

# Primary Sources: *Han Expansion in the South*



## Introduction

Below is a series of the excerpts from the Han Empire that give us a sense of how and why the government attempted to expand southward.

As you read each source, consider the following questions:

- What does the source tell us about why the Han government wanted to expand its political influence to the north?
- What does the source tell us about challenges that Han emperors faced in that expansion?
- What evidence is there that explains the strategies of imperial expansion that the Han government used to address those challenges?

Compare your answers across the sources. Consider how what you might learn in one reinforces, challenges, or complicates what you learn in another.

## PRIMARY SOURCES

### INTRODUCTION

### REPORT OF THE HAN EMPIRE'S RELATIONS WITH THE SOUTHERN YUE

### DEBATING HAN MILITARY INTERFERENCE IN THE SOUTH

### TANG MENG'S ADVICE ABOUT CONFRONTING THE SOUTHERN YUE

### MISSION TO FIND A SOUTHERN TRADE ROUTE

### THE HAN INCORPORATION OF THE KINGDOM OF DIAN

# Primary Source 1: *Report of The Han Empire's Relations with the Southern Yue*



**Sima Qian**

The textual passages in this collection of sources all come from *The Records of the Grand Historian*, a monumental work of history completed around 100 BCE by Sima Qian (d. circa 86 BCE), the senior archivist at the Han imperial court. It was intended by its author to serve as a history of the known world from earliest times down through the time of Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE), who reigned during Sima Qian's lifetime. Sima Qian was himself a witness to the Han Empire's period of most rapid expansion. As court archivist, he had access to all kinds of government documents to assist him in his compiling efforts.

The following is an excerpt from Sima Qian's account of early Han relations with the state of Southern Yue – also called Nanyue – established by a former Qin official named Zhao Tuo in 204 CE after the Qin collapse. Southern Yue bordered Changsha, the southernmost Han kingdom, with whom it engaged in periodic warfare. The uneasy relationship between the Han Empire and Southern Yue continued until that state's demise about a century after the founding of the Han. The Han annexed Southern Yue territories as new commanderies.

Source: Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, Volume II, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia, 1993), 208–10. In one instance, spelling has been changed for consistency.

In the time of Empress Lü\* the officials requested that all trade in iron goods between Southern Yue and China be prohibited. When Zhao Tuo received word of this, he protested. "Emperor Gaozu set me up as a feudal lord and sent his envoy giving me permission to carry on trade. But now Empress Lü, heeding the advice of slanderous officials, is discriminating against me, treating me as one of the barbarians and breaking off our trade in iron vessels and goods. This must be a plot of Wu Rui, the king of Changsha.\*\* He thinks he will be able to use the forces of China to attack and destroy Southern Yue, and then increase his prestige by making himself king of this region as well!"

Zhao Tuo thereupon assumed the title of Emperor Wu of Southern Yue and sent out his troops to attack the towns along the border of Changsha. They succeeded in capturing several district towns before returning to their own territory.

Empress Lü dispatched General Zhou Cao, the marquis of Longlü, to attack Southern Yue, but he encountered such heat and dampness, and so many of his officers and men fell ill, that his army could not cross the mountains into the region. After a year or so Empress Lü passed away and Zhou Cao's troops were recalled to China.

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\* Lü Zhi (241–180 BCE) had been empress consort to Emperor Gaozu. After Gaozu's death she effectively ruled China until her death.

\*\*An influential general who had helped found the Han dynasty, after which he enfeoffed as king of the southern kingdom of Changsha.

Zhao Tuo began once more to threaten the border with his forces. He sent gifts and bribes to the chiefs of Minyue, Western Ou, and Luoluo,<sup>\*\*\*</sup> persuading them to submit to his authority, until the region under his control extended over 10,000 *li*<sup>†</sup> from east to west. He then began to ride about in a carriage with a yellow top, decorated with plumes on the left side, and to call his orders "edicts" in imitation of the Han emperor, all of which was intended to show that he was an equal of the ruler of China...

When Lu Jia<sup>‡</sup> arrived in Southern Yue, Zhao Tuo, thoroughly frightened, wrote a letter of apology. Referring to himself as "Your aged subject Tuo, a barbarian chief," Zhao Tuo explained:

Some time ago, when Empress Lü cut off trade with Southern Yue and began to discriminate against me, I suspected that it was due to the slanders of the king of Changsha. I also heard rumors that all the members of my clan in China had been executed and the graves of my ancestors dug up and desecrated. Therefore in desperation I dared to violate the borders of the kingdom of Changsha. Moreover, this region of the south is low and damp and inhabited only by barbarian tribes. To the east of me is the chief of Minyue who, with no more than 1,000 subjects, calls himself a king, while to the west are the lands of Western Ou and Luoluo, whose rulers likewise call themselves kings. So your aged subject, to gratify a whim, presumed in his delusion to call himself "emperor." Yet how could he dare to report such a fact to the Heavenly King of China?

Zhao Tuo bowed his head and apologized, begging that he might be allowed to continue to serve the emperor as a feudal lord, rendering his tribute and labor services as before. He then circulated an order throughout his kingdom which read:

I have heard that two great men do not stand side by side, and two wise men never appear in the same age. The emperor is in truth a wise Son of Heaven. From this time onward, I relinquish the use of the words "emperor" and "edict" and the yellow covered carriage with plumes on the left side.

Lu Jia returned and reported the success of his mission, which greatly pleased Emperor Wen. Thus, for the remainder of his reign, as well as for that of Emperor Jing, Zhao Tuo called himself a subject of the Han and sent envoys with tribute to the court in the spring and fall. As a matter of fact, however, he continued secretly to use the designations "emperor" and "edict" the same as before within his kingdom, and only referred to himself as a "king" and used the other terms appropriate to a feudal lord when he sent envoys to the rulers of China.



**Statue of former Qin official Zhao Tuo**

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> These refer to peoples to the south of the Han Empire.

<sup>†</sup> A unit of distance, about 1/2 of a mile (or roughly 1/2 a kilometer).

<sup>‡</sup> An official of the Han Dynasty sent as an emissary to negotiate with Zhao Tuo. Lu Jia was also influential in promoting Confucian teachings as central to the Han government.



**Sima Qian**

## Primary Source 2: *Debating Han Military Interference in the South*

Like the first passage in this collection, this text comes from Sima Qian's *The Records of the Grand Historian*, which dates to roughly 100 BCE. The following is Sima Qian's account of a court debate over whether the Han should intervene in a conflict between two indigenous groups—Minyue and Eastern Ou (also called Âu Việt)—in what is now Fujian province, on the southeast coast of China across from Taiwan. Taking place during the early reign of Emperor Wu, the central question concerns the Han role in managing the relations of non-Han peoples. In the end, it seems Zhuang Zhu won the argument over Tian Fen.

Source: Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, volume II, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia, 1993), 220-21. Minor edits have been made for clarity and consistency.

In the third year of the *jianyuan* era\* the king of Minyue finally called out his troops and surrounded the city of Eastern Ou. Food supplies in the city were soon exhausted and the defenders in such distress that they were about to surrender, when the king of Eastern Ou dispatched someone to report his plight to the present emperor [i.e. Emperor Wu]. The emperor questioned the grand commandant Tian Fen on what course to follow. Tian Fen replied, "It is a common occurrence for the men of Yue\*\* to attack each other. Moreover, they have several times proved disloyal to us. There is therefore no reason for China to go to the trouble of rescuing them. It has been the policy since the Qin dynasty to let them go their own way and not to attempt to force them into submission!"



**Map showing locations of Minyue and Eastern Ou (above); Minyue kingdom arrowheads (below)**



\* That is, 138 BC. This is the term for one of the eras of governance of Emperor WU of Han.

\*\* Tian Fen used the term "Yue" to refer generally to the area southeast of the Han Empire, not specifically to the kingdom of Southern Yue.



### **Display of ceramic Han infantry**

The palace counselor Zhuang Zhu, however, took exception to Tian Fen's words. "The only thing we should worry about is whether we have strength enough to rescue them and virtue enough to command their loyalty," he said. "If we have, then why should we 'let them go' as you say? As for the Qin dynasty, it 'let go' not only Yue but the whole empire, including the capital itself! Now a small country has come to report its distress to the Son of Heaven. If he does not save it, to whom can it turn for aid? And how can the Son of Heaven claim that the rulers of all other states are like sons to him if he ignores their pleas?"



"It is obvious," said the emperor, "that Tian Fen is not worth consulting in these matters! However, since I have just come to the throne, I do not wish to issue the tiger seals\*\*\* and officially call out the troops of all the provinces and kingdoms." He therefore dispatched Zhuang Zhu with the seals of an envoy to call out only the troops of Kuaiji.† The governor of Kuaiji tried to prevent him from carrying out his orders on the grounds that he was not bearing the tiger seals, but Zhuang Zhu cut off the head of one of the marshals to show that he meant business, and eventually managed to call out the troops and transport them by sea to rescue Eastern Ou. Before they reached their destination, the king of Minyue withdrew his troops and departed; The king of Eastern Ou then requested that he be allowed to move the inhabitants of his state to China. Permission was granted, and he and all his people came and settled in the region between the Yangtze and Huai rivers...‡

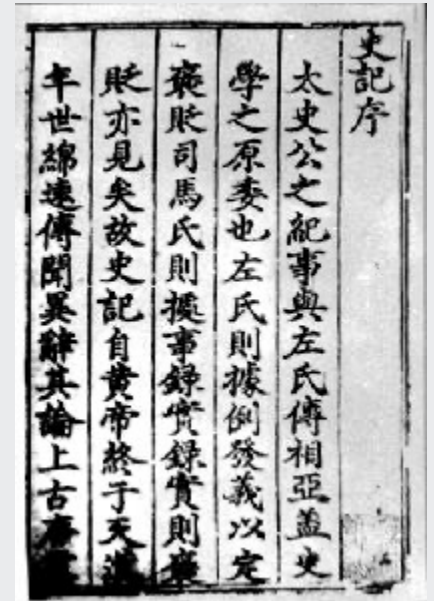
### **Emperor Wu**

\*\*\* Official markers used to deploy troops by the emperor.

† A commandery around Hangzhou Bay at the delta of the Yangtze River.

‡ The Huai (also sometimes Huaihe) River is a tributary of the Yangtze that also flows west to east, north of the Yangtze.

# Primary Source 3: *Tang Meng's Advice about Confronting the Southern Yue*



First page of Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian (*Shiji*)

This text also comes from Sima Qian's *The Records of the Grand Historian*, which dates to roughly 100 BCE. In it, Sima Qian's describes the Han envoy Tang Meng's advice concerning how the Han Empire might expand its influence amongst the southwestern chieftains. This episode supposedly took place around 135 BCE, just at the moment when the Han court has initiated military campaigns against the Xiongnu to the north and attempted to expand its influence into Central Asia to the west.

Source, Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, Volume II, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia, 1993), 254-55. In two places, edits were made for clarity and consistency.



Jujube fruit

In the sixth year of the era *jianyuan*\* the grand messenger Wang Hui was sent to attack Zou Ying, the king of Eastern Yue, who was in revolt. Shortly afterwards the men of Eastern Yue murdered Zou Ying and reported their willingness to submit to Han rule. Wang Hui, relying upon his military might to bring the region under control, dispatched Tang Meng, the magistrate of Boyang,\*\* to visit the king of Southern Yue and persuade him to remain loyal to the Han. While Tang Meng was at the court of Southern Yue, he was given some *ju* berry sauce\*\*\* to eat. When he inquired where it came from, he was told, "It is brought down the Zangge River† from the northwest. The Zangge is several *li* wide and flows past Panyu,‡ the capital of Southern Yue."

When Tang Meng returned to Chang'an he questioned a merchant of Shu on the matter and the merchant replied, "Shu is the only place that makes *ju* berry sauce. Large quantities of it are exported in secret to the markets of Yelang, which is situated on the Zangge. The Zangge at that point is over 100 paces across, wide enough to allow boats to move up and down it. The king of Southern Yue sends money and goods in an effort to gain control of Yelang, extending his efforts as far west as Tongshi, but so far he has not succeeded in getting Yelang to acknowledge his sovereignty."

\* That is, 135 BCE. This is the term for one of the eras of governance of Emperor WU of Han.

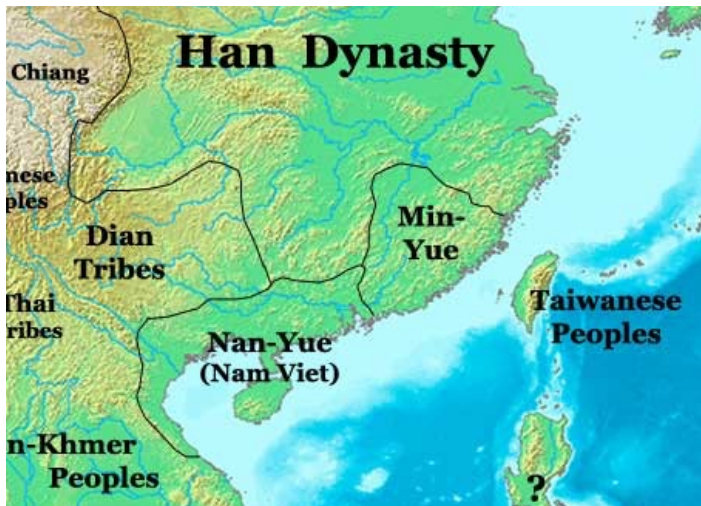
\*\* A city to the southeast also sometimes spelled Poyang.

\*\*\* This seems to refer to the fruit of jujube plant (*Ziziphus jujuba*), also called the Chinese date.

† Today, this is called Beipan River, which is part of the Pearl River watershed in southern China.

‡ Today, the city of Guangzhou, an important trade city at the mouth of the Pearl River.

Tang Meng then sent a letter to the throne, saying, "The king of Southern Yue rides about in a yellow canopied carriage with plumes on the left side, like the Son of Heaven, ruling a region that measures over 10,000 *li* from east to west. He is referred to as a 'foreign vassal' of the Han, but in fact he is the lord of a whole vast territory. If troops were sent from Changsha and Yuzhang<sup>§</sup> to attack him, they would find most of the rivers impassable and would have great difficulty in



**Map of Southern Yue, c. 200 BCE**

advancing. I have received information, however, that over 100,00 first-rate soldiers could be recruited from the region of Yelang. If these were transported down the Zangge River in ships and deployed against the king of Southern Yue while he was still unprepared, it would be an excellent way to bring his territory under control. With the strength of the Han forces and the wealth of Ba and Shu<sup>||</sup> to support the undertaking, it would be an easy task to open up communications with Yelang and establish officials in the region."

The emperor approved of this plan and, appointing Tang Meng as a general of palace attendants, put him in command of a force of 1,000 soldiers and over 10,000 porters. With these he marched out through the Zuo Pass in Ba and visited Duotong, the marquis of Yelang.<sup>¶</sup>

Tang Meng presented Duotong with generous gifts and, describing the might and virtue of the Han dynasty, urged him to permit Han officials to be sent to the area, promising that Duotong's son would be appointed as governor. The small towns in the neighborhood of Yelang were all anxious to obtain silk from the Han, and Duotong, considering that the road between his territory and China was too steep and perilous to be kept open for long, agreed for the time being to listen to Tang Meng's demands. Tang Meng then returned to the capital to report on his mission. As a result, the [commandery] of Jianwei was established in the area and troops from Ba and Shu were sent out to work on the road, extending it through Po in the direction of the Zangge River.



**Landscape of the region around the Zangge River (today called Beipan)**

<sup>§</sup> That is, large cities in central China.

<sup>||</sup> The Ba and Shu were non-Han peoples who served the Han Empire in the southwest.

<sup>¶</sup> Yelang, a chieftainship just beyond the southwestern border with the Han Empire had been an ally of the Southern Yue.

## Primary Source 4: *A Mission to Find a Southern Trade Route*

This text also comes from Sima Qian's *The Records of the Grand Historian*, which dates to roughly 100 BCE. In it, Sima Qian provides an account of an attempt to find a southwest route to Central Asia - the so-called Southern Route of the Silk Roads - so that Han envoys could avoid the Xiongnu. The events described here took place in 122 BCE, when Han military expeditions against the Xiongnu had seen recent successes.



**Sima Qian**

Source: Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, volume II, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia, 1993), 256-57. In a few instances, spellings, including of some place names, have been changed for consistency and clarity.

In the first year of *yuanshou*\* Zhang Qian, the Bowang marquis, returned from his mission to the land of Bactria\*\* and reported that while he was there he had seen cloth produced in Shu and bamboo canes from Qiong. On inquiring how they had gotten to Bactria, he was told, "They come from the land of Shendu,\*\*\* which lies some several thousand *li*† southeast of here. We buy them in the shops of the Shu merchants there."



**Map of Zhang Qian's travels with the places he visited highlighted in blue**

He was also told that Shendu was situated some 2,000 *li* west of Qiong. "Bactria, which is situated southwest of our country," Zhang Qian reported to the emperor with enthusiasm, "is eager to open relations with China and is much distressed that the Xiongnu are blocking the road in between. If we could find a new route from Shu via the land of Shendu, however, we would have a short and convenient way to reach Bactria which would avoid the danger of the northern route!"

\* That is, 122 BC. This is the term for one of the eras of governance of Emperor Wu of Han.

\*\* Bactria, also called the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, was also a Hellenistic state in Central Asia that Han officials referred to as Daxia.

\*\*\* Shendu, which has several other common spellings, was the Chinese name for India.

† A unit of distance, about 1/2 of a mile (or roughly 1/2 a kilometer).





**Map showing the Han and Xiongnu empires, and Dian cultural zones, c. 150 BCE.**

The emperor therefore ordered Wang Ranyu, Bo Shichang, Lü Yueren, and others to go on a secret expedition through the region of the southwestern barbarians and on to the west to search for the land of Shendu. When they got as far as Dian, Changqiang, the king of Dian,<sup>‡</sup> detained them and sent a party of ten or twelve men to the west to find out the way to Shendu for them. The Chinese party waited over a year, but all the roads to the west had been closed off by the inhabitants of Kunming,<sup>§</sup> so that none of the men who had been sent ahead were able to reach Shendu.

In the course of his talks with the Han envoys, the king of Dian asked, "Which is larger, my domain or that of the Han ruler?" and the marquis of Yelang asked the same question. Because there were no roads open between their lands and China, each considered himself the supreme ruler of a vast territory and had no idea of the breadth and greatness of the Han empire.

When the Han envoys returned to the capital, they stressed that Dian was a large state and ought to be bound by closer ties to China. The emperor gave the matter serious consideration.



**Bronze Dian cowrie container, featuring tigers and seven oxen. Oxen are a common motif in Dian artwork.**

<sup>‡</sup> Changqiang was king of Dian, a small kingdom southwest of China, bordering the regions of Ba and Shu, located within the Han Empire. Thirteen years after these events Han armies conquered Dian and incorporated it into the Han Empire.

<sup>§</sup> A people who lived just to the west of Dian, along the mountainous journey toward India.

# Primary Source 5: *The Han Incorporation of the Kingdom of Dian*

This text also comes from Sima Qian's *The Records of the Grand Historian*, which dates to roughly 100 BCE. It provides Sima Qian's account of Han attempts to bring the Dian kingdom on the southwest border under further Han influence.

Source: Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, volume II, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia, 1993), 258.



**Map of 109 BCE Han expedition towards Dian**



**Gold seal of the King of Dian**

The emperor also sent Wang Ranyu to persuade the king of Dian to pay a visit to the capital,\* pointing out to him the fate that Southern Yue and the chiefs of the southwestern barbarians had suffered at the hands of the Han forces. The king of Dian possessed a force of some 20,000 or 30,000 men, while to the northeast of him lived the tribes of Laojin and Mimo which were ruled by members of the same clan as himself and were in a position to aid him. He was therefore not inclined to listen to the threats of the Han envoy. Moreover, the men of Laojin and Mimo frequently made attacks on the Han envoys and soldiers. In the second year of *yuanfeng*,\*\* the emperor dispatched troops from Ba and Shu to attack and wipe out the Laojin and Mimo states and take up a position on the border of Dian. Because the king of Dian had originally been friendly toward the Han, they were not ordered to execute him.

The king of Dian, Linan,\*\* then surrendered to the Han forces with all his people, asking that officials be sent to govern his territory and that he be allowed to visit the emperor. His lands were made into the [commandery] of Yizhou and he was presented with the seals of the king of Dian and restored to the position of leader of the people. Thus, of the hundreds of native rulers among the southwestern barbarians, only those of Yelang and Dian were granted the seals of kings. Dian, although a relatively small fief, still enjoys the highest favor with the emperor.

\* Visiting the capital indicates recognition of Han superiority.

\*\* That is, 109 BCE.

\*\*\* The translation of the first part of this sentence is tentative because the text in the original appeared to have been corrupted.

## Image Citations:

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