

Chang Ch'ien (Zhang Qian)

Encyclopedia Article

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fl. 138-114 B.C.

Chinese official who journeyed to central Asia, establishing the first contact between China and other civilizations. Prior to Chang Ch'ien, the Chinese had known only of barbarians beyond their frontiers. It was to deal with just such a group of nomads, the Hsiung-Nu or Huns, that the Han emperor Wu-ti (156-87 B.C.) sent Chang Ch'ien westward to form an alliance with the formerly nomadic Yüeh-chih people. The latter, however, had settled down and become civilized, adopting aspects of Hellenistic civilization that lingered in Bactria (modern Afghanistan) from the invasions of Alexander (356-323 B.C.) centuries before. They had no interest in returning to China, and thus Chang Ch'ien, who was imprisoned a total of 11 years by the Hsiung-Nu, failed in the immediate purpose of his 13-year mission. However, his efforts led to the opening of the trade routes known as the Silk Road, which greatly heightened contact between East and West in the centuries that followed.