

Imagination and Reality: Analysis of Reasons of the Existence of Bias Against Xiongnu in Han Shu

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Abstract: The Han dynasty was an imperial dynasty in Chinese history that had been interacted with the Xiongnu (匈奴), a nomadic tribal confederation which was mainly active in the northwest region near Han's boundaries in Eurasian continent, for four hundred years. Han Shu (汉书) is a historical record that comprehensively documents Han history, and Han Shu's recordings of the Xiongnu have been an essential source for Xiongnu studies. However, though there are concise and concrete facts and descriptions in the text of Han Shu, given the nationality of the author, Ban Gu (班固), bias that come from the imagination of Xiongnu that Han had and the reality of Han Dynasty inevitably exists in the text. Therefore, a deeper understanding of Xiongnu might be required for Han because of interactions and corporations happened between those two opposing nations. This paper will discuss the reasons for the existence of bias based on the text of Han Shu and attribute the bias to the imagination that Han people had of Xiongnu due to the geographical separation created by natural mountains and villages, and to the reality that Han interacted with Xiongnu in both peaceful and unpeaceful ways which led to complex feelings.

Keywords: Han Dynasty, Han Shu, Xiongnu history, Ban Gu

1. Introduction

Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) is one of the imperial dynasties in ancient China established after the corruption of Qin Dynasty in 202 BC. Han Dynasty could be divided into Former Han Dynasty and Later Han Dynasty. The Former Han Dynasty ended in 9 AD, while the Later Han Dynasty, in which the author of Han Shu, Ban Gu, was born, began in 25 AD and ended in 220 AD. For over four hundred years, Han Dynasty had been confronted Xiongnu, a tribal confederation of nomadic pastoralists lived in eastern Eurasian steppe from third century BC to first century AD. The strategies applied by the Han in order to defend and fight against Xiongnu include intermarriage, trade and war.

The paper is based on *Han Shu* for the primary source. *Han Shu*, the history of Former Han Dynasty, was initiated by Ban Biao while written by his son Ban Gu, a court official of Later Han. Completed in 111AD, *Han Shu* recorded Han history from 206 BCE to 23CE, including the interactions between Han and Xiongnu. However, in consideration of the identity of Ban Gu, the recordings of Xiongnu in *Han Shu* inevitably contain bias that may result from the imagination of Xiongnu held by Ban Gu and Han people and the reality of Han Dynasty, including political events and purposes, that could have impacts on Ban Gu's writing. Based on the recording in *Han Shu* and

other reliable secondary sources, this paper unveils the disrespectful name of Xiongnu people given by Han, analyzes the bias that Han held regarding Xiongnu lifestyle and moral principles, and discusses the overall pride attitude of Han people towards the relationship of Han and Xiongnu.

2. Biased Against Xiongnu Identified in Han Shu

In *Han Shu*, Ban Gu describes and comments on Xiongnu people, their lifestyle and moral principles as uncultured and primitive, using a scornful tone.

First of all, though Ban Gu did not create the name “Xiongnu” for this certain nomadic tribe, since the *Records of the Grand Historian*, also known as *Shiji*, a monumental history of China written by Sima Qian, has been using the name “Xiongnu” to represent this tribe, the Chinese name itself includes pejorative meanings. Some scholars believe that the character “匈 (Xiong)” in ancient Chinese is identical to “凶 (Xiong)”, which stands for “fierce”, while the “奴 (nu)” means “slaves” or “slavery”. Together, this phenomenon also appeared when ancient Chinese dynasties named the surrounding non-Han tribes in Chinese, and this name, “Xiongnu”, given by ancient Chinese is apparently biased and dismissive.

In *Han Shu*, Ban Gu emphasizes the difference between Xiongnu’s lifestyle and Han’s. Xiongnu people, as depicted in *Han Shu*, had meat along with animal products as food resources, and they dressed in leather and fur, while the normal Han people left bulls and oxen for farming use and could hardly consume meat in daily life and dressed textile made of cotton or hemp fiber. Though agricultural and nomadic way of living reflect the natural living conditions in both regions, respectively, Ban Gu along with Han people tends to consider themselves as more cultured and their behavior as more appropriate.

Being aware of the disparity of moral principles between Han and non-Han nationalities, Ban Gu describes Xiongnu people as greedy and savage. In the text, Xiongnu only values commercial and political interests and makes decisions only based on profit concerns, while Confucian ideas applied by people in Han Dynasty disparage utilitarianism for individuals. According to him, the Xiongnu ignored all the moral principles, including respecting the aged and taking care of the young, which were encouraged by Confucianism of the Han, let alone sharing wives among fathers, sons and brothers, which are despised by the Han people.

Moreover, occasionally the despise is extended from the vulgar lifestyle of a nation to the inherence of a race. As based on evidence to some extent, Ban Gu expresses the idea when he writes, “It is their (Xiongnu’s) custom to plant crops and raise and hunt animals as a livelihood when the conditions are advantageous for them; it is their nature to invade and attack surrounding countries when the conditions are tough.” While some is not based on evidence, but imagination: “...The Yi and the Di people are greedy and desirous of gain; they wear their hair down their backs and fasten their garments on the left; they have human faces but the hearts of wild beasts. (*Traditions of the Xiongnu, Han Shu*)”

Attributing the inferior behavior and characteristics to the nature of Xiongnu people, *Han Shu* emphasizes the unchangeability of vicious characteristics of Xiongnu, which is largely based on imagination of Han people for Xiongnu and further belittles the Xiongnu and thus is clearly biased. Overall, by intentionally contradicting Xiongnu traditions with Han’s and judging Xiongnu’s traditions by Han’s criterion and adding imaginative elements in the description, *Han Shu* depicts Xiongnu people as virtueless savages.

The disdain reflected by *Han Shu* may further indicate a profound traditional conception regarding “Yi (夷)” and “Xia (夏)”, which is to respect for Xia, the Han nationality, while despise the Yi, a general name for minority or non-Han nationality beside the Han, such as Xiongnu, Turks and Jurchen [1]. As said in *Traditions of the Xiongnu in Han Shu* (《汉书·匈奴传》), according to *Chunqiu*(

《春秋》), Xia lives inside the Central States, while separated by mountainous regions, Yi and Di(狄) live outside.

The contempt in Yi and Xia concept is exemplified by the relationship between Xiongnu and the Han Dynasty, and Emperor Wu, who is considered as one of the most powerful and greatest Emperors in Chinese history, played a decisive role in the Han and Xiongnu interactions. According to the *Annals of Emperor Wu in Han Shu*(《汉书·武帝纪》), in May in 134 BC, Emperor Wu once said that,

I have heard that in the past, in the Yao and Shun dynasties, only the clothes of sin were used to symbolize the five punishments, but the people would not break the law; at that time, in places where the sun and the moon shone, no one was not submissive to the King. In the time of King Cheng and King Kang of the Zhou Dynasty, the laws of punishment were not used, and the virtue of the king was so great that it reached the birds and beasts, and the education was spread to the four seas. Overseas Su and Shen (names for minor nationalities) came to the court; Qu and Sou (names for minor nationalities) in the north waited to serve the king; the Di and Qiang (names for minor nationalities) were subservient to the central dynasty. Stars brought the blessing; the sun and the moon were not eclipsed, the mountains and hills did not collapse, the rivers were not plugged; the kylin and the phoenix appeared in the countryside, while books emerged in the Yellow River and Luo Shui. Oh! It is only with the help of universal virtue that such a prosperous world can emerge!

(Chinese: “朕闻昔在唐虞，画象而民不犯，日月所烛，莫不率俾。周之成康，刑错不用，德及鸟兽，教通四海。海外肃皃，北发渠搜，氐羌徕服。星辰不孛，日月不蚀，山陵不崩，川谷不塞；麟凤在郊薮，河洛出图书。呜呼，何施而臻此与！）

By that Emperor Wu intends to convey a message that the obedience of overseas and foreign nationalities, such as Su, Shen and Sou, is presented in a paralleled structure with the natural functioning of stars, the sun and the moon, and the mountains and rivers, which are typically the prerequisites or symbols of a peaceful realm and stable ruling for the emperor, and those are granted and required by the heaven, which, in fact, is not. Considering the recognition of Han people of the Xiongnu, represented by Emperor Wu's words, it is reasonable for Han people, include Ban Gu, at that time to disdain the Xiongnu, because for the Han people, Xiongnu never deserves an equal political relationship with the Han Dynasty.

To sum up, bias against Xiongnu in *Han Shu* exists in naming, judgements of lifestyle and moral principles, and consideration of relationship between Han and Xiongnu.

3. Reasons of Existence of Bias Against Xiongnu

3.1. Imagination: Geographical Separation

As nomadic pastoralists, Xiongnu people live under an entirely different natural environment with that of Han people, as civilization that develops mainly based on agricultural production.

As said by Ban Gu in *Ban Gu's Comments to the Traditions of the Xiongnu in Han Shu*(《汉书·匈奴传赞》), Xiongnu's agricultural practices are different, as “their land cannot be cultivated so as to produce food; their people cannot be made subjects and tamed.” This statement could be biased to some degree due to the source, but at least it demonstrated the largest difference they contain, which is the natural environment. According to *The Xiongnu Empire in Seven Hundred Years*(《匈奴帝国七百年》) by Chen Xujing, the largest proportion of the Mongolia land is desert, and the grassland is changing its size periodically depending on the amount of rain and snow. Areas that could be cultivated is small and only yields crops such as barley and oats [2]. Consequently, Xiongnu lives a nomadic way of life, as said in *Shiji*, they “live by water and grass” [3]. Differ from Xiongnu,

Chinese lived during the Han Dynasty have been following rules that generated under an agricultural society since the antiquity of Shang Dynasty.

The reason why Ban Gu attributes the inferior characteristics of Xiongnu to the nature of the people may be amplified to be the difference of nomadic and agricultural lifestyle. Because of this discrepancy and the fact that numerous Chinese moral principles are established based on agricultural custom, Ban Gu could only recognize that it is this distance that leads to the vulgarity and a lack of righteousness of Xiongnu, and thus consider Xiongnu, who does not receive the natural condition of advanced agricultural development, as remote and unpromising.

Moreover, the bias may be generated from Han people's imagination of Xiongnu. As proved by Sima Qian and following scholars, it is likely that Xiongnu did not actually develop their own written language or characters. Therefore, information regarding natural and political situation in north and west regions where Xiongnu people were active might mainly come from reports written by Han officials after observation in person, and in that case, certain amounts of details and concise facts might be unavailable to Ban Gu. Thus, to some degree, he had to imagine connections between events debris and find explanation for figures' action to form a reasonable historical narration as a whole.

Proved by evidence above, Ban Gu included bias against Xiongnu while recording history in *Han Shu*, due to unrealistic imagination generated from the unclear conception of Xiongnu's living condition, which is one of the challenges and limitations in his work.

3.2. Reality: Battles and Conflicts

In addition to despise Xiongnu and to depict people of which as primitive and rude, there are also examples in *Han Shu* that describe Xiongnu as frighteningly powerful and destructive, as in the reality Xiongnu people invaded and harassed the Han or previous dynasties, even before the name "Xiongnu" was invented, such as Zhou, a Chinese dynasty that lasts almost eight hundred years and coexists with the Spring and Autumn period and Warring State period.

From the *Traditions of the Xiongnu* in *Han Shu*, it is said that "when King Yi of Zhou, the grandson of King Mu of Zhou, the royal family of Zhou declined, and the Rong Di ("戎狄", another name for early Xiongnu) repeatedly attacked and ravaged the countries of the Central Plains. The people of the Central Plains suffered so much that poets began to sing poems hating them: 'There is no house and no home, it is all because of the Xianyun ("獫狁", another name for early Xiongnu); Which day do we not go to guard against them? The attack of Xianyun came very intensely.'" Presented by this description of Xiongnu, the influences of nomads brought by Xiongnu before Han Dynasty were severe that made people lived in central plains in China to be fearful of the invasive pastoralists.

In early Former Han Dynasty, Emperor Gaozu used to experience the dreadful feeling that brought by direct confrontation of Xiongnu army. At first, it was the general Han Xin who was trusted by Emperor Gaozu surrendered to Xiongnu in a battle. Then Emperor Gaozu himself led more than 300,000 troops to defeat Han Xin, defeating his army at where now south region of Qin County in Shanxi Province is. Emperor Gaozu heard of the Xiongnu army's location, and aimed to attack it, so he sent his men to investigate the Xiongnu. However, Modu (冒顿), the ruler of Xiongnu, hid his strength and deliberately showed his weakness, which made Emperor Gaozu immediately sent 320,000 Han troops northward to fight against Xiongnu, and even personally led the advance troops to Pingcheng (平城). Nevertheless, Modu alone besieged Emperor Gaozu at Baideng Mountain (白登山) with 400,000 fine cavalryman, and within seven days, the contact between the Han army and the outside was interrupted. Finally, Emperor Gaozu was assisted to have Modu relieved the siege in a corner, and the Han army broke through and rescued Gaozu with a loss of hundreds of thousands of soldiers.

Specifically, to some extent, Ban Gu recorded the invasive behaviors of Xiongnu as dreadful due

to fearful emotions, while he may have other concerns to leave recordings in the orientation that the Han nationality historically being afraid of Xiongnu because the Han people used to be violated by Xiongnu people, which could be further elaborated as a historical sense of victimhood. Considering the antagonism of Han and Xiongnu and the identity and purpose of Ban Gu to write *Han Shu*, the intention of Ban Gu to depict the Han as victim in the battle may be a justification of the warfare that the Han Dynasty later provoked to the Xiongnu, which could protect the fame of Han Emperors, such as Emperor Wu, who dedicated to eliminating Xiongnu as the largest foreign threat of Han Dynasty in his life, and more importantly, gain political advantages for Han Dynasty in warfare.

From the siege of the Baideng Mountain experienced by Emperor Gaozu to the battle strategies taken by Emperor Wu, it could be told that Xiongnu in the north regions continued to be a huge threaten to the central plain dynasty that Emperor Wu urged to fight against Xiongnu regardless of the cost, which prevent Xiongnu from moving toward south in a large scale. Later, due to the decentralization inside Xiongnu tribe, Han Dynasty seemed to dominate in the relationship between Han and Xiongnu. However, events and attitude other than winning and losing battles deserve more attention, along with being cautious about bias occurs in historical writing. At least *Han Shu* is the result of writing history. Therefore, it is cleared that in a certain period of time, the central dynasty, Han Dynasty, was predominate. The battle between strong and weak powers continued to exist, while the historical writing centered at central dynasty amplified its own advantage.

Besides, the intention of battles against Xiongnu in Han Dynasty requires to be identified. Some may consider those battles as battles that aim to fight back against the invasion of Xiongnu or to protect Han's territories. However, people at the time of Emperor Wu would call it as "expansion of the boundaries (开边)" and even take the battles as the evidence of the ambition of Emperor Wu. This discrepancy is interesting to interpret. Lattimore, in his book *China's Inland Frontiers in Asia*, pointed out that "the war with the minorities was not entirely the result of the invasion of China by the minorities from the distant steppes, but the result of the expansion of the Han nationality." The expansion of the Han nationality forced out the inhabitants of the original "unenlightened Han nationality" and gradually transformed them into a kind of steppe society." Therefore, bias against Xiongnu in *Han Shu* might be generated among the mutual effects of complex attitude, such as pride, scruple and fear, and practical demands.

4. Author's effect on the narration of Han Shu

Ban Gu wrote *Han Shu* on the basis of his father Ban Biao(班彪)'s *Later Biography of the Records of the Great Historian* (《史记后传》), but it was a great crime for him to narrate the history of the country privately, and he was denounced and put into prison. His younger brother Ban Chao(班超) protested for Ban Gu, believing that his father and brother were promoting "Han De"("汉德"), the fame and virtue of Han Dynasty, Emperor Ming of Han praised Ban Gu's talent after reading the manuscript, and made him go to the capital of Han to take charge of and revise the imperial books, specializing in history. According to *the Biography of Ban Gu in the Book of Later Han*(《后汉书·班固传》), Ban Gu suggested Han as the dynasty that blessed by Yao(尧), one of the legendary Chinese rulers, the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors(三皇五帝). Since the former historians who recorded Han histories quitted earlier, Ban Gu viewed himself as the one who continued this mission in which he had paid numerous efforts for over twenty years, and he described *Han Shu* as a popular work at that time.

In addition, Ban Gu also participated in the discussion on the relationship between Han and Xiongnu at that time. *The Biography of Ban Gu in the Book of Later Han* recorded Ban Gu's discussion on the intermarriage between Han and Xiongnu, which directly reflected Ban Gu's understanding of the relationship between the two. Unlike other people's fear of Xiongnu, Ban Gu

traced the relationship in the historical context. According to him, Han Dynasty used to have had four methods: “To sign contract to make peace with it, to use force to conquer it, to subjugate it, or to submit to it” (“或修文以和之，或用武以征之，或卑下以就之，或臣服而致之” [4]), and in the Later Han Dynasty, the Xiongnu fell apart inside, they took the initiative to surrender and ask for peace. This obvious contrast between military power and political status is an important reason for Ban Gu's approval of peaceful intermarriages. He had high expectations for the civilization of Han people, and at the same time considered the relationship between Han and Xiongnu with a very practical attitude, and did not completely surpass the debate between Yi and Xia. This reflects his commonality as a scholar of Han Dynasty and his characteristics as a historian.

This is also reflected in Ban Gu's writing of the *Biography of Xiongnu* in *Han Shu*. For example, he emphasized that Han and Xiongnu were from the same origin [5], but the difference was in rites and moral principles, and also recorded the interaction between Han and Xiongnu. All in all, both in terms of his identity as a Han and his life experiences, Ban Gu gave a high appraisal to the Han people and the Han Dynasty, and regarded the Han as orthodox, rejecting other nationalities.

5. Conclusion

The bias against Xiongnu in *Han Shu* exists in various aspects including naming, lifestyle, moral principles and relationship between Han and Xiongnu due to the conscious despise and dread of the Xiongnu generated from imagination of Xiongnu's living conditions and values, and the differences of geography and lifestyle between the Han Dynasty and Xiongnu, along with difference living demands, led to conflicts and battles in the reality and made the misunderstanding even more severe. However, it is by no means appropriate to totally deny the significant of *Han Shu* as a great historical record or Ban Gu as a great historian, since it could be seen that Ban Gu has offered present historians a considerably reliable source of researching Han history and a large amount of profound and earnest thoughts and suggestions.

There are limitations of the study. Because *Han Shu* is the primary source for numerous studies concerning the history of Han Dynasty and Xiongnu, it is hard to utilize other secondary sources to recognize the bias in a more authoritative text, while supplementary materials from Xiongnu side would further help with identification of the existence of bias.

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