Fall of Xiong-nu and Rise of Manchurian Nomad

XIANBEI REPLACING XIONG-NU

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Guang Wu-di (25-57), who founded the Later Han dynasty (25-220), re-conquered South China and northern Vietnam, and Ming-di (57-75) tried to restore the control over Xiong-nu. An outbreak of the Xiong-nu civil war after AD 47 left the Mongolian steppe fragmented for the first time in 250 years, since the rise of the nomadic empire under the leadership of Mao-dun in 209 BC. The Wu-huan and the Xianbei of Liao-xi steppe, that had both a common origin and language, threw off the Xiong-nu control.

In 48 AD, when the Xiong-nu split into two groups, a court official named Zang Gong “advocated taking advantage of Xiong-nu weakness by becoming allied with the Koguryeo, the Wu-huan, and the Xianbei to attack the Xinog-nu.” 1 Guang-wu-di, however, forcefully declared his position against war. In AD 49, Guang Wu-di attracted the Xianbei to the Han side by offering generous gifts and trade. After AD 58, the Han court made regular annual payments (to the sum of two hundred and seventy million coins) to Xianbei chieftains that amounted to almost three times the cash value made over to the southern Xiong-nu during the same period.2

During 89-93, a combined force of Xianbei, southern Xiong-nu, and Later Han troops routed the northern Xiong-nu in the Orkhon region, which likely had caused their western migration from Mongolia all the way to the southern Russian
steppes, passing through the steppes of Balkhash and the Aral. The Xiong-nu of the west disappeared from history until their descendants crossed the Volga and the Don in about 374 and invaded the Roman Europe under the name of Huns, led by Attila after 441. With Attila’s death in 453, the Huns withdrew back toward the Russian steppe.

The Aryans that had settled in the north of India and Iran in prehistoric times dispersed west and south. The Aryans moved down to the Indus Valley around 1500 BC, destroying the Dravidian civilization of Mohenjo-Daro, whose cruelty is vividly recited in the Mahabharata. The Aryans occupied the steppes of southern Russia and western Siberia in the name of Scythians from the seventh to the third century BC, and in some other names thereafter. The Xiong-nu 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. Historically, women have been much more genetically mobile than men because of brutal practices. Geometrically stylized Scythian animal art, like the Ordos Xiong-nu art of stylized animal motifs, was surely ornamental. Both the Scythians and the Xiong-nu were mounted archers, eating only meat, sleeping on furs in felt tents, and hunting enemy skulls to be used as drinking-cups.

The Xianbei of western Manchuria gained autonomy by default and absorbed the majority of the remains of northern Xiong-nu, including their land. We can see why the culture of Xianbei became rather Mongolic (or Turkic). Unlike the Xiong-nu, however, the Xianbei had a weak confederacy under an elected leader with limited supra-tribal leadership. Petty chieftains, who occasionally united under a charismatic leader, entered the tributary system of Chinese dynasties as small autonomous tribes. The Xianbei pattern stressed an egalitarian political system with no hereditary succession, in contrast to the Xiong-nu pattern of hereditary leadership and central authority. It was the demise of the northern Xiong-nu that gave rise to Xianbei power.

The Later Han court was willing to deal directly with minor Xianbei chieftains. It encouraged the fragmentation of nomadic tribes by providing titles and subsidies directly to the numerous tribal leaders. The Chinese frontier officials let each
tribal leader of barbarian lands participate in the tributary system individually, receiving titles and gifts appropriate to their rank, as well as the right to trade. They tried to handle petty tribal rulers separately and allow many jealous chieftains to obtain subsidies without giving up their autonomy in order to encourage them to oppose any centralization and unity on the steppe.\(^5\)

According to Barfield (1989: 85), the Later Han records of AD 108 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 Xiong-nu. For an elected Xianbei leader, however, the best strategy to maintain tribal unity was to raid China in combined military action. The military strategy adopted by Xianbei was identical to that of Xiong-nu: the savage raiding for loot followed by withdrawal to the steppe, alternating peace and war to increase subsidies or trade, and refusal to occupy the Han Chinese land.

The civilian officials of the Chinese court, trained in the Confucian tradition, were opposed to offensive military tactics because they generated opportunities for the advancement of soldiers and merchants (see Jagchid and Symons, 1989, p. 54). They cited the wars of Qin Shih Huang-di and Han Wu-di as examples of bad policy for dealing with an area that China could never incorporate or easily pacify. Stability could be maintained by a policy of appeasement under the cloak of the tributary system. For the civilian officials, paying off the nomads was decidedly a cheaper and better strategy than constantly fighting them.\(^6\) The tactics of the conquest dynasties of Manchurian origin (that occupied North China after 300 AD), however, were quite different from the tactics of Chinese dynasties, and created great difficulties for the Turk-Mongol nomads.

The Han Chinese dynasties (206 BC-316 AD) facing the steppe nomads were contemporaneous with the Roman Empire (272 BC-395 AD) facing the German barbarians. In order to drive the Xiong-nu away from the Silk Road from which they were extracting food and wealth, the Later Han court had let generals Ban Zhao and his son Ban Yong conquer the entire Tarim basin between 94-127, introducing Buddhism...
and Gandharan style Greco-Hellenistic art to the east, and facilitating the contacts with the western end of the Eurasian continent.

Being located at the center of the warm Mediterranean region, the Roman Empire flourished throughout the Little Ice Age (400 BC-300 AD), but the advent of global warming coupled with droughts started to activate all sorts of northern barbarians. This period coincides with the beginning of the era of Five Barbarians and Sixteen States in North China (304-439) and the Germanic Folk-movements in Europe (374-453). At the beginning of the fourth century, Germanic peoples, who had been playing the Xiong-nu to the Romans, were stretched along the whole length of the frontier from the Rhine to the Black Sea. The invasion of the Huns after 374 triggered a chain reaction. The whole of Europe was ravaged both by the wild Huns in continuous pursuit of other tribes and by the runaway Germanic tribes.

Lamb (1995: 160-1) notes: “By the fourth century AD, as we know from changes of level of the Caspian Sea and studies of the intermittent rivers and lakes and abandoned settlements in Sinkiang and central Asia, drought developed on such a scale as to stop the traffic along this route [Silk Road]. … The suggestion, made by Ellsworth Huntington in his book The Pulse of Asia in 1907, that it was the drying up of pastures used by the nomads in central Asia that set off a chain reaction of barbarian tribes and unsettled peoples migrating westwards into Europe, where they ultimately undermined the Roman empire, looks a sensible one in the light of this evidence.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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