DUNHUANG IN CHINESE HISTORY

Dunhuang is located at the Western edge of the Hexi Corridor in modern Gansu Province. In the past, it has been the entry point to Central China from the direction of Central Asia. The overland Silk Road that connected Eastern and Western cultures passed through here. As a result of the significance of its geographical location, Dunhuang played an important role in Chinese history, and left us a rich cultural heritage.

1. Dunhuang during the Western and Eastern Han Dynasties

The earliest written records about Dunhuang go back to the Warring States period (475–221 BC). At that time, the main inhabitants of the Hexi Corridor were the Yuezhi tribes, whose pasturage centered around Dunhuang and the Qilian Mountains but also stretched over a vast area, in the east reaching the eastern part of the Hexi Corridor and the Longyou region, and in the west the eastern part of the Tarim basin and the East Tianshan region. Around the end of the Qin dynasty (221–207 BC), the Yuezhi grew in power and attacked the nomadic Wusun people who lived in the western part of the Hexi Corridor, forcing them to move to the regions north of the Tianshan. Even the fierce Xiongnu people on the Mongolian Plateau were obliged to send Maodun, the son of king Touman, as a hostage to the Yuezhi.1

At the time of the transition from the Qin to the Han dynasty, under the leadership of their new king Maodun, the Xiongnu became powerful, and after defeating their strong eastern neighbors the Eastern Hu, they took advantage of the turmoil on the Central Plains associated with the decaying Qin dynasty and seized the Ordos region south of the Yellow River Bend. Following this, in the west they overwhelmed the powerful Yuezhi, inducing their large-scale migration farther west. The Hexi Corridor became a Xiongnu territory: Western Hexi, including Dunhuang, was ruled by the Xiongnu king Hunye, whereas East Hexi fell under the

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1 *Shiji* 史記 110, “Xiongnu liezhuan” 匈奴列傳; 123, “Dayuan liezhuan” 大宛列傳.
control of king Xiutu 休屠. After this, the Xiongnu turned south and conquered the territories held by the kings of the Loufan 樓煩, Baiyang 白羊 and Henan 河南 tribes. In addition, they pushed farther west and took control over the Central Asian territories, effectively becoming rulers of Northern China from east to west. The newly established Han kingdom was also subject to Xiongnu assaults but, lacking the military power to strike back, it was forced to buy temporary peace through intermarriage and tributes.2

After over seventy years of accumulating power, the Han dynasty gradually reached a state of prosperity. In 140 BC, after Emperor Wudi 武帝 succeeded the throne, he began planning a retaliatory war against the Xiongnu. Relying on abundant material preparation, coupled with information on the Hexi Xiongnu gained from Zhang Qian’s 張騫 first journey to the West, in the spring of 121 BC, under the leadership of general Huo Qubing 霍去病, the Han troops crossed the Qilian Mountains and carried out a direct attack on the Xiongnu. In the summer of the same year, general Huo once more entered the Hexi region, inflicting heavy damages on the Xiongnu and forcing over forty thousand of them surrender to the Han. With this the Xiongnu suffered a serious blow, as is expressed in a Xiongnu song: “Having lost our Qilian Mountains, our animals have no place to breed; having lost our Yanzhi Mountains 燕支山, our women marry without splendor.”3 From this time on, the Hexi region became part of the Han domain.

Following the conquest of the Hexi Corridor in 121 BC, the Han administration established the commanderies of Wuwei 武威 and Jiuquan 酒泉, with the Dunhuang area falling within the jurisdiction of Jiuquan commandery. Ten years later, in 111 BC, the territory of Wuwei and Jiuquan commanderies was further divided, and the commanderies of Zhangye 張掖 and Dunhuang were established.4 Concurrently with this, the Han built the portion of the Great Wall stretching from Jiuquan to the west of Dunhuang, and at the west of the city established the passes of Yumen-guan 玉門關 and Yangguan 陽關 to guard the route from Central Asia to

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2 Shiji 110, “Xiongnu liezhuan”.
3 The Shiji suoyin 史記索隱 quoting the Hexi jiushi 西河舊事, see the punctuated edition of the Shiji, p. 2909.
4 This date of the establishment of Dunhuang commandery is based on the “Wudi benji” 武帝本紀 chapter of the Hanshu 漢書. However, the chapter “Dilizhi” 地理志 in the same book says that this happened during the Houyuan 後元 reign (88–87 BC). In addition, there are also theories that place this event between these dates, although a general consensus is yet to be reached.