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## The Division and Destruction of the Xiongnu Confederacy in the first and second centuries AD

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NOTE: This paper is based primarily upon Rafe de Crespigny, *Northern Frontier: the policies and strategy of the Later Han empire*, Australian National University Faculty of Asian Studies Monographs, New Series No.4, Canberra 1984. [\[1\]](#)

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### 1. Introduction: the nature of the Xiongnu [Hsiung-nu] state

For more than three hundred years after the great Shanyu Modun [or Maodun], at the end of the third century BC, the Xiongnu dominated the steppe-lands north of China, and contended for influence in central Asia. Other contributors consider the earlier history of the state, and its rivalry with the Chinese dynasty of Former Han; the present paper deals with the decline and fall of the Xiongnu during the first two centuries AD, at the time of the Later Han dynasty.

The overwhelming amount of information on the people and their rulers comes from Chinese sources, which are for the most part predictably hostile. Few words are recorded of the Xiongnu language, and small confidence can be placed on transcription from their alien speech through ancient Chinese to the present day. The Chinese term "Xiongnu" presumably reflects the sound of the foreign tongue; though identification has often been suggested the name need not be related to that of the later Huns who afflicted Europe centuries later.

Like other steppe regimes, the Xiongnu government was a family affair, with authority in the hands of the royal house and a limited number of clans related by marriage. The name of the state came from the royal tribe, while outside clans and tribes of the steppe were held in submission by the threat of force and by largesse from the leadership, frequently acquired by trade or warfare with the settled people of China. [\[2\]](#)

As Lattimore argued in 1940, the development of the Xiongnu state reflected tensions on the frontier as the Qin and Han dynasties of China consolidated their power. On the one hand, the people of the steppe were threatened by the expansion of the Chinese empire in the north, but at the same time the products of China offered opportunities of wealth and luxury far beyond those available in the grasslands. Much of the history of the Xiongnu state can be seen as a reaction to Chinese encroachment, combined with the desire to obtain goods either by trade or by war. For their part, the emperors of China sought to dominate the northern regions by controlling the trading outlets and, of comparable importance, ensuring that the peoples either side of the *limes* were kept apart. Besides its obvious function of military defence and warning, the Great Wall of Qin and Former Han was an excellent instrument for these purposes, and though much of the fortification was left unmanned by Later Han the policies of separation of people and restriction of trade were sought by other means.

A major concern of the Xiongnu rulers was to gain access to the wealth of China and thus maintain their authority over other peoples of the steppe; and they pursued this policy through regular trade, through the exchange of official gifts – often a disguised tribute – or by actual or threatened warfare. Their power depended very largely upon the relationship with China, and the structure of their state was not sophisticated. At the same time, it was to Chinese advantage that this foreign state should be maintained in control of peoples and regions beyond the reach of imperial arms and government. During the first century AD, however, division among the Xiongnu leadership and over-ambition at the court of Han destroyed the balance and brought disorder and disintegration.

### 2. The quarrel with China and the frontier wars [9-45 AD] [\[3\]](#)

As Wang Mang took the imperial throne in 9 AD, relations between the Chinese government and the Xiongnu were satisfactory to both sides. The conflicts of the second century BC had been largely concluded by the aggressive, albeit costly, campaigns of Emperor Wu, and the Huhanye [or Huhanye] Shanyu [reigned 59-31] was grateful for Chinese support against his rival Zhizhi. In 43 he undertook a solemn oath to maintain the peace, and the settlement was maintained for more than thirty years after his death. There were regular exchanges of goods and presents, occasional visits by the Shanyu to the imperial court and several marriages of Chinese women into the royal house of the Xiongnu [of which the most celebrated was that of the Lady Wang Zhaojun to the Huhanye Shanyu himself]. The distaff influence aided the pro-Chinese faction at the Xiongnu court, but the *heqin* system of "peace and family connection" depended largely upon subsidies from China, which were valuable to the Xiongnu ruling house and expensive for Han, but a great deal cheaper than the costs of frontier war.

Though it was the Shanyu who went to the imperial court, never the other way round, the Xiongnu saw the relationship as one of equality, and the Chinese did not formally treat them as vassals. Wang Mang, however, had other ideas, based upon traditional concepts and pursued with

rigour. In 8 AD, when he already held regency control of the Han government, he persuaded a new Shanyu, Nengzhiyasi, to accept the replacement of the covenant of 43 BC by a new Treaty of Four Articles, which provided *inter alia* for the return of renegades and refugees not only from China but also from the Wuhuan in the east and the Wusun people and other peoples of central Asia. Still more personally, in reflection of Chinese custom, Nengzhiyasi agreed to change his name to the plain Zhi: it is said that he was bribed, and it is questionable whether it made any difference to his nomenclature among the Xiongnu, but it is certainly a sign of agreeable compliance.

In the following year, however, as Wang Mang proclaimed his own imperial government, he pressed the matter further. A new seal presented to the Shanyu described him as subordinate to the Xin dynasty, and despite protests Wang Mang would make no change. More importantly, moreover, Chinese officials advised the Wuhuan people that according to the new Treaty they should have no further dealings with the Xiongnu. The Wuhuan had been the first victims of the founding Shanyu Modun, but it was now claimed that their allegiance was ended. As Xiongnu agents came for tribute and traders came to take part in the annual market of furs, the Wuhuan attacked and killed them, and when the Shanyu sent a punitive expedition the Chinese insisted that he had no lost his right to suzerainty.

With the authority and independence of his state so clearly threatened, in 10 AD the hitherto agreeable Shanyu Zhi defied the Treaty by accepting submission from the rulers of Jushi [Turfan] in central Asia, formerly subject to Han, and welcoming a group of Chinese mutineers. Wang Mang issued a proclamation to abuse and depose the Shanyu, appointed his own puppet nominees, and stationed a grand army in the north to prepare an attack. Nothing came of the plan, but the long peace was ended by a series of Xiongnu raids along the frontier.

Zhi died in 13, and Wang Mang's protégée Xian came to the throne. The relationship was troubled by Wang Mang's previous execution of Xian's son Deng, but apologies were made and the pro-Chinese party held influence until Xian's death in 18. Xian's successor, Yu, was initially ambivalent in his sympathies: though he distrusted the pro-Chinese group, he was prepared to accept the advantages of a subsidised peace. Wang Mang, however, was unwilling to negotiate, and despite protests from his senior officers and advisers he again proclaimed his own candidate as puppet Shanyu. Another large army wasted resources on the frontier, and Shanyu Yu became a confirmed enemy of China. [\[4\]](#)

In 23 Wang Mang's government was destroyed and he himself was killed at his capital of Chang'an. The fall of his regime was effected by a combination of the rebellion of the Red Eyebrows from the east and more regular armies raised by the former imperial Liu clan in the immediate south. The situation in the north was not directly relevant, though the maintenance of a large army on the frontier certainly affected Wang Mang's capacity to deal with the insurrection. As China entered a long period of civil war, however, with rival members of the Liu family and other pretenders contesting the whole region north of the Yangzi, the Xiongnu took advantage of the confusion to intervene in support of some participants and to encroach upon the northern commanderies of the empire.

In 36, as Liu Xiu, Emperor Guangwu of Later Han, destroyed his last major opponent within China, he was faced with substantial Xiongnu aggression along the Ordos loop of the Yellow River and eastwards in the valley of the Sanggan. Lu Fang, a Chinese pretender supported by the Shanyu, was defeated and driven away in 37, and there followed some attempt to restore Chinese control, but the measures were primarily defensive, with walls and a fortified road protecting not only the hill passes of the Taihang ranges but even the North China plain. Further south and west, raids along the Fen River and against the line of the Wei required construction of another series of walls to guard the region of Chang'an itself. In 39 the Grand Marshal Wu Han was sent to take command in the north, but the result was only to confirm the Chinese abandonment of Yanmen, Dai and Shanggu commanderies. In 44 Wuyuan too was lost, while Xiongnu raids struck as far south as Shangdang and threatened Chang'an from the west. In the winter of 44/45 the celebrated general Ma Yuan attempted a sortie, but was defeated with loss, and in the following year a riposte from the Xiongnu broke once more through the border defences and raided Changshan.

By the middle 40s AD, therefore, the restored dynasty of Han had found itself unable to deal adequately with the power of the Xiongnu along the frontier, while the Shanyu Yu had gained control of territory comparable to that held by his great ancestor Modun. In 46, however, Yu's death was followed by internal conflict comparable to that lately suffered by China, and within a very short time the situation of power had been reversed and the Xiongnu state was on the way to division and destruction.

### 3. Succession struggles and the division of the Xiongnu [46-51 AD]

When he died in 31 BC, the Huhanye Shanyu had left instructions that succession to the state should move through his sons, from eldest to youngest, before transferring to the next generation. The prescription had been largely followed, though intrigues by the pro-Chinese party in 13 AD had caused the Shanyu Yu to be by-passed in favour of the renegade Xian. After a reign of almost thirty years, however, and remarkable success in war against the troubled Chinese empire, Yu was prepared to break the fraternal entail in favour of his own sons. In accordance with his will, his eldest son Wudadihou came to the throne, and when Wudadihou died a few months later he was succeeded by his younger brother Punu.

Punu, however, had a rival. His cousin Bi was the eldest surviving son of the Shanyu Zhi, and though the accession of Wudadihou had received general approval, there was a party which supported Bi's claim as scion of an elder line. Bi himself had shown his discontent, and though he held a responsible position on the eastern frontier against the Wuhuan he was supervised by lesser officials and felt increasingly uneasy.

After the long reign of their father Yu, the swift succession of Wudadihou and then Punu created uncertainty, and the political problem was compounded by a crippling drought and a plague of insects. At the same time, the hitherto subservient Wuhuan rose in rebellion and seized a large area of grazing land, no doubt to the embarrassment of Bi, who was responsible for this region. For his part, Punu was making approaches for peace to the Chinese court, but in the exchange of embassies which followed Chinese agents made contact with Prince Bi, and Bi presented them with a map of Xiongnu territory, traditional sign of submission. In the following year, 47, he called upon the Administrator of Xihe commandery and offered to act as a supporter of Han within the Xiongnu government.

This was extremely dangerous behaviour, bordering upon treason, and Bi's supervisors reported it to the court Punu planned to have Bi arrested at the Longcheng ceremony of the fifth month, but Bi got word of the threat and gathered his followers, some fifty thousand men, to defend himself. Punu sent troops against him, but they were outnumbered and turned back, and Bi established an independent base in the Ordos. In the winter of 48/49 he took title as Shanyu, undertaking to defend the frontier for China and act as a buffer against the north. In honour of his grandfather and referring both to his right of succession and to his policy of friendship and alliance, Bi styled himself also as Huhanye Shanyu.

The Northern Xiongnu were now attacked from the east by the Wuhuan and their wilder neighbours the Xianbi, who were rewarded with bounties by the Han, but Punu held the treasury and the majority of the tribes, and the situation of the Southern Shanyu remained precarious. Bi desperately needed a formal alliance with Han, and the spring of 50 he obtained it. The settlement came, however, at great cost of prestige: for the first time in relations between the two states, a Shanyu performed the kowtow, and over the next few months arrangements were made to bring the exiled state under Chinese control. Bi's headquarters were moved from the Wuyuan frontier to the city of Meiji in the western Ordos, an

Emissary was stationed to supervise his administration, and one of the Shanyu's sons was kept hostage at the new Han capital, Luoyang. The kowtow, however, was not required again, nor any tributary visits, and the alliance was maintained by gifts from China and a regular exchange of courtesies.

Though the value of subsidies to the Southern Xiongnu was far greater than those to the first Huhanye Shanyu, and represented a substantial part of the imperial budget, the buffer state and its troops guarded much of the frontier without major commitment of Chinese troops. There were, however, two great disadvantages to the system. Firstly, the alliance with the Southern regime made it difficult to establish any good relationship with the Northern Xiongnu, and though Punu sent embassies to seek peace Guangwu's government felt obliged to reject them in order to keep faith with the Southerners. Secondly, the settlement of non-Chinese within the Ordos, combined with a history of military uncertainty, drove settlers back from the frontier. At the census of 2 AD the northern commanderies had contained some three million registered Chinese inhabitants, but by the middle of the second century, after some hundred years of the Southern Xiongnu state, the Chinese population of the region was barely half a million. In effect, though their government had formally recovered control over the north, Chinese on the ground were over-shadowed by the Xiongnu tribesmen, and the tradition of peasant agriculture and colonisation was lost.

This civilian weakness of the Chinese, moreover, was reflected in the military structure. The Great Wall was maintained in the Gansu corridor and its salient of Juyan [Edsin-Gol], but the greater part of the *limes*, from present-day Lanzhou north around the Ordos and east to the sea, was no longer in service, for there was no civil population to support such a forward defence line. The Han controlled the region, and the Xiongnu were their tributaries, but the northern part of China Proper was largely occupied by the non-Chinese pastoralists.

#### 4. The destruction of the Northern Xiongnu [51-92 AD]

At the time of his defection, the Southern Shanyu Bi could claim support from only eight tribal divisions and perhaps 100,000 people, and the forces of the North were far stronger. The Southern Xiongnu were valuable to the defence of China, but for another generation the Northern state was able to dominate the steppe. By the early 60s, under Guangwu's son Emperor Ming of Han, the Northerners were still offering peace but were strong enough to launch raids into Chinese territory. Even more worrying, some groups of the Southern Xiongnu, suspicious of Chinese intentions, sought contact with their old companions.

In 65, therefore the office of General Who Crosses the Liao was established near Huhhot in Wuyuan, both to guard the frontier and to prevent contact between the Northern and Southern Xiongnu.<sup>[5]</sup> As no peace was made, the Northern Xiongnu began to encroach on Chinese interests among the oasis states of central Asia, present-day Xinjiang, while raiding along the Gansu corridor was so fierce that Chinese cities kept their gates shut even during the day. In 73 Emperor Ming sent out a major expedition, with local commandery levies, Wuhuan, Xianbi and Qiang auxiliaries, and the regular troops of the Liao command combined with the forces of the Southern Shanyu. The results, however, were indecisive, the military situation was largely unchanged, and no comparable effort was made for over ten years.

In the mean time, however, a series of droughts and locust plagues took toll of the north, while the Wuhuan and Xianbi, with Chinese encouragement and subsidy, pressed the eastern flank of the Northern Xiongnu. Under this natural and human pressure, and perhaps also as a consequence of internal conflict, in 83 and 85 two large groups of Northerners came to surrender, while in 84 the Han court approved a proposal for trade through the frontier at Wuwei commandery. The agreement, however, was disrupted by the jealousy of the Southern Xiongnu, who raided the Northern caravans and obliged the Chinese government to condone their aggression.

After the death of the Southern Shanyu Bi in 56, succession to his title followed the fraternal lineage upon which he had based his original claim, and after several agreed transfers of power the state was consolidated by the long reign of Bi's son the Shanyu Zhang. In the north there is no record of the immediate successors to Punu, but in 87 a great raid by the Xianbi captured the Youliu Shanyu, killed him and took his skin. As this military disaster was compounded by a plague of locusts, the Northern Xiongnu fell into utter confusion. Great numbers came south to seek the protection of China, the new Northern Shanyu withdrew across the steppe, and a dissident group of nobles set up a rival against him. On this basis, the Southern Shanyu wrote to suggest a campaign of conquest.

In 88 Emperor Zhang of Han was succeeded by his ten-year-old son Emperor He, and government was held by a regency under the Empress-Dowager Dou and her brother Dou Xian. Originally from the northwest, the Dou were connected to the imperial house by generations of intermarriage, and both their regional background and their position at court encouraged them to seek the expansion of central authority through war: in this respect, the interests of the imperial aristocracy conflicted with those of the provincial gentry who occupied the civil service and sought peace rather than extravagant prestige. Dou Xian, moreover, had been involved in scandals at the capital, and both he and his sister the Dowager sought to hide his embarrassment beneath a cloak of military glory. Despite strong opposition from more conservative advisers, the Lady Dou ordered the despatch of an expeditionary force.

In the summer of 89 the Chinese advanced in three great columns, comprised of the professional regiments of the imperial Northern Army, the garrison troops of the General Who Crosses the Liao with local levies and non-Chinese auxiliaries, and the main army of the Southern Xiongnu. With minimal opposition they advanced to Zhuoye Mountain in present-day Outer Mongolia. A large detachment then moved to the northwest, and in the major battle of the campaign they defeated the Northern Shanyu at Jiluo Mountain and pursued him westwards into the Altai ranges. It is said that they captured a million head of horses, cattle, sheep and camels, killed over thirteen thousand of the enemy, and induced the surrender of two hundred thousand more.

In the mean time, Dou Xian brought the main body of his troops in triumphal progress north to Mount Yanran, west of present-day Ulaan Baatar. There he erected a stele, composed by his client the historian Ban Gu, which celebrated the achievement and described how the Chinese had crossed all the lands once held by Modun and had destroyed the sacred Xiongnu site of Longcheng.

Dou Xian then led his forces back, and the Northern Shanyu sought to negotiate peace. The Southern Shanyu Tuntuhe, however, was anxious to destroy his rival completely, and early in 90, as embassies were still being exchanged, he launched an attack which destroyed the Northern ruler's remnant base, captured his seal and treasure and his wives and daughters, and drove him in flight again to the west. Dou Xian now reported that the Northern ruler was so weak there was no point in treating with him further, and in the following year a final attack defeated the Shanyu and drove him finally from his kingdom. He was not heard of again.

There was a brief attempt to restore the Northern regime as a puppet state under the former Shanyu's brother, Yuchujian, with a capital at Yiwu in the Barköl Tagh and a resident Emissary in the same style as the Southern court. The plan, however, was bitterly opposed by the Southern Shanyu and by Chinese advisers who supported his claim to priority. Dou Xian initially had his way, but in 92 the young Emperor He ran a coup to destroy the Dou family and seize power for himself. In the period of uncertainty which followed, Yuchujian attempted to free himself, but in the autumn of

that year he was obliged to surrender to the Chinese general Ren Shang, and on his way back to captivity he was killed. The inheritance of the Northern state died with him, for though some children of the former Shanyu had been captured earlier, they are not heard of again.

On the other hand, though the Northern Xiongnu confederacy outside the frontier of China proper had been destroyed by Dou Xian, and its former territory was steadily taken over by tribes of the Xianbi, the Xiongnu of Dzungaria, the northern part of present-day Xinjiang, had not been directly affected, and some part of the shattered polity was reconstructed under a new Shanyu. The states of Jushi, about Turfan and Urumqi, close to the lands of the Xiongnu, were always exposed to their influence, and Han forces in the Western Regions, from the time of the great Protector-General Ban Chao until the effective end of their empire fifty years later, continued to contend with those rivals. That, however, is a different story. On the frontier of China which faced present-day Mongolia, however, the Xiongnu state was ended.

#### **5. The decline of the Southern Xiongnu [92-150 AD]**

Though the triumph of Dou Wu had left the Southern Shanyu as sole claimant to authority over the Xiongnu people, fifty years of rivalry and warfare had left a bitterness and distrust which could not be easily overcome, while the Southern court and its people proved themselves neither willing nor able to make the adjustments necessary for a reunified state. Tensions, indeed, were enhanced in the aftermath of success, and internal contradictions brought long-term weakness to the whole political structure.

With the death of the Shanyu Tuntuhe in 93, matters came to a head. His official successor, Anguo, was not a man of distinction, and was notably over-shadowed by his cousin Shizi, who had acquired great reputation in war. Shizi was admired by Southern loyalists and was predictably feared and disliked by the people of the North, while Anguo was naturally envious of his popularity. Since Shizi and his supporters continued to plunder the Northern refugees, despite the declared peace, Anguo sought to gain support by taking the former enemies' side, and made plans against Shizi. In 94 the Chinese Emissary and the General on the Liao wrote to the court to question his loyalty, then followed with an attack. Anguo was killed, Shizi succeeded him as Shanyu, and the Northerners were predictably dismayed.

Soon after Shizi's accession, there was a rebellion by men of the North, and though it was defeated by Chinese troops, the dissidents now sought to break away. Fenghou, though a prince of the Southern royal house, accepted position as their leader, and 200,000 people destroyed Chinese installations and sought independence beyond the frontier. They were pursued by the Chinese army, but escaped across the frozen Yellow River, and in the spring of 95 the chase was abandoned.

A period of indecisive warfare followed, with further attempts at desertion, while Fenghou remained out of Chinese reach. He and his followers, however, were under increasing pressure from Xianbi groups coming into Mongolia from their home country in the hills of the Manchurian borderland. They were initially concerned rather with the open steppe than with the borders of China, but their effect upon the Xiongnu was considerable, and in 104 and 105 Fenghou, now based near Dunhuang, sought rapprochement with the Han court. His overtures were ignored, and he withdrew still further to the northwest, but the difficulties he encountered make it clear that a great part of the former Xiongnu homeland had been lost to the Xianbi.

Within China, on the other hand, from 107 the great rebellion of the Qiang devastated the northwest, present-day Gansu, interrupted communications with central Asia, and threatened the Wei valley. In 109 the Southern Shanyu was persuaded to take advantage of his overlords' weakness with an insurrection of his own, but the trouble was ended in the following year, and in the later stages of the Qiang war the Xiongnu served once more as auxiliaries to the imperial army. In 118, moreover, as the last Qiang resistance was crushed, the erstwhile renegade Fenghou brought a few remnants of his troops and surrendered at the Shuofang frontier.

To some appearance, the situation had been restored, but there were two great differences. Firstly, the expansion of Xianbi influence was so great that they now dominated the steppe where the Xiongnu had formerly held sway: and those of Fenghou's followers who failed to surrender now called themselves Xianbi, not Xiongnu. Secondly, the imperial position behind the frontiers had been greatly weakened by the Qiang insurgency, and the loyalty of the Southern Xiongnu could no longer be assumed. By the early 120s, as the Xianbi war-leader Qizhijian pressed against the borders, some Xiongnu began to resent the constant demands for allied support, and there was a substantial, albeit short-lived, mutiny in 124. The limited numbers of Han Chinese people in the north, however, meant that Xiongnu and Wuhuan auxiliaries played an essential role in the defence of Chinese territory, and, several punitive expeditions were composed almost entirely of non-Chinese troops. To a very large extent, Han control of the northern frontier had become a matter of bargaining and diplomacy, with one group of barbarians used to deal with another.

After the death of Qizhijian in the middle 130s the Xianbi raids were interrupted, but in the summer of 140 there was a rebellion amongst the Southern Xiongnu. At first, only a few thousand men were involved, but the rebels gained wide support as they attacked Chinese positions, and though they were defeated in the field they remained at large to plunder the countryside. A new rebellion of the Qiang added to the pressure against the imperial government, and the situation was made worse when the Emissary Chen Gui rebuked the Shanyu Xiuli for failing to control his people. Pressed between the demands of the Chinese and his own lack of authority, the Shanyu killed himself. As the disturbance spread wider, the rebel leader Wusi proclaimed his colleague Cheniu as Shanyu, and the dissidents sought alliance with the Wuhuan to the east and the Qiang to the southwest.

Chen Gui was punished for his failure of policy, but the damage was very great, for the prestige of the Southern Xiongnu court had been grossly compromised, and the new leaders, who had no connection to the royal house, proved widely popular. By the end of autumn the Xiongnu rebels had driven south to the Wei valley, defeating local Chinese levies and killing their commanders, and their success was confirmed by imperial edicts ordering that the administrative headquarters of Shang, Xihe, Beidi, Anding and Shuofang commanderies be withdrawn. The effect was that the whole of the Ordos region north of the Wei valley was abandoned, save only for the garrison outpost of Wuyuan. Cheniu was captured in the winter, but Wusi remained at large until he was assassinated by Chinese agents in 143. His head was brought in triumph to the capital, but the former commanderies were not restored.

Touluchu, a prince of the royal house who had been resident at the imperial capital, was now named Shanyu by the government of Han, with ceremonies, insignia, and every sign of favour and honour. He and his successor Jucheer held their position under Chinese tutelage for over thirty years, no rival disputed their claim, and Chinese authority was largely unchallenged. On the other hand, it is questionable whether their state had any real meaning, and their acceptance may indicate not so much a tacit approval among the tribes but rather a lack of interest in an authority now largely irrelevant.

As an example of the changing situation, we may observe that during the rebellion of the 140s comparatively small numbers of troops had been engaged: at the time of Dou Xian, the Southern Shanyu could claim fifty thousand fighting men; fifty years later, though numbers in the field were fewer than ten thousand on either side, the chief cause of the despair of the unfortunate Shanyu Xiuli was the fact that he commanded too few

soldiers to deal with the rebels who had defied his authority.

So the situation in the north had changed. We are told that Northern Xiongnu on the steppe changed their designation to Xianbi, and it is probable that others had fled the Southern state and gone back across the frontier to join them. And even within the Ordos region, while many tribesmen remained, they had no close concern with the Shanyu and his officers, nor with the Chinese officials who controlled them. They could be conscripted into service on occasion, but for the most part they were untouched by the politics of the state to which their fathers had owed allegiance. Fifty years after the conquest of the north, the authority of the Shanyu was withering away.

#### 6. The end of the Southern Xiongnu state [150-216 AD]

The settlement of Wusi's rebellion was followed by some ten years of peace, and various stirrings of rebellion from the middle 150s were controlled by the military and diplomatic skills of the Chinese generals Zhang Huan and Huangfu Gui. For a short time in 166 the Shanyu Jucheer allied himself with the Xianbi and with dissident Wuhuan and Qiang, but he was soon returned to allegiance, and though the Chinese court considered deposing him for his disloyalty it was decided that he could keep his position. The very fact that such a question was raised, however, indicates how dependent the Shanyu was upon the approval of his overlords, and when Jucheer died in 172 the personal name of his son and successor was not even recorded.

At this time, moreover, the Xianbi were united under the leadership of Tanshihuai, a chieftain who had been involved in raiding along the frontier from the early 160s. Tanshihuai had been the instigator of the insurgency in 166, and by the early 170s his piratical kingdom was claimed to extend across the whole of the northern steppe.<sup>[6]</sup> After almost twenty years of distress, during which Chinese defences had proven quite inadequate, in 177 the court of Emperor Ling approved a major punitive expedition, with one column provided by Xiongnu cavalry. Lured far into the steppe, however, the army was disastrously defeated, and it is said that three-quarters of the men failed to return.

This was the first direct loss of a major Chinese army for over a hundred years, and the effect on prestige was critical. At the same time, the triumph of the Xianbi state marked the end of meaningful existence for the Xiongnu regime, and confirmed the failure of the Shanyu, even as a subordinate ally to China. Within a few years of 177, the last vestiges of central authority had disappeared. In its place, there were a variety of contending clans, of which the most notable was the Xiuchuge group, who first came to notice in the 150s and had played a leading role since that time.

In 187 a rebellion broke out among the Wuhuan, and the Chinese government, seriously short of troops, called once more upon the Xiongnu. In the following year, however, the Xiuchuge led a mutiny and rebellion, killed the Shanyu Qiangqu, and ended the succession. Qiangqu's son Yufuluo fled to the Chinese court to seek support, but in 189 Emperor Ling died and Han itself fell into a chaos of civil war. Left to his own devices, and refused re-entry to his traditional homeland, Yufuluo led a precarious existence as a bandit soldier of fortune until his death in 195, when his claim passed to his brother Huchuquan. For their part, the Xiuchuge group remained active in the hill country of present-day Shaanxi, but they were gradually driven to the west, and in 214 they surrendered to the growing power of the Chinese warlord Cao Cao.

By this time, however, the Xiongnu state had largely disintegrated, and the activities of the claimant Shanyu and his rivals were of small relevance to the tribes and clans which had formerly given their allegiance. In 216 Cao Cao re-established a formal structure of power, with the chieftain Qubi in nominal authority over five divisions. The territory, however, was little than a narrow fringe along the south of the Ordos, while the northern loop of the Yellow River and much of the rest of the old Han frontier was abandoned to the Xianbi. Huchuquan, last of the Southern Shanyu, was kept at Cao Cao's court until his death. No successor was appointed.

Almost a century later, at the beginning of the fourth century AD the Xiongnu chieftain Liu Yuan, son of Bao who was a son of Yufuluo, founded a short-lived state which he named the Han, and in 311 he captured Luoyang from the Chinese Jin dynasty. His success marked the beginning of the division of China, and the age of the "barbarian" dynasties in the north. That, however, lay in the future, and we need only observe that when the Han dynasty came to its formal end in 220 the Xiongnu empire, which had once ranged across the whole northern steppe, was reduced to a few settlements and people in the hills of northern China.

#### 7. Conclusion

The division, decline and collapse of the Xiongnu during the first two centuries AD reveal the fragility of the nomad regime. Essentially a family affair, the leadership emerged in response to the challenge and opportunities presented by the empire of China, but there was minimal structure to the state, and the disruption brought by the problems of succession was sufficient to break its co-ordination and power. The fatal division between North and South in the 40s AD was just one of many occasions that a Shanyu was faced by pretenders or claimant rivals.

Finally, moreover, we should distinguish between the rulers of the state and the people they sought to control. By the beginning of the second century AD, as their leadership fell into decay, former Xiongnu subjects were changing their allegiance and adopting the name of the newly powerful Xianbi, but below the level of this change, most people of the steppe continued their lives as they had before, with nomad pastoralism, trade amongst themselves and with their neighbours, and occasional raiding parties by hot-headed warriors. Ultimately, despite the ravages and disruption, the fall of the Xiongnu state was a political matter: one clan failed and was driven away, but was replaced on the steppe by another, initially far less structured but later producing a new warlord grouping to face the frontier of China.

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#### Maps

[MAP of Han and Xiongnu about 90 AD](#) [JPG file 65kb]

#### Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> General bibliographical note:

This paper is based primarily upon Rafe de Crespigny, *Northern Frontier: the policies and strategy of the Later Han empire*, Australian National University Faculty of Asian Studies Monographs, New Series No.4, Canberra 1984. General works of substantial relevance include Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, The American Geographical Society of New York, second edition 1951, Ying-shih Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: a study in the structure of Sino-barbarian economic relations*, University of California Press 1967 [strongly interpreted from the Chinese

view-point], and Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War and Trade along the Great Wall: nomadic-Chinese interaction through two millennia*, Indiana University Press 1989 [which presents the view of a Mongolian-Chinese scholar]. *The Cambridge History of China: volume 1, The Ch'in and Han empires 221 B.C. – A.D. 220*, Cambridge University Press 1986, includes many valuable references, but has limited detail on the later years of the Xiongnu states. There is, of course, a great deal of material available in Chinese and other languages: these can be accessed through the bibliographies of the Western-language works cited above.

[2] This source and structure of power is well described by Jagchid and Symons [1989], 24-37.

[3] Hans Bielenstein, *The Restoration of the Han Dynasty: volume III; the People*, in *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* No. 39, Stockholm 1967, 85-152, has a detailed account of the history of Xiongnu relations with Wang Mang and then with Emperor Guangwu of Later Han. His view of Wang Mang's policies is more favourable than mine.

[4] For criticism of Wang Mang's policy by one of his own generals, see Jagchid and Symons [1989], 52-54.

[5] The Liao River is in Manchuria, far to the east of the Ordos, but under Later Han the responsibilities of the commander with that title were concentrated upon the immediate northern frontier, not in the territory that his title would imply.

[6] On the empire of Tanshuhai, see K H J Gardiner and R R C de Crespigny, "T'an-shih-huai and the Hsien-pi Tribes of the Second Century AD," in *Papers on Far Eastern History* 15 [Canberra 1977], 1-44, and de Crespigny, *Northern Frontier*, 329-345.

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