

was to gain their aid against those hereditary foes of China, the Hsiung-nu, destined to appear later as the Huns in European history. These powerful nomad tribes, united in a great confederacy, had for centuries from the side of Mongolia harried the northern marches of the Empire. The Yüeh-chih, whom they had ousted some twenty years earlier from their old seats along the northern foot of the Nan-shan, had migrated far away to the west and established a new kingdom on the Oxus in what until quite recently was Bukharan territory. When Chang Ch'ien, after many trials and difficulties, including a ten years' captivity among the Huns, at last reached the Yüeh-chih, they refused to turn back and seek revenge on the Huns. But although the mission entrusted to Chang Ch'ien thus failed in its direct aim, it was nevertheless destined to open a new epoch in the economical and political relations of China with the world outside its own civilization.

Chang Ch'ien, after a total absence of thirteen years, succeeded in regaining China by way of the Tarim basin, with only one companion surviving out of the hundred with whom he had started. He brought back definite information about the Central - Asian countries he had passed through, including in the west the rich territories corresponding to the present Farghana, Samarkand, Bukhara and Balkh, as well as about the still more distant regions of Persia and India. It was he who first revealed to the Chinese the existence of great civilized populations beyond the ring of barbarous tribes by whom all their land frontiers were hemmed in. The great importance of securing access to these populations for the sake of trade and military aid was quickly realized by the Emperor Wu-ti, and the state of