

The Evolution of Interaction Between China and the Da Qin Based on Chinese Historiography

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Abstract: In this essay, I will discuss about the changing relationship between China and the Roman Empire in the long stream of history from Chinese historiography. While doing research I found that in Qin dynasty two countries have direct interaction with each other, but faded in Tang dynasty. Multiple historical resource written in Tang dynasty were overlap with previous source written during earlier period like Qin. As we all know, China and Roman empire are both really strong empires over their regions. If their influence each other in economic or politics perspective, the influence is incalculable. Nowadays, there were only few research researching on this topic; however, the effect of this research would be extremely valuable. The interaction between these two countries not only will bring effect on themselves in political and economic impact, but also bring to those countries along the silk road connected between China and Da Qin, so it would be very significant researching on this topic.

Keywords: Da Qin, Tang dynasty, Silk Road, Chinese historiography

1. Introduction

China and the Roman Empire were two powerful empires in their regions over hundreds of years. They both had a great influence on the trade network of the Silk Road and the surrounding countries. However, there was not much interaction between these two countries, probably because of their distant location and limited technology. Interestingly, as time went on, by the Tang Dynasty (618 to 906 AD,) [1], relations between China and the Roman Empire(27BC-476AD) [2] did not become as close as expected, and their relationship even became more distant, compared to earlier period, with no new innovations in Chinese historical records and even hearsay beginning.

With the confusion, paper will focus on three questions. The first one is how much the Chinese historical record on the Roman Empire has changed? The second is what kind of country did China historiography imagine Rome Empire to be? The last will be what was the effect of China imagining Roman Empire?

2. Basic Information about the Roman Empire and China Relationship

When searching for the Roman Empire from Chinese historical records, there are two words are often used to describe it.

The first one is Da Qin. As what R. Todd Godwin mentioned in his research on his study¹, “this is the view put forth by Friedrich Hirth, in his seminal work of 1885, *China and the Roman Orient*, still widely cited today.” When searching for this word, this term start used in the period of Pre-Qin and two Han, which is a very early period. In the record of western regions from Han Shu [3], a Chinese historical record recorded in Han, the term of Da Qin was used to described the Roman Empire. Many scholars probably wonder why China give this name to the Roman empire, since all the name should have a meaning.

Da of the Da Qin, in Chinese means the great. Qin is the first Chinese unified dynasty (221 to 206 B.C.) [4]. According to the Western regions from Hou Han Shu [5], From Zhangdi Zhanghe first year [6], emperor send ambassador to the Roman empire, showing a direct relationship between Roman empire and the Han dynasty. *Hou Han Shu* records that “受放者甘黜不怨。其人民皆长大平正，有类中国，故谓之大秦”。 It means Roman empire is a country that accepts a willingness to be deposed without resentment. The people are very tall, peaceful and neutral, and the stubbornness is really some Chinese, so he is called "Da Qin". Han people believe the Roman empire has some trait of Chinese, and we can infer that Chinese empire pictured Roman empire as a very strong empire, with the ability unified the region, since it used “Da” and “Qin”, which is praise them as great unified empire. Chinese’s perspective toward the Da Qin is very unique because Chinese imperial family serve them as the central of the world mostly, and serve all of the people lower than them. This unique perspective of calling Roman Empire *Da Qin* can be reflected that the strength of the Roman Empire was reaffirmed by China.

Another term describe the Roman Empire is Fu Lin. As I search from the “Chinese Philosophy Book Electronic Project” [7], this word appears in the Tang dynasty period. This term is describing as the Byzantine Empire, which refers to the Eastern Roman Empire.

Within the searching, the amount of source had increased a lot from Han dynasty to the Tang dynasty. However, when looking deeper, the source from Tang period is very short and most are based on the previous source. For example, from Han period, there are “Han Shu” that records directly based on diplomatic mission, which the record is very specific and relatively accurate. However, as time move on to Tang dynasty, the record is mostly based on previous source and very short. As what “The Art and Literature Collection”² records “《魏略》曰：“大秦国出明珠夜光珠真白珠，夫馀出珠，珠大如酸枣。 It means that according to the “Wei Lue" says: "The great Qin state out of the bright pearl luminous pearl is the real white pearl, Fuyu out of the pearl, beads as big as sour dates." The new source are copying previous record to fill up its book directly, with no new records.

3. Three Focused Questions

The first question as what I mentioned in the introduction is how much the Chinese records had change over time. In the basic information part, I mentioned that Tang period source directly copied from previous, but this is only a very small part. From General Code³, “或云其国西有弱水、流沙，近西王母所居处，几于日所入也。外国图云：“从隅巨北，有国名大秦。其种长大，身丈五六尺。” This means some say that the west of his country has weak water and quicksand, and it is close to the place where the Queen Mother of the West lives, so it is almost the reason why it enters. The foreign chart says: "From a corner of the huge north, there is the name of the country "Da Qin". It grows grain long and big, and its body is one and a half feet high and six feet. It seems that this is

¹ Bangu, Han Shu

² Du You, Tong Dian: Border Defense IX

³ Ban Gu; western regions; Hou Han Shu

written by 通 itself; however, it is not. Through adding comparison, according to the Hou Han Shu” 或云其国西有弱水、流沙，近西王母所居处，几于日所入也。“ This is the exact same word from the western regions of the Hou Han Shu, and 通典 (Tongdian) directly copy it from the Hou Han Shu.

Thus, we can know that from Han dynasty to the Tang dynasty, there is not much update on source, and because of the time lapse, people might not know the origin of the source already, leading to more questioning in their accuracy of their record.

This will lead to the second question, within this long-time lapse, did Tang dynasty imagine the Roman empire, and what kind of country did China historiography imagine Rome Empire to be? From the Zang Hong Chuan [8], it said that “洪为袁绍所围，粮乏，乃掘鼠而食。” This mean that "Hong was surrounded by Yuan Shao, lack of food, so digging rats to eat." However, from the same book, it also records that Da Qin makes a lot of precious jewelry, which I already wrote in the section of basic information part. The not in line historical document show that people changed what previous historical documents were, substituted their own imagination of Da Qin. In addition, according to the *General code* [9], “其人长大平正，有类中国，故谓之大秦，或云本中国人也。” This means that they said People from the roman Empire looks calm and peace, similar to Chinese, so-called Da Qin, and somebody said that their origin is from China. As I mentioned in the first question, source from a lot of documents from General Code is copy from the previous record. As what *Hou Han Shu* said: “其人长大平正，有类中国，故谓之大秦”， which means that Roman people look calm and peace, so they are call Great Qin. The document in 通典 has one more sentence, which is the one saying the origin of Roman people are from China. This show that 通典 is adding the record out of thin air instead of using the original text of the *Hou Han Shu*. From Zang Hong Chuan and General Code, we can see that Tang dynasty imagine Roman people ancestor are Chinese and they think their country are not wealthy. It also proves that China thinks that all other countries are inferior to them.

The last question is about the effect of the Tang dynasty imagining the Roman empire? Although in the past we would not have seen direct trade links between them because they were so far apart geographically, the invention of many technologies in the Tang dynasty should have at least facilitated increased trade. The Tang records are enough to suggest that they did not have more contact, or even much less. Even though there is no record of how they would have traded more frequently, there is no doubt that it would have contributed to the development of both countries. If they have more contact in trade, then how many goods and cultural interaction can interact between them? This should be a question we considered about.

4. Conclusion

From Han to Tang dynasty, the direct relationship between China and Roman Empire have decreased a lot. Chinese perspective of believing Roman empire had an advanced political and trade system was no longer subservient, but was replaced by a view of superiority over them. This cultural backwardness is frightening, and later is appear in the fall of the Tang dynasty.

I really like to thank all who finish read about this paper, and people who help me finish this paper. Also, I hope more scholars can join to this are of research, since it seems to be not very deep research on this topic nowadays. Hope more people can join, and I can do further research on this as well.

References

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- [2] *The sinologists' Da Qin; East Syrian Scientists across the Courts of Early Medieval Persia, China, and Tibet, and the Possibility That 'Da-Qin' Christians Were 'Tajik' Christian; mentioned about the origin of the name of Da Qin*

and its purpose.

- [3] *Founded in History website. <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-china/qin-dynasty>*
- [4] *Fan Ye; compilation of previous Chinese historical record.*
- [5] *Eastern Han; ZhangHe emperor ruled in 87-88CE.*
- [6] *An electronic version of Chinese historical record from pre-Qin to the modern era.*
- [7] *Ouyang Xun, Yi Wen Classical Collection: The section 84 - under the Part of Baoyu.*
- [8] *Ouyang Xun, Yi Wen Classical Collection The 95 section - Under the Part of animals.*
- [9] *Du You, Tong Dian: Border Defense IX; Roman Empire.*