

The pioneer of China's expansion westwards, fittingly honoured by the Emperor with high rank as 'the Great Traveller', died about a year after his return from the first of those missions in 115 B.C. But the intercourse of which he had been the pioneer rapidly developed and increased, until embassies attended by several hundred men, we are told, "followed upon one another's heels all along the route".

In the interest of the development of China's internal resources it was very important to use the newly opened route for direct access to fresh markets for China's industrial products, and in particular for the most valuable among them, its silk textiles. There is in fact ample evidence in the Chinese records to show that the great westward move initiated by the Emperor Wu-ti was meant to serve economic considerations connected with trade quite as much as political aims. But even if the wish to obtain allies against the dreaded Huns in warlike tribes like the Yüeh-chih and Wu-sun north of the T'ien-shan had been absent, troubles attending the newly established intercourse with the West would soon have forced upon the Chinese government political and military expansion in the same direction. It did not take many years before Chinese missions on their way through the Tarim basin experienced serious trouble from the chiefs and inhabitants of petty territories which cut off their food supplies, obviously with a view to blackmail, or else directly attacked them. Worse still, the power of the Huns to the north of the T'ien-shan remained unbroken, and small parties of these formidable horsemen would at times "intercept west-bound envoys", where they passed through Lou-lan or Lop.