

On the Emergence of the Qinghai Sections of the Silk Road

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Between the Han 漢 and Tang 唐 dynasties, the Hexi corridor (Hexi zoulang 河西走廊, Gansu corridor) in northern Gansu 甘肅 was controlled by a number of short-lived states and was often a scene of military operations. During these centuries, trade routes emerged across the territory of the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾 Kingdom, in present-day Qinghai 青海 Province, and grew more and more important towards the end of the period. It is a popular assumption that the ascent of these routes is a result of instability in the Hexi corridor and its occupation by the non-Chinese dynasties of North China. Research into the political events of the era indicates that the importance of these southern routes cannot confidently be explained by instability and foreign powers in the Hexi corridor. Instead, the degree of political organisation brought to the region by the Tuyuhun and their unique items of pastoral production might at least in part account for the popularity of the trade routes that ran through their kingdom.

Between the Western Jin (Xi Jin 西晉 265–317) and Sui 隋 (581–617) dynasties, i.e. the period of the so called ‘Sixteen Kingdoms of the Five Barbarians’ (304–439) and the ‘Northern and Southern Dynasties’ (439–581), the Hexi-corridor (Hexi zoulang 河西走廊) in northern Gansu 甘肅 was controlled by a number of short-lived states and was often a scene of military operations. The ethnically Han-Chinese dynasties in this period were confined to the southern half of China, having no access to the corridor. During these centuries, trade routes emerged across the territory of the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾 Kingdom (329–663), in present-day Qinghai 青海 Province, and grew more and more important towards the end of the period. It is a popular assumption that the Tuyuhun, a neutral power between the rivalling North and South, provided alternatives to the Hexi-corridor then occupied by warring dynasties of mostly barbarian origin. The study of the political events of the era indicates that the importance of the alternative routes in modern Qinghai cannot confidently be explained by instability and the influence of foreign powers in the Hexi-corridor. Instead, the degree of political organisation brought to the region by the Tuyuhun and their unique items of pastoral production might at least in part account for the popularity of the trade routes crossing their kingdom.

1. *The Hexi and Qinghai Sections of the Silk Road*

The Hexi-corridor is a narrow passage that connects modern central Gansu 甘肃 with Xinjiang 新疆. Its northern border is the Mongolian Plateau and the ranges of the Qilian 祁連 mountains come from the south. The major cities and stations of the **Hexi section**, a part of the Silk Road running from east to west, were: Guzang 古藏 (modern Wuwei 武威), Zhangye 張掖, Jiuquan 酒泉, Yumen 玉門, and Dunhuang 敦煌 (also Shazhou 沙洲).

South from the Qilian Mountains lies the Kuku-nor region (roughly today's Qinghai province), a large part of which was occupied by the Tuyuhun from 317 to 663. In the northeastern corner of the modern Qinghai province is the valley of the Huangshui 湟水 river. This is one of the very few parts of Qinghai where relatively large-scale agriculture is possible and, therefore, this is the part of the province where the Han Chinese settlements and administration first appeared.¹ The route running along the valley connecting the modern cities and townships of Minhe 民和, Ledu 乐都 and Xining 西寧 is the **Huangshui section**. The Huangshui and the Hexi sections are connected by the **Qilian path** across the Qilian Mountains. After leaving the Huangshui valley behind, south from the Qinghai lake a new section, the **Caidam section**, begins. This, passing the Caidam basin (Chaidamu pendi 柴達木盆地), ends up at the eastern rim of the Tarim Basin in modern Xinjiang, which is called the Western Regions (Xiyu 西域). In roughly the same area, where the Huangshui section ends and the Caidam section begins, another section joins the system from the southeast. This is the **Henan section** that connects the Sichuan Basin in southwest China with the vicinity of the Qinghai lake.²

¹ In the first century B. C., Zhao Chongguo 趙充國 the Han general, who in 61 B. C. occupied the area, mentioned that the Qiang 羌 people had practiced agriculture in the area between Linqiang 臨羌 (Huangyuan 湟源) and Haomen 浩亶 (Xiangtang 享堂) in the Huangshui valley. Zhao's occupation was followed by establishing agricultural garrisons (*tuntian* 屯田) in this area. See Jie Shusen & Chen Bing 解书森 & 陈冰 "Qinghai de kaituo yu guonei yimin," 青海的开拓与国内移民 [The opening up of Qinghai and the inland migration] *Jingji Yanjiu* 经济研究. 3 (1984), 54-58.

² I named this section after the area it ran through, the Henan 河南 area. The name means "South from the river", which refers to the section of the Yellow River flowing roughly parallel to the Huangshui, in the eastern portion of modern Qinghai. This area is not to be confused with the modern Chinese province bearing the same name.

2. *The Era of Disintegration and the Emergence of the Tuyuhun Kingdom*

When the brief unification under the Western Jin-dynasty (265-317) ended with the occupation of Lanzhou (in 311) and Chang'an (the end of 316) by the Xiongnu Liu Cong 劉聰,³ the Chinese ruling elite were evacuated to South China, where the Sima clan continued their rule under the auspices of the Eastern Jin dynasty (Dong Jin 東晉 317-420). The Eastern Jin was then followed by the Liu Song 劉宋 (420-479), the Southern Qi 南齊 (479-502), the Southern Liang 南梁 (502-587)⁴ and the Chen 陳 (557-589) in the South, until the Sui (581-617) unified the whole of China again in 589. Between 317 and 589, the Chinese dynasties in the South could not extend their power to north China for it was occupied by a number of dynasties of mostly non-Han establishment. During these times, the southern dynasties, due to their geographical location and the occupation of the North by hostile powers, did not have access to the Hexi section. Yizhou 益州, located in the Sichuan basin, was these dynasties' main economic and cultural centre on their western flank. Yizhou was further connected by the Min 岷 and the Yangtze rivers to the capital, Jiankang 建康 (Nanjing 南京), in the East. It was mainly through the Yizhou and from there the Henan section that the southern dynasties could gain access to the Silk Road through the territory of the Tuyuhun.

In North China, the ephemeral states of the "five barbarians" contended with each other for hegemony.⁵ During these times, the Hexi section, the traditionally used passage between China and the Western Regions, was controlled by several of these barbarian states. Tao argues that during these times the Hexi-corridor was often obstructed, which explains why the alternative routes via Qinghai came into use.⁶ He also writes the following:

"For a long time, the Gansu Corridor dominated the links between Central China and the Western regions, but during this particular period, when

³ Liu Cong was the son of Liu Yuan 劉淵, the founder of the first barbarian kingdom the Xiongnu Former Zhao (Qian Zhao 前趙 304-329), of the Sixteen Kingdoms period. For more on the Former Zhao see: D. B. Honey, "The Rise of the Medieval Hsiung-nu: The Biography of Liu-Yüan", In: *Papers on Inner Asia, Subseries: Ancient Inner Asia*, 15 (1990), ed. Yuri Bregel.

⁴ Note that Southern Liaang and Southern Liang are not the same dynasties. The character of the former's name 梁 and in the latter's 涼 are different, but their modern Mandarin pronunciations are the same: *liang*. In order to make a distinction between the two, in this paper I spell the former name as Liaang.

⁵ For a summary of the barbarian kingdoms of the time see: P. Corradini, "The Barbarian States in North China", *Central Asiatic Journal*, 50/2 (2006), 163-232.

⁶ Tao Tong, *The Silk-Roads of the Northern Tibetan Plateau during the Early Middle Ages (from the Han to Tang dynasty as Reconstructed from Archaeological and Written Sources*, PhD Dissertation: Everhard-Karls University, Tübingen, 2008.

warfare and turmoil increased, the section that passed through the Huang Shui valleys came into use by travelers pursuing various goals.”⁷

In relation to this Xu Hongmei states:

„The Silk-Road was often obstructed by warfare and this gave rise to the trade routes in the territory of the Tuyuhun to become an important channel of communication between East and West.”⁸These explanations seem to be too convenient and simple; other factors also played important roles in the emergence and prosperity of the Qinghai sections (Huangshui, Henan, and Caidam) of the Silk Road. For a better understanding of the problem, we have to turn our attention both to the Hexicorridor and the Kuku-nor region, and to the events that took place there during the period under discussion.

The Hexi-corridor between 317-581

Not long before the Chinese elite of the Jin fled to the South in 317, Zhang Gui 張軌, the inspector (*mu* 牧) of Liangzhou 涼州, in the eastern half of the Hexi-corridor, claimed independence and established the Former Liang 前涼 dynasty (314–376). His regime was destroyed by Former Qin 前秦 (351–394), another barbarian state, in 376. Ten years later, Lü Guang 呂光 a Di general of the Former Qin, established his own state, the Later Liang 後涼 (386–403), in the same region. Later Liang’s collapse around the turn of the 5th century gave rise to three other “Liang” dynasties: Southern Liang 南涼 (397–414), Northern Liang 北涼 (398–439/60), and Western Liang 西涼 (400–421).⁹ Northern Liang was initially based in Zhangye and, in 412, it took Liangzhou from Southern Liang and shifted its capital there. Two years later, Southern Liang ceased to exist. In 420 and 421, Northern Liang took Jiuquan and Dunhuang from Western Liang and, upon its destruction, became the only power in the Hexi-corridor. By 439, Northern Wei 北魏 (386–534) destroyed Northern Liang and annexed the Hexi-corridor, conquering the whole of North China at the same time. Northern Wei then held control of the Hexi-corridor until 523, when serious rebellions broke out all over the empire, including within this region. In 526, the Tuyuhun acted as vassals of Northern Wei in suppressing the rebellion and gained control of the Hexi-corridor for a couple of years. Torn apart by rebellions, in 535 Northern Wei split into two halves, and the corridor from

⁷ Tao, *The Silk Roads*, 23.

⁸ Xu Hongmei, 许红梅 “Dulan xian chutu de Dong Luoma jinbi kaozheng” 都兰县出土的东罗马金币考证 In: *Minzu Lishi Yanjiu* 民族历史研究 15/2 (2004), 90–93, 92.

⁹ T. J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, Nomadic Empires and China 221 BC to AD 1757. Cambridge–Oxford 1992, 118.

then on belonged to Western Wei (Xi Wei 西魏 535–57). From 557, it belonged to Northern Zhou (Bei Zhou 北周 557–81).

From the above events, it is obvious that the Hexi-corridor was indeed often a scene of warfare and turmoil, especially between 317 and 439. The kingdoms of this period contended for control over the most important oases of the corridor: Liangzhou, Zhangye, Jiuquan, and Dunhuang.

The Huangshui and Henan Sections between 317–581

The Huangshui valley and its surroundings (the northeastern part of modern Qinghai) were also subject to contention between the numerous powers of northwest China. From the early 310s to 376, this territory was held by Former Liang. After the demise of Former Liang Former Qin (between 376–95), Later Liang then took possession of this piece of land (between 495 and 400). At the turn of the 5th century, the Qifu 乞伏 tribe of the Xianbei separated themselves from Later Liang and established their own state: Southern Liang. Xiping 西平 (modern Xining) and Ledu, located right on the bank of the Huangshui river, served as their capitals and the Qifu constantly fought for the valley with another separatist state, namely Northern Liang. After a brief occupation by the victorious Northern Liang, the valley was taken by yet another power: Western Qin (Xi Qin 西秦 385–431). This occurred in 415; they were able to hold it briefly before their destruction by the joint forces of the Tuyuhun, Northern Liang, and Da Xia in 431. The Tuyuhun at this time took control of the land until Northern Wei took it from them in 445. From this point on, Northern Wei and its western successors, Western Wei and Northern Zhou, possessed the valley up to the Riyue 日月 mountains.¹⁰

The Henan region, in the southeastern part of modern Qinghai, that connected the Tuyuhun with the Han-Chinese powers in South China, was taken from the Tuyuhun by the Western Wei in 553. By this point, the Western Wei was able to isolate the Chen dynasty and cut off most its communications with the Tuyuhun and, through them, the Western Regions.

The Tuyuhun and their Neighbours

In 285, not long before the emergence of the above barbarian states, an offshoot of the Murong 慕容 Xianbei under the leadership of the Tuyuhun migrated from Southern Manchuria, via the Yin 陰 mountains, and in the 310s arrived at what is now southwestern Gansu. Around 329, a grandson of the Tuyuhun, Tuyan 吐延 (318–330) established his state, which he named after his grandfather. They subjugated the local Qiang and Di tribes of southern Gansu

¹⁰ The Riyue Mountains that separate the Huangshui valley from the Qinghai lake served as the northeastern border of the Tuyuhun Kingdom.

and northern Sichuan and to the west, extended their territory roughly to the whole of the contemporary Qinghai province, and at times even to Eastern Xinjiang.¹¹ In the North and the East, the quickly emerging and vanishing northern powers became their neighbours, while in the southeast they had common borders with the dynasties of South China. The states of the Western Regions were located west of the Tuyuhun, an important area of trade, commerce, and cultural exchange for all Chinese powers.

The borders, especially in the North and the East, changed frequently. In the North, the ranges of the Qilian Mountains separated the Tuyuhun from the Hexi-corridor. In the East, the border between North China and the Tuyuhun fluctuated around what is today Western Gansu and Eastern Qinghai. In the southeast, by the Henan section, the Tuyuhun could make contact with Yizhou.

In 371 Suixi 碎奚 (352–375), a Tuyuhun sovereign, for the first time established relations with one of the sixteen states: Former Qin (351–395). The Tuyuhun Kingdom became a vassal state of Former Qin and paid it a regular tribute. The northern states rose and fell within short periods of time; most lasted only for a few decades and the Tuyuhun had to find ways to deal with those that became their neighbours. Between 390–431, they paid tribute to Western Qin 西秦 (385–431) and from 431 to 534 to Northern Wei 北魏 (386–534). During their history of relationships with these northern dynasties, the Tuyuhun were constantly seeking independence and when they felt strong enough, refused to pay tribute and also often looted their borders. This behaviour enticed retribution in the form of punitive expeditions. Thus, periods of war and peace alternated between the Tuyuhun and their neighbours in North China.

In 535, Northern Wei fell into two contending parts: Western Wei (534–557) and Eastern Wei (Dong Wei 東魏 534–550). They were later followed by Northern Zhou (557–581) and Northern Qi (Bei Qi 北齊 550–577), respectively. The Tuyuhun established friendly relations with Eastern Wei and Northern Qi, the states that were situated further to the East, and with whom they had no common border. Understandably their relationships with the neighboring Western Wei and Northern Zhou were typically not peaceful.

On the other hand, the southern dynasties aspiring to restore Chinese rule over a reunited North and South inherently opposed the northern powers. Due to its geographical position, the Tuyuhun Kingdom became a buffer zone between the South and the North. It also became a channel through which, by means of the Henan section,¹² the South could gain indirect access to the wealth

¹¹ The Tuyuhun Kingdom was not counted among the sixteen states of the North; nor did it belong to South China. Its territory laid west from China proper, or what Chinese historians refer to as Neidi 內地 "Inner lands", but it shared its borders with both domains.

¹² It has to be mentioned here that according to Lubov-Lesničenko the route leading through the Caidam via the area of the Qinghai lake (through the Huangshui valley) reached Lanzhou 蘭州, from where the journey could be continued either

of the Western Regions. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Tuyuhuns' relationship with the southern dynasties was constantly peaceful, although it has to be noted that the South never rendered military aid to the Tuyuhun for their wars against the northern states. It was not only the southern dynasties that could access the Western Regions only via the Tuyuhun. Eastern Wei and Northern Qi, being situated in the eastern flank of the preceding Northern Wei, had no access to the Hexi-corridor over which their rivals, Western Wei and then Northern Zhou, held control. The Tuyuhun also provided access to the Western Regions across their own territory to these two states.

The Chinese chronicles outline the economy of the Tuyuhun and the characteristic products (*fangwu* 方物) of their land. They were famous for their sheep, long tailed yaks, and fine horses. Through the Silk Road, they obtained Persian mares which they then – according to belief – took to the island of the Qinghai lake where they were inseminated by a white dragon.¹³ The Tuyuhun were also specialists in training dancing horses, which were in constant demand in the Chinese courts.¹⁴

3. Travellers During the Era of Disintegration

Early Travellers

The trade routes across the Kuku-nor region were frequently used by merchants and artisans, as attested by the archaeological discoveries of the province.¹⁵ We know of a Sogdian artisan, who lived in the southern Liang

to North- or to South-China. Present-day Lanzhou during the times in discussion belonged to the northern dynasties by the name Jincheng 金城. Therefore, if one traveled to South-China along the Caidam- Huangshui-Jincheng-Sichuan route he inevitably had to proceed through the territory of a northern dynasty, suggesting that avoiding such a territory was not the reason of bypassing the Hexi-corridor. On the other hand, we know that there existed the Henan section connecting Sichuan with the area of the Qinghai lake. By this, northern territories could entirely be avoided and possibly cutting the journey shorter. See: L. Lesničenko, *Kitaj na Šelkovom Puti. šelk i vnešnje svjazi drevnego i rannesrednevekovogo Kitaja*, [China on the Silk-Road. Silk and the international relations of China in antiquity and the early Middle Ages] Moscow 1994

¹³ G. Molé, *The T'u-yü-hun from the Northern Wei to the Time of the Five Dynasties*. Roma 1970, 39, 115, note 180., also T. D. Carroll, *Account of the T'u-yü-hun in the History of the Chin Dynasty*. Berkeley-Los Angeles 1953, 23, note 34.

¹⁴ On dancing horses, see G. Molé, *The T'u-yü-hun*, 20, 28, 36.

¹⁵ Tao's dissertation (Tao, *The Silk Roads*) is strongly based on archaeological discoveries, which he assembled and discussed in detail. Xu Hongmei's (*Dulan xian*) paper discusses two Byzantine golden coins and to a lesser extent, the Sassanid silver coins that were unearthed in Qinghai. In relation to Qinghai's

Dynasty of South China, and whose father arrived from the West to Sichuan around the second quarter of the 6th century.¹⁶ His route of travel was not recorded, but there is a good chance that he took the Caidam and Henan sections. The presence of Sogdian and Chinese residents, most likely artisans, merchants and officials, is also attested to in the Tuyuhun Kingdom.¹⁷ However, those travellers whose itineraries are documented are mainly monks on pilgrimages.

Tao mentions seven monks who travelled through Qinghai between 399 and 535.¹⁸ Two of them, Fa Xian 法顯 (in 399) and Fa Yong 法勇 (in 420), according to Tao most probably travelled along the same route.¹⁹ They both started from Chang'an, which in 399 belonged to Later Qin Kingdom, and by 420 was sacked by Da Xia. On their journey, the monks reached the territory of Western Qin in the Huangshui valley; then turning to the North, they crossed the Qilian range and arrived in Zhangye, located in the middle of the Hexi-corridor. They could not take the Caidam section and thus bypass the entire Hexi-corridor, for the former came into use only after 423, possibly around 440.²⁰ Fa Xian arrived in the Hexi-corridor (in 399/400) when Later Liang was

connection with the Western regions and beyond, see A. Heller, "Some preliminary remarks on the Excavations at Dulan", *Orientalia* 29. (1998), 84-92., the two papers by Huo Wei 霍巍 "Lun Qinghai Dulan tuobo shiqi mudi kaogu fajue de wenhua shiyi", 论青海都兰吐蕃时期墓地考古发掘的文化史意义" [A discussion on the meaning of cultural history concerning archaeological excavation of the ancient tomb of Tubo regime period in Dulan county, Qinghai province] *Qinghai Minzu Xueyuan Xuebao* 青海民族学院学报 [Journal of Qinghai Nationalities Institute] 29/3 (2003), 24-31., and "Sute ren yu Qinghai dao" 粟特人与青海道 [The Sogdians and the Qinghai Road], *Sichuan Daxue Xuebao* 四川大学学报 [Journal of Sichuan University] No. 2, Sum No. 137 (2005), 94-98.; as well as the three articles by Xu Xinguo 许新国: "Dulan chutu sheli rongqi" 都兰出土舍利容器 [The Burial Vessels unearthed in Dulan County], *Zhongguo Zangxue* 中国藏学 86/2 (2009), 74-81.; "Dulan Reshui tubo muzang fajue shuyao," 都兰热水吐蕃墓葬发掘述要 [General description of the excavation of Tobo graves at Reshui, Dulan.] *Qinghai Difang Shizhi* 青海地方史志 1 (1984), "Dulan chutu shujin yu Tuyuhun zhi lu," 都兰出土蜀锦与吐谷浑之路 [The Shu silk unearthed in Dulan and the Tuyuhun Road] *Sichuan daxue zhongguo zangxue yanjiusuo* 四川大学中国藏学研究所 *Zangxue xuekan* (vol. 3), *Tubo yu sichou zhi lu zhuanji*, 藏学学刊 (第三辑), 吐蕃与丝绸之路研究专辑 [Tibetan studies, vol. 3, Special issue on Tubo and the Silk-Road Studies] (2007) 93-116.

¹⁶ É. de la Vaissère, *Sogdian Traders: a History*. Leiden-Boston 2005, 144, Huo, *Sute ren yu Qinghai dao*, 95.

¹⁷ G. Molé *The T'u-yü-hun*, xxvi.

¹⁸ Tao, *The Silk Roads*, 23, 29.

¹⁹ Tao, *The Silk Roads*, 23.

²⁰ Tao, *The Silk Roads*, 25. In 423, the Tuyuhun established a diplomatic relationship for the first time with a southern dynasty, namely Liu-Song. Later on, this communication between South China and the Western Regions was maintained by means of the Henan and Caidam sections.

falling apart and approaching its demise, which occurred in 403. Its rivals had already emerged by this time: Northern Liang in 398 in Zhangye, Southern Liang in 397 around Wuwei (Liangzhou), and Western Liang in 400 near Dunhuang. Thus, around the turn of the 5th century, the Hexi-corridor was indeed in turmoil. Yet Fa Xian travelled to its very centre and continued his journey westwards along its western half through Dunhuang.

When Fa Yong supposedly arrived in Zhangye around 420–421, Northern Liang controlled the city. In these exact years, battles were fought in the western half of the corridor. In 420, Western Liang, who controlled Jiuquan and Dunhuang, attacked Zhangye but was defeated. In a counteroffensive, Northern Liang took Jiuquan and Dunhuang, thus destroying Western Liang in 421. Considering the situations in the western half of the Hexi-corridor during the journeys of Fa Xian and Fa Yong, it seems doubtful that these two monks chose to travel along the Huangshui valley in order to avoid war. In fact, when travelling to Zhangye, they found themselves in the midst of turmoil and military operations. It is also highly unlikely that, by taking the Huangshui valley, they tried to avoid territories being under the control of states that rivalled their own.

Major fights in which Southern Liang, Northern Liang, Western Qin, and Da Xia were involved in the Huangshui valley, around modern Minhe, Ledu, and Xining took place between the two monks' journeys. In 413, Northern Liang annexed the Huangshui valley,²¹ and by 415, Western Qin had seized control.²² This means that when Fa Yong could have travelled there around 420–421, the Huangshui valley was likely a peaceful area, already controlled by Western Qin. However, 20 years prior to this, when Fa Xian travelled in the same area, this was not the case. It was right at that time, at the turn of the 5th century, when the Hexi Xianbei, the founders of Southern Liang, crossed the Qilian from the North and conquered the land.²³

In summary, the Huangshui valley is geographically separated from the Hexi-corridor by the ranges of the Qilian mountains, but was as much contended for by the dynasties of the era as were the oases of Hexi. In the author's opinion, there is no reason to assume that this area was significantly safer or more peaceful than the Hexi-corridor during the journeys of the above-mentioned two travellers. In addition, by taking this route, they bypassed only the eastern half of the Hexi-corridor. Therefore, the statement that constant warfare in the Hexi-corridor accounted for the rise and development of the Qinghai sections of the Silk Road invites revision. From the examples of the above monks, it is clear that this explanation not work for the Huangshui section.

Tao does not mention Zhi Meng 智猛, another monk, who travelled to the

²¹ Tao, *The Silk Roads*, 22.

²² *Qinghai jianshi*. 青海简史 [A brief history of Qinghai] ed. In chief Wang Yu 王昱, Xining 2012, 45.

²³ Wang, *Qinghai jianshi*, 40.

Western Regions all the way through the Hexi-corridor. He started his journey in Chang'an, the capital of Later Qin in 404, and proceeded via Liangzhou and the Yang pass 陽關.²⁴ By this time, Later Liang had vanished and the Hexi-corridor was divided between Southern-, Northern-, and Western Liang. Zhi Meng passed through all of these rivaling states. Essentially, the same can be said about Fa Xian with the difference that at the time of his travel, these states had just appeared. The two monks started their journey from the same capital, around the same time, and travelled roughly under the same political circumstances yet they chose different paths.

We might add that none of the above travellers stepped on Tuyuhun soil (they occupied the area only between 431 and 445). Thus, their neutrality cannot account for those monks' choice of routes who chose to take the Huansghui valley.

Later Travellers

The rest of the travellers who travelled between 440 and 557, the period when Northern- (385–535) and Western Wei (535–557) ruled over northwest China, all avoided the Hexi-corridor. Hui Lan, Fa Xiann 法獻, and Ming Da travelled between the Sichuan basin and the Western Regions.²⁵ Their choice of route, i. e. the avoidance of the Hexi-corridor, is completely understandable as they travelled either to or from South China, and thus they wanted to avoid the hostile northern territories.

The explanation of northern travellers' choices of route is more problematic. Song Yun 宋雲 and Hui Sheng 惠生 in 518 travelled from Loyang (the capital of Northern Wei) to the Western Regions.²⁶ Jinagupta 闍那崛多 (also Zhide 志德) travelled from Gandhara to Chang'an between 554 and 559, reaching Shanzhou (Ledu) in 557. They all chose to bypass the Hexi-corridor, taking instead the

²⁴ LGSZ: 3.10.

²⁵ Hui Lan 慧覽 (between 440–444) and Ming Da (in 502) travelled from the Western Regions to Yizhou while Fa Xiann (in 475) travelled from Yizhou to the Western Regions. We know of two different monks by the name Fa Xian. Their names are identical only in transcription. Fa Xian 法顯 (337–422) was from North China, present-day Shanxi. Fa Xiann 法獻 (423–97) was a southerner from the Liu-Song-dynasty. Tao (*The Silk Roads*, 23, 28) mentions both monks but neither gives the Chinese characters of their names nor does he point out that they were not the same person. Xu Hongmei (*Dulan xian*, 92) mentions only Fa Xian, but confuses their names.

²⁶ Tang Changru, 唐长儒 "Nanbeichao qijian xiyu yu nanchao de lulu jiaotong," 南北朝期间西域与南朝的陆路交通 [The Inland Communications between the Southern Dynasties and the Western Regions during the Northern and Southern Dynasties Period] In: *Weijin nanbeichao shilun shiyi* 魏晋南北朝史论拾遗 [Collection of Essays on the Periods of the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties] ed. Tang Changru [Beijing] 1983, 168–195, 188.

Caidam and Huangshui sections. In 518, Northern Wei held control over both Loyang and the Hexi-corridor. Thus, it was not occupied by an enemy or disturbed by war at this time. Rebellions only broke out there in the 520s.

In 556, when Jinagupta was already on his way to Western Wei, the Turks and Western Wei jointly attacked the Tuyuhun in the Huangshui valley near the Qinghai lake. When Jinagupta a year later arrived at Shanzhou in the middle of the Huangshui valley, in this very year Western Wei was replaced by Northern Zhou (557 to 81), and the Tuyuhun stormed Liangzhou, Hesanzhou and Shanzhou, three prefectures in the Hexi-corridor.²⁷ Thus, neither the Hexi nor the Huangshui sections were particularly safe at this time. Jinagupta's destination was initially Western Wei/Northern Zhou, yet he chose to travel across the domain of the Tuyuhun, who were at this time openly hostile towards these dynasties. Tao hints that Jinagupta chose the Caidam and Huangshui sections because, in the Northern Zhou period, the Turks had control over the Hexi-corridor. However, for what reason would Jinagupta prefer a section under the control of the Turks who were allies of Western Wei, the dynasty towards which he was proceeding? On the other hand, the Turks were unlikely to have much control over the region by 556-67, as only with Western Wei permission and assistance could they attack the Tuyuhun via Liangzhou.

A few years earlier, in 553, when the Tuyuhun and Northern Qi (550-577) were allied against Western Wei, the prefect of Liangzhou (Western Wei) captured a Tuyuhun delegation travelling with a huge caravan consisting of 240 Sogdian merchants and 600 camels returning back from Northern Qi. This indicates that even those who had good reasons to avoid hostile territory did take the risk of crossing such an area.²⁸ Zhang Qian's 張騫 well-known journey from the early Han-dynasty 漢 (206 BC -220 AD) is also a classic example of taking such a risk.²⁹

²⁷ Zhou Weizhou, 周伟州 *Tuyuhun shi*. 吐谷浑史 [The History of the Tuyuhun] Shanghai 1983, 50.

²⁸ ZS: 2, Zhou, *Tuyuhun shi*, 49.

²⁹ Han Wudi (140-87 BC.) in 139 or 138 sent his envoy Zhang Qian to a westward journey in order to find the Great Yuezhi and ask them to ally with the Han against the Xiongnu. Zhang travelled through the Xiongnu-controlled Hexi-corridor where he was caught and held captive for a decade. In captivity, he married a Xiongnu woman and had a son. According to the *Shiji*, when Zhang Qian was transferred to the shanyu, the ruler said to him: 月氏在吾北，漢何以得往使？吾欲使越，漢肯聽我乎？ "The Yuezhi live North of us. How it is that the Han sends an envoy to them? What if I wanted to send an envoy to Yue? Would the Han be willing to give consent? SJ: 123, HS: 61

4. Conclusions

It is beyond doubt that the sections of the Silk Road in the Kuku-nor region existed and played a significant role in international commerce. The Tuyuhun mediated between the Western Regions and their allies who did not have access to the Hexi-corridor. However, it is an inadequate explanation to suggest that the emergence and prosperity of the routes through the Huangshui valley and across the Caidam basin was due to chronic warfare and turmoil in the Hexi-corridor. It is also a possibility that, by the 5th century, the Kuku-nor region had become more attractive than it was before.

In Han times, agriculture and irrigation systems were developed in the Huangshui valley. After the Han abandoned the area and fell, the Qiang remained and continued to use the facilities. Lianchuanbao, Ledu, and Xiping were probably newly emerging centres of production, commerce, and culture. Often the statlets who occupied the Hexi-corridor could, or at least tried, to occupy the Huangshui valley as well. The fact that a good number of states contended for control of this region and that Southern Liang had its capitals here demonstrate its key position in the northwestern frontiers. As the Tuyuhun did not hold the Huangshui valley for a long time, associating the popularity of the Huangshui section with the neutrality or safety of the Tuyuhun Kingdom would be misleading.

The Henan and Caidam sections were used by southern travellers only after the 440s. Therefore, their avoidance of the Hexi section cannot be explained by warfare in the Hexi-corridor, but rather by its occupation by the northern dynasties.

The question of why the northern travellers, who used the Huangshui and Caidam sections, chose to travel all across the Tuyuhun Kingdom is difficult to answer through the concept of the Hexi-corridor being blocked by hostile powers or warfare. One possible contribution to the explanation of the popularity of this route might be the attractiveness of the unprecedented political and economic environment that the Tuyuhun created in the Kuku-nor region. In the first half of the 4th century, the Tuyuhun subjugated the Qiang and Di, and established their own state. Their kingdom evolved from a characteristically military nomad state to a more Chinese-style state with civil administration, and simultaneously walled cities gradually emerged on their territory. The Tuyuhun were descendants of the Murong-Xianbei, the creators of Former Yan-dynasty (Qian Yan 前燕 337-370), who had learned the arts of running a Chinese-style government in South Manchuria. The Qiang and Di had not built a state or united their tribes in a centralised confederation.³⁰

³⁰ On the political organisation of the Murongs' dynasties, see: T. J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*: 105-114. For a detailed study of the Former Yan, see: G. Schreiber, "The History of the Former Yen Dynasty, Part I.," *Monumenta Serica*. XIV. (1955), 374-480 and The History of the Former Yen Dynasty, Part II.," *Monumenta Serica*. XV. (1956), 1-141.

Therefore, they brought a higher degree of political organisation and came up with the highly-demanded items of pastoral production. This, along with South China's isolation from the Hexi-corridor, might have also contributed to the popularity of the Caidam section, which later also became an important route for the northerners. The presupposition that the route along the Hexi-corridor was inherently a better option for travellers, and that the Qinghai sections of the Silk Road were used only when there was something in the Hexi-corridor to avoid, therefore might not be an all-pervasive explanation.