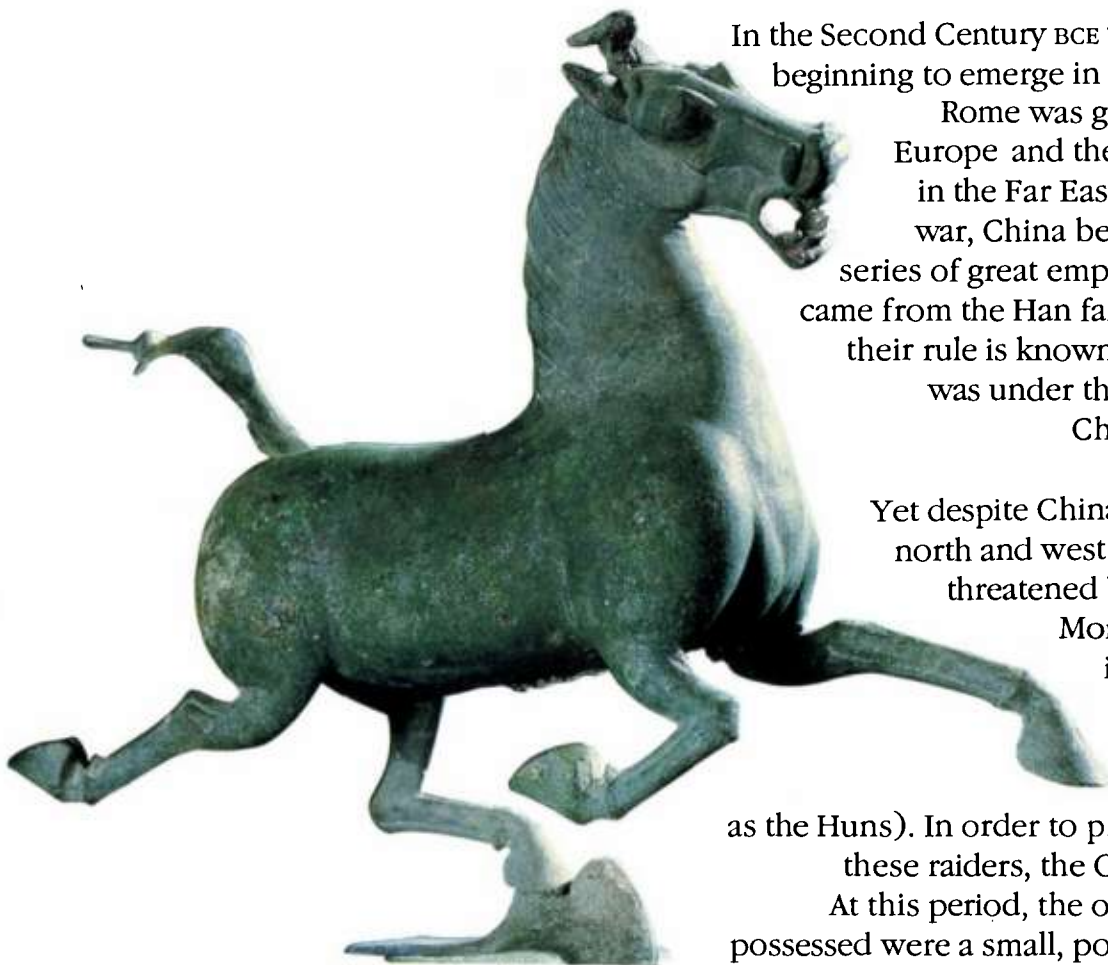




chapter two

The Opening of the Silk Route

Zhang Qian's Expedition



In the Second Century BCE two great powers were beginning to emerge in the world. In the West, Rome was gaining control through Europe and the Near East. Meanwhile in the Far East, after a period of civil war, China became reunited under a series of great emperors. These emperors came from the Han family, and the period of their rule is known as the Han Dynasty. It was under the Han Dynasty that the Chinese Empire began to spread westwards. Yet despite China's newfound strength, north and west China were constantly threatened by raids from nomadic Mongol and Turkic tribes, in particular a tribe the Chinese called the Xiongnu (later known in Europe as the Huns). In order to protect themselves from these raiders, the Chinese needed horses. At this period, the only horses the Chinese possessed were a small, pony-like breed, but they

▲ *This beautiful bronze horse was made in China during the Han Dynasty. Its foot is balanced on a swallow, enabling it to fly. The 'heavenly horses' of Ferghana inspired the creation of many works of art during the Han period.*

had begun to hear reports of a new kind of horse. This was large and strong, and capable of carrying armour-clad men into battle. According to the reports these 'heavenly horses' (as the Chinese called them) were bred by the people who lived in the valleys of Ferghana. These valleys lay beyond China to the north-west, on the other side of the Tian Shan Mountains.

The Han Emperor, Wu-di, decided to send an expedition to Ferghana to find these horses. The man he chose to lead this expedition was Zhang Qian. In 138 BCE, Zhang set off westwards from the imperial capital of Changan on what was to become one of history's greatest voyages of exploration. Together with his expedition of 100 men, he journeyed to the western end of the Great Wall of China, which had been built to protect the Chinese Empire from the northern barbarians. From here he ventured forth towards the notorious Taklamakan desert, which he was told meant in local dialect: 'Go into this place and you won't come out alive'.



Zhang found a way round this death-trap by travelling between the remote oases which skirted the desert. Next he had to deal with the high passes over the Tian Shan Mountains to Ferghana. All this time Zhang was in danger from the Xiongnu. Twice he was taken prisoner. One of these periods of captivity was to last for over ten years! Finally, after thirteen years of adventure and hard travelling Zhang managed to make it back to Changan. He had only one companion left from his original expedition of one hundred men.

The Emperor Wu-di had long given up hope for Zhang and his expedition, believing that they were all dead. Zhang told the amazed court that the stories they had heard about the 'heavenly horses' of Ferghana were true. According to a Chinese historian of the period, Zhang also told of an empire he had heard of called Persia, and a fabulous empire to its south-east, India.

Zhang Qian was not the first to travel across the mountains to the West. This route had almost certainly been used by occasional traders for several centuries. But it was through Zhang Qian that China discovered the potential for trade with the West, thus laying the foundations for what was eventually to be known as the Silk Route.



▲ The Tian Shan or 'Heavenly' Mountains. Zhang Qian had to cross the western end of this high range to reach Ferghana.

◀ The Silk Route crossed this barren landscape in the Tarim Basin. It has changed very little since Zhang Qian passed through this remote area on his long journey.



▲ *Acrobats and tumblers have long been popular in China. Many trace the traditions of their art back to the Han Dynasty when entertainers from western Asia came to China by way of the Silk Route.*

► *A stone relief depicting a mounted Chinese warrior, dating from the Han Dynasty. The Chinese adopted the tactic of fighting on horseback from the Xiongnu.*

▼ *The green area on this map shows the extent of the Chinese Empire around 100 CE.*



The Golden Age of the Han Dynasty

As a result of Zhang Qian's expedition, the Emperor Wu-di sent another mission to Ferghana. He wanted to buy some of the 'heavenly horses' in order to defend China against the Xiongnu. But the people of Ferghana believed that their horses were sacred, and refused to sell them to the Chinese. So the Emperor Wu-di next despatched a huge army of 60,000 men over 2400 kilometres across the mountains to capture some 'heavenly horses'.



It was a massive undertaking but the Emperor Wu-di's expedition was a great success. It managed to capture a breeding herd of these new large horses, which was brought back to China. In the course of this successful campaign, the Xiongnu were driven from north-western China, and Chinese power spread across the entire Tarim Basin. Caravans could now safely journey through the region and traders soon began exploring this new route carrying bales of silk from China, bringing back precious jade from the mountains of the Tarim Basin.

But this was only the beginning. The west-bound traders discovered that silk was a highly valued commodity in the West, and soon began exporting their wares beyond the Pamir Mountains. Under the protection of the newly-expanded Chinese Empire, the caravans began opening up the Silk Route to the West.

The Han emperors encouraged this trade and, perhaps for the first time, the Chinese began to look at the world beyond their borders for reasons other than the need to defend themselves. The trading caravans returning from the West along the Silk Route arrived in China with all kinds of new wonders, never before seen in the East, and bearing tales of the empires in the West. For the first time, the Chinese annals mentioned the empire of 'Li-Gan' – a name that seems to refer to the Roman Empire.

Chinese silk was exchanged for luxuries such as furs, precious stones and ivory. The traders introduced cucumbers, grapes, figs and many other foods to China. The Chinese word for grape comes from the Greek – a clear indication that the fruit arrived in China from the West, probably via Bactria (part of present day Afghanistan), at that time a Greek speaking region, famous for its vineyards.

The golden age of the Han Dynasty had begun. From around 100 BCE, China entered a period of great progress and stability that was to last for over a century. Historical records dating from the period give us some idea of how much of China's rapid progress during the Han Dynasty came as a direct result of trade with the West by way of the Silk Route.

▼ *This jade burial suit, held together by gold wire, was made for the Han Princess, Tou Wan. Jade was highly prized by the Chinese and the newly-opened Silk Route gave them access to the rich deposits of this stone around the Tarim Basin.*





Silk and the Roman Empire



▲ The red area on this map shows the extent of the Roman Empire around 100 CE.

While the Han Dynasty prospered in the East, the Roman Empire continued to grow in the West. By the beginning of the Common Era, the Roman Empire stretched from northern France to the shores of North Africa, and from Spain in the west to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. This guaranteed protection for trading caravans at the western end of the Silk Road.

As capital of this empire, Rome became a city of great wealth and sophistication importing products from far and wide. When Chinese silk first reached Rome it caused a sensation. The Romans had never before seen such fine material, and silk garments became the height of fashion amongst the aristocracy. In no time silk was in great demand, and its popularity began to spread throughout the Roman Empire. The Romans could not get enough silk to satisfy the demand, and silk began to fetch huge prices. It was literally worth its weight in gold!

▼ Roman women would have worn clothes like these, some of them made from highly-fashionable silk.





◀ These magnificent Roman ruins from Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) give some idea of the wealth of the Roman Empire. Much of this wealth was spent on luxuries from the East.

▼ Silken twine being put on to reels by hand. Today this is usually done by machines.



▼ Silk worms spinning their cocoons in a bamboo tray.



Making Silk

The silkworm is the caterpillar of a large, flightless moth simply known as the silk moth. When changing from caterpillar to moth, the silkworm spins a cocoon around itself for protection. The inner part of this cocoon is a continuous strand of very fine silk, that can measure up to 900 metres in length. Silk farmers unravel this strand and entwine it with as many as fourteen others to produce the silken thread, which can then be woven into silk cloth.

The craze for silk and other eastern luxuries led to huge amounts of Roman money and gold being sent eastwards to trading centres across Asia, from the Middle East to India and beyond. Early in the First Century CE, the emperor Tiberius complained that the riches of the empire were being drained away by what he saw as needless extravagance: 'In exchange for trifles, our money is sent to foreign lands and even to our enemies.' But the silk continued to be bought.

The Roman historian, Pliny, refers to a form of silk being produced on the Greek island of Cos, but the art of sericulture, that is silk making, was largely unknown in the West. Under the Han Dynasty, the Chinese were careful to keep knowledge of this art secret, so that they could continue to make huge profits from the silk which was shipped west along the Silk and Spice Routes.



▲ Map of the four empires crossed by the Silk Route around 100 CE: the Roman (red area), the Parthian (blue area), the Kushan (orange area) and the Chinese (green area).

The Middle Empires

For much of the first two centuries of the Common Era, traders along the eastern end of the Silk Route were protected by the Chinese Empire. Similarly, at the western end of the Silk Route, traders were guaranteed safe passage by the Roman Empire. But there still remained the lands between these two empires. During the Roman-Han period, this region was largely controlled by two peoples, the Parthians and the Kushans.

An Iranian tribe from south-east of the Caspian Sea, the Parthians had a well-established empire stretching from the Pamirs to the Syrian desert by the start of the First Century BCE. The newly-opened Silk

Route passed through this territory, and the Parthians soon began to prosper as middlemen. They would levy taxes on the caravans passing through their territory, in exchange for protection. Also their traders would buy goods from the incoming caravans and re-sell them at a profit to other caravans passing through their territory.

In the First Century CE the Parthians began to lose control of the eastern end of their empire. This allowed the Kushans, a tribe from northern China, to establish a large empire in central Asia. They, too, saw the benefits of trade and encouraged it by protecting the routes through the Pamirs and the trading centres of Samarkand and Bactra.

Relationships between the Chinese and the Kushans were relatively good, but the Romans and Parthians were not on such friendly terms. Rome resented paying huge prices for goods that had passed through Parthian lands and, in an attempt to bypass the middlemen, looked more to the sea routes from the Red Sea to India as a means of obtaining eastern goods. But so long as these four empires remained stable and able to protect the trade routes, overland trade flourished.



▲ A group of Parthian warriors carved in stone relief. Note their trousers, which show that they were horsemen.

▼ This Parthian pendant dates from 1st Century CE. It is made of gold studded with garnets. Garnets and other coloured stones were some of the most expensive items traded along the Silk Route.



◀ This great arch is the world's largest unsupported brick vault. It is part of a palace in Ctesiphon, the capital of the Parthian (and later Sasanian) Empire and a wealthy centre for Silk Route trade.

