

China versus the Barbarians

THE FIRST CENTURY OF HAN-XIONGNU RELATIONS

By Jonathan Markley

The Han-Xiongnu relationship is especially important in world history because it is the first time a major steppe power and a major agriculturalist civilization had extensive contact and conflict with each other. Before the Huns, before the Mongols, there were the Xiongnu.

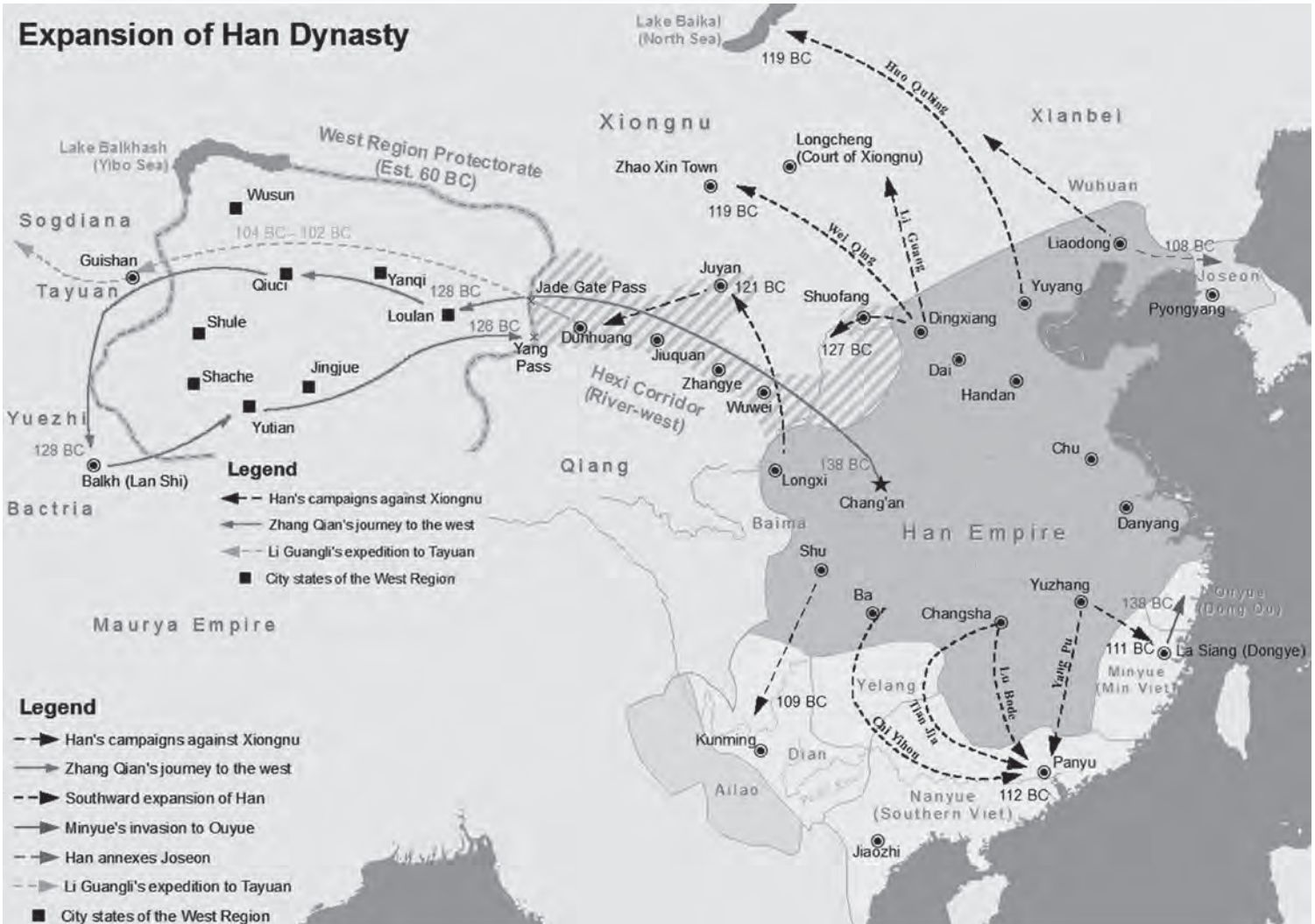
World history textbooks devote considerable space to the rise of agriculture. Basic agriculture emerged roughly 10,000 years ago, after the end of the last Ice Age. After thousands of years of development, agricultural states began to emerge in Egypt, the Near East, the Indus Valley, and China. Eventually, empires would emerge, with a significant period of consolidation following the age of Alexander the Great in the West and the Warring States period in China. The final stage of this would be the rise of the Roman Empire and its direct contemporaries in the East, the Qin and Han dynasties.

Less familiar, but following a similar track, is the story of pastoralist societies. Pastoralism also arose from the age of domestication, but while the agricultural civilizations chiefly depended on domesticated grain crops (like wheat, barley, and rice), pastoralist societies gained the majority of their calories from animal products (including meat and milk products). Pastoralism emerged in the Russian Steppe, stretching from the Ukraine (north of the Black Sea) to Central Asia. Early farming communities brought domesticated cows and sheep into the region, and archaeological evidence shows there were many marginal agricultural settlements, but the meeting between Eastern European hunter-gatherers and Middle Eastern farmers led to the emergence of a new pattern. With the invention of the wheel and domestication of the horse, mobile herding societies came to dominate the region. Agricultural societies withered and then mostly disappeared. Herds of sheep and cows could live much more readily in the harsh conditions with long winters and short growing seasons, and humans who could follow the herds to new grazing lands enjoyed a much more successful existence.

While the story of agricultural societies was generally one of gradual consolidation, with city-states gradually giving way to multiple city-states and ultimately the emergence of centralized

Terracotta Army. Part of the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor and a UNESCO World Heritage Site located in Xian, China. It is likely that the Qin Dynasty were partly responsible for the formation of the Xiongnu. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by DnDavis.





Map showing the expansion of the Han Dynasty in second century BCE. Note: While Zhao Xin Town and Longcheng are known to be in Xiongnu territory, the true location of both is unknown. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/3c5skhtv>.

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empires, pastoralist societies tended to stay more dispersed. They were nomadic and therefore difficult to conquer. Unlike farmers, the day-to-day existence of pastoralists involved riding horses, archery, hunting, and living off the land, all skills to make them their formidable warriors. If a farmer's land is conquered, so is the household, but herders moved animals to new lands. Nomadic herders only occasionally formed powerful coalitions, but if this process occurred, agriculturalist neighbors could be seriously threatened. The

Scythians, for example, presented great challenges to the classical Greeks.

The formation of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE) and the Xiongnu tribal confederacy (209 BCE) occurred almost simultaneously. Liu Bang established the Han Dynasty in the wake of the collapse of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE). It's likely that Qin rulers were also responsible for the formation of the Xiongnu. In reunifying China, the Qin defeated several northern Chinese states, seized massive amounts of grazing lands, and improved existing defensive walls into what later would become the Great Wall. This security threat probably drove scattered pastoralist nomadic tribes to create a confederation under a strong chieftain, known as the *Chanyu*. The Xiongnu language has never been translated, but the title "Chanyu" was likely similar to that taken by the great Mongol ruler Temüjin, who took the title "Genghis Khan" or "Universal Ruler" after he united the disparate pastoralist tribes of the north.

Inevitably, the two sides clashed. Liu Bang worked to control former Qin territories, and at the same time, the Xiongnu moved to reoccupy their lost lands. In the next century, the Han Dynasty tried many different means of coping with northern nomads, including offensive and defensive wars,

paying tribute, marrying Chinese princesses to Xiongnu rulers, and utilizing border markets and other rewards to encourage Xiongnu defections and cultural assimilation. Varying degrees of success notwithstanding, these tactics ultimately did not bring Chinese security. Xiongnu chiefs had less control over subordinate tribes than the centralized Chinese state over its subjects and could not stop raids into Chinese territory even if they tried. For the next 2,000 years, different Chinese dynasties would experiment with various policies to stop the people north of the Great Wall but ultimately failed.

The first major clash occurred when Liu Bang led an army to the north in 200 BCE. He was surrounded on a hill near Pingcheng and was forced to negotiate with the Xiongnu. Two years later, his representative formalized a peace agreement, which the Chinese called *Heqin* (“Peace and Family Relations”). The Chinese would pay annual tribute (cotton, silk, alcohol, grain, and other foods) and also send a Chinese princess to marry the Chanyu. They hoped the Chinese princess would have a son who would become Chanyu and who would owe allegiance to China. This never happened.

The agreement did not bring peace, and Liu Bang was forced to continue to campaign in the north, but after he died in 195 BCE, there was a period of stability in the time dominated by his widow, the Empress Dowager Lü (d. 180 BCE), but this was because the Xiongnu were occupied fighting the Yuezhi, nomadic rivals to their west, not because of Chinese diplomacy. Once their conquests were complete, they began to probe the Chinese frontier from their newly acquired lands, launching several attacks in the final years of Empress Lü.

Emperor Wen ascended the throne and soon began to experience Xiongnu problems. In 177 BCE, the Wise Prince of the Right (a Xiongnu noble) launched a major invasion. Internal rebellion prevented a Chinese military response, and the raiders withdrew with many prisoners and livestock. This led to a round of negotiations between the Chinese and Xiongnu rulers. The Chanyu insisted that the Wise Prince of the Right had launched the attack without informing him, providing an example of the loose structure of the Xiongnu confederacy. However, the Chanyu also blamed the Chinese for starting the conflict by insulting the prince and encroaching on his lands. He suggested a return to the old *Heqin* system: “If the emperor does not want the Xiongnu near the frontier, then he should also order his officials and people to keep a good distance from it.”¹

Emperor Wen denied responsibility—“those who break off relations are always on the Xiongnu side”—but nevertheless agreed to a resumption of the old treaty.

The Chanyu Modu died soon after, and a new Chinese princess was sent as a bride for his successor, the Chanyu Jiyu. A eunuch, Zhonghang Yue, was sent with the princess, despite his bitter objections. As soon as he arrived, he switched sides and began advising the Xiongnu ruler. There is a long narrative describing what happened in the main ancient Chinese source the *Shiji*, written by Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BCE).² The historian describes a debate with a Chinese ambassador who criticized Xiongnu customs. Zhonghang gave a spirited defense of the Xiongnu and criticized his former homeland. The key difference between nomadic pastoralists and an agricultural civilization is highlighted, as is the looser government/social structure:

*Zhonghang Yue said, “the Xiongnu eat the meat of their domestic animals . . . and wear their skins; the domestic animals eat grass and drink water, and they move around according to the season. When they are disturbed, they ride out and shoot arrows, and when they are at peace, they are happy and have no problems. Their rules are loose and easy to follow. Ruler and subject have an easy relationship, and governing the nation is like governing a single person . . . [Compare this with these Chinese, who] use their strength in ploughing and tending mulberry trees to clothe and feed themselves. They build city walls to be prepared. When the people face disturbances, they are not used to fighting, and when the crisis is over, they are too tired to work. Ha! The [Chinese] live in dirt houses and get all dressed up, but what good does it do them?”*³

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Portrait of Liu Bang, founder of the Han Dynasty.
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/2jxnvmmx>.



Emperor Wen is seated and listens intently to his official minister Yuan Ang at Shanglin Garden. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/7dcaey42>.

The Kul Tigin inscriptions from the Second Kok Turk Empire (680–744 CE) are a rare primary source from the pastoralists themselves.

Remarkably, there is a parallel from the Western world. In 448 BCE, the Eastern Roman Empire sent an embassy to the court of Attila the Hun. Priscus wrote an account of his experiences during this mission, describing meeting a man who looked like a Hun but spoke like a Roman. Priscus discovered that he was once a wealthy Roman merchant who had been captured and taken as a slave by the Huns. He had fought for his Hunnic master, Onegesius, won his freedom, and now felt that his life as a Hun was better than it had been when he lived in the Roman Empire. When Priscus objected, the former merchant responded that although the Roman government/social structure was overly complex, it was impossible for a normal person to get justice through the Roman courts.⁴

The parallel example is interesting, but there appears to be more of an emphasis in the case of the Chinese and Xiongnu on economics. Zhonghang Yue also advised the Chanyu against becoming too reliant on Chinese goods:

The size of the Xiongnu's horde cannot equal the population of one Chinese district. What makes you strong is that your food and clothing are different, and you don't rely on anything from the Chinese. But if you become dependent on Chinese goods, and copy their customs . . . you risk being absorbed by them.

The warning was a timely one, because the Chinese were looking to culturally assimilate the Xiongnu using border markets and soft diplomacy. In 162 BCE, Emperor Wen issued an edict proclaiming a new age of Chinese–Xiongnu relations: “I have not been able to spread virtue afar. This has caused some peoples outside our border to be restless . . . Year after year the Xiongnu have ravaged the frontier and killed many officers and commoners.”⁵

When reading documents from different cultures and time periods, it is important to remember that words and concepts can mean very different things than would first be assumed by a modern reader. An adviser to Emperor Wen called Jia Yi spelled out what was meant by a foreign policy based on “virtue” in his book *Xin Shu (New Writings)*.

He recommended a change in policy, away from Heqin (marriage alliance) to one based on culturally undermining the Xiongnu confederacy. He called his new policy the “Three Demonstrations and the Five Baits”:⁶

If you follow my policy, then distrust will grow among the Xiongnu . . . The nobles will look at the Chanyu as though he is a vicious tiger or wolf, and they will come south to China like little children returning to their mother. When their warriors see their own leaders, it will seem that they are facing a fierce enemy, and they will turn towards the south and will come to China like water running downhill. This will cause the Chanyu to lose his ministers and people. Will he not suffer, and thus be cowed, and ask to submit? This is what is called “striving for virtue.”

Emperor Wen’s focus on virtue in foreign relations did not refer to simply being a good person or being nice to people as a way to achieve peace. China still uses such policies today, referring to it as “soft power” diplomacy. Jia Yi went on, describing exactly how his application of “virtue” would defeat the Xiongnu:

The Triumph of Virtue

If the Xiongnu see through the plan . . . there are several solutions. With regards to frontier markets, their cunning won't help them, and they will yearn for the markets. Your Majesty . . . can promise the Xiongnu large markets . . . There will be so many Xiongnu visitors flocking through the narrow passes that we will have to chisel them open . . . Give generously to them . . . and the many bribes will make them reliant. They will admire and be grateful to China. . . Showing our splendor is a means of beckoning their people. In a matter of three to five years the Xiongnu can be obliterated. This is called “the triumph of virtue.”

There is a common misconception that the Han Dynasty established border markets because of



Photo montage of a Kul Tigin stone pillar in a Mongolian grassland.
Monument photo source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/35cnvu8x>.
Background image source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/p95vp4tz>.
Montage by Willa Davis.

Xiongnu demands for Chinese goods, which has grown into the “trade or raid hypothesis.” Basically, this idea states that the Xiongnu needed Chinese goods, and if they could not get them by trading, they would get them by raiding. The assumption is that Xiongnu invasions of Chinese occurred because they could not survive without their agricultural products. In fact, the Xiongnu usually took livestock and prisoners, and almost never took grain, etc. The border markets were a Chinese idea aimed at luring the Xiongnu closer to culturally assimilate them. Jia Yi himself compared his policy to a Chinese device, the *yao chan*, in which a flame was burned to lure cicadas (i.e., in English idiom, they would be attracted “like moths to a flame”).

This formed the basis of much future Chinese diplomacy with the steppe peoples, and at least some of them would come to see through this Chinese stratagem. Most pastoralist peoples were illiterate, and we seldom get direct evidence of what they thought. The Kul Tigin inscriptions from the Second Kok Turk Empire (680–744 CE) are a rare primary source from the pastoralists themselves. They are inscribed on stone pillars sticking out of the surrounding grasslands, written in a runic script.

On one of these stone pillars, their chieftain warned against Chinese schemes:

The words of the Chinese people are sweet and silk of the Chinese people is soft. They attract remote people, luring them [closer]. . . . When the Chinese have settled remote people nearby, they devise schemes to create discontent If a man turns against them, they show no mercy towards his family, his people, nor even towards babes in the cradle. In this way, enticed by the sweet words and soft silk of the Chinese, many of you Turk people perished Ill-intentioned people give counsel in this way, saying, ‘If you are far from the Chinese people, they give you poor quality silk; if you are near, they give you fine quality silk.’ In this way, ignorant people were taken in, moved near the Chinese people, and many of you perished.⁷

A common assumption is that the Chinese wished pastoralist peoples to stay far away from the Great Wall, but in fact, Chinese policy was often aimed at inducing them to come closer and to become dependent on Chinese goods. The Chinese themselves came to refer to “cooked” versus “raw” barbarians. The “cooked” ones had been partially assimilated and could be dealt with more easily. The “raw” barbarians were those who had avoided this fate and thus were far more difficult to handle.

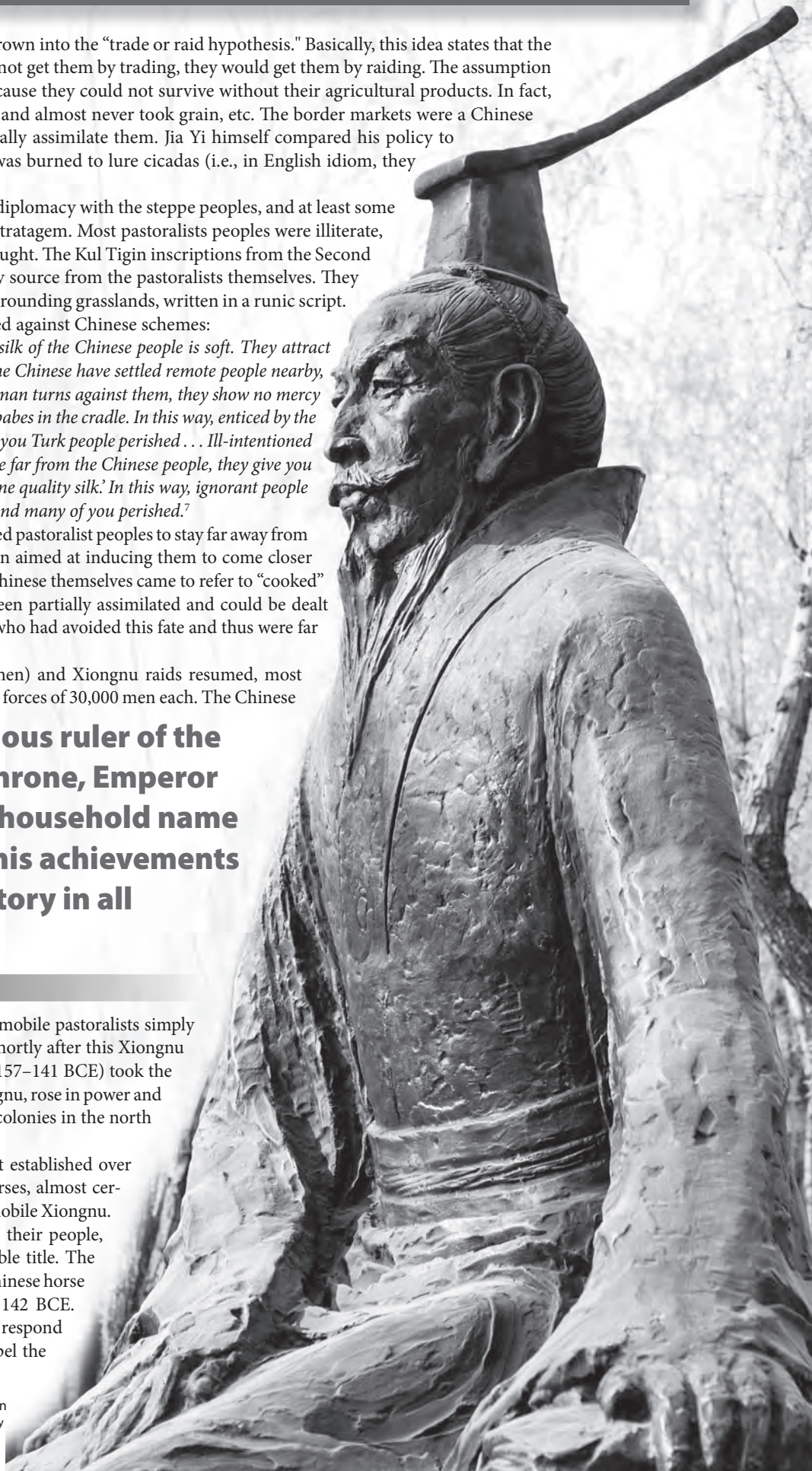
A new Chanyu came to power (Chanyu Junchen) and Xiongnu raids resumed, most notably a major incursion in 158 BCE involving two forces of 30,000 men each. The Chinese

Shortly after, the most famous ruler of the Han Dynasty came to the throne, Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE). He is a household name in China today, known for his achievements in expanding Chinese territory in all directions.

put six armies into the field to resist them, but the mobile pastoralists simply withdrew before the Chinese could engage them. Shortly after this Xiongnu invasion, Emperor Wen died and Emperor Jing (r. 157–141 BCE) took the throne. Chao Cuo, who advocated fighting the Xiongnu, rose in power and influence, and he advised the emperor to establish colonies in the north to help defend the frontier.

In the late 150s BCE, the imperial government established over thirty horse studs in the north to breed cavalry horses, almost certainly for fighting against the mounted and highly mobile Xiongnu. In 147 BCE, seven Xiongnu princes defected with their people, and each noble was given lands and a Chinese noble title. The Xiongnu attacked again in 144 BCE, targeting the Chinese horse studs, killing 2,000 Chinese troops, and again in 142 BCE. The Chinese horse breeding enabled the Chinese to respond more swiftly, sending a large body of cavalry to repel the attack, but unrest continued.

The statue of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. Source: ©123rf stock images. By wangdu88.



Shortly after, the most famous ruler of the Han Dynasty came to the throne, Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE). He is a household name in China today, known for his achievements in expanding Chinese territory in all directions. Despite this, his initial policy was to avoid conflict with the Xiongnu. He opened his father's horse pastures to the public (thereby reducing the breeding of military horses), and in 135 BCE, when there was a formal request from the Xiongnu to renew the peace treaty, he agreed.

Then, in 134 BCE, Wang Hui, a minister who had strongly opposed renewing the treaty, proposed a plan to the emperor. Normally when Xiongnu forces invaded in the empire, they would withdraw before a Chinese army could be mobilized and sent to engage them. Wang Hui proposed a method

Emperor Wu traveled to the northern frontier in person in 110 BCE and reviewed a cavalry force of 180,000. He sent envoys to the Chanyu, challenging him either to come south and fight or submit to Chinese authority.

to catch the Xiongnu within Chinese territory and to force them into a decisive battle. He would send an agent to the Xiongnu who would promise to kill Chinese officials at a northern city called Mayi and allow the Xiongnu to capture it. The plan was put into operation in 133 BCE, and he signaled to the Chanyu that it was time to attack. In the meantime, the Chinese positioned several hundred thousand troops who were planning to lie in wait until their enemies captured Mayi, and then they would close the escape routes, trapping the Chanyu and his forces. The plan almost worked. The Chanyu invaded China heading for Mayi. However, interrogations of a Chinese prisoner revealed the plan, and he was able to withdraw before the Chinese could close the trap. Wang Hui, the mastermind behind the plan, was forced to commit suicide.

The Mayi ambush campaign was a defensive operation that depended on the willingness of the Xiongnu to invade. The true turning point came in 129 BCE, when the Han first attacked the nomads in their own territory. Four Chinese columns of 10,000 cavalry each rode out hoping to catch the Xiongnu near the border markets. One force succeeded in killing a few hundred enemy, one achieved nothing, and the other two were heavily defeated and their commanders captured.

Full-scale war continued. Large Xiongnu attacks into China inflicted serious losses, but in 124 BCE, a large Chinese expeditionary force under General Wei Qing attacked a major Xiongnu force while they were encamped for the night and inflicted a significant defeat. Despite the war, the policy of encouraging Xiongnu defections was still in force, and in 121 BCE, 30,000 to 40,000 Xiongnu crossed over to the Chinese side. Their main chieftain, called the Hunye prince, was made marquis of Tayin and

given a large fief with the right to collect tax from 10,000 households. The defectors were broken up into five groups, each granted semiautonomous “dependent state” status, and sent to garrison the northern frontier, fighting on the Chinese side for years to come.

These reverses caused the Chanyu to withdraw his people away from the frontier, going north of the Gobi Desert. Emperor Wu sought a decisive outcome to the war, but this was impossible if the Xiongnu refused to engage. In 119 BCE, a large army was mobilized with a massive supply train to allow the Chinese to take the war to the Xiongnu. Faced with this challenge, the Chanyu gave the Chinese what they had wanted so badly: a decisive battle. Chinese accounts claim that they killed or captured 19,000 Xiongnu, but though the Chanyu was wounded, he escaped, denying the Chinese the resolution they needed. A Chinese cavalry column marched farther north, claiming to kill or capture an improbable 70,000 men, but still the campaign failed in its ultimate objective to win the war. Historian Sima Qian, an opponent of the war policy, went out of his way to emphasize the huge cost of this expedition. He claimed that the Chinese lost 110,000 horses and tens of thousands of men,



Rubbing detail of chariots and horses in Stone Chamber 1 of the Wu Family Shrines in Shandong Province, China, dated to the second century AD, made during the Eastern Han Dynasty. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/zr54ve>.

and that the cost was so huge that it caused an economic crisis. The currency had to be reformed, and government-monopoly control over salt and iron was introduced for the first time.

After a quiet period, Emperor Wu traveled to the northern frontier in person in 110 BCE and reviewed a cavalry force of 180,000. He sent envoys to the Chanyu, challenging him either to come south and fight or submit to Chinese authority. The Chanyu ignored him and stayed far away, but in the following years, he sent envoys asking for a return of the old treaty relations: peace in return for Chinese tribute payments. The Chinese demanded that the Chanyu send his son and heir hostages, but he refused. Negotiations broke down in 107 BCE when a Xiongnu envoy died of natural causes while he was in China and the Chanyu blamed the Chinese for his death.

Following a severe winter in 103 BCE, a Xiongnu noble offered to defect with his people, and the Chinese sent a large force to meet them. The Chanyu discovered the plot and killed the noble before he could defect. He surrounded and destroyed the Chinese army, capturing the Chinese general. The following year saw some of the biggest Xiongnu attacks ever recorded on China, with two Xiongnu columns penetrating deep into Chinese territory, capturing thousands of prisoners.

By this stage, the constant campaigning in the north had caused a chronic shortage of horses for Chinese forces. In 99 BCE, General Li Ling attempted to find a way to engage the Xiongnu without cavalry. He took an infantry force equipped with double-shot crossbows and many wagons filled with crossbow bolts. Every time Xiongnu forces tried to engage them, they “circled the wagons” and held the nomads off with crossbow fire. However, they ran out of ammunition before they could get back to Chinese territory, and due to a miscommunication, a Chinese relief force never arrived. The Chinese troops were told “every man for himself,” and only a few made it back. General Li himself was captured and spent the rest of his life among the Xiongnu. Sima Qian defended General Li against criticism at court, but this was interpreted as a criticism of the emperor. The historian was castrated, giving him a strong reason to be biased against Emperor Wu and his handling of the Xiongnu.

Conflict on the northern frontier would never cease. There simply was no policy solution. Different Chinese rulers and different Chinese dynasties would implement the different policies of the first century of the Han Dynasty. They would try peace treaties and tribute payments, they would try cultural assimilation policies, and they would try outright war, but none would ever achieve a lasting resolution. Even when the Xiongnu ultimately faded from power, new nomadic coalitions would emerge to replace them. In due course, some of these coalitions, such as the Mongols and the Manchus, would succeed in conquering all of China, and this was the only time that peace ever came to the northern frontier. ■

NOTES


1. Sima Qian, *Shiji (Treatise on the Xiongnu)* 110.2896. All quotes from Sima Qian are translations by the author.
2. Sima Qian wrote an encyclopedic history of China, and his work often describes the same topic from multiple dif-

ferent points of view, which sometimes contradict each other. For example, Liu Bang’s first clash with the Xiongnu at Pingcheng is described in nine different chapters, and the versions are so different from each other as to make it nearly impossible to be certain what occurred. See Jonathan Markley, “Gaozu Confronts the Chanyu: The Han Dynasty’s First Clash with the Xiongnu,” in *Silk Roads Studies*, ed. Craig Benjamin and Samuel Lieu, vol. 4 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 131–140.

3. *Shiji* 110.2899–2900.
4. For the full account by Priscus, see “*Excerpta de legationibus Romanorum ad gentes*,” in R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. 2 (Cairns: Liverpool, 1983).
5. *Shiji*, “Basic Annals of Emperor Wen,” 10.431.
6. Jia Yi, *Xin Shu*, book 3. All translations from Jia Yi are original translations by the author. For a full translation of the full passage concerning Xiongnu policy, see Jonathan Markley, *Peace and Peril, Sima Qian’s Portrayal of Han Xiongnu Relations* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2016), 250–260.
7. “Orkhon Monuments: The Kul Tigin Inscription,” in *An Anthology of Turkish Literature*, trans. Kurtuluş Öztöpcü and Sherry Smith-Williams, ed. Kemal Silay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 1–10.

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