

Comparison between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty of China---from the perspective of foreign trade and cultural values

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Abstract: From the 2nd century BC to around the 2nd century AD, two prominent empires, the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire, fell respectively upon the Eastern as well as Western lands. From the perspective of global history, it's really important and valuable for us to make comparisons between these two nearly synchronous empires which hold different civilizations. Taking advantage of the method of historical comparison between East and West, this article strives to make a comparison between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty based on foreign trade and cultural values. In term of economy, the germination of "globalization" appeared, and the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty made foreign trade frequently through the Silk Road; in term of cultural values, as autocratic country, the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty paid attention to the construction of "common cognition", and further stabilized their rule through the process of "Romanization" and "Confucianism" respectively. Then, this paper makes a critical analysis, and combines it with the national conditions of today's China to strive to find some useful insights for us, hoping to achieve the effect of "using history as a mirror to know the rise and fall of dynasties".

Key words: the Roman Empire; the Han Dynasty; global history; comparison

1 Introduction

The Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire appeared in history at almost the same time, and they are both similar and different. It's meaningless just to delineate one of them in detail, so my purpose is to compare these two civilizations, so that the differences and similarities of these two civilizations can present in front of us directly and clearly. A civilization consists of many aspects, yet due to the restriction of my article, I just want to focus on two main aspects-- foreign trade and cultural values.

2 The trade route--the Silk Road

"From Chang'an (nowadays Xi'an) to the coast of Mediterranean, the Silk Road passes through numerous plains and mountains, with a total length of 7,000 kilometers and the sea route stretching from Egypt to northern Vietnam, nearly 12,000 kilometers long". The Silk Road (including the Silk Road and the sea route, as shown in the Figure below), to some extent was the only route to connect the West and the East at ancient time. Although both empires built roads primarily for military purposes, these arteries also came to be used to facilitate trade. Centralized monarchy and peaceful inner environment, to some degree, contributed to the development of foreign trade. Although, the certain purpose, content and

influence of the trade between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty were spontaneous, uncertain and disorderly, they still attracted the attention of many scholars.

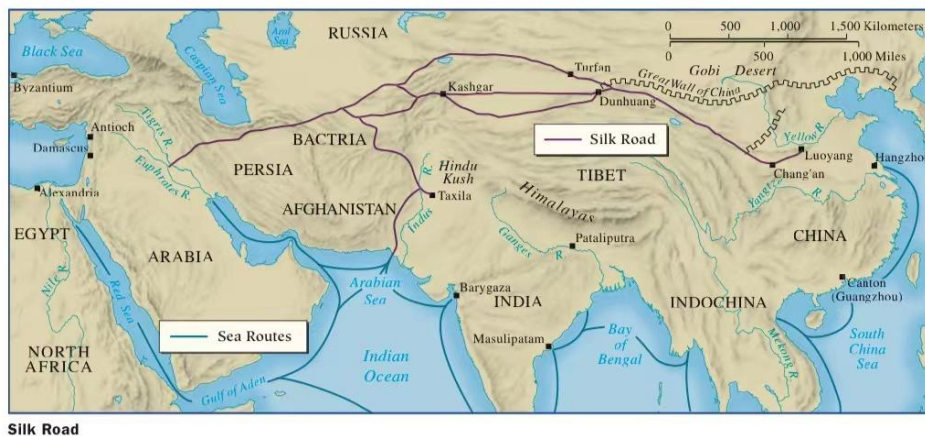


Figure 1. The silk road

The name "Silk Road" was first mentioned by Germany prominent geographer Baron von Richthofen, who recorded in his book *China* that the route, from 114 BC to 127 AD, was used to make silk trade between central Asia, China and India, named "Seidenstrassen" or "Silk Road", then this term was quickly accepted by scholars and the public. A lot of research about the Silk Road became popular, for instance, in 1910, Albert Herrmann further enriched the connotation of "Silk Road", and believed that the real range of the Silk Road should extend to western Syria. His opinion was agreed by other scholars, marking the end of the definition of "Silk Road"

2.1 What to exchange -- the different goods exchange between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty

There are numerous products exchanged through the Silk Road between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty. The table below will show you the answer clearly.

Table 1. The different goods exchange between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty

	Goods for exchange
the Han Dynasty	Silk; tea; sugar; chinaware; paper; iron; pearl; camphor; cinnamon; copper; alum; gold and silver; lacquerware; vegetable oil; bamboo ware; rhubarb; slave; gunpower; compass; letterpress and so on.
The Roman Empire	Cotton; wool and products; horse; iron; lead and zinc; diamond; statue; coral; amber; shark fin; pearl; rice; glass; gem; grape; pomegranate; walnut; sesame; cucumber; garlic; carrot; fig; Buddhism and so on.

From the table above we can conclude that the types of goods exchanged between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty are various, and what makes me surprised is that "slaves" were also seen as a kind of goods traded through the Silk Road.

3 Cultural values--"Romanization" and "Confucianism"

According to the theory of cognition, we know the fact that people's cognition guides their outward actions. In other

words, their behaviors are determined by their inner thoughts. Thus, what is the cultural values of the Roman Empire and the Han dynasty? In term of politics, due to the centralized monarchy, cultural freedom and cultural diversification became impossible. The centralized government put strong cultural control upon citizens, and people were forced to submit to the centralized government. The Roman empire utilized "Romanization" to push people to form common cultural recognition meanwhile Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (156-87 BC) proscribed all non-Confucian schools of thought and declared Confucianism to be the state ideology [1].

3.1 Romanization in Roma and Romanization of overseas Colonies

3.1.1 Romanization in Roma

The primary process of Romanization displayed within the provinces of Roma, especially the western Mediterranean, and Roma brought "civilization" to these barbarian areas. British archaeologist Haberfield first mentioned the term "Romanization", which not only means the process of transforming local people to complete Romans, but also symbolizes two trends. First and foremost, Romanization erased the differences between Roma and Western empires, urged them to use the same language, set up common cultural values, political emotions as well as regional values. Secondly, the degree of Romanization varies from area to area. Romanization does not mean destroying or replacing all local traditions, but just staying upon the surface. For instance, for the Roma-Britain civilization, the appearance is Roma, but Celtic is still its essence. So, how to achieve Romanization? The elites of upper class play a very crucial role. Elites deeply knew the fact that the identity of Roman citizen emblemizes supreme glory, for this identity could bring them protection from Roma, so they strove to intertwine Roman civilization with their own tradition. Because of the great benefit provided by Roma, people striving to attain the identity of Roman citizen became an obvious phenomenon at the 2nd century AC. According to this identity, Roman citizens belonged to the upper class while non-Roman citizens were nothing but people with low status. Therefore, adhering to the rule of Roma, people could live better and easier. Thus, in fact, the motivation of "Romanization" stems from those elites who attain numerous benefits from the rule of Roma. If you agree with the rule of Roma, you could get the protection from Roma. On the contrary, for the normal people, the benefit for them was trivial, thus further enlarging the gulf between elite and normal people, rich and poor, urban area and suburb [3].

3.1.2 Romanization in overseas colonies

Romanization not only displayed within Roma, but also in overseas colonies, which deserves our attention. The establishment of colonies held close connection with the process of granting Roman citizenship, which means as long as the colony was established, the people who inhabited in the colony could become Roman citizens [2]. The granting of Roman citizenship became an important method to achieve political Romanization over colonies. People with Roman citizen right were able to attend Roman politics and military affairs.

Romanization cannot be separate from education. Latin served as formal language in overseas colonies. The more frequent Latin language people used, the deeper degree of Romanization had been achieved. Roman education nearly became basic and core education in overseas colonies. Roma established numerous children's Grammar Schools as well as Higher Education Centers in colonies. For example, at Beirut, students could strongly feel the atmosphere of Roman civilization, especially the research of law. Spain was also a good model of Romanization. Some eminent poets and writers such as Seneca, Matiyar, Kuntiliang, all came from Spain. A lot of colonies also held their own bookstores and libraries. Bookstores often sold newly Greek and Latin books, which were brought to colonies from Roma. So, if people want to read these books, they have to master Greek or Latin language. When people in colonies read these books, at the same time, they deeply absorbed Roman cultural values. Thus, Roman rulers, utilizing books as vehicle, established libraries and bookstores in overseas colonies to facilitate the expansion of Roman civilization around Mediterranean area. By embracing

Roman values, overseas colonies gradually became parts of the whole Roman empire.

3.1.3 Dismissing the hundred schools, and exclusively venerating Confucianism

At the primary stage, the Han Dynasty emphasized the opinion of Huang-Lao School---ruling by doing nothing. But later, in order to maintain centralized monarchy, the belief of Huang-Lao School could no longer meet the needs of the empire, so the rulers turned to Confucianism and advocated opinions such as "the great unity of the Spring and Autumn Period", "benevolence and justice", "ethics of monarchs and ministers", which, to some extents, were benefit to the centralized rule. The policy of "dismissing the hundred schools, and exclusively venerating Confucianism" was first mentioned by Dong zhongshu around 134 BC, then implemented by Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. Under this policy, officials had to learn and understand the thoughts of Confucianism, used Confucian views to explain laws [4]. One of the important characteristics of Confucianism was to make politics ethical, and to dye the political relationship between rulers and officials with the warmth of patriarchal ideas, which is similar to Roman empire's "Father of the land". The Han Dynasty also resorted to the power of deity to strengthen control. Dong zhongshu made theological transformation of Confucianism, by proposing the idea that "divine-human induction", thus theologizing ethics and morality. He also believed that the power of the empire was endowed by deity, thus providing proof for the rationality of autocratic monarchy. Finally, what I want to say is that the policy of "dismissing the hundred schools, and exclusively venerating Confucianism" controlled people's mind to a large extent, maintained the centralized monarchy, but this policy also impeded cultural freedom, which was essentially a morbid state. Therefore, it's high time for us to know the truth that "single culture" can never last long, only "diversification" is our right answer.

4 Conclusion

The above has been elaborated and briefly summarized mainly in terms of foreign trade and cultural values. To sum up, the Roman empire and the Han dynasty have both similarities and uniqueness. The two civilizations like splendid stars on the sky, illuminating the darkness of human history.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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