

The Xiongnu Strategies and Nomads' Characteristics

Linjia Liu

*Qingdao No. 2 Middle School, Qingdao, China
1040309688@qq.com*

Abstract. The Xiongnu, as a significant variable and influencing factor in the Silk Road Economic Belt since ancient times, played a crucial role in the development of ancient economies and cultural integration. To delve deeper into the ethnic characteristics of the Xiongnu, this work begins by examining the lifestyle traits of nomadic peoples, analyzes historical records from China's ancient primary sources regarding the Xiongnu tribes and their leaders, and concludes that the Xiongnu's tactics were adapted to their unique characteristics. The work contains contents recorded in the ancient Chinese historical books *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, analyzes in detail the unique living habits of the Xiongnu, such as nomadic life and plundering economy, and lists the common strategies and practical experiences of the Xiongnu in war with the Han court, so as to explain the relationship between the ethnic characteristics of the Xiongnu and their war strategies. Therefore, this work summarizes that the Xiongnu are not just a barbaric, uncivilized nation recorded in some historical materials. On the contrary, these nomadic people have rich strategies and their own wisdom, so that they can cope with the powerful Han Dynasty.

Keywords: Xiongnu, nomadic lifestyles, nomadic strategies, advantages and shortcomings of Xiongnu society

1. Introduction

As a powerful force that was long at odds with the Han Dynasty, the nomadic Xiongnu 匈奴 has always been of great interest to historians. Sima Qian claimed in *Shiji* that, although the Xiongnu were violent, barbaric, and uncivilized people, he still admitted that the Xiongnu were also brave and warlike people, and had a very different culture from the agricultural civilization of the Central Plains, which the Han Dynasty lived in [1]. This duality in their portrayal reflects the complex relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han, shaped by both conflict and occasional cooperation. Nevertheless, as an official and a scholar who devoted to serving the Han Dynasty and its people, Ban Gu emphasizes people the Xiongnu were greedy for wealth, fond of profit, and tyrannical. Such contrasting perspectives may stem from the differing positions and purposes of the historians—Sima Qian sought to document the broader historical landscape, while Ban Gu's account was more aligned with the Han's political narrative. From different historical dimensions, such far-apart historical comments make the Xiongnu even more mysterious and elusive group of people [2]. However, the Xiongnu were nomadic folks who knew how to use their advantages very clearly, and their own strength and shortcomings led to their strategies that were one of a kind. Their adaptability

to the harsh steppe environment and their ability to exploit the weaknesses of settled civilizations were key factors in their political and military tactics. Studying its strategy helps to understand the conflict and interaction between nomadic civilization and agricultural civilization. Thus, I am planning to analyze historical classics such as *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, inquire into how the Xiongnu's characteristics influence their political strategies, to deeper understand the structure of the Xiongnu society.

2. The nomadic lifestyle and key strategies

Starting with the nomadic nature of the Xiongnu and their advantage in war, the Xiongnu lived in an unsettled, nomadic way of life. They didn't have specific places to live, raised cattle and horses, and wore clothes made of animal fur. As *Shiji* recorded, these nomads started learning archery at a very young age and became very skilled cavalry when they grew up [1]. This early and continuous martial training ensured that warfare was deeply embedded in their culture, making military prowess a fundamental aspect of Xiongnu identity. The entire structure of the Xiongnu society was optimized for mobility and warfare. Their life, which was settled on horseback, fostered very experienced equestrian skills, leading to the basis of a powerful cavalry force. Such mobility not only enhanced their combat effectiveness but also shaped their strategic thinking, favoring hit-and-run tactics over prolonged engagements. Meanwhile, the lack of permanent settlements made them elusive targets, while their decentralized structure allowed for rapid decision-making and force dispersal and reconcentration. This organizational flexibility meant that the Xiongnu could adapt swiftly to changing circumstances, whether in warfare or in evading retaliation. Crucially, their pastoral economy, which was vulnerable to climatic disaster since the growth of grass depends on different weather, inherently incentivized raiding settled communities for surplus grain and goods. The famous historian Ban Gu emphasizes this connection in *Hanshu* that the Xiongnu have no walled cities or fixed dwellings, when they see something advantageous, they advance; when they see no advantage, they retreat [2]. At the same time, the mastery of Xiongnu mounted archery was of best quality at their time, giving them a devastating stand-off capability. The combination of superior archery and unmatched mobility allowed them to dominate open battles while minimizing their own casualties. The nomads made a very flexible strategy of resisting the Han Dynasty according to their unique way of life.

The Xiongnu core Strategies exploited mobility, evasion, and predation. "They came into the borderlands, plundered wealth and people, especially in Liaodong and Yunzhong." [2] As *Hanshu* recorded, the Xiongnu implemented a plundering economy, robbed local livestock and grain as food, people as slaves, and made money for themselves. This systematic predation not only provided immediate resources but also served as psychological warfare, instilling fear in Han border populations. They burn down the city and disappear, leaving nothing in the ruins. This strategy was employed in almost every warfare they were involved in, as a very typical means that the Xiongnu used. The consistency of these tactics across different campaigns suggests they were deeply ingrained in Xiongnu military doctrine rather than ad hoc solutions. In the battle of the Hexi Corridor, the Xiongnu troops captured border people for labor service, plundered cattle and sheep to supplement military supplies, and looted iron, grain, and money, hitting the local economy hard [1,2]. One other famous strategy of theirs is the Swift Raids. Utilizing their superior mobility, they launched lightning-fast attacks on vulnerable border commanderies. These raids were carefully timed to maximize impact, often coinciding with harvest seasons when grain stores were fullest, yet defenses were most distracted. In Henan Land Raids during emperor Wen's reign, their cavalry moved south in several directions to attack the Han border counties of Longxi, Beidi and Shangjun.

They avoided the main fortresses of the Han army, focused on villages and farming areas with weak defenses of Han. Simultaneously, they launched the autumn offensive for several years, started at the Henan Raids, which was called the Protracted War Strategy. This multi-year approach systematically weakened Han border regions while minimizing Xiongnu casualties, demonstrating their strategic patience. They also deliberately led the Han soldiers deeper into their own main positions to better strike at the imperial army. As a result, the Xiongnu profited greatly, and the Han Dynasty was forced to restart the peace marriage, while the border economy of the Han suffered from this battle [1,2]. Through tactics such as surprise attack, protracted war, economic plunder, and luring the enemy deeper, the Xiongnu troops effectively made use of their own advantages and made up for the shortcomings of insufficient resources. They also deliberately led the Han soldiers deeper into their own main positions to better strike at the imperial army. As a result, the Xiongnu profited greatly, and the Han Dynasty was forced to restart the peace marriage, while the border economy of the Han suffered from this battle.

The classic strategy adopted by the Xiongnu for generations was clever and effective, resulting in many battles against the Han court. Over the decades, the Xiongnu implemented their strategy with remarkable consistency. The cumulative impact was profound: constant insecurity depopulated border regions, crippled agricultural production and trade, drained the Han treasury through military expenditures and tribute payments, and inflicted significant military losses on overextended Han expeditions. The classics vividly illustrate the immense resources and exceptional generalship required by the Han to finally achieve significant counter-offensive successes, underscoring the prior effectiveness of Xiongnu methods. In The Siege of Baideng, the Han emperor Liu Bang led the vanguard of light cavalry to Pingcheng before the arrival of the main army and then was surrounded at Baideng Mountain by elite cavalry with 400,000 soldiers led by Chan Yu, the Xiongnu's leader. And after that battle, the Xiongnu kept harassing the Han border, forcing the Han Dynasty to sign an unequal peace treaty, which gave "silk, wine, rice and food" every year, and married the Han Princess to the nomads [1,2]. In 158 BC, the Xiongnu attacked Yunzhong and Shangjun by two routes, continuing to kill and loot thousands of people and tens of thousands of livestock, which was called the "Hou Qiu Shu" strategy in history. The Han Dynasty was forced to garrison heavy troops on the border, and its financial burden increased greatly [1]. Similarly, after the plot of Mayi, the Xiongnu discovered the ambush plan of the Han Dynasty and destroyed the border on a large scale. All the pavilions and barriers passed by were destroyed, and officials and people were killed by them. The economy of the northern counties of the Han Dynasty declined, and the border counties were abandoned; farming and weaving activities there stopped for a long time [2]. The Xiongnu "made much money" through coercion, demonstrating the tangible success of their predatory economic model.

3. The drawbacks of Xiongnu strategies

However, although the Xiongnu strategies were effective and useful, there were still limitations and declines. There were inherent weaknesses and cracks in the nomadic model that existed within these strategies, and they ultimately led to their failure to secure lasting victory. Firstly, their dependence on resources directly determined that they gradually fell into the lower hand in their repeated confrontations with the Han Dynasty and were eventually completely defeated by the Han Dynasty. After Huo Qubing captured Hexi, the Han Dynasty built beacon towers and fortifications along the corridor to cut off the connection between the Xiongnu and the Western Regions. In 127 BC, after fighting the Xiongnu, Wei Qing recovered the Hetao region of Henan. Emperor Wu of Han once again ordered the construction of Shuofang City, rebuilt the old Great Wall of the Qin Dynasty, and

added "outer cities" [2]. Since the Xiongnu's war machine and food supply relied heavily on successful plunder, the Han knew exactly how to cut their food chain off, which resulted in improving Han defenses such as walls, colonies, mobile cavalry armies, or internal divisions, which could trigger an economic crisis and weaken the Han Dynasty's authority. Secondly, their organizational fragility greatly weakens their war ability. The loose confederacy structure was prone to internal rivalries and succession disputes, fracturing unity and making coordinated long-term strategy difficult. Han diplomacy can easily exploit these divisions, as they said, "using the barbarians to check barbarians" [3]. In 53 BC, the Xiongnu were divided into five Chanyus who fought each other. Huhanye Chanyu was defeated by his brother Zhizhi Chanyu and was forced to migrate south and surrender to the Han Dynasty. Emperor Xuan of Han sent troops to escort Huhanye Chanyu back to the southern desert and provided grain and fodder to help him become a vassal of the Han Dynasty. In the first 36 years, Chanyu Zhizhi moved westward to Kangju, threatening the Western Regions. Chen Tang, deputy commander of the Han Dynasty's Western Regions, attacked the region without imperial approval and joined forces with various states. The Han army captured Zhizhi City, beheaded Chanyu Zhizhi, and sent his head to Chang'an [2]. Thirdly, the depth of the Xiongnu strategies was also limited. While effective for raiding and defense-in-depth, their strategy lacked the capacity for permanent conquest or administration of settled territories, so that they could devastate but not easily replace the Han state structure. Their succession system was very messy because abnormal changes of rights often occurred. During the 150 years from Modu Chanyu to Huhanye Chanyu, there were nine abnormal power changes in the Xiongnu [4]. Therefore, the Han Dynasty formulated a complete countermeasure. During the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, from 133 to 90 BC, the population of the Xiongnu was reduced from about 1.5 million to 700,000; and after Dou Xian's battle of Yanran Mountain in the Eastern Han Dynasty, the Northern Huns moved westward, and only 200,000 tribes remained [5]. The economic unsustainability of the Xiongnu's plunder, their weak military technology, and their political tribal system, which led to heavy consumption, all gave the Han court an opportunity to defeat the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu were effectively struck down by Han's use of embargoes, strengthening protection, and sowing discord among the nomads, and finally lost their control of the edge parts of ancient China.

4. Conclusion

Above all, the Xiongnu strategies have a broader significance in the context of nomadic-settled conflicts. The Xiongnu were far more than some "barbarian groups who lived on plundering blindly." They developed a highly sophisticated and effective military doctrine perfectly adapted to their nomadic strengths and aimed at the economic and psychological vulnerabilities of their settled adversary. Their mastery of mobility, evasion, surprise, and economic predation allowed them to dominate the early stages of the conflict and force a powerful empire to the negotiating table. However, their strategy was inherently tied to a specific socio-economic model vulnerable to internal discord and external adaptation. The long-time conflict between the Han Court and the Xiongnu demonstrates the potent efficacy of asymmetric warfare based on exploiting core societal characteristics, but also highlights the long-term challenges such strategies face against a resilient and adaptive state capable of learning and systemic reform.

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