi'an) and was captured by the Huns when passing the Hexi Corridor<sup>[1]</sup> controlled by the Huns. After being trapped for ten years, Zhang Qian escaped from the Huns and finally arrived at Rouzhi. This was an extremely difficult march. On the Great Gobi Desert, flying sand and rocks, the heat waves are rolling; the Pamir is as high as the roof, covered with ice and snow, and the cold wind is biting. There are few people along the way, and water is scarce. Coupled with the hasty escape, the material preparation was insufficient. Zhang Qian and his entourages were sleeping with the dew and eating in the wind. Many entourages died on the way because of hunger or thirst, or buried in the yellow sand and ice caves. Later, after staying in Rouzhi for one year, he returned to Chang'an, but was captured by the Huns again and detained for another year. In 126 BC, Zhang Qian finally returned to Chang'an.

## **Significance of the mission**

Although the communication between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions was initially for military purposes, after the Western Region opened, its influence far exceeded the military scope. From Dunhuang in the Western Han Dynasty, go out of Yumenguan to enter Xinjiang, and then from Xinjiang to Central Asia and Western Asia through a cross-west passage, once again unimpeded. This passage is known as the "Silk Road" in later generations. The "Silk Road" links the Western Han Dynasty with many countries in Central Asia, and promotes political, economic, military, and cultural exchanges between them. Since the feudal central government of all generations in China called the border ethnic minorities "Yi"(夷), Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions promoted the first cultural integration between China and foreign countries. A dozen species of plants such as walnuts, grapes, pomegranates, broad beans and alfalfa in the Western Regions are gradually cultivated in the Central Plains. Musical instruments such as Huqin and musical composition enriched the cultural life of the Han people. The Han army used underground well-penetrating techniques in the field of Shanshan, Jushi and other places, known as "Karez", which was gradually promoted locally. In addition, the Ferghana horses of Farghana were very famous in the Han Dynasty, and they were called "Horse from Heaven". At that time, no silk was produced from the west of Farghana to the Parthia, and they did not know cast iron. Later, the envoys and soldiers of the Han passed these technologies. The westward advance of Chinese silk and iron smelting has greatly contributed to the development of human civilization.

[1] Hexi Corridor: a string of oases running the length of Gansu, forming part of the Northern Silk Road

Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions brought China's influence directly to the East and West of Congling. Since then, not only has Xinjiang's ties with the mainland strengthened, but China's direct exchanges with Central Asia, West Asia, and even Southern Europe have been established and strengthened.



Route map of Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions

Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions was not only an extremely difficult diplomatic trip, but also a fruitful scientific investigation. Zhang Qian conducted on-the-spot investigation and research on the vast western region. He not only personally visited the small countries in Xinjiang and the countries in Central Asia, but also learned from these places that Uisin (south of Balkhash Lake and the Ili River Basin), Alans (North of the Caspian Sea, Aral Sea), Parthia (ie Persia, now Iran), Antiochia (also known as stag-gzig, now Iraqi area), India and many other countries. After returning to Chang'an, Zhang Qian made a detailed report to Emperor Wu of Han Dynasty and explained the location, specialty, population, city, and military strength of these countries. The basic content of this report is preserved by Sima Qian in "History of Ferghana ". This is the first and most accurate and reliable record of these regions in China and the world. It is still the most precious material in the world to study the

paleogeography and history of the above regions and countries.

### **Zheng He's Maritime Expedition**

On July 11, 1405, the Liujiagang Wharf in Suzhou was crowded with people, and numerous flags were fluttered in the wind. Dispatched by the emperor of the Ming Dynasty, the 35-year-old eunuch Zheng He will soon lead the fleet to the West for the first time. Accompanied by sailors, interpreters, doctors and escort soldiers, the entire fleet has a total of more than 27,800 people.

More than two hundred ships docked neatly beside the dock, of which sixty-two big ships are particularly magnificent, these big ships are also called "treasure ships". Each treasure ship is 148 meters long and 60 meters wide, as tall as ten-story buildings. There are nine masts and twelve sails on the ship, which can ride more than one thousand people and need to be driven by two or three hundred people. The ship was equipped with the most advanced instruments of the time, such as the navigation compass. Close to the treasure ship are many warships, grain ships and water ships.



Zheng He and his fleet

Near noon, the burly Zheng He stepped onto the command ship with vigorous strides. He clasped his hands to bid farewell to the crowd on the shore, then raised the command flag and shouted: "Set sail!" In the cheers and blessings of the people, the fleet looked like a giant dragon set off in might.

The fleet exited the Yangtze River estuary, sailed across the East China Sea and the South China Sea, and knifed through the waves westward. Whenever he came to a country, Zheng He first handed the credential to the king, and presented gifts to them on behalf of the Ming emperor, hoping to have friendly exchanges with them.

After seeing the large scale of Zheng He's fleet and the friendly attitude with no sign of showing off force or threatening others, the monarchs and their subjects of all countries expressed their warm welcome. When the local people heard that the Ming Dynasty's fleet was coming, they all scramble to watch at the sea along with the young and the old. They were all amazed by the treasure ships they had never seen before. At that time, Chinese silk and porcelain were well-known overseas. The people along the way heard that the fleet was full of these products, and they were very happy. They exchanged spices, coral, and jewelry for Chinese local products. Businessmen everywhere are very happy to do business with the Chinese. Many people also give gifts to Chinese guests to express friendly feelings.





Route map of Zheng He's maritime expedition

However, this voyage was also full of danger. On the sea, the fleet encountered dangerous waves several times. The wind was roaring, and the sea was rolling like wild horses. The huge waves rushed to the fleet frantically as if to tear the ship. Faced with such a dangerous situation, Zheng He always calmed down and commanded the fleet to move forward bravely in the waves, heading off

the danger again and again. The fleet also encountered pirate attacks on their way home. Zheng He ordered the soldiers to wait in line based on the information received in advance. When the pirate ship sneaked close to the fleet in the night, Zheng He's fleet quickly surrounded the pirates. The soldiers dropped torches from the big ship and burned the pirate ship. The pirates had nowhere to escape, so they obediently became prisoners.

In the 28 years from 1405 to 1433, Zheng He led the fleet seven times abroad, and traveled to more than 30 countries. The last voyage, Zheng He was already an old man

in his 60s, his temples were all white. This voyage reached the east coast of Africa and did not return to the motherland until the third year.

Zheng He's maritime expedition reached the peak of the world's nautical career in terms of scale, duration, and scope. It shows the tenacious spirit of exploration of the ancient Chinese people and broadens the horizon of the Chinese people. Zheng He's visit has promoted economic and cultural exchanges between China and many countries in Asia, and Africa.

### **Monk Jian Zhen's voyages to Japan**

During the Tang Dynasty, many Chinese people contributed to the exchanges between the people of China and Japan. Among them, the most prominent is the eminent monk Jian Zhen. He did not fear the hardships and dangers and traveled to Japan to teach Buddhism theories and spread the extensive and profound Chinese culture, which promoted the improvement of Japanese Buddhism, medicine, architecture and sculpture, and was respected by the Chinese and Japanese people and Buddhist circles.

### **Monk Jian Zhen**

Jian Zhen's original surname is Chun Yu, from Yangzhou Jiangyang County (now Yangzhou, Jiangsu). He was a monk at Da Ming Temple in Yangzhou when he was 14. Because of his hard work and study, he became a learned monk after middle age. During this period, he took a study tour to Chang'an and Luoyang. After returning to Yangzhou, he built Chongfu Temple, Fengfa Temple and other large halls, built tower statues, and preached the Vinaya Pitaka[2]. For more than forty years, he shaved and

[2] Vinaya Pitaka(律藏): Generic term for works on commandments in Buddhist scriptures.

taught the ordinances to the common people, and reached more than 40,000 people. He was regarded as a master of ordination in the Yangze river and Huai river region

### **Arduous voyages to Japan**

In 742 AD, at the invitation of Japanese monks, Jian Zhen, regardless of the discouragement of his disciples, tried six times to travel to Japan. After all the hardships, he finally arrived in Japan in 754.



Monk Jian Zhen's voyages to Japan

During the six trips to Japan, Jian Zhen and his entourage encountered many setbacks. Before the first east crossing, the apprentice who traveled with Jian Zhen joked with a monk. As a result, the monk became angry from embarrassment. He falsely accused Jian Zhen and his party of building a ship in collusion with the pirates. The local officials were shocked by the news and sent people to detain all the monks, so the first trip was not possible.

Several subsequent trips failed, and the fifth trip to Japan was the most tragic. Jian Zhen was already 60 years old that year. The fleet set off from Yangzhou, and just after the

[2] Vinaya Pitaka(律藏): Generic term for works on commandments in Buddhist scriptures.

vicinity of Langshan (now Nantong, Jiangsu), he encountered violent winds and huge waves and took shelter from a small island. A month later, he set sail again, and when he reached the Zhoushan Islands, he encountered another surge. When sailing for the third time, the wind and waves were even greater. They drifted south for 14 days, ate raw rice and drank sea water to spend the day, and finally arrived in the southern part of Hainan Island to shore. On the way back, Jian Zhen was blinded and seriously ill because of a long journey and overwork.

Jian Zhen's last east crossing was not all smooth sailing. As the fleet set sail, a pheasant suddenly landed on the bow of a ship. Jian Zhen believes that the river beaches are overgrown with reeds, and it is not surprising that the fleet flew the pheasant, but the Japanese diplomats to the Tang Dynasty thought it was not auspicious, so the fleet turned around and returned to sail the next day, and finally arrived in Japan after all difficulties.

### **Jian Zhen's arrival and experiences in Japan**

After Jian Zhen arrived in Japan, he was ceremoniously treated by the Emperor Kouken(孝谦天皇) and Emperor Shoumu(圣武天皇). On February 1, AD 754, Fujiwara no Nakamaro(藤原仲麻吕) [3] personally greeted him in Hanai. On February 4, Jian Zhen and his entourage arrived in Nara to lead the Japanese Buddhist affairs together with another local monk.

However, in AD 758, Emperor Kouken, who was Jian Zhen's main supporter, lost power in the court struggle and was forced to pass on to Emperor Junnin(淳仁天皇).

Correspondingly, Jian Zhen also suffered from exclusion. In AD 758, Emperor Junnin ordered the removal of Jian Zhen's post and gave Jian Zhen the official residence of the former crown prince who was defeated and died in the court struggle. The following year, the disciples of Jian Zhen built a temple in the mansion. Emperor Junnin gave the name "Toshodaiji Monastery"(唐招提寺). Jian Zhen moved here from Todai Temple. Emperor Junnin also decreed that all Japanese monks must go to Toshodaiji Monastery to study before being ordained, making Toshodaiji Monastery the highest school of Japanese Buddhists at that time.

On May 6, AD 763, Jian Zhen passed away in Toshodaiji Monastery, and before his death, his disciples made a full-lotus posture statue for Jian Zhen, which has been handed down today.



The full-lotus posture statue of Jian Zhen

In 764, Emperor Kouken suppressed Fujiwara no Nakamaro's rebellion and regained the throne. Toshodaiji Monastery has also been expanded to become a national

[3] Fujiwara no Nakamaro(藤原仲麻呂): A high-ranking official in the court of Nara Age.

treasure in the history of Japanese architecture. The Four Commandments Altar created by Jian Zhen has also become the only place where the Japanese Buddhist monks formally ordained before the establishment of the Japanese Tiantai Sect. Jian Zhen is also regarded as the first ancestor of the Japanese Vinaya School.

### **Significance of Jian Zhen's voyage to Japan**

Jian Zhen lived in Japan for 10 years and worked tirelessly to spread the cultural achievements of the Tang Dynasty. He brought a lot of books and cultural relics. Among those who went with him, some were good at art and some were good at medicine. They also apply what they have learned in Japan. Jian Zhen carefully designed the Toshodaiji Monastery for Japan according to the style of Chinese Tang Dynasty temple architecture. After two years, Toshodaiji Monastery was built and became a famous Buddhist building in Japan.

Jian Zhen's voyages to Japan has great historical significance, which promotes the exchange and development of Chinese and Japanese culture. Because of him, Buddhism has spread more widely to East Asia, which has a positive and far-reaching impact on the development of Japanese religious and cultural undertakings, and has enhanced the friendship between the people of China and Japan.

### **Exercises:**

Part I Based on the text, answer the following questions.

1. What difficulties did Zhang Qian encounter during his mission to the Western Regions?

2. What is the historical significance of Zheng He's voyage to the west?
3. What are the main contributions of Jian Zhen to Japanese Buddhism?

## Part II Group discussion

1. In your opinion, Zhang Qian, Zheng He and Jian Zhen, who encountered the most difficulties in the journey?
2. In addition to the three historical events in the text, what other stories do you know about ancient China's foreign exchanges?