Interactions between the Xiongnu-Turks and the Han Chinese:

Sima Qian’s Bipolar World of Nomads vs. Sedentary People[[1]](#footnote-1)

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1. Dynasties Disrupted by a Little Ice Age

**north to south folk movements**

Challenging the conventional explanation by invasion, political disintegration of an overextended empire, unexpected coincidence of poor leadership, or social pathology, Weiss (1993) contended that the sudden end of Akkadian capital in Syria c.2200 BCE was caused by an abrupt climate change (to long-term drought) that lasted until 1900 BCE. Weiss had only an incomplete mosaic of hard data in 1993, but we now have the (GISP2) proxies to climate changes such as the values of dust and sea salt between 2200-1900 BCE to support his contention of extraordinary cooling and drying. The signals of abrupt climate change (that left their imprint on the ice laid down in Greenland) show up around the world, suggesting that the events that made life difficult at Akkadian also impacted other civilizations at that same time.1

Lamb (1995: 161-2) contends that the migrations of peoples in the last millennium before Christ were predominantly in one direction, from **north to south**. Much of the period known as the Warring States period was a time of confusion in China. Lamb believes that there was a spreading out of Arctic cold air of which we have unmistakable evidence.2

Knowledge of Holocene glacial history is still very fragmentary, and there is too little data to build up a reliable picture, but I take the period c.400 BCE-300 CE for a Little Ice Age, the beginning of which coincided with the formal beginning of the Warring States period (403-221 BCE) in the eastern world, and also with the beginning of the Great Celtic Migrations (c.400-178 BCE) in the western world.

The changes in climate create geographical vacancies and new attractions as the colder climate drives the population to a warmer region.3 Adaptation does not mean staying in one place regardless of what happens. Habitat tracking, i.e., moving to where the grass is greener, is a fundamental cultural adaptation to conditions hostile to life.4 This chapter examines what Lamb calls the North-to-South Movements in the eastern world.

**formation of warrior nomadism and an expansionary cycle**

According to Barfield (1989: 1), “around 800 BCE, the Eurasian steppe underwent a profound cultural transformation that was to shape world history for the next 2,500 years.”Nomadic horseriding people migrated with their herds of grazing animals across the steppes, and their cavalry warriors terrorized the sedentary farmers, establishing powerful empires, until the revolution in technology in the mid-eighteenth century shifted the military balance of power in favor of their sedentary neighbors. The DNA of Homo sapiens had been fine-tuned to their life as predatory hunters and gatherers that had been practiced all over the world until the Agricultural Revolution which occurred as recently as some 10,000 years ago. Because human DNA evolves slowly through random mutation and natural selection, the nomads who practiced hunting remained, for a long period of time, the fittest and most successful predators against those who practiced agriculture. This continued until the Industrial Revolution, c.1760, revolutionized military technology.

Eberhard (1965: 112-122) contends that the warrior-nomadism in East Asia was formed after 400 BCE, commencing the violent interactions between the Han Chinese states (that eventually formed a series of mighty centralized empires) and nomads (that eventually formed an empire-like well organized federation). An expansionary cycle, eventually settling on coexistence, might be described as follows.5 The nomadic tribes near the frontier began to rob foodstuffs and luxury goods from the Han Chinese peasants. The warring states took precautions, built walls, and tried to stop the attackers. Nomadic federations came into being under capable leaders. The process of unifying and centralizing agricultural China was accelerated in reaction to the raiding nomads, and there emerged the autocratic Qin Empire (221-207 BCE) that could unify mainland China and expel the Xiongnu-Turks from the Ordos steppe. The Xiongnu came to be united under a capable leader called Maodun (r.209-174 BCE), who was able to unify nomads in the Mongolian steppe, subjugate the Xianbei nomads of the western Manchurian steppe, and build a great nomadic empire. The most violent interaction between the newly emerging Former Han Empire (206 BCE-8 CE) and Maodun’s nomadic empire (209-60 BCE) began. Maodun could easily capture Han Gaozu in 200 BCE and conquer the newly- born Han empire but, being apprehensive about a hardworking life of administering unfamiliar lands, made a rational choice to keep Gaozu as the ruler of the Han Chinese and enjoying himself by living the easier life of an extortionist, like a Mafia boss retaining a capable and proven owner-manager of a great restaurant in his domain.

Peace-by-extortion between the Han Chinese and the Xiongnu-Turks continued (somewhat chaotically with a series of Xiongnu civil wars after 60 BCE) until the complete demise of the Maodun’s empire and a massive westward flight of the northern Xiongnu in 89-93 CE. The Xianbei tribes from western Manchuria emerged as dominant extortioners after the demise of the northern Xiongnu.

2. Disintegration of the Zhou Dynasty in the Eastern World

**Warring States Period in the Eastern World**

According to the *Shiji*, “Viscount Xiang of the Zhao family of Jin…annexed the region of Dai, bringing his state into contact with the Hu-Maek tribes. Shortly afterwards he joined with the viscounts of the Hann and Wei families in wiping out their rival… and dividing up the state of Jin among the three of them.”This partition was officially recognized by the Zhou king in 403 BCE, and hence the official beginning of the Warring States period (403-221 BCE), with seven champion states, coincided with the beginning of the Little Ice Age (c.400 BCE-300 CE). 6

The rulers of seven states registered and mobilized the individual peasant households in order to impose universal military service. The warfare now included large infantry armies, cavalry, crossbows and siegecraft. 7 The northern expansion of Zhao, Yan, and Qin caused the absorption of the pastoral and semi-pastoral peoples such as the Rong and Di, and brought these northern states into direct contact with a new type of nomad, Hu. The states along the northern frontier soon learned the arts of riding and archery from the newly emerging nomad warriors, acquiring horses for cavalry warfare, using saddles, and wearing belt-buckles and trousers strapped in at the ankle.

According to Di Cosmo (1999: 951), the pressure from the new type of nomad caused such a small state as Zhongshan to start constructing long walls in 369 BCE, “the prelude to the building of the Great Wall.” 8

In 344 BCE, Hui Hou (魏惠候 r.369-319 BCE) of Wei adopted the title “king” that had previously been reserved for the Zhou Son of Heaven, and in 334 BCE persuaded Wei Hou (齊威候 r.356-320 BCE) of Qi also to take the royal title. Huiwen Gong (秦惠文公 r.337-311 BCE) of Qin as well as the ruler of Hann also adopted the title of king in 325 BCE, and by 323 BCE the rulers of Zhao, Yan, and Zhongshan all followed suit.9

The *Shiji* records that King Zhao of Qin constructed long walls [with tamped earth] “as a defense against the *Hu*” (sometime between 306 and 299 BCE), and King Wuling of Zhao also constructed [exterior] long walls (probably between 306-299 BCE), stretching from Dai (代) along the foot of the Yin Mountains (陰山下) to Gaoque (高闕). It is also recorded that Yan built long walls (likely late in the reign of King Zhao, r. 311-279 BCE) “as a defense against the *Hu*.” 10

The *Shiji* records the debate held in 307 BCE at the court of Zhao over the adoption of cavalry and mounted archers. King Wuling of Zhao then decided to change the costumes of his people, ordering them to adopt Hu dress (胡服) and to practice riding and shooting, and led them north in a successful attack on the Lin Hu (林胡). In the course of the third century BCE, the Xiongnu kept invading and pillaging the northern border. King Daoxiang of Zhao (r.244-236 BCE) let General Li Mu raise an army consisting of 1300 chariots, 13,000 cavalry, 50,000 infantry, and 100,000 archers, and lead them to annihilate about 100,000 Xiongnu horsemen. Li Mu (d.228 BCE) could also destroy the Eastern Hu and the Forest Hu. The Xiongnu thereafter dared not approach the Zhao’s border for about ten years.11 By constructing walls and learning riding-shooting, the warring states could apparently cope with the marauding nomads.

**unification of mainland china by qin shihuangdi**

Qin began (possibly with Xiang Gong 襄公 r.777-766 BCE) as the westernmost of the Zhou feudal states. Holcombe (2001: 16) states: “Much as Rome was originally peripheral to Hellenistic civilization, Qin once was marginal to the middle kingdom.” It was situated on the Wei River basin in the area of today’s Shaanxi province where the Zhou had earlier risen to power. It had been assigned the task of raising horses for the Zhou imperial house and defending the dynasty against the nomadic tribes. The Zhou as well as the Qin dynasties could develop military vigor from their contacts with the nomads and from intermarriage.

Holcombe (2001: 16) lists the milestones in the legalistic buildup of state wealth and military power by the Qin rulers as: collection of the first systematic tax in kind on agriculture in 408 BCE; mandatory household registration in 375 BCE (for universal conscription and taxation); reorganization of the rural communities into centrally administered districts (providing the foundation for centralized bureaucratic administration that was lacking to the Zhou state); and erection of standardized grid layouts for farmland in 350 BCE.

By the tightening of administrative control over the rural population, all adult males over the age of fifteen could be called to arms. Shihuang’di (政 r.246-210 BCE) succeeded in conquering the other six kingdoms between 230 and 221 BCE, proclaiming himself the First Emperor in 221 BCE. The *Shiji* explains: “Thus the empire was divided into thirty-six provinces, each province provided with a governor, a military commandant, and a superintendent. … All weights and measures were standardized, the gauge of wheeled vehicles was made uniform, and the writing system was standardized. The empire extended east to the sea and to Chaoxian (Chosun), west to Lintao and Qiangzhong, and south to Beihu. In the north fortresses were established along the Yellow River and then over the Yin Mountains to Liaodong.” 12

At the time when Qin Shihuang’di unified mainland China, the Xiongnu and Donghu emerged as the two clearly identified major forces outside the northern boundaries of China.

The *Shiji* states that in 215 BCE “Master Lu, a native of Yan, …submitted a document that said: ‘Qin will be destroyed by Hu.’ The First Emperor thereupon ordered General Meng Tian to call out 300,000 troops and lead them north to strike at the Hu Barbarians. The general invaded and seized the area south of the bend of the Yellow River. [In 214 BCE] the Xiongnu were driven back and the region from Yuzhong east along the Yellow River was joined with Mr. Yin (陰山)… fortifications were built along the river to protect the border. Meng Tian was also ordered to cross the Yellow River and seize Gaoque, Mr. Tao, and Beijia. Outposts were constructed in order to drive out the Rong people, and convicts were transported to the region to populate the new districts. [In 213 BCE] officials in charge of lawsuits who had been unjust in their dealings were transported to the Great Wall to work at its construction.”14

Mobilizing 300,000 troops, Meng Tian, who had been appointed a Qin general in 221 BCE, expelled the barbarians from the Ordos steppe (河南) in 215 BCE and started constructing, in the words of Lewis (1999: 629), “the earliest version of the Great Wall.”Shihuang’di sent uprooted peasants and convicts to settle and farm in the Ordos Loop region and to perform a frontline defense against the Xiongnu as soldier-peasants. Meng Tian continued the construction work (mostly with tamped earth), and awed the Xiongnu until his death in 209 BCE. 13

The Meng Tian’s wall consolidated and linked other frontier walls: that built by the Qin itself c.306-299 BCE; the wall built by Wei c.358 BCE; the wall built by Zhao c.306-299 BCE; and a Yan wall built c.283-279 BCE. It was substantially extended and rebuilt (with bricks) by the Ming dynasty in the sixteenth century. The Great Wall, running east to west from Shan’haiguan at the Gulf of Parhae (Bohai) to Jiayuguan in the western Gansu Province, marked the edge of Chinese civilization and the beginning of “barbarian” territories.

The Xiongnu, however, reoccupied the Ordos after the fall of Qin. The buckles and the button ornaments are typical of the Ordos region. The Scythian-type weapons, horse gear, and animal-style precious ornaments found at the Ordos sites, which were in use between the third and first century BCE, are attributed to the early Xiongnu culture. 14

The powerful but short-lived Qin empire (246-221-207 BCE) was succeeded by the Western and Eastern Han dynasties (206 BCE-220 CE) with a fifteen-year interregnum of Wang Mang’s Xin (9-23 CE). The following Han Chinese dynasties preserved the Qin concept of empire, of a supreme autocrat, and of rational units of local administration, as well as the Qin system of codified law. Unlike the Qin, however, the Han dynasty made Confucianism a state orthodoxy. 15

The Zhou tribe had at first settled in the Wei River valley, and then became strong enough to conquer Shang in the east. Qin was also situated on the Wei River basin where the Zhou had earlier risen to power. According to Lewis (2007: 258), the founders of Western Han, with its capital located in Guanzhong, “regarded the area ‘east of the passes’ with a mixture of suspicion and contempt …. [The literati] from east of the mountains …seldom participated in the great discussions of state affairs. Although men from Guandong (關東) played a larger role in Western Han government after Emperor Wu’s death, only when the capital moved to Luoyang did the situation truly change. The Eastern Han founder Guangwu and most of his followers came from just south of Luoyang. …With the easterners’ dominance of the court came a decline in the status of military expertise.”

3. Unified Xiongnu vs. Han Empire: Coexistence with Extortions

**Rise of the maodun’s xiongnu empire**

The Xiongnu *liezhuan* (Memoir of the Xiongnu) of the *Shiji* states: “early as the time of Emperors Yao and Shun and before, we hear of these people, known as Mountain Rong (山戎), Xianyun, or Hunzhu, living in the region of the northern barbarians and wandering from place to place pasturing their animals. The animals they raise consist mainly of horses, cows, and sheep… The little boys start out by learning to ride sheep and shoot birds and rats with a bow and arrow, and when they get a little older they shoot foxes and hares … Thus all the young men are able to use a bow and act as armed cavalry in times of war … [I]n periods of crises they take up arms and go off plundering and marauding expeditions. …On the death of his father, a son will marry his stepmother, and when brothers die, the remaining brothers will take the widows for their own wives. They have no [surnames] but only personal names.”16

The Han Chinese military system of the Qin-Han period (*geng-i* 更役) was to conscript all able-bodied males as a part of corvée obligation to the state. Under the Former Han system, all males over the age of twenty-three were subject to compulsory military service: one year in their home areas, obtaining military training, and, for some of the conscripts, another year of guard duty in the capital or on the frontier. They could be called up in the event of emergency until they reached the age of fifty-six, and the general to lead the army in a campaign was appointed on an ad hoc basis.17 The limited training period, however, made it impossible for conscripts to achieve high professional standards, and the short terms of service prevented the government from waging long campaigns or meeting other exigencies.

For the hunter-cavalry nomads, there was little distinction between civilian and military life. Riding and archery were daily routines, and they learned discipline and coordination in the seasonal movement of camps and tribal hunting. In war, each clan was grouped as a separate detachment under the command of its own clan chieftain. In the aristocratically organized nomad army, a hereditary bond of tribal loyalty united the captains of tens, of hundreds, of thousands, and of ten thousands. A nomadic state had effectively maintained a universal obligatory system of military service for their entire tribes. 18

Wittfogel and Fêng (1949: 505) state that “Superiority in horsemanship and archery indeed brought to the fore a new type of mounted warrior, whose attacks, from the middle of the first millennium A.D. on, challenged the traditional balance of power in all parts of the Old World. … The revolutionary rise of the cavalry occurred after many centuries of experiment with saddle and harness.” This was the “transformation that was to shape world history” until the Industrial Revolution. One may readily cite samples: about 200,000 Murong-Xianbei horsemen could occupy North China in 352; about 40,000 of Shatuo horsemen could destroy the Huang Chao peasant army and recapture Chang’an in April 883; and less than 150,000 mounted bannermen conquered Ming China in 1644. 19

The Xiongnu religion was shamanism based on the cult of Heaven (Tängri) and on the worship of certain sacred mountains. They believed that a shaman could communicate with the spirits of heaven to cure illness, curse an enemy, and predict the future. The spiritual culture of shamanism was common to all the ancient northern Mongoloid people. The cultural parallels between the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria include a regional variety of shamanism with a preponderance of female shamans. Even the Ainu cultural heritage includes the Siberian shamanism as well as the bear cult of Northern Eurasia.20

In 209 BCE, three years before Liu Bang established the Han dynasty, there emerged an extremely capable Xiongnu leader called Maodun (r.209-174 BCE). Under his leadership, the Xiongnu were able to organize their nomadic tribes into a unified force, converting the tribal confederation into a centralized empire. At about the time Maodun first became shanyu, the power of Donghu in the western Manchurian steppe had reached its zenith, frequently invading the lands of the Xiongnu. According to the *Jinshu*, Donghu had more than two hundred thousand archers.21 The situation was, however, soon reversed. In a surprise attack, Maodun defeated the Donghu c.210 BCE. The better organization and the able leadership of Maodun may account for the subjugation of the Donghu. “The few who survived the defeat,” says Schreiber (1949-55: 377), “withdrew into remote territories and split into two groups, the Xianbei and the Wuhuan. They were obliged to pay annual tribute of cattle, horses, and sheep to the Xiongnu.” 22

The *Shiji*, translated by Watson (1961: 134-6), states: “At this time the Eastern Hu were very powerful and the Yuezhi (月氏) were likewise flourishing. The Shanyu…of the Xiongnu was named Touman. Touman, unable to hold against the Qin forces, had withdrawn to the far north… After Meng Tian died [in 209 BCE] and the feudal lords revolted against the Qin…the convicts which the Qin had sent to the northern border to garrison the area all returned to their home. The Xiongnu…once again began to infiltrate south of the bend of the Yellow River until they had established themselves along the old border of China. Touman’s oldest son, the heir apparent to his position, was named Maodun, but the Shanyu also had a younger son by another consort whom he…was very fond of. … At this time the Donghu were very powerful and, hearing that Maodun had killed his father…they sent an envoy to ask if they could have Touman’s famous horse that could run 1,000 *li* in one day. … [Maodun] sent them the thousand-*li* horse. … [T]he Donghu…sent an envoy to ask one of Maodun’s consorts…and [Maodun] sent his favorite consort to the Donghu. … [The ruler of the] Donghu… invading … sent an envoy to Maodun saying, ‘…I would like to take possession of [an area of over 1,000 *li* of uninhabited land between his territory and that of the Xiongnu]!’ …Maodun mounted his horse and set off to attack the [Donghu who] made no preparations for their defense… [Maodun] inflicted a crushing defeat, killing the ruler of the Donghu… Then he…rode west, attacking and routing the Yuezhi … He recovered possession of all the lands which…Meng Tian had taken away from the Xiongnu [in 215 BCE]; the border between his territory and that of the Han empire now followed the old line of defenses south of the Yellow River, and from there he…invaded Yan and Dai … Maodun…[massed] a force over 300,000 skilled crossbowmen. …When Maodun came to power, …the Xiongnu reached their peak of strength and size, subjugating all of the other barbarian tribes of the north and turning south to confront China as a rival nation.”

The Yuezhi people, likely of nomadic Aryan stock, were driven out of Gansu in 201 BCE by Maodun. They fled all the way to Fergana, subjugated the Greek kingdom of Bactria (323-250-128 BCE), and established the Kushan dynasty that reached its height in the first century CE, extending its territory to Samarkand, Kabul, and northwest India.23 A thrust at one end of the steppe set in motion a chain of unanticipated consequences.

***Heqin* (peace and kinship) and *tributary* relations**

In 200 BCE, Han Gaozu (r.206/202-195 BCE) attacked the Xiongnu. Maodun’s forces could encircle Gaozu at Pingcheng (the present-day Datong district, west of Beijing) but Maodun (r.209-174 BCE) let Gaozu escape from the trap with a quid pro quo in mind. Han Gaozu established *heqin* (peace and kinship) relations with the Xiongnu in 198 BCE by proclaiming the brotherhood, and by offering imperial princesses in marriage to the Shanyu, lavish gifts of luxury items, huge subsidies (in cash, floss, silk, wine, rice and other foodstuffs), and subsidized trade at frontier markets. The Xiongnu ruler could secure a regular source of revenue and luxury goods to reward the tribal elite, as well as border markets to provide profitable trade for the ordinary nomads. 24 The Great Wall was accepted as the boundary between the two empires: “the land north of the Great Wall,” the *Shiji* writes, “where men draw bows, was to receive its commands from the Shanyu, while that within the wall, whose inhabitants dwell in houses and wear caps and girdles, was to be ruled by the Han emperor.”Frequent invasions by the Xiongnu, however, were to raise the magnitude of extortions. 25

According to the *Shiji*, translated by Watson (1961: 139-45), “At this time a number of Han generals had gone over to the side of the Xiongnu, and…Maodun was constantly plundering the region of Dai…[After Gaozu passed away] Lu Wan, the king of Yan, revolted and led his party of several thousand followers across the border to surrender to the Xiongnu; they roamed back and forth …from Shanggu to the east… Emperor Hui [r.195-188 BCE] and Empress Lü [d.180 BCE]…ruled the country. At this time the Han had just come to power and the Xiongnu, unimpressed by its strength, were behaving with great arrogance. Maodun even sent an insulting letter to Empress Lü [suggesting that, since both he and empress were old and lonely, they might get together and console each other]… When Emperor Wen [r.180-157 BCE] came to the throne…the Xiongnu…invaded the region south of the Yellow River… The emperor…sent an envoy [in 174 BCE] which read… ‘The Han has made a pact of brotherhood…and…sent generous gifts to you. Any violations of the pact….have been the work of the Xiongnu.’ … Maodun died and his son Jizhu was set up… Emperor Wen sent a princess … dispatching a eunuch from Yan named Zhonghang Yue to accompany her as her tutor [who] went over to the side of the *Shanyu*, who treated him with the greatest favor. … Zhonghang Yue told …‘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. …although the Han sends no more than a fifth of its goods here, it will in the end succeed in winning over the whole Xiongnu nation [unless you let the people] see that silks are no match for the utility and excellence of felt or leather garments [and] that [the Han foodstuffs] are not as practical or as tasty as milk and kumiss!’ … [H]e instructed the *Shanyu* on how to maneuver into a more advantageous position.”26 According to Di Cosmo (1994), the nomads had been self-sufficient in essential food, clothing, and shelter. Zhonghang Yue, the first in the series of distinguished collaborators to be recorded in the Chinese dynastic chronicles, advised the Xiongnu ruler not to disrupt the traditional self-contained, frugal life style and thus creating dependency upon Chinese grain, silk, and other luxuries.

Much of the silk acquired by the Xiongnu as tributes from the Han (*na gong* 納貢 in the name of betrothal gifts, *na* 納 *zheng/ping* 徵/聘) passed through the middlemen, including Sogdian, Parthian, and Indian merchants, and ended up in Rome. The Qin and Han empires with some 50 million people confronted the steppe empire of Xiongnu of some one million people, maintaining a kind of balanced partnership.27

Han Wudi (r.140-87 BCE) grew irritated with the expense and humiliation incurred by the *heqin* policy. In 133 BCE, Wudi had abandoned the appeasement policy and, by 117, threw the Xiongnu back into Upper Mongolia, instituting military colonies in Hetao (the Ordos Loop). Wudi greatly expanded the Former Han Empire (206 BCE - 8 CE), conquering the southern coast in Zhejiang and Fujian, and annexing Guangdong, Guangxi and northern Vietnam by 111 BCE. The Han troops moved into the Tarim Basin and conquered the city states there. This move was to “cut off the right arm of the Xiongnu” and to stop the revenue the Xiongnu derived from the city states of Turkestan.28

Wudi also destroyed Old Chosun in 108 BCE, in order to “sever the left arm of the Xiongnu,” and established the outposts of commanderies in the lower basin of the Liao River and the northwestern coast of the Korean Peninsula. Janhunen (1996: 194) notes: “As colonial representatives of the Chinese political state, the Han Chinese soldiers, administrators and merchants in Manchuria and Korea are likely to have been characterized by an inherent instability, which ultimately forced them either to return to the Motherland or to become assimilated by the surrounding Northern Barbarians.”

Many Han Chinese statesmen seem to have believed that the war against the Xiongnu had caused the demise of the Qin Empire.Wudi was also criticized for bankrupting the Han Empire in pursuit of the short-lived glory. Wudi had to provision large numbers of troops and promote victorious generals. To provision Chinese forces in pursuit of nomadic warriors into the vast steppe was immensely costly. Sima Qian (c.145-86 BCE), who was contemporaneous with Wudi, “attributes both the decline of the Han economy and the growth of administrative corruption to Wudi’s military activities.” 29

In Spring 54 BCE, long after the abandonment of Wudi’s aggressive policies, the Xiongnu accepted Han China’s ceremonial “tributary relations” — mere tokens of symbolic submission, being identical in essence to the *heqin* relations. This was an extortion sugarcoated with euphemisms such as “submission,” “homage,” and “tribute.” The Han rulers could at least “gain the ideological satisfaction of treating Xiongnu envoys as if they were from subject states,” maintaining the fiction of a Sinocentric world order. According to Jagchid and Symons (1998: 116), “although payments to the nomadic states are hidden behind the mask of carefully selected terms and couched in the rhetoric of tributary formulas, in reality many Chinese dynasties were presenting tribute to nomadic powers stronger than they in order to avoid conflict,” and “although extremely expensive to the sedentarist, trade and the presentation of gifts was infinitely less costly than military alternatives.”The punitive expeditions into the steppe *a la* Wudi were not only costly but perilous. A peace pact guaranteed secure frontiers in exchange for titles, subsidies, and border markets. The costs of subsidies amounted to only a fraction of the costs of maintaining troops on the frontier. The Chinese court, Barfield (1989: 248) notes, “could often count on military aid from the nomads to put down rebellions or repel invasions because the nomads wanted to maintain a profitable status quo.” 30

The *heqin* (peace and kinship) system enacted in 198 BCE was to give the Xiongnu princess-cum-gifts for peace between brotherly equal states, while the tributary system formally enacted in 54 BCE was to give the Xiongnu investiture-cum-gifts for peace and nominal submission as an outer vassal paying symbolic tributes. The Shanyu, in the words of Yu (1986: 396), “was treated more as the head of a rival state than as a vassal (不臣之禮).” Investiture implied the bestowal of official titles with seal and credentials, in return for homage and hostages that were seldom enforced. The “tributary system,” that came to be patronized by the latter-day Chinese courts, turned out to be more costly to maintain “than the earlier system of marital alliance (ibid: 397),” but gave psychic vainglory and enabled the later-day Han Chinese historians to write self-glorifying fictions.31

In 33 BCE, the Xiongnu Shanyu was presented with five women selected from the Chinese court ladies-in-waiting. One of these ladies, named Wang Zhaojun, impersonating a princess, gave birth to two sons. When the Shanyu died in 31 BCE, following the custom of the Xiongnu, she became a wife of the new ruler, giving birth to two daughters. She became the most famous beauty in Chinese folklore and an enduring source of inspiration in its literature.

Barfield (1989: 91) contends that the Xiongnu never tried to conquer China because their number of troops was sufficient to conduct savage raids to terrify the Han court but was too few to occupy the Chinese territory. Nor did they have the sedentary administrative structure necessary to govern the agricultural land. They employed terror as a tool to extract subsidies and discourage resistance against them. The frequent breaches of peace treaties were aimed at increasing subsidies. Petty tribal leaders in a centralized nomadic state were not permitted to negotiate directly with the Chinese court. The supra-tribal leader maintained his monopoly on the tributary system. The Great Shanyu redistributed the ever-increasing tributes extracted from the Han Chinese among the petty tribal leaders, securing their continued support.

**downfall of the Xiongnu empire**

The pattern of Xiongnu succession was very much lateral: from elder brother to younger brother until a generation was exhausted. The nomads preferred a proven warrior to an untried youth. By seniority, the eldest son of the eldest brother was entitled to the throne after all the younger brothers had died. However, the sons of the more recent shanyu could employ their fathers’ political allies in their own struggles for the throne among cousins. The system caused a cyclical instability for the nomadic empire, breaking out in civil war.32

Guang Wudi (r.25-57 CE) founded the Later Han dynasty (25-220 CE), and re-conquered South China and northern Vietnam. A civil war broke out among the Xiongnu in 48 CE that divided the Xiongnu empire into two parts. The southern Xiongnu asked for Chinese protection and were settled within the upper loop of the Yellow River. The Donghu-Xianbei of the Liaoxi steppe in no time threw off Xiongnu control. When the Xiongnu split into two groups, a court official named Zang Gong “advocated [in 51 CE] taking advantage of Xiongnu weakness by becoming allied with the Koguryeo, the Wuhuan, and the Xianbei to attack the Xinognu.”33 Guangwu’di, however, declared his position against war, and then simply tried to attract the Xianbei to the Han side by offering generous gifts and trade. 34

During 89-93, a combined force of Xianbei, southern Xiongnu, and Later Han troops routed the northern Xiongnu in the Orkhon region, which likely had caused their western migration from the Mongolian steppe all the way to the southern Russian steppes. The Xiongnu Turks of the west disappeared from history until their descendants crossed the Volga and the Don in about 374 CE and invaded Roman Europe under the name of Huns.35

The Aryans that had settled in the Altai region, north of India and Iran in prehistoric times, dispersed west and south.The Aryans occupied the steppes of southern Russia and western Siberia in the name of Scythians from the seventh to the third century BCE, and in some other names thereafter. 36 The Xiongnu and, in later times, Turks and Mongols from the Mongolian steppes were bound to have heavy genetic mixing with the Aryans (farmers or nomads) on their way west. 37

The Han Chinese had obtained the service of the Xianbei to fight the Xiongnu at a very high cost. The Xianbei of western Manchuria took over “all the lands previously held by the northern Xiongnu,” and emerged as dominant extortionists. A memorial submitted by Cai Yong (蔡邕133-92) in 177 is quoted by Yu (1986: 445-6): “Ever since the [northern] Xiongnu ran away, the Xianbei have become powerful and populous, taking all the lands previously held by the Xiongnu and claiming to have 100,000 warriors. … [R]efined metals and wrought iron have come into the possession of the [Xianbei] rebels. Han deserters also seek refuge [in the lands of the Xianbei] and serve as their advisers (謀主).” 38 A story told by the memorialist Ying Shao in 185 is also quoted by Yu (1986: 446): “The Xianbei people … invade our frontiers so frequently that hardly a year goes by in peace, and it is only when the trading season arrives that they come forward in submission. But in so doing they are only bent on gaining precious Chinese goods; it is not because they respect Chinese power or are grateful for Chinese generosity. As soon as they obtain all they possibly can [from trade], they turn in their tracks to start wreaking damage.”39

After the northern Xiongnu fled west, there followed a sudden expansion of the Xianbei nation. The Xianbei took over all the lands previously held by the Xiongnu, and a large number of the northern Xiongnu who had failed to run away, numbering 100,000 tents, declared themselves the Xianbei (皆自號鮮卑).The power of the Xianbei reached its peak in the middle of the second century, when all the Xianbei tribes were united into a federation under the vigorous leadership of Tan Shihuai (r.156-80). In 166, Tan divided his Xianbei Empire into three parts. Tan’s Eastern Province bordered on Puyeo and reached Liaodong, and included 20 Yemaek towns. The Western Province reached as far as Dunhuang and included Inner Mongolia, parts of Outer Mongolia, and Gansu. One of the Xianbei vassals in the Middle Province was named Murong.40 The History of Later Han records that, in 168, the Xianbei and Yemaek made a raid on the provinces of Youzhou (around modern Beijing) and Bingzhou (west of Youzhou).41 The Xianbei confederacy, however, disintegrated after Tan’s death in 180.

The 87-year period from 93-180 may stand as the first time for the Xianbei of western Manchuria to occupy and rule the Mongolian steppe. The Xianbei regime was representative of the Mongol type of social organization that, unlike the Xiongnu Turks, lacked an aristocratic social order among the tribes: “each tribe was essentially independent and equal to any other tribe.” 42 A capable leader could transform the tribes into military detachments, but as soon as he died, the federation broke up.

**to Encourage the Fragmentation of Nomadic Tribes**

Unlike the Xiongnu, the Xianbei had a weak confederacy under an elected leader with limited supra-tribal leadership.The Later Han records of 108 CE counted 120 small Xianbei tribes as compared to one or two dozen tribal groups whose names appeared in the reports for the whole steppe under the generic name of Xiongnu. Petty Xianbei chieftains, who occasionally united under a charismatic leader like Tan Shihuai, entered the tributary system of Chinese dynasties as small, autonomous tribes.43 To prevent unity on the steppe *a la* Maodun’s empire, the Later Han court had tried to encourage the fragmentation of nomadic tribes by providing titles and subsidies directly to the numerous tribal leaders. The Chinese frontier officials let each Xianbei leader participate in the tribute system individually, receiving titles and gifts appropriate to their rank, as well as the right to trade. The tribal chieftains were given titles, offices, ranks, and emoluments, alluding some sort of indirect rule or at least some political influence on them by the Han Chinese. The hierarchy of those titles was, however, simply the formalization of the existing tribal structures. The tribal chieftains kept ruling their peoples according to the tribal tradition. 44

The fall of the Later Han dynasty started with the Yellow Turban rebellion of 184. Government expenditures had been financed by taxing the less powerful and less wealthy households, while the large landholders were exempted from taxation. The peasantry rebelled, and the Later Han court had to depend on regional warlords to put down the revolt. 45 After the death of Emperor Ling in 188, the Han ruler was the puppet of warlords. Liaodong was occupied from 190-238 by the Gongsun warlords, who had established the Daifang commandery in the area south of Lelang from 196-220.

During the Three Kingdoms period in mainland China (220-65), small Xianbei tribes struck their own bargains with Wei, and laid claim to various frontier districts. The Cao Cao’s Wei maintained a policy of indirect rule over tribal peoples settled inside its borders, while providing generous subsidies and access to trade for those nomads living beyond its borders.46 The short-lived Western Jin dynasty (265-316) continued the Wei’s policies.

In 177, Cai Yong referred Ling’di (靈帝 r.168-89) to the “Construction of the Long Wall (秦築長城)” by the Qin and the “Construction of the Forts and Fences” by the Former Han (漢起塞垣) in a way to remind the emperor of the critiques exhorted to Wang Mang by Yan You (嚴尤 d.23): “The strategy adopted by Zhou King Xuan (827/25-782 BCE) of repulsing the invading barbarians may be rated mediocre; the Han Wudi’s strategy of waging the 30-year wars may be judged inferior; and the Shihuangdi’s strategy of constructing the Long Wall may be called no strategy (*sans stratégie*) at all.” 47 The civilian officials of the Han Chinese court, trained in the Confucian tradition, were opposed to offensive military tactics because they generated opportunities for the advancement of soldiers and merchants. They cited the wars of Qin Shihuangdi and Han Wudi as examples of bad policy for dealing with an area that China could never incorporate or easily pacify. They sought to maintain stability by a policy of appeasement under the cloak of the tributary system.48

According to Chin (2010: 316-7), “Ban Gu’s (班固 32-92) comments, or ‘appraisal’ (贊), to the Xiongnu zhuan [of *Hanshu*] offers an evaluative summary of Han-dynasty policy toward the Xiongnu. He distinguishes two main approaches used thus far during the Han dynasty—the *heqin* peace treaty and punitive military expeditions—and argues that both are doomed to failure. … He supports a third approach, hostile vigilance, which is called the ‘loose rein’ approach (*jimi* 羈靡) and involves neither military aggression nor political concession … reiterated (周漢之策 僅得中下) by Fan Ye (范曄 398-446), the author of the *Hou Hanshu*.”49

4. The Celtic Migrations in the Western World

**the Great Celtic Migrations (c.400-178 BCE)**

We now examine the “**north-to-south** movements” before Christ in the western world. The Iron Age in the western world is believed to have been initiated by the Hittites of Asia Minor, spreading the use of iron first to Egypt (c.1200 BCE) and then to the Celtic Danube Basin (c.750 BCE). The prehistoric Iron Age in Celtic Central Europe is divided into the first Iron Age of Hallstatt culture (c.750-450 BCE), named after the salt mining site of Saltzkammergut in Austria, and the second Iron Age of La Tène culture (c.450-50 BCE), named after a site on Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland.50

The expansion of Celticism had begun in the Late Bronze Age (c.1300-750 BCE), and continued to the Iron Age. The civilization of the Celts (from Greek *Keltoi*,designating the peoples living far away) in Central Europe, marked with such a strong artistic style, according to Hubert, was derived directly from the culture of Hallstatt and expanded “down to the fifth century, over Western Germany, Upper Austria, Switzerland, Lorraine, the Franche-Comté, and Burgundy.” 51 The Celts rubbed shoulders with the Germans, the barbarians of Northern Europe, labeled *Germani* by the Romans. The Greeks and Romans regarded the Celts also as barbarians, but as barbarians of a superior kind. Cæsar said that “there was a time when the Gauls surpassed the Germans in valour.”52

The systems of early Celtic chiefdoms (750-450 BCE) suddenly collapsed, and there followed a diaspora and a warrior society. Circa 400 BCE, the Celts began to leave Central Europe. The archeological data show that there occurred a major social change in Transalpine Europe at the time of early migrations.53 I define “the Great Celtic Migrations” as “the Celtic migrations beyond the pre-400 BCE domain,” implying “the Celtic drive to the British Isles, East Europe, and Italy in the La Tène period,” which coincides with the beginning of the Little Ice Age.

The Celtic Britons from Gaul, the agriculturalists, seem to have arrived in the British Isles en masse at the beginning of the fourth century, and their settlement seems to have been completed c.300 BCE. The Greeks apparently knew that the Celts had occupied the Gallic coast of the Atlantic Ocean before 300 BCE. The Celts must have appreciated the temperate climate of England, warmed by the North Atlantic Current and by southwest winds. “Agriculture took its place in a countryside which had already been adapted to pasture, and the English countryside remains the same today,” observes Hubert (1934-I: 213). 54

**the Celtic incursions into italy**

According to Hubert (1934-II: 9), the “Celtic invasion of Italy” was “the first of the great historical expeditions of the Celts.” Unlike the Celtic migrations into the British Isles, the great Gallic invasion of Italy was fairly well recorded by the ancient historians as an epic descent of the Celts into the warm and fertile land in the south.

Circa 400 BCE, the Celts of Central Europe improvised a confederation of tribes from different regions, formed a huge army exceeding 300,000 men, crossed the Alps with women and children, flocks and herds, wagons and pack-animals and a great number of chariots, and then marched south in search of a warm land.55 Cunliffe (1997: 75) states that “the three most developed centers of Early La Tène culture –the Marne, the Moselle, and Bohemia—contributed to populations which made their way through the Alpine passes about 400 BCE to set themselves up in the lush lands of the Po Valley.” Some tribes settled down at once, while others had to go further down and hence took longer to find their resting place. The Celtic tribes who were found at the end of the line were the last-comers.

The Celts first destroyed the Etruscans and Umbrians, and then sacked Rome in 390 BCE.56 According to Plutarch (46-119), Aristotle (384-322 BCE) had heard of the Celts sacking Rome.57 Alexander the Great was born in 356 BCE, and died in Babylon in 323 BCE. The Macedonians found themselves face to face with the Celts advancing from the Italian coast of Adriatic Sea in c.335 BCE.58 Celtic valor trumped Roman discipline for a short period of time, but collapsed before long.

The La Tène phase began in c.450 BCE, and a new elite society developed briefly on the traditional Celtic social system which suddenly collapsed by c.400 BCE. Cunliffe (1997: 272) contends: “The suddenness of this and the massive social upheaval which ensued make the events of the late fifth century BCE a classic example of systems-collapse. The causes are difficult to untangle but may in part have been the social instability inherent in the elite system exacerbated by population increase … What followed was an outpouring of populations into the Mediterranean zone and the east European zone. The expansion was temporarily halted in the Balkans by the power of Macedonia, but, following the death of Alexander … Celtic-speaking peoples thrust eastwards, establishing themselves in the Middle Danube, on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, [and] in Asia Minor.” The classical writers cite the two reasons for the folk movement: overpopulation and the lure of southern luxuries.59

I attribute the Great Celtic Migrations in the 4th century BCE to a change in climate. Hubert (1934-II: 11) speculates that: “In every case, it is the riches of Italy, the fruit, the figs, the wine, that draw the barbarians from their less kindly regions.” They terrified Etruria and Latium, accustomed only to wars between cities. The battle of the Allia was a rout. Until 349 BCE, the Romans remained on the defensive, but then the Romans turned upon the Celts, and established its supremacy over central Italy. Once in the warm and fertile Italian countryside, the Celtic warriors gorged themselves with food and drink. The Italian summer was too hot for these men of the north. There came the plague, likely the dysentery, and then the famine in the countryside wasted by war. Rome formed again with its army outside its ravaged soil.60

In 289 BCE, the Romans were defeated by the Senones, a Gaulish Celtic tribe, at Arretium, but they defeated the Senones in 283 BCE, giving the Romans time to wage the First Punic War (264-241 BCE) against African Carthage without having anything to fear from the Celtic Gauls.61 The intramural (i.e., intra-Mediterranean) First Punic War was followed by the Second (218-201 BCE).62 After their defeat in the battle of Telamon in 225 BCE, the Celts had ceased to be an acute menace to the Romans.

In 218 BCE, Hannibal crossed the Alps from Spain and invaded Italy. Rome, however, pulled back from the brink of annihilation. Hannibal recruited Celtic mercenaries who were not so enthusiastic.63 Perhaps the Celts missed their opportunity in Hannibal.64 The intramural challenge of African Carthage was removed by 201 BCE, and the Roman Republic began to pick off the remaining countries, achieving mastery of the whole Mediterranean.

In 192 BCE, the Celtic tribes of Northern Italy finally submitted to Rome. In 186 BCE, twelve thousand Celtic warriors with their families came over the Carnic Alps, but were sent back whence they came by the Roman army. After 178 BCE, the Romans did not allow the Celts to cross the Alps, though the resistance by the Celts remaining in Italy lasted over a hundred years.65 Illyria (which had remained free from the conquests of Philip of Macedon) was conquered between 229 and 168 BCE, and mainland Greece was taken over by 146 BCE. The Roman Empire in 133 BCE consisted of eight provinces: Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, the two Spains, Gallia Transalpina, Africa, Macedonia, and Asia Minor. Pressed by the barbarous Germans from the Nordic zone and by the Dacians from the east European zone, the Celtic civilization of La Tène was eventually absorbed into Rome. 66

The military technology of the Celts was very much inferior to that of the Romans. The heroic battle-fury of Celtic warriors could not win out over the highly organized and disciplined Roman military machine. Furthermore, the incursions of the Celts into the Italic peninsula occurred at a time when Roman vigor and vitality began to thrive in the milder Mediterranean climate. Celts were politically undeveloped, and they never had the leadership to overcome schismatic infighting and to institutionalize the centralized government bureaucracy necessary for a permanent conquest dynasty.

**sedentary people could cope with the nomadic incursions**

Hubert (1934-I: 15) contends that Celtic civilization “survives only in the foundation of our Western Europe and has made hardly any contribution to its superstructures.” By the fifth century BCE, Celtic civilization had reached its peak, and yet Celtic societies “missed the opportunity to become a kind of great confederation” or a “great nation” side by side with the Roman Empire.67 Their failure may be due to the commencement of the Little Ice Age that uprooted the Celtic farmers and stock-breeders from their pasture ground and ploughed hillsides. The vigor of migrating warriors failed to transform itself into ingenuity for empire building. The great migrations, however, gave the Celts “physical mobility and mental elasticity.”68 The Celts became fully subject to the authority and culture of Rome. The Gallo-Roman civilization became the essential spirit of France.69 Being located at the center of the warm Mediterranean region, the Roman Empire, in the form of a republic and then an imperial dynasty, was founded and flourished during the Little Ice Age.

The Celtic invasion, however, implanted in the Roman mind the idea of the vulnerability of the Italic Peninsula to the barbarian invasions from the north. The Celts were perceived as a menace to the Mediterranean Greco-Roman civilization, just like the Rong-Di-Hu nomads to the Han Chinese civilization. The fact that the Alps, just like the Han Chinese Great Wall, had proved to be ineffective and unreliable barriers prompted the Romans to adopt the “offensive strategy” of establishing their defense line thousands of miles away, across the Alps, Romanizing Gaul and driving the German nemesis beyond the Elbe-Rhine-Danube line. The Han Chinese, on the other hand, had adopted the “defensive strategy” of peace-and-kinship, or tributary system, in order to maintain the Qin Long Wall as definitive boundaries of Chinese civilization.

With the expansion of Arctic cold air, the Zhou dynasty in mainland China disintegrated into seven warring states and faced the marauding nomads, called the Rong, Di, Hu, etc. By constructing walls and learning riding-shooting, however, none of those Han Chinese states succumbed to the nomads. The rulers of the warring states mobilized the peasants, imposing universal military service. Like the Roman peasant-soldiers confronting the Celtic incursions in the western world, the Han Chinese peasant-soldiers managed to cope with the nomadic intrusions. In the east and also in the west, the empires located in warm areas could cope with the initial disruptions, and eventually gain control of the barbarians by fortifications, military expeditions, gifts, and subsidized trade. Qin Shihuangdi (r.246-221-210 BCE) tightened administrative control and armed the conscripted peasant-soldiers with long iron swords and crossbows.

At the time the first of China’s unified empires was proclaimed (221 BCE), the Xiongnu of the Mongolian steppe and the Donghu of the western Manchurian steppe emerged as clearly identified major nomadic forces. Shihuangdi, however, was able to expel the Xiongnu from the Ordos steppe by 215 BCE, and started to link the frontier walls built by the old warring states. The Qin general, Meng Tian, awed and terrified the Xiongnu. In mainland China, the short-lived Qin empire was succeeded by a series of Han Chinese empires (206 BCE-220-265-316 CE) which could keep the Xiongnu or Xianbei threats under control (through the peace-and-kinship or tribute system) and prospered until the end of the Little Ice Age, much like the Roman Empire in the warm Mediterranean subjugated the Celts and kept the German threats under control. The Han Chinese dynasties coexisting with the Xiongnu or Xianbei nomadic empires beyond the Qin Long Wall were contemporaneous with the Roman Empire (201 BCE-337 CE) subjugating the Celts beyond the Alps and coexisting with the German barbarians beyond the Elbe-Rhine-Danube line.

Offensive or defensive, neither the Roman Empire in the west nor the Han Chinese Empires in the east could survive the next round of massive nomadic intrusions in the 4th century CE.

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1. See Wontack Hong, *East Asian History: A Tripolar Approach*, Seoul: Kudara, 2012, Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)