

Primary Sources:

Han Expansion in the North



Introduction

Below is a series of the excerpts from the Han Empire that give us a sense of how and why the government attempted to expand in the north, as they competed for power with the nomadic Xiongnu, which ruled over a vast but largely decentralized empire in Inner Asia.

As you read each source, consider the following questions:

- What does the source tell us about why the Han government wanted to expand its political influence to the north?
- What does the source tell us about challenges that Han emperors faced in that expansion?
- What evidence is there that explains the strategies of imperial expansion that the Han government used to address those challenges?

Compare your answers across the sources. Consider how what you might learn in one reinforces, challenges, or complicates what you learn in another.

PRIMARY SOURCES

INTRODUCTION

NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE HAN AND XIONGNU

A HAN EUNUCH AMONG THE XIONGNU

TWO HAN OFFICIALS DEBATE IMPERIAL POLICY TOWARD THE XIONGNU

COURT OFFICIALS DEBATE THE STATUS OF XIONGNU CHANYU HUHANYE



Sima Qian

Primary Source 1: *Negotiations Between the Han and the Xiongnu*

This passage is the first of source in this collection that comes from *The Records of the Grand Historian*, a monumental work of history completed around 100 BCE by Sima Qian (d. circa 86 BCE), the senior archivist at the Han imperial court. It was intended by its author to serve as a history of the known world from earliest times down through the time of Emperor Wu (141–187 BCE), who reigned during Sima Qian's lifetime. Sima Qian was himself a witness to the Han Empire's period of most rapid expansion. As court archivist, he had access to all kinds of government documents to assist him in his compiling efforts.

This passage describes the origins of the *heqin* policy, in which Han princesses were given to the Xiongnu ruler—the *chanyu*—along with regular payments of goods to prevent raids on Han border communities. The story takes place during the early years of the Han, when the Xiongnu were militarily superior. The immediate context of the formulation of the *heqin* policy is a rebellion by one of Gaozu's former allies whom he had set up as a "king" in the northern region of Han. The defection of these kings to the Xiongnu was a source of constant trouble in the early days of the Han.

Source: *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the Shih Chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 219–21.



In the seventh year Xin, the king of Han, revolted and Gaozu went in person to attack him. When the emperor reached Jinyang he received word that Xin was about to join the Xiongnu in a joint attack on the Han. In a rage, the emperor dispatched envoys to the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu took care to conceal all of their fine young men and fat cattle and horses, and let the envoys see only the old men and boys and the leanest of their livestock. As many as ten envoys made the trip but all, when they returned, announced that the Xiongnu could be attacked. The emperor then sent Liu Jing to go as his envoy. On his return, Liu Jing reported on his mission. "When two states are about to attack each other, it is customary for each to exaggerate and make a show of its superiority. Now when I journeyed to the Xiongnu, I saw only emaciated animals, old men, and boys. It can only be that they deliberately wish to appear inferior and are counting on surprising us with an ambush attack and winning victory. In my opinion the Xiongnu cannot be attacked!"

Emperor Gaozu



Model of Han shieldbearers

At this time the Han force of two hundred thousand or more had already crossed Juzhu Mountain and arrived for the assault. The emperor began to curse Liu Jing angrily. "This scoundrel from Qi has managed to win himself a position with his wagging tongue, and now he comes with his foolish lies and tries to halt my army!" He had Liu Jing fettered and bound at Guangwu, and proceeded on his way as far as Pingcheng.*

As Liu Jing had foreseen, the Xiongnu sent out a surprise force and surrounded the emperor on the White Peak** for seven days, until they at last withdrew. When the emperor returned to Guangwu he pardoned Liu Jing, saying, "Because I did not listen to your advice, I encountered great difficulty at Pingcheng. I have already executed the ten earlier envoys who advised me that the Xiongnu could be attacked!" He proceeded to enfeoff Liu Jing as a marquis in the Area within the Pass, awarding him two thousand households and the title of marquis of Jianxin.

Gaozu abandoned the Pingcheng campaign and returned to the capital, while Xin, the king of Hann, fled to the Xiongnu. Modun, who at this time had just become *chanyu*, had a powerful force of troops, including three hundred thousand crossbow-stretchers, and several times attacked the northern frontier. The emperor, troubled about the situation, consulted Liu Jing, who replied, "The empire has only just been brought to peace and the officers and men are worn out by fighting. It is not possible at this time to make the Xiongnu submit by force of arms. Moreover, Modun acquired the position of *chanyu* by murdering his father. He has taken his father's concubines as wives and relies solely on force to maintain his rule. Such a man can never be swayed by appeals to benevolence and righteousness. Therefore I can only suggest a plan whereby in time Modun's descendants can be made subjects of the Han. But I fear Your Majesty will not be able to carry it out. . . ."

"If it will actually work, why should I not be able to carry it out?" asked the emperor. "Only tell me what I must do!"



Sculpture of Modun (Modu) Chanyu

* Guangwu (present-day Daixian, Shanxi Province) and Pincheng (present-day Datong, Shanxi Provinces) are both in the north, on the border between the Han Empire and the Xiongnu. These were sites of battles in the Han-Xiongnu War, in 100 BCE.

** This likely refers to *Ta Pai Ting (The Great White Peak)*, in northern China.

"If you could see your way clear to send your eldest daughter by the empress to be the consort of Modun, accompanied by a generous dowry and presents, then Modun, knowing that a daughter of the emperor and empress of the Han must be generously provided for, would with barbarian cunning receive her well and make her his legitimate consort and, if she had a son, he would make him heir apparent. Why would he do this? Because of his greed for Han valuables and gifts. Your Majesty might at various times during the year inquire of his health and send presents of whatever Han has a surplus of, and the Xiongnu lack. At the same time you could dispatch rhetoricians to begin expounding to the barbarians in a tactful way the principles of etiquette and moral behavior. As long as Modun is alive he will always be your son-in-law, and when he dies your grandson by your daughter will succeed him as *chanyu*. And who ever heard of a grandson trying to treat his grandfather as an equal? Thus, your soldiers need fight no battles, and yet the Xiongnu will gradually become your subjects. If, however, Your Majesty cannot send the eldest princess, but should attempt to deceive Modun by sending someone else and having the princesses and their ladies in waiting address her as 'Princess,' I fear he would discover the deception and be unwilling to pay her any honor, so that no advantage would be gained."

"Excellent!" agreed the emperor, and prepared to send the eldest princess, but Empress Lü*** day and night wept and pleaded, saying, "The only children I have are the heir apparent and this one girl! How can you bear to cast her away to the Xiongnu?"

In the end the emperor could not bring himself to send the princess, but instead selected the daughter of another family and, calling her the eldest princess, sent her to marry Modun, dispatching Liu Jing to go along at the same time and conclude a peace treaty.



Contemporary depiction of a Xiongnu marriage ceremony

*** Lü Zhi (241-180 BCE) was empress consort to Emperor Gaozu.

Primary Source 2: *A Han Eunuch Among the Xiongnu*

Like the last passage, this text comes from Sima Qian's *The Records of the Grand Historian*, which dates to roughly 100 BCE. This passage describes Zhonghang Yue, a Han eunuch who defected to the Xiongnu. Sima Qian could not have witnessed any of the dialogues reported here, but these quasi-fictional accounts nevertheless capture some of the dynamics of the *heqin* policy. It is useful to evaluate the effectiveness of the *heqin* policy as well as to assess how ideas about cultural differences related to political strategies.

Source: Sima Qian, *The Records of the Grand Historian*, vol. 2, rev. ed., trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia, 1993), 143–45. In a few instances, spellings have been changed for consistency within this module.



Sima Qian

The Xiongnu had always had a liking for Han silks and foodstuffs, but Zhonghang Yue told them:

“All the multitudes of the Xiongnu nation would not amount to one province in the Han empire. The strength of the Xiongnu lies in the very fact that their food and clothing are different from those of the Chinese, and they are therefore not dependent upon the Han for anything. Now the *chanyu* has this fondness for Chinese things and is trying to change the Xiongnu customs. Thus, although the Han sends no more than a fifth of its goods here, it will in the end succeed in winning over the Xiongnu nation.

From now on, when you get any of the Han silks, put them on and try riding around on your horses through the brush and brambles! In no time your robes and leggings will be torn to shreds and everyone will be able to see that silks are no match for the utility and excellence of felt or leather garments. Likewise, when you get any of the Han foodstuffs, throw them away so that the people can see that they are not as practical or as tasty as milk and kumiss!”



Xiongnu Leather Robe, dates to the Han era

He also taught the *chanyu's* aides how to make an itemized accounting of the number of persons and domestic animals in the country.

The Han letters addressed to the *chanyu* were always written on wooden tablets one foot and one inch in length and began, "The emperor respectfully inquires about the health of the great *chanyu* of the Xiongnu. We send you the following articles, etc., etc."

Zhonghang Yue, however, instructed the *chanyu* to use in replying to the Han a tablet measuring one foot two inches, decorated with broad stamps and great long seals, and worded in the following extravagant manner: "The great *chanyu* of the Xiongnu, born of Heaven and Earth and ordained by the sun and moon, respectfully inquires about the health of the Han emperor. We send you the following articles etc., etc."

When one of the Han envoys to the Xiongnu remarked scornfully that Xiongnu custom showed no respect for the aged, Zhonghang Yue began to berate him: "According to Han custom," he said, "when the young men are called into military service and sent off with the army to garrison the frontier, do not their old parents at home voluntarily give up their warm clothing and tasty food so that there will be enough to provide for the troops?"

"Yes, they do," admitted the Han envoy.

"The Xiongnu make it clear that warfare is their business. And since the old and weak are not capable of fighting, the best food and drink are naturally allotted to the young men in the prime of life. So the young men are willing to fight for defense of the nation, and both fathers and sons are able to live out their lives in security. How can you say that the Xiongnu despise the aged?"



...After this, whenever the Han envoys would launch into any sermons or orations, Zhonghang Yue would cut them off at once. "Not so much talk from the Han envoys! Just make sure that the silks and grainstuffs you bring to the Xiongnu are of the right measure and quality, that's all. What's the need for talking? If the goods you deliver are up to measure and of good quality, all right. But if there is any deficiency or the quality is no good, then when the autumn harvest comes we will take our horses and trample all over your crops!"

A 2nd-1st century BCE belt buckle found in Tajikistan. It depicts a nomadic horseman spearing a boar, with characteristically Xiongnu horse trappings.



Xiongnu empire, c. 150 BCE (above); belt buckle of nomad family, 2nd-1st century BCE (below)





Ban Gu

Primary Source 3: *Two Han Officials Debate Imperial Policy Towards the Xiongnu*

This passage comes from a work titled *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, completed principally by a historian and official at the imperial court named Ban Gu (32-92 CE), with some parts likely to have been written by his younger sister Ban Zhao (ca. 48-116 CE). This work was intended as a history of the first two centuries of the Han. Writing in the first century CE, Ban Gu and Ban Zhao were able to cover the period after Sima Qian's death.

The passage below records a debate held at the court of Emperor Wu (r. 141-87 BCE) in 134 BCE. By this time, the failure of the *heqin* policy to prevent Xiongnu attacks had been apparent for decades, and the officials were discussing whether the policy might be abandoned in favor of more aggressive tactics. One official, Han Anguo, argued in favor of maintaining the *heqin* policy, while another official Wang Hui argued for expansion.

Source: Translation by Andrew Hardy from Ban Gu. *Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 2398-2404; <https://ctext.org/han-shu/dou-tian-guan-han-zhuan>.

Han Anguo: "Fighting a thousand *li** away, the army will gain no advantage. Now, the Xiongnu depend on the hooves of their horses, and in their chests beat the hearts of beasts. Moving around and swarming together like birds, they are impossible to control. To gain their territory, it is not enough to expand. To contain their multitudes, it is not enough to draw a border. Since remote antiquity, they have never submitted. If Han were to launch an expedition over thousands of *li* to gain advantage, then the soldiers and horses would be exhausted, and the enemy could overwhelm them in their weakness. This undoubtedly would be dangerous. Thus I believe that *heqin* is better than fighting."



Contemporary depiction of Xiongnu in ceremony with a visitor

* A unit of distance, about 1/2 of a mile (or roughly 1/2 a kilometer).

** The Five Emperors and Three Kings were ancient sage rulers seen as models for good governance. In the Han imagination, "ritual" and "music" symbolized social and political order. Wang Hui's point here is that each of these sage rulers adopted different policies and institutions.

Wang Hui: "Not so! I have heard that the Five Emperors did not replicate each other's rituals, nor did the Three Kings repeat each other's music.** This was not because they opposed each other, but because they each followed what suited their times. Gaozu dressed in stout armor and carried sharp weapons, concealed by fog, drenched by frost and snow, fought for over ten years. The reason he did not avenge his defeat by the Xiongnu at Pingcheng is that one cannot use force if one does not have the capacity. So, he put the hearts and minds of the world at rest. But now, there are frequent disturbances at the border, soldiers are wounded and killed, and the roads of the Central States are filled with carriages carting home the dead. This is what grieves the benevolent man. Thus I say we should strike."



Early Xiongnu gold crown

Han Anguo: "Not so! I have heard that one should not alter one's line of business unless it would increase profits tenfold, nor should one change strategies unless it would multiply one's achievements by a hundred...Since time immemorial, the barbarians have not shared by our ritual calendar or ceremonial garments. Without a show of force, they cannot be controlled, and the border cannot be pacified. The sage kings of old believed that such remote, ungovernable people could not trouble the Central States. But the Xiongnu are fast and nimble, daring and keen soldiers. They arrive like sudden gust of wind, and disappear like a bolt of lightning. They live by herding and hunting with bow and arrow, they follow their herds as they seek pasture, and have no fixed dwellings. They cannot be governed. In recent times they have made the commanderies on the border abandon farming and weaving in order to support their needs. We are no match for their power."

Wang Hui: "Not so! I have heard that the sage adapts to the times just as the phoenix floats on the wind. In the past, Duke Mu of the state of Qin made his capital at Yong and possessed 300 *li* of territory. Being attuned to the changes of the times, he attacked the Western Rong barbarians,[†] expanded his territory by a thousand *li*, and united fourteen states, including the areas of Longxi and Beidi.[‡] Later, Meng Tian[§] attacked the northern barbarians and expanded its territory by several thousand *li*, making the Yellow River its border, and piling up stones for fortifications and planting trees as its border passes. The Xiongnu did not even dare let the horses drink from the Yellow River, and only after they had set up beacon fires did they feel safe to let their horses graze. It is clear that the Xiongnu can only be pacified with might, and cannot be nurtured with benevolence. Now, when the Central States is prosperous again, we can call on 10,000 times the resources. If we sent one out of a hundred to attack the Xiongnu, it would be like bursting a malignant by shooting it with a crossbow! Nothing would stand in our way."

*** Duke Mu of Qin (d.621 BCE) had been a Qin duke in far west of the Zhou Kingdom.

[†] The Xirong or Rong people were a nomadic people to the west, known to the Han as one of the Four Barbarians living outside the borders of the empire.

[‡] At the time, these were Han commanderies in the northwest.

[§] A general of the Qin empire in the third century BCE.

Primary Source 4: *Court Officials* *Debate the Status of Xiongnu* *Chanyu Huhanye*



Ban Zhao

Like the preceding text, this passage comes from Ban Gu and Ban Zhao's *History of the Former Han Dynasty*. This selection records a debate held at the court of Emperor Xuan (reign, 74–49) around 51 BC, when a Xiongnu chanyu named Huhanye came to submit to the Han emperor.

Han officials debated how to choreograph the ceremonies for this momentous, unprecedented state visit. This was of utmost importance, because the state rituals would be full of implications concerning the political status of the Xiongnu with respect to the Han. The central question in this debate was how to label the Xiongnu in terms of their cultural distance from the Han and their degree of subordination to the emperor. The more culturally similar, the more the Xiongnu would be expected to abide by the Han political hierarchy, and the more the Han would be obligated to punish any perceived insult. The more culturally distant, the more the Han could treat the Xiongnu as a guest who need not be expected to follow Han norms.

Source: Translation by Andrew Hardy from Ban Gu. *Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 3282-3; <https://ctext.org/han-shu/xiao-wang-zhi-zhuan>

At first, when the Huhanye *chanyu* was coming to court, the emperor ordered his ministers to discuss the proper ceremonies with which to meet him. The Prime Minister Huang Ba and the Imperial Counsellor Yu Dingguo argued the following:

"In the institutions of the sage kings, the ruler spread his influence and practiced the rites. He treated the capital as superior to the rest of the states of the Central Plains, and the states of the Central Plains as superior to the barbarians. As the *Odes* say:

'He followed the precepts of ritual and did not overstep them;
He obeyed the showings of Heaven and carried them out.
Xiangtu was very glorious;
Beyond the seas he ruled!'

Your majesty's charismatic influence fills Heaven and Earth, extending over the four quarters. The *chanyu*, turning toward your example and longing to emulate you, comes to present treasures and pay his respects at court. Since ancient times this has not been seen. The *chanyu* should be received according to the rites for receiving a noble of the Han realm, but his placement in the ceremonies should be below them."

* The *Odes* are a collection of poems that form one of the Five Classics, which many Han thinkers considered to be the highest expressions of civilization. Many of these poems offered idealized visions of the Zhou and pre-Zhou past. This particular poem describes Xiangtu, one of the great rulers of the Shang dynasty, which preceded the Zhou. Translation from Arthur Waley in *The Book of Songs* (Grove Press: New York, 1996), 321.



Han tom relief , c. 2nd century

Xiao Wangzhi put forward the following opinion:

“Our ritual calendar does not apply to the *chanyu*, thus his country should be labeled an ‘enemy country.’ He should be received with the ceremonies for those who are not imperial subjects, and his position should be *above* the nobles of the Han realm. When the barbarians pay obeisance and call themselves ‘peripheral barbarians’ the Central States should refuse them and not treat them as subjects, this is the meaning of ‘loose rein,’ and the blessings brought by acting with modesty. It says in the *Documents*: ‘The Rong and Di** submit inconsistently,’ meaning that their coming to court is random and irregular.*** If the descendants of the *chanyu* suddenly were to scatter like birds or burrow into the ground like rats, and lapsed in coming to court, then they would not need to be treated as rebellious subjects. If we act with trust and deference towards the barbarians, then the blessings will flow without end, and this will be a sound policy for ten thousand generations.”

The Son of Heaven accepted this proposal, and sent down an edict, saying: “We have indeed heard that the Five Emperors and Three Kings did not extend their administration to those areas where their transformative influence did not reach. Now, the *chanyu* calls himself a “peripheral barbarian” of the north and comes to court for the rites of the New Year. But Our virtue is insufficient, and Our influence does not spread over a large area. Let the *chanyu* be received with the rites of an honored guest, and have his position be placed above the nobles of the Han realm. In the court audience, let him call himself “minister” and not use his personal name.

Wang Zhaojun, a heqin princess later sent by Han Emperor Yuan to marry Chanyu Huhanye in 33 BCE



** Like the Rong, the Di were one of groups of people whom Han officials called the Four Barbarians.

*** The *Documents* was another one of the Five Classics, containing speeches attributed to ancient rulers.

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