

The Introduction of Grapes and Alfalfa into China: A Reflection on the Role of Zhang Qian

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(Received June 23, 2005; Accepted August 24, 2005)

There is a prevailing legend that grapes and alfalfa were introduced to China from West Asia by Zhang Qian in 126 BC. This paper intends to show the legend to be a misconception. The three crucial documents were thoroughly examined, and the author believes he can demonstrate that it was a later traveler who actually brought these two plants to China following the trade route pioneered by Zhang Qian.

Key words—grapes; alfalfa; Zhang Qian; China

THE LEGEND

Grapes and alfalfa (or lucerne) were introduced to China from West Asia by Zhang Qian in 126 BC. This has been the generally accepted view.

In 1915, Professor Jitsuzo Kuwahara at Kyoto denounced the view as an untenable misconception,¹⁾ but his contention remained within a limited academic circle. It was the traditional view that survived without debate or reconsideration.

This paper will elaborate on Prof. Kuwahara's report and aims to set the historical record straight, that is, to make clear that it was not Zhang Qian, but someone else, who introduced grapes and alfalfa to China (Zhang Qian is abbreviated as ZQ hereafter).

THE HISTORY

For discussion, three historical documents merit particular attention:

1. *Shi ji* (史記)²⁾ or the earliest Record of the History of Ancient China compiled by Si Maqian in 91 BC

2. *Han shu* (漢書)³⁾ or the Annals of the Han Dynasty written by Ban Gu around AD 78

3. *Bowu zhi* (博物志)⁴⁾ or the Record of the Natural History by Zhang Hua about AD 300.

(1) *Shi ji*, in the chapter of the Da Yuan Biography, contains this description, translated into English by F. Hirth in 1917 and quoted by J. Needham⁶⁾ in 1986:

The people (of Da yuan) liked to drink wine, and their horses liked to eat alfalfa grass. The Chinese en-

voy imported the seeds (of the grapevine and alfalfa) on his way back (to China). The emperor thereupon caused alfalfa and grapevine to be planted on rich tracts of ground.

A Sino-Iranologist, Bernhold Laufer,⁷⁾ in 1919 translated the same chapter of *Shi ji* as follows:

They (the people of Da yuan) were fond of drinking wine in the same manner as their horses relished alfalfa. The Chinese envoys* took the seeds of both plants along to their country, and the Son of Heaven was the first to plant alfalfa and the vine in fertile soil (*Note the plural form).

The present author's literal translation of the crucial part is that Han shi (Han's envoy) came back (to China) after collecting the seeds (of grapes and alfalfa). For the sake of confirmation, the passage in question is shown in Chinese: 漢使取其實來 (史記·大宛列傳).

(2) *Han shu*, in its Xi Yu Biography, records in the same way that Han shi came back (to China) after gathering the seeds of grapes and alfalfa. For confirmation again, the passage in Chinese is: 漢使采蒲陶目宿種歸 (漢書·西域傳).

As shown above and as Prof. Kuwahara pointed out earlier, both *Shi ji* and *Han shu* say that it was Han shi (Han's envoy) who introduced grapes and alfalfa into China, and neither names ZQ.

(3) *Bowu zhi*, the third document, is cited to have contained such passages as these:

- ZQ was on a mission to Xi yu (the Western Region) and returned home after obtaining the seeds (of grape) for the first time.
- ZQ was on a mission to Xi yu and returned home after obtaining grape (vine).

- ZQ was on a mission to Xi yu and returned home after obtaining grape, shallot and alfalfa.
- The emperor Wu of Han sent ZQ as his envoy to Da yuan, and obtained grape seeds.
- An alfalfa garden of ZQ is situated now in the capital town (Luo yang). Alfalfa was originally a vegetable grown in West Asia and ZQ was the first to have it in the Western Countries.

These passages have been quoted repeatedly in later documents⁵⁾ such as *Shuyi ji* (ca.500), *Zhaimin yaoshu* (ca.535), *Taiping yulan* (984), *Tujing bencao* (1062), *Daguan bencao* (1108), and *Bencao gangmu* (1578) all of which contributed to the prevailing legend in the Tang and Song era that ZQ had brought grapes and alfalfa to China.

Bowu zhi itself is known to have undergone transforming alterations in which the original version consisting of 400 volumes, was contracted to ten by the emperor Wu of Jin by deleting supposedly unreliable or unrealistic stories. At a later time, *Bowu zhi* was totally lost and then reconstructed by several authors, who collected then-available quotations found in the various documents. Today, the several editions made at different times in Song and Ming are known to exist.

The present author's careful perusal of the existing editions of *Bowu zhi*, nine of which are available to him, discloses no clear description of ZQ's introduction of the two plants to China. Other researchers agree with the author that it is indeed nonexistent. There are only two references to ZQ in the existing editions of *Bowu zhi*:

- Han shi ZQ went over to the Western Sea Region to reach the Roman Empire.
- ZQ was on a mission to Xi yu and returned home after obtaining walnut seeds.

As can be clearly seen, the term *Han shi* (Chinese envoy) in *Shi ji* and in *Han shu* was rewritten as ZQ by Zhang Hua in *Bowu zhi*. From the context, the present author is unable to comprehend why Zhang Hua wrote Han shi as ZQ. Was this interpretation current during his time, or did he base it on some undisclosed source of information? The present author would point out that this rewriting of the term *Han shi* as ZQ is most likely the source of today's continuing misconception about the origin of grapes and alfalfa in China.

HAN SHI IN SHI JI

Now the author intends to clarify that *Han shi* was never meant to be an indirect reference to ZQ; it was so written by Zhang Hua of *Bowu zhi* as a result of his misinterpretation of the term.

A close examination was made of the use of the name of the envoy himself as well as the term *Han shi* in the entire text of the Da Yuan Biography in *Shi ji*, keeping in mind that the story is written in more-or-less chronological order. To indicate the actual man, the name ZQ occurs five times and is shortened to Qian 35 times. The individual's name never appears in the story that covers the period after ZQ's death. The term *Han shi* is used 28 times, 25 of them in the section that follows ZQ's death.

So, let us look at these three mentions of Han shi before ZQ's death.

- Qian told the chief of the Da yuan tribe of his intention to visit Yue zhi in the capacity of Han shi.
- The Kun ming tribe, violent plunderers with no leader, killed Han shi (an emissary sent by Qian).
- The chief of the Wu sun tribe failed to offer a respectful reception to Han shi, not following their customary dutiful protocol, and Qian was much chagrined.

In these three quotations, the relationship of Han shi with ZQ is clearly seen.

There is only one exceptional occurrence, out of the 25 instances, in which Han shi is said explicitly to be ZQ, and it must be discussed here.

Well after ZQ's death in the text chronologically, there are descriptions like this: Han shi reached the riverhead (of the Yellow River) which originated from Yu tian, and the mountain yields many jade stones, which were collected (by Han shi) to bring back (to China). Several paragraphs later, the description in question occurs: Han shi came back after picking the seeds.

In the addendum placed at the end of the Biography text, Taishi gong (another name of *Shi ji*'s author) states that ZQ went on a mission to Da xia (Tokhari) and reached the riverhead (of the Yellow River) for the first time. This statement can be read as equating the Han shi described in the main text as ZQ himself.

But let us examine the validity of Taishi gong's in-

terpretation, in this sole instance, of Han shi as ZQ. To restate the quotation, Han shi reached the riverhead, which originated from Yu tian. On his way back to China, ZQ is believed to have taken the so-called Southern Route, which indeed passes Yu tian, located at the southernmost edge of the Taklimakan Desert in the Xinjian Uygur Province. In the neighborhood of this oasis, the river Keriya he flows north. This river, however, has nothing whatever to do with the head of the Yellow River, identified today as being in the distant Qinghai Province.

ZQ was never known to have undertaken an expedition into deep mountain areas to find the riverhead, nor to have brought jade stones back home. This means that Han shi who allegedly found the riverhead and jade stones was not ZQ but some later party (or parties). Taishi gong's statement in the addendum therefore must be a misapprehension, perhaps induced by his admiration of ZQ.

All of these factors—the usage of the terms, the frequency of their occurrence, their placement in the chronology as well as the context, and finally, the clarification of the single exceptional instance—give weight to the belief that the party that brought grapes and alfalfa back to China must have been not ZQ himself but some other person or parties who came after ZQ had opened the trade routes with Xi yu (the Western Countries). This deduction is amply supported by numerous narratives documenting the emperor's desire to obtain good horses from Da yuan, which prompted the dispatch of many envoys—Han shi—to the Western Countries. These envoys are presumably the ones who brought back to China various foreign products, including grapes and alfalfa.

PERILS OF AMBIGUOUS TRANSLATION

In the English translation by Hirth-Needham⁶⁾ of the *Shi ji* chapter as given above, the original Chinese term *Han shi* is converted in English to *the Chinese envoy*; the peculiarity of the Chinese language dictates that the Chinese term, *Han shi*, may imply here either the *Chinese envoy* or *a Chinese envoy*, or even *Chinese envoys* (as in Laufer's translation⁷⁾). For those who are fluent in Chinese, there is no confusion of the meaning, which in most cases is understood from the context. The author believes that, based on the context, the usage of the definite article *the* is not appropriate here in this translation. The sentence, if *the* is used, will inevitably relate to a specific envoy or,

more likely, implicitly to ZQ himself. The author, however, has already deduced that the envoy in question was not ZQ.

THE INFLUENCE OF ADMIRATION IN HISTORIC INTERPRETATION

It may be, however, that later historians were moved by admiration to attribute the significant introduction of these plants to so remarkable a personality as ZQ, who had come to be called the Chinese (or Oriental) Columbus. Certainly ZQ would have been well aware of his emperor's ardent desire to augment his stables with the "heavenly" horses of West Asia. The horses' fodder, alfalfa, would therefore have been a valuable gift to the emperor. Also, during his 13 years away from home, even though much of that time spent in confinement, ZQ must have enjoyed the local wine and probably wanted to present the plant from which it was derived for his emperor's delight.

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, the conclusion of this paper, which strengthens the report made by Prof. Kuwahara 90 years ago, is that grapes and alfalfa were introduced to China not by ZQ himself but by someone else in later years who took advantage of the trade route pioneered by ZQ.

ZHANG QIAN GOODS

In addition to these two plants,⁸⁾ the introduction of many other edible plants into China has been attributed to ZQ. Among them are hugua (cucumber), husui (coriander), hucong (shallot), hutao (walnut), huma (sesame), and anshiliu (pomegranate). Such attribution is understood today to be no more than a popular expression of praise for the pioneering achievement of ZQ. Those plants are affectionately referred to as Zhangqian goods or the Zhangqianides. Laufer⁷⁾ said in 1919 that arrival in China of any plants whose names are formed with the attribute *hu* were ultimately credited to the old General (ZQ) as the easiest way out of a difficult problem and as a comfortable means of avoiding the need for further thought.

Details of the arrival of those foreign plants in China will be discussed elsewhere.

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