



A Concise Commentary on
Memoirs on the Western Regions
in the Official Histories of the Western and
Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, and Southern and
Northern Dynasties

Yu Taishan



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the Western and Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, and
Southern and Northern Dynasties

Commentary translated by **Li Qiancheng**

Historical texts translated by **Yu Taishan et al.**, and

edited by **Victor H. Mair**



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Preface to the English Edition

This book is a contribution to the project, “The Mediterranean Sea and China in Ancient Times”, a cooperative venture with Western scholars under the auspices of the Foreign Affairs Department of the Academy of Social Sciences of China.

I was told that our colleagues in this cooperation would like to commence with the collection of source materials, which take two forms, textual and archeological. The Western scholars will work on materials discovered in the West, and the Chinese scholars on those found in China. The task of collecting the source materials was assigned to the Institute of History of the Academy of Social Sciences of China, with myself in charge. The outcome is the volume, *Liang Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao zhengshi Xiyu zhuan yaozhu* 兩漢魏晉南北朝正史西域傳要注, or *A Concise Commentary on the “Memoirs on the Western Regions” in the Official Histories of the Western and Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties* (Zhonghua shuju, 2005) and the essay, “Hanwen shiji youguan Luoma diguo de jizai” 漢文史籍有關羅馬帝國的記載, or “Records about the Roman Empire in Chinese Histories” (*Wenshi* 文史 69 [2004.4]: 9-57). Both deal with source materials in Chinese concerning our project’s theme, “The Mediterranean Sea and China in Ancient Times”, with the former broad in scope and the latter having a narrower focus.

Although the book has “Concise Commentary” for its title, it is more than commentaries and annotations; rather, it is a collection of relevant materials focusing on the Western Regions, which can be seen as a collection of materials for research. I hope that it can save Western scholars some efforts in their search for source materials.

When the book was published, I wanted to have it translated into English. For this purpose I contacted Professor Victor H. Mair of the University of Pennsylvania: I was

to produce a draft translation, and he was to revise it and produce the final manuscript. Unfortunately, our cooperation was not completed for various reasons.

Professor Li Qiancheng was then persuaded to undertake the arduous task of translating the section devoted to Commentary. This has fulfilled my wish of many years; no words can express my delight and gratitude.

Finally, my gratitude goes to Dr. Babis Ziogas. Without the support from the Foundation for the East-West Understanding, it would have been impossible for this book to see print.

Yu Taishan

4 August, 2011

The commentaries are provided for the original texts in Chinese. English translations of the Chinese texts are included for the convenience of readers in the West. In order to avoid confusion, I have tried my best to use existing English translations of the memoirs. Alterations have been made for the sake of stylistic unity. The versions included here were edited and finalized by Professor Victor H. Mair of the University of Pennsylvania. The following are the versions used in the translations of the original historical text:

1. F. Hirth, "The Story of Chang K'ien, China's Pioneer in Western Asia", *JAOS* 37 (1917): 89-152.
2. B. Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian of China, translated from the Shih chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, 2: 264-289 (*Shih chi* 123: "The Account of Ta-yüan"). New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.
3. A. F. P. Hulsewé and M. A. N. Loewe, *China in Central Asia, the Early Stage: 125 B.C.-A.D. 23*. Leiden: Brill, 1979.
4. F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*. Shanghai and Hong Kong: 1885.
5. R. B. Mather, trans. *Biography of Lü Kuang* 吕光. Berkeley: University of California, 1959.
6. C. B. Wakeman, trans., *Hsi Jung (the Western Barbarians): An Annotated*

Translation of the Five Chapters of the T'ung Tien on the Peoples and Countries of Pre-Islamic Central Asia. UMI, 1990.

7. D. D. Leslie and K. H. J. Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources.* Roma: 1996.

I wish to express my gratitude in particular to A. F. P. Hulsewé and M. A. N. Loewe, whose masterful translation of the "Memoir on the Western Regions" of *Hanshu* is reproduced in its entirety. I am grateful to Professor M. A. N. Loewe and the press, E. J. Brill, for their permission to use the translations in the book.

Preface

It was with mixed feelings that I finished my portion, a translation of Professor Yu Taishan's Commentary; it seems that the task was completed exactly when I began to have an idea about how to do it in a better way—like in so many other things in life. I had never imagined, not even in my wildest dreams, that my interest in the fictional Western Regions in Chinese literature would lead to its historical counterpart.

Here I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Yu Taishan, who on many occasions came to my aid with specific terms and toponyms, and read through the translations. Moreover, I am grateful to him for providing me with his own translations of many passages which have appeared in his works, "A Study of Sakā History", "A Hypothesis about the Sources of the Sai Tribes", and "A History of the Relationship between the Western and Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties and the Western Regions", all included in the *Sino-Platonic Papers*, nos. 80 (July 1998), 106 (September 2000), and 131 (March 2004). Some of these are revised and incorporated into the book. My gratitude also goes to Professor Victor H. Mair, the editor of the series in general and of these pieces in particular. I would have been unable to undertake the translation of the Commentary without the English version of the original historical text provided by Professor Yu Taishan. The "Memoirs" were translated or edited from existing versions by Professor Yu Taishan himself. Again, Professor Victor H. Mair meticulously edited the complete versions of all the individual memoirs. I thank them both for their enormous efforts and their dedication. Occasionally I have used the translations by other Scholars; in such cases I have specified the sources in parentheses. Finally, my thanks go to Bruce Doar, from whose editorial expertise I have benefited much.

LQ

December, 2011

Conventions

1. Different interpretations are not listed, to avoid distractions from the interpretations offered in this book, which form a coherent system.
2. Passages that have nothing to do with the Western Regions are omitted, in order to highlight what is more important.
3. The scope is determined by the content of the memoirs; no digressions are included.
4. The most important materials from certain official histories in which the individual memoirs occur are included (with some sections briefly annotated).
5. No annotations focusing on linguistic or lexical issues are included, unless absolutely necessary.
6. The sources of included alternate views are specified.
7. The texts, including punctuation, follow the editions issued by the Zhonghua shuju 中華書局; variations are indicated.

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to provide a systematic commentary on the writings about the Western Regions preserved in the memoirs on the vast area in the official histories of the Western and Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties.

The memoirs on the Western Regions in the official histories of the Western and Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, collectively constituting a complete system, are important primary sources for studies on Central Asia, South Asia, Western Asia, and even Europe and North Africa prior to the seventh century CE and are specially valued by scholars in China and elsewhere. Since the annotations by Ding Qian 丁謙 toward the end of the Qing Dynasty, there have been no attempts to interpret this body of materials in a systematic manner, except for some works on individual pieces. Today, when great progress has been made in the historical study of the area, particularly Central Asia, a new annotated edition of this body of literature with a commentary should be on our agenda.

There are fifteen official histories for the period of the Western and Eastern Han, Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, eleven of which include memoirs on the Western Regions; namely, the “Dayuan liezhuan” 大宛列傳 (Memoir on Dayuan) in *Shiji* 史記, the “Xiyu zhuan” 西域傳 (Memoir on the Western Regions) in *Hanshu* 漢書, the “Xiyu zhuan” 西域傳 (Memoir on the Western Regions) in *Hou-Han shu* 後漢書, the “Xi Rong zhuan” 西戎傳 (Memoir on the Western Rong) in *Jinshu* 晉書, the “Xibei zhu Rong zhuan” 西北諸戎傳 (Memoir on the various Rong of the Northwest) in *Liangshu* 梁書, the “Xiyu zhuan” 西域傳 (Memoir on the Western Regions) in *Weishu* 魏書, the “Yiyu zhuan (xia)” 異域傳下 (Memoir on foreign lands) of *Zhoushu* 周書, the “Xiyu zhuan” 西域傳 (Memoir on the Western Regions) in *Suishu* 隋書, the “Xiyu zhuguo zhuan” 西域諸國傳 (Memoir on the various states in the Western Regions) of *Nanshi* 南史, the “Xiyu

zhuan” 西域傳 (Memoir on the Western Regions) of *Beishi* 北史, and the “Xi Rong zhuan” 西戎傳 (Memoir on the Western Rong) in *Weilüe* 魏略 as quoted in the *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 annotated by Pei Songzhi 裴松之. Specifically, it can be noted:

1. The “Dayuan liezhuan” (Memoir on Dayuan) in *Shiji* is, strictly speaking, only the combined biographies of Zhang Qian 張騫 and Li Guangli 李廣利, but it launched the tradition of memoirs on the Western Regions in official historiography, so it is the first piece in this book.

2. In four of the memoirs, namely, the “Xi Rong zhuan” of *Jinshu*, the “Xibei zhu Rong zhuan” of *Liangshu*, the “Yiyu zhuan (xia)” of *Zhoushu*, and the “Xiyu zhuan” of *Suishu*, only the materials pertinent to the Western Regions are commented on.

3. The current text of the “Xiyu zhuan” of *Weishu* is copied from the “Xiyu zhuan” of *Beishi*. The latter, however, appropriated texts from the “Xiyu zhuan” of *Weishu*, the “Yiyu zhuan (xia)” of *Zhoushu*, and the “Xiyu zhuan” of *Suishu*. Thus, the “Xiyu zhuan” of *Weishu* which I have commented upon is actually the “Xiyu zhuan” of the *Beishi* with the texts from *Zhoushu* and *Suishu* expunged.

4. The “Xiyu zhuguo zhuan” of *Nanshi* often repeats the “Xibei zhu Rong zhuan” of *Liangshu*, so my commentary focuses on textual variations.

5. Since the “Xiyu zhuan” of *Beishi* appropriated texts from the “Xiyu zhuan” of *Weishu*, the “Yiyu zhuan” of *Zhoushu*, and the “Xiyu zhuan” of *Suishu*, my commentary on it focuses on the source of the records.

6. The “Xi Rong zhuan” of *Weilüe* 魏略 as quoted in the *Sanguo zhi* annotated by Pei Songzhi preserves the most important records about the events that occurred in the Western Regions during the Cao Wei 曹魏 period, so it is also included in this volume and commented upon.

The “Concise Commentary” in the title indicates my attention to the most important issues. On the other hand, this title also implies that I have avoided writing on things about which I know little. Needless to say, interpretations and discussions about this body of literature will continue, with different emphases and from various perspectives. I retain an open mind to different views, and look forward to exchanging ideas with my colleagues, so as to enhance my own understanding of this subject.

一 《史記·大宛列傳》^[1] 要注
A CONCISE COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER 123 OF *SHIJI*,
“THE MEMOIR ON DAYUAN”*

大宛^[2]之跡，見自張騫。張騫，漢中^[3]人。建元中爲郎。是時天子問匈奴^[4]降者，皆言匈奴破月氏^[5]王，以其頭爲飲器^[6]，月氏遁逃而常怨仇匈奴^[7]，無與共擊之。漢方欲事滅胡^[8]，聞此言，因欲通使^[9]。道必更匈奴中^[10]，乃募能使者。騫以郎應募，使月氏，與堂邑氏胡奴甘父^[11]俱出隴西^[12]。經匈奴，匈奴得之，傳詣單于^[13]。單于留之，曰：“月氏在吾北^[14]，漢何以得往使？吾欲使越^[15]，漢肯聽我乎？”留騫十餘歲^[16]，與妻，有子，然騫持漢節不失。

The first knowledge of Dayuan 大宛^[2] dates from Zhang Qian 張騫. Zhang Qian was a native of Hanzhong 漢中 [Prefecture]^[3]. During the Jianyuan 建元 reign-period [140-135 BCE], he served as a courtier. At that time the Son of Heaven made inquiries concerning deserters from the Xiongnu 匈奴^[4], and they all reported that the Xiongnu had defeated the king of the Yuezhi 月氏^[5] and made a drinking vessel of his skull^[6]. The Yuezhi had fled, but, while they were enraged with the Xiongnu,^[7] there was no party with whom they could attack them jointly. As it happened, the Han 漢 wished to start operations to eliminate the Hu 胡^[8]; and, hearing of this report, they wished to make contact [with the Yuezhi] by means of envoys^[9]. Their route would perforce have to pass through the lands of the Xiongnu.^[10] A call was then issued for persons able to undertake the mission. In his capacity as a courtier, [Zhang] Qian answered the call and was sent to the Yuezhi. Setting out from Longxi 隴西 [Prefecture]^[11] in the company of Ganfu 甘父, formerly a Hu slave of the Tangyi 堂邑 clan,^[12] he took the short route

* The English version of this memoir is from *China in Central Asia: The Early Stage: 125 B.C.-A.D. 23* by A. F. P. Hulswé and M. A. N. Loewe, the translation of the “Memoir on Chang Ch’ien and Li Kuang-li”, chapter 61 of *Hanshu*, with alterations by Yu Taishan. The text here is edited by Victor H. Mair.

through [the land of] the Xiongnu, who captured him and had him sent to their *Chanyu* 單于.^[13] The *Chanyu* said: “The Yuezhi lie to the north of us; ^[14] how may Han send its envoys there? If I wished to send envoys to Yue 越^[15], would the Han be willing to let me [do so]?” For over ten years he detained [Zhang] Qian^[16], giving him a wife by whom he had children. However, [Zhang] Qian [constantly] retained the Han emblems of authority, never losing them.

[1] This chapter is generally regarded as the first memoir treating the Western Regions, launching a tradition in official Chinese historiography. This is correct, but judging from the content of this memoir, it is more appropriate to regard it as the combined biographies of Zhang Qian 張騫 and Li Guangli 李廣利. The life and works of both Zhang Qian and Li Guangli were related to Dayuan, so they share one biographical chapter. According to *Shiji suoyin* 史記索隱, this chapter “should be placed after ‘Chaoxian liezhuan’ 朝鮮列傳 (Memoir on Chaoxian), rather than inserted between ‘Kuli liezhuan’ 酷吏列傳 (Biographies of harsh officials) and ‘Youxia liezhuan’ 遊俠列傳 (Biographies of wandering knights). The present arrangement probably came about because of a hiatus in Sima Qian’s work and an error on the part of Zhu Shaosun 褚少孫 when preparing the supplement. Fortunately, this was not a grave mistake”. As a matter of fact, many chapters after the 118th are combined biographies of historical figures with similar accomplishments; therefore, it should not be regarded as improper for this memoir to be inserted between “Kuli liezhuan” (Biographies of harsh officials) and “Youxia liezhuan” (Biographies of wandering knights). Otherwise, the memoir should have been placed immediately after “Chaoxian liezhuan” (Memoir on Chaoxian), because the subjects of “Nan Yue liezhuan” 南越列傳 (Memoir on the Southern Yue), “Dong Yue liezhuan” 東越列傳 (Memoir on the Eastern Yue), “Chaoxian liezhuan” (Memoir on Chaoxian), and “Xinan Yi liezhuan” 西南夷列傳 (Memoir on the Southwestern Yi) are all areas that were under the management of Han, not combined biographies of the historical figures as in this memoir.¹ The “Zhang Qian, Li Guangli zhuan” 張騫李廣利傳 (Biographies of Zhang Qian and Li Guangli) in *Hanshu* 漢書 is also based on this chapter; I will therefore deal with the textual variations whenever relevant. This memoir also forms the basis of several paragraphs of the “Xiyu zhuan” 西域傳 (Memoir on the Western Regions) in *Hanshu*; textual comparisons can be found in my commentary on the *Hanshu* chapter.

[2] Dayuan was the name of a state in the present-day Ferghāna Basin.²

[3] Hanzhong 漢中 was the name of a prefecture. Its seat of government was located east of present-day Hanzhong, Shanxi 陝西 Province. *Shiji suoyin* 史記索隱 quotes *Yibu qijiu zhuan* 益部

耆舊傳 by Chen Shou 陳壽: “Zhang Qian is a native of Chenggu 成固 of Hanzhong [present-day Chenggu, Shanxi Province].”

[4] The Xiongnu were nomadic tribes north of the Gobi Desert. According to the “Xiongnu liezhuan” 匈奴列傳 (Memoir on the Xiongnu) in *Shiji*, “At this time [i.e., during the reign of the First Emperor of Qin], the Eastern Hu were very powerful and the Yuezhi were likewise flourishing. The *Chanyu* or chieftain of the Xiongnu was Touman 頭曼. Touman, unable to hold out against the Qin forces, had withdrawn to the far north.... Touman’s oldest son, the heir apparent to his position, was named Modu 冒頓, but the *Chanyu* also had a younger son by another consort whom he had taken later and of whom he was very fond. He decided that he wanted to get rid of Modu and set up his younger son as heir instead, and he therefore sent Modu as a hostage to the Yuezhi nation. When Modu arrived among the Yuezhi, Touman made a sudden attack on them. The Yuezhi were about to kill Modu, but he managed to steal one of their best horses and escape, eventually making his way back home. His father, struck by his bravery, put him in command of a force of ten thousand cavalry”. When Modu became the *Chanyu*, the Xiongnu “inflicted a crushing defeat, killing the ruler of the Eastern Hu, taking prisoner his subjects, and seizing their domestic animals. Then he returned and rode west, attacking and routing the Yuezhi, and annexed the lands of the ruler of Loufan 樓煩³ and the king of Baiyang 白羊 to the south of the [Yellow] River”.⁴ Thus, “the kings and leaders of the right live in the west, the area from Shang 上 Prefecture⁵ west to the territories of the Yuezhi, Di 氐, and Qiang 羌 tribes. The *Chanyu* has his court in the region north of Dai 代⁶ and Yunzhong 雲中 [prefectures]”.⁷ (Burton Watson, trans., *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, 2 vols. [New York: Columbia University Press, 1961], 2:160-161, 162, 163; Romanization and some terms modified.) This is to say, it was during the reign of *Chanyu* Modu (209-174 BCE) that the Xiongnu began to thrive, defeating the Yuezhi in the west and the Eastern Hu in the east and making frequent encroachments on the south, to become the most serious menace to the border of the Western Han.⁸

[5] The Yuezhi were nomadic tribes. Before their defeat by the Xiongnu, they were extremely strong; their territories stretched from north of the present-day Mount Qilian 祁連 in the east and east of the present-day Tianshan [Mountains] and the Altai Mountains in the west. Their influence even extended to the Hetao 河套 area.⁹

[6] The drinking vessel here refers to a wine vessel or container. The Commentary by Yan Shigu 顏師古 (hereafter the Yan Commentary) on the “Zhang Qian, Li Guangli zhuan” in *Hanshu* states: “From what is recorded in ‘Xiongnu zhuan’ 匈奴傳, ‘[the Xiongnu] drank blood from a vessel made of the skull of the king of the Yuezhi, whom they had defeated, and made an oath’, the

drinking vessel certainly refers to a wine cup". As is recorded in the *History* (IV, 65) of Herodotus, the Scythians also had this custom: "The skulls of their enemies, not indeed of all, but of those whom they most detest, they treat as follows. Having sawn off the portion below the eyebrows, and cleaned out the inside, they cover the outside with leather. When a man is poor, this is all that he does; but if he is rich, he also lines the inside with gold: in either case the skull is used as a drinking-cup".¹⁰ The Xiongnu treated the king of the Yuezhi in such a way; this custom could also have influenced the Yuezhi.¹¹

[7] "The Yuezhi had fled, but, while they were enraged with the Xiongnu...": *Chanyu* Modu began to deal with the Yuezhi after he had defeated the Eastern Hu and eased the threat from the east. He launched two large-scale attacks on the Yuezhi. The first was carried out at the end of the third century BCE, thwarting the Yuezhi's momentum toward the east. The second occurred in 177 to 176 BCE; as a result, the Yuezhi abandoned the land they had possessed, and most of them migrated westward to the valleys of the Ili and Chu Rivers. The Yuezhi who had migrated to the west are referred to as the Da Yuezhi. The statement that "the Xiongnu had defeated the king of the Yuezhi", understood in the context of the following record, "the *Chanyu* Laoshang of the Xiongnu killed the king of the Yuezhi and made a drinking vessel of his skull", should refer to the *Chanyu* Laoshang (r. 174-161 BCE). That is, the Yuezhi who had migrated westward to the Ili and Chu Rivers had suffered another defeat at the hands of the Xiongnu, with their king killed. However, this defeat by *Chanyu* Laoshang did not force the Da Yuezhi to abandon the valleys of the Ili and Chu Rivers. The statement that "the Yuezhi had fled" means only that they were defeated in battle.

[8] "Hu" here refers to the Xiongnu. The statement, "The Yuezhi had fled, but, while they were enraged with the Xiongnu, there was no party with whom they could attack them jointly", etc., can serve as collateral evidence. "Hu" here is an abbreviated term for the Xiongnu.¹²

[9] Zhang Qian's first journey to the west as an envoy was to contact the Yuezhi in order to attack the Xiongnu jointly. One can conclude that at the time when Zhang Qian commenced his journey, the Da Yuezhi, who "were enraged with the Xiongnu", were still active in the valleys of the Ili and Chu Rivers.

[10] "Their route would perforce have to pass through the Xiongnu": During the Jianyuan 建元 reign-period of Emperor Wu 武, the Yuezhi were in the valleys of the Ili and Chu Rivers. The Xiongnu, after they had driven the Yuezhi out of the lands they formerly possessed, not only controlled large areas of land north of the Qilian Mountains and east of the Tianshan and Altai Mountains, but also the southern foothills of the Altai, including Dzungaria and the oasis states of the Tarim Basin, which used to be controlled by the Yuezhi. This is why Zhang Qian, when he set out from Longxi 隴西 for