

## POSITION

on Prof. Dr. Sci. VALERI GRIGOROV STOYANOV

regarding the dissertation of MARIA TINKOVA MARINOVA

***Strategy and Diplomacy of Emperor Wu of Han (141-87 BC) in Central Asia through the Lens of "The Chronicle of Dayuan" from "Records of the Grand Historian"***

for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education 2.

*Humanities*, Professional direction 2.1. *Philology*, Scientific specialty *Languages of the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and America (Chinese Language, History, and Culture)*

with scientific advisor **Assoc. Prof. Dr. EVGENIY KANDILAROV**

I never imagined I would come across a Bulgarian scientific study with such a theme. My academic interests regarding the *Xiongnu* have been peripheral, and in my limited research on this topic, I've mostly used secondary literature. So, when I was invited to be a member of the Scientific Jury for the dissertation discussion, I accepted with excitement and justified curiosity. Especially since source material was also offered here, made available to the local audience for the first time. My review of the text only proved that Bulgarian Oriental studies, which began institutionally in 1952 with the establishment of the "Turkish Philology" specialty, have made significant progress over the past decades and now claim to stand alongside the best schools in Eastern studies.

The work of Assistant Professor MARIA MARINOVA has a dual nature, typical of source-based Oriental studies. On one hand, it's philologically driven—offering a translation of a text from classical Chinese to Bulgarian, accompanied by analyses and commentary on the onomastic elements it contains, like ethnonyms, anthroponyms, toponyms, hydronyms, oikonoms, etc. On the other hand, it's a historical study, as reflected in the title itself. Here, the source text undergoes critical analysis to justify the specifics of Emperor Wu-di's strategy and diplomacy in his relations with the state formations and peoples of Central Asia. In both cases, the author excels as a source scholar, linguist, and historiographer—"historian scholar."

The structure of the dissertation follows the classic three-part division: Introduction, Main Body in three chapters with corresponding subsections, and Conclusion, which summarizes the main findings and achieved results. Additionally, there is a Bibliography and four Appendices, bringing the total to 203 pages. I don't have significant criticisms about the arrangement and wording of the titles, except for two points: the first subsection of Chapter IV "Conclusion" is labeled as "1. Summary of Main Findings." However, the subsequent numbering is 5.2, 5.3, and 5.4, which seems unjustified. On the other hand, throughout the text and in Appendix No. 4, the term "Book" is used for the Han Dynasty (or the Late Han Dynasty). Wouldn't "History of the Han Dynasty" be more appropriate?

The introduction covers the scope, object, and subject of the research, along with its main goals and tasks. It highlights the conclusions, methodology, and structure of the work, as well as its contribution and scientific innovation. A brief overview of the content is also provided. The first chapter offers a critical review of existing literature on the topic (both primary and secondary), and the appendices include the translation of the "Chronicle of Dayuan," which is the main philological contribution of the work. The other two chapters are mainly significant from a historical perspective, not only outlining the background of the development of the state administrative structure of the Western Han dynasty but also analyzing Emperor Wu-di's

strategies. The doctoral candidate proposed five publications related to the topic, which were reduced to four in the final version of the abstract.

The first chapter introduces the existing literature on the problem. Based on source material, it outlines the Chinese concept of the so-called Western Regions. In the broadest sense, these are the western parts of Gansu province, sometimes including the Tarim Basin. According to Chinese sources, these lands lie west of the *Xiongnu* territory and south of the *Wusun*, encompassing 36-50 kingdoms — fortified city-states with developed agriculture and domesticated animal husbandry. The second section of the first part of this chapter offers a valuable overview of secondary literature on the topic, starting with the works of Canadian sinologist Edwin Pulleyblank and extending to American anthropologist Thomas Barfield, who provided valuable insights into the nature of steppe empires, particularly the *Xiongnu* state, and their interactions with China. The review is extremely rich and useful without becoming an end in itself, as otherwise, it would take up much more space. Besides prominent Western scholars, Chinese researchers are also represented. In the end, the author was compelled to simply list the names of a vast number of other researchers, referring to their main works in footnotes. Twenty-five authors are mentioned (including Pulleyblank again). This could be somewhat shortened. I would recommend mentioning only 3-5 more important names (e.g., Bichurin, Gumilev, Janos Harmatta), with a reference to the extensive bibliography at the end. The evaluation of existing approaches to this issue in academic literature, presented in the second section of the first chapter, is unequivocal—while Chinese historiography is Sino-centric and in this sense nationalistic, Western studies are far more critical and objective, applying interdisciplinary methods and incorporating linguistic and archaeological data for a more comprehensive understanding of the discussed issues.

The second chapter offers a detailed "Analysis of the Historical Context of the Study." It begins with a brief overview of ancient Chinese history, starting from the first historically recorded Shang Dynasty (16th-11th century BC) through the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), which marked the beginning of the imperial era and lent its name to the country (e.g., English, German, *China*; French, *Chine*; Greek, *Kίνα*; Turkish, *Çin*; the Russian and Bulgarian "*Kumaï*" comes from the later Khitan Liao Dynasty) to the rise of the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD), after which the largest Chinese ethnic group is named. The chapter is structured into three subsections. It first examines the formation of state structure and administration during the Early (or Western) Han, then follows the comprehensive reforms carried out under Emperor Wu-di, leading to the diplomatic subjects in the pre-Han period and during the Western Han, acting as a thematic transition to the next chapter. The author has professionally handled the data provided, allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding of the historical background against which the processes described in the "Chronicle of Dayuan" unfold.

The choice of terminology seems a bit problematic when conveying certain concepts. For example, "commandery" as a term for a military-administrative territorial unit directly subordinate to the imperial court. This term, known from the structure of the Knights Templar, is a collective term for all order members in a given area (there are 33 such gatherings in Bulgaria today). However, it sounds quite unusual when applied to foreign historical realities. Wouldn't it be better to replace it with "province" or "prefecture"? Also, I don't find it appropriate to refer to the "mandate of Wu-di" (p. 50). Mandate is associated with the idea of appointing an official for a specific term. In this case, it is more accurate to speak of the "reign of Wu-di." Additionally, I don't understand why the text and the title of the third subsection use the feminine form for the name of the Han Dynasty, e.g., "Western Han." I would use the plural form – "Western Han" or "Early Han." Similarly, it is

acceptable to use the plural form for the traditional designation "Springs and Autumns" (as in the name of the chronicle) instead of the atypically sounding "Spring and Autumn Period."

In the third section, there's a brief overview of Han's main rival—the *Xiongnu* steppe warriors. It's highlighted that they had superior military tactics but "despite this," they avoided open battles with the numerically superior Han armies (p. 52). I think it should be "because of this," not "despite this." It's known that the *Xiongnu*, under their leader Maodun, who united all the "bow-shooting steppe tribes," didn't aim to conquer Chinese lands. Their periodic border raids, alternating with "temporary diplomatic agreements" (p. 52), aimed to confirm arrangements made with previous rulers. The Sinocentric perspective doesn't consider that these agreements were "personal"—between the emperor and a specific leader. When the parties changed, the agreements had to be renewed to be upheld. This tactic can also be seen with later nomadic peoples. For example, the Polovtsians would come to "ask for peace" (as noted in Russian chronicles) with each newly ascended Kievan prince.

The third chapter analyzes the foreign policy strategies used during Emperor Wu-di's reign, based on information from translated sources. It holds dual significance, both historically and philologically, as it clarifies numerous foreign names of states, geographical locations, and ethnic groups mentioned in the original Chinese text. The author first examines the structure, content, and role of Sima Qian's "Records" in shaping the Chinese historiographical tradition. His work became a model for organizing later dynastic chronicles, and he is rightly placed alongside Herodotus among the "fathers of history."

"The Chronicle of Dayuan" occupies a relatively modest space at the end of Sima Qian's "Records," but by revealing the specifics of Chinese diplomacy towards Central Asian peoples, this chapter shows the genesis of the future "Silk Road" and offers parallels with today's Chinese foreign policy models. *Dayuan* (or *Ta-Yüan* – "Great Yuan") refers to a state west of the Pamirs, located along the middle and lower reaches of the Syr Darya River and the Fergana Valley. It's challenging to determine whether it was inhabited by descendants of ancient Greeks (Ionians) or *Tocharians*, as such theories have been discussed in scholarly literature. The Tocharians are identified with the so-called *Yuezhi*, a once-powerful tribal confederation, where Mao-Tun was held hostage before escaping and overthrowing the *Xiongnu* leadership, turning them into "masters of the steppe."

During his son's reign, the *Yuezhi* were defeated and driven from their lands, with the fallen leader's skull turned into a sacred drinking cup. Most of this people settled westward in the valleys of the Ili and Chu rivers, where they were called *Ta-Yüeh-chih* ("Great Yuezhi"). The first Chinese mission to the west was sent to them. The second mission was to the *Wusun*, likely the ancient Iranian-speaking *Asii* (*As*), ancestors of the Ossetians. Four tables summarize the data from the "Chronicle" regarding the location, economy, and military power of various kingdoms, offering well-reasoned identification of names. For example, *Dayuan* in ancient Fergana is believed to have been a *Saka* land; the residents of *Kangju* (or *K'ang-chü*, i.e., *Kangyui*, *Kandiz*, Avestan *Kangha*) might have been *Sogdians* or a federation of nomadic tribes – Saka, Asii, and Tocharians, who overthrew Greek rule in Eastern Bactria (*Ta-hsia*, or *Dahia*, *Daxia*). The name *Anxi* for the Parthian Empire might originate from its founder Arsaces, who around 250 BCE broke away from the Achaemenid Empire. In turn, the state of *Yancai*, extending to the "Northern Sea" (Aral? Caspian?) might be identified with the land of the Alans, as in later sources the name *A-lan* replaces *Yen-t'sai*.

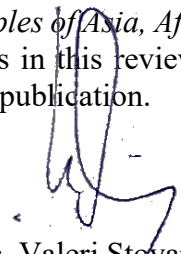
The third section of this chapter focuses on Emperor Wu-di's shift from peaceful diplomacy to military expansion in foreign policy. The formal trigger was the refusal of the Dayuan nobles to gift China the famous Ferghana "heavenly horses." The author analyzes the economic, ideological, and cultural motivations behind the emperor's desire to acquire this valuable breed, as well as the reasons for the subsequent refusal, which led to the two Han punitive expeditions. A separate section discusses the role of military talent in Wu-di's expansionist policy, as not all campaigns were successful. The means of "soft policy" are analyzed in the final fifth subsection, which examines the imperial court audiences, the tributary system, diplomatic missions, as well as dynastic marriages and the exchange of hostages. To some extent, these tools were known in earlier times and among non-Han "barbarian peoples." For example, during the Shang-Yin era, noble families and even rulers married off their daughters to the *Zhou* tribe leaders, who later established their own dynasty; the son of *Shan-yu* Tu-man was also given as a hostage to the powerful *Yuezhi* of that time. Similar diplomatic practices of "soft power" were present in other regions as well; for instance, the son of Prince Boris I, Michael the Baptizer, was sent to Constantinople to be educated at the Magnaura school. However, it was during Emperor Wu-di's reign, rightly considered the peak of Chinese imperial power, that these means reached their perfect development.

The conclusion is set as a separate, fourth chapter. It summarizes the main findings, highlights the scientific contribution of the research, notes some limitations and difficulties in dealing with source material, and outlines prospects for future inquiries. The bibliography is relatively extensive, containing 142 titles in Latin script (noted as "in English," but it includes German publications, too), 114 in Chinese, and 18 in "other languages" (i.e., in Cyrillic - in Russian and Bulgarian). Perhaps it would have been better to follow the classic arrangement here - in Cyrillic, Latin script, and other languages (in this case, Chinese). Four appendices complement the author's text - the translation of the "Chronicle of Dayuan," presented in parallel in Old Chinese and Bulgarian, two maps of the Han expansion from the 2nd century BCE and the ethno-political formations with which the empire established diplomatic relations, as well as a demographic profile of the kingdoms in the Western Regions.

It would be nice if the work included an alphabetical index to identify the individual proper names found in the text—anthroponyms, toponyms, hydronyms, oikonyms. They are indeed explained in the study, which is one of its contributions, but it would be more organized if they were also included in a separate appendix at the end.

I highly recommend that this work be published, but only after some editing. For example, expressions like "according to the author of this dissertation" could be replaced with the simpler "according to us," and so on.

Based on everything stated above, I accept MARIA MARINOVA's scientific work as a completed high-contribution effort and recommend that the Scientific Jury vote positively for awarding her the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the field of Higher Education 2. *Humanities*, professional direction 2.1. *Philology*, scientific specialty *Languages of the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and America (Chinese Language, History, and Culture)*. Let all critical notes in this review be taken as collegial recommendations for improving the text for potential future publication.



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(Prof. D.Sc. Valeri Stoyanov)