

Reconsider How Did Chinese Historian Represent Hsiung-nu in Light of Han Histories

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Abstract: In this paper, through a comparative study of some fragments about Hsiung-nu in Shih Chi and Han Histories, we can conclude that Ban Gu rewrote Shih Chi by changing words, moving sentences, and deleting them to reflect his thoughts and the purpose of writing history. The analysis of these changes in this paper focuses on the details. From the details of Ban Gu's rewriting of Shih Chi, we can find that Sima Qian had a view on ethnic equality, while Ban Gu had a derogatory view of Hsiung-nu.

Keywords: Hsiung-nu, Han Histories, Shih Chi

1. Introduction

The study of Ban Gu's views on Hsiung-nu is a research focus in the study of Han history, but few articles have explored this topic alone, and this part is only reflected in Ban Gu's rational thought. By comparing Shih Chi and Han Histories and entirely using documentary sources, this paper tries to show Ban Gu's views on Hsiung-nu realistically.

2. Literature Review

Sima Qian, the author of the Shih Chi, lived in the era of Emperor Wu, which was full of class conflicts when the economy of the Western Han Dynasty had reached unprecedented prosperity. At the same time, Emperor Wu took a series of measures to weaken the vassal kings, further strengthening the centralised feudal absolutism system. Based on economic prosperity, Emperor Wu fought against Hsiung-nu in the north and opened the Western Regions, making the Western Han Dynasty a great unified feudal empire. At the same time, the reign of Emperor Wu was marked by the contradictions between the peasants and the landlords, and the peasant riots and uprisings occurred from time to time, which marked Sima Qian with the contradictions of the times [1]. Although Dong Zhongshu put forward the idea of "Abandoning the other schools of thought and respecting only Confucianism," the other schools of thought were still very influential at that time, and Sima Qian's opinions were mixed with Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, Legalism and so on. The style of Shih Chi, which is perpendicular and horizontal, has much to do with the inclusiveness and openness of his thinking. Under his father's tutelage, Sima Qian not only developed a strong interest in talking and writing history but also acquired a high education as a historian, making it his life's work to write history [2]. In his understanding of the status of the Hsiung-nu, compared to his predecessors, Shih Chi was less discriminatory and contemptuous. He paid more attention to the ethnic minorities,

essentially aspiring for all ethnic groups' long-term stability and shared prosperity [3]. That is why he mentioned in *Shih Chi* that those who advised Emperor Wu on the Hsiung-nu issue were not looking out for the country's interests but were trying to gain the appreciation of Emperor Wu. Because of such selfishness, the advice of these people was often without careful consideration of the enemy and the consequences. Emperor Wu made his state policy based on the guidance of these people, and the final result was predictable. Sima Qian was well aware of the relationship between Han and Hsiung-nu, could personally feel the pressure of Hsiung-nu on the Han dynasty, and knew that the Hsiung-nu problem had to be dealt with seriously. Even if he did not think that the Hsiung-nu problem could be just solved by war, he would not wholly reject the reasonable use of warfare. However, after seeing Emperor Wu's initiatives, he thought that the ruler and ministers lacked far-sightedness and did not find a comprehensive solution to the Hsiung-nu problem.

However, Ban Gu was in the early period of the Eastern Han Dynasty when Confucianism was unified, and the other schools of thought could no longer compete with Confucianism. Ban Gu's father, Ban Biao, was deeply influenced by the idea of "exclusive respect for Confucianism" at that time and took Confucianism as the principle of faith. This determines that Ban Gu and his *Han Histories* exhibit a distinctly traditional and conservative style [4]. Although Confucianism was the foundation of the Ban family, they also chose the Taoist idea of "being worldly-wise and making oneself safe" in real life. During Wang Mang's reign, the Ban family's political status declined, but they were not significantly affected because of the idea of "protecting oneself." [2]. In the early period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, Emperor Guangwu ordered to free enslaved people and punished corrupt officials for solving the problem of social conflicts, which gradually stabilized the society and improved the economic situation. When Emperor Ming succeeded the Eastern Han Dynasty, the reign of the Eastern Han Dynasty was still firmly established, and he paid much attention to the work of writing history books. He freed Ban Gu, who was convicted of "changing the history of the state," and ordered him to continue the work of writing history books. Thus, in a way, there existed a sense of gratitude to Ban Gu for the pardon of Emperor Ming. All of this makes the *Han Histories* fundamentally represent the interests of the ruling class of the Han dynasty and take the promotion of Han virtue as its fundamental purpose, thus serving the authoritarian politics of the grand unification of the Han dynasty. It was against this social background that the *Han Histories* were produced. Therefore, it reflects the historical process from the first year of Han Gaozu to the end of Wang Mang's reign, but with a clear tendency of the ruler. In Ban Gu's description of the Hsiung-nu, contrary to Sima Qian's, we find solid derogatory expressions, such as that the Hsiung-nu had human faces but hearts of beasts. These two almost antithetical approaches arose from differences in methods and aims. Whereas Sima Qian lived through a period of sharp confrontation between the nomads and China (one that required China's urgent understanding of its neighbours), in Ban Gu's age, the Hsiung-nu had become less threatening. China was more confident of its power as a unified empire, and a stricter Confucian orthodoxy had asserted itself [5].

Therefore, Ban Gu describes the following three main characteristics of the writing of the *Han Histories*:

In the first place, Ban Gu's depiction is respectful of Han, and he rewrites *Shih Chi* to maintain the dignity of Han, showing off the achievements of Han, and whitewash the rule of Han, so he adds, subtracts, and replaces some materials to achieve the purpose of "false beauty."

For example, *Shih Chi* says: "Hsiung-nu came to ask for peace-making marriage, and the ministers discussed at the court." [6]. *Han Histories* says: "Hsiung-nu came to beg for peace-making marriage, and the ministers discussed at the court." [7]. *Shih Chi* uses "ask" to reflect a relatively equal relationship, while *Han Histories* uses "beg." These two words represent two different leaders. On the one hand, the word "ask" in the *Shih Chi*, though proposed by the Hsiung-nu, who was the leader of the peace-making marriage policy, reflected a relatively equal relationship. In contrast, the word

"begs" in Han histories, though also proposed by Hsiung-nu, reflected a superior-subordinate relationship. The subjectivity of the Han Dynasty is enhanced, and it had absolute decision-making power. The change of the word "asks" to "beg" in Ban Gu is to highlight the dominance and importance of the Han Dynasty in dealing with the relationship between the Han Dynasty and Hsiung-nu.

In the same way, Shih Chi says: "The Hussar General caught the Qiu Tu King, and the Huns who led the crowd to surrender were 2,500 people." [6]. Han Histories says: "The Hussar General captured Dan Huan King and Qiu Tu King under Chanyu, as well as the prime minister and the captain who led their men to surrender, a total of 2,500 people" [7]. In this part, Ban Gu added the captured captives and surrendered men in detail, emphasizing that Dan Huan King and Qiu Tu King belonged to Chan Yu, and added the middle and lower ranking generals like "prime minister and captain" to the list. This shows that the Han Histories have the characteristic of being a broad and knowledgeable book. From the comparison between Ban Gu and Sima Qian, we can also see that although this part of the history is an addition to the historical facts, it also reflects the importance that Ban Gu attached to the war between Han and Hsiung-nu. It also strengthened the achievements of the Han army to a great extent [8].

Furthermore, Shih Chi says: "More than 200 years after King Mu of Zhou, King You of Zhou had a grudge against the Shen Hou because of his favorite concubine Bao Si. In anger, Shen Hou joined hands with Hsiung-nu to attack and kill King You of Zhou at the foot of Mount Li. Hsiung-nu then occupied the Jiaozhu area of the Zhou Dynasty, invading the Central Plains from time to time." [6]. Sima Qian blames Hsiung-nu's "invasion of China" on the conflict between King You of Zhou and Shen Hou due to his favouring of Bao Si, and states that the Hsiung-nu's invasion of China was essentially the result of Shen Hou's collaboration with him. This event was recorded in the Han Histories: "During the reign of King Yi of the Zhou Dynasty, the Zhou royal family declined, and Hsiung-nu repeatedly attacked and ravaged the countries of the Central Plains. People of the Central Plains suffered greatly." [7]. From the above-mentioned historical materials, we can see that Ban Gu has deleted the records of King You of Zhou's favouring Baozi, Shen Hou's collusion with Hsiung-nu, etc. The problems within the ruling group of Zhou are summarized by the words "the royal family is weakened." This change contains the meaning that Hsiung-nu has been invading China for a long time, highlighting that Hsiung-nu has always been a danger to China. As long as the Central Plains is weak, Hsiung-nu will invade it [9].

Secondly, Ban Gu conceals some of the failures of the Han Dynasty. By deleting the statements in Shih Chi that showed Sima Qian's criticism of the Han Dynasty's military policy and tarnished the reputation of the Han Dynasty, he tried to maintain the absolute dignity of the Han Dynasty in the country and its absolute authority over the neighbouring peoples.

For instance, Shih Chi says: "In autumn, Wei Qing led 30,000 cavalries to attack Hsiung-nu and killed several thousand enemies. The following year, Hsiung-nu invaded the border, killed the governor, took more than 2,000 captives, and defeated the army of General Han Anguo." [6]. Han Histories says: "In autumn, Wei Qing led 30,000 cavalries to attack Hsiung-nu; Wei Qing destroyed several thousand enemy troops. The following year, Wei Qing attacked Yunzhong County, killed several thousand enemy troops, and gained more than one million heads of livestock." [7]. Since ancient times, defeats in battles laterally reflected the weakness of the state, and the Han Dynasty was an excellent unification dynasty after the Qin Dynasty, bent on conquering the Hsiung-nu. To save the face of the Han Dynasty, Ban Gu removed the historical facts of Han's defeat to show the Han Dynasty's military prestige.

Then again, Shih Chi says: "Wei Qing set out to attack the Hsiung-nu, and from Shanggu County, defeated the Hu at Rongcheng. General Li Guang was captured by Hsiung-nu and later escaped; Gongsun Ao's soldiers suffered heavy casualties. General Li Guang and Gongsun Ao should have

been executed, but they paid money to redeem themselves as civilians. The next year, Hsiung-nu invaded the border, killed the governor of Liaoxi, and killed and plundered thousands of people when they entered Yanmen. General Wei Qing set out from Yanmen and attacked them." [6]. However, Han Histories says: "General Wei Qing and his soldiers attacked the Hsiung-nu and captured Hsiung-nu's Longcheng. The next year, Hsiung-nu invaded the border again in force." [7]. According to the Shih Chi, the historical facts, including the defeated military actions of the Han army, are stated straightforwardly. At the same time, the Han Histories removed the defeated battles of the Han army to highlight the strength of the Han army and its national prestige of Han.

In the above two cases, Ban Gu's change is to delete the part about the defeat of the Han army, while Sima Qian gives a detailed account of the events. The difference between them is not only related to their orthodox and unorthodox historical thinking but, more importantly, the difference in their views on wars. Although Sima Qian was also in favour of using war to fight against the Hsiung-nu for the country's stability, he was also profoundly aware of the cruelty and destructiveness of war and the calamity it brought to the world. Therefore, in Shih Chi, did not protect the defeat of the Han army but presented it straightforwardly to show that war was not an option, that the Han army was not invincible, and that there were potential dangers in waging war. On the other hand, as a later generation, Ban Gu represented the interests of the ruling class of the Han Dynasty when he remembered the previous dynasty and made the promotion of Han virtue his fundamental purpose, thus serving the authoritarian politics of the Han Dynasty. Therefore, when Ban Gu examined ethnic relations from the standpoint of the ruling class, he naturally developed the ethnic thought of respecting the Han and suppressing Hsiung-nu [10]. Therefore, Ban Gu deleted the defeat rather than used it.

Thirdly, Ban Gu intended to belittle the Hsiung-nu. Some parts of the Han Histories written by Ban Gu deviated from the facts and were used to criticize specific people and deeds for emphasizing certain political concepts and deeds and for elevating the status of the Han Dynasty. Like the previous "false beauty," Ban Gu also changed words, added or subtracted from the relevant contents and expressions of the Chih Chi to belittle Hsiung-nu.

A typical example of this is that Shih Chi says: "How can a large army be sent in such a situation when Han envoys come in batches of several hundred people, and often more than half of them die for lack of food? They can do nothing to us." [6]. Han Histories say: "How can a large army be sent in such a situation when Han envoys come in batches of several hundred people, and often more than half of them die for lack of food?" [7]. Han Histories removes the phrase "They can do nothing to us." This sentence reflects the arrogance of Hsiung-nu and the incompetence of the Han Dynasty. Ban Gu deleted this sentence to extinguish the prestige of Hsiung-nu and prevent readers from thinking that Hsiung-nu was superior to the Han.

Besides, Shih Chi says: "When Dihou Chanyu first came to the throne, he sent all the emissaries of the Han Dynasty who did not want to surrender back to their home." [6]. However, Han Histories says: "When Dihou Chanyu first came to the throne, he was afraid that the Han Dynasty would attack them, so he released all emissaries who refused to surrender." [7]. The Han Histories add "fear of attack from Han." Ban Gu adds sentences speculating on the inner thoughts of Hsiung-nu Chan Yu, while Sima Qian describes history objectively. Although Ban Gu's speculation was probably correct, it also reflects Ban Gu's inner views that the Han Dynasty was a powerful empire and Hsiung-nu was in awe of it.

Additionally, Shih Chi says: "However, by the time of Modern's reign, Hsiung-nu forces were at their strongest, making the northern barbarians completely subservient to the rule, while becoming hostile to the Han Dynasty in the south, and only after that were their lineage and the official names of the state recorded." [6]. However, Han Histories says: "However, when Modun became Chanyu, it was the most potent time for Hsiung-nu, and all the minority groups in the north obeyed his rule,

and the Chinese tribes in the south were enemies, and its lineage and official names were only recorded at this time." [7]. In Han Histories, "lineage and official names of the state" was changed to "lineage and the official names." The use of the word "state" in the Shih Chi reflects Sima Qian's recognition of Hsiung-nu as a state, while the deletion of this word by Ban Gu shows his repudiation of the Hsiung-nu regime. The meaning of "state" is equal to that of the Han Dynasty, while "official names" is inferior to that of the Han Dynasty. The deletion of this word by Ban Gu shows his disavowal of the Hsiung-nu regime and his belief that Hsiung-nu was merely subservient to Han rule.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of Sima Qian in writing Shih Chi is to reveal the essence through historical facts and phenomena, to explore the interaction between natural phenomena and human society, to understand the development and evolution of dynasties from ancient times to the present, and to search for the reasons for the rise and fall of dynasties and their successes and failures, and to form his unique theoretical doctrine of history through Shih Chi, with trade-offs and criticisms. Indeed, Shih Chi expresses his deep thoughts. He criticizes the generals of the Han dynasty who were involved in the affairs of the Hsiung-nu as a quick way to show their nobility, and he blames the monarchs for their lack of success in dealing with the Hsiung-nu because of their misuse of people. In his account of the Hsiung-nu affairs, he was primarily objective and less subjective accusations.

The purpose of Ban Gu to write Han Histories is to praise the merits and achievements of the Han dynasty, the saintliness of the ruler, and to maintain the orthodox status and authority of the Han dynasty. His orthodox ideology is mainly reflected in highlighting the status and role of the emperors and generals and putting the Hsiung-nu in a secondary position, believing that they could only be a city around the Han dynasty. In the writing of the Han Histories, some strongly contrasting historical materials from Shih Chi were concealed internally. At the same time, it was advocated that the basis of the rule of Hsiung-nu is to maintain the necessary distance from them and a policy of conservative rule is appropriate.

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