

Choice by Pertinence: Depiction of Xiongnu in Chinese Historical Texts

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Abstract: *This paper aims to discuss the depiction of Xiongnu in Chinese historical texts. The Han historians tended to oversimplify the polity of Xiongnu in their records while overlooking some crucial parts of the sophisticated political system, but disagreement remains as to why such oversimplification occurs. The historians never reduce the entire polity to its leader, Chanyu, but to an idealized hierarchy made up of both Chanyu and the lesser kings, the latter being neglected more by modern researchers than by the authors of these records. On the basis of such revision, it will be argued that chroniclers' ignorance of the lesser kings is far from sufficient to account for their rare, and often scattered, appearance in the records. Alternatively, less relevance of these local leaders to Han Dynasty, especially when compared with Chanyu or the Xiongnu as a whole, is considered a more credible explanation for their being less frequently mentioned.*

Keywords: *Xiongnu, Han Dynasty, Chanyu, Shiji, Hanshu, Lesser King*

1. Introduction

Chinese historical narratives, mainly *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, have long been viewed as the authoritative source in the studies of Xiongnu and their relationship with their southern neighbours, the Han Empire. However, recent archaeological excavations increasingly reveal the flaws of these Chinese texts, among which oversimplification of Xiongnu's political structure is much debated. Miller accused Han historians of "simplify(ing) steppe politics and gloss(ing) over provincial political agents." [1] Such accusation is itself simplified to some degree. If we take a closer look at *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, such numerous records can be found on the so-called lesser kings, together with information on their relative social status sometimes, that they can actually form a political hierarchy, though still far from precise if we are to compare it with archaeological findings done mainly through the past two decades. [2]

By focusing on exactly the controversial primary sources, one can infer that by no means were Chinese historians, especially Sima Qian, unaware of Xiongnu lesser kings, an explanation often arbitrarily accepted as one, if not the only, reason for less frequent mention of them. Then, another question arises as to why they were not attached sufficient importance to. In fact, there is inconsistency in that modern scholarship is evaluating the credibility of these narratives in terms of studies of the Xiongnu Empire, whereas Sima Qian, as well as Ban Gu, who basically followed the former's methodology and pattern, was writing histories of *China*, whether to speak for Confucianism or to legitimize certain political agendas. Scarcely, then, would any overlap be found, let alone satisfy contemporary researchers. In Chinese perceptions, the majority of their knowledge about Xiongnu was not worth writing, because they were not relevant to Han at all.

2. Revision to Oversimplification

While Miller's comments on Chinese historians (see above) highlight the problem of simplification in primary sources, upon which modern research has been relying on, he suggests the records are rendered "explicable and simple" at the cost of precision in that a major group of participants in the dynamics of Xiongnu Empire has been overlooked; on the other hand, he does consider it plausible to construct a general picture of Xiongnu's "social and political dynamics". [3] Indeed, there is an imbalance between records of Chanyu and those of local kings, but both dynamics in the steppe empire (e.g. *Hanshu* 94a: 3789-3791) and a political hierarchy (e.g. *Hanshu* 94a: 3751) have been framed to an extent through the delineations. Therefore, though unable to meet modern researchers' expectations, chroniclers did complete their mission, that is, focusing on what they thought worth elaborating on (see

below), and the widely used term, oversimplification, would better be defined as reducing Xiongnu as a sophisticated polity to a simple hierarchy made up of Chanyu and a strict hierarchy of lesser kings. On the other hand, what *has been* omitted is to what extent, if any, the power is centralized across Xiongnu, which contributes to intense debate among later scholars.

3. Less Written than Known

Taking one step further, one would naturally wonder why there was such oversimplification as defined above. The classical theory has been proposed repeatedly that historians were ignorant of these lesser kings, with Han historians said to “(rationalize) what little was known about the northern neighbours into a purported comprehensive understanding of their society.” [4] Such explanation certainly makes sense, but it remains inadequate given the social status of historians during Han Dynasty and the nuances in different parts of primary sources.

Han chroniclers are essentially different from modern historians in that the former are supported by court. [5] This indicates high social status and, moreover, access to valuable materials:

Three years after (Ssu-ma T’an) had expired (Ssu-ma) Ch’ien became Prefect Grand Scribe. He drew out the records of the scribes, the documents (contained in) stone houses and metal caskets. (Shiji 130: 3296)

Apparently, historians would be the most knowledgeable among contemporaries. A similar description can be found in a commentary, saying that all of the books annually submitted to the central government are available to court historians first (Shiji 130: 3288). With such special privilege, they are supposed to have a relatively deep understanding of Xiongnu.

Differences in records do betray the historians, who prove to notice many details after all. Sima Qian once developed narratives of the same incident, a clash between Han General Huo Qubing and Xiongnu lesser kings in 122 BCE in two separate chapters (See Shiji 110: 2908; Shiji 111: 2929-2930). Though focusing on the same war, the author made them significantly different, and paradoxically, less information of Xiongnu was given in Chapter 110, the particular biography of it; more interestingly, in Chapter 111, names of four kings, Supu, Hunu, Zhelan, and Luhu, all of whom are absent from records in Chapter 110 and are instead referred to collectively with the ambiguous notion of “Xiongnu,” have been mentioned.

That said, ignorance may no longer qualify as the primary reason for missing information in the case of Xiongnu, as we can even conclude that Sima Qian intentionally shortened the story when composing a biography for China’s northern neighbour. This inclination is also obvious from the organization of his book, which is composed of systematically classified biographies, each focusing on either one figure or a group of similar people. Therefore, compressing Xiongnu into only one record means reducing the whole polity, supposedly an equivalent of Han Empire, to that of an individual, which in itself shows that the author intends to be economical here; he chooses from what he knows.

4. Picking the Pertinent

In the following part, the alternative answer will be given to the question why the erudite Chinese chroniclers decided not to present Xiongnu in detail, a phenomenon, paradoxically, most pronounced in the particular chapter for Xiongnu. Briefly speaking, relevance to Han Dynasty acts as a major filter in the works, which makes necessary further inquiry into what on earth is, from Han officials’ perspective, relevant to them, as well as how it is presented in written texts.

4.1 “Us Versus Them”: What Is Pertinent and What Is Not

Di Cosmo points out the tradition of differentiating “the Chinese”, also named Hua and Xia, from “foreign” ones, who are often portrayed as barbaric, and among whom people to the north are less “assimilated”, thus less relevant to the “civilized” world of China. [6] This perception leads to a boundary, political or cultural, between China and its northern neighbours. Though merely used as slogans for political campaigns initially [7], the fabricated “distance” and incompatibility with people to the north lead to perception that they are by and large not relevant to the “culturally superior” Chinese world. This trend is embodied in the designation of northern people in Chapter 110 of Shiji, where before the unification of Xiongnu in 209 BCE, people there are called Hu, Rong, and Xiongnu,

all of which are highly ambiguous.

From their first ancestor down to the time of Tow-man, for upwards of a thousand years, the tribe had suffered from the vicissitudes and alterations incident to dispersion and long separation; and there is no detailed record of the secular changes among them. Under Maou-tun, however, the Heung-noo attained their greatest power. They had brought into complete subjection all the wild tribes on the north, while China was their rival nation on the south. The following were the designations of their principal dignitaries and officers. (Hanshu 94a: 3751)

Xiongnu are said to have existed for a millennium before Modu's unification, the history of which Han historians claimed was not known to, nor recorded by, them, while what happened after 209 BCE was better understood. However, a totally different conclusion can be drawn with close examination of the texts. Regardless of periods and dynasties, Xiongnu is almost equally familiar to Chinese people, that is, disharmony, sometimes antagonism, between the two sides, characterized by raids, battles, and wars. Dynamics in such "international relationship" have been repeatedly recorded from the Spring and Autumn Period through the Warring States (Shiji 110: 2881-2886), all within a framework of animosity.

At this, some of the Jung-ti settled in Lu-hun, in the east reaching (the state of) Wei, invading, plundering, tyrannizing, and oppressing the Central States. (Shiji 110: 2882)

As for the incidents later, an attempt to more comprehensively understand the northern people can be discovered, leading to a more detailed delineation of, for example, ethnography (Shiji 110: 2883) and Xiongnu's internal affairs (Shiji 110: 2888). Nevertheless, by no means has the ultimate goal of observing dynamics in the bilateral relationship been changed, since in a history of *China*, it is the only aspect relevant when it comes to Xiongnu. That is to say, the core of Chinese historical narrative is the nexus between the two "superpowers," for which available information is filtered, leaving much out on the political structure, Chanyu, or local kings; even though some details about Xiongnu per se do appear in these texts, often in a scattered way [8], they are mentioned as background information and still serve the purpose of proper grasp and sensible handling. Such writing pattern is shown in the commonality of reference to lesser kings and culminates in the records of Huhanye's "subordination" (Hanshu 94b: 3795-3798). The two cases shall be discussed respectively below.

4.2 Indivisibility, Proxy and Pragmatic Impartiality: Ways to Present Xiongnu

From the Three Dynasties onwards, the Hsiung-nu always were the Central States' worry and (source of) harm; wishing to know about their time of strength and (times of) weakness, when arrangements and preparations (for defense) and punitive expeditions and campaigns should be made, I created the "Arrayed Memoirs of the Hsiung-nu, Number Fifty." (Shiji 130: 3317)

Xiongnu is perceived as a formidable enemy of China, which is implicitly represented in texts; thus, the relationship would naturally feature unremitting conflicts. Based on what has been discussed above, it can be concluded that the record of Xiongnu is basically one of wars.

Similarly, the majority of mentions of lesser kings occur in the background of wars, as the examples below indicate:

Chang Hwuy, the master controller, went with the Woo-sun troops to the right Luh-le's court, captured the Shen-yu's paternal relatives, sisters-in-law, princes next in rank, Le-han commandant, colonels, leaders, and subordinates, over thirty thousand in all..... (Hanshu 94a: 3786)

In other cases, the author merely uses the equivocal expression of "Xiongnu," a phenomenon seen more often in the narratives of the "Heqin" period:

The Heung-noo sent the Great General Yeu Ken with the Right and Left Hoo-che princes, in charge of over twenty thousand cavalry to look after the Chinese army..... (Hanshu 94a: 3779)

Through comparison of the language above, it is clear that by mentioning specific lesser kings in a war, whether as invaders or as captives, Han chroniclers are actually referring to "*Xiongnu's*" invasion. "Xiongnu" in such context is viewed holistically, that is, as an indivisible entity. Lesser kings are merely symbols of or proxies for Xiongnu in invasions, while their names per se have significance to neither Han chroniclers nor the intended readers of their historical records, who, unlike modern scholars, would never make Xiongnu itself a subject of their studies. Derived from the theory of proxy is what I would refer to as "pragmatic impartiality," the phenomenon that Han chroniclers record all the kings they get to know in the context of incidents, usually warfare, at and beyond the border, as an

equivalent to Xiongnu as a whole, regardless of their identities. Therefore, Chanyu's more frequent appearance in Chinese texts simply indicates his more active role as military leader, rather than Han historians' inclination to elaborate on him; similarly, lesser kings have less access to leadership in wars and thus are not presented as clearly, with little signs of their being "gloss(ed) over." [1] Factually this explanation does conform to one purpose of the establishment of the united Xiongnu Empire, where "the aristocracy provided leadership in the organization of large hunts and of raids against neighbouring groups" [9] and external wars are led by the newly-ascending Chanyu as a means to draw support and consolidate his power [10]. Due to the nature of the Xiongnu confederation, Chanyu is given much more opportunities, and meanwhile threatened with loss of power, to show up more often at the frontier.

The case of Huhanye Chanyu (See Hanshu 94b: 3795-3801) is more intriguing as an indication of both Chinese indifference and "impartiality," as are mentioned above. Extraordinarily detailed record of internal dynamics the Xiongnu Empire can be found in this section, which nonetheless is not the goal of this part: it ends up with Huhanye's "subordination," which is considered a milestone in Han-Xiongnu relationship. Obviously, whatever the story, the officials in China stick to their own country as the theme. On the other hand, even with the knowledge that Xiongnu, as a polity, is suffering from domestic chaos, with many Chanyus in power simultaneously, only one of whom turns to Han for help, senior officials still take this event as surrender. A cultural instinct to find someone as a representative of the unitary Xiongnu in each event can be palpably sensed here.

5. Conclusion

In search of the primary reason for insufficient attention for Xiongnu and its lesser kings, this paper seeks to point out that mismatch lies not between how Chinese perceive Xiongnu and what Xiongnu actually is, but between what is known about them and what is finally recorded for them, and this mismatch results from conscious choice and abridgement. Therefore, criticism of these texts should concentrate not on what is present, but on what is absent, because, given the authors' knowledge, the latter reflects their perceptions of Xiongnu more directly. On the other hand, in order to make full use of these texts to study the remarkable period, one should search more for a Chinese way of interpretation than for facts and truth; after all, the former is equally crucial as the latter in shaping the destiny of both empires, and, through the time-honoured Silk Road, that of people beyond.

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