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**STRATEGY AND DIPLOMACY OF THE HAN EMPEROR
WUDI (141–87 BCE) IN CENTRAL ASIA
THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE “ANNALS OF DAYUAN” FROM
THE “RECORDS OF THE GRAND HISTORIAN”**

AUTHOR’S ABSTRACT

of a dissertation

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1. Introduction

1.1. Scientific scope of the dissertation. Object and subject of the study. Relevance of the research problem

The four-century period of rule of the Han dynasty (汉朝, 206 BCE – 220 CE) is rightfully considered the apogee of the empire's territorial and economic development, which laid the foundations for its future hegemony in East Asia. The successful foreign policy of the Han court was the result of the efforts of a succession of determined and visionary emperors, who entrusted the realization of their ambitions to capable military commanders and diplomats. The immortalization of their deeds was secured by the enduring Chinese historiographical tradition, whose roots draw nourishment from the most ancient mythological narratives. The mixed nature of the early sources, where the real and the mythological intertwine, is among the objective factors complicating their critical analysis. However, the primary difficulty in source studies stems from the laconic and multi-layered nature of the Classical Chinese text, as well as from the extensive use of specific names and terms whose contextualization demands immense temporal and intellectual resources. Due to these particularities, important texts concerning fundamental historical events often remain entirely outside scholarly attention or are only partially examined. In most cases, the available source material is used indirectly and in a fragmented manner, primarily through secondary literature, which hinders a full understanding of the internal logic of historical interactions and the motives and processes underlying them.

The present study, dedicated to the strategies and diplomacy of the Han emperor Wudi (141–87 BCE) in Central Asia, examined through the prism of the “Annals of Dayuan” from the “Records of the Grand Historian”, is the result of the author's scholarly interest in the most remote Chinese antiquity, attested through archaeological and written materials, as well as in the analysis of Classical Chinese texts and cultural-historical realities. In this respect, the scholarly orientation of the research encompasses two main directions: philological (source studies) – in the form of a translation of the text of the “Annals of Dayuan” and clarification of the toponyms, ethnonyms, and anthroponyms contained therein; and historical – in the form of an analysis of the diplomatic and strategic models in the foreign policy of Emperor Wudi. For this reason, the source studies layer of the dissertation may be regarded as fundamental, as it

constitutes a necessary prerequisite for the in-depth historical analysis of the factual information in the annals.

The object of the study is the complex ethnopolitical relations between the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE – 9 CE), the powerful tribal confederation of the Xiongnu, which controlled the territories to the north and northwest of the Chinese empire, the great kingdoms of Central Asia, and the small fortified city-states in the so-called Western Regions (encompassing today's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and parts of Central Asia), which culminated in a blend of diplomacy and targeted military expansion during the reign of Emperor Wudi.

The subject of the study is Chapter 123, “Annals of Dayuan,” from the “Records of the Grand Historian” – the first Chinese historiographical work in the narrow sense, which provides a comprehensive account of the dynamics of these interactions and forms the documentary basis of the dissertation.

The chronological scope of the study is focused on the period of Emperor Wudi's reign (141–87 BCE), at the end of which the foreign policy models of the Han Empire were consolidated, acquiring durability and continuity in the policies of subsequent dynasties. The historical dynamics in the region during this period were particularly intense; therefore, in certain discussions, data from the period of the Western Han dynasty and adjacent epochs are drawn upon as argumentative material in clarifying the geopolitical picture.

The geographical scope of the study encompasses the territories under the direct control of the Chinese Empire during the Western Han dynasty, as well as the lands to the northwest reaching as far as India and Iran, falling within the boundaries of Central Asia. The analysis also includes the domains of the Xiongnu and the ethnic groups surrounding the Han Empire from the north and the south.

The choice of dissertation topic is largely motivated by the limited accessibility for the Bulgarian academic community to information from primary Chinese sources that shed light on significant historical events and figures. Reconstructing their true image, as attested by eyewitnesses or contemporaries, is a prerequisite for their proper interpretation and for the accuracy of the scientific paradigms and conclusions derived from them. In the field of Bulgarian Sinological research and Oriental studies as a whole, there has long been a need for translations not only of literary, folkloric, and philosophical works, which more often attract the interest of translators, but also of original source material that can give impetus to historical studies of the region, based on reliable primary sources.

In addition to being an attempt to address the deficiencies in the above direction, the choice of dissertation topic fits within the growing academic interest in historical transregional

interactions in Central Asia. The present study acquires further relevance against the backdrop of contemporary efforts to build economic and cultural ties between the states of the Eurasian space, which in certain aspects resemble the models of hard and soft diplomacy documented in sources such as the “Annals of Dayuan.” Although the comparison between ancient and modern approaches to establishing regional influence lies outside the aims of this research study, the analysis presented here may serve as a starting point for future interdisciplinary studies.

1.2. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aims of the present dissertation are multilayered due to the complex philological and historical nature of the study. From a philological perspective, this work aims to make accessible for future academic research by Bulgarian non-specialists or non-Sinologists the factual information contained in the chapter “Annals of Dayuan” from the “Records of the Grand Historian”. It should be noted that a detailed textual analysis of the chapter goes beyond the set objectives and the scope of this dissertation. Due to the needs of teaching Classical Chinese in Bulgarian educational institutions and the scarcity of Bulgarian-language materials in this field, such a textual analysis could in the future become a natural continuation of the present study.

From the historical perspective, the main aim of the study is to extract from the rich factual fabric of the narrative in the “Annals of Dayuan” and to analyze the priorities and models of foreign policy, as well as the strategic and diplomatic means applied by Emperor Wudi toward the state formations in Central Asia. The interaction between Dayuan and the Han Empire is of historical significance, as it represents one of the first major contacts between the urbanized Indo-European culture and Chinese civilization, which paved the way for subsequent material and cultural exchange. Therefore, to the aims of the historical aspect of the research can be added the aspiration to clarify the complex intercultural dynamics in the region during the examined period.

A secondary aim of both aspects of the study is for the findings to be practically applied in the teaching and learning of disciplines related to ancient Chinese history and Classical Chinese language. The results can be used both by students in the “Chinese Studies” and “South, East and Southeast Asia” programs at Sofia University, and by learners of Chinese language and culture in other educational institutions, academics, translators, historians, and researchers.

The achievement of the aims thus formulated requires fulfilling the following objectives in the course of the study:

- To clarify the historical context in which the interactions between the Chinese Empire and foreign ethnic and state entities during the reign of Emperor Wudi developed, through an overview of the principal domestic and foreign political factors that shaped this context;
- To examine and substantiate the historical significance of the “Records of the Grand Historian by Sima Qian” (145–86 BCE) and to assess the value of Chapter 123, “Annals of Dayuan,” as a source for scholarly research;
- To produce a translation of Chapter 123, “Annals of Dayuan,” from Classical Chinese into Bulgarian, accompanied by commentary;
- To extract and contextualize the factual information contained in the “Annals of Dayuan,” and to clarify the meaning and development of the principal ethnonyms, toponyms, and anthroponyms mentioned in the text;
- To systematize the available data and, on this basis, to reconstruct the cultural and historical context of the “Annals of Dayuan” and the ethno-political situation in the region during the reign of Emperor Wudi (141–87 BCE);
- To elucidate the sequence of events leading to the establishment of Chinese influence in Central Asia and to trace the interconnected socio-cultural processes;
- To identify, analyze, and summarize Emperor Wudi’s foreign policy strategies toward the tribal and state entities in Central Asia, which typically remain outside the scope of mainstream research on the subject.

1.3. Sources and Methodology of the Research

With regard to the accessibility of information, a translation from Classical Chinese into Bulgarian was made of the primary source on which the analysis is based, namely, the chapter “Annals of Dayuan” from “Records of the Grand Historian” by Sima Qian. This chapter constitutes the most complete and comprehensive narrative describing the westward expansion of the Han Empire. In addition to detailed information on the motivation, sequence, and logical interconnection between the individual stages of China’s territorial expansion, the text contains over 120 names of kingdoms, ethnic groups, regions, administrative units, official titles, and historical figures, as well as numerous other realities that have so far been inaccessible to the Bulgarian scholarly audience. By clarifying these in the course of the research, a relatively

clear picture of the region during the historical period under consideration has been constructed, based on authentic source material.

The translation of the “Annals of Dayuan” was carried out on the basis of the complete six-volume edition of the “Records of the Grand Historian” in Chinese, edited by Li Hanwen¹, which contains the original Classical Chinese text with annotations and an adaptation into modern Chinese. As auxiliary tools, the revised edition of the English translation of “Records of the Grand Historian” by Burton Watson², the “Dictionary of Frequently Used Characters in Classical Chinese”³, the “Guide to Reading the Records of the Grand Historian”⁴, the “Annotations on the Western Regions, Documented in the Comprehensive Dictionary”⁵, and other dictionaries and reference works were used. The pronunciations of toponyms and ethnonyms in the text follow the “Dictionary of Toponyms and Ethnonyms in the Records of the Grand Historian”⁶ and the “Dictionary of Toponyms in World History”⁷.

For the transcription into Bulgarian of geographical, ethnic, personal, and other names from the original Classical Chinese text, the transcription system of Sofia Katürova and Zhang Sunfeng-Kaneti⁸ was used. Although it contains some shortcomings and inaccuracies, examined in detail by Prof. Aleksandür Aleksiev⁹, this transcription system was among the first to become established in academic circles and is still used by a significant number of lecturers and translators working with the Chinese language.

The research on the topic has been carried out primarily on the basis of the “Annals of Dayuan”, supplemented by quotations from other ancient Chinese historical sources that likewise constitute primary literature on the subject. As secondary sources aiding interpretation, the works of leading Chinese, European, Russian, Japanese, and American scholars –

¹ Sima, Qian; Li, Hanwen (ed.) (2016) 司马迁, 李翰文 (主编). 《史记》. 北京联合出版社.

² Watson, Burton (tr.) (1993). *Sima Qian. Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II*. Columbia University Press.

³ Gu Hanyu 《古汉语常用字字典》编写组 (1997). 《古汉语常用字字典》 (修订版), 商务印书馆出版.

⁴ Ping, Ping 萍萍 (2011). 《《史记》一读就懂》. 北京: 中央编译出版社.

⁵ Li, Jinxiu & Yu, Taishan 李锦绣, 余太山 (2009). 《《通典》西域文献要注》, 上海: 上海人民出版社.

⁶ Guo, Shengbo 郭声波 (2020). 《《史记》地名民族词典》. 北京: 中华书局.

⁷ Sun, Wenfan 孙文范 (1990). 《世界历史地名辞典》. 吉林文史出版社.

⁸ Katarova, Sofiya, and Sunfeng-Kaneti Zhang Катърова, С., Джан, С.-К. (1989). “Za prakticheskata transkriptsiya na kitayskite srichki” За практическата транскрипция на китайските срички. *Filologiya Filologiya*, 21–22 (1989): 78–87.

⁹ Aleksiev, Al. Алексиев, Ал. (2018). “Pravila za transkriptsiya i pravopis na kitayskite lichni i geografiski imena na bălgarski ezik – problemi i predlozheniya za tyakhnoto razreshavane” Правила за транскрипция и правопис на китайските лични и географски имена на български език – проблеми и предложения за тяхното разрешаване. *Manas: Bălgarska transkriptsiya na antroponimi i toponimi ot aziatski i afrikanski ezitsi* Манас: Българска транскрипция на антропоними и топоними от азиатски и африкански езици, 4, 1 (2018): 55–67.

specialists in various aspects of the dissertation research – have been used. A detailed review of the literature consulted and the results achieved to date is presented in Chapter One.

The methodological sequence adopted as the most appropriate for achieving the objectives formulated above includes:

- Translation from Classical Chinese into Bulgarian of the text of the “Annals of Dayuan” from the “Records of the Grand Historian”, around which the analysis of the research topic is structured;
- Extraction and systematization of the factual information contained in the text under study;
- Clarification and contextualization of the main ethnonyms, toponyms, anthroponyms, and other cultural realia present in the original text;
- Selection of additional and secondary literature on the subject, critical review, and identification of relevant scholarly theses that form the context of the issues under consideration;
- Comparison with other ancient Chinese historical sources to verify the reliability and supplement the content of the analysis;
- Analysis of the foreign policy priorities, objectives, and diplomatic strategies of Emperor Wudi;
- Formulation of key conclusions regarding the nature of the Han Empire’s diplomatic policy in the period under study;
- Summarization of the results and outlining of possible directions for future scholarly research.

1.4. Contribution and Scholarly Innovation

The philological component of this dissertation offers a unique contribution. It presents the first Bulgarian translation from Classical Chinese of “Annals of Dayuan”, accompanied by a detailed elucidation of the extensive specialized terminology interwoven into the historical narrative. This terminology encompasses over one hundred designations of kingdoms, geographical regions, oasis city-states, administrative units, ethnic groups, tribal formations, rivers, lakes, and numerous other cultural and political realities. As the text of the “Annals of Dayuan” is among the most important primary sources revealing the early history and

formative processes of the Silk Road, its translation into Bulgarian represents a work of considerable scholarly value for students, researchers, and historians.

From a historical standpoint, the dissertation represents the first systematic study of the early diplomatic instruments that emerged prior to the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE – 9 CE) and their subsequent evolution during the reign of Emperor Wudi. The analysis uncovers the deep roots of Chinese state diplomacy and clarifies the factors shaping the foreign policy ideology of the empire and its strategic manifestations. It demonstrates how Sinocentric worldviews and notions of civilizational superiority over other states and tribal formations fostered the growth of both the diplomatic toolkit and the military power of the Han Empire.

The study moves beyond traditional dichotomies between “hard” and “soft” power, offering an innovative interpretation of Wudi’s foreign policy through modern concepts such as *smart power* and *pragmatic realism (realpolitik)*. In this respect, the dissertation can serve as a foundation for comparative research between the ancient Chinese diplomatic tradition and later or contemporary concepts of international relations and spheres of influence.

1.5. Significance and Applicability of the Obtained Scholarly Results

The present study offers a new perspective on the complex foreign policy of the Han Empire during the reign of Emperor Wudi, analyzing the hybrid use of military, diplomatic, and cultural means to consolidate imperial influence in Central Asia. The results obtained make a substantial contribution in several key areas.

First, the translation of the “Annals of Dayuan” enriches the contemporary corpus of translations of Classical Chinese texts, particularly in the field of historical sources. This translation can be used as a valuable educational resource in university courses on Classical Chinese, ancient Chinese history, the history of diplomacy, and international relations. The geographical, political, cultural, and historical realities elucidated in the course of the research could serve as the basis for the creation of a specialized dictionary or a teaching aid intended for lecturers and students in the field of Chinese studies.

Furthermore, the results of the historical analysis of the “Annals of Dayuan” are applicable to contemporary research on interactions along the Silk Road, the formation of the Chinese diplomatic tradition, and the geopolitical structure of ancient Eurasia. The demographic profile of the kingdoms in the Western Regions presented in Appendix 4, compiled on the basis of information from the “Book of Han” 《汉书》 and the “Book of the Later Han” (《后汉书》), provides valuable reference data on the population size and military

strength of more than 50 state entities in Central Asia. This information serves as a useful tool for teachers, researchers, and students of ancient Chinese history and political geography.

2. Structure and Content of the Dissertation

2.1. Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized into an introduction, three main chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and appendices. Each part reflects the logical sequence of the research process and is aimed at achieving the primary objective – a comprehensive analysis of the foreign policy and diplomatic strategies of Emperor Wudi, examined through the prism of the classical source “Annals of Dayuan”.

The introduction outlines the scholarly scope of the dissertation, defines the object and subject of the study, and highlights the relevance of the research problem. The aim and objectives of the dissertation are formulated, and the main sources and methodological approaches employed in the course of the study are presented. Attention is given to the contribution and scholarly novelty of the study, and the applicability of the research results is discussed. A list of publications through which the results of the research work on the topic have been validated is also provided.

The first chapter is devoted to an analysis of the problem and the state of scholarship in various aspects related to the topic of the dissertation. It delineates primary and secondary sources and offers a critical review of the most significant academic contributions and advancements within the field. The first section offers a survey of the primary literature, focusing mainly on Chinese historiographical texts, including the “Records of the Grand Historian” 《史记》, the “Book of Han” 《汉书》, the “Book of the Later Han” 《后汉书》, the “Book of Documents” 《尚书》, the “Commentary of Zuo” 《左传》, the “Discourses of the States” 《国语》, and other early sources.

The second section offers a critical review of the secondary literature, organized into two principal categories: philological and historical. The review includes works occupying a central place in both Chinese and Western scholarly traditions, presenting fundamental analyses and theses related to the subject of the dissertation. Attention is also given to classical studies by Russian authors, as well as to representatives of other contemporary trends in sinology. The third section evaluates existing approaches, outlining the main scholarly paradigms and

identifying limitations in the available research on the topic, as well as unresolved questions in the field of the dissertation.

The second chapter examines the historical context in which the foreign policy of Emperor Wudi developed. The first section examines the development of the state structure and administration of the Western Han dynasty, through which an enduring model of imperial governance was established, lasting for two millennia. The second section analyzes the domestic political, administrative, and economic reforms implemented during Wudi's reign, which created favorable conditions for the pursuit of an active foreign policy and for the territorial expansion of the empire. The third section explores the diplomatic entities with which China interacted during historical periods prior to the founding of the Western Han dynasty, as well as the expansion of their number during the reign of Emperor Wudi. A systematic review is conducted of certain state formations and tribal confederations located in close proximity to the Han Empire, clarifying their ethnic identities, regional characteristics, and role in the geopolitical dynamics of the region.

The third chapter constitutes the core of the dissertation. It presents an in-depth analysis of Emperor Wudi's foreign policy strategies, based on the historical information contained in the chapter "Annals of Dayuan", written during his reign. The first section examines the structure and content of the "Records of the Grand Historian", emphasizing its importance in the formation of the Chinese historiographical tradition. Special attention is given to Sima Qian's innovative approach to presenting historical events from the perspective of an external observer, rather than through the traditional lens of Sinocentrism. The second section traces the Han empire's motivation for establishing diplomatic relations with the tribal and state formations in the Western Regions, initially driven by the need to secure allies against the nomadic Xiongnu confederation. The third section analyzes the transformation of Emperor Wudi's foreign policy strategies, marking the shift from peaceful diplomacy to military campaigns and territorial expansion. The ideological and pragmatic motives underlying this transformation are identified, as well as its short- and long-term consequences. The fourth section explores the role of the military talent of Han generals in the successful campaigns in the Western Regions and in driving back the Xiongnu, alongside the personal and dynastic interests that underpinned their career ascent. The relationship between the results of the military campaigns and the formation of the dynasty's subsequent foreign policy strategy is also examined.

The fifth section discusses the instruments of soft policy reflected in the historical narrative of the "Annals of Dayuan". Imperial audiences, participation in the tributary system,

diplomatic missions, dynastic marriages, and the exchange of hostages are identified as the main tools of cultural and diplomatic influence. The historical roots of these instruments are traced, and their role in the Han court's foreign policy toward the Central Asian kingdoms and nomadic peoples is analyzed.

The conclusion of the dissertation summarizes the main findings regarding the nature and evolution of Emperor Wudi's foreign policy strategies, with emphasis on the balance between the application of soft and hard power toward regional actors. It is argued that the Han court's foreign policy during this period can be effectively defined in modern terms such as *pragmatic realism* (*realpolitik*), *hybrid policy*, or *smart power*, as it combined elements of both diplomacy and coercion. In addition, the scholarly contributions of the dissertation are outlined, and suggestions for future research are presented.

The bibliography covers a wide range of sources in Chinese, English, Russian, and Bulgarian.

The appendices supplement the main study with an original translation of the "Annals of Dayuan" from Classical Chinese into Bulgarian, maps illustrating the geopolitical situation in Central Asia during the 2nd century BCE, and tables containing demographic and political data on the Western kingdoms, extracted from dynastic chronicles.

2.2. Content of the Dissertation

Chapter One offers a theoretical overview of scholarly research, related to the subject of the dissertation. It defines the geographical concept of the "Western Regions" as it appears in the official historical chronicles of the Han dynasty, both in a broad and a narrow sense. In the broad sense, it encompasses the vast territories west of the Yumenguan (玉门关) and Yangguan (阳关) passes, located on the western periphery of the Han Empire (present-day western Gansu Province), while in the narrow sense it refers specifically to the Tarim Basin and its adjacent areas. The chapter presents a review of primary literature on the topic, with a focus on the "Annals of Dayuan", which serves as the basis for the analysis of the foreign policy strategies and tools employed by the dynastic court during Emperor Wudi's reign. Much of the information in this source overlaps with or is supplemented by corresponding passages in the "Book of Han" 《汉书》, which provides detailed accounts of diplomatic missions, tributary systems, and foreign relations during the first two centuries of the dynasty's rule. Historiographical studies have shown that, overall, the texts of the "Records of the Grand

Historian” and the “Book of Han” concerning interactions with the Central Asian kingdoms are highly similar, apart from minor differences in wording or sequence of events that do not affect the meaning of the information presented.

To build the factual foundation of the study, data from other early Chinese sources have also been used, illustrating the evolution of Han diplomacy in the course of the empire’s territorial expansion and growing political influence. The earliest and most systematic source is the “Rites of Zhou” 《周礼》, compiled between the 4th and 2nd centuries BCE. It documents the ceremonial practices and state protocol of the Zhou dynasty, through which the court regulated foreign relations. Another important source from this period is the “Book of Documents” 《尚书》, which contains official decrees, speeches, and correspondence related to state affairs and the diplomacy of the Western Zhou dynasty (1066–771 BCE). Detailed accounts of negotiations and interactions between regional kingdoms and their rulers during the late Zhou dynasty, particularly in the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), are also found in the historical works „The Commentary of Zuo” 《左传》) and “Discourses of the States” 《国语》. The information from these sources makes it possible to trace the historical development of diplomatic instruments in the period preceding the reign of Emperor Wudi, and to analyze how he built upon and adapted them to the new geopolitical circumstances.

The secondary literature relevant to the dissertation topic is divided into two main categories: philological and historical. However, when examining historical questions through the analysis of primary sources in their original form, it becomes challenging to delineate a clear boundary between these domains, as philological and historical aspects are inherently interconnected and mutually reinforcing. In terms of linguistic studies, a central place in the Western scholarly tradition is occupied by the works of Canadian sinologist Edwin Pulleyblank (1922–2013), particularly his research on early Chinese chronicles containing information about the empire’s interactions with non-Chinese peoples during the first few centuries of the Common Era. The secondary literature addressing the linguistic dimension of the study also includes contemporary research focused on the identification of place names in the “Records of the Grand Historian”, most of which are concentrated in the “Account of Dayuan.” Despite the inherent challenges posed by the fragmentary nature of the source material and the historical changes in nomenclature, toponymic studies play a key role in building the foundation for the dissertation research.

Regarding the secondary literature addressing the historical dimension of the dissertation analysis, a review of early academic works reveals a lack of comprehensive and systematic studies of the content of the “Account of Dayuan”. Research from the early 20th century suffers from several limitations, including insufficiently deep familiarity with the historical context, the absence of thorough source analysis, and the lack of interpretation of key aspects of the Western Han’s foreign policy. Although some works provide comparative analysis of historical sources and present innovative hypotheses, studies from this period remain incomplete, especially in light of important historical documents discovered in later decades.

The analysis of the secondary literature also examines the works of Chinese historians Yu Taishan (余太山), Zhang Chunshu (张春树), and Rong Xinjiang (荣新江), who occupy a central place in the study of cultural and historical interactions between China and Central Asia in antiquity and the Middle Ages. Among the extensive body of scholarly literature devoted to various aspects of the foreign policy of the Han Empire, several foundational works by Western scholars stand out, applying an interdisciplinary approach based on textual evidence and recent archaeological discoveries from China, Mongolia, and Central Asia. The review of secondary literature in this category includes the studies of Nicola Di Cosmo, Valerie Hansen, Otto Maenchen-Helfen, and Thomas Barfield. Attention is also given to the research on the political and cultural dynamics in relations between China and the nomadic peoples by Nikita Bichurin, Lev Gumilev, Vsevolod Taskin, Lin Meicun, Sophia-Karin Psarras, Michael Loewe, Victor Mair, Bryan Miller, Gideon Shelach-Lavi, Mark Lewis, Armin Selbitschka, Nikolay Kradin, Leonid Kyzlasov, and many others. The scholarly contributions of these studies are subjected to critical analysis and are integrated into the dissertation in various forms and to varying degrees.

The first chapter further contains an assessment of existing approaches to the subject under investigation and an identification of unresolved challenges. The review of the literature clearly demonstrates that studies devoted to translating the content of the “Annals of Dayuan”, elucidating and interpreting the geographical and personal names, political and cultural realities, and other specific features mentioned in this chapter, possess substantial scholarly value but also certain limitations. First, they are characterized by a high degree of specialization in research methodology, which makes them difficult to use for non-specialists and historians lacking solid philological training. Second, such studies typically reduce the analysis to a text-critical examination of the historical sources, without offering a systematic interpretation of the events and processes reflected in the text. Moreover, a significant portion of the linguistic

studies and translations of the “Annals of Dayuan” were produced at a time when research on the Silk Road and its associated historical and material culture was still in its early stages, a circumstance that inevitably affected the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the proposed interpretations.

With regard to the historical aspect of the dissertation, modern studies on the Western Han dynasty demonstrate significant progress in understanding the complex strategies employed by the empire to expand its regional influence. Nevertheless, Emperor Wudi’s flexible policy has not received sufficient attention in contemporary historiography, particularly in relation to the soft diplomacy that formed its foundation. Most works tend to focus either on the military campaigns and territorial expansion of the empire during Wudi’s reign, or narrowly on the interactions between the Han and the Xiongnu. Some studies offer a limited interpretation of the empire’s complex relations with the nomads, reducing them to military conflicts or simplified schemes of subjugation and control, without taking into account the cultural interdependence and economic ties between the two sides. A recurrent theme in scholarly works is the portrayal of Wudi’s policies as a model of forced assimilation, systematically implemented as a reflection of an ambitious drive for expansion and regional domination. In reality, a careful reading of the historical narrative in the “Annals of Dayuan”, as presented in the dissertation, reveals that the Han court resorted to military campaigns against the Xiongnu and the kingdoms in the Western Regions only after diplomatic means had proven ineffective and the other side had actively challenged the political authority of the empire. In this context, the influence of state and tribal entities as a factor shaping the foreign policy of the Western Han dynasty remains an aspect that has yet to receive adequate scholarly attention. Likewise, there is still a lack of systematic research on the role of Zhang Qian’s (张骞) missions in restructuring Han foreign policy.

The literature review also identifies several common limitations in the scholarship of Chinese historians and source specialists. Many authors, particularly from the past two decades, depict Wudi in an idealized light as a “visionary” of Chinese globalization, a portrayal in which strongly pronounced nationalist overtones are evident. Another characteristic tendency is the excessive reliance on official dynastic histories, such as the “Records of the Grand Historian” and the “Book of Han”, which are often employed without critical examination of their omissions and Sinocentric biases. Despite recurring criticisms of Sima Qian’s partiality in representing certain events and figures, the “Records of the Grand Historian” remain a key reference text in studies of early contacts between East and West. Against this background, the

Western historiographical tradition demonstrates a more critical approach to Chinese sources, an active use of linguistic evidence, and a more pronounced commitment to objectivity.

In the Chinese scholarly tradition, there is an almost complete absence of an interdisciplinary approach combining textual evidence with archaeological data, which could complement the picture of the Western Regions in Wudi's time. There is also insufficient dialogue with the international academic community, with only a small number of Chinese scholars actually integrating into their research the findings of Western authors. As a result, despite the significant advances made by Chinese historiography in recent decades, it continues to face fundamental challenges such as methodological nationalism, a lack of critical reflection on the official historiographical tradition, and limited scholarly exchange with the international research community. Overcoming these weaknesses would enable a deeper and more objective understanding of the complex cultural and political processes in Ancient China.

The dissertation seeks to address the above-mentioned limitations and gaps in existing scholarship on the topic through an innovative analysis of Emperor Wudi's "hybrid diplomacy" as reflected in the "Annals of Dayuan". It examines the balance between "soft" foreign policy instruments – such as diplomatic missions, imperial audiences, dynastic marriages, and the exchange of hostages – and "hard" measures, including punitive expeditions, military campaigns, and the construction of border posts and garrisons. In doing so, it offers a valuable perspective on the long-term impact of Wudi's policies on the development of Chinese statehood.

Chapter Two of the dissertation presents an analysis of the historical context of the study. The first section traces the formation of the state structure and administration of the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE – 9 CE). The evidence suggests that the early administrative system of the Han Empire was based on the principle of dividing the territory into two main zones: a western half directly controlled by the imperial court, and an eastern half governed by the aristocracy in the form of semi-independent regional kingdoms. Under the direct jurisdiction of the central government were the prefectures (郡) and counties (县), which together formed the empire's two-tier administrative network. In 106 BCE, following the incorporation of new territories, this system was expanded to include vast peripheral regions known as "provinces" (州). At the same time, a significant portion of the empire's territory continued to be administered by vassal kingdoms (王国), which functioned as semi-autonomous political entities. Although they demonstrated loyalty to the emperor through regular court audiences and the payment of taxes, these kingdoms maintained their own administrative hierarchy,

comprising advisers, ministers, and high-ranking officials, as well as their own armies. Indicative of the growing tension with the central authority was the “Rebellion of the Seven Kingdoms” in 154 BCE, followed by measures undertaken by the Han court to curtail the power of the vassal kings, thereby restoring the balance of power.

The review of historical evidence presented in the second section of the chapter reveals that Emperor Wudi’s expansionist policy was preceded by a series of domestic reforms in several sectors. The reduction in the number and size of the vassal kingdoms (王国) in favor of increasing the number of commanderies (郡) under the direct administration of the Han court played a decisive role in stabilizing the internal political situation of the empire and in effectively governing its remote frontier regions. A strategic measure traditionally attributed to Emperor Wudi was the promulgation of the “Edict on the Distribution of Favor,” which resulted in the fragmentation of the political and economic boundaries of the feudal kingdoms and their subdivision into smaller units. A direct outcome of the reforms concerning the vassal kingdoms was the increase in the number of small feudal estates of the *hou* type, which were granted both to high-ranking officials and to rulers of foreign ethnic groups, and which fell under the direct jurisdiction of the imperial court. The sixfold rise in the number of such estates during Wudi’s reign clearly indicates that, in this period, the Han court actively employed the conferral of titles and estates as a means of motivating military commanders and state officials to carry out important political tasks, as well as a tool for securing the loyalty of foreign rulers.

The analysis further reveals that the comprehensive internal reforms in the fields of administration, politics, coinage, agriculture, and other areas enabled Han China to carry out a more centralized and efficient management of its territory and resources. As a result, by the middle of Emperor Wudi’s reign, the empire already possessed sufficient military and administrative capacity to launch offensive campaigns in Central Asia, to expand and fortify its northern borders, to establish prefectures in newly conquered territories, and to dispatch new expeditions to the south. Alongside the military initiatives, active measures were undertaken to expand trade routes and integrate new economic zones into the Han sphere of influence.

The specific characteristics of the peoples with whom the Han Empire established contacts, as well as their cultural, political, and ethnic profiles, are examined in the third section of the chapter. It includes a survey of the diplomatic entities in the pre-Han period and in the era of the Western Han dynasty, as well as the increase of their number during the reign of Emperor Wudi. In the earliest written records of Chinese history – the inscriptions on oracle

bones from the Shang dynasty (16th–11th century BCE) – the names of more than one hundred foreign tribes are mentioned, which were objects of interest and interaction on the part of Chinese rulers. Among them were the Qiang (羌方), Tu (土方), Gui (鬼方), Zhu (竹方), and Northern Rong (北戎) ethnic groups inhabiting the northern and northwestern border regions of China; the Ba (巴方), Gen (亘方), Lun (龙方), Ji (基方), Ya (亚方), Zhao (召方), and other tribes located to the west; the Bao (暴), Lu (卢), and Que (雀) ethnic groups inhabiting the southern borders; the Xianyu (鲜虞), Yuan (元), Shen (佺), Tui (魑), Feng (逢), and other tribes located to the east and northeast, as well as many others. In the late period of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), the dynastic court applied various diplomatic means to balance relations with the powerful feudal states of Qi (齐国), Jin (晋国), Qin (秦国), Yue (越国), Wu (吴国), and Chu (楚国), while at the same time being compelled to curb the raids of the powerful nomadic tribes of Shan Rong (山戎) and Lin Hu (林胡) in the north, the Dongyi (东夷), Yue (越), and Yang (扬) peoples located in the southeast, and the Ba (巴) and Shu (蜀) peoples inhabiting the southwestern border regions.

During the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE – 9 CE), the regional landscape and the distribution of power became even more complex with the emergence on the historical stage of the powerful tribal confederation of the Xiongnu nomads, which gradually turned into a serious competitor and threat to the empire. In the dualistic concept of foreign relations that dominated during this period, the known world was in practice divided into two halves – the Chinese rulers and the Xiongnu exercised real power not only over the people of their own states, but also political influence over other independent communities or kingdoms located in neighboring territories.

In the first half of the 2nd century BCE, the tribal federation of the Xiongnu gradually became the main military force in East Asia, dominating an extensive territory stretching from Manchuria to the Western Regions (present-day Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) and as far as Lake Baikal to the north. In response to the increasingly frequent attacks, the empire took measures to strengthen its defense and built a system of watchtowers and signal beacons for early warning and deterrence of future incursions.

Alongside military measures, in 155 BCE the dynastic court, aware of the potential threat of an alliance between the Xiongnu and one of the restive vassal kingdoms in the northern periphery of the empire, carried out reorganizations and reforms in these territories to prevent their secession. These preventive policies, however, only temporarily deterred but did not

eliminate the steppe threat. During the reign of Emperor Wudi (141 – 87 BCE), the powerful nomadic federation continued to represent the most serious challenge for China. In 133 BCE, the emperor ended peaceful relations and initiated a series of large-scale military campaigns against the Xiongnu, the financial and demographic consequences of which almost paralyzed the country's economy. The Han Empire managed to reverse the course of the conflict only toward the end of the 1st century CE, when under the leadership of General Ban Chao (班超, 32 – 102 CE) the Xiongnu were finally driven out of the Tarim Basin area, and China established its control over these territories. For his merits, General Ban Chao was appointed chief of the General Protectorate of the Western Regions (西域都护), created in 60 BCE to maintain the safety of trade routes and to manage relations between the fortified city-states and the Han Empire.

The overview of the subjects of early Chinese diplomacy shows that they differed across the various historical periods, while the foreign policy strategies of the dynastic court, in turn, were adapted to the specific circumstances and characteristics of each region or ethnic group. Historical records indicate that these subjects had complex and dynamic relations with the Han, in which periods of cooperation often alternated with periods of resistance, forcing the rulers to apply a combination of flexible policies and military measures. The “Annals of Dayuan” is one of the most important historical sources regarding the diplomatic subjects and strategies of the Western Han dynasty, as it describes the establishment and development of the empire's foreign policy interactions with a large number of previously unknown state entities in Central Asia. Among them are Dayuan (大宛), Kangju (康居), Yancai (奄蔡), Anxi (安息), Tiaozhi (条枝), Daxia (大夏), Loulan (楼兰), Gushi (姑师), Lixuan (黎轩), Yuandu (身毒), Hanmi (扞罽), Suxie (苏薹), and others. This chapter also contains valuable historical information about the ethnic groups Wusun (乌孙), Yuezhi (月氏), Southwestern Yi (西南夷), Man (駃), Ran (冉), Xi (徙), Bo (犍), Kunming (昆明), Dian (滇), Qiong (邛), and others. The main focus of the historical narrative in the chapter, however, is on the transformation of relations between the Han Empire and the kingdom of Dayuan (Fergana), which marked a shift from diplomacy to armed conflict, in turn completely reshaping the balance of power in the region.

Based on the above, the following general conclusions are drawn for Chapter Two:

1. From the very beginning of the Western Han dynasty, an administrative and political model emerged that would serve as the foundation for Chinese statehood for the next two millennia. This model featured a centralized administrative system, a clear distinction between territories under direct imperial control and semi-autonomous vassal kingdoms, and the

creation of an efficient bureaucratic apparatus grounded in Confucian principles and meritocracy.

2. One of the main challenges in the domestic policy of the early Western Han was overcoming opposition and separatist attempts among the vassal kingdoms in the eastern part of the empire. A resolution to this problem was achieved only under the reign of Emperor Wudi, whose legislative reforms led to the territorial and political fragmentation of the vassal domains, significantly limiting their autonomy.

3. Thanks to a series of agricultural, administrative, economic, and social reforms undertaken by the Han court, the reign of Emperor Wudi saw a strengthening of central authority, stabilization of the domestic political situation, and the accumulation of economic resources, which created the conditions for an active foreign policy and territorial expansion.

4. The regional ethnopolitical landscape in which Chinese civilization existed and developed was exceptionally diverse and complex. The Chinese dynasties, including the Han, were compelled to apply flexible mechanisms toward dozens of non-Chinese tribal and state formations located on the periphery of the empire, in order to maintain peace and stability along the borders. These mechanisms included both diplomacy and military campaigns, as a result of which the Han Empire succeeded in subjugating and annexing new territories.

5. In terms of foreign policy, the early Han dynasty's greatest challenge was the continuous raids by the powerful nomadic confederation of the Xiongnu, which gradually emerged as the empire's main rival for regional hegemony. The failure of Wudi's predecessors to achieve a lasting solution and peace along the northwestern borders motivated the emperor to seek new strategies to attract allies in the struggle against the Xiongnu. This necessity became the reason for sending the first diplomatic missions to Central Asia, through which contacts were established with previously unknown civilizational centers – contacts that subsequently transformed the future of the region and elevated the Chinese empire to the position of a dominant power on the international stage.

In the third chapter of the dissertation, an analysis is conducted of Emperor Wu's foreign policy strategies based on the historical accounts in the "Annals of Dayuan". The first part examines the structure, content, and significance of the "Records of the Grand Historian" for the formation of the Chinese historiographical tradition. This monumental historical work, completed around 91 BCE by the court historian Sima Qian, is distinguished by its exceptionally broad chronological scope, encompassing figures and events spanning two millennia, beginning with the earliest mythological layers. One of Sima Qian's greatest achievements lies in his ability to arrange into a coherent narrative the complex events of the

past, drawing on a variety of sources that were sometimes contradictory. The source material on which he built his account was likewise highly diverse: it included the court chronicles of the preceding Qin and Han dynasties, earlier texts, parts of annals of individual feudal states, materials from the canonical books, the philosophical writings of various schools, and even historical novels. This approach rests on the deeply rooted understanding in traditional Chinese culture that the past is not merely a collection of facts but a source of human experience and moral lessons – a view traceable to the earliest ruling dynasties.

Sima Qian reflects on the cultural differences between the Chinese and the “barbarians” not from the position of a defender of Sino-centrism, but rather as an outside observer, which is an exceptional achievement for early Chinese historiography. For centuries, the Chinese had believed their civilization to be the most advanced in the world, but after Zhang Qian’s two missions into the heart of Asia (in 139 and 119 BCE), they realized that other flourishing sedentary societies and cultures also existed. Thus, in the “Records of the Grand Historian”, and especially in the chapter “Annals of Dayuan”, the author provides his readers with the most up-to-date geographical and ethnographic information, helping them to reconsider their own history within a broader, “global” framework. At the same time, he not only describes the components of foreign cultures but also examines their functionality as interconnected systems, and he is equally interested in how others “look back” toward the civilized “center” represented by the Chinese empire, which is a pioneering approach in Chinese historiography.

When Sima Qian created his epoch-making work, he could hardly have foreseen the forthcoming flourishing of the cultural and political influence of the Han Empire over the following centuries, nor the lasting significance that this subject would retain even today. At first glance, Chapter 123 of the “Records of the Grand Historian”, titled “Annals of Dayuan”, occupies a modest place within the composition of the monumental historical work, as it is positioned near the end of the final section, “Annals”. And yet, it is precisely this chapter that holds the genesis of the future Great Silk Road, reveals the ideological foundations of Chinese diplomacy toward the peoples of Central Asia, and offers a broad field for parallels with the contemporary foreign policy models of the PRC.

In essence, the “Annals of Dayuan” is a historical account of the discovery of safe routes to Central Asia and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Han Empire and the local state entities during the reign of Emperor Wudi (141–87 BCE). This endeavor was driven by the impulse to unite with non-Chinese ethnic groups against a common enemy – the Xiongnu nomads of the northern steppes, who were increasingly assuming the role of military and political authority in the region. Although in the historical narrative of the “Annals of

Dayuan” the Xiongnu play an important political role, the main thread of the account focuses on the complex relations between the Han Empire and the state of Dayuan (大宛). Dayuan is the Chinese exonym for a distant kingdom located west of the Pamir range, encompassing the lands along the middle and lower reaches of the Syr Darya River and the Fergana Valley (today in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), which in Western scholarly literature is conventionally referred to as “Ancient Fergana.”

The second section of the chapter examines the motivation and strategies for establishing diplomatic contacts between the Han Empire and the state entities in Central Asia during the reign of Emperor Wudi. Information about the existence of the kingdom of Dayuan reached the Chinese court thanks to the renowned envoy Zhang Qian (张骞, c. 164 BCE – c. 114 BCE), who was sent as an ambassador to the Yuezhi tribe with the mission of persuading them to become allies of the Han dynasty against the powerful steppe federation of the Xiongnu. Since he failed to win the support of the Yuezhi people, the emperor later entrusted him with a second diplomatic mission to the Western Regions, aimed at forging an alliance with the powerful Wusun nomads and persuading them to return to their former settlements in the eastern part of the Tarim Basin, which would bring them closer to the sphere of influence and control of the Chinese empire.

The successes achieved during Zhang Qian’s first mission earned him the post of Palace Counsellor (太中大夫), while his second mission elevated him to the rank of “Grand Envoy” (大行), placing him among the nine highest-ranking ministers at court. Although the main goal of his first mission – winning the Greater Yuezhi as Han allies – was not accomplished, Zhang Qian’s stay in foreign lands, which lasted more than thirteen years, yielded invaluable insights into the ethnopolitical landscape west of the empire. The state entities about which he was able to gather and provide reliable information to the emperor included the kingdoms of the Greater Yuezhi (大月氏) and the Wusun (乌孙), as well as the states of Dayuan (大宛), Yancai (奄蔡), Anxi (安息), Tiaozhi (条枝), Daxia (大夏), Kangju (康居), Lixuan (李玄), and Yuandu (身毒). The data on these kingdoms, documented in passages 6–14 of the “Annals of Dayuan”, offers valuable historical information, which is presented in the dissertation in tabular form for better visualization and analysis.

Zhang Qian’s second mission achieved even greater success and built upon the results of the first, as it established a network for contact and exchange between Central and Eastern Asia. The narrative attests to the growing diplomatic and commercial activity of the Han Empire after the initial contacts with the western kingdoms: on the one hand, the number of expeditions

increased drastically; on the other hand, large-scale diplomatic missions with lavish gifts were replaced by more routine and smaller delegations, indicating the institutionalization of relations.

The third section of the chapter traces the transformation of Emperor Wudi's foreign policy strategies in Central Asia and the shift from peaceful diplomacy to military expansion. One of the Han dynasty's main interests during this period was the "blood-sweating horses" bred in Dayuan, later called "Heavenly Horses," renowned for their size and extraordinary endurance. According to the historical records, the emperor held deep admiration for Dayuan's horses and therefore dispatched successive diplomatic missions to acquire them. The Dayuan aristocracy, however, judged that there was neither reason nor economic incentive to comply with the Han envoys' request, refusing to share one of the kingdom's most prized commercial resources. The escalation of tensions, manifested through mutual accusations and retaliatory actions, led to the organization of two large punitive military campaigns against Dayuan in 104 and 102 BCE, known in historical sources as the "War of the Heavenly Horses" (天马之战). These campaigns not only enabled Emperor Wudi to subjugate Dayuan and establish a local pro-Han regime, but also allowed him to project his power over numerous smaller oasis city-states in the Western Regions, compelling them to withdraw from their alliances with the Xiongnu and to align themselves with the Chinese empire.

This section offers an analysis of the main political, economic, and ideological factors underlying the emergence of antagonism and the launch of punitive actions by the Chinese empire. Regarding the motives that prompted Emperor Wudi to acquire the Heavenly Horses, the text of the "Annals of Dayuan" contains no explicit evidence of any pragmatic grounds, but rather suggests ideological considerations. Nevertheless, in the ancient world, the Fergana horses were known for their elegant and graceful appearance, while also being larger and more enduring than the breeds prevalent in Mongolia and China during the first centuries BCE. For this reason, they were likely perceived by the emperor as a potential means to improve the quality of the Han cavalry and gain an advantage over the mounted Xiongnu nomads.

Modern research supports the view that cavalry was the key factor determining the outcome of all clashes with the Xiongnu during Emperor Wu's reign; therefore, horses and horsemen were the two main elements sustaining the success of military campaigns in this period. Consequently, the failure of the diplomatic mission tasked with obtaining some of the Heavenly Horses by peaceful means was perceived as a direct act of defiance against the authority and will of the emperor, and it became the immediate cause of the punitive campaigns against Dayuan. These campaigns brought about a substantial transformation of the regional

geopolitical landscape and a redistribution of spheres of influence between the Xiongnu and China.

The fourth section examines the role of military talent in the expansionist policy of Emperor Wu. A review of the source material shows that between 135 and 119 BCE, the main focus of military operations was the struggle against the Xiongnu, who posed a constant threat to the empire's northern borders. At the time Emperor Wudi ascended the throne, the empire still lacked sufficient military resources to drive back the nomads, but by 130 BCE, domestic political reforms and economic stability enabled the Han court to undertake active offensive campaigns. Generals such as Li Guangli (李广利), Wang Hui (王恢), Huo Qubing (霍去病), and Bai Shichang (柏始昌) played a key role in these operations, successfully repelling Xiongnu attacks and implementing the new foreign policy course of seizing and consolidating territories along China's northwestern frontier.

The study shows that personal and dynastic interests played a significant role in the unfolding of expansionist policy during Emperor Wu's reign. At the imperial court, a favorable environment emerged for statesmen and commanders willing to take great risks in the service of the empire. Especially noteworthy is the active involvement of relatives of imperial consorts in these campaigns, driven by the ambition to bolster their political standing through military achievements. A closer examination of historiographical sources, especially the biographies of leading generals who took part in Emperor Wu's campaigns, also reveals that the outcome of military actions was directly linked to the qualities and skills of the commanders-in-chief.

An analysis of the records of the sixteen campaigns against the Xiongnu conducted during Emperor Wu's reign unambiguously shows that the generals involved possessed varying levels of strategic and tactical competence. Historical sources clearly indicate that Generals Wei Qing (卫青) and Huo Qubing (霍去病) played a decisive role in pushing the Xiongnu northward and consolidating the military authority of the dynasty. In contrast, other commanders proved far less successful – most failed to achieve tangible results in battles against the Xiongnu and thus remained in historical memory as leaders “without merit.” Others suffered defeats, and some even surrendered to the enemy, renouncing their loyalty to the emperor.

The study of additional documents related to the military campaigns against the Xiongnu provides yet another perspective on the crucial role of their commanders. As noted, beginning in 127 BCE, General Wei Qing achieved three decisive victories that altered the course of the struggle for supremacy between the Han Empire and the nomadic confederation. After each of

these victories, Emperor Wudi expressed his admiration and recognition for Wei Qing's accomplishments and those of his armies through the issuance of official edicts, which described in detail the successes achieved and reflected the emperor's enthusiasm and satisfaction with them. Similar edicts were issued following each of the victorious campaigns of General Huo Qubing between 123 and 119 BCE, illustrating how the successes of the two generals strengthened the emperor's confidence and his willingness to send out new military expeditions. By contrast, after the six unsuccessful campaigns against the Xiongnu that followed 119 BCE, no such edicts were issued, suggesting a change in the Han court's attitude toward military initiatives. Disheartened by the series of failures and acts of betrayal within the ranks of his generals, Emperor Wudi gradually lost his initial enthusiasm and shifted toward a more moderate foreign policy in the final years of his reign.

The fifth section of the chapter examines the means of soft policy presented in the "Annals of Dayuan," which are a natural continuation of traditions formed in the earliest stages of Chinese statehood. As early as the Shang (16th–11th century BCE), Zhou (1046–256 BCE), and Qin (221–206 BCE) dynasties, the court employed a set of strategies, rituals, and protocols through which it built and maintained stable relations with semi-independent vassal kingdoms and neighboring ethnic groups. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), these instruments were expanded and refined, with some of them becoming established as distinctive features of Chinese foreign policy. Among the most emblematic diplomatic mechanisms were imperial court audiences, the tributary system, diplomatic missions, dynastic marriages, and the exchange of hostages.

Imperial court audiences (朝) were an indispensable part of ritual diplomacy and an important political tool even in the period long preceding the Western Han dynasty. They were one of the earliest mechanisms by which Chinese rulers regulated the formal recognition of the emperor's supremacy over vassal kingdoms and non-Chinese ethnic groups in the region. This recognition, in turn, granted foreign states significant advantages and privileges, such as access to trade, cultural and technological achievements, and military protection. Conversely, the approval expressed by the Son of Heaven during the audience conferred legitimacy and recognition upon the foreign ruler. On the other hand, ceremonial visits to the court and the presentation of tributary gifts unequivocally signified political and economic subordination to the Chinese empire.

What made the audiences an effective foreign policy mechanism was that it was precisely through them that the so-called "tributary system" (朝贡体系) was put into practical operation

– a term introduced by John K. Fairbank and S. I. Têng in the mid-20th century. As early as the late Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), tributes represented the physical expression of actual or nominal subordination to the authority of the Chinese ruler, while also carrying economic connotations. After the unification of the Warring States in 221 BCE, the growing intensity of external contacts prompted Emperor Qin Shi Huang (r. 221–210 BCE) to introduce an official policy of collecting tributes from vassal domains in the form of valuable goods, agricultural produce, textiles, livestock, resources, or other symbolic offerings. This practice became even more formalized and institutionalized during the Han dynasty, developing into a standard mechanism for regulating relations and trade between China and neighboring states.

The superiority of the tributary system over other diplomatic instruments lay in its ability to politically integrate all “barbarians” into the Chinese imperial order, thus serving as a logical extension of the governance system in the sphere of foreign relations. Following the dispatch of missions and the establishment of contacts with Central Asia, the Han Empire expected the foreign entities with which it had established diplomatic relations to participate, at least to some extent, in the tributary system as an expression of recognition of its supreme authority. For this reason, the presentation of the Heavenly Horses as a tributary gift from Dayuan held particular symbolic and political significance for the Han court. When, contrary to expectations, the local nobility refused to bestow upon the emperor “one of the most precious treasures” of their kingdom and openly displayed contempt for the empire by robbing and killing the Chinese envoys, Emperor Wudi regarded this as a blatant act of defiance against Han authority, one that required punishment. The two subsequent large-scale military expeditions succeeded in restoring the empire’s tarnished image and in drawing new entities into the tributary system.

The dispatch of diplomatic missions (使, 行人) to neighboring kingdoms or peoples was another important diplomatic instrument that became established as a practice of the Chinese court as early as the late 7th century BCE. During the Han dynasty, this practice reached its peak, especially under the long reign of Emperor Wudi and the series of missions to Central and Southeast Asia described in the “Annals of Dayuan.” In the period of the Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE), the oasis kingdoms of Turfan (吐鲁番), Gaochang (高昌), Loulan (楼兰), Karashar (焉耆), Kucha (库车), Aksu (姑墨), Kashgar (疏勒), Cherchen (且末), Khotan (和田), Hami (哈密), and others flourished on the periphery of the Tarim Basin. Despite their small size, these fortified city-states were of strategic importance to Chinese geopolitics, as removing them from the sphere of influence of the Xiongnu meant severing their vassal dependence, which supplied resources to the nomadic confederation. In addition to being

subjects of Han foreign policy, the state formations in the Tarim Basin also served as important stops along the route of the empire's diplomatic missions to the kingdoms of the powerful Wusun and Yuezhi tribes, as well as to more distant regions such as Mesopotamia, India, Bactria, Parthia, Ferghana, and others. The purpose of these missions was to build friendly relations and present the interests of the Chinese court, while valuable gifts such as silk, porcelain, jade and lacquerware demonstrated the cultural sophistication and high level of development of Chinese civilization to its distant neighbors.

The "Annals of Dayuan" contains detailed and vivid descriptions of the early diplomatic missions of the Han Empire to the Western Regions, including information on the selection of envoys, the tactics employed toward foreign kingdoms, and their successes and failures. The historical accounts reveal the meticulous preparation and vast resources, as well as the dangers, involved in carrying out these embassies. The envoys were forced to travel for years, crossing thousands of kilometers of arid desert lands under extremely harsh conditions, causing most of them to lose their lives. The fate of those participating in diplomatic missions depended not only on the whims of an inhospitable nature, but also on the goodwill of the ethnic groups whose lands they traversed, as well as on the mercy of the bandits prowling the roads. Despite these dangers, it was precisely through the efforts of the envoys that China succeeded in extending its civilizational influence far to the west, establishing pro-Han regimes in a number of satellite kingdoms and drawing them into its political orbit. In addition, the missions contributed to overcoming the empire's traditional isolation and to building historical ties with distant and culturally distinct regions, which later developed into a full-fledged material and spiritual exchange.

The arrangement of dynastic marriages (和亲) for diplomatic purposes was another key method of maintaining the balance of power in the early period of Chinese statehood, actively applied as early as the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE). In this period, dynastic marriages were both social and political acts, concluded primarily between members of the dynastic family and the ruling houses of the feudal states, and more rarely with representatives of foreign ethnic state formations. It is believed that in this historical era, the main motivation for engaging in strategic marriages was the creation of personal and, if possible, lasting bonds between aristocratic lineages. The instability of relations with foreign ethnic groups during the second half of the Western Han dynasty led to the revival of this practice. Emperor Wudi married off to the Wusun leader the daughter of a vassal king who, while of imperial lineage, was not his own daughter. Historical sources describe more than fifteen instances during the

Western Han period in which Chinese “princesses” were married to rulers of the Wusun or the Xiongnu, but in most cases the court resorted to sending women from aristocratic families or even from the common populace, formally granting them the title of “princess” in order to preserve the inviolability of the imperial line. These dynastic marriages embodied multiple functions. First and foremost, they contributed to the establishment and maintenance of long-term peaceful relations between the two sides and the securing of loyalty. At the same time, Chinese princesses also served as hostages, who could be used as bargaining chips in negotiations during conflicts or periods of tension.

The exchange of hostages (质) involved sending members of noble families to reside in a foreign state as a pledge for maintaining peace and honoring agreements. It is believed that, as a diplomatic instrument, this practice originated even before the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) and became firmly established in the foreign policy of the Han dynasty. The accounts contained in the „Commentary of Zuo” 《左传》 and “Strategies of the Warring States” 《战国策》 reveal that in the late Zhou period, the obligation to send their sons as hostages to ensure peace and stability was imposed on the rulers of politically inferior states, while their more powerful partners dictated the terms of such relations through the implicit threat to the hostages’ physical safety. Historical sources attest that during the Han dynasty, the exchange of hostages took shape as a fully developed mechanism, successfully applied in the empire’s interactions with foreign state formations, especially those along its southwestern and northeastern borders. In these cases, hostages fulfilled several distinct diplomatic purposes. First, their dispatch served specific political causes and expressed goodwill for reciprocity in relations. Second, the rulers of small satellite city-states in the Western Regions, whose loyalty wavered between the Xiongnu and the Chinese Empire, sent their sons or nephews to the Han court as proof of their final acceptance of China’s supremacy and as confirmation of their serious intentions for alliance. Information from historiographical sources suggests that hostages did not remain at the Han court for a fixed period, but rather for as long as they retained political or diplomatic significance. After 50 CE, the exchange of hostages with the southern branch of the Xiongnu became more regular, with their chieftains beginning to send new hostages to China annually, while the old ones returned to their homeland.

The analysis of historical materials clearly reveals that the tributary system, imperial audiences, dynastic marriages, the exchange of hostages, and diplomatic missions were important soft power strategies employed by the governing apparatus of the Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties. The cases presented in historiographical works show that these diplomatic

instruments were used both to exercise real authority over more fluid foreign state formations and to moderate the threat posed by the nomadic Xiongnu confederation. Nevertheless, none of these instruments originated as a deliberately formulated policy; rather, they evolved from a set of parallel practices that had been employed and further developed over the course of centuries. Whenever the dynasty sensed wavering in the relations of foreign ethnic groups or satellite city-states, it demanded confirmation of their loyalty in the form of sending hostages or paying tributes. Foreign states, for their part, actively participated in this arrangement, with a clear understanding and acceptance of its political consequences – incorporation into the Chinese sphere of influence and formal acknowledgment of the emperor’s authority. In the turbulent historical period in which early Chinese diplomacy was taking shape, however, loyalty was fleeting, and hostages and tributes often proved to be only temporary means of securing peace. Thus, dynastic marriages emerged as an alternative for establishing more lasting friendly relations in situations where the imperial court was compelled to make concessions and offer something in return. The overview of soft power instruments contained in the “Annals of Dayuan” provides grounds for concluding that, during the reign of Emperor Wu, Chinese diplomacy already possessed a high degree of flexibility and was guided not so much by ideological considerations as by specific political needs, met through appropriate means.

A key component of the dissertation research, carried out to the fullest extent in Chapter Three, is the extraction of a vast amount of toponyms, ethnonyms, hydronyms, anthroponyms, and other realia from the text of the annals, as well as the discussion of their content, historical development, and the scholarly hypotheses associated with them. At the same time, the ideological motives, diplomatic instruments, military aspects, and other factors that determined the success of the active foreign policy pursued by Emperor Wudi in the Western Regions and along the empire’s northern borders are also identified and analyzed. Based on the examined material, the following general conclusions from Chapter Three are formulated:

1. In the early period of Emperor Wu’s reign, the contacts of the Chinese Empire with foreign ethnic groups and states were limited to interactions with its immediate neighbors inhabiting the peripheral areas. The dispatch of the two diplomatic missions to the West in search of allies against the steppe nomads can be assessed as a strategic move by the Han court, in which the high degree of risk of failure was balanced by potential long-term benefits and consequences.

2. Although the first diplomatic mission failed to achieve its immediate objective, the diplomat Zhang Qian brought to the Han court an exceptionally valuable resource for his time

– information about highly remote geographical regions and their inhabitants. The reports on India, Bactria, Parthia, Ferghana, and the smaller state formations in Central Asia became the foundation for formulating a comprehensive foreign policy strategy of the Han dynasty aimed at expanding its regional influence. The historical records outline two clearly defined stages in the implementation of this strategy. In the first stage, the empire employed its material, social, and cultural superiority as a soft power resource through which it projected its image as a civilizational center and stimulated corresponding interest among foreign states. The narrative in the annals reflects the gradual decline in the effectiveness of this policy and its transformation into a form of “naive power” that ceased to serve the interests of the Han court. This fact can be regarded as the underlying cause of the conflict between China and Dayuan (Ferghana), while the Heavenly Horses were merely the immediate trigger for its eruption. The second stage of Emperor Wu’s foreign policy strategy involved conducting punitive campaigns against political opponents, carried out through large-scale and costly military expeditions. Analysis of the textual evidence reveals that these military campaigns also served as a demonstration of the empire’s hard power resources – its military strength and uncompromising stance toward its enemies – which had a long-term impact on the way foreign states interacted with China thereafter.

3. The analysis of Han dynasty’s strategic policy aimed at strengthening the cavalry and purposefully breeding large, high-quality horses for military purposes reveals the pragmatic side of the motivation behind Emperor Wu’s persistent desire to acquire the Ferghana horses. A comparison between the information in the “Annals of Dayuan” and other historical sources from this period leads to the conclusion that two main factors were decisive for the ultimate dominance of the Chinese empire over the nomadic Xiongnu federation: on the one hand, the improvement of the quality of warhorses in the army and the mastery of effective cavalry tactics; and on the other hand, the subjugation of the small satellite states in Central Asia, which cut off the flow of resources to the nomadic empire and led to its gradual disintegration by the end of the first century CE.

4. The examination of the narrative in the “Annals of Dayuan” indicates that Emperor Wu’s successful foreign policy was built on the skillful combination of military power with established diplomatic means such as imperial court audiences, tribute offerings, dynastic marriages, diplomatic missions, and the exchange of hostages, applied according to the needs of the specific political situation. In the course of expanding the empire’s contacts with the western states and increasing the circle of diplomatic actors, the traditional instruments of

foreign policy broadened their scope and improved, while at the same time retaining their multifaceted functions and continuing to guarantee stability in foreign relations.

5. The review of the results of Emperor Wu's military campaigns against Dayuan and the nomadic federation also reveals one underestimated aspect – the role of the competence and personal qualities of the generals leading these campaigns, as well as the dynastic significance of their achievements. Historical records attest to a close interconnection between the successes and failures of military expeditions and the planning of the Han dynasty's foreign policy, as well as to the strong influence of the results and the loyalty of the commanders on the emperor's strategic decisions.

3. Summary and Conclusions

The present study offers a new perspective on the historical events during the reign of Emperor Wudi (141–87 BCE), marking a pivotal moment in the establishment of the first contacts between the great civilizations of the East and the West. These historical events are examined through the lens of the historical source “Annals of Dayuan” from the “Records of the Grand Historian”, which presents them in their authentic context. The contribution of Sima Qian's monumental historical work and the high scholarly value of the annals are discussed in detail and substantiated in Chapter One of the study, in accordance with the objectives formulated in the introduction.

The translation of the annals from Classical Chinese into Bulgarian, although included as an appendix to the main study, constitutes its conceptual foundation and serves as the starting point for the analysis. Through the translation, the principal philological goal of the dissertation is achieved – namely, to make the rich and multifaceted information it contains accessible to the Bulgarian academic audience. In order to clarify and contextualize the factual material presented in the annals, the study identifies, systematizes, and analyzes the main political, historical, and cultural realities characteristic of the researched period, as well as over one hundred geographical, ethnic, state, personal, and other names. This part of the work fulfills one of the main objectives of the dissertation: to present the content of the “Annals of Dayuan” in an accessible manner, including for non-specialists and those outside the field of Sinology.

Following the objectives outlined at the beginning of the study, Chapter Two offers a systematized analysis of data drawn from historical sources and secondary literature, forming the basis for reconstructing the historical context in which Emperor Wu's foreign policy strategies and diplomatic activities took shape. The summarized data reveal that by the end of

the 3rd century BCE, the nomadic tribes inhabiting the northern and northwestern borders of the Han Empire had emerged as the main external threat to its integrity. Their periodic incursions led to the destabilization of Chinese society and economy, becoming a constant source of tension and rivalry. The analysis shows that despite the destructive nature of these conflicts, frontier interactions played a dual role, also serving as a catalyst for the strengthening of state governance, as they forced the dynasty to develop effective military strategies and administrative reforms. In response to the nomadic raids, the imperial court periodically organized military campaigns, which resulted not only in territorial expansion but also in processes of cultural assimilation and the integration of new ethnic groups and regions. An emblematic example of this model of military and civilizational expansion is the policy of Emperor Wudi – the seventh emperor of the Western Han dynasty, who reigned between 141 and 87 BCE. His active measures against the Xiongnu tribal confederation were initially motivated by the necessity of defending the empire’s northern frontier, but subsequently these campaigns expanded in scale and extended the influence of Han China far beyond its traditional territories.

The examination of Emperor Wu’s diplomatic and military strategies in Central Asia, presented in Chapter Three, clearly shows that their success was determined by several key political and economic factors. At the core of the successful expansionist policy lay the achievement of unprecedented administrative unity and centralization of dynastic power, which created the conditions for economic growth. After the suppression of uprisings among the vassal rulers and the reduction of the number of feudal domains under Emperors Wendi (文帝, r. 180–157 BCE) and Jingdi (景帝, r. 157–141 BCE), the regional separatist forces were significantly weakened, ushering in a long period of political stability. Concurrently, advances in technology, agricultural reforms, and the reinforcement of riverbanks fostered the growth of the productive forces and provided significant impetus to economic development. Owing to the “pluralistic” and “syncretic” intellectual culture of this period, as well as to the favorable social policies introduced by his predecessors, by the time Emperor Wudi ascended the throne, the Han dynasty had already experienced more than seven decades of sustained economic and political growth. An analysis of the dynasty’s domestic policy clearly shows that it was precisely this economic surplus under Emperor Wu’s rule that enabled the Han court to finance ambitious foreign policy undertakings as part of a broader strategy to integrate the Western Regions into the Han sphere of influence.

Chapter Three of the dissertation is devoted to the realization of the main objective of the study—namely, to extract and analyze from the rich factual fabric of the narrative in the “Account of Dayuan” the priorities and patterns of foreign policy, as well as the strategic and diplomatic instruments employed by Emperor Wudi in dealing with the political entities of Central Asia. Among the factors shaping regional relations during this historical period were the low level of productive forces and the limited nomadic way of life of the northern peoples, including the Xiongnu, which provoked interest in the culture of the Central Plain and a desire to share in its benefits. The sequence of events in the annals reveals that, after receiving the first information about the ethnic and political formations in the Western Regions during Zhang Qian’s initial mission, Emperor Wudi and his advisers developed a foreign policy vision that skillfully exploited these attitudes in the culturally and materially less advanced peoples. The court dispatched lavish diplomatic missions bearing generous gifts of gold, silk, and luxury goods, by means of which it secured the loyalty of the smaller kingdoms and aroused the admiration of the greater ones. This deliberately crafted policy of “soft power” followed a clear pattern of demonstrating Han superiority and prosperity, and as a result succeeded in drawing the “more primitive” Central Asian societies into the Chinese sphere of influence. Key aspects of this process included the conscious construction of the Han empire’s image as a civilizational center through diplomatic instruments such as audiences at the imperial court, participation in the tributary system, the dispatch of official missions, and the reception of foreign envoys. The analysis further shows that, in addition to these soft measures, Wudi selectively applied a set of established long-term mechanisms of cultural and political dependency, such as dynastic marriages and the taking of hostages; and where diplomacy failed, the empire’s economic power was converted into military potential, through which it forcibly imposed its regional influence.

A closer reading of the narrative in the “Account of Dayuan” reveals the dual nature of the Fergana horses, which stand at the center of the conflict marking the transition from peaceful diplomacy to military expansion in Central Asia. The Han court’s desire to obtain valuable specimens of this breed can be regarded as part of a deliberate state policy aimed at strengthening the cavalry and breeding first-class horses for military purposes. Textual analysis, however, shows that for the empire these large and resilient animals were not only a valuable economic resource but also a tributary commodity of high ideological significance. During the reign of Emperor Wu, the “Heavenly Horses” were perceived as a favorable omen affirming the divine status of the emperor and symbolizing the submission of culturally distinct subjects to his might. This provides grounds for assuming that Han China’s pursuit of their acquisition

was driven not only by pragmatic considerations but also by motives that went beyond purely economic benefit. In this sense, Emperor Wu's two punitive expeditions against the distant Central Asian kingdom may also be interpreted as a continuation of an already established strategy for demonstrating strength and affirming the prestige of the Chinese empire in relation to states perceived as potential threats or unwilling to formally acknowledge its supremacy.

In addition to thoroughly elucidating the sequence of events related to the establishment of Chinese influence in Central Asia, Chapter Three of the dissertation also fulfills another of the research objectives – namely, to extract, analyze, and synthesize the foreign policy strategies of Emperor Wudi towards tribal and state entities in Central Asia that generally remain outside the scope of popular studies on the subject. The discussion of the combination of military strategies and diplomatic instruments employed by the Han court during Zhang Qian's two missions to Central Asia and the subsequent wars for the "Heavenly Horses" demonstrate that Wudi's flexible foreign policy drew on the historical experience of preceding dynasties while adapting to the specific circumstances and geopolitical needs of his own time.

The author argues that this flexible policy can be aptly described using modern concepts such as *pragmatic realism* (*realpolitik*¹⁰), *hybrid policy*, or *smart power*, as it combined elements of both soft diplomacy and coercion. In the political reality of our own time, smart power is defined as "the strategic use of diplomacy, persuasion, capacity building, and projection of power and influence in ways that are cost-effective and possess political and social legitimacy" (Crocker et al. 2007:13). Evidence from the *Account of Dayuan* confirms that the most effective strategies in Emperor Wudi's foreign policy were based precisely on the combination of hard and soft power resources, since relying on only one of these tools proved insufficient in certain situations. A telling example is the complex relationship with the Xiongnu steppe nomads, toward whom the Han empire alternated massive military campaigns with diplomatic tools such as dynastic marriages, aimed at restoring and maintaining long-term peace. The development of the empire's relations with the kingdom of Dayuan and several oppositional Central Asian states, such as Gushi and Loulan, likewise illustrates the selective application of foreign policy instruments tailored to specific actors and circumstances.

The analysis shows that in the initial stage of these relationships, the Han court relied on soft diplomacy through official visits and gift exchange, thereby successfully projecting the image of the Celestial Empire as an advanced civilizational center. In the later stage, when

¹⁰ The term "realpolitik" emerged in the mid-19th century and denotes a pragmatic approach to politics based on practical interests rather than ideological or moral considerations.

Emperor Wudi dispatched an official mission charged with the task of delivering to China a number of purebred Fergana horses, this was perceived as diplomatic pressure and an encroachment upon the kingdom's most valuable resource, and was therefore met with outright refusal. Moreover, the contemptuous attitude displayed by Dayuan's aristocracy toward the Han envoys, their gifts, and their goods clearly indicated that soft means had exhausted their effectiveness, forcing the dynasty to resort to hard power to achieve its foreign policy objectives.

Following the punitive campaigns against Dayuan and the antagonistic city-states, the Han returned once again to a diplomatic course – albeit a more assertive one – through the installation of pro-Chinese regimes in the defeated kingdoms and the establishment of military garrisons and border posts in the Hexi Corridor. Based on these strategic outposts, in 60 BCE Emperor Xuandi (r. 74–49 BCE) further solidified the Han's foreign policy in Central Asia by officially creating the Protectorate of the Western Regions (西域都护府), whose purpose was to ensure political control, military defense, and commercial stability along the western routes, as well as to counter the influence of the Xiongnu and other regional powers.

Although the reign of Emperor Wudi remains in history as a period of large-scale military conquests and territorial expansion, the factors underlying the success of his expansionist policy remain insufficiently studied. The analysis presented in Chapters Two and Three of the dissertation outlines three key military strategies that played a decisive role in realizing the Han court's geopolitical ambitions during this period: the mass breeding of horses, the creation of an effective cavalry force, and the emergence of three great military commanders – Li Guangli, Wei Qing, and Huo Qubing. Over time, these three factors transformed not only the structure of the Chinese army, but also the overall military policy of the empire.

The study further reveals that, due to their specific geographical location and natural conditions, the northwestern regions of the Han empire were of particular importance for the preparation of military campaigns and served as the main driving force of its expansion. This conclusion harmonizes with the observation of the Chinese historian Zhang Chunshu, who notes that each geographical region of China appears to fulfill its own specific historical or cultural mission (Chang 1966:173).

On the one hand, the Northwest was the principal center of horse breeding, where a deliberate state policy for the development of equine husbandry was implemented. Combined with the gradual adoption of cavalry tactics, this policy contributed to transforming the Han army into a mobile and effective fighting force. On the other hand, historical records indicate

that of the twenty well-known generals of the Western Han period whose geographical origins are documented, eighteen were born in the northwestern parts of China, making these areas an important source of personnel for the formation of the imperial cavalry. In this sense, the contribution of the northwestern territories to the expansion of Han China during Emperor Wudi's reign may be regarded as their specific historical share in this process.

The analysis of information preserved in the "Annals of Dayuan" and other historical sources further reveals that the Han empire's success in its military campaigns against the Xiongnu and the restive kingdoms in the Western Regions was not always guaranteed by the deployment of large armies, but depended to a considerable extent on the competence of individual generals. While talented commanders such as Wei Qing, Li Guangli, and Huo Qubing proved their abilities in a series of victorious battles, many others failed to achieve significant results or suffered defeats. The successes of these three generals led not only to territorial gains, but also to the weakening of the Xiongnu nomadic confederation and to winning the loyalty of a number of Central Asian polities. Conversely, the contrast between Emperor Wudi's enthusiasm following victorious campaigns and his subsequent restraint after military setbacks, as well as the impact of these outcomes on his future decisions, reveals the close interconnection between the individual achievements of commanders and the overall military strategy of the empire.

The research tasks formulated in advance and implemented within the framework of the dissertation also contribute to achieving the second principal objective: to elucidate the complex intercultural dynamics between East and Central Asia during the reign of Emperor Wudi. The outcomes of his hybrid policy are clearly crystallized in the fact that, within only a few decades, Central Asian societies at a lower level of socio-economic development voluntarily integrated into the Chinese sphere of influence, adopting the Han model as a paradigm to emulate. This process led to the gradual weakening of the steppe nomads' power, the detachment of their vassal states, and the severing of their resource inflows – factors that precipitated the collapse of the Xiongnu confederation at the end of the first century CE. Through the systematic application of military and economic dominance, cultural attractiveness, and political engineering, most notably through dynastic marriages and other forms of soft power, the Han empire succeeded in transforming its material and civilizational advantages into a sustainable mechanism of geopolitical influence. This mechanism was continuously adapted and refined in subsequent historical periods and has remained deeply embedded in the governing tradition and foreign policy thought of the Chinese state to the present day.

4. Contributions of the Dissertation

The present dissertation offers several significant scholarly contributions, which can be systematized as follows:

1. The first complete translation into Bulgarian of the chapter “Annals of Dayuan” from “Records of the Grand Historian”, accompanied by a philological and historical commentary, making it accessible to a broad academic audience.
2. Identification and systematization of over one hundred proper names (toponyms, anthroponyms, ethnonyms, hydronyms, etc.) contained in the annals, with each entry supplemented by a historical and geographical reference and, where possible, compared with data from other sources or modern research.
3. A new interpretation of Emperor Wudi’s policy toward Central Asia, based exclusively on an analysis of the source material, tracing the main motives and stages in the transition from peaceful interaction to military expansion.
4. An interpretative framework has been formulated, within which the annals’ accounts have been used to identify and systematize the principal instruments of soft policy employed by the Han Empire: imperial court audiences, inclusion in the tributary system, diplomatic missions, dynastic marriages, and the exchange of hostages. This systematization contributes to a deeper understanding of the ethnopolitical interactions between China and Central Asia during the last two centuries BCE.
5. The study sheds light on little-researched aspects of Emperor Wudi’s military policy, including the Han court’s measures to enhance the combat effectiveness of the cavalry, the contribution of military commanders to the success of campaigns, and the significance of the northwestern territories as a driving force behind military expansion.
6. The dissertation lays the groundwork for future Sinological, historical, and comparative studies, relating both to the “*Records of the Grand Historian*” and to the broader issues of inter-civilizational contacts along the Silk Road during its formative phase.

5. Limitations of the Study

The study is carried out within several objective limitations that determine its scope and interpretative possibilities. With regard to the source material, it should be noted that, despite its high historical value, the text of the “Annals of Dayuan” presents events from the

perspective of the Han court and is invariably aligned with a specific ideological framework. This calls for a cautious approach when extracting objective information and for taking into account possible authorial biases. On the other hand, the lack of sufficient written evidence for some of the regions and kingdoms mentioned in the annals hinders the clarification of their role and historical development.

The translation of the annals from Classical Chinese is also accompanied by a number of difficulties related to the polysemy and cultural connotations of certain terms, as well as to the specifics of the historical context. Therefore, despite the effort to achieve maximum accuracy and closeness to the original, some translation choices carry an element of interpretation.

6. Prospects for Future Research

The results of the present study outline several directions for future scholarly work in the field of ancient Chinese history and Silk Road studies:

1. An ethnocultural study of the peoples and states presented in the annals, through comparison with archaeological materials and written evidence from non-Chinese sources, which would enrich the understanding of transregional contacts in Central Asia during the 2nd–1st centuries BCE.
2. A more in-depth linguistic analysis of the terminology used in the annals, including diplomatic, political, and military vocabulary, which would contribute to the study of Classical Chinese in the context of intercultural interactions.
3. The development of an annotated critical translation of the “Annals of Dayuan,” with parallel commentary, to serve as an academic resource for future research and teaching.

7. Publications on the Dissertation Topic

The outcomes of the author’s research on the issues addressed in the dissertation have been presented at international scholarly forums and published in the following articles in Bulgarian and English:

1. Marinova, M. Маринова, М. “Nov pogled kăm dinamikata na vzaimodeistviia mezhdur khanski Kitai i Fergana (大宛). [A New Perspective on the Dynamics of Interaction between Han China and Ferghana (大宛)].” *Aktualni problemi v sŭvremennata kitaisitika i*

iztokoznanie [Current Issues in Contemporary Sinology and Oriental Studies], vol. 1, Universitetsko izdatelstvo “Sv. Kliment Okhridski”, 2022: 292–307.

2. Marinova, M. Маринова, М. “Diplomaticheski instrumenti na kitaškata dŭzhava v pred-Hanskiia i Hanskiia period.” [Diplomatic Instruments of the Chinese State in the Pre-Han and Han Periods]”. *The Silk Road / Pŭtiat na koprinata*, vol. 7, Institut Konfutsii v Sofiia, 2023, pp. 285–299.

3. „Status of Women in Ancient Sogdian Society“. *丝绸之路研究集刊 [Silk Road Research Collection]*, vol. 9, 社会科学文献出版社 [Social Sciences Academic Press], 2023, 157-173.

4. „Relative Analogies in the Ritual Use of Red Mineral Pigments (Ochre, Hematite) in Neolithic and Eneolithic Burials from Xinjiang and Bulgaria“. *Silk Road Research Series, vol. 3: “Major Archaeological Discoveries Along the Chinese Silk Road”*, Springer-Singapore, 2023, 31-49.

Some of these publications are available in the author’s research profiles in the academic databases ResearchGate at <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maria-Marinova-3> and Academia at https://uni-sofia.academia.edu/MMarinova?from_navbar=true.