27 | The Xiongnu, Raiders from the Steppe

WHILE THE FIRST Emperor of Qin was cementing his empire in China, a mighty nomadic confederacy was forming on the northern steppes. This was the Xiongnu empire, an assemblage of various tribes and nations first united by a leader named Modu (d. 174 B.C.E.). As pastoral nomads, the Xiongnu had no fixed homes, but wandered across the steppe with their herds according to precise patterns, taking advantage of all the pasturelands at the most opportune times of the year. The Xiongnu tribesmen were also adept at mounted warfare—it is sometimes said that they learned to ride before they learned to walk—and exploited this advantage by attacking and plundering Chinese settlements along the northern frontier. We know that the First Emperor was concerned by their presence: General Meng Tian, whom we recall accompanying Prince Fusu in death, was stationed far in the north, contending with the Xiongnu menace.

But the Qin dynasty fell too quickly to gauge the success or failure of its Xiongnu policies. It was a consequence of the Han empire's very stability that its emperors were the first to have to face the steppe-nomadic threat as an endemic geopolitical problem. No single strategy provided a long-term solution. Attacking the Xiongnu was not only costly and risky—the first Han emperor was almost captured on such an expedition—but also futile because territorial gains could never be consolidated: the steppe was not easily incorporated into the Chinese empire and economy. The Han administration attempted to prepare for the Xiongnu raids by building garrisons along the frontier, but this approach was hardly less costly and was vitiated by the static nature of permanent fortifications. Sometimes the Han government would attempt to foment civil war among the Xiongnu by supporting a pretender to the steppe throne and encouraging him to wage war on his rivals, but too often the Han backed a weak contender without the resources to affect the balance of power on the steppe. So most Han emperors considered it expedient simply to buy off the Xiongnu with annual gifts and subsidies. But the high price of this modus vivendi strained the national treasury, and many Chinese patriots considered it shameful for the empire to prostrate itself before a horde of barbarians.

The financial burden of defending against the Xiongnu began to affect the domestic economy. Partly to help defray the cost of maintaining a fortified frontier, the Han administration established government monopolies in crucial industries over which it did not wish to lose control: salt, iron, liquor. Intellectuals protested that it was inappropriate for the government to engage in commerce. The basic mandate of government, in Confucian eyes, was the moral education of the populace; as soon as the government used its position to pursue profitable ventures, it was thought to be abusing its power. Thus a great conference was called in 81 B.C.E. between representatives of the imperial government and the Confucian intellectuals who opposed its economic policies. The Confucians scored a rhetorical victory, but the government monopolies, far from being abolished, were only confirmed as a standard element of imperial administration.

A transcript of the proceedings has come down to us in the form of a text called *Discourses on Salt and Iron (Yan tie lun)*. To modern readers, the proposals of the Confucians seem ethereal and impractical, their repeated quotes from scripture pedantic and unworldly. From the point of view of intellectual history, however, the text is valuable because it documents the rise of a kind of fundamentalist classicism: the belief that the correct blueprint for all human endeavors could be found in the Confucian canon. This outlook was to become mainstream in Later Han times.

The selections below include excerpts from the chapter on the Xiongnu in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)* and the opening pages of the *Discourses on Salt and Iron*.—PRG

The Xiongnu [From *Records of the Grand Historian*. Excerpts]

The progenitor of the Xiongnu was a descendant of the Xiahou clan named Chunwei. Since before the time of Tang and Yu,[1] there have been [tribes like the Xiongnu, named] Mountain Rong, Xianyun, and Xunyu. They live in the northern wastelands and wander about with their herds of pastoral animals. The majority of their animals consist of horses, oxen, and sheep, but they also have strange animals such as camels, asses, mules, *taotu,* and *dianxi.*[2] Though they move their abodes in pursuit of water and grasslands, and though they have no walls or fortifications, no permanent dwellings, and no agriculture, they do divide their lands into individual [territories].[3] They have no literature or writing and seal their covenants with oaths and speeches. As children, they can ride sheep and shoot birds and rodents with their bows; once they have grown a little, they shoot foxes and rabbits, which they use for food.

The men are all strong enough to bend a bow and serve as armed cavalry in cases of emergency. According to their custom, in times of peace they follow their herds and shoot wild animals for subsistence; in times of crisis the people wage war and attack. This is their Heaven-endowed nature. Their long-range weapon is the bow and arrow, their short-range weapons daggers and spears. In advantageous situations, they advance; in disadvantageous situations, they retreat. They are not ashamed to flee. Only profit attracts them; they know nothing of ritual and righteousness.

From the rulers on down, they all eat the meat of the herd-animals and use their skins and hides for clothing, covering themselves in felt and fur. Those who are most hardy eat the fattest and choicest [pieces]; the aged eat the remnants. They value hardiness and vigor and depreciate age and weakness. When a father dies, [the son] takes his stepmother as his own wife, and when their brothers die, they take their [brothers'] wives as their own. It is their custom to have personal names, but no taboo-names[4] or clan names.

(The text now recounts the ancient history of the steppe nomads, coming down at last to Touman, *chanyu*[5] or king of the Xiongnu, who lived at the time of the Qin dynasty.)

The *chanyu* had an heir named Modu. Later [the *chanyu*] obtained a *yanzhi,*[6] whom he loved and who bore him a younger son. Desiring to do away with Modu and establish his younger son [as his heir], the *chanyu* sent Modu as a hostage to the Yuezhi.[7] Once Modu had become a hostage of the Yuezhi, Touman quickly attacked them. The Yuezhi wanted to kill Modu, but Modu stole their best horse, mounted it, and charged home. Touman then considered him hardy and put him in charge of ten thousand cavalrymen.

Modu then made some whistling arrows and used them to train his cavalrymen. He commanded them: "I will behead anyone who does not shoot when I shoot my whistling arrows." When he was hunting game-birds, anyone who did not shoot in unison with his whistling arrows was summarily beheaded. Then Modu shot at his best horse with a whistling arrow, and some men in attendance did not dare shoot; Modu promptly beheaded those who did not shoot his best horse. A while later, he used his whistling arrows again to shoot his beloved wife, and some men in attendance were quite afraid and did not dare shoot; Modu beheaded them, too. Still later, Modu went out hunting and shot the *chanyu*'s best horse with a whistling arrow; all of his attendants shot it [as well]. Thus Modu knew that all of his attendants were reliable. He accompanied

his father, the *chanyu* Touman, on a hunt, and shot Touman with a whistling arrow. His attendants all followed suit and shot the *chanyu* Touman to death. Then he executed all of his stepmothers and younger brothers, as well as those among the great advisers who did not obey him. Modu proclaimed himself *chanyu*.

At this time the Eastern Hu[8] were strong and prosperous. When they heard that Modu had killed his father and taken his place, they sent an embassy to Modu demanding Touman's thousand-tricent horse.[9] Modu consulted with his advisers, who all said, "The thousand-tricent horse is a treasured horse of the Xiongnu nation. Do not grant [their request]."

Modu said, "Why should I begrudge one horse to a neighboring nation?" So he granted them the thousand-tricent horse.

A while later, thinking Modu was scared of them, the Eastern Hu sent an embassy to Modu demanding a *yanzhi* from the *chanyu*. Modu again consulted with his advisers, who were all incensed and said, "The Eastern Hu have no decency, asking for your *yanzhi*. Attack them, we pray you."

Modu said, "Why should I begrudge one girl to a neighboring nation?" Then he selected his favorite *yanzhi* and bestowed her on the Eastern Hu.[10]

The king of the Eastern Hu, becoming more and more arrogant, attacked westward. Between [the Eastern Hu] and the Xiongnu, there was some unclaimed territory of over a thousand tricents that was uninhabited. Each [nation] placed frontier entrenchments on either side [of the buffer zone]. The Eastern Hu sent an embassy to Modu, saying, "Since you, the Xiongnu, are unable to occupy the unclaimed territory that lies between your frontier entrenchments and ours, we wish to possess it."

Modu consulted with his advisers, and some of them said, "This is unclaimed territory; granting their request and not granting it are both acceptable."

Thereupon Modu was greatly enraged and said, "Land is the basis of the nation. How could I grant their request?" He beheaded everyone who had said to do so. Modu ascended his horse, ordered that anyone in the nation who lagged behind would be beheaded; then he penetrated eastward and attacked the Eastern Hu. Since the Eastern Hu had earlier taken Modu lightly, they had not prepared for him. Thus when Modu arrived with his troops and attacked, he destroyed the Eastern Hu king, capturing his people and livestock. Once he had returned home, he attacked westward and routed the Yuezhi. To the south, he conquered the kings of Loufan and Boyang, which is south of the Yellow River.[11]

Discourses on Salt and Iron

Discussing "Roots"[12] [Excerpt]

In the sixth year of the Shiyuan era,[13] the Counselor-in-Chief and the Ombudsmen were sent by imperial decree to a conference with worthy literati who had been selected for that purpose. They asked about the afflictions of the people.

The literati responded, "We have humbly heard that the Way of ruling the people is to ward off the causes of licentiousness and indolence, broaden the incipiences of virtue,[14] rein in the profits of merchants, and cause humanity and righteousness to bloom. Only if one does not display profit [before the people] can the transformative effect of education flourish; only then can habits and customs be reformed. But now the territorial administrations have salt and iron [bureaus], the liquor monopoly, and 'equitable distribution';[15] they are contending with the people for profit. They dissipate the honest and kind simplicity [of the people], causing them to turn

covetous and mean. Therefore, among the Hundred Clans, few people pursue the 'roots,' and many hanker after the 'branches.' When the blossoms are luxuriant, the fruits decay; when the branches flourish, the roots wilt. If the branches are cultivated, the people will be licentious; if the roots are cultivated, the people will be diligent. If the people are diligent, then resources and provisions will be adequate; if the people are perverse, then hunger and cold[16] will be born. We entreat you to abolish the salt and iron [bureaus], the liquor monopoly, and 'equitable distribution,' so as to advance the roots and abate the branches, and increase the profitability of agricultural enterprise. This would be expedient."

The Grand Masters[17] said, "The Xiongnu have turned their back on us, rebelling and refusing to be our subjects. They repeatedly plundered frontier settlements. If we prepare for them, we will be straining the soldiers of China; if we do not prepare for them, they will invade and rob incessantly. The former emperor,[18] grieved by the longstanding troubles of the frontiersmen and bitter at their capture by the 'caitiffs,'[19] built mote-and-bailey forts with a network of alarm towers and garrisons in order to prepare for them. The funds available to be spent on the frontier were inadequate, so he instituted the salt and iron [bureaus], organized the liquor monopoly, and established 'equitable distribution.' [These instruments] increased goods and wealth severalfold, thereby mitigating the frontier expenditures. Now the discussants wish to abolish them. At home, this would empty the reserves in the granaries and storehouses; abroad, this would diminish the funds available for defense and preparation. The soldiers who keep watch in the forts and mount the walls would be made to endure starvation and cold on the frontier. How do [the literati] expect to supply them? To abolish [the monopolies] is not expedient."

The literati said, "Confucius said: 'Heads of states or households worry not about poverty, but about inequality; they worry not about underpopulation, but about insecurity.'[20] Thus: 'The Son of Heaven does not speak of much or little; the feudal lords do not speak of advantage or detriment; the grand masters do not speak of gain or loss.'[21] If one influences [the people] by nurturing humanity and righteousness, and cherishes them by extending one's virtuous conduct, then those who are near will intimately attach themselves [to the ruler] and those who are distant will gladly submit. Thus: 'One who is adept at attacking does not wage war; one who is adept at waging war does not lead his soldiers; one who is adept at leading his soldiers does not deploy them in formation.'[22] Cultivate yourself in your ancestral hall; then incursions will be beaten back and you can return your troops.[23] One who is a king carries out humane government and has no enemies in the world. What need is there for [frontier] expenditures?"

—PRG

Notes

1. "Tang" and "Yu" are alternate names for the Sage Kings Yao and Shun, respectively. Therefore, this phrase means that steppe nomads had existed for as long as Chinese historians could remember.

2. A *taotu* is a wild horse, a *dianxi* perhaps a pony.

3. Modern research suggests that ancient steppe nomads did in fact engage in agriculture, though to a limited degree. The biography of Modu goes on to contradict the claim that the Xiongnu did not establish fortifications.

4. In China, a ruler's personal name was taboo and could not be uttered by his subjects.

5. This term is sometimes Romanized in Western works as *shanyu,* but *chanyu* is the preferred pronunciation in Chinese dictionaries.

6. This term is glossed by commentators as the Xiongnu word for "royal concubine."

7. The western neighbors of the Xiongnu.

8. The eastern neighbors of the Xiongnu.

9. I.e., a horse that could run a thousand tricents in one day (approximately three hundred miles).

10. The parallel between this tale and the preceding one is evident: Modu first sacrifices a valuable horse, then a favorite concubine.

11. The reference is to the area within the northern loop of the Yellow River, often called the Ordos region.

12. Here and in what follows, the "roots" are understood as agriculture, the "branches" as commerce.

13. I.e., 81 B.C.E.

14. An allusion to Mencius.

15. "Equitable distribution" *(junshu)* refers to the government practice of transporting goods across the state to equalize the supply and thereby stabilize prices.

16. By "cold" is meant homelessness.

17. I.e., the representatives of the imperial government.

18. I.e., Emperor Wu of Han (r. 140–87 B.C.E.).

19. The Chinese referred to the Xiongnu disdainfully as "caitiffs"; the (unintentional) irony here is that it is the "caitiffs" who are taking the prisoners.

20. A quote from *Analects* 16.1.

21. This saying was attributed to Xun Zi in ancient times, but it is not found in his extant writings today.

22. This was a kind of bromide in ancient times; a similar saying appears in the *Guliang Commentary* to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

23. A similar saying is attributed to Confucius in ancient times; it does not appear in the received *Analects*.