

The Non-government Trade Between the Western Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu in the 2nd Century BCE

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Abstract: The paper pays close attention to the non-government trade between the Western Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu and its unintended political consequences in the 2nd century BCE. Through the investigation of the Central Plains and the north nomadic patriarch period of communication history based on traditional literature and archaeological sources, the work holds that the domestic trade network since the 5th century BCE extended beyond the Central Plains during the Warring States period. It became a tool for the game between the two regimes in the early Western Han Dynasty. Then, when the Han regime gained the upper hand in the game, its economic and political influence extended to the northern and Western regions with the extension of the trade network, which made the foreign trade of the Han Dynasty become “domestic trade” to some extent. At the same time, the foreign policy of the Han Dynasty became hardline, leading to territorial expansion, which became a liability to the empire, especially when it was in decline.

Keywords: Nongovernment trade, Han Dynasty, Xiongnu

1. Introduction

The Western Han Dynasty refused to take military action directly against the Xiongnu since Emperor Kao-Tsu was surrounded in P'ing-ch'eng. It was not until the victory brought about by Wei Qing in 119 BCE that the Western Han Dynasty was truly free from the military threat of the Xiongnu. During this period, however, policies of conciliation, including *Heqin* (和親) and tribute, were used to appease and weaken their enemy, which was generally considered as deceptive policies before the final showdown by people in power and historians. And among these policies, nongovernment trade between the Western Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu has received less attention.

Compared with official trade in the form of tribute, Sima Qian emphasized the practicability of nongovernment trade to check the aggression of the Xiongnu. At the same time, the nongovernment trade between the Western Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu became the eastern starting point of the Silk Road in Eurasia, which could be proved by archaeological evidence. And it determined the direction of the future foreign policy of the Han Empire to a large extent.

2. Trade in Northern China and its Decline

In the Bronze Age of the northern prairie peoples, existing archaeological evidence shows that they had unique cultural characteristics. In the second millennium BCE, after the emergence of nomads in northern China, both the Yin Dynasty and the northern regimes that opposed Yin independently produced bronzes, which meant they were city-states in the northern region, just like the general dynasties in the early state [1]. This fact shows the character of the independent development of the nomadic regimes in the north at that time, but things changed during the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age.

Limited by documentary and archaeological sources, we cannot accurately map the routes and scale of trade, but artifacts from the Central Plains deeply influenced Xiongnu culture. The bronze mirror and iron sword found in the Xiongnu tomb *Xigoupan* 西沟畔 clearly reflected the influence of the Central Plains, or were the product of the Central Plains [2]. And we might claim that official trade was already active at that time. The gold ornaments for example, they were unique ornaments from the Xiongnu culture [1]. But the Xiongnu relics found in the Xiongnu tomb *Xigoupan* 西沟畔 are engraved with *Shaofu* 少府 two characters, indicating that it was specially made for the Xiongnu imperial Dynasty in the Central Plains [2]. Combined with the historical documents, we can believe that the trade and cultural exchanges between the Central Plains and the northern Xiongnu was unprecedentedly prosperous in the Warring States Period, which was quite different from the subsequent period.

Between the 5th and 3rd centuries BCE, historians have focused on wars at home rather than foreign exchanges. Therefore we cannot describe the trade between the Central Plains and the Xiongnu, and it might be at a standstill. Owen Lattimore saw this as a sudden narrowing of China's early historical perspective, and it would take hundreds more years for the Central Plains to extend the frontier to the "sub-oasis areas" in the west [3]. However, documents show that the people of the Central Plains still maintained close ties with the Hiongnu:

In the seventh year [200 B.C.] the Hsiung-nu attacked Hsin, the king of Hann, at Ma-i. Hsin joined with them in plotting a revolt in T'ai-yüan. His generals, Man-ch'iu Ch'en of Po-t'u and Wang Huang set up Chao Li, a descendant of the royal family of Chao, as king of Chao in revolt against the emperor. [4]

And Wang Huang was noteworthy for his identity of a businessman [4]. So, he was a representative of a business community that was active in domestic politics and that actively sought its interests, even in rebellion. At the same time, the existence of this community also proved stable communication between the Central Plains and the Xiongnu region. At least until the 2nd century BCE, the two maintained a considerable degree of interaction, which partly depended on nongovernment trade. The trade that followed for more than four centuries testifies to the flourishing of civilizational contacts at that time.

3. Nongovernment trade in the early Western Han Dynasty

As can be seen from the above, the nongovernment trade between the Western Han and Xiongnu in the 2nd century BCE was carried on from the previous foreign trade. From the perspective of space, the trade between them was the extension of domestic trade in the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period. We can find clear evidence of its existence from historical sources:

Because the region [Zhong and Dai] is so close to the territory of the northern barbarians, armies have frequently been sent there, and when supplies were transported to them from the central states, the people were often able to profit from the surplus [4].

So we can confirm the existence of early trade between the Central Plains and the Xiongnu. Though details of business dealings were unclear at that time, the Xiongnu had their own preference for "bulk trade goods" including silk and lacquerware [5]. But it is worth noting that silk and lacquerware are considered as symbols of nobility or power. To take lacquerware for an example, Sima Qian described the society's view of it:

Those who own 1,000 mu of lacquer trees in Chen or Xia, 1,000 mu of mulberries or hemp in Qi or Lu, or 1,000 mu of bamboo along the Wei River... Commodities such as these are in fact, the sources of considerable wealth. [4]

In other words, lacquerware or lacquer tree was not only one of the important economic sources of the nobility or the powerful but also the proof of their wealth and status. So it is impossible for civilians in the Central Plains to use lacquerware in large quantities as daily utensils. And the production of raw materials for lacquerware has regional restrictions. As Sima Qian described, raw materials like timber, bamboo and lacquer grow along the east and west sides of the Xiaoshan Mountains [4]. Obviously, lacquerware had to be transported and sold long distances before it was made. Since lacquerware production had a clear regional division of labor, and their origins were far from the border between China and Xiongnu, we can conclude that the nongovernment trade before the 2nd century BCE was a high-investment, high-return trade in luxury goods. At the same time, it is likely to be in the hands of the aforementioned merchant community with sufficient capital and long-distance trade experience. To this extent, the merchant groups, who were not limited by borders and for the purpose of profit, connected the "Huaxia" 華夏 and "Xiongnu" in the later sense and promoted the diffusion of material civilization from the eastern side of Eurasia to its center.

Goods produced in the Central Plains entered the north through domestic trade, which should have been the hub at the beginning of the eastern side of the Silk Road. Over the next century, however, this trade was significantly influenced by politics, especially as the Central Plains emphasized identity distinctions. And the cost was the shrinking of Han commercial influence in the north.

Ever since Emperor Kao-tsu of Han ascended the throne, private trade was banned. After he was surrounded in P'ing-ch'eng in 200 BCE, however, trade with the Xiongnu gradually became one of the secrets of the later emperors to balance the Xiongnu [6]. In terms of nongovernment trade between them, it came to be an important tool for maintaining peace in the middle of the 2nd century BCE. As Emperor Jing continued his father's policy of allowing Xiongnu to buy goods in the markets along the Great Wall, there was no major invasion except for small raids from time to time [4]. It continued to play a role in the early years of Emperor Wu's reign, "all the Xiongnu grew friendly with the Han, coming and going along the Great Wall." [4]

Even if the relationship between the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu was broken, the Central Plains could still maintain trade under the Great Wall to meet the trade needs of the Xiongnu:

At the same time they continued to be as greedy as ever, delighting in the border markets and longing for Han goods, and the Han for its part continued to allow them to trade in the markets in order to sap their resources. [4]

Apparently, the Han Dynasty again recognized the importance of trade and took advantage of it. The Battle of Mayi in 133 BCE ended the "peaceful" relationship between Han and Xiongnu and replaced it with a state of intense warfare. But for the next five years, the two maintained unofficial relations until "the Han government dispatched four generals, each with a force of 10,000 cavalry, to make a surprise attack on the barbarians at the border markets." [4]. At this time, the Han Dynasty voluntarily ended all trade with the Xiongnu, and the war that would decide the fate of both was imminent.

Sima Qian emphasised the importance of nongovernment trade. In order to test its accuracy, I combined the existing historical documents:

Table 1: Number of major Han-Xiongnu wars in the early Western Han Dynasty

Rulers	Emperor Kao-tsu	Empress Lü	Emperor Wen	Emperor Ching	Emperor Wu
Number	1	0	3	3	11

Table 1 shows the number of major wars between Han and Xiongnu from 200 BCE to 120 BCE according to the rulers' reign.

It is worth noting that after Emperor Wu ascended the throne, there was no conflict between the two sides until 133 BCE. But only after the four generals attacked the market the Xiongnu launched five massive retaliatory wars over the next two years. This proves the Huns' dependence on border trade, which is exactly what the Han Dynasty expected.

As for the goods traded before the beginning of the war, it is hard to imagine that the Huns were so dependent on the previous trade in luxury goods.

However, after studying the tombs of Xiongnu civilians, we found that the social stratification of Xiongnu was different from that of the Han Dynasty. To be more specific, Xiongnu civilians could also use lacquerware and other crafts:

A lacquered ear cup is one of the most abundant artifacts in Xiongnu tombs. Presumably purchased mainly from the Han, it can be seen that the scope of trade between the Xiongnu and the Han people at that time may be more extensive than we think. A total of 28 tombs contained lacquerware, of which 2 were male (18% of gender-specific tombs), 9 were female (82%), and 17 were gender-unknown. These lacquerware are basically ear cups, large plates, bowl fragments, etc. From the statistical data, these utensils are mostly buried in female tombs [7].

In addition to lacquerware, a large number of broken Han-style bronze mirrors were found in women's burials, and scholars inferred that this was a special sacrificial custom [7]. At the same time, material civilization from the Han Dynasty, such as flower-shaped bubbles, influenced Xiongnu culture:

However, these flower-shaped bubble nails not only have the role of fixing textiles but also may contain the meaning of four directions. For example, this kind of iron bubble decoration was also unearthed in the Han tombs in the Central Plains, so this custom may have spread from the South to draw slaves. [7]

It can be seen that in the 2nd century BCE, the crafts of the Central Plains were widely accepted by the Xiongnu regardless of whether they were luxury goods for the Han Dynasty. In addition, Han exports to the Xiongnu in the 2nd century BCE probably did not include grain:

The government then called upon the people to supply grain, offering honorary ranks to those who were prepared to send grain to the frontier. The ranks varied with the amount of grain but reached as high as the eighteenth rank, called dashuzhang [4].

“Dashuzhang” 大度長 was a very high rank, usually only for outstanding generals. And those who received the title would not have to pay tax. So, this situation illustrated the difficulties of transporting grain to the border area in the early Han Dynasty. By the time of Emperor Wu, the tough policy towards the Xiongnu led to financial difficulties for the state. the rulers had to resort to other measures, which meant men who presented goods would be appointed to symbolic positions, and

some who made sufficient contributions would be immune from punishment for some minor crime [4].

The traffic in the north has become quite bad, and commerce, with the exception of arts and crafts, was largely at a standstill. The situation did not improve sufficiently in the 2nd century BCE compared to later periods, especially after A.D. And Nion-Ula cemetery is an excellent proof. In addition to a wide variety of lacquerware and bronze mirrors, wooden utensils were also found, such as umbrella covers. Among them was a wooden table that got a lot of attention. Unfortunately, the tabletop did not remain, but two of the legs found had mortise and tenon structures, which meant it came directly from China [8]. Also this was also a rare everyday item from China. Relics such as these indicated the resumption and prosperity of trade between Han and Xiongnu after AD.

The renewed prosperity of foreign trade in the Han Dynasty was accompanied by the expansion of the political territory because the purpose of the expansion of the Western Han Dynasty to the western regions was to encircle the rear of the Xiongnu. So, the focus of the war against the Xiongnu shifted to the Western Regions, and foreign trade revived. In addition, Han-style artifacts have been unearthed from Xinjiang to the Mediterranean coast, but scholars have not been able to determine whether they came directly from the Han Dynasty [5]. There is no doubt that, however, a large number of foreign trade merchants in the Central Plains were ready for foreign trade, and clients were not limited to the Xiongnu. At the same time, what used to be “international trade” became “domestic trade”; that is to say, after the removal of the Xiongnu threat, the Han Dynasty had external control far beyond its borders, at least in the realm of trade.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of the world, Trade with the outside world was briefly closed In the 2nd century BCE during the Han-Xiongnu War, and it took hundreds of years from the suspension of foreign trade to its reopening and the trade routes since the Eastern Zhou Dynasty were connected with the Silk Road. So as international trade became domestic trade, China permanently and firmly became a part of the Silk Road.

For China itself, its defensive campaign against the Xiongnu gradually led to involuntary foreign expansion, with the accompanying expansion of political influence and foreign trade. Then, with the decline of the Western Han Dynasty, China lost control of its territories beyond the Central Plains. It was not until the Eastern Han Dynasty that China briefly regained its glory in the Western regions and along the Silk Road.

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