

The Unprecedented Peace: Power Dynamics Between the Han Dynasty and Xiongnu from the 100 BCE to 100 AD

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ABSTRACT

After years of military conquest with a huge sacrifice, the Han Emperor Wu Di finally defeated the Xiongnu, ending the conflicts that lasted several hundreds of years between the two. After Emperor Xuan Di inherited the throne, how the Han should maintain the peace, and prevent the surrendered enemy from reviving one day and inciting wars again became a serious question for the Han court to pay great attention. This essay aims at exploring the reason why this peaceful relationship between the two rivals can maintain for such a long time by analyzing the rationale behind the Han's political strategy as to the maintenance of dependence in all aspects of Xiongnu from the 1st century BCE to the 1st century AD, and the reason for Xiongnu's acceptance of it-----the political and economic benefits.

Keywords: *Jimi policy, competition in the Western Regions, economic rewards, Noin Ula Xiongnu tombs, political demand.*

1. INTRODUCTION

There have been plenty of resources concerning the relationships between the Han Dynasty (BC 202- AD 220) and the Xiongnu in the ancient times; fewer articles closely analyzed the reason for peace between the two during the 1st century BCE to the 1st century AD when Wuzhuliu Chan-yu was on the throne, however. Since the Xiongnu had few written texts during that time periods, *the Han Shu* and *the Book of Late Han* become two main primary sources for later scholars to refer to. Chinese scholar Lin Gan has detailedly introduced the power dynamics based on the *Han Shu*, but he believed that Xiongnu's dependence on the Han was the fact [1]. Nicola Di Cosmo, though focused more on the formation of the Xiongnu and the early Han Dynasty, still provided insightful explanations of why wars would happen among heterogeneous cultures, which helps find the reasons for attitudes and a series of behaviors of the Han and Xiongnu towards each other [2]. Wang Zijin focused on how Xiongnu managed the Western Regions (西域). Competition in expansion of influence in the Western Regions between the Han and Xiongnu offers another angle to view the power dynamics [3]. Additionally, archaeological report of the Noin Ula tombs can provide detailed excavated objects that indirectly reflect the

Xiongnu's life [4]. This essay builds on these important researches and explores the rationale behind a policy called Jimi launched by the Han to manage the Xiongnu society. By closely examining the details recorded in the *Han Shu* and the *Book of the Late Han*, I tried to find the possible explanations for the maintenance of peace between heterogeneous cultures. This essay may also offer new perspectives on viewing contemporary political relationships.

The core of the policy that the Han Dynasty launched towards Xiongnu is to maintain Xiongnu's political, economic dependence on the Han and to culturally assimilate Xiongnu, turning them into people with shared civilizations. In this way, peace could last and Han's political philosophy of "unification all under heaven" could be realized.

2. THE HAN'S RATIONALE BEHIND THE JIMI POLICY

The Jimi policy towards Xiongnu had been invented in the Qin Dynasty around the 3rd century BCE and then were inherited by the Han, often used to manage the ethnic minorities. This flexible policy consists of two parts: political coercion and economic rewards, which

can be regarded as a dynamic and elastic zone attempting to keep Xiongnu's power in a controllable situation.

For the Han court, political coercion could keep the Xiongnu people aware and afraid of the power and majesty of the Han Dynasty so that they would dare not invade the Han. It also aimed at counterbalancing Xiongnu's political influence over the states around it. One case recorded in the Han History is worth noticing. In the second year of Jianping under the reign of Emperor Ai Di, Bei Yuan Zhi, Wusun King's son, brought his people to invade Western frontiers of Xiongnu's territory, stole and robbed Xiongnu of its livestock, and killed its people. Xiongnu avenged and accepted Wusun hostage, the son of Bei Yuan Zhi. Then, Xiongnu reported this case to the Han court, followed by that the Han dispatched officials to visit Xiongnu, blaming them and requiring Xiongnu to return the hostage back to Wusun. Xiongnu agreed and sent the hostage back [5].

Two things are important. Firstly, Xiongnu reported their internal affairs to the Han court. It is assumed that only ministers, vassal kings or regional governors needed to report affairs to the central government. It is not clear whether the Han required Xiongnu to report its internal affairs or the Xiongnu did this out of its own willingness. Yet at least from the Han's perspective, reporting symbolized the Xiongnu's submission. The behavior of sending the hostage back corroborates the submission as well.

More significantly, the fact that Xiongnu returned the Wusun hostage after being politically warned by the Han officials, in my opinion, meant the Xiongnu gave up the competition against the Han in expanding influence in the Western Regions (西域). Since Zhang Qian visited the various states of the Western Regions, the Han has been dedicated to developing diplomatic relation (non-military) with these states and trading with them. By these, the Han intended to expand their political, economic, and cultural influence. The Western Regions, for Xiongnu, were also crucial. Geographically, they lived as neighbors, closely interconnected. If states of Western Regions were all subject to the Han, Xiongnu would be put in an unfavorable condition, surrounded by enemies. Xiongnu was irritated by Han's communication with Wusun, sometimes even attacking Han envoys. To consolidate their status in the Western Regions, Xiongnu also sent envoys there. Wang, Zijin claims that the Han envoys to the Western Regions often received worse treatment than the Xiongnu envoys due to the Han envoys' low virtues and more importantly, the military deterrence of Xiongnu [3].

Regarding hostage, the Han and Xiongnu competed as well. Lou Lan, a state of Western Regions, sent hostage, the son of the king, to the Han and Xiongnu respectively in BC 108. Having heard the news of the King of Loulan's death earlier than the Han, Xiongnu quickly sent Loulan hostage back to Loulan. By

manipulating the heirship, Xiongnu successfully turned Loulan into a state against the Han Dynasty [3]. Back to the return of hostage when the Han occupied the dominant position in the relation, this behavior can be regarded as Xiongnu's temporary giving up in competing for influence over the Western Region with the Han, at least publicly. In turn, Xiongnu has become like one of the states of the Western Regions under Han's political influence. At the same time, by coercion, the Han prevented the probable alliance between Xiongnu and Wusun that might enhance Xiongnu's power.

Appropriate coercion helps maintain peaceful relations, yet constant political coercion, to its extreme, would convert into suppression for Xiongnu that made them feel threatened and humiliated all the time. As a result, it is possible that Xiongnu people could not bear the suppression, rebelling by inciting wars again. Economic rewards can comfort them, from the Han's point of view, implying that as long as the Xiongnu people followed the Han, the Han would be ensuring them a rich life. It is said that every year during the peaceful time the Xiongnu Chan-yu dispatched envoys to visit the Han, sometimes even the Chan-yu paid the visit in person, the Han court rewarded Xiongnu with a lot of goods. When Hu Han Ye pay his first formal visit to the Han court, the Han emperor rewarded him with gifts including "a cap, a sash, a suit of garments, the gold seal of investiture with an azure ribbon, a jade-ornamented sword, a dagger, a bow, four arrows, ten lances in covers, a chariot, saddle and bridle, fifteen horses, twenty pounds weight of gold, two hundred thousand coins of the realm, seventy-seven suits of inner clothing, eight thousand pieces of embroidered, figured, and variegated silk, and six thousand pounds of raw silk" [6]. Later on, there's only an increase in the amount and type of rewards. Many objects have already been excavated from the Xiongnu tombs that echo the records [4].

Why did the Han Dynasty choose Jimi policy in addressing the relations with Xiongnu?

The process of deciding how to treat Xiongnu offering to submit to the Han was recorded in the Han Histories. It was a conversation between Emperor Yuan Di and his minister Xiao Wangzhi. While most of the other Han ministers believed that Hu Han Ye Chan-yu, as a surrendered King, should be a minister of the Han court even inferior to all other lords and princes of the empire while Xiao maintained that Chan-yu should be treated with ritual of guest with his rank fixed above all the lords and princes of the empire. Xiao stated that the Han called the Xiongnu enemies because they did not obey the Han's calendar system. Foreign barbarians were willing to submit, but if the Han was modest and declined their submission, Xiongnu could be drawn over, which was the fortune brought by modesty. In this fashion, even if the posterity of Xiongnu rebelled one day in the future, absent from the court, the Xiongnu would not be called

renegade ministers. The Xiongnu could recognize the Han's honesty and modesty, and these moral virtues were thus spread to these distant areas, and gained popularity among barbarians, which would bring about long-lasting peace and benefits generations by generations [5].

Emperor Xuan Di finally adopted Xiao's advice. Hu Han Ye Chan-yu, indeed, ended up ranking above all lords and princes with ritual of guest. When he visited the Han court, he was a minister of the Han emperor, but the Ritual Minister of the Han would not pronounce his first name, which was an extremely high courtesy. (In the Han Dynasty, to show reverence to the emperor, ministers should call their first names when visiting and talking with the emperor. Being allowed not to call one's first name in front of the emperor was a high courtesy.)

Xiao's advice and the emperor's final decision were built upon an assumption that between the Han and Xiongnu is a cultural gap [5]. This gap causes "the antagonism between those who are 'in' and those who are 'out', and the criteria the community adopts to demarcate not only its territory but also the characteristics that are assumed to be the very basis of its *raison d'être* (a faith, a race, a code of behavior, a shared set of values) are at the foundation of how a 'civilization' defines itself" [3]. The Han, as settled people regarding their civilizations as highly developed, defined people of the Xiongnu and various other states as nomadic pastoralists living in an uncivilized society.

The dual opposition, and the discrimination of the Han against the nomadic pastoralists (probably vice versa) were strengthened by constant wars between the two, making it impossible for the two communities to completely blend in with each other. Facing such a cultural community opposite to the Han's culture suddenly claiming its submission, the Han had to think carefully. The submission of Xiongnu was an important step for the Han to realize "unification all under heaven". However, as a bellicose community contending against the Han for such a long time, it is clear for the Han that Xiongnu's submission must be temporary, and the Xiongnu would betray at any time. Therefore, maintaining peace was essentially delaying the time for their betrayal by putting the Xiongnu in constant demand for the Han Dynasty politically and economically, making merits brought by submission outweigh those brought by wars. These rationales were covered by the Han publicly announcing that the Han would treat Xiongnu with the ritual of guest, which put the Xiongnu's status equal to the emperor, letting the Xiongnu feel the Han's modesty and respect for them. More importantly, the Han Dynasty left space for the Xiongnu to develop. Nevertheless, certain control was exerted by the Han. For instance, in the Wusun case as mentioned above. The Han wanted the Xiongnu to be aware that they are seemingly equal, but the equality was allowed by the Han, which can be recalled at any time

once the Xiongnu betrayed, or was likely to betray the Han. If so, all benefits and support they received from the Han court would also go away.

In addition, the decision of practicing Jimi policy revolves around the unification of all under heaven. For example, Xiao's reason for treating Xiongnu Chan-yu as guests, not vassal kings, was to protect Xiongnu from the reproach of being renegade ministers. In fact, what he really wanted to protect was the reputation of the Han court. The betrayal of Xiongnu was so likely that, once happened, for Han's commoners, the Han court would be regarded as incapable. Simultaneously, renegade ministers represent the failure of the unification of "all under heaven". Furthermore, the emperor followed but modified Xiao's advice-----he still put the Chan-yu in the position of minister. Despite not pronouncing the name, the emperor still desired unification.

The Han Dynasty tried its best to balance the power dynamics between the Han itself and the Xiongnu. Sometimes even though the emperor wanted to refuse Xiongnu's regular visit, ministers like Yang Xiong wrote a long article to remind the emperor of the huge sacrifice and efforts that former emperors had paid in conquering Xiongnu in case the crack took place [5]. But the peaceful relationship still broke after Wang, Mang snatched the throne and established the Xin Dynasty in AD 9. His failure to manage the Xiongnu was because that the balance brought by Jimi was broken. During his first year in reign, Wang changed Chan-yu's previous seal conferred by the former Han emperor, formally ranking the Chan-yu under other lords and princes [2]. Wang also killed the hostage son of the Xiongnu, which, from Ban Gu's perspective, marked the crack of the peaceful relations [5]. At the same time, the raid and robbing on the frontiers began. Even worse, he attempted to manipulate the heirship of Xiongnu, even deterring them with military power [5]. Irritated by this, the Xiongnu attacked the Northern frontiers of the Xin Dynasty. Coincidentally, the Han's posterity swore to regain its glory from Wang. But at that moment, the Chan-yu thought they had helped the Han's posterity in subverting the Xin, so he was not willing to respect the Han but required the Han to be inferior to the Xiongnu [5].

3. THE HAN'S CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON THE XIONGNU

If there is something that the Han and Xiongnu shared, it would be the "... ideological need to defend themselves not just against their own enemies, but against the enemies of civilization, the 'barbarians' [2]. In other words, once their civilizations have something in common, the chance of having conflicts may lower. Behind the economic offerings, the Han, in fact, tried to culturally assimilate Xiongnu, indirectly turning the enemies into a group of people with shared civilizations

as much as possible. Xiongnu might be conscious of this earlier under the reign of the Laoshang Chan-yu (BC 174-161). After all, Zhong Hang Yue once warned the Laoshang Chan-yu not to rely on Han's products. He claims the reason for the Xiongnu's strength comes from its simple dress, and wholesome food such as good milk and cream, which are independent of China. Though precious, the Chinese silk garments are not as durable and strong as Xiongnu's own clothes, which can be torn if Xiongnu rides among the thorns and brushwood. He further suggests that "should your Highness change the national customs, and introduce a taste for Chinese luxuries, while the supply of these [is] only sufficient to meet about one-fifth of thee requirements, the Hsiung-nu will all go over to the Chinese" [6]. Zhong was conscious of the strong power of cultural assimilation entailed by the economic and material dependence, pointing out the importance of the Xiongnu keeping their own lifestyle and maintaining their military superiority over the Han resulting from its own culture. Nevertheless, Xiongnu's capability after the conquest of the Han was not comparable to that under the reign of Laoshang Chan-yu. According to the archaeological report of the Noin Ula tombs, many burial goods such as silk painted in the Han style were discovered. Bronze mirrors that have special meaning in the Han culture were also found [4]. The most widely used lacquers in the Han, were also excavated whose inscriptions pointed out that they came from the Han imperial workshop [4]. With the help of inscriptions including when the lacquers were made, scholars were able to date the tombs to the 1st century BCE to the 1st century AD.



Fig. 1. Excavated 22nd Noin-Ula mound [8].

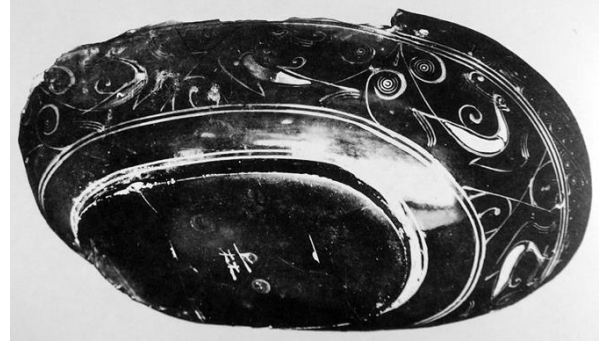


Fig. 2. Wine cup, dated 2 BCE, from Noin Ula tomb 6. Seen from the bottom without handles. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (photograph after Umehara 1960, pl. 59). [9]

The most noticeable one was the structure of these tombs sharing similarities with those of the Han officials. Specifically, there was a path leading to the chamber used for transporting objects. Virtually all chambers consist of 2 outer coffins and one inner coffin, all of which north-south. Burial goods were put in the space between the 2 outer coffins [4]. Jinke Lu, the author of this report, believed the standardized layouts of the Noin Ula tombs were likely to be designed by the same group of Chinese craftsmen [4]. It is not clear why Xiongnu aristocrats, even WuZhuliu Chan-yu, adopted the Han's tomb structure [4]. Perhaps the Xiongnu people found it helpful in building a stable and hierarchical community by differentiating aristocrats' tombs from lesser groups. Probably imitating the Han tombs was a way for the Xiongnu people to show their loyalty to the Han. In any case, cultural impact acting as side effects of economic rewards can be another important part of the Jimi policy.

4. THE SO-CALLED DEPENDENCE FROM THE XIONGNU'S PERSPECTIVE

The Han court puts its policy into concrete practice, but for the Xiongnu people, they may never completely depend on the Han Dynasty. Their acceptance of Han's support is temporary for their own political and economic demand predicated on Han Shu.

Firstly, the formation of the peaceful relationship between Xiongnu and the Han Dynasty started with Hu Han Ye Chan-yu's resolution to submit to the Han Dynasty. At that time, the Xiongnu community was separated into Northern Xiongnu led by Zhi Zhi Chan-yu and Southern Xiongnu led by Hu Han Ye Chan-yu. Stormy discussion among the magnates of Southern Xiongnu preceded Hu Han Ye's decision to submit. According to the Han Shu, some magnates believed submission to the Han Dynasty was a humiliation to Xiongnu ancestors [5]. Yet Hu Han Ye was on the side of the idea that "Now if we submit to China, our nation will be preserved in peace; but if we refuse to submit, we are running into perdition. We cannot avert this by our plan" [6]. In other words, for Hu Han Ye Chan-yu, to

consolidate his status in Xiongnu community and counterbalance the power of Zhi Zhi Chan-yu, submission to the Han Dynasty to acquire support was the best choice. Interestingly, hearing Hu Han Ye's inclination to submit to the Han, Zhi Zhi Chan-yu also dispatched envoys to the Han court out of worry, asking for a friendly relationship [5]. Generally speaking, Xiongnu's political demand brought about the submission.

Secondly, the Han court, and the subsequent Xin Dynasty, interfered with Xiongnu's internal affairs, Xiongnu's resentment accumulated but was not publicly shown to the Han envoys. Just as I mentioned above, the Han asked Xiongnu to return Wusun hostage, required Xiongnu territory and added new rules to prevent them from accepting others' surrender [5]. For instance, the Han official recognized that the Han emperor hoped to have part of Xiongnu's territory where they originally cut off tree and collected wood to make arrows [5]. The official asked the Xiongnu for this area but the Xiongnu Shen-yu declined, claiming that this was the land their ancestors left for them. Later, Chan-yu asked the Han emperor why so. The emperor stated that it was not his idea but the official's. He had already dismissed the official. Particularly the Xin Dynasty, crossed the baseline of Xiongnu several times. Conflicts accumulated, and Xiongnu people could not bear the Han official, waiting for the opportunity to transform their inferior status. As mentioned above, the restored Han court hoped to re-establish the previous friendly relationship with Xiongnu. Arrogant Chan-yu thought his people had helped the Eastern Han to defeat Wang, Mang, so they should be superior to the Han [5]. Battles started again for several years. The return to a peaceful relationship was because that Bi Chan-yu, son of Wuzhuliu Chanyu, grandson of Hu Han Ye Chan-yu, thought he should've been the heir of Chanyu, for he was the blood son of Wuzhuliu. Then, the Xiongnu community separated into Northern and Southern Xiongnu again. Similar plots took place. Hard to counterbalance the Northern Xiongnu, Bi turned to the Han court for help and became the Chan-yu with Han's support [10]. A peaceful relationship was restored and the Han's step to "all under heaven" seemed to be closer.

5. CONCLUSION

The policy of the Han Dynasty towards Xiongnu revolves around the philosophy of all under heaven, delaying the betrayal by maintaining Xiongnu's political, economic dependence, and cultural assimilation. At the same time, Xiongnu found the Han's political strategy suit its political interests. Mutual benefits enable the comparatively smooth practice of Jimi policy, which results in a relatively peaceful time period between the two communities. Once the benefits never mattered, the peaceful relationship would break. It is hard to assert to

what extent the Han's products really penetrated into Xiongnu people's life. Yet, Xiongnu aristocrats died with these Han products, which may imply the special meanings of these Han products.

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