

# Beneficial Effects of Seemingly Controversial Lifestyles on Xiongnu's Survive in Harsh Environment during Han Dynasty

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**Abstract:** Xiongnu is a really barbaric tribe on the meadows. However, it is their barbaric lifestyles that helping them survive in the harsh environment. In this work, some Xiongnu's lifestyles are analyzed in detail, which are different from Han Dynasty. Moreover, this work also come up with some new understanding of these seemingly controversial lifestyles. It can be helpful in changing the traditional ideas towards Xiongnu for many people.

**Keywords:** Xiongnu, Barbaric lifestyles, Wars, Survive, Han Dynasty

## 1. Introduction

Xiongnu (or Hsiung-nu) were a nomadic tribe in northern China and modern-day Mongolia during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE - 8 CE). They primarily raised horses, oxen, sheep, and even camels, on the pasturage. The Xiongnu were considered nomadic, because they traveled from place to place with no fixed city or home, searching for food and water. Xiongnu were not agriculturally self-sufficient, but traveled from place to place based on seasons and weather to find sufficient food and shelter. Historians have struggled to study the Xiongnu due to a lack of written texts written by the Xiongnu, depicting their everyday lives. Since the Xiongnu lived on the meadow, a large grassland with barren soil, they lacked resources (e.g. vegetables, fruits, crops, and tea) necessary for their survival, forcing them to obtain supplies from Han. Under these circumstances, frequent conflicts between Xiongnu and Han were inevitable. To prepare for long-term fighting, Xiongnu came up with some outwardly strange and even barbaric strategies, by modern standards, but those policies ultimately helped their tribe survive and thrive against the Han Dynasty.

Xiongnu, in many ancient historians' perspective, were a really cruel and strange tribe that lacked moral values. However, these primeval lifestyles actually helped them to survive in the harsh meadowland and during wars with different tribes. In this research paper, I will analyze the seemingly strange and barbaric strategies of Xiongnu during wartime and diplomacy with the Han Dynasty, as outlined in *Selections from the Han Narrative Histories* and *The Grand Scribe's Records*, presenting unbiased arguments that could explain their behaviors and ability to survive against the Han Dynasty.

## 2. Xiongnu Wars with Han

Due to limited resources, the Xiongnu frequently fought in wars against the Han to steal indispensable resources (e.g., food, land, and money) necessary to their livelihood, allowing them to survive and even dominate against the Chinese Han Dynasty. During Han dynasty, these strategies helped Xiongnu adapt to the harsh meadow environment. According to Waugh's (1999) English translation of the *Han Narrative Histories*, "[t]he Hsiung-nu make war the business of life" (p. 6). This clearly proves that the Xiongnu thoroughly enjoyed engaging in battle with other countries (e.g. China and western countries), becoming a lifestyle. Eastern historians even regard Xiongnu as people who cared only about material things, like food, land, and money, forgoing morality to gain what necessary for survival. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (2019) concluded that "wherever there is some easy gain, [the Xiongnu] do not know propriety nor righteousness" (p. 202). This indicates that the Xiongnu used whatever means necessary to obtain the resources indispensable for survival. Xiongnu's methods created an optimal environment, leading them to war against Han. For this reason, ancient historians, especially Chinese historians, often regard Xiongnu as a barbaric tribe void of any rules and regulations to restrict their seemingly barbaric

behavior. As stated by Nienhauser, Jr. (2019), the Xiongnu “[did] not have written documents [but made] agreements and bonds by means of spoken words” (p. 202). This quote clearly suggests that Xiongnu did not adhere to any laws to regulate their behaviors, contributing to historians’ view that they were, in fact, barbaric. Because Xiongnu’s tribes were small, they did not adhere to regulations to maintain a peaceful environment. In order to win the wars, Xiongnu trained their children from an early age to become powerful warriors.

### ***2.1 Xiongnu Children Raised for War***

In order to obtain indispensable resources (e.g., food, land, and money) from the Han Dynasty, the Xiongnu also trained their young in the ways of war, allowing them to survive as a tribe and dominate the Han Dynasty. Xiongnu made riding horses, hunting, and fighting a normal part of their children’s everyday life, fully preparing them for battle in adulthood (Nienhauser, Jr., 2019, p.202). This evidence shows that Xiongnu children mastered riding and shooting skills early in their lives. Traditionally, this policy of training young children to fight from an early age seems strange, because only adults can fight in battlefields in other countries around the world. However, because the Xiongnu lacked necessary resources, it was imperative that they train their children as warriors, who would one day be able to fight and steal those resources, helping the Xiongnu survive against the Han.

### ***2.2 Xiongnu War Strategies***

Apart from training children for wars, Xiongnu’s strategies and motivations for war differed from those of Han. Han wanted to obliterate Xiongnu; whereas Xiongnu only wanted to get enough resources from Han to survive. Consequently, Xiongnu did not care as much about winning the wars, as they did acquiring needed resources from Han. Waugh (1999) found that “...when successful in the contests, [the Xiongnu] pressed forward; but on meeting a reverse, they retreated, and thought it no shame to run away” (p. 2). Unlike traditional Chinese who wanted to utterly defeat Xiongnu, Xiongnu did not want to fight with and kill a lot of Han’s soldiers; they simply wanted to obtain critical resources like tea, clothing, and vegetables. Once the Xiongnu successfully obtained resources essential for their survival, they would retreat back into the meadow, rather than continue fighting just to “win” the war. Nienhauser, Jr. (2019) noted that Mao Dun (a Xiongnu leader) used to invade Han, but once Han sent a lot of gold and crops to Xiongnu as compensation, he immediately retreated from Han territory (p. 206). The text shows that the Xiongnu merely wanted resources rather than the lives of Han people: once they obtained enough resources, Xiongnu would stop attacking and retreat. In order to strengthen cohesion, Xiongnu came up with another policy to inherit property, contributing to their survival.

### ***2.3 Xiongnu Wartime Policies***

Xiongnu also devised innovative policies to strengthen cohesion during years-long warfare with Han, further helping them to survive. Xiongnu had a strange policy of inheriting properties during the wars. According to Nienhauser, Jr. (2019):

When [Xiongnu] attack in battle, cutting off heads as trophies is rewarded by one goblet of wine, and the booty that they make is given to them on that account ... [Xiongnu] in battle helps to carry away a dead [comrade], [and] obtains all of the dead’s household possessions. (p. 207)

These policies seemed strange for Han people because personal properties could not easily be owned by outsiders in Han at that time. However, these policies stimulated Xiongnu’s passion of alternating periods of war and peace with Han. By promising to send dead comrades back to their homelands and share properties of those people, Xiongnu could strengthen bonds among themselves to fight for the same goal, which is important for Xiongnu to survive in meadowland with limited resources.

Influenced by limited resources, Xiongnu devised other seemingly unbelievable rules, like social Darwinism, ensuring survival of the fittest over the weaker members through natural selection. Nienhauser, Jr. (2019) stated that the stronger members of the Xiongnu tribe wore the best clothes and ate the best meat. Xiongnu only paid attention to the hardy and fit, ignoring the old and weak (p. 202). This policy seems to betray traditional sense of filial piety. However, in the harsh meadow environment in which the Xiongnu traveled, only the strong survived. Furthermore, the Xiongnu had abundant opportunities to foster stronger soldiers, excluding the weaker members of their tribe from fighting in battle. Actuating social Darwinism made the entire army more powerful and competitive, so that Xiongnu could fight against their biggest enemy, Han. For the sake of maintaining population after wars, Xiongnu

allowed member to marry within their tribe.

#### **2.4 Xiongnu Intermarriage**

Because Xiongnu's population decreased drastically after warring with Han, they came up with some strange policies -- disordered sexual relationships. In his historic account of the Xiongnu, Nienhauser, Jr. (2019) states, "[I]f a father dies, [the sons] marry their step-mothers; if a brother dies, [the other siblings] all take his wives and marry them. In their customs, they have a praenomen without regard for taboos, but no cognomen (last name) or agnomen (first name)" (p. 202). Consanguineous marriage betrays the common ethical values in Han or even in western countries. However, impacted by limited resources and the longing for more essential substances from Han, Xiongnu needed to ensure that they bore enough children to raise into strong warriors. Although carrying out this policy created some problems related to family lineages, it greatly increased the Xiongnu population, indirectly strengthening their military power in their fight against Han. In the opinion of Sima Qian, a famous Chinese ancient historian during Han Dynasty, Xiongnu's behaviors were appropriate for nomadic lifestyles; whereas, Han's behaviors (e.g. complex etiquette when meeting each other; strong sense of being urbane) were improper and too rigid (Nienhauser, Jr., 2019, p. 246) In a word, as with the Xiongnu's other policies, intermarriage was another tactic that provided them much-needed resources, allowing them to survive in the harsh meadow against the Han.

Benefited by these strange policies (e.g. early strict training of children to fight, social Darwinism, disordered relationships, etc.), Xiongnu won the vast majority of wars against Han despite tiny populations and limited resources. Waugh (1999) found that "[T]he entire Hsiung-nu population is not equal to that of one Chinese province; but one cause of their strength is the simplicity of their dress and food, in which they are independent of China" (p. 6). Although small in size, the Xiongnu could defeat the larger Han empire, proving they were very powerful due to their strategic policies. As compensation for Xiongnu's invasion, Han sent thousands of pieces of jewelry, clothes, silk, and horses to Xiongnu, as well as skilled workers to teach them technology (Nienhauser, 2019, p. 222). This clearly shows that Xiongnu got a lot of jewelry and clothing as compensation after winning wars against Han. These seemingly strange policies supplemented the Xiongnu's nomadic lifestyle, otherwise void of everyday necessities, further building them into a stronger, more cohesive military power and allowing them to survive in the harsh meadow during the Han Dynasty. Apart from warring, Xiongnu also came up with strange political strategies, also different from Han politics.

### **3. Xiongnu Political Strategies**

In addition to the Xiongnu's militaristic strategies, their political affiliations during the war with the Chinese Han Dynasty allowed them to survive and even dominate in the harsh meadow during this time. After losing excessive money and properties, Han grew to fear and hate the Xiongnu. Zhang Qian, the envoy from Han went to Yueh-Chih (in northern Asia) to persuade the king to become an ally, proving the Han feared the Xiongnu, but Zhang Qian was arrested by Xiongnu and forced to join Xiongnu's tribe for eight years. Nienhauser, Jr. (2019) noted that "Zhang Qian, acting as a magistrate, went on a diplomatic mission to the Yueh-Chih .... Zhang Qian was detained for more than a decade, married and had a child, but he kept the symbol of the Han emissary intact" (p. 240). Zhang Qian's mission to the West opened up trade with Xiongnu. After coming back, Zhang Qian made use of his 8-year experience to communicate with Xiongnu's leader, Chan Yu, about the trade of goods, opening the barrier with nomadic tribes (e.g. Xiongnu, Sogdian, Scythian, etc.). However, Zhang Qian only wanted to seek out allies against Xiongnu; he didn't want to trade with them or other western countries, which happened accidentally. As stated in Waugh (1999), Zhang Qian intended to set an alliance with Yueh-Chih upon coming to Inner Asia, marking an important development in relations between Han and Inner Asia (p. 1). Through Zhang Qian, the Xiongnu were able to trade with the Han for valuable resources. Xiongnu reduced their death toll and established a temporary peaceful period, giving them a chance to survive in the meadowland and prepare for future wars. Zhang Qian's trip to negotiate and establish alliances with the Han and other tribes incidentally fostered trade for Xiongnu. In order to maintain the harmonious relationship with Han, Xiongnu frequently arranged marriages with Han, further facilitating their survival.

#### **3.1 Xiongnu Arranged Marriages**

Although Han frequently fought with and feared Xiongnu, many Xiongnu leaders preferred living peacefully through intermarriage and fair trade over fighting. Wu Sun, a relative of Chan Yu, emphasized

that Xiongnu should maintain peaceful trade relations with Han. Han sent a princess to Chan Yu's grandson as part of an arranged marriage. Waugh (1999) includes an account of intermarriage in a letter (BCE 64) forwarded from the Kwan-me (a Xiongnu leader) of Wu-Sun to the throne:

Desiring that the imperial grandson Yuen-kwei-me should continue the succession, it is my wish that by allying with an Imperial Princess, the bond of relationship should be strengthened afresh, and thus our connection with the Xiongnu be completely cut off. (p. 41)

After the marriage, the relationship between Han and Xiongnu became temporarily peaceful and friendly, so Xiongnu had enough time to rest and train their soldiers for future wars and consequently survive on the prairie. However, when it came to peace treaties, Xiongnu regarded them as both enforceable and breakable as they saw fit.

### ***3.2 Xiongnu Peace Treaties with Han Dynasty***

Besides their arranged marriage policies, the Xiongnu had some unusual diplomatic policies, including treaties with the Han, which allowed them to survive in the harsh meadowland. After losing the war against Huo Oubing and Wei Qing (two powerful Han generals), Xiongnu sent an envoy to Han signing treaties to negotiate temporary peace. Xiongnu wanted temporary (not permanent) peace, because they needed enough time to recruit soldiers and buy horses to regain power. Waugh (1999) claims that Xiongnu did not take treaties seriously, but they thought that peace treaties could give them more time to regain power (i.e., by recruiting more soldiers and maintaining efficiency of hunting and archery) and invade China (p. 21). Sometimes, Xiongnu won the wars, but most of the time, they lost. By signing the treaties, Xiongnu had invaluable chances to regain vigorous power to continue warring against and stealing from Han.

Consequently, Xiongnu obtained additional indispensable resources (e.g. vegetables, crops, tea) to survive, and Han traded with Xiongnu (i.e. by exchanging tea for horses). During peacetime, Han happily traded and communicated with Xiongnu, but once Xiongnu faced bad weather (i.e., droughts that destroyed grass for the horses and sheep to eat) or ran out of supplies, they would breach the treaties, going beyond the Great Wall and invading Han, because the resources gained from trading and exchanging were too little to support the whole tribe. In order to survive, the Xiongnu tore the treaties up and fought with Han for needed materials. In these instances, nomads like Xiongnu, Sogdian, and Hoo found that, ultimately, the best method for survival was to maintain warfare interspersed with temporary periods of peace with Han. All in all, the combination of peace and wars with Han helped nomadic tribes to live vigorously, indirectly stimulating trade along the Silk Road.

In all, the Xiongnu's political strategies helped them survive against the Han, despite breaking treaties and imprisoning envoys. Upon breaking treaties and suddenly invading the Han, the Xiongnu obtained more essential resources than those gained through peaceful treaties, allowing them to survive in the harsh weather.

## **4. Conclusion**

Xiongnu's seemingly barbaric lifestyle and ability to cope with limited resources, along with their battle strategies and political alliances with other nomadic tribes and agreements with the Han Dynasty, allowed them to survive and even dominate in the harsh meadows during Han Dynasty. As a nomadic tribe, the Xiongnu did not have enough food and essential resources to survive, so they had to take those things from Han, who resided in north-east Asia, thriving on plentiful crops and vegetables. Consequently, war was unavoidable for the Xiongnu. To win wars and obtain the resources they needed to enlarge their army, the Xiongnu came up with the following seemingly strange methods to ensure their survival: training children at an early age to fight in battle; inheriting policies to strengthen their military; performing strong social Darwinism to select the strongest men for battle; permitting intermarriage among families to increase populations; and signing and breaking treaties at their discretion.

Overall, due to their relatively small numbers, the Xiongnu could not afford the long-term warfare with Han because of their limited resources and weaker armies. At that time, Xiongnu signed some treaties and traded with Han for temporary peace and rest, but once Xiongnu regained power or faced harsh weather, they would fight back to take more resources from Han. Although Xiongnu seemed to have done something strange or even barbaric, we, as history scholars, need to analyze their behaviors based on their living conditions and food supplies, rather than judging it by our own, contemporary moral values. After studying Xiongnu, we can better understand how humans lived and coped with harsh

environments, struck a proper balance between wars and repose in order to maximize their powers, and survived by challenging their moral and physical baselines, overcoming obstacles with the power of the human spirit.

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