

# An Analysis of the Debate Regarding the Establishment Timeline of the Protector General of the Western Regions

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**Abstract:** The Western Regions was the collective name for the areas west of the Yangguan and Yumen Passes during the Han Dynasty. The Protector General of the Western Regions was the official there. In ancient Chinese history, the establishment of the Protector General of the Western Regions represents the starting point of the Central Plains dynasties' control over the Western Regions. Although the timing of this Protector General's initial establishment is crucial, no consensus has been reached. This paper first enumerates three accounts in the *History of the Former Han Dynasty* regarding the establishment time of the Protector General of the Western Regions, then discusses the differing viewpoints of later scholars. Finally, based on a comprehensive analysis of historical and geographical information, the viewpoint that the Protector General of the Western Regions was established in the third year of the Shenjue Era (59 B.C.) is concluded.

**Keywords:** Protector General of the Western Regions; History of the former Han Dynasty; Shenjue era; Zheng Ji

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## 1. Background

The Western Regions (西域) was the collective name for the areas west of the Yangguan and Yumen Passes during the Han Dynasty. The Protector General of the Western Regions (西域都护) was the official responsible for governing and protecting the Western Regions at that time. The initial establishment timeline of the Protector General of the Western Regions is important in history, as it represents, to some extent, the starting point of the Central Plains dynasties' control over the Western Regions.

The primary historical sources regarding the Protector General of the Western Regions are mainly from the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*. However, in this book, different chapters tell slightly different stories about when the Protector General of the Western Regions was set up. These records seem to be contradictory. In addition to this classic book, the Juyan (居延) and Xuanquan (悬泉) Han slips, which were recently unearthed, contain some records related to the activities of the Protector General of the Western Regions, but do not provide clear evidence about its establishment time. Archaeological excavations have also been conducted on the ancient city in Xinjiang, which may have been the site of the Protectorate of the Western Regions, but no significant new archaeological discoveries have been made so far.

The issue of inconsistent records regarding the establishment timeline of the Protector General of the Western Regions in the *History of the Former Han Dynasty* is not a new topic. Since the Northern Song Dynasty, scholars have taken notice and engaged in textual research and debates on this matter. Currently, the academic community, especially textbook writers, predominantly uphold the mainstream view that the Protector General of the Western Regions was established in the **second** year of the **Shenjue** (神爵) Era (60 B.C.). Some scholars have chosen to set aside the controversy, such as Loewe (1986) and Bielenstein (1980), who both adopted the phrasing such as "the office of Protector General of the Western Regions was established 'in 60 or 59 B.C.," while also noting the sources of differing interpretations.

Despite some differing opinions, I have examined various historical and geographical records about the Former Han

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Dynasty and considered perspectives from later scholars. Based on this analysis, I conclude that the office of the Protector General of the Western Regions was first established in the third year of the Shenjue era (59 B.C.).

## 2. Three Accounts Regarding the Establishment Time of the Protector General of the Western Regions in the History of the Former Han Dynasty

The first account states that the Protector General of the Western Regions was initially established in the second year of the **Dijie** (地节) era (68 B.C.). The "History of the Former Han Dynasty: Tables of the Civil and Military Officials" (Ban Gu 班固, 2000) records: "The Protector General of the Western Regions was an additional official position, first established in the second year of Emperor Xuan's Dijie reign period." The "History of the Former Han Dynasty: Biographies of Fu, Chang, Zheng, Gan, Chen, and Duan" (Ban Gu, 2000) records: "From the Yuanshou (元狩) era (the reign title of Emperor Wu of Han), Zhang Qian (张骞) first opened up communication with the Western Regions. Until the Dijie era, Zheng Ji (郑吉) was appointed the title of Protector General. Corroborating the aforementioned account, the "History of the Former Han Dynasty: Biography of Feng Fengshi" (Ban Gu, 2000) records that states such as Shache (莎车) in the Western Regions launched rebellions along the southern route of the Tianshan Mountains and "Protector General Zheng Ji... captured their city." "It was the first year of **Yuankang** (元康)." The above text indicates that prior to the first year of Yuankang (65 B.C.), probably in the second year of Dijie (68 B.C.), Zheng Ji had already taken on the title of "Protector General."

The second statement indicates that the Protector General of the Western Regions was first established in the **second** year of the **Shenjue** era (60 B.C.). The "History of the Former Han Dynasty: Annals of Emperor Xuan" (Ban Gu, 2000) records: "In the autumn of the second year of Shenjue, the Xiongnu Rizhu King (日逐王) Xianxian Dan (先贤掸) led over ten thousand of his people to surrender. Shi (使) Protector General of the Western Regions and Cavalry Commandant (使都护西域骑都尉) Zheng Ji welcomed Rizhu, defeated the Jushi (车师) people, and both Rizhu and Zheng Ji were enfeoffed as marquises." According to this record, in the second year of Shenjue, Zheng Ji welcomed the Xiongnu Rizhu King who surrendered to the Han dynasty, and the title Zheng Ji used was "Protector General of the Western Regions and Commandant of Cavalry." This seems to suggest that prior to the second year of Shenjue, Zheng Ji had already held the position of "Protector General."

The third statement indicates that the Protector General of the Western Regions was first established in the **third** year of **Shenjue** (59 B.C.). The "History of the Former Han Dynasty: Treatise on the Western Regions" (Ban Gu, 2000) records that during the second year of Shenjue, when the Xiongnu were dealing with internal conflicts, King Rizhu rebelled against the Chanyu and surrendered to the Han. Zheng Ji, the Envoy Protecting the West of Shanshan (鄯善), welcomed them... This was the third year of Shenjue. After that time, Zheng Ji was appointed to oversee the Northern Route as well as the South Route, hence he got the title 'Protector General! The establishment of the Protector General began with Zheng Ji." In this historical record, "Protecting the West of Shanshan" refers to safeguarding the region west of the Shanshan Kingdom, which essentially corresponds to the southern route of the Silk Road during the Han Dynasty. The term "Protector General" signifies the protection of both the northern and southern routes (Xiao Chuo (萧绰), 2017), which was appointed in the third year of the Shenjue reign period.

## 3. Three Perspectives Among Scholars Across Different Dynasties Regarding the Establishment Timeline of the Protector General of the Western Regions

### (1) The establishment of the Protector General of the Western Regions lasted from the second year of Dijie to the second year of Shenjue (68 - 60 B.C.)

There was an 8-year difference between the second year of Dijie and the second year of the Shenjue reign period. Some scholars argue that the establishment of the title, initial appointment, and administrative governance of the Protector

General of the Western Regions were distinct historical events, occurring respectively from the Dijie to the Shenjue era. That is to say, this event lasted about 8 years. Viewpoints are as follows:

The "History of the Former Han Dynasty: Tables of the Civil and Military Officials" (Ban Gu, 2000) records that "the Protector General of the Western Regions was an additional official position, first established in the second year of Dijie." To explain the aforementioned records, Du You (杜佑) (2008) of the Tang Dynasty gave the statement: "probably as Cavalry Commanders (骑都尉) or Admonishing Officials (谏议大夫) were dispatched to oversee the thirty-six states of the Western Regions..., the Protecting role was added to the original official position. Zheng Ji was initially appointed to this role."

Li Bingquan (李炳泉) (2003) proposed that in its early stage, the Protector General of the Western Regions was an additional official position managed by the Cavalry Commandant (骑都尉) acting as an envoy, which later evolved into a formal official position. He believed "Envoy Protector of the Western Regions Cavalry Commandant (使都护西域骑都尉)" was the full title of the Protector General of the Western Regions. Li Dalong (李大龙) (1991) pointed out that the evolution process of the Protector General of the Western Regions' official position was "Envoy (使者) - Envoy Protector of the Southwestern Route beyond Shanshan (护鄯善以西南道使者) - Protector General of the Western Regions," with "Envoy" being the precursor to the Protector General of the Western Regions. Ha Jianhua (哈建华) (1983) believed that "when the Han dynasty dispatched Zheng Ji as the Emissary Commandant (使者校尉) to garrison Quli (渠犂)..., Zheng Ji held a low-ranking position (salary rank of 600 dan), merely acting concurrently as the Protector General while his official title remained Emissary Commandant."

The above records and discussions all emphasize that the Protector General of the Western Regions, established in the second year of Dijie, was of an "additional official" nature. It was assigned by the emperor to the Commandant of Cavalry to govern the Western Regions in the capacity of an envoy, indicating that the Protector General of the Western Regions at this time was a title attached to one's primary position, with specific responsibilities (Yang Yuanzhen (杨远楨), 2021). Later, during the governance of the Western Regions, it gradually evolved into an official position (Bian Runzi (卞润梓), 2024). The term "first established" in the literature can be understood as the initial emergence of the title "Protector General", rather than indicating that the administrative authority of "comprehensive guardianship" over the Western Regions had already been fully implemented.

## **(2) The Protector General of the Western Regions was first established in the second year of Shenjue (60 B.C.)**

The *History of the Former Han Dynasty* was completed during the Eastern Han Dynasty, after which Sima Guang (司马光) (1987) of the Northern Song Dynasty adopted the account of the second year of Shenjue (60 B.C.). The "Shenjue Second Year" entry in Volume 26 of *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance* states: "After Ji defeated Jushi and subjugated the Rizhu King, his prestige shook the Western Regions. He then took charge of the northwestern routes beyond Jushi, hence being titled Protector General. The establishment of the Protector General began with Ji. Ji thus governed the Western Regions and established a headquarters, with the emperor enfeoffing Ji as Marquis of Anyuan (安远侯)." Hu Sanxing (胡三省) from the Song - Yuan transition period first noted there were two accounts regarding the establishment date of the Protector General of the Western Regions. He believed "Dijie" was a textual error for "Shenjue," and argued that "The Tables of the Civil and Military Officials states: 'Protector General of the Western Regions, an additional post, was first established in the second year of Dijie'—evidently mistaking Shenjue for Dijie. The Treatise on the Western Regions also records 'the third year of Shenjue,' which is likewise erroneous." However, Hu Sanxing did not analyze the cause of the error, simply concluding it as a "misrecording".

Qian Daxin (钱大昕), a Qing Dynasty scholar, concurred with Hu Sanxing's viewpoint in his work *Textual Research on the Twenty-Two Histories*, stating that "the 'third year of Shenjue' was a textual error for 'the second year of Shenjue'" (Bian Runzi, 2024). Xu Song (徐松) (1937) also held this view, and likewise believed that the Protector General of the Western Regions was established in the "second year of Shenjue". Due to his exile to Xinjiang (新疆) during the Jiaqing (嘉庆) reign of the Qing Dynasty, Xu Song had the opportunity to conduct on-site investigations of various regions around the

Tianshan Mountains. Therefore, his viewpoints were relatively influential.

Subsequently, with the support of scholars such as Wang Xianqian (王先谦) and Zeng Wenwu (曾问吾), the second year of Shenjue (60 B.C.) became the traditional mainstream view regarding the establishment time of the Protector General of the Western Regions (Bian Runzi, 2024).

### **(3) The Protector General of the Western Regions was first established in the third year of Shenjue (59 B.C.)**

Li Dalong (1991) believed that "Zheng Ji welcoming the Rizhu King began in the second year of Shenjue, but the conclusion of the entire event, namely the enfeoffment of Xianxian Dan and Zheng Ji, occurred in the third year of the Shenjue." He declared, "placing the entire handling of the event in the second year of the Shenjue was an error." However, Li Dalong has not analyzed why it can be determined that Zheng Ji's enfeoffment occurred in that year. Ha Jianhua (1983) believed that the mainstream view about "the second year of the Shenjue" was debatable. He explained, since the territory of the Rizhu King was located at the southern edge of the Xiongnu's right division, and his journey should have proceeded from the south of the right division, passing through the rear and front regions of Jushi. If the Rizhu King had departed in early October, he would have had to travel over 9,000 li to reach Chang'an (长安). Whether he could have arrived in Chang'an by the end of the second year of Shenjue is highly questionable. He questioned whether Zheng Ji could arrive in Chang'an by the end of the second year of Shenjue, but did not conduct further analysis or argumentation.

## **4. An Analysis on the Establishment Time of the Protector General of Western Regions**

Although there are discrepancies in the timing of the establishment of the Protector General of the Western Regions across different chapters of the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, several points remain undisputed: the establishment of the Protector General was related to the surrender of the Xiongnu's Rizhu King to the Han Dynasty and Zheng Ji's role in welcoming him; the Protector General was established during the reign of Emperor Xuan of Han (74 B.C. - 49 B.C.); Zheng Ji served as its first chief administrator; following its establishment, the Han Dynasty exercised governance over the Western Regions, while Xiongnu influence withdrew from the area.

Next, I'll look at the timeline and location details of how the Protector General of the Western Regions was set up. To do that, I'll go over Zheng Ji's life and what he achieved, especially focusing on how he helped escort the Xiongnu Rizhu King back to the Han Dynasty.

### **(1) During the Dijie and Yuankang, the Han Dynasty had not yet achieved control over the northern route of the Western Regions, lacking the conditions for establishing a Protector General over the Western Regions**

The establishment of the Protector General of the Western Regions signified that the Western Regions became an integral part of the Western Han Dynasty. From then on, the central government could exercise jurisdiction over the Western Regions, including dispatching officials, setting up administrative offices, and promulgating laws and decrees. Therefore, the significance of studying the initial establishment time of the Protector General of the Western Regions lies not only in verifying when official titles such as "Protector" and "Protector of the Western Regions Cavalry Commandant" emerged, but more importantly in determining from which point onward the Western Han Dynasty exerted actual control over the Western Regions.

The routes from Dunhuang (敦煌) of Han to the Western Regions included only the southern route along the northern foothills of the Nan Shan (Kunlun Mountains) and the northern route along the southern foothills of the Bei Shan (Tianshan Mountains), known as the Southern and Northern Silk Roads respectively (Hejian Hexing (鹤间和幸), 2014). Before the second year of Dijie, the Han Dynasty had basically gained control over the Southern Route, while the Northern Route remained inaccessible due to some states still being subordinate to the Xiongnu (Xiao Chuo, 2017).

The "History of the Former Han Dynasty: Treatise on the Western Regions" (Ban Gu, 2000) records: "In the second year of the Dijie, the Han Dynasty dispatched the Gentleman of the Palace (侍郎) Zheng Ji and Commandant (校尉) Sima Xi (司

马熹) to lead pardoned homo sapiens to cultivate fields in Quli, accumulate grain, with the intention of attacking Jushi." Jushi was located in the Turpan Basin of Xinjiang and served as a strategic passage connecting the northern and southern regions of the Tianshan Mountains. At this time, Zheng Ji's mission was to lead troops in cultivating military farms at Quli, with the aim of protecting the southern route of the Silk Road west of the Shanshan Kingdom, further to conquer Jushi, and to strive for northward expansion. Judging from the map, Quli is relatively close to Jushi, making it a suitable location for garrison farming and creating favorable conditions for capturing Jushi. Through the above analysis, it can be seen that in the second year of Dijie, the Han Dynasty intended to attack Jushi but had not yet launched large-scale military operations, and the Xiongnu still maintained control over the northern route of the Western Regions.

From the autumn of the second year of Dijie to the Yuankang period, the Han Dynasty engaged in repeated fierce struggles with the Xiongnu over Jushi on the basis of military-agricultural colonies. All parties engaged in mutual attacks, and the Han Dynasty's dominant position in the Western Regions was not yet firmly established. Since the Han Dynasty had not yet fully gained control over the Northern Route of the Western Regions during the Dijie and Yuankang reign periods, establishing a nominal title like "Protector General of the Western Regions" would have held no practical administrative function. Therefore, it was impossible for the Han Dynasty to formally establish the Protector General of the Western Regions at that time.

## **(2) The surrender of the Rizhu King during Shenjue facilitated the Han Dynasty's comprehensive control over the Western Regions**

From the reign of Emperor Wu to Emperor Xuan, the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu engaged in "five battles for Jushi," with victories and defeats on both sides. Neither party gained an overwhelming advantage. An important historical event that led to the Han Dynasty's capture of Jushi occurred after internal turmoil within the Xiongnu, when the Rizhu King surrendered to the Han Dynasty. Zheng Ji really made a difference by dealing with the situation in the right way. Regarding this event, apart from the aforementioned records in the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, the timing documented in the following materials is largely consistent, further corroborating that it occurred during Shenjue rather than the Dijie or Yuankang periods.

First, the "Biographies of Fu, Chang, Zheng, Gan, Chen, and Duan" in the *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Ban Gu, 2000) stated: "During the Shenjue period, the Xiongnu fell into turmoil. The Rizhu King, Xianxian Dan, sought to surrender to the Han and sent envoys to communicate with Ji. Ji mobilized 50,000 troops from the states of Quli and Kucha (龟兹) to welcome the Rizhu King.... After Ji defeated Jushi and subdued the Rizhu King, his prestige shook the Western Regions. He thus took charge of the routes northwest of Jushi, earning the title of Protector General. The establishment of the Protector General began with Ji."

Second, the "History of the Former Han Dynasty: Treatise on the Western Regions" (Ban Gu, 2000) had another record: "Upon the death of Chanyu (Xulü Quanqu (虚闾权渠)), in that year, the second year of Shenjue... the Rizhu King... immediately led his tens of thousands of cavalymen to submit to Han."

## **(3) The establishment of the Protector General of the Western Regions was completed in the third year of Shenjue (59 B.C.), not the second year (60 B.C.)**

Let us review the process of the Rizhu King's surrender to the Han Dynasty from the perspective of historical geography, combining the geographical background with historical phenomena.

In September of the second year of Shenjue, internal strife broke out among the Xiongnu. The following month, King Rizhu Xianxian Dan sent an envoy to Zheng Ji, expressing his intention to surrender. Thereafter, Zheng Ji dispatched fifty thousand troops to welcome them, and Xianxian Dan led twelve thousand people to surrender.

Around that time, Zheng Ji was located near Jushi. According to the *History of the Former Han Dynasty: Treatise on the Western Regions* (Ban Gu, 2000), it is recorded that "The former state of Jushi, with its capital at Jiaohe (交河) City... was 8,150 li from Chang'an." The distance from the agricultural colonies established by Zheng Ji in Quli and the Jushi region

to Chang'an of the Western Han Dynasty was vast. Regarding the precise distance of one li during the Han Dynasty, Chen Mengjia (陈梦家) (1996) believed it to be equivalent to 417.53 meters. Assuming an estimation of 8,000 li from Quli to Chang'an, with each li being 400 meters, completing this journey would require traversing a geographical distance of approximately 3,000 kilometers. Then how much time would it take to complete this journey during the Han Dynasty?

The Han Dynasty bamboo slips unearthed in 1991 at the Xuanquanzhi site in Dunhuang indicated that in November of the second year of Shenjue, Dunhuang Xuanquan stable assistant (厩佐) named as Guangde (广德) and other officials provided meals for the Rizhu King when he passed through Guangzhi (广至) County. This suggested that the Rizhu King and Zheng Ji set out in October and arrived at Dunhuang in November. The journey from Jushi to Dunhuang took approximately one to two months (Ma Li (马丽), 2024). Then, the distance from Dunhuang to Chang'an was approximately 4,300 li, roughly half the journey from Chang'an to Jushi. Under normal circumstances during the Han Dynasty, officials on diplomatic missions, with vehicles provided by post stations along the way, would take about 47 days to travel from Chang'an to Dunhuang (Dunhuang Academy, n.d.). Assuming the marching difficulty is roughly the same, it would also take the Rizhu King and Zheng Ji one to two months to travel from Dunhuang to Chang'an.

In reality, under normal circumstances, a large group of people moves at a slower pace than a single light cavalryman. For instance, during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, the marriage delegation of Princess Jieyou (解忧) set out from Chang'an and, after a journey lasting half a year, finally reached the Wusun Kingdom in the Western Regions (Ma Li (马丽), 2024). Considering that the King of Rizhu brought over ten thousand people to the Han Dynasty, and Zheng Ji also led his own troops, even if some members dropped out along the way, this still constituted a massive contingent. Arrangements for provisions, supplies, and accommodations along the route would have been extensive, making it impossible for the procession to move quickly. The journey would have taken no less than three months.

Based on the above analysis, it can be basically determined that the process of Zheng Ji welcoming the Rizhu King's submission to the Han Dynasty would span from the second (60 B.C.) to the third (59 B.C.) year of Shenjue. During that period, a series of procedures, including resettlement, court audience, and official appointments, would be completed. I believe the records in "History of the Former Han Dynasty: Tables of Meritorious Officials of Emperors Jing, Wu, Zhao, Xuan, and Yuan" (Ban Gu, 2000) regarding Anyuan Miao Marquis (安远繆侯) Zheng Ji, who was "enfeoffed on the Renxu (壬戌) day of the fourth month in the third year of Shenjue," and Guide Jing Marquis (归德靖侯) Xianxian Dan, who was "enfeoffed on the Wuxu (戊戌) day of the fourth month," are reasonable.

Then, how to explain the widely known record discussed before: "the second year (of Shenjue) ... autumn... Shi (使) Protector General of the Western Regions and Cavalry Commandant Zheng Ji to welcome Rizhu, defeated Jushi, and all were enfeoffed as marquises"? This is the main source supporting the account of "the second year of Shenjue (60 B.C.)."

I partially agree with Li Bingquan (2003) 's interpretation, who believed that the account of "welcoming the Rizhi and conquering Jushi" was intended to explain the reason for Zheng Ji's enfeoffment, while "Shi (使) Protector General of the Western Regions and Cavalry Commandant" was Zheng Ji's official position at the time of his enfeoffment. In other words, this refers to Zheng Ji's current position when discussing his past deeds, rather than indicating that his official position during the "welcoming of Rizhi" was "Shi (使) Protector General of the Western Regions and Cavalry Commandant." The difference between my opinion and that of Li Bingquan (2003) lies in the authoritative expression recorded in Emperor Xuan of Han's edict in the "Biographies of Fu, Chang, Zheng, Gan, Chen, and Duan" in the History of the Former Han Dynasty (Ban Gu, 2000), which states "Protector General of the Western Regions and Commandant of Cavalry Zheng Ji." This indicates that the official title of the Protector General of the Western Regions should be "Protector General of the Western Regions and Commandant of Cavalry," without the character "Shi (使)." The additional character "Shi (使)" before "Protector General of the Western Regions Cavalry Commandant" may not be a noun meaning envoy, but rather a verb meaning "to dispatch" or "to appoint."

It is noted that in the second year of Shenjue, during the month of April, when Zheng Ji was enfeoffed as a marquis, he was in Chang'an. To fulfill the duties of the Protector General of the Western Regions, he needed to return

to the Western Regions and carry out tasks such as site selection and construction for the administrative office of the Protectorate. According to the records (Ban Gu, 2000) stating that "the Protector General governed in the Wulei (( 乌垒 ) City, which was 2,738 li from Yangguan Pass, close to the agricultural officials of Quli, with fertile land and located at the center of the Western Regions; hence the Protector General governed there," the office was in Wulei. Wulei was located at the midpoint of the northern route of the Western Regions during the Han Dynasty (Xiao Chuo, 2017). The journey from Chang'an to Wulei would also take several months. If the establishment of the Protectorate of the Western Regions is taken as the initial appointment time for the Protector General of the Western Regions, the argument for the third year of Shenjue (59 B.C.) is more reasonable.

## 5. Conclusion

I believe that the journey of the King of Rizhu and Zheng Ji to the capital of Han and their subsequent conferment of titles occurred between the autumn of the second year of Shenjue (60 B.C.) and the spring of the third year (59 B.C.), rather than being completed within the same year. The second year of Shenjue marks the starting point of the event, while the third year of Shenjue signifies its conclusion. It is more accurate and meaningful to consider the third year of Shenjue, when Zheng Ji was appointed as a marquis and authorized by Emperor Xuan of Han to administer the Western Regions, as the establishment date of the Protector-General of the Western Regions.

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