

The Development of the Han-Xiongnu Relationship over the Reign of Emperor Wudi

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ABSTRACT

Starting in 202 BC, the Han Dynasty was established as the ruling power of China. Considered the golden age of China, the Hans were considered the dominant power in Asia, with the development of the major trading route The Silk Road being developed during this dynasty. Despite the Hans being arguably the peak of Chinese society, it also had its number of conflicts and wars with neighboring kingdoms and tribes. One of its more notable interactions of conflict was its relationship with a nomadic steppe tribe, named the Xiongnu. This paper focuses on the relationships and conflicts between the Hans and the tribe before, during, and after the reign of Emperor Wudi (ruled from 141 BC – 87 BC) and will discuss perspective from both sides of the relationship, and how it developed overtime.

Keywords: Han Dynasty, Xiongnu, Nomadic Society, Sedentary Society, The Silk Road, China, Han-Xiongnu Society, Han-Xiongnu War, Emperor Wudi

1. INTRODUCTION

The Silk Road was an instance of a major trade route that introduced intercontinental interactions between different kingdoms and nations. It was a major contribution to a lot of civilizations, such as China, Korea, Japan, the Middle East, and other Eastern European nations such as the Roman Empire. Not only did the Silk Road benefit many societies economically by trading different goods such as paper or gunpowder, but cultural ideas and knowledge such as Buddhism were exchanged along the road as well [1]. The origins of the road came from the Han Dynasty's silk trade, which was later expanded and carried out throughout all of central Asia and Eastern Europe. A major reason for this expansion was partially due to Zhang Qian, a Chinese diplomat, who was sent on military missions and explorations by the Han Emperor to gain allies from the west in order to fight against the Nomadic Xiongnu society that was constantly causing tension and damage towards Northern China, which is the main focus of this essay. The Xiongnu were a nomadic pastoral tribe that were dominant and ruled the steppes of Eastern Asia (an area now known as modern day Mongolia), locating them above Northern China [2] [3]. The Xiongnu and the Chinese have had a fair share of interactions and relationships, mostly during the periods before, during, and after the reign of Emperor Wudi of the Han Dynasty

from 141 BC to 87 BC, which will be the main time period that will be focused on [2]. The relationship between the Xiongnu and the Chinese Han dynasty saw them interacting with each other in several different ways under different emperors, such as the signing of a marriage diplomacy between the two societies, the start and continuation of a Sino-Xiongnu War, and the desire for peace or an ultimatum following the death of Emperor Wudi.



Figure 1: Geographical Map of The Han Dynasty and Xiongnu, Courtesy of Wikiwand [4]

2. PRE-WUDI, THE START OF A MARRIAGE DIPLOMACY

The beginning relations between the Chinese and the Xiongnu before the reign of Emperor Wudi saw the nomadic tribe raiding Han territory frequently near the wall of the Han Kingdom, leading to them having to come up with the idea of a marriage diplomacy/treaty to prevent less economic and military damage. Due to the nature of the Xiongnu being a nomadic society, a lifestyle in which people who don't live ceaselessly in a similar spot however move consistently or occasionally. Nomadism doesn't infer unlimited and undirected meandering; instead, it depends on transitory focuses whose strength relies upon the accessibility of food supply and the innovation for taking advantage of it [2]. Due to the geographical location in which the Xiongnu was in, they were close to one of the biggest sedentary powerhouses during that time, leading to them taking advantage of their current status and frequently raiding



Figure 2: Image depicting the Han and Xiongnu gathered together, Courtesy of joycebayhistory [5]

Northern parts of China in order to take advantage of gaining loot and resources as a nomadic society. Due to the amount of infrastructure and political damage that the Xiongnu were dealing due to the continuous raids, the Chinese were concerned as they had to think about a way to deal with the Xiongnu. They did not like the idea of going to war against a small but troubling and destructive tribe, as they felt that it would just costs them more economic and military damage in the long run if they did go on a full-scale suppression of the Xiongnu. Therefore, they had to think of an alternative method to end the raids diplomatically and in a peaceful way, which is where the plan of sending Chinese princesses to the nomadic tribesman to decrease the tensions and attacks. *“This was a cause of much anxiety to the Chinese, and eventually led the Emperor to adopt the notable expedient of sending a princess of the imperial house to Maou-tun, for his consort.”* [6] Although this did not completely stop the raids from years to come, this did help to act as a type of damage control between the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu. Because of this treaty occurring during the early stages of the Han Dynasty, before the reign of the Emperor Wudi, many emperors of different generations continued the trend of sending princesses to the tribe for them to marry. *“On his accession, the Emperor Wan-te,*

following up the example and policy of his ancestor, sent a princess of the imperial house for a consort to the newly-elevated chieftain, and appointed the eunuch Chung-hing Yue to escort her to her new home.” [6] As said before, although this marriage diplomacy did not completely solve the problem of raids on the Chinese by the Xiongnu, it was still a type of truce that the Chinese had come up with in order to suffer less damage on their kingdom that they were already withstanding with the raids. This could also be seen as a way of the Hans trying to gain influence and control over the actions of the Xiongnu, not by military force but by political and family ties, hence the process of letting Han princesses marrying Xiongnu tribesmen. In the short run, these treaties proved to have improved the relationships and interactions between the two societies: *“A treaty was again signed, and a market was opened at the barrier. Presents were forwarded to the Hsiung-nu, and an imperial princess was sent to cement the alliance with the Shen-yu. The treaty was tolerably well observed throughout the reign of King-te; towards the close there were some petty incursions on the borders, though there was no serious raid.”* [6] Mentioned previously, although assaults still happened near the walls between the two societies, tensions between the two sides did eventually calm down and an alliance was considered. This could all however, just be machination constructed by the Chinese in order to turn the tide of power towards their side, as from the outside looking in, they were arguably the more superior power in this situation. This could prove itself to be true, as after the Emperor Wudi took the reign, the Chinese would go on to make alliances with neighboring kingdoms and nations in order to help with the Sino-Xiongnu war. Consequentially, despite a marriage treaty being signed between the Xiongnu and the Han Dynasty in order to prevent further raids committed by the nomadic tribe resulting in a better relationship between the two nations, this all fell apart after Emperor Wudi's reign started and proclaimed the start of a war against the Xiongnu.



Figure 3: Map showing the territories of the Hand Dynasty and the Xiongnu, Courtesy of weaponsandwarfare.com [7]

3.DURING WUDI'S REIGN, THE START OF A WAR

After the breaking of the treaty during the start of the reign of Emperor Wudi, the Chinese attempted to form an alliance with the west in order to combat the Xiongnu as preparation for battle, which led to a full-scale war in the end. *"About the same time the Hsiung-nu made several raids on the border, killed the general and guards, took captive the people, and drove off great numbers of their animals."* [6] Due to the numerous gifts and appeasements the Han Dynasty has given out to the "barbarians" of the north, and because of the continuing raids committed by the tribe has damaged agricultural areas of China by releasing livestock and taking farmers captive, Emperor Wudi felt like the time was right for China to go to war. The Chinese had plans to go to war with the tribe, but because the previous Emperor, Gao of Han, realized the nation was still vulnerable to attacks by the Xiongnu. As a result of this, he came up with the idea for the Chinese to start preparing a full-scale war against the Xiongnu people in secret, all the while covering it up by easing the tension and hostility by signing a marriage treaty with the nomads. But after Emperor Wudi came into power, the policy of peace between the Xiongnu and the Han Dynasty ended, as China began to form allies with neighboring tribes and started the Sino-Xiongnu war. *"After the death of K'ien, the Hsiung-nu heard of China's relations with Wu-sun, at which they became angry and wished to make war on it."* [6] As higher-ups of the Xiongnu tribe got the news that China had broken the treaty of truce, started forming alliances, and became more aggressive with their attacks and raids as the war had been declared on them by the Chinese. *"From that time the treaty was abandoned by the Hsiung-nu, who attacked the stockades on the high road, and were constantly committing acts of brigandage on the border, too numerous to mention."* [6] As said before, the intensity in which the Xiongnu began to terrorize Chinese land increase, with their raids and attacks on the Han becoming more brutal and disturbing. One of the main reasons for the increased brutality may be due to the way the Chinese backstabbed the Xiongnu by breaking the treaty, but nonetheless the brutality without a doubt contributed to the worsening of the relationship between the two sides, reverting the developing ally's status that previous emperors had been building. Thus, due to military tensions between the two sides began to start rising again after the reign of Emperor Wudi began, the relationship between the Han Empire and Xiongnu tribe had gone from potential allies to enemies, as the actions of Emperor Wudi breaking the marriage diplomacy both sides had and reverting the process of having a potential alliance to stop the raids aggravated the relationship between the two societies.



Figure 4: Aftermath of a battle during the war between the Han and Xiongnu, Courtesy of weaponsandwarfare.com [7]

4.THE DEATH OF WUDI, BEGINNINGS OF PEACEFUL NEGOTIATIONS

After the death of Han Emperor Wudi in 84 BC, the war continued between the Chinese and Xiongnu regardless. However, due to the brutality, damage, and major losses on both ends as a result of the war, both sides wanted more peaceful interactions and formal submission, especially from the Xiongnu's side as they were the ones that took the most damage. Overtime, although the war had caused casualties and damage to both sides that were fighting, the advantage of the conflict slowly started to side with the Chinese, since they had a bigger military advantage in terms of their organization and size. *"The military tide begins to turn in the Chinese favor."* [6] Another reason as to why the Chinese got the better of the Xiongnu in the war was mainly due to the Chinese having more resources, firepower, and geographical advantage than the tribe did. As time went on, despite both sides taking damage due to the war, the Xiongnu ended up suffering larger consequences as a result of the Han having a bigger army and the land advantage. Because of this, the Chinese began to push the Xiongnu further into Northern China. *"For more than twenty years past, the Chinese troops had been pursuing the Hsiung-nu and had continued to follow them up far into their northern retreats."* [6] In spite of the overall status of the war, the Xiongnu were still able to fight back against the Chinese, launching successful invasions and raids that gave them a slight upper edge in terms of the resources that they gained from these minor attacks, with their military tactics and quickness being what led them to these small victories. Nevertheless, many in the Xiongnu state wanted a halt to the war, as many had felt that they would just lose more if the war had continued. As a result, this led to many Xiongnu tribesmen wanting a more peaceful resolution to the conflict, and to restore the original relationship that the two societies had between each other. *"At that time the beacon fires could be distinctly seen along the border regions of the empire; so that the Hsiung-nu got little advantage by their marauding incursions; and they seldom afterwards ventured on the stockades. The Chinese had recently received the submission of some of*

the Hsiung-nu” [6] Overtime, the entire Xiongnu kingdom realized the major losses that they had undergone due to the conflict, many had realized that a peaceful resolution may be the most optimal way to ease the tension between the two sides and restore the positive relationship that they used to have. “From the Shen-yu downwards, there had been a general desire among all classes to have a treaty of peace.” [6] Not everyone within the ranks of the Xiongnu agreed with the plan or formal submission however, as internal conflicts within the tribe began to occur due to the argument of whether to sue for peace or not, which led to a temporary power vacuum for the nomadic state. In the end, with them having no other option as they were running out of resources while still fighting an unwinnable war, the idea of having a truce was finally bought up. “With their fortunes at low ebb and no longer under unified leadership, and the power of the Ha having reached well into Eurasia, the Hsiung-nu debated the idea of formal submission.” [6] The aftermath resulted in the Xiongnu formally submitting to the Han Empire, stopping the war and enabling the two sides to be able to recover, which was a good decision made by the Xiongnu as they ended up receiving hospitality and general friendliness from the Chinese after the declaration of submission along with gifts and offerings given by the Xiongnu. “Shen-yu also sent an envoy with offerings, who was received and treated with great liberality by the Chinese.” [6] With this, the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Chinese had gone full circle; developing from a marriage diplomacy that led to mostly peaceful interactions, to a war caused by Emperor Wudi that ruined the peace, and a later submission by the Xiongnu to attempt to revert the damages of the war and restore the original relationship that the two societies had. With this, after the death of Emperor Wudi, the damages caused by the war led to both sides questioning the continuation of the war. This would end up leading to the Xiongnu wanting to sue for peace, which led to their relationship with the Chinese going back to a somewhat similar state after the long conflict.



Figure 5: Art of Xiongnu men on their horses, Courtesy of ringmar.net [8]



Figure 6: Han and Xiongnu cavalry charging into battle, Courtesy of thehistoryofchina [9]

5. CONCLUSION

Before, during, and after the reign of the Emperor Wudi during the Han dynasty, the interactions and relationship between the Chinese and the Xiongnu developed overtime. firstly, by signing a truce of marriage diplomacy before the Emperor Wudi took control leading to a semi-positive and peaceful status between the two societies. However, when Emperor Wudi came into power, the Chinese were preparing to go to war with the Xiongnu which destroyed the partial ally status that the two sides had. However, after the death of Emperor Wudi, the Xiongnu decided to sue for peace by submitting to the Chinese which would help with their relationship back to a peaceful one. In conclusion, the relationship between the nomadic Xiongnu and the sedentary Han Dynasty developed overtime through a series of truces, wars, and formal submissions, leading to a cycle of being peaceful and hostile towards one another.

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