

The Prosperity of the Silk Road Qinghai Road during the Wei Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties

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Abstract: *Qinghai Road is an integral part of the overland Silk Road and an auxiliary passage of the Hexi Corridor, the main road. During the Wei Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties, the Central Plains was still in turmoil, and Qinghai Road once replaced Hexi Road because of its safety and convenience, and became the main line of the eastern section of the Silk Road, and all kinds of people were constantly on the Qinghai Road.*

Keywords: Wei Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties, Qinghai Road, Prosperity.

1. Introduction

The Silk Road served as an ancient trade route in China, linking the East and West while traversing Eurasia. The Qinghai Road forms an integral part of the overland Silk Road and acts as a secondary route to the main corridor of the Hexi Corridor. Over various dynasties, it has been referred to by several names, including “Qiangzhong Road,” “Henan Road,” “Tuyuhun Road,” “Qinghai Road,” “Tangbo Ancient Road,” and “Qing-Tang Road.” The Qinghai Road connects the strategic military towns of Dunhuang and Qilian, as well as the Huangshui River basin area, which flows near Xining. It serves as a vital transportation hub between Hexi Corridor and the Western Regions. Specifically, the Qinghai Road comprises a network of routes centered around Qinghai Lake. It traverses the Hexi Corridor from west to east, merging into the main Silk Road artery at Lanzhou. The southern route connects to present-day Gannan, following the Bailong River or Min River into the Sichuan area (Chengdu). The western route crosses the Qaidam Basin and continues towards the Altyn-Tagh Mountains, ultimately reaching Ruoqiang in Xinjiang, linking with the southern Silk Road. To the north, the route passes through the Bian Dou Mountain Pass Canyon into the Hexi region at Zhangye.

2. The Rise of the Qinghai Road

During the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, Zhang Qian embarked on his first diplomatic mission to the Western Regions. Upon returning from the Great Yuezhi, he avoided being recaptured by the Xiongnu by taking a detour through the “Qiangzhong” route. *The Records of the Grand Historian*, Volume 123, notes, “Qian traveled from the Yuezhi to Daxia but could not secure the Yuezhi’s key territories. After staying for over a year, he attempted to return through Qiangzhong, but was once again captured by the Xiongnu [1].” Zhang Qian’s route proceeded eastward along the foothills of the Kunlun Mountains, passing through Shache, Yutian, and Shanshan, and then traversed the Altyn Mountains to enter the Qaidam Basin in Qinghai. The “Qiangzhong Road” mentioned reflects what we now refer to as the “Qinghai Road,” suggesting that this route existed at least during the Han Dynasty. However, as the Xiongnu were defeated, the Hexi Corridor opened up, and attention shifted away from the Qinghai Road.

During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, the chaotic domestic situation created an opportunity for the rise of the Qinghai Road. Throughout the Wei and Jin periods, frequent conflicts plagued the Central Plains, and the main thoroughfare connecting the east and west, the Hexi Corridor, faced significant obstructions, making the Qinghai Road the optimal alternative. The Northern Ruanruan and small states in the Western Regions sought to collaborate with the southern regimes to restrain the Northern Wei, positioning the Qinghai Road as a vital link for communication. The southern powers aimed to engage in cooperative endeavors with the Ruanruan and the Western Regions while also facilitating cultural and economic exchanges, with envoys and merchant groups finding the most favorable routes through the relatively weak Tuyuhun territory of the Northern Wei. The Tuyuhun regime was established in 329 AD and grew stronger amid the turbulent circumstances, navigating relations with various powers. In 439 AD, following the fall of Northern Liang, the Northern Wei briefly deployed troops to the Western Regions but opted to withdraw approximately 30 years later. Tuyuhun seized the opportunity, successfully establishing dominance over the Western Regions, gaining control over territories such as Shanshan and Jiemu, and gradually asserting control over the southern segment of the Qinghai Road. Under Tuyuhun’s proactive leadership and diligent management, the Qinghai Road flourished, becoming a major trade and transportation artery linking the East and the Western Regions.

3. The Flourishing Scene of the Qinghai Road during the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties

The Qinghai Road of the Silk Road entered a period of flourishing from the mid-5th century, lasting for over a century. The prosperity of the Qinghai Road was closely tied to the diverse groups of people traversing this route. These included diplomatic envoys from various countries engaging in political exchanges, monks from both China and abroad promoting Buddhist interactions, and enterprising merchants seeking profit, all of whom contributed vitality and dynamism to the flourishing of the Qinghai Road.

After the Qinghai Road was opened, diplomatic missions from various nations frequented the region. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, states such as Northern

Liang, Tuyuhun, and Rouran dispatched a total of 62 missions to the Southern regimes. Among these, Tuyuhun sent the most missions, totaling 42. The kingdoms of the Western Regions also sent missions to the Southern regimes for tribute trade. Amidst the North-South confrontation, these missions had no choice but to select the Qinghai Road to reach their destinations. In the first year of the Yixi era of Eastern Jin, Western Liang, which had been engaged in long-term conflict with Northern Liang, “Dispatch the attendants Huang Shi and Liang Xing for a covert mission, carrying the memorial to the imperial palace,” two years later, “Once again, I will dispatch the monk Faquan with the memorial to take a lesser-known route to Jiankang, to pay my respects to the Eastern Jin court [2].” The route taken will undoubtedly avoid traversing the territory of Northern Liang; rather, it will proceed south from Dunhuang, cross the Qaidam Basin, utilize the Qinghai Road to reach Yizhou, and then continue to Jiankang. During this period, Tuyuhun was also actively seeking to establish amicable relations with the Southern Dynasties. In the first year of the reign of Emperor Jingping of the Song dynasty, the Tuyuhun king, A-chai, dispatched envoys to pay tribute to the Liu Song regime, Shaodi “appointed A-chai as the General of Anxi and the Governor of Liangzhou, conferring upon him the title of Duke of Jiaohe [3].” Subsequently, the Tuyuhun delegation frequently traveled between the two regions, with their most efficient route entering Shu from their eastern frontier. The *Book of Song* also notes that the Rouran communicated with the capital, which was over 30,000 li away via the “Western Route,” sending envoys annually to engage in equal diplomatic relations with the Central Plains dynasties [3]. The “Western Route” refers to the Qinghai Road. The *Book of Southern Qi* records that the Ruirui typically traveled to Yizhou via the Henan Road [4]. Additionally, the *Book of Liang* also recorded that during a nation’s interaction with the Southern Dynasties, “their speech required translation by the people of Henan before communication was possible.” This shows that the Qinghai Road served as a vital communication bridge for the Rouran, Western Regions, Tuyuhun, and the Southern Dynasties, facilitating frequent diplomatic missions along this route during this period.

Once the Qinghai Road became accessible, monastic exchanges between the domestic and foreign Buddhist communities flourished. During the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, Buddhism began to thrive, and an increasing number of monks sought to travel westward for scriptures, with many preferring the Qinghai Road. The renowned monk Faxian departed from Chang’an and traveled through the Qinghai Road, visiting thirteen countries, as noted in the *Biographies of Faxian*, “Faxian set out from Chang’an, crossed the Long Mountains, and arrived in the country of Qiangui for summer meditation. After completing the meditation, he continued his journey to the country of Naotan, traversing the Yanglou Mountains, ultimately reaching Zhangye Town [6].” In 475, Shakyamuni traveled through the Sichuan region along the Silk Road via the Qinghai Road to reach Khotan. The *Biographies of Eminent Monks* mentions, “In the third year of the Song Yuanhui period, a traveler set off from Jinling, traveling westward through the Sichuan region, passing through Henan, and traversing the Ruirui area [7].” Furthermore, the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* also records that the Eastern Jin monk Tanhong made two round

journeys to Sichuan and Chang’an via the Qinghai Road. Yang Xianzhi also documented in the *Record of the Pagodas of Luoyang* that Song Yun and Huisheng traveled to the Western Regions for scriptures via the eastern segment of the Qinghai Road, although the specific route remains a subject of debate. Additionally, Buddhist texts brought back from Tuyuhun were translated into Tuyuhun language and were transmitted through the Qinghai Road to various Western Regions countries, as noted in *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*, Volume Two, “Biography of Zhanakouduo”, “Moreover, it passed through Kela Pandu and other countries... and reached Tuyuhun, arriving in Shanzhou, during the first year of the Western Wei era [8].” The Zhao-na Jue duo traveled from Khotan to Tuyuhun, and then to Shanshan, taking the Qinghai Road, which goes without saying. “In the first year of the Western Wei (535 AD),” indicates that this was approximately the last group of Buddhist monks from Khotan during the Southern and Northern Dynasties who journeyed along the Qinghai Road to places like Shanshan in order to reach Chang’an.

The Qinghai Road served as a crucial pathway for the exchange of goods and cultural interactions during the period following its opening, facilitating the movements of merchants from various states. After the obstruction of the Hexi Corridor, commodities such as Shu silk from Chengdu and tea from the Southern Dynasties were transported to the Western Regions, while horses from Tuyuhun and exotic treasures from the West were directed towards the Central Plains through this route. According to the *Book of Zhou*, “in the second year of Emperor Wei’s abdication (553 AD), notable diplomatic ties were established between the Qi state and Tuyuhun. When a certain individual returned, the commander Xing led cavalry to ambush him near Chiquan, capturing significant figures along with two hundred and forty Hu merchants and six hundred mules, coupled with immense quantities of colorful silks and satin [9].” While this interaction was ostensibly a matter of governmental relations, the substantial number of Hu merchants and the vast quantities of silk indicate a large commercial caravan under Tuyuhun guidance. The Tuyuhun acted as intermediaries, leveraging their geographic advantage to capitalize on trade opportunities, implementing various policies to safeguard commercial activities, including provisions for accommodations, guides, translators, and even military protection for traders from the Central Plains and Western Regions. Regardless of the accessibility of transportation or trade policies, many merchants have been drawn to the Qinghai Road, leading to its historical prosperity as a vital link in connecting trade and traffic between the East and West along the Silk Road. Merchants from Central Asia and the Western Regions, after conducting business in China, often chose to settle down. Biographical records of merchants from Shu confirm that they arrived in China via the Qinghai Road. The *Book of Sui* records the ancestry of He Tuo, indicating that the He surname generally refers to people from Central Asia. “They entered Sichuan through commercial endeavors and established residence in Pixian [10],” which is strategically located at the southern segment of the Qinghai Road, also known as “Mianshan Road,” leading into Yizhou (Chengdu). Thus, it is evident that He Tuo’s ancestors migrated from the Western Regions to Pixian via the Qinghai Road.

“The Silk Road was opened due to human needs and evolved through human activities [11].” The Qinghai Road flourished due to the relentless flow of merchants and travelers, not only including diplomats, monks, and businessmen but also armies with imperial mandates, ordinary people migrating for various reasons, and travelers exploring cultures and customs. Although their names are rarely recorded in historical texts, they have left an indelible mark and vibrant presence on the Qinghai Road, contributing significantly to the historical and cultural fabric of this route. The prosperity of the Qinghai Road persisted into the reign of Emperor Yang during the Sui Dynasty, but as he launched military campaigns against the Tuyuhun, the more advantageous Hexi Corridor became accessible, leading to the gradual decline of the Qinghai Road’s prominence. It wasn’t until the Northern Song period that the Qinghai Road experienced a resurgence, but its status was far diminished compared to its previous glory.

4. The Historical Significance of the Qinghai Road in the Context of Sino-Western Transportation History during the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties

The significance of the Qinghai Road during the transportation history between the East and West in the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties is indisputable. The prosperity of the Qinghai Road not only enhanced political and military communication among various regimes but also established Yi Province as a crucial transportation hub and commodity transfer station, serving as a bridge for cultural exchanges between northern and southern powers and the East and West. As Mr. Zhou Weizhou remarked, “From the mid-5th century to the early 7th century, the Qinghai region, controlled by the Tuyuhun, effectively became one of the centers of East-West transportation. There were accessible routes leading north, east, southeast, west, and southwest from Qinghai, linking China with the northern regions, the Western Regions, the Tibetan Plateau, and India, underscoring its pivotal importance [12].”

The flourishing of the Qinghai Road further strengthened its functions in political exchanges. The frequent diplomatic missions through the Qinghai Road between the Western Regions and the Southern Dynasties illuminated its critical role as a political bridge between the East and West. Despite the geographical isolation of the Southern Dynasties, they were still regarded as orthodox, profoundly influencing the trajectory of the political relationship between the Central Plains and the Western Regions. On one hand, the Southern Dynasties utilized the Qinghai Road for tribute trade with countries in the Western Regions, thereby promoting their national prestige; on the other hand, they leveraged the Qinghai Road to connect with the minority regimes in the northwest to counter the military blockade imposed by the Northern Dynasties. This allowed the Qinghai Road to seize this historical opportunity, becoming a key component in the reconstruction of the tribute system in the new era, further highlighting its unique value in political exchange. The prosperity of the Qinghai Road also significantly enhanced the power of the Tuyuhun. With the smooth operation of the Qinghai Road, Tuyuhun became an essential route for connecting the nations of the Western Regions with the

Central Plains, as “transportation between the Ruanruan (or Ruru), the Xie-Da (or Huaguo), and Tuyuhun primarily occurred through Gaochang, creating an interconnected relationship among them [13].” The Tuyuhun utilized the transportation advantages of the Qinghai Road, adapted to the current circumstances, and maneuvered among various political regimes. In a time characterized by the coexistence of multiple nations and a complex political landscape, they diligently sought opportunities for survival and development while expanding their political influence. This also reflects the further enhancement of the political communication functions of the Qinghai Road.

The prosperity of the Qinghai Road positioned Yizhou as a pivotal transportation hub and a significant trading intermediary. After the disruption caused by warfare in Hexi, the Qinghai Road became the main artery; its southern starting point being Yizhou (Chengdu). Countries from the Western Regions and Persia established trade and economic exchanges with the Central Plains through Chengdu, while southern powers also formed trade relations with the Western Nations via Chengdu and the Qinghai Road. Hence, the *Book of Liang* states, “The geographical proximity of Tuyuhun to Yizhou facilitates frequent commercial exchanges, with the populace admiring the benefits of Tuyuhun, prompting many to engage in business activities there [5].” The *Book of Song* similarly reports, “Merchants from distant lands flocked to the Shu region, with some obtaining loans reaching millions [3].” Yizhou emerged as a commercial hub, attracting merchants from both domestic and foreign territories and became an indispensable trading relay on the Silk Road. Some Western merchants drawn by Chengdu’s local culture decided to settle down, marry, and establish a base in Chengdu, traveling between the Western Regions and the Central Plains for trade, eventually amassing significant wealth. The monk Shidaoxian was also a prominent merchant before his ordination, frequently using Chengdu as a transit point between the Western Regions and Jiankang, accumulating wealth in the hundreds of thousands. Yizhou gradually evolved into the preferred destination for Western merchants engaging in trade activities.

The Qinghai Road served as a bridge for cultural exchanges between the southern and northern regimes and between the East and West. Although economic exchanges were the primary objective for the countries of the Western Regions and southern powers, the cultural landscape of the area exhibited characteristics of diversity and fusion during this process. Since the 1990s, painted wooden coffin panels from the Tuyuhun period have been discovered along the Qinghai-Tibet Route. Research indicates that the tradition of decorated wooden coffins originated with the Tuyuhun people, associated with the Xianbei system, yet the most prevalent imagery reflects the equestrian scenes characteristic of the Han cultural sphere, encapsulating the rich interactions and integrations of diverse cultures along the Qinghai-Tibet Route. The constant flow of monks traveling along this route played a critical role in the introduction of Buddhism to China. Numerous Buddhist relics have been excavated in the Min River tributary of the Qinghai-Tibet Route, as well as in Chengdu and its surrounding areas, some of which exhibit features of Buddhist art from the Western Regions. Scholars generally believe that certain Buddhist sculptures were

brought into Sichuan via this route. The region along the Qinghai-Tibet Route is home to various ethnic groups, including Han, Tibetan, Hui, Uyghur, Salar, and Bonan peoples, alongside individuals from the Western Regions, Central Asia, and West Asia. This pattern of mixed and concentrated habitation has had a profound impact on ethnic integration, cultural exchange, and the formation of a diverse yet unified Chinese nation.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, as noted, the Qinghai-Tibet Route supplanted the Hexi Corridor as the main thoroughfare of the Silk Road during the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, playing an undeniable role in its history. This period saw flourishing trade along the Qinghai-Tibet Route and vibrant cultural exchanges, which not only facilitated commercial interactions and cultural dissemination between China and the Western Regions, Central Asia, and even Europe, but also strengthened political ties and ethnic unity, ultimately making significant contributions to the prosperity and development of the Chinese nation. Under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative, there is a need to revisit and study the thriving role that Qinghai Province plays in the realms of politics, economy, and culture. This examination is of paramount importance for innovatively inheriting the illustrious history of the ancient Silk Road, promoting the establishment of the Silk Road Economic Belt, and fostering a community with a shared future for humanity.

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