A STEPPE TOO FAR
THE DESTRUCTION OF THE NORTHERN XIONGNU 89-92 AD

Introduction:
At the end of 88 Dou Xian, brother of the Empress-Dowager Dou, who held regency power for the young Emperor He of Han, proposed a grand expedition to eliminate the state of the Northern Xiongnu in present-day Mongolia. The plan was accepted and the first offensive took place in 89. The military operation was completely successful, and by 92 the Northern regime had been broken and driven away.

The destruction of the Northern Xiongnu represented the triumph of China after three centuries of conflict with the empire of the steppe. The grand strategy, however, had been opposed by a substantial group of advisers at the imperial court, and the end results were by no means so satisfactory as its protagonists in the war party had expected. The present paper discusses this enterprise, while considering also the back-ground to the planning, the arguments raised against the proposal, and its long-term effect on Han policy. From such a discussion we may learn something of traditional Chinese attitudes and policy towards the peoples of the northern frontier.

The restoration of Han and the division of the Xiongnu 20-50
After the fall of Wang Mang in 23 and the failure of the Gengshi Emperor of the restored Han dynasty, Liu Xiu, future Emperor Guangwu, claimed the throne in 25. Final victory in the civil war of succession, however, came only in 36, and almost immediately after Guangwu's success within China he was obliged to deal with substantial incursions from the forces of the Shanyu Yu, who ruled the Xiongnu from 18 to 46.

Yu was a son of the Huhanye Shanyu, who had been supported by Chinese arms against the rival Zhizhi Shanyu in 36 BC, and who had arranged that the succession should be passed among his sons in order of seniority. Yu's half-brother the Shanyu Zhi had maintained friendship with China, but in 9 AD the heavy-handed pretensions of Wang Mang's imperial regime drove him to hostility, and though Zhi's brother and successor Xian had been more amenable the accession of Yu

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1 The basic accounts of the campaign of Dou Xian appear in his biography in HHS 23/13:814-819 and in the Account of the Southern Xiongnu, HHS 89/79:2953-54.
2 On this first Huhanye Shanyu, see Loewe, Biographical Dictionary, 167-169 [as Huhanye Shanyu], and deC, Northern Frontier, 187-191.
brought the disgrace and exile of the pro-Chinese party from the Xiongnu court.

In 23 the Gengshi Emperor sought to re-establish the tributary relationship of the past, but Yu rejected the seal he was offered and claimed that since he had given help against Wang Mang it was the new emperor who should pay him respect. Predictably, neither the Gengshi Emperor nor his successor Guangwu were prepared to do this, and during the years of civil war the Xiongnu ruler supported the pretender Lu Fang 盧芳, whose puppet state was based on the northern loop of the Yellow River and the upper valley of the Sanggan 桑乾河. The intervention was of no major consequence for the course of events further south, and in 37 Lu Fang was heavily defeated and driven to refuge among his allies. As the Han government sought to re-establish control, however, the Xiongnu faced them directly, and for the next several years the Chinese were steadily forced back. When Yu died in 46 his holdings in northern China were comparable to those of his great ancestor Modun 冒頓 two hundred and fifty years earlier, and the imperial defences were pressed against the edge of the North China plain. ³

Yu's death, however, brought a political crisis among the Xiongnu. The Huhanxie Shanyu had left a testament prescribing succession among his sons on the basis of seniority, but the principle of brotherly or collateral inheritance was not strong in Xiongnu tradition, and the long-lived Shanyu wanted to establish the succession in favour of his own descendants. As his elder son died after a few months, however, his younger brother Punu 蒲奴 was challenged by his cousin Bi 此, son of Yu's elder half-brother the Shanyu Zhi.

Bi received only limited support, but early in the new reign the uncertainty brought by the change of rulers was compounded by a severe drought and by an attack from the Wuhuan 烏桓 people of the east. The new regime sent envoys to the Han court to ask for peace, and a return embassy visited the Xiongnu. Very possibly with advance commitment from the Chinese, Bi took the opportunity to seek their support for his claim, but his treachery was discovered and he fled south across the Yellow River to seek refuge in the region of the Ordos.

With Chinese encouragement, Bi took title as Shanyu in 49 and sent raids against Punu's followers. His forces were substantially smaller, however, and he was increasingly dependent on the goodwill of China. In 50 Bi was obliged to kowtow to envoys bearing an edict from Emperor Guangwu, and

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³ Details of this history are given by Bielenstein, RHD III, 94-102, and deC, Northern Frontier, 194-218. Bielenstein shows more sympathy for Wang Mang's policies than I do.
he was soon afterwards transferred to the city of Meiji 美稷 in Xihe 西河 commandery, where his Southern regime was supervised by a resident Emissary (使匈奴中郎将 shi-Xiongnu zhonglangjiang) and a force of Chinese guards.

The immediate effect of Bi's defection was a swift restoration of the Chinese position in the north. The Northern Xiongnu were weakened not only through the loss of Bi's supporters but also by attacks from Wuhuan and Xianbi 鲜卑 tribesmen encouraged by bounties from China, and within a few months the Han court was able to order the resettlement of the northern commanderies. At the same time the Southern Xiongnu spread along the territory within the frontier, and Bi's fighting men served as an auxiliary defence force, permanently hostile to their erstwhile comrades in the north.

The cost of the Southern state was not small. In the first eight years of the new arrangement, official gifts from the Han to the Xiongnu court was as much as Former Han had granted in fifty years, and by the early 90s the annual subsidy amounted to over a hundred million cash. In addition, some eight million cash was paid to various states of the Western Regions of central Asia (西域 Xiyu), while in the time of Emperor Ming 明帝 270 million cash was levied from the eastern provinces of Qing 青州 and Xu 徐州 to purchase the allegiance of the Xianbi on the frontier outside You province 幽州. These sums were paid steadily for more than a hundred years and, without considering the unknown amounts needed to keep peace with the Qiang of the north-west and the Wuhuan of the north-east, payments to China's nominal allies and tributaries may have amounted to as much as seven per cent of the annual revenue of the empire.\(^4\)

Such protection money, however, was yet far less than the cost of full-scale war. During the first great rebellion of the Qiang 姜 people in the west, from 107 to 118, the direct cost of twelve years military operations was estimated at 24,000 million cash, or 2,000 million a year, to which of course must be added the collateral damage to lives and property among the settled lands of the frontier, and the loss of state revenue which this entailed.\(^5\) The price of Danegeld was high, but the Han government could evidently afford

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4 On these calculations, see deC, Northern Frontier, 240-242. The amount of the subsidies to the Southern Xiongnu and to the Western Regions is given in a memorial of 91 from the official Yuan An: HHS 45/35:1521, cited by Yü Ying-shih, Trade and Expansion, 49-51, and the subsidy to the Xianbi is identified in HHS 90/80:2986. On the comparison with payments to the Xiongnu in the last half-century of Former Han, see Bielenstein, RHD III, 123 and 129, also Yü, "Han Foreign Relations," 397.

5 The costs of the campaigns against the Qiang are given in a memorial of the general Duan Jiong 段颎 in 167, HHS 65/55:2148.
it, and in exchange, at least so far as the Southern Xiongnu were concerned, the Chinese gained a buffer zone, dividing the power of their ancient enemy, with allies largely controlled by imperial officials. In commemoration of his ancestor, and as a means to justify his claim to the title, Bi also styled himself Huhanxie Shanyu.

**War, peace and settlement 50-88**

The arrangement with the Southern Xiongnu had critics among the officials of Han. In 51, the year after Bi had taken up residence at Meiji, the Northern Shanyu Punu sent ambassadors to the frontier at Wuwei 武威 to ask for peace with China. A full court conference was held to debate the question and, not surprisingly, we are told there was great difficulty in reaching an agreement.

On the one hand, the defection of the Shanyu Bi and his followers gave China an opportunity to take the offensive against the north, with a plausible pretender in the lead and strong possibility of alliance with the neighbouring tribes of Wuhuan and Xianbi, long hostile to the Xiongnu confederacy. The frontier generals Zang Gong 臧宫 and Ma Wu 馬武 argued that a single campaign at this time could destroy Bi’s northern rival and place him on the throne as a grateful client.

Even if such an offensive could have been mounted, however – and the north of China was still recovering from the ravages of war – it is doubtful how long either Bi’s power or his gratitude would have lasted. It had, after all, taken just one generation for descendants of the grateful first Huhanxie Shanyu to turn against the mistaken arrogance of Wang Mang. Once Bi was established in the steppe, moreover, he would be obliged to adopt a position of Xiongnu nationalism in order to maintain the loyalty of his supporters, and at such a distance it would be impossible for the Chinese to exert authority without another campaign.

Besides this, Emperor Guangwu had more general reasons to be cautious. The long civil war had left the nation exhausted, and part of the settlement had involved not only the disbandment of armies but the end of universal military service. In 30 AD the training program of Former Han, with local militias and annual reviews throughout the empire, had been abolished for the inner commanderies of the empire, and physical service was replaced by a tax commutation, the *gengfu* 更賦. During Later Han, local militias were

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6 On Bi’s secession and settlement with Han, see Bielenstein, *RHD III*, 116-131, and deC, *Northern Frontier*, 227-242. My interpretation below, however, differs from Bielenstein’s.

7 Bielenstein, *Bureaucracy*, 114 and 191 note 2, argues that the program of conscription suffered only temporary suspension. In deC, *Northern Frontier*, 48-50, however, I offer
used only for local problems of banditry and rebellion. During Later Han local militias were used for local disturbances, and many convicts were conscripted for garrison duty or settlement on the frontier, but free men from the inner commanderies seldom served in major expeditions. When they did, as the second century observer Ying Shao 應劭 put it: "... sending men into battle without having trained them is simply throwing them away."8

The end of military service over the greater part of the empire had the advantage of reducing the danger from local rebellion: one plan for revolt against Wang Mang had been based on subverting an annual military review; and the experience of civil war had demonstrated the trouble that could be caused by too many men who were armed and trained. For Later Han, the core military force of the empire was the Northern Army (北軍 beijun), with five regiments each containing some eight hundred men. This central strategic reserve of the empire was based at the capital and was directly under the control of the imperial government. There were also professional troops along the Wall in the northwest, supported by two recruitment and training bases near Chang'an 長安 and another at Liyang 黎陽 in Wei 魏 commandery in central China. As under Former Han, border commanderies were obliged to maintain a militia, and in time of emergency or major campaigns the citizen levies of the frontier could be stiffened by professional troops from the Northern Army and the great encampments, and assisted by non-Chinese auxiliaries.9

All across the north, however, Chinese population was in decline: in the commanderies about the Ordos loop of the Yellow River, individual registrations declined from almost three million in 2 AD to barely half a million in 140 and much of the loss may fairly be dated to the troubles at the beginning of Later Han. Even after the surrender of the Southern Shanyu, many refugees failed to return, and Chinese peasants were steadily replaced by Xiongnu pastoralists. As a result, though levies were available for emergencies, there were not enough men to keep steady control of the ground. Such a situation did not lend itself to major offensive operations, and in the early 50s it could well be argued that the new empire was not ready for a forward policy in the north.10

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8 Quoted in the commentary of Liu Zhao 劉昭 (6th century) to HHS 118/28:3622 at note 5: 不敎而戰,是謂棄之.
9 See, for example, the discussion of The military system of Later Han in Chapter One of deC, Northern Frontier.
10 deC, Northern Frontier, 242-246.
Given this situation, there remained the question how to handle the rival Xiongnu states. At the conference of 51 the Heir Liu Zhuang 刘庄, future Emperor Ming, set out the problem:

If we cannot at this time send out troops, and yet on the contrary we enter into negotiations with the Northern enemy; then I am afraid the Southern Shanyu could have second thoughts, while the Northerners who talk of surrender may not come to us again. In effect, the Han found themselves obligated to their client the Southern Shanyu, and to maintain his confidence they had to reject overtures from the north. Guangwu accepted the policy, and when new envoys came to Luoyang in 52 they were treated with arrogance: the Northern Shanyu should offer submission, not look for alliance. A final attempt in 55 received gifts of silk and an imperial letter but nothing more, and no further approaches were made. There followed some years of comparative quiet, but by the early 60s the situation was becoming less stable, and in 62 a major raid from the north was driven off by local troops and Southern auxiliaries. The Northern Shanyu once more made overtures of peace, but when an envoy was sent from Han in 65 the Southerners became suspicious and sought to negotiate directly with the North. In swift response the Chinese established the office of the General on the Liao (度遼將軍 du-Liao jiangjun), based north of the Yellow River in Wuyuan 五原, to serve as a guard against such dangerous collusion and to maintain a frontier reserve.

The professional soldiers of this new command were raised in central China and trained at Liyang in Wei commandery, so frontier defence relied that much less upon local militia. It appears, moreover, that this was the only major Chinese force in the region. The barrier of the Wall was maintained westwards along the Gansu corridor and the Juyan/Edsen Gol salient, but it was not manned in the Ordos region during Later Han. Further east, in the Sanggan valley and the region north of present-day Beijing, the Wall was primarily a customs barrier: a small force under the Protector of the Wuhuan (護烏桓校尉 hu-Wuhuan xiaowei) supervised the frontier markets while the

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11 HHS 89/79:2946.
12 HHS 89/79:2946-48; Bielenstein, RHD III, 124-128. Emperor Guangwu's reply to the Northern overtures was composed by the historian Ban Biao 班彪. Formally speaking, it accepted the possibility of peace, but it was couched in terms which were surely unacceptable.
13 Bielenstein: General Who Crosses the Liao. The Liao River, which flows through Manchuria, had given its name to a general's command in Former Han, but the office revived by Later Han dealt only with the north and had no concern with the north-east.
essential peace was kept by subsidy payments. In general, with too few men for linear defence the Chinese relied upon the mutual hostility of rival groups and the watchful eye of the Trans-Liao army.\textsuperscript{14}

A generation after the division of the Xiongnu, however, the Northern regime had somewhat recovered from the secession. They began to threaten cities in central Asia which were tributary to China, and they launched raids against the Gansu corridor and across the Yellow River. By the early 70s the disturbances were sufficiently irritating, and the power of Han sufficiently assured, that Emperor Ming decided on a serious attempt to establish authority in the further north. He was encouraged by a war party at court headed by Geng Bing 耿秉 and Dou Gu 窦固: both were men of leading families from commanderies near the frontier and both had gained experience and a reputation for planning in that region.

In 73, therefore, four columns set out to attack the Northern Xiongnu. They included the Trans-Liao troops and frontier militia, with substantial contingents from the Wuhuan, Xianbi, Qiang and Southern Xiongnu. Dou Gu made a successful attack in the western flank, paving the way for the reconquest of the Western Regions of central Asia by the celebrated Ban Chao 班超. The greater part of the expeditionary force, however, failed to engage the enemy, so the Northern Xiongnu were largely unaffected and their raiding continued.\textsuperscript{15}

Nature, however, now played a hand. A plague of locusts in 76 was accompanied by a drought, and dry seasons continued through the late 70s and into the 80s. At the same time, moreover, though the Chinese launched no more major attacks, they subsidised the Wuhuan and the Xianbi to raid their neighbours. Partly through these efforts, and partly too as the result of internal divisions at the Northern court, numbers of Xiongnu came to surrender in 83 and 85, while envoys seeking trade were sent to the Wuwei frontier in 84. The court of Emperor Zhang 章帝 approved, and for a short period there was a peaceful market in cattle and sheep, with residences allocated to the merchants, and gifts and rewards for those who came.

At this stage, however, the Southern Xiongnu again caused trouble. Concerned as before at Chinese acceptance of the Northerners, the Shanyu Chang 長, grandson of Bi, sent raiding parties north and west from the Ordos. They raided outlying groups of the North and intercepted trading caravans as they approached the Wuwei frontier, seizing goods and kidnapping the people. In the winter of 85 the local administrator Meng Yun 孟雲 reported this to the court, observing that the Northerners felt betrayed,

\textsuperscript{14} deC, \textit{Northern Frontier}, 51-52, 254-256, and 383-385

\textsuperscript{15} deC, \textit{Northern Frontier}, 259-261.
that they might well start raiding again, and recommending that the Han
government intervene to have the captives returned.

A heated debate took place, evenly divided between those who were
prepared to support their old allies of the South and those who felt
responsibility for the fate of the Northerners under their formal protection.
Eventually, at the urging of the minister Yuan An 袁安, it was agreed that the
Chinese would buy the captives from the South and return them to the North,
and pay blood money for any that had been killed.16

One may see here the influence of a peace party, but in practice the
Southern Shanyu had been given financial incentive to disrupt any contact
between China and the North so that, as in the early 50s, the nominal client
was controlling the policy of his patron. No doubt with encouragement from
the forward faction at the Han court, the Southern Xiongnu continued their
raids, and though numbers of Northerners came to surrender the hopes of
real peace were lost.

The Shanyu Chang died in 85, but his policy was continued, first by his
cousin Xuan 宣 and then by his younger brother Tuntuhe 屯屠何, who came
to the throne in 88. In that year Emperor Zhang of Han also died and his son
Liu Zhao 劉肇, Emperor He, succeeded him. The new ruler was a minor, so
empire was controlled by a regency government whose nominal head was
the Empress-Dowager Dou, naturally under strong influence from her
kinsmen.

Just at this time the Northern Xiongnu suffered a series of disasters. In 87
a massive raid by the Xianbi broke the defences on the eastern steppe and
captured the Shanyu. The unfortunate prisoner was promptly killed, his skin
stripped from his body, and the raiders withdrew in triumph with their grisly
trophy. As the new Shanyu withdrew his followers to the north, a dissident
group of nobles established a rival prince to oppose him and the state fell
into civil war. Military and political misfortune was compounded by a plague
of locusts which devastated grazing lands, and increasing numbers came as
refugees to seek the protection of China and the Southern Shanyu.

The ambitions of the Dou family and the debate of 88
The Lady Dou was a great grand-daughter of Dou Rong 窇融, leading
warlord of the northwest at the beginning of Later Han, while her mother
was an imperial princess. The Dou family, however, had been disgraced by
Emperor Ming, and when the Lady Dou joined the harem of Emperor Zhang
in 77 she made her way by her own youthful charms: she would have been
about fifteen years old when she was named Empress in the following year.

16 HHS 45/35:1518-19, the biography of Yuan An, and deC, Northern Frontier, 262-263.
The Lady herself could not bear children, but she consolidated her power by adoption. In 82 she had the current Heir dismissed, while his mother the Lady Song 宋 was accused of witchcraft and forced to commit suicide. The three-year-old Liu Zhao was named as successor, but his natural mother the Lady Liang 梁 soon afterwards "died of grief" when her male relatives were executed or exiled for an alleged treason. Taking over care and control of the future Emperor He, the empress had him treated as a scion of the Dou with no reference to his Liang maternity. When Emperor Zhang died in 88 the boy was aged ten, and the Dowager was in her mid-twenties.¹⁷

The head of the family at that time was Dou Gu, nephew of Dou Rong and great-uncle of the Lady Dou, who had been noted in the time of Guangwu for his aggressive policies towards the Xiongnu. Though he had been out of office for ten years after the family's disgrace under Emperor Ming, Dou Gu distinguished himself in frontier warfare and played a commanding role in the expedition of 73 against the Xiongnu and the subsequent conquest of the Western Regions. A minister under Emperor Zhang, he was a leading adviser on frontier policy, strongly identified with the forward party at court.

The elderly Dou Gu died, however, soon after the Dowager took control of the regency, and her brother Dou Xian became the senior male of the family. Arrogant, greedy and cruel, in the time of Emperor Zhang Dou Xian barely escaped disgrace when he attempted to extort land from an imperial princess, and after his sister became effective ruler of the empire he embarked on a series of killings, first of an official who had been involved in the family's earlier disgrace, then of the marquis Liu Chang 劉暢, who had gained the favour of the Dowager and whom Dou Xian saw as a potential rival for influence. He sought to put the blame upon a brother of Liu Chang, but the whole affair was found out, there was an appalling scandal, and Dou Xian was placed under house arrest.

It was just at this time that the Southern Shanyu Tuntuhe presented a long memorial praising the policies of Emperor Zhang, and particularly the manner in which the Wuhuan and the Xianbi had been used to keep pressure on the Northern Xiongnu. Reporting on the turmoil in the rival state, he proposed a decisive campaign to conquer the steppe. Since his own troops were too weak to manage such an affair by themselves, he asked that a major

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¹⁷ The biography of the Lady Dou is in HHS 10A:415-17. On her career and that of her family, see also HHS 23/13 and Bielenstein "Wang Mang, Restoration, and Later Han", 280-282.
attack should be made along the whole northern front, and suggested that if plans could be agreed by the autumn the campaign could begin that winter.\textsuperscript{18}

The Dowager first discussed the idea with Geng Bing, who had served as General on the Liao and was currently head of the palace police.\textsuperscript{19} Geng Bing was predictably enthusiastic, for this was the same strategy as he had urged on Emperor Ming in 73, and the present occasion was far more propitious. The Dowager agreed, and saw the further advantage that if Dou Xian was given command of the grand army he could cover his political and personal embarrassment with a cloak of military glory. So the plan was approved.

Immediately, however, there was a storm of criticism from the senior ministers. Though the Dowager had not referred her decision to the court, a series of memorials were sent in opposing the campaign and its strategy.

It appears that the protest was initiated by the Master of Writing Zong Yi 宗意 who, as a member of the Imperial Secretariat (尚書 shangshu), was responsible for drafting the orders.\textsuperscript{20} He was followed very swiftly, however, by Song You 宋由 the Grand Commandant (太尉 taiwei) and his colleagues Yuan An the Excellency over the Masses (司徒 situ) and Ren Wei 任隗 the Excellency of Works (司空 sikong). These three, highest officials of the bureaucracy, were then supported by all the ministers of the civil government.

There was a general objection that no court conference had been held to discuss such an important decision, but there were also specific arguments: that warfare could not bring long-term success; that the Northerners were not currently attacking the frontier but were seeking peace; that there was no justification for the cost and danger of a distant campaign in hope of a short-lived triumph; and that while the enterprise might benefit the Southern Xiongnu it could well turn to the long-term advantage of the Xianbi – it was certainly no advantage to Han.\textsuperscript{21}

The Dowager maintained her policy, however, and in the face of her wrath the majority of her opponents withdrew. Yuan An and Ren Wei maintained the argument for a time, but they were over-ruled and in the winter of 88 Dou Xian was duly proclaimed as General of Chariots and Cavalry (車騎將...
軍 *jufi jiangjun*), commander-in-chief of the expedition against the Northern Xiongnu, with Geng Bing as his chief assistant.

The debate at court was a crucial defeat for the peace party, and the composition of the two sides is worthy of note. With the exception of Song You, who came from the former capital commandery of Jingzhao 京兆 in the west, leading opponents of the forward policy were all gentlemen from inner commanderies, Yuan An from Runan, Ren Wei and Zong Yi from Nanyang. All came from established official families, and Ren Wei’s father had been a leading assistant of the founding Emperor Guangwu; but none had held any office in the frontier region of the north.

On the other side the Dou, as we have seen, were descended from the north-western warlord Dou Rong, whose support had been of great value to Emperor Guangwu and whose clan had held power and influence since early in the dynasty. The Dowager's great-uncle Dou Gu had been a major figure in frontier policy, while his associate Geng Bing belonged to a family from Youfufeng 右扶風 which had produced many senior commanders in the wars against the Xiongnu and in central Asia, and he had himself played a leading role in several campaigns. The Geng were not so close to the throne as the Dou, but they had been factional allies since the time of Guangwu and they had made a number of marriages into the imperial clan.

The rival protagonists thus differed in two ways. Firstly, the Dou and the Geng were connected to the imperial house while their opponents owed their authority to the regular bureaucracy. Though many commentators class the two groups together, I believe that it is appropriate to distinguish the "aristocracy" represented by the Dou, the Geng and other great families which regularly inter-married with the Liu clan, from the "gentry" who had substantial landed estates but could rarely look for such connection and who held their political influence through official positions. There is frequent and ample evidence of an innate hostility between the two groups: the extravagant relatives and favourites of the ruler; and the conservative, often moralistic, officials of the outer court.

Secondly, moreover, while the Dou and the Geng had a long history of involvement with warfare and strategy on the frontier, the background and experience of Yuan An and his colleagues meant that their chief interests lay in the heartland of the empire, not on the more distant borders. So the ambitious projects of the imperial government were opposed by men from the local regions that would have to pay for them with their taxes.

Apart from the personal reasons of the Dowager for giving her brother Dou Xian the opportunity for command, therefore, her family and faction were primarily concerned with the central authority of the empire, its
expansion and prestige. In terms defined by Michael Loewe, this group held the "Modernist" view of a powerful state, while their civil service opponents, "Reformists" in Loewe's nomenclature, placed emphasis on proper conduct and morality.\textsuperscript{22}

Though the division between the two parties remained firm, the Grand Commandant Song You was an exception. Initially allied to Yuan An, Ren Wei and the ministers at court, he withdrew his support at the first sign of the Dowager's displeasure, he took no part in subsequent protests, and he was later known as a supporter of the Dou family. Unlike the others, Song You came from the territory of the old capital Chang'an, closer to the homeland of the Geng and the Dou, and it is probable that some regional interest attracted him to their view of the world — though he may also have had personal reasons for accepting pressure from the throne.

Leaving aside such background, however, both sides had arguments to support their positions. It was possible that a grand expedition might settle the problems of the frontier; and some modern historians have endorsed the strategy.\textsuperscript{23} It was equally arguable that the campaign as proposed was morally unjustified, that the cost would have serious effect upon imperial resources of men and money, and that in the long term it would lead to further instability. Events would prove which theory was correct.

\textit{The destruction of the Northern Shanyu 89-91}

The army was prepared during the winter of 88/89. At the core of the force were the regiments of the Northern Army, central reserve of the empire, together with regular troops from the command of the General on the Liao and the camps at Liyang and in Youfufeng. There were also levies of frontier militia, contingents from the Wuhuan in the east and from the Qiang of Liang province in the west, and of course the main army of the Southern Xiongnu. The total was over forty thousand, and perhaps three-quarters of that number were non-Chinese auxiliaries.

In the summer of 89 the army advanced from the frontier in three columns to rendezvous at Zhuoye Mountain, the first high ground of the Mongolian steppe. From here a large detachment was sent west along the northern flank of the Altai Mountains: it was commanded by Yan Pan, a Senior Colonel (副校尉), with two members of the Geng family on his staff, and accompanied by horsemen of the Southern Xiongnu. In the major fighting of the campaign they defeated the Northern Shanyu by Jiluo Mountain and pursued him to the northwest. It is said that they

\textsuperscript{22} Loewe, \textit{Crisis and Conflict}, 11-13.
\textsuperscript{23} For example, Bielenstein, \textit{RHD III}, 123-129.
killed more than thirteen thousand of the enemy, took the surrender of another two hundred thousand, and captured a million head of horses, cattle, sheep and camels.

At the same time Dou Xian and Geng Bing were leading the main body of the army in triumphal progress to the heartland of traditional Xiongnu territory, a thousand kilometres beyond the Ordos frontier. A stele was erected on Mount Yanran 燕然山, southwest of present-day Ulan Bator, and the historian Ban Gu 班固, who had accompanied the expedition, wrote a commemorative inscription. In flowery style he described how the Han troops and their allies had crossed the Zhuoye Mountains, marched through all the lands once ruled by the Shanyu Modun and burnt the sacred site of Longcheng 龙城; and in concluding verses he praised the wide-spread power of the empire, which would inspire awe amongst ten thousand generations to come.

The Northern Frontier of Han c. 90 AD

As Dou Xian led his men home, he sent envoys to the Northern Shanyu, who had taken refuge at the Western Lakes 西海, near the present-day frontier of Mongolia with Chinese Xinjiang. They took gifts of gold and silk and a summons to surrender to Han. The Shanyu agreed and returned towards China, but on the way he heard of Dou Xian's withdrawal. Halting at the
Siqu Lake 私渠海, he sent his younger brother as envoy and potential hostage. Dou Xian, now at headquarters in Wuyuan, insisted the Shanyu come himself if he wished to obtain peace; but in the mean time the Southern Shanyu planned his own attack on his rival's camp.

In the spring of 90, even as Dou Xian sent Ban Gu on another embassy, the Emissary Geng Tan 耿譚 lent troops to assist the Southern sortie. Taken by surprise, the Northern Shanyu was wounded and fled, his wives and daughters, his seal and his treasure, were taken, and more than ten thousand other people were killed or captured. When Ban Gu and his fellows arrived there was no-one to be found, and when they reported this Dou Xian wrote to the court advising that the Shanyu was too weak to negotiate with, and recommending he be utterly destroyed. In the following year an attack by the Colonel Geng Kui 耿夔 defeated the Northern Shanyu and drove him away. He was not heard of again.

The former Shanyu's younger brother Yuchujian 於除鞬 now gathered the remnants of his following by the Pulei Lake 蒲類海, present-day Barkol north of Hami in eastern Xinjiang, and asked again to surrender. In a first attempt to settle the defeated people, Dou Xian sent Geng Kui as Emissary to present the seal of a tributary ruler to Yuchujian. His plan was to maintain two Xiongnu states, both subordinate to China, so that the steppe might be controlled by one or the other but neither could gain independence or dominance.

The proposal was endorsed by a majority at court, but Yuan An and Ren Wei both objected. They argued that the Han had long been committed to the cause of the Southern Shanyu as legitimate ruler of his people, and to set up his defeated rival with equivalent authority was a clear breach of trust. Furthermore, the cost of maintaining the Southern court was already high, and two such dependencies would be worse, while commitment to the North meant direct involvement for China in the struggle of the Xiongnu against the Xianbi. Both morally and practically, therefore, the proper course was to grant the Southern Shanyu authority over all the steppe, subject to his commitment to China. With a united people, he could be left to deal with the Xianbi as best he might.

Initially, however, Dou Xian's plan was approved, his opponents were weakened by the death of Yuan An early in 92, and when Dou Xian returned to Luoyang in triumph a few weeks later the authority of his family appeared at its height. But in the summer of that same year the youthful Emperor He carried out a coup against his over-powerful minister. Dou Xian and his brothers were stripped of their offices, sent out to their estates, and there
compelled to commit suicide. Many of their followers shared their fate, and though the Dowager kept her title, she held no power.

The fall of the Dou family was essentially a matter of court politics, but it had immediate repercussions on the frontier, as the position of the Northern Shanyu was called again into question. For his part, Yuchujian had hopes of freeing himself from Chinese control, and in 93 he attempted to escape. The new Emissary Ren Shang was sent in pursuit and the fugitive was persuaded to return to allegiance, but he was killed on the return journey. Some children of the former Shanyu had been captured earlier, but they do not appear again in the records.

Remnants of the Northern regime maintained themselves in the region of Dzungaria, north of Urumqi in present-day Xinjiang. They continued to maintain alliances and influence among the petty states of the Tarim basin and dealt with later Chinese officials in that region. On the frontier of China which faced present-day Mongolia, however, the Xiongnu state was ended.

The failure of reconstruction
With the flight of the Northern Shanyu, the numbers of his former subjects who came under the sway of the Southern court rose by the hundreds of thousands, and many took refuge within the borders of the empire. The Emissary Geng Tan asked that his senior staff be increased from two to twelve, a sign not only of the growing numbers but also of the increasing difficulty keeping them under supervision. And at the same time Dependent States (屬國 shuguo) were established for Xihe and Shang commanderies to deal with the "newly-surrendered barbarians."

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24 The Ban family had a long association with the Dou, and the historian Ban Gu had served on Dou Xian's staff and composed the text of the triumphal stele on Mount Yanran. As Emperor He was preparing to attack the Dou family he made particular use of the Chapter on the Imperial Relatives by Marriage from the Han shu lately published by Ban Gu [HS 97A-B] to guide his planning: HHS 55/45: 1800-01. Since Ban Gu died in prison after the coup against his patron, this may be taken as a striking, albeit unfortunate, example of the relevance of historical research.

25 Geng Kui had been dismissed on account of his former association with Dou Xian, and Ren Shang was appointed in his place.

Ren Shang's surname is the same as that of the Excellency Ren Wei, but he probably belonged to a clan from the frontier commandery of Beidi, while Ren Wei came from Nanyang. The two men were surely not related.

26 During the 90s the Protector-General of the Western Regions Ban Chao drove the Xiongnu away and forced their allied states to submit to Han, and his son Ban Yong had similar dealings in the 120s: HHS 47/37.
The Southern court, however, was unable to adapt to its altered circumstances. Generations of hostility and open war between the two groups of Xiongnu meant that even after the Northerners had surrendered they remained suspicious of their former enemies, while the people of the South had little interest in treating them well. The prince Shizi 師子 in particular, who had attacked and plundered the North even in time of peace, and who had commanded the major auxiliary division under Dou Xian, had no interest in reconciliation. Though he was naturally distrusted by the North, however, he was a hero of the South and was admired by the Chinese.

On the death of Tuntuhe in 93, the new Shanyu Anguo 安國 was jealous and fearful of his popular cousin, and in an attempt to shore up his position he showed some sympathy and favour to the Northerners. Within a year, however, the two parties had come to fighting, and as the Chinese came to Shizi's aid Anguo was killed. Shizi succeeded him, but was in turn attacked by a group of Northerners, who then sought to escape beyond the frontier under the chieftain Fenghou 逢侯. The fugitives were pursued by Chinese troops, but many made their escape across the frontier and by 95 there was a new Shanyu in the open steppe.

The experience of Fenghou demonstrated the failure of Chinese policy toward the Xiongnu. Though he was a member of the royal clan of the South, he became the leader of Northerners who felt threatened by their Southern kinsmen and quite inadequately protected by Chinese officials. On the other hand, Fenghou failed to maintain an independent state on the open steppe, for almost all his people left him and styled themselves Xianbi. He and his few last followers surrendered in 118 and were resettled inside China.27

By this time, the empire had other, wider problems. In 107 the Qiang people of Liang province, who lived among the Chinese, embarked upon a rebellion which devastated the northwest and which was not put down until 118. In 109 the Southern Shanyu Tan 檀, observing the apparent weakness of Han, also rose against his overlords, and the trouble spread to involve Xianbi and Wuhuan from the east and across the frontier. The disturbance was put down in the following year, and Xiongnu troops later served against the Qiang, but it was clear that the former clients could no longer be trusted.28

At the same time, however, both Xiongnu and Han were faced with the spread of Xianbi power. Like the refugees under Fenghou, those Xiongnu who had remained in the steppe abandoned any coherent authority and began to style themselves Xianbi,29 while the Southern state had demonstrated its

27 HHS 89/79:2958; deC, Northern Frontier, 288.
29 HHS 89/79:2942; deC, Northern Frontier, 295.
inability to re-unite the divided people and was uncertain even within its own territory. In 126 the Shanyu Ba 拔 was obliged to ask the Han government to strengthen its garrison forces: a far cry from the days when the Southern Xiongnu could claim to protect the frontier. Though the Shanyu and other chieftains were sometimes willing to assist Chinese operations against their common enemies, ordinary tribesmen were increasingly reluctant to serve, there were a number of mutinies, and the nadir of the declining relationship came in 140.

In that year, after the rebellion of the Xiongnu chieftain Wusi 吾斯 was compounded by a fresh outbreak amongst the Qiang, the local Chinese authorities, buttressed by a critical edict from Emperor Shun 順帝, so oppressed the elderly Shanyu Xiuli 休利 that he and his brother killed themselves. As the troubles gained new life, the Chinese were obliged to withdraw their commandery administrations from the Ordos, and though the rebels were brought to surrender in 142 the authority of the Southern state had been destroyed. Despite the efforts of their government, Chinese settlers did not return, while the majority of the Xiongnu abandoned their allegiance to their nominal suzerain and gathered themselves in small independent groups on either side of an increasingly meaningless frontier.

In the mean time, moreover, the Xianbi were extending their presence, either by migration or through amalgamation with existing tribes, across the northern steppe. Their first great war-leader, Qizhijian 其至鞬, led attacks on the frontier in the 120s, but the endemic problem was small-scale raiding by hot-headed young men from local camp-fire gatherings. In their erratic search for plunder they caused constant disruption to both the Xiongnu and the Chinese, and the imperial hold on the north steadily declined. In 177 the Xianbi warlord Tanshihuai 檀石槐 defeated a full Han army, with Xiongnu auxiliaries, on the open steppe. This was the first such humiliation for Chinese arms in almost three centuries, but the real damage had already been done, and by the end of the dynasty the Ordos region of present-day Shenxi and much of present-day Shanxi had been lost to China. In 216 Cao Cao 曹操, founder of the successor state of Wei 魏, re-established a puppet Xiongnu state in the valley of the Fen River, and the last Shanyu ended his days in honourable captivity at the new imperial court.

Problems of strategy

In the early 50s, through the defection of the Southern Shanyu Bi, the government of Later Han for the first time gained the initiative in its dealings

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30 HHS 89/79:2959-60, HHS 6:253; deC, Northern Frontier, 301.
31 DeC, Northern Frontier, 306-315.
with the Xiongnu. The policy agreed at that time was cautious, adapted to the limitations of a new regime which was recovering only gradually from years of war and disruption. As the Northern Xiongnu were held at bay, the weakness of Chinese settlement along the frontier was compensated by the tributary alliance of the Southern regime. In subsequent years, though the Northern state caused trouble on the frontier and in central Asia, and China was frequently forced onto the defensive, the basic system worked well, and after Emperor Ming's expedition of 73 the Han began to establish a position in the Western Regions.

In the course of the 80s, however, as the Northern Xiongnu were afflicted by natural disasters and by pressure in the east, notably from the Xianbi, the situation became unbalanced. In its difficulties, the North sought peace and trade with China, and some generosity from the Han court might have secured a substantial period of settlement.

At this point, however, as in the 50s but now with less justification, imperial policy was confused by the actions of the tributary Southern Shanyu, while a war party at court opposed any signs of rapprochement. Regardless of moral claims of the parties, the decision to ransom Northern Xiongnu captives, kidnapped by raiding parties from the Southern Xiongnu while they were engaged in peaceful trade, was a compromise in bad faith and rewarded the Southerners for their disruptive aggression. As Han confirmed its commitment to the South, the hopes of settlement faded in the North.

A few years later, after the Northern Xiongnu had been disastrously defeated by the Xianbi, the imperial government once more accepted the plan of the Southern Shanyu and the warlike policy of the Dou and Geng faction. Military success on the steppe, however, was followed not by decades of peace but by the spread of Xianbi into the north and by the ruin of the Southern Xiongnu regime, which proved incapable and unworthy of its greater responsibilities.

At the same time, despite repeated edicts calling for Chinese refugees to return to the frontier, and stringent policies to hold those that were there in place, out-migration continued and programs for resettlement gained most limited response. During the 120s, after the first great Qiang rebellion, the Deputy Director of the Secretariat Yu Xu 虞詡, who had both military and civil experience in the northwest and might be assumed to know the situation from first-hand, urged the government of Emperor Shun to establish full Chinese re-occupation of the devastated region. He quoted the ancient text of the *Yu gong 禹貢 "Tribute of Yu"* from the *Classic of History (書經 Shujing)*, referring to fertile ground, fields of grain, abundant water and splendid
pasturage. Arguing for an energetic policy of resettlement, Yu Xu chose his rhetoric to put the best case, but he must have known that the current reality was different, and that tension with the non-Chinese made the region inhospitable for any colonists.

By contrast, in 169 the successful general Zhang Huan 張奐 was rewarded with special permission to leave his homeland in the far western commandery of Dunhuang 敦煌 and settle his family within the empire. A short time later, when his enemies at court proposed to withdraw the approval and send him back, Zhang Huan responded with a humble letter recalling his past good work and begging for mercy. The government accepted his plea, but it is clear that few people would stay on the frontier voluntarily or return if they could avoid it, and there is no reason to believe the situation had been more attractive at an earlier time.

More generally, however, and yet more dangerously for the empire, demographic weakness along the border region was paralleled by the limited resources available to the central government. In retrospect it is clear that the finances of the dynasty had been over-stretched by the great enterprise of Dou Xian. There had already been complaints about the extravagance of the imperial kinsmen at a time of financial stringency, and though the costs of the attack on the Northern Xiongnu are not quantified they were certainly very great.

In the aftermath of the campaign the dynasty was under increased financial pressure. Following the death of Emperor He in 106 his former Empress Deng 鄧, now regent Dowager for the child Emperor An 安, was noted for her reduction of offices at the palace, for eating meat only once a day and, more significantly, for reducing military expenditure and training. This may be no more than a worthy woman cutting down on extravagance, but it is likely that her policy reflects a shortage of money, and that is before the great rebellion of the Qiang devastated Liang province and removed its revenues from the imperial treasury. There is evidence from both written texts and archaeology, moreover, that during the second century AD the government of Later Han was unable to gain access to an appropriate proportion of the national wealth and was thus incapable of carrying out traditional dynastic responsibilities of aid and relief in time of famine or other misfortune. Many of the problems which faced later generations might have been avoided with an adequate budget.

33 HHS 65/55, 2142; deC, Northern Frontier, 328.
34 HHS 10A:422.
In simplest terms, the ideal situation on the frontier was to have a non-Chinese ruler so powerful within his own lands that his orders were obeyed, but so dependent upon Chinese goodwill, or vulnerable to Chinese threats, that he would command his people not to make mischief in Chinese territory. By destroying the Northern Shanyu the Han dynasty removed a potential client and found itself faced with the incoherent but constantly threatening power of the Xianbi.\(^{35}\)

Problems of perception
Both in prospect and in retrospect, therefore, the campaign to destroy the Northern Xiongnu was a major error. The empire embarked upon expenditure it could ill afford in order to destroy a weak and all but suppliant enemy, for the benefit of a junior ally who would prove incapable of making good use of the victory, and for the hopeful occupation of frontier land where Chinese people had shown no wish to remain.

Surely, one must feel, some of this information was available at the time: the problems of Chinese settlement were known, the Emissary and other agents of Han had excellent opportunity to judge the capacity of the Southern Xiongnu regime, and despite the distances there must have been a deal of intelligence concerning the situation on the steppe and the threat from the Xianbi. Even allowing for the political opportunism of Dou Xian and his regent sister, those with knowledge of the frontier should have been more cautious. On the contrary, however, both on this occasion and on others the forward party arguing for war included officers with experience of dealing with the non-Chinese.

While civilian ministers argued the conservative case well, moreover, their motives were related rather to theories of morality and a power struggle at court than to the realities of the frontier. There was resentment at the pretensions of the Dou family and their allies, and criticism of the attack on the Xiongnu was just one item in a litany of complaint. In 88 the Dowager's proposal that her brother should command the expedition was correctly viewed as a device to restore Dou Xian's political prestige, and was opposed accordingly. In 91, however, when Dou Xian planned to re-establish the Northern Shanyu in a puppet state, Yuan An and Ren Wei objected that this would betray the South; but Yuan An had argued for assistance to the Northern Xiongnu when they sought peace in 85, so his policy was not

\(^{35}\) DeC, *Northern Frontier*, 417-422, following the concept of "suasion" presented by Luttwak, *Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 195-200.

In his account of "Han Foreign Relations" at 404-405 Yü Ying-shih refers to the campaign of Dou Xian almost in passing, comparable to the far less successful operations of 73. I believe his interpretation is mistaken.
consistent. And the final fate of the Northern Shanyu was determined by the destruction of Dou Xian at the hands of Emperor He.

It was politics at court that determined frontier policy at this time, and the policy which evolved was very short-sighted. Dou Xian's last-minute sponsorship of the Northern Shanyu was clearly an after-thought, and there is no sign of any previous discussion as to how the political vacuum on the steppe should be filled, or what procedures should be adopted to receive the surrendered refugees brought under the sway of the Southern state. The Southern regime had no concept of its new, expanded and changed responsibilities, and the Shanyu himself had stated that his troops were not strong enough to manage alone, but it was only when crisis was at hand that the Emissary Geng Tan sought assistance. Though opponents of the initial plan raised the dangers of Xianbi expansion, their point was never answered and so their forebodings proved correct.

More generally and in the longer term, the separation between the men on the frontier and the advisers at court was even more basic than the hostility of regular officials for the relatives and favourites of the emperor. The General on the Liao Deng Hong, for example, despite many successes in the field, was arrested and died in prison after Fenghou made his escape in 95; and other men who served with distinction on the frontier, such as Geng Kui, Ren Shang and Liang Qin, suffered similarly harsh treatment from authorities at the capital.36

This situation continued in later times. During the latter part of the second century, three great generals held the line for Han against the threat from the Xiongnu, the Xianbi and the Qiang, but they achieved no recognition at court. In 166 Huangfu Gui wrote to support the men of Faction protesting against Emperor Huan's eunuch-dominated government; but he was ignored.37 Zhang Huan, a distinguished scholar with sympathy for the dissidents, received no contact from them and finished on the eunuchs' side in the coup of 168 which destroyed the reformists.38 Duan Jiong, hammer of the Qiang under Emperor Ling, became a fierce oppressor of the Proscribed Party.39 And at the very end of imperial government, as the frontier

36 On Geng Kui, Ren Shang and Liang Qin, see deC, Biographical Dictionary, sub voce. All three were energetic and successful commanders against the Qiang and other non-Chinese on the frontiers, but Liang Qin was at one time imprisoned for exceeding his authority, Geng Kui suffered the bastinado, and Ren Shang was executed on a charge of corruption after the final defeat of the first Qiang rebellion.
37 HHS 65/55:2136; deC, Huan and Ling, 79.
38 HHS 65/55:2140, and 69/59:2244; deC, Huan and Ling, 100.
39 HHS 78/68:2525; deC, Huan and Ling, 127.
general Dong Zhuo 董卓 seized power in Luoyang in 189, he had only contempt for the courtiers and officials who had brought the state to ruin.\footnote{E.g. HHS 72/62:2323; deC, Establish Peace, 18.}

In all the sad history of failed policy, moreover, one is struck both by the urge for aggression and by the insensitivity which lay behind debates at the Chinese court. Certainly the raison d’être of the Southern Xiongnu regime was hostility to the North, but it was not necessarily in the interest of the imperial government to accept that lead. And despite their discussions of morality and public interest, there is little evidence that policy-makers had any real concern for the people whose future they sought to determine. At different times settlers on the frontier were ordered to abandon their lands, to return or to stay, but there is seldom consideration of what this meant in human terms, and references to humane and popular officials are few. Likewise there are no signs of understanding of non-Chinese people: though the Southern Xiongnu were allies, in the debate in 88 Zong Yi referred to them by the pejorative term "caitiff" (虜 lu),\footnote{The rendering "caitiff" is clumsy, but widely used. The character lu was common in Chinese discussion of their neighbours into the Ming period.} and there is ample evidence that such barbarians were regarded as the subjects of Chinese policy, not as participants and certainly not as equals. Most officials were concerned to hold the non-Chinese down by force or threats, and treaties or agreements were seldom made and less often kept.\footnote{As Yü Ying-shih observes, in his somewhat Sino-centric discussion of Han foreign relations, "In dealing with the Northern [Xiongnu], it seems that the Later Han government recognised them more as a de facto economic and military force than as a de jure political entity:" Trade and Expansion, 103.}

Here, perhaps, is the main problem for Han: to maintain peace at a distance required a sense of reality and the possible, but those who debated policy had limited vision beyond the politics of the court and the capital, and minimal sympathy for the various peoples with whom they dealt. During the 80s, through the weakness of the Northern Xiongnu there was opportunity to settle the problems of the frontier. Instead, the armies of China were launched on the putative enemy without any good program for ultimate peace, and the long-term consequences of this inadequate planning were chaos on the frontier and a weakened dynasty. Given the mind-set and the
priorities of those who were making the decisions, however, it is hardly surprising that they got it wrong.

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