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Chapter 4

The rise of Chinese imperialism: the northern frontiers and foreign relations of the Western Han

1. World views and the political situation in the Qin and Western (Former) Han empires

In Chapter Two, I argued that the Warring States era from the early fifth to the late third century BC was a crucial period in the formation of Chinese identity and Chinese worldviews. After the seven major states had been unified into a single empire by Qin Shi Huang, the term *tianxia* came into increasing use, often to refer to a coherent, unified geo-political entity. Consequently, in most cases *tianxia* should be understood as corresponding to the modern concept of “empire” (*diguo* 帝國), a term which did not emerge in Chinese sources until the nineteenth century.¹ Despite this development, the term *tianxia*, “all under Heaven”, also retained its literal meaning in the Early Imperial period. Using the Stele Inscriptions of Qin Shi Huang as a case study, I have examined the two meanings of the *tianxia* in the ancient texts. The broader meaning of *tianxia*, as stated earlier, had a strongly rhetorical sense which was used to highlight the grandeur of the territory under the authority of the Chinese ruler. Nevertheless, by the Early Imperial period, in most cases, as Yu Yingshi 余英時 suggests, *tianxia* had evolved into a “more purely political concept”, as can be seen in the texts of the Stele Inscriptions.²

Qin Shi Huang had dreamed that control of the *tianxia* would be transmitted within his family on a permanent basis. In reality, the newly created empire collapsed very soon after his death. Only sixteen years after its unification, the *tianxia* fell apart again. Following a short period of turmoil and disorder, Liu Bang 劉邦 (256-195 BC), a junior officer from the peasant class and a native of the county of Pei 沛縣 (present-day Xuzhou 徐州, Jiangsu Province), finally seized the imperial throne after defeating the king of Chu, Xiangyu 項羽, in 202 BC. He assumed the title of Emperor Gao 高帝 (r. 202-

¹ For a recent discussion of the use of the Chinese word *diguo* 帝國 and its English translation “empire” in Chinese literature, see Elliot (2014).

² Yu Yingshi (2008) 378.

195 BC) and was the founder of the Han dynasty which lasted for the next four hundred years.

Unlike the Qin regime, the Han dynasty had no connections with the aristocratic lineages of the pre-Qin period. In fact, during the first phase of their rise to power Liu Bang and his followers were no more than a group of rebel bandits operating in the territory of the old state of Chu in the declining Qin empire.³ Alarmed by the rapid disintegration of Qin, Liu Bang and his advisors did their best to establish their power on a firmer footing. In their endeavours, the early Han rulers resorted to many of the administrative arrangements created by Qin Shi Huang, and there was also a high degree of ideological continuity with the Qin period.

When this situation is taken into consideration, it is not surprising that the broader concept of *tianxia* is to be found in various literary works composed in the early Western Han period. For example, Jia Yi 賈誼, a statesman who lived during the reign of Emperor Wen 文帝 (r. 180-157 BC), makes the following comment on the relationship between the emperor and the inhabitants of the world:

*According to the ancient exegesis, when traveling to the east, west, south and north, as far as a ship or cart can reach, and as far humankind can journey, even though the barbarian peoples dwelt there, there was no one who did not submit to the sovereign called Son of Heaven.*⁴ 古之正義，東西南北，苟舟車之所達，人蹟之所至，莫不率服，而後雲天子。

In terms of the *wufu* (five-zone) theory described in Chapter 2, the Son of Heaven (*tianzi* 天子) was supposed to occupy the centre of the five zones, in contrast to the territory of the barbarians which was to be found in the outermost ring, which was named the *huangfu* 荒服, “the wilderness zone”.⁵ This theory neatly allowed the lands of the barbarian peoples to be part of the territory controlled by the wise kings of remote antiquity. The passage just quoted suggests that this idea still remained alive in the second century BC. During the Western Han period, all peoples were supposed to be subject to the

³ For the rise of Liu Bang and the formation of the new military meritocracy of the Han, see the monograph by Liu Kaiyuan 李開元 (2000) esp. 119-190.

⁴ *Xinshu* 3,1 (*Wei Buxin*) 131.

⁵ For the five-zone theory in the Confucian canons, see the discussion in Chapter Two, and Yu Yingshi (1986) 379.

authority of the Chinese emperor which extended to the outermost edges of the inhabited world.

The reality was completely different. More or less simultaneously with the establishment of the Han dynasty, the rise of the Xiongnu confederacy on the steppes of Inner Asia began to exert significant pressure on the northern frontiers of the Chinese Empire. The expansionist policies of the nomadic tribes undermined the position of superiority to which the Han imperial authorities aspired, and threatened the stability of the new government. Emperor Gao tried to resolve this problem by embarking on a major military campaign against the Xiongnu in 201 BC. Unfortunately, this military action ended in a humiliating defeat. Emperor Gao was besieged by the Xiongnu forces in Pingcheng 平城 (near present-day Datong, Shanxi province) for several days and almost died there.⁶ Thereafter, for a period of nearly seventy years between this defeat and the early years of the reign of Emperor Wu, the Han government generally took a defensive stance towards the Xiongnu (for details, see the discussion below).

Perhaps not surprisingly, various Han intellectuals regarded the weakness of Han as unacceptable. This sentiment was particularly voiced by such Confucian scholars as Lu Jia 陸賈 and Jia Yi 賈誼, who reasoned that the pre-eminence of the barbarian tribes was not consonant with the emperor's position of authority. One of Jia Yi's essays contains the following passage:

The current situation in the world (tianxia) is upside down. I hope His Majesty can perceive this. The Son of Heaven is the head of all under Heaven. Why? Because the head is at the top. The barbarian people are the feet of all under Heaven. Why? Because the feet are at the bottom. Recruiting and giving orders to the barbarians is the concern of His Majesty, while paying tribute to the emperor is the ritual which the officials and subjects have to perform. Now the feet are at the top and the head at bottom. This turns the whole situation upside-down.⁷

天下之勢，方倒縣，竊願陛下省之也。凡天子者，天下之首也，何也？上也。蠻夷者，天下之足也，何也？下也。蠻夷徵令，是主上之操也，天子共貢，是臣下之禮也。足反居上，首顧居下，是倒縣之勢也。

Jia Yi's critique clearly shows that he was worried about the relations between the Han and barbarian peoples (mainly referring to the Xiongnu). In his work,

⁶ *Hanshu* 94a, 3753.

⁷ *Xinshu* 3,10 (*Jiexian*) 127.

Jia Yi does not expound on what strategies the Han government used, or should have used, to tackle the threat posed by the barbarians in the frontier regions, restricting himself to the observation that the hierarchical relationship existing between the emperor and the barbarians was the reverse of what it ought to be. Only if the emperor occupied a position of unchallenged superiority could the relationship between him and the barbarians be fitted into the five-zone theory of the Chinese classicists, in which the Son of Heaven occupied the centre of the earth under Heaven and the barbarians the most peripheral parts. Now the correct world order had been turned upside down, a state of affairs which Jia Yi found totally unacceptable.

In practice, Jia Yi's appeal had no discernible effect on the foreign policies or worldviews of the educated elite of the Han court. Certainly contributing to this apparent indifference was the presence of a less ambitious worldview according to which the *tianxia* was simply a geopolitical domain consisting of a fixed number of administrative units. In other words, the empire could be seen as a geopolitical entity composed of a certain number of commanderies, counties and kingdoms, all of which were under the rule of the Han emperor who was a member of the clan of Liu.⁸ In this interpretation, the *tianxia* is understood as a clearly defined political and ethno-cultural entity which was transmitted within the house of Liu Bang.⁹

As already discussed in Chapter 2, various terms, including *sibai*, *hainei* and *sifang*, had been used to refer to the outer limits of the *tianxia* long before the unification of China in 221 BC. Such terms were transposed to the imperial era and widely used in literary works of the Qin-Han period and thereafter. After Liu Bang/Emperor Gao had crushed the rebellion of Ying Bu 英布 (黥布), the king of the Huainan kingdom 淮南王, in 195 BC he paid a visit to his hometown of Pei, where he invited his fellow villagers and old friends to a feast.

⁸ Under the Han capital Chang'an, *jūn* 郡 (commandery) and *xiān* 縣 (county) were the two basic administrative units. Moreover, Emperor Gao distributed vast territories to his allies and kinsmen as a reward for their support during the civil war. The feudal system which had been abolished by Qin Shi Huang and Li Si had been initially restored by Xiang Yu in the interval between Qin and Han, and was preserved by Liu Bang. The territories received by these men became kingdoms. For the administrative structures of the Western Han empire, see Bielenstein's monograph (1980) 4-109.

⁹ The biography of Dou Ying claims that "the *tianxia* is the possession of the Emperor Gao and it is passed from generation by generation (within the family)". See *Hanshu*, 52; Shinichirō Watanabe 渡辺信一郎, trans. by Xu Chong (2008) 130.

At the height of this feast, the emperor sang a song he had composed himself, which was later named the “Song of the Great Wind” (*Dafeng ge* 大風歌):

*The great wind blew forth and the clouds flew [away] and scattered. Now my might has been imposed upon all within the four seas (hainei), I have returned to my native village. Where shall I find brave men to guard the four quarters (sifang) of my land?*¹⁰

大風起兮雲飛揚，威加海內兮歸故鄉，安得猛士兮守四方。

Although the term *tianxia* does not appear in this text, it does contain the expressions *hainei* (within the seas) and *sifang* (four quarters). The “four quarters” guarded by the emperor’s “brave men” are clearly coextensive with the *tianxia* of the Han empire. On these grounds it would seem that, ideologically speaking, the empire of Han was less open than the Roman empire at the time of Augustus.

A few months after reciting the poem, Emperor Gao returned to Chang’an where he issued an edict to commemorate the twelfth anniversary of his accession to the throne, taking the opportunity to warn the nobles of the empire not to rebel against Han rule. In this edict, the term *tianxia* is clearly used to refer to a geopolitical entity consisting of a series of hierarchically arranged administrative units. In this text the barbarians seem to have been excluded from the world order referred to and they were not expected to observe the laws and rituals of the Han. The text reads as follows:

I have been made the Son of Heaven, and thus far as Emperor (di) have possessed the tianxia for twelve years. I have subjugated the tianxia with the brave men and talented grandees of the empire; together we have pacified and reunited it. Among those of my followers who have distinguished themselves, I have established the best as kings, the next [best] as marquises, and moreover the least have been given the income of towns. Furthermore, some of the relatives of my important subjects have become marquises. All have been personally authorized to appoint their officials and levy taxes. Their daughters have become princesses. The marquises who have the income of towns all wear seals; we have granted them large residences. The officials [of the rank of] two thousand shi; we have moved to Chang’an to be granted small residences. Those who went to Shu and Han and subjugated the three [parts of the state of] Qin are all exempted [from taxes and services] from generation to generation. I might be said not to have been ungrateful to those talented officers and meritorious officials of the tianxia. Let those who rebel against the Son of Heaven without cause and

¹⁰ *Hanshu* 1b, 74.

*arbitrarily raise troops be punished by the military forces of the tianxia and executed. Let this be published and announced to the tianxia so that it might clearly understand our intention.*¹¹

吾立為天子，帝有天下，十二年於今矣。與天下之豪士賢大夫共定天下，同安輯之。其有功者上致之王，次為列侯，下乃食邑。而重臣之親，或為列侯，皆令自置吏，得賦斂，女子公主。為列侯食邑者，皆佩之印，賜大第室。吏二千石，徙之長安，受小第室。入蜀、漢定三秦者，皆世世復。吾於天下賢士功臣，可謂亡負矣。其有不義背天子擅起兵者，與天下共伐誅之。佈告天下，使明知朕意。

In Chapter Two, I noted that the distinction between *nei* 內 ('inner') and *wai* 外 ('outer') is a key concept in understanding the worldview of ancient China. From the mid to late Warring States period, these terms were frequently used in texts referring to the distinction between the *huaxia* (a general name for the Chinese people) and the *yidi* (a general name for the barbarian peoples living on the periphery of the Chinese world).¹² As argued in Chapter Two, between the fifth and late third centuries BC climatic changes on the northern frontier of the Chinese Central Plains sharpened the distinction between the farming populations of the Chinese states and the nomadic tribes of the north, thereby stimulating the economic and cultural cohesiveness of the agricultural zones. During the Early Western Han period the gap between the agriculturalists and the nomadic world of the northern steppe deepened, particularly after the rise of the Xiongnu empire. The threat posed by the formidable cavalry of the Xiongnu prompted the Han government to construct more fortifications on its northern border, thereby encouraging the stimulation of the emergence of an increasingly exclusive Chinese world order.

¹¹ *Hanshu* 1b, 78. My translation is largely based on that of Dubs (1938) 55.

¹² As Yates has pointed out, "the relations between the elites, religious leaders, and ordinary people of the steppe, desert, and mountain fastness, between the outer regions (*wai*) and the emperors in Beijing, were very different from those that held between the emperors and the officials, local elites, and subordinate masses within (*nei*) China proper." See Yates (2001) 355-356. I have argued that the distinction between *nei* and *wai* had come into existence long before the creation of the Qin-Han empire. See my discussion in Chapter Two. The increasing disjunction between the agricultural society of China and the nomadic world of the north, in tandem with the establishment of the unified empire and the more or less simultaneous rise of Xiongnu power increased the importance of these territorial concepts.

Liu Bang had originally intended to build a new capital at Luoyang, the old capital of Luoyi of Zhou dynasty, the place it was assumed was located at the centre of the world (cf. Chapter 2). However, for the sake of security Lou Jing 婁敬, a senior minister, advised the emperor to establishing the capital in the homeland of Qin.¹³ Lou Jing's proposal was supported by another senior official, Zhang Liang 張良.¹⁴ Finally the capital was established in Chang'an (modern Xi'an 西安), a city which was situated only about 30 km to the east of the old Qin capital Xianyang. The region in which Chang'an was situated was named *Guanzhong* 關中 (Within the Passes). Throughout the Early Han period this remained the core region of the empire.¹⁵ The area to the east of Mount Xiao 嶠山 and Hangu Pass 函谷關 (in present-day Lingbao 靈寶), where Emperor Gao granted vast tracts of land to his kinsmen and supporters, was called *Guandong* 關東 (East of the Pass). Most other areas were divided into commanderies and counties which were directly administered by imperial officials.

On the basis of these arrangements, the early Han empire might be depicted as consisting of three zones, namely Guanzhong, Guandong and the remainder of the empire. The barbarian lands which were located outside the empire were conceptualized as making up a fourth zone. Furthermore, as I shall argue in Chapter Six, the humble origins of the imperial house of Liu stimulated various attempts to augment the legitimacy of the Han rulers by emphasizing the link between these rulers and Heaven as the highest power in the cosmos. According the political theories of Dong Zhongshu, for instance, the emperor, as "the Son of Heaven", played an intermediary role between Heaven and mankind.¹⁶ A logical corollary of this theory was that the Han emperor should

¹³ As Lou Jing explained, the Qin area was protected by the Xiao Mountains, the Yellow River and the Four Passes. If an emergency should arise, an army of a million men could be instantly raised. Even there were disorder in the areas east of the Xiao Mountains, the area of Qin would remain safe. Using a wrestling metaphor, Lou Jing argues that as long as the emperor controlled the area of Qin, he will be in good position to strangle his enemy and hit the latter's back. See *Shiji* 99, 2716.

¹⁴ Like Lou Jing, Zhang Liang gave various reasons for building the capital in the area of Qin. The advantages mentioned by him included the good defensive location of the region, the abundance of all kinds of materials and the fertility of the land. See *Shiji* 55, 2044.

¹⁵ Chen Suzhen 陳蘇鎮 (2011) 230-234.

¹⁶ About Dong Zhongshu's theory and his contribution to the development of the Chinese political cosmological thought, see Schwarz (1985) 363-381. A detailed

rule all of mankind, and indeed Confucius and Mencius had claimed that the true king leaves nothing and nobody outside his realm, and that his power is not constrained by distance.¹⁷ For these reasons, the unbounded worldview of the Western Zhou period never disappeared entirely (cf. Chapter Two).

Since the Han emperors of the early second century did not control the territories of the Xiongnu, the persistence of this all-encompassing worldview could be a spur which stimulated intellectuals and emperors to contemplate the possibility of further territorial expansion. In actual fact, Han thinkers such as Dong Zhongshu do not seem to have been worried by the discrepancy between ideological representations and realities. In the following section, I shall investigate how the seemingly contradictory worldviews which can be found in early Han sources were fused, and how these worldviews affected actual decisions taken regarding the relationship between the empire and their Xiongnu neighbours during the Western Han period.¹⁸

2. Han worldviews and the relationship between the Han and the Xiongnu

When Augustus became the first emperor of the Roman empire, Rome had already established unchallenged military supremacy throughout the Mediterranean world. In striking contrast to this achievement, the Han empire established by Emperor Gao was immediately faced with mounting threats from a rising steppe empire on its northern frontier. This fundamental divergence between the steppe and the sown prompted the early Han emperors to seek different strategies to deal with their barbarian neighbours than those adopted by the Roman emperors of the first century AD.

Unlike the Roman armies of the early Principate, the Western Han army initially was in a weak position in any confrontation with the steppe peoples,

discussion of Dong Zhongshu's theory of imperial sovereignty in relation to Heaven will be given in Chapter Six.

¹⁷ L. S. Yang 楊聯陞 (1968) 26. It should be noted that the saying "nobody outside his realm" refers mainly to the idea that "all under Heaven" had been conquered by the ruler's moral power rather than by the use of military force. For the moral duties of Chinese rulers, see Chapter Six.

¹⁸ Loewe also observes this tension. As he puts it, "An emperor was essential to the maintenance of government within the cosmology in which the rule of man was placed; but how far he fitted the ideals that philosophers expected is another matter." See Loewe (2002) 348.

both tactically and in terms of military equipment.¹⁹ By the last decade of the third century BC, the Xiongnu confederacy had acquired a highly developed hierarchical military system under their charismatic leader Modu Chanyu 冒頓單于 (234-174 BC).²⁰ Unlike the frontier soldiers of the Western Han period who were recruited from the farming population in the remote hinterland regions and were expected to serve for only one year, all adult Xiongnu males above a certain age were obliged to bear arms. The pastoral cavalry forces could move fast, making it relatively easy for the Xiongnu to raid Chinese territory on horseback. The Chinese infantry and chariots were no match for this highly mobile cavalry.²¹ This imbalance was exacerbated by the fact that, after the bitter Chinese civil war, the victorious Emperor Gao had demobilized a large part of his armies in order to minimize the risk of future rebellions.

After the death of Emperor Gao, the power devolved to the Empress Dowager Lü 呂 (Zhi 雉) and her clan until Emperor Wen 文 (Heng 恆 r. 180-157 BC) was enthroned with the support of some old ministers in 180 BC. The dynastic feuds pursued by various members of the House of Liu and the faction of Lü at this time distracted the Chinese rulers from realizing the necessity of investing resources in their frontier armies. As literary sources show, during the larger part of the reign of Emperor Wen and his successor, Emperor Jing 景 (Qi 啟 r. 157-141 BC), the Han empire adopted an policy of appeasement, sending the Xiongnu large amounts of grain, silk, cloth and other luxuries to secure peace on its northern frontiers.²²

Shortly after the humiliating defeat of the Han armies led by Emperor Gao at Pingcheng, in 198 BC, on the advice of Lou Jing 婁敬, a senior Han official, the Han government signed a treaty with the Xiongnu.²³ Sima Qian

¹⁹ In terms of military capabilities the Han generally lagged behind the Xiongnu in the early period of the Han dynasty. This discrepancy emerges clearly from the essay by the Western Han statesman Chao Cuo. See Di Cosmo (2004) 203.

²⁰ On the formation of the Xiongnu state and the territorial expansion which took place under Modu Chanyu in the late third century BC, see Barfield (1989) 323-6; Di Cosmo (2004) 167-190; Yu (2008) 118-220.

²¹ In order to deal with this weakness, Emperors Wen and Jing increased the size of the Han cavalry. See Di Cosmo (2004) 192-227, 235.

²² For a detailed discussion of these payments, see Yu (1967) 45-47; 61; 64.

²³ The treaty, signed in 198 BC, contained four main provisions. 1. The Han had to send a princess to the Xiongnu Chanyu to be his wife; 2. Each year the Han court had to provide the Xiongnu with a certain amount of grain, wine, silk and foodstuffs; 3. The Han empire and the Xiongnu would be equal partners; 4. The boundary line between Han and Xiongnu was the Great Wall. See *Shiji* 110; *Hanshu* 43. Yu (1967) 41-42;

states that the treaty clearly stipulated that the Great Wall was to be the boundary line between the territory of Han and that of the Xiongnu. It also provided that all those peoples who drew the bows (引弓之國) beyond the Wall should be under the orders of the Chanyu, while all those wearing Han caps and sashes (冠帶之室) within the Wall were to be ruled by the Chinese emperor.²⁴ This treaty unambiguously demonstrates that, in the world of real politics, the Chinese emperor was assumed to constrain his authority within a specified geographical space. The upshot was that this reality formed a sharp discrepancy with the ideal of universal imperial rule developed by the Confucian literati of the Han period.

The discrepancy between Confucian ideology and the political and military reality is also illustrated by the letters exchanged between the Xiongnu Chanyu and the Han emperor recorded in historical accounts. Ban Gu's *Hanshu* 漢書 (The Book of Former Han) claims that the letters sent by Modu Chanyu to Emperor Wen contained the following passage: *The great Chanyu of Xiongnu inaugurated by Heaven sends [his] respects to the [Chinese] emperor and wishes [him] well* (天所立匈奴大單于敬問皇帝無恙).²⁵ The Chanyu states unequivocally the claim that his authority derived from Heaven, thereby asserting that he was the equal of the recipient in terms of status. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that Xiongnu Chanyu addressed the emperor as his “brother” (Kundi or Xiongdi 昆弟, 兄弟).²⁶ These indications suggest that the relationship between the Xiongnu Chanyu and the Han emperor was regarded as a relationship between equals, at least by the former.²⁷

It is interesting that the Western Han rulers do not seem to have been particularly concerned by this discrepancy between Confucian ideology and political reality. At least part of the explanation of this paradox is that the military weakness of the Han empire could be compensated by insisting on the cultural superiority of the Chinese emperor over the Xiongnu. After the death of Emperor Gao in 195 BC, Modu Chanyu sent a letter to Dowager Empress

Barfield (1981) 52; Chang (2007) 172. For archaeological evidence, including the tiles which were excavated from Han tombs in Baotou in Inner Mongolia in the twentieth century, see He Lin (1986).

²⁴ *Shiji* 110, 2902.

²⁵ *Shiji* 110, 2899; *Hanshu* 94a, 3756.

²⁶ In several letters sent to the Chanyu by Emperor Wen, the latter repeats that the Han and Xiongnu were brothers according to the terms of the previous treaty. See *Shiji* 110, 2902; *Hanshu* 94a, 3754.

²⁷ Di Cosmo (2004) 193.

Lü containing an offer of marriage. From the Chanyu's perspective, the proposal made sense because the customs of the Xiongnu allowed a man to marry his brother's widow (levirate), but from a Chinese point of view the offer was an unbearable insult.²⁸ Infuriated by this humiliation, Empress Lü summoned the chancellor, Chen Ping 陳平, and a number of senior officials to debate whether the Han should send out troops to punish the Xiongnu's arrogance. Pan Kuai 樊噲, an eminent general who had helped Liu Bang in his rise to power, boasted that he would speedily crush the Xiongnu army with a hundred thousand soldiers under his command. His confidence was rebuked by another statesman, Ji Bu 季布, who bitterly criticized Pan's plan for two reasons. He began by reminding those present of the painful defeat which the late Emperor Gao had suffered in 200 BC. Furthermore, he argued that the barbarians were not worth attacking:

*The Yi and Di peoples are like beasts. It is neither worth even being glad if we receive compliments from them, nor worth being irritated by their insults.*²⁹ 且夷狄豢如禽兽，得其善言不足喜，恶言不足怒也。

In the end Empress Lü accepted Ji Bu's advice and wrote a respectful letter to the Chanyu in which she politely declined the latter's marriage proposal.

The "harmonious kinship" policy (*heqin* 和親) by means of which the early Western Han emperors tried to deal with the Xiongnu confederacy was not enough to guarantee the stability of the frontiers and dispel the hostility between the Han and Xiongnu. From time to time, the Xiongnu army broke the peace and raided the northern frontier counties of the Han empire, extorting more subsidies.³⁰ In short, the enormous amount of subsidies paid by the Han emperor did not buy peace and the financial burdens of the Han government only increased.³¹

Another problem arose from the fact that the Han people was far less keen than the Xiongnu to exchange goods on the frontier. Whereas the Han court wanted to establish a clear border with "as few links as possible between

²⁸ *Shiji* 110, 2879. About the Xiongnu people's customs, see Chin (2010) 327.

²⁹ *Hanshu* 94a, 3755.

³⁰ Barfield (1981) 53. Since all of the surviving sources are Han-biased, it is difficult to establish if Han army also broke the peace and interfered in Xiongnu affairs.

³¹ According to Sima Qian, the annual Han subsidy amounted to less than 5,000 *hu* of grain, 10,000 *shi* of wine and 10,000 *pi* of silk cloth. See Barfield (1981) 53; Yu (1967) 48.

its border people and the Xiongnu”, the latter desired exactly the opposite.³² As a result of this inconsistency, the relationship between the two states remained unstable for the next century and a half. Aware of the Xiongnu’s fondness for Han goods, some early Han statesmen urged the emperor to continue implementing the *heqin* policy, stating that they were convinced that the barbarians would cease to harass Han frontiers after their desires had been assuaged by material goods. This scheme, first proposed by Jia Yi, became known as the policy of the “Five Baits”. Jia Yi stressed the best way of dealing with the barbarians was:

- (1) to give them elaborate clothes and carriages to corrupt their eyes;
- (2) to give them fine food to corrupt their mouths;
- (3) to give them music to corrupt their ears;
- (4) to give them lofty buildings, granaries, and slaves to corrupt their stomachs; and
- (5) to provide gifts and shower favours on those Xiongnu who surrendered.³³

The *Shiji* recounts that this strategy was betrayed to the Xiongnu Chanyu by a Han captive named Zhonghang Yue 中行說.³⁴ Knowing the seductiveness of Han luxury goods, he warned the Chanyu not to be obsessed by Han goods or customs:

The strength of the Xiongnu lies in the very fact that their food and clothing are different from those of the Chinese, and they are therefore not dependent on the Han for anything. Now the Chanyu has acquired this fondness for Chinese things and is trying to change the Xiongnu customs. Therefore, although the Han sends no more than one-fifth of its goods here, eventually it will succeed in winning over the whole of the Xiongnu nation. From now on, whenever you receive any Han silk, put this on and try riding your horses through undergrowth and brambles! In no time your robes and leggings will be torn to shreds and everyone will see that silks are no match for the utility of felt and leather garments. Likewise, when you receive any Han foodstuffs, throw them away so that people can see that they are not as practical or tasty as milk and kumiss.³⁵ 匈奴人眾不能當漢之一郡，然所以彊者，以衣食異，無仰於漢也。今單于變俗好漢物，漢物不過什二，則匈奴盡歸於

³² Lattimore (1940) 478-480; Yu (1967) *passim.*, esp. 92-133; Barfield (1981) 54.

³³ Yu (1967) 37; Yang (1968) 27-9.

³⁴ *Shiji* 110, 2879. Chin (2010) 325.

³⁵ *Shiji*, *ibid.* This passage is translated by Watson (1961) 170 and also cited by Barfield (1989) 52.

漢矣。其得漢繒絮，以馳草棘中，衣袴皆裂敝，以示不如旃裘之完善也。得漢食物皆去之，以示不如湏酪之便美也。

The foregoing discussion would appear to show that the rulers and educated elite of the early Western Han period harboured ambivalent sentiments about Han relations with the nomadic peoples in the north. On the one hand, some Han officials, such as Jia Yi, were well aware of the awkward discrepancy between the reality in which the Han emperor was in a weak position when confronted with the expansionist policies of the Xiongnu and the ideal picture of universal imperial power. On the other hand, the Han emperor was very reluctant to end the threat posed by the Xiongnu by use of military force. Even Jia Yi thought that the best way to counter the barbarian threat was to corrupt the Xiongnu's minds by providing them with luxuries.³⁶

Chao Cuo 晁錯 (200-154 BC), another prominent statesman living in the time of Emperor Jing who wrote several essays on military and frontier issues, came to a different conclusion. He was fully aware of the military power of the Xiongnu, pointing out that the Xiongnu soldiers were adept at horse-riding and shooting, galloping through rugged terrain and enduring harsh climatic conditions. Unlike Jia Yi, however, he believed that the Xiongnu's threat could only be ended by military resistance.³⁷ Despite his conviction, he was firmly opposed to the idea of carrying out any offensive campaigns against the Xiongnu, arguing that the best solution was the establishment of permanent garrisons of farmer-soldiers along the frontier.³⁸

The first part of this chapter briefly touched upon the imperial worldview developed by Dong Zhongshu. In his opinion, the emperor occupied the centre of the cosmos, ruling all mankind by the mandate of Heaven. As a statesman, however, he seems to have been unconcerned by the

³⁶ Loewe (2011) 107.

³⁷ For Chao Cuo's theories concerning the best way of dealing with the Xiongnu, see *Hanshu* 49, 2279–2281.

³⁸ As he points out, “war is a dangerous thing ...and the pursuit of victory is at the cost of human life. Once it has failed, it is too late to repent.” This is why in his proposals to the emperor Wen Chao did not advocate launching any major campaigns against the Xiongnu. On the contrary, he urged the emperor to pay more attention to the consolidation of the frontier fortifications. For Chao Cuo's proposal concerning the establishment of new settlements along the borders, see *Hanshu* 49, 2283-2287. For a discussion of Chao Cuo's ideas and proposals, see Chang (2007) 147-150.

inferior position of the Han emperor in relation to the Xiongnu barbarians. Some of his views on this topic were recorded by Ban Gu:

It is principles which move a righteous man, while profits move an avaricious one. Peoples like the Xiongnu cannot be persuaded by talk of benevolence and moral principles. All one can do is talk to them about fine profits and to get them to seek links with Heaven. Let them contract only with Heaven. Therefore, give them rich profits to subdue their will, bind them to Heaven by oath, and take their beloved sons in charge as hostages so that they are emotionally involved. Even were the Xiongnu to attempt to make a change, would they be willing to forego the chance of gaining a rich profit? Would they practise deceit on Heaven? Would they like to see their dear children put to death? Taxes and the handing-over of gifts are not as high as the cost of an army, and the strength of a city's walls is not as effective as a promise agreed by men of integrity. What a benefit it would be to all if adults close to the borders could loosen their [war] belts and if their infants could be suckled in peace; if, with no enemy horse [cavalry] spying out what they could find at the defence lines, there would be no call to send emergency dispatches up and down the empire.³⁹ 義動君子，利動貪人。如匈奴者，非可以仁義說也，獨可說以厚利，結之於天耳。故與之厚利以沒其意，與盟於天以堅其約，質其愛子以累其心，匈奴雖欲展轉，奈失重利何，奈欺上天何，奈殺愛子何！夫賦斂行賂不足以當三軍之費，城郭之固無以異於貞士之約，而使邊城守境之民父兄緩帶，稚子咽哺，胡馬不窺於長城，而羽檄不行於中國，不亦便於天下乎！

To judge from this passage, Dong was arguing that, when dealing with the Xiongnu, the emperor should not rely heavily on military force thereby creating enormous costs and disturbing the Han people of the frontier zone. Instead he urges the emperor to use a judicious combination of material benefits and emotional blackmail to keep the Xiongnu in check. This idea is very similar to the “Five Baits” approach advocated by his contemporary Jia Yi.

Much later, in the mid-first century AD, Dong's approach was vehemently criticized by the historian Ban Gu. As Ban Gu points out, the Chanyu had never allowed his sons to go to the Han court as hostages. Furthermore, he observes that, during the reigns of Emperors Wen and Wu, Han armies had successfully fought large-scale campaigns against the Xiongnu. In these confrontations the losses of men, horses and land had been evenly

³⁹ *Hanshu* 94b, 3832-3834. For Dong Zhongshu's ideas regarding the Xiongnu, see the analysis by Loewe (2011) 106-109. My translation is a slightly adapted version of that offered by Loewe. See *ibid.* 107-108.

balanced. Although the Han armies had captured new territories to the south of the Yellow River and set up the Suofang commandery to consolidate its gains, the Han government had lost the lands south of Zaoyang up to a distance of 900 *li*. Although the Xiongnu did occasionally send envoys to the Han capital, they also detained the Han envoys dispatched from the Han imperial court. Finally, Ban Gu criticizes Dong Zhongshu's lack of knowledge about the fortification of the frontiers and dismisses his plan to defeat the enemy through bribes as naïve.⁴⁰

At first sight Dong's political ideas might seem to be a contradiction of the all-powerful image of the Han emperor, but closer inspection reveals that the military weakness of many Han emperors did not undermine prevailing ideas about the empire or the legitimacy of emperors. In Chapter Six I shall argue that Han ideas about the ideal emperor focused on the latter's role as a living moral example rather than any heroic military qualities he might possess. In other words, the reputation of the Chinese ruler depended, for the most part, on his success in disseminating morality and order among his Chinese subjects.⁴¹ A wise ruler was supposed to have the charismatic power needed to persuade the barbarians occupying the remotest areas to acknowledge the superiority of the Han emperor, on account of the latter's benevolence and impeccable morality. On the other hand, since the barbarians living outside the empire were not regarded as subjects of the Han emperor, they were not seen as a target group in the emperor's project of moral transformation.

These observations help to explain why some literati of the early Western Han were not so much concerned about the military inferiority of the empire in its combats with the Xiongnu barbarians. As discussed in Chapter Two, the idea of Chinese moral and cultural superiority can be observed as one of the products of the strengthening of Chinese cultural-ethnic identity between the collapse of the Western Zhou dynasty and the creation of the unified Qin empire. Paradoxically, these feelings of cultural and moral superiority were reinforced rather than reduced as a result of the rise of the steppe empire in the north by the Western Han period.

During the Warring States Period, many Chinese philosophers had already formulated the view in general that violence was not the best way to

⁴⁰ For Ban Gu's critique, see *Hanshu* 94b, 3831.

⁴¹ Loewe (2002) 345. Roman emperors were also expected to pay great attention to their moral duties, see Noreña (2011) 37-100. However, during the Principate the reputation of the ruling emperor continued to depend largely on military successes. For a more detailed discussion of this topic see Chapters Five and Six.

achieve political ends. Partly for this reason, many Chinese rulers showed little interest in pursuing military glory and territorial expansion.⁴² Most of them appear to have seen the creation of a clearly defined physical boundary and compliance with the demands of the Xiongnu rulers as the best way to counter the threat posed by the northern barbarians. Only when this approach had ended in failure did some Han turn to a more aggressive frontier policy.⁴³

3. Military campaigns and territorial expansions (133-60 BC)

3.1. Major campaigns of the Han (133-119 BC)

It is not entirely clear why Emperor Wu decided to change the foreign policy regarding the Xiongnu. Both the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* recount that, although Xiongnu cavalry forces carried out small-scale raids into Han territory from time to time, no major incursions occurred during the reign of Emperor Jing.⁴⁴ When Emperor Wu ascended the throne, the harmonious pseudo-kinship policy was even reaffirmed by a clarification of the terms of the treaty and by increasing traffic in the border markets. Ban Gu records that the relationship between the Han empire and the Xiongnu grew less hostile and that border markets in the vicinity of the Great Wall boomed.

This felicitous period did not last long. Peace between the Han and the Xiongnu broke down in 136 BC. In this year a Xiongnu envoy came to Chang'an to visit the emperor with a marriage proposal from Chanyu Junchen 軍臣單于 (r. 161-126 BC). Emperor Wu convened a court conference to discuss this matter. Two statesmen, Han Anguo 韓安國 (d. 127 BC) and Wang Hui 王恢 (d. 133 BC), dominated the debate. The following year, Nie Wengyi 聶翁壹, a Chinese merchant from the frontier city of Mayi 馬邑, proposed that Wang Hui ambush the Xiongnu forces led by the Chanyu when the latter

⁴² For a discussion of violence and war in the Warring States period, see the seminal study of Lewis (1990) 53-96. For attitudes to warfare during the Qin and Han empires, see the final chapter of this dissertation.

⁴³ Since the early Han, the *heqin* policy was largely dictated by the military inferiority of the Han empire, but its existence does not prove that the Han elite was satisfied with the existing situation. On the other hand, it has to be said that the Han government tried to maintain peace with the Xiongnu by concluding a treaty in which the latter were treated as equal partners.

⁴⁴ *Hanshu* 94a, 3765.

visited the border. Wang submitted this proposal to the Emperor Wu, and another heated debate with Han Anguo ensued.⁴⁵ The details of the discussion are recorded by Ban Gu. As an experienced military official from the old frontier state of Yan 燕, Wang Hui had a deep knowledge of Chinese-barbarian relationships. As far as he was concerned, the appeasement policy had proved to be a failure, since it did not stop the Xiongnu from raiding the Chinese borders whenever they wanted. The main reason for their audacity, Wang Hui thought, was purely and simply that the Xiongnu did not fear the emperor. Moreover, Wang Hui believed that the Xiongnu's appetite for new territory could never be satisfied. Therefore he advised Emperor Wu to end the policy of appeasement and to subjugate the Xiongnu by force. Unlike most other literati, Wang Hui did not think that the Han army was inferior to the Xiongnu in the battlefield.

Wang Hui's proposal was rejected by Han Anguo, the Imperial Chancellor, who advised the emperor to continue the "peace and marriage" policy designed to appease the Xiongnu. Han Anguo emphasized the superiority of the Xiongnu's military strength, stating that the nomadic soldiers excelled in archery and that their speed could be compared to that of a hurricane or lightning. He also reminded the emperor of the fact that the two military campaigns which had been mounted during the reigns of Emperor Gao and Emperor Wen had yielded no positive results. Interestingly, as one of the court literati, Han Anguo also expressed his concern about the cultural gap existing between the Xiongnu and those inhabiting the Zhongguo (Central State). As he pointed out, since time immemorial the barbarians had upheld completely different institutions, rituals and customs to the Chinese. Therefore, as completely uncivilized people occupying the outermost parts of the world, the Xiongnu were not even worth worrying about.⁴⁶ Finally, he expressed his worry that a military advance into enemy territory would create immense logistical problems. This Sino-centric view is in line with those formulated by some other Chinese scholar-officials already mentioned.

Although Emperor Wu had begun to consider the possibility of attacking the Xiongnu, no military offensive was launched until 129 BC. In the autumn of that year, the Han court sent four generals, Wei Qing 衛青, Gongsun Ao 公

⁴⁵ The debate is recorded at length in the *Book of Han Anguo* by Ban Gu, see *Hanshu* 52, 2398-2407.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 2402.

孫敖, Gongsun He 公孫賀 and Li Guang 李廣, each commanding 10,000 cavalry, to fight the Xiongnu. This first campaign ended in failure. In 127 BC, however, General Wei Qing, who had set out from Yunzhong 雲中 with an army to march on Longxi 隴西, inflicted a heavy defeat on the Xiongnu force. This success resulted in the recovery of the region of Henan 河南地, where two new commendaries, Shuofang 朔方 and Wuyuan 五原, were established. The fortification works running along the Yellow River were also reconstructed at this time.

In 121 BC, the Xiongnu forces again suffered heavy losses when they were defeated by a Han army commanded by General Huo Qubing 霍去病. Having crossed the Yanzhi Mountain 焉支山 with 10,000 cavalry, he captured 8,000 Xiongnu soldiers during the first phase of his campaign. In the summer of 121 BC, he launched a campaign across Juyan 居延 from Longxi and Beidi 北地 and succeeded in bringing the Qilian Mountains 祁連山 under Han control. This campaign resulted in 30,000 Xiongnu soldiers and over ten commanders being captured. Angered by the defeat of his subordinate kings, Hunye (or Hunxie) 渾邪王 and Xiutu 休屠王, the Chanyu decided to summon them to his capital and execute them. When King Hunye learnt about this plan, he killed Xiutu and led 40,000 armed soldiers to surrender to Han. His action led to the creation of the five Subordinate States of Han in the five commanderies of Longxi, Beidi, Shangjun 上郡, Shuofang and Yunzhong in the region beyond the old garrisons to the south of the Yellow River. Once these were set up, Han officials transferred large numbers of poor people from Guandong (the area east of Hangu Pass) to populate the area of Henan (the area beyond the part of the Great Wall built by the Qin king, Zhaoxiang, to the north of the Yellow River).⁴⁷

Only three years later, in 118 BC, Emperor Wu again dispatched his generals, Wei Qing and Huo Qubing, with 100,000 cavalymen to mount a large-scale attack on the Chanyu's base in Mobei 漠北 after Xiongnu invasions of You Beiping 右北平 and Dingxiang 定襄 in 119 BC.⁴⁸ The army of Wei Qing confronted the Xiongnu's elite soldiers in the region of Mobei and inflicted another defeat on the Chanyu's army, forcing Ichise Chanyu to flee to

⁴⁷ For Emperor Wu campaigns against the Xiongnu and the political arrangements which were made between 129 BC and 118 BC, see Chang (2007) 162-75.

⁴⁸ *Shiji*, 110; *Hanshu*, 94a; Liu Yanwei 劉彥威 (1997) 11.

the northwestern regions. At the same time, the forces commanded by Huo crushed the army led by the Wise King of the Left at a distance of 2,000 *li* from Dai Commandery 代郡. The Xiongnu king escaped to the northwest with the remnants of his army, pursued by the Han army all the way to Hanhai 瀚海 (Lake Baikal). In the wake of these successes, the Han government now established military settlements along the Yellow River between western Shuofang and Lingju 令居. Between Lingju and Dunhuang, a chain of military posts, watchtowers and beacon fires was established along the Great Wall as a measure to reinforce the defensive lines. Although the Xiongnu did not stop harassing the northern frontier regions, these campaigns ended the Xiongnu's military superiority.

3.2. Expansion into the Western Regions and the triumph over the Xiongnu (139 BC-AD 9)

The rulers of Han had long realized that the military strength of the Xiongnu was based on their control of the multiple states of the Western Regions 西域, composed of a huge area to the west of the Yumen Pass (Yumen Guan 玉門關), which provided the Xiongnu with rich resources. In the light of this knowledge, the Han court dispatched Zhang Qian 張騫 to pay a visit to these western lands for the purpose of establishing an alliance. Zhang Qian's first journey took place in 139/8 BC. It was not a success as Zhang Qian was captured by the Xiongnu people and detained by them until 129/128 BC, when he managed to escape to the Western Regions. Crossing a number of states in the Tarim Basin 塔里木盆地 and Xinjiang 新疆, he finally reached Yuezhi 月氏, a powerful state in Central Asia. However, since Yuezhi had no intention of opposing the Xiongnu, Zhang Qian's mission was ultimately unsuccessful.

In 119 BC Zhang Qian was sent to the Western Regions by Emperor Wu for the second time. The aim of his mission was to “cut off the right arm of the Xiongnu (斷匈奴右臂)”.⁴⁹ In other words, the Han court was trying to establish a military alliance with some of the states in the Western Regions which had been under the control of the Xiongnu. However, Wusun 烏孫, the most important state the Han was trying to win over, showed little interest in

⁴⁹ *Hanshu* 61, 2692.

becoming an ally of the Han emperor, pointing out that it was located very far away from the Han empire and knew little about the latter. This negative response was also motivated by the fact that the Xiongnu had controlled Wusun and many other peoples in the Western Regions for many years, making the Wusun nobles reluctant to offend their overlords. Although the contemporary historian Sima Qian rated Zhang Qian's undertaking in travelling to the Western Regions highly, the fact remains that his two missions failed to produce any tangible results.⁵⁰

Despite these unsuccessful diplomatic missions, Emperor Wu did not give up his intention of undermining the power of the Xiongnu by establishing control over the minor states in the Western Regions. Between 104 BC and 99 BC he even took the step of launching military operations against the oasis state of Ferghana (Dayuan 大宛), which was situated to the southwest of the areas inhabited by the Xiongnu, at a distance of no fewer than 12,559 *li* from the Han capital. Both Sima Qian and Ban Gu claim that the main reason for launching the Ferghana campaign was Emperor Wu's desire to acquire the legendary Ferghana horses.⁵¹ In reality, the campaign was part of a long-term strategy devised to dismember the Xiongnu confederacy. Ever since the reigns of Emperors Wen and Jing, the Han court had been trying to breed more and better horses which would be a match for the formidable Xiongnu cavalry.⁵² On this occasion, the first move of the Han court was to send two generals, Zhao Ponu 趙破奴 and Wang Hui, to attack Jushi 車師 and Loulan 樓蘭, two states occupying the Turfan depression and its northern edges. The rulers of these states were in the habit of detaining the Han envoys and goods on their way to the Western Regions, thereby blocking Han connections with Central Asia.⁵³ After an initial military setback in 104 BC, the Ershi General Li Guangli 李廣利 again attacked Ferghana in 102 BC. This time he won a decisive victory, and many states of the Western Regions now began to send envoys and tribute to the Han empire.

⁵⁰ *Shiji* 123, 3170.

⁵¹ This type of horse was known as the "blood-sweating horse". Its existence was unknown in Han China until Zhang Qian's return from the Western Regions. The Han sources record that Emperor Wu sent people to Ferghana with good horses and gifts to exchange these for horses. See *Shiji* 123, 3160.

⁵² On the policy of horse-breeding in early Han, see He Pingli 何平立 (1995) 103-110.

⁵³ Yu (2008) 132.

In 54 BC, during the reign of Emperor Xuan (r. 74-49 BC), the Xiongnu empire was split into a northern and a southern part, principally as a consequence of a feud which had commenced around 60 BC. In 53 BC Chanyu Huhanye 呼韓邪 (r. 58-31 BC), ruler of the southern Xiongnu, expressed his willingness to submit to the Han emperor by sending his son to the capital of Chang'an. Two years later, in 51 BC, Huhanye came to Chang'an in person in order to offer large amounts of tribute and to make his submission official. Meeting Huhanye in the Ganquan Palace 甘泉宮, the emperor rewarded him with substantial gifts. Among other honours, Huhanye was accorded a privileged rank which was higher than that of any other dependent king.⁵⁴ The Han emperor ordered a large cavalry force to escort Huhanye back to Guanglu 光祿 (the northwestern part of present-day Baotou, Inner Mongolia) in the northern frontier zone, and the Han court allowed him to garrison the cities of this area with Xiongnu troops. One year later, Zhizhi Chanyu 郅支單于, the leader of another Xiongnu group, also sent envoys and tribute to the Han emperor as an overture towards establishing friendly relations. According to the sources, compared to its dealing with the Northern Xiongnu, the Chinese government accorded the Southern Xiongnu preferential treatment.

In 47 BC the two Han commanders of Chariots and Cavalry 車騎都尉, Han Chang 韓昌 and Zhang Meng 張猛, established a new alliance with Huhanye at Dong Mountain 東山 near the Nuo River 諾水.⁵⁵ Concerned about the rising power of the Southern Xiongnu, Zhizhi Chanyu led the Northern Xiongnu westwards, moving them all the way to Sogdiana (Kangju 康居).⁵⁶ In 36 BC, Han troops dispatched by the Protector-General Gan Yanshou 甘延壽 killed Zhizhi in this region.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Cf. my discussion of Xiao Wangzhi's in the final part of this chapter.

⁵⁵ *Hanshu* 94b; Yu (2008) 141. The treaty announces that from now on the Xiongnu and the Han will be united in one family and that the descendents of the Han and the Xiongnu will not deceive or attack each other. Should there be robberies, the treaty stipulates that the governments on both sides must notify each other, and assume responsibility for punishment and compensation. If one party is attacked by enemies, the other must send troops to assist. Finally, it emphasizes that whoever violates the agreement will bring misfortune upon themselves.

⁵⁶ According to the *Shiji*, Kangju was a nomadic state whose customs resembled those of the Great Yuezhi. It was situated about 2,000 *li* to the northwest of the Ferghana region. See *Shiji* 123, 3161.

⁵⁷ *Hanshu* 70, 3009; 94b, 3802.

After learning about Zhizhi Chanyu's death, Huhanye sent a petition to the Han court in which he expressed his willingness to pay homage to Emperor Yuan 元帝 (r. 49-33 BC). When Huhanye visited the court in 33 BC, he received twice as many gifts as he had done in 51 BC. In response to Huhanye's proposal to strengthen Han-Xiongnu ties through marriage, it was decided that a concubine of the imperial court would become his wife. In other words, the *heqin* policy between the Xiongnu and Han recommenced but its content had been completely altered. During the final fifty years of the Western Han dynasty, the northern frontier remained relatively peaceful.

3.3. Han administration and colonization in the Western Regions after Zhang Qian

The large-scale military campaigns initiated in 129 BC during the reign of Emperor Wu profoundly changed the contours of Chinese historical geography. In the course of about three decades, Han territory was extended to the far-flung areas to the west of the Hexi Corridor 河西走廊. It has been calculated that between 129 and 90 BC as much as 1.5-1.7 million square miles of territory passed into the control of Han China.⁵⁸

In order to establish permanent control over these newly conquered territories, the Han government introduced new administrative structures. As said, when King Kunye 昆邪 and 40,000 of his followers submitted to Han rule in 121/120 BC, the Han court established five special administrative units, which were called "the Subordinate States" (*shuguo* 屬國), in Longxi 隴西, Beidi 北地, Shangjun 上郡, Shuofang 朔方 and Yunzhong 雲中. Kunye's men were settled in these areas.⁵⁹ Later, four new commanderies, namely: Jiuquan 酒泉, Wuwei 武威, Zhangye 張掖 and Dunhuang 敦煌, were established in the western part of the Hetao Corridor 河套走廊, with the aim of checking the movements of the Southern Xiongnu. Collectively, these four commanderies became known as the *Hexi sijun* 河西四郡, "the Four Commanderies of Heixi".

⁵⁸ Chang (2007) 215.

⁵⁹ The *Hanshu* records this office was originally established in the Qin dynasty, specifically to be in charge of those barbarians who had become subjects. It had been superseded after the fall of Qin until its re-establishment by Emperor Wu to govern the Xiongnu tribes which had submitted themselves. See *Hanshu* 19a, 735.

In the Western Regions the colonies of Jushi 車師, Bugur 輪台 (in the eastern part of modern Luntai, Xinjiang) and Kurla 渠犂 (present-day Korla, Xinjiang) were established to consolidate Han power in the region. The plan to increase the number of farmer-soldiers (*tuntian* 屯田) in Bugur proposed by Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊, which had been rejected by Emperor Wu, was finally carried out in the reign of his successor Emperor Zhao 昭 (r. 87-74 BC). In 60 BC, after the Rizhu king of Xiongnu 日逐 had submitted to the Han court, a special office, the Office of the Protector General of the Western Regions 西域都護府, was established to govern these very extensive territories. The creation of this office signalled that the Han had gained secure control over these regions as far as the Ili Valley 伊犁谷地. By the end of the first century BC, the settlements of the “agricultural garrisons” extended all the way to the state of Khotan 于闐 and parts of the regions of Yarkant 莎車 to the west and southwest of the Tarim Basin.

Since the time of Modu Chanyu in the early third century BC, the ethnic group generally called the Donghu 东胡, which included the tribes of Xianbei 鮮卑 and Wuhuan 烏桓 who had originally lived in Inner Mongolia and then moved to Manchuria, and the Qiang 羌 of the northwestern frontier region, as well as the minor states of the oases of the Western Regions, had been under the control of the Xiongnu empire. During the reigns of Emperors Wu and Zhao, these states gradually won independence from the Xiongnu. It was an ephemeral independence as the vacuum left by the waning of the power of the Xiongnu was quickly filled by the Han empire. By the end of the first century BC, these nomadic states and tribes had been brought under Han economic and military control. To cope with the situation, in the early years of the first century AD, a new tributary system was developed. The chieftains of the nomadic peoples and states of the northern and western frontier zones now had to send their princes to the Han capital, where they were “lodged” for long periods. Furthermore, various types of goods had to be sent to the Han emperor.⁶⁰ In return, the tributary states and tribes annually received large amounts of gifts, including rice, other types of grain, fabrics and livestock, from the Han court, which also confirmed the legitimate status of their chieftains by granting them various official titles.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Yu (1986) 416.

⁶¹ Yu (1967) 45-51.

The Han government also sought to consolidate the Han military presence in the marginal territories by encouraging people living in the Chinese Central Plain to move into the frontier zones. During the initial decades of the Han dynasty, the various emperors followed the advice of Chao Cuo, who had recommended a policy of “safeguarding the border and establishing protection against the Hu enemies by encouraging people to develop agriculture.”⁶² Emperor Wen, for instance, transferred large numbers of labourers from the area of Guandong to the northwestern frontier regions.⁶³ Early in the reign of Emperor Wu, the Han army recovered the area of Henan which the Xiongnu had occupied during the Chinese civil war following the fall of Qin. The *Hanshu* reports that, immediately after this success, two new commanderies, Shuofang and Wuyuan, were set up in Henan and about 100,000 people were moved to the Shuofang area.⁶⁴ More migration programmes were carried out after the Han army had advanced westwards in the time of Emperor Wu. A large proportion of the population of the four commanderies of Hexi 河西四郡 is believed to have come from the commanderies of the interior regions. Furthermore, colonies were established in the far-off Western Regions beyond the Yumen Pass after the Han empire had gained control over the states of these areas. Military colonies were set up as far west as Bugur and Kurla. In the reign of Emperor Xuan, this programme of colonization was extended to the most distant parts of the Western Regions, with new colonies being established at Jushi 車師, Yarkant and Bixu Jian 北胥犍.

Thanks to the bamboo strips excavated in places on the northern frontiers like Juyan 居延 and Dunhuang detailed information about the administrative networks of the northern and northwestern frontier regions of the Han empire is now available.⁶⁵ The study of Chen Mengjia 陳夢家 reveals that the administrative units of the frontier zones had a strongly military appearance. In the northern frontier commanderies under the Grand Administrator, for example, the principal task of the commandants 都尉

⁶² Chao Cuo's suggestions regarding the defence of the northern frontiers against the Xiongnu were recorded in the book which he wrote for Bangu; see *Hanshu* 49, 2278-2289.

⁶³ On the substantial Chinese migration into the northern and western frontier zones during the Western Han dynasty, see Ge Jianxiong 葛劍雄 (1997) 147-153.

⁶⁴ *Hanshu* 6, 170.

⁶⁵ Chang (2007) vol. 2, 70-129.

appointed was to deal with security issues in specific localities or areas.⁶⁶ In the reign of Emperor Wu, a chain of forts, beacon towers and watchtowers, with a total length of between 3,000 and 4,000 *li* (777 to 1,036 miles), was established across the vast expanse of Hexi.⁶⁷

As large numbers of colonists were being settled in some of the newly acquired frontier regions, groups of barbarians who had surrendered were being established in other areas which were also integrated into the administrative system of the Han empire. As mentioned earlier, the office responsible for these areas was called the Office for the Subordinate States. Initially, this office was based Chang'an but when the Xiongnu king Kunye submitted to Han with a large number of followers in 121 BC, Emperor Wu ordered the establishment of five Subordinate States in the frontier zone to accommodate these people. The commandant of each of these Subordinate States was subordinate to the Grand Administrator of a neighbouring Han frontier commandery.⁶⁸

The principal aim of the Han government in settling these barbarian groups was not to promote the agricultural development of marginal areas, but to protect the frontier lands against any future barbarian invasions. In the Western Han period this idea had already been put forward by some officials such as Jia Yi and Chao Cuo, but had lain dormant and was not implemented until the time of Emperor Wu.

4. Motives for territorial expansion

In the first part of this chapter, it has been argued that the first emperors of the Han dynasty did not pursue any expansionist policy. Their territorial ambitions appear to have been confined to maintaining control of those regions in which

⁶⁶ For the administrative network revealed by the Han bamboo texts from the two Commanderies of Zhangye and Juyan in the Western Han period, see Chen Mengjia's brilliant research: Chen Mengjia 陳夢家 (1980) 37-135.

⁶⁷ Chen Mengjia (1980) 219; Chen Xiaoming 陳小鳴 (2002) 28. Chen Mengjia studied the fortification works in the border region of Juyan on the basis of the bamboo texts which were discovered in the 20th century.

⁶⁸ Yu Yingshi (1967) 72; Sun Yancheng 孫言誠 (1987). The Dependent State (*Shuguo*) had appeared during the Qin dynasty, but under a different name, *Shubang* 屬邦, which also means 'dependent state'. The name of the office was changed after the accession of Liu Bang. It is not clear which, if any, areas were administered by it between Emperor Wu's accession to the throne and the creation of the five Subordinate States in 121 BC.

Chinese civilization had taken root. Consequently, this assumption leads to the questions: Why did Emperor Wu and some of his successors decide to launch a series of large-scale military campaigns, some of which even reached the distant Ferghana region? How did the diplomatic missions and military expeditions organized in the period after 129 BC influence Western Han worldviews?

On the basis of the argumentation cited, several observations can be made about these issues. First and foremost, the massive territorial expansions of Han China which took place between the late second and mid-first centuries BC can be seen as an active response to the constant pressures exerted on its northern and western frontiers. Unquestionably, from the late third century, the Xiongnu confederacy repeatedly made excessive economic demands on the sedentary population of the Han empire.⁶⁹ In its heyday, the Xiongnu empire controlled a vast territory encompassing all of Mongolia and extending southwards to the Ordos region in the loop of the Yellow River in northern China.⁷⁰ In the west, Xiongnu influence extended as far as the Ili Valley and Bactria. Not satisfied with the exploitation of the resources of the pastoral states and tribes occupying these areas, the Xiongnu frequently used their cavalry to invade and plunder Chinese territories. Unable to defend the frontier regions effectively, the first emperor of the Han dynasty, Emperor Gao, had no option but to make a peace treaty with Modu Chanyu (the fourth Xiongnu ruler) in around 200 BC. This treaty marked the beginning of the *begin* policy of appeasement. Nevertheless, it was soon obvious that this policy did not have the desired effect of stopping all Xiongnu attacks, partly because on the

⁶⁹ Recent scholars have tended to pay more attention to the social and economic nature of Xiongnu society in order to explain why it relied so heavily on the products of other peoples, including the Chinese. As Barfield argues, because the steppe peoples lacked a system of tax collection, a few individuals (elite) regularly needed to be in possession of a large amount of material goods to distribute among their followers to maintain their power and control of his subordinates. This might explain why the Xiongnu made such excessive demands for products from China. As long as the Han government refused to open a market and exchange goods with the Xiongnu, raids were the only method to gain wealth. Had the Chanyu not been able to provide his tribesmen with material goods, his position would soon have been usurped by others. See Barfield (1981) 56; Namio Egami 江上波夫 (1988) 35, trans. Zhang Chengzhi 張承志; Di Cosmo (1994) 117. Because the stability of the Xiongnu empire depended heavily on extorting vast amounts of wealth from China obtained by through pillage, tribute payments, border trade and re-export of luxury goods, this type of empire is called a “shadow empire” by Barfield. See Barfield (2001) 10; Scheidel (2010).

⁷⁰ Rogers (2011) 220-221.

Xiongnu side the Chanyu did not have the absolute authority to restrain his subordinates from pillaging the Chinese towns of the frontier region.⁷¹

The ruling elite of the Han empire was fully aware of the threats posed by the warlike barbarian nomadic peoples of the steppe world. Nevertheless, prior to the reign of Emperor Wu few actually urged the emperor to develop an expansionist policy in response to this challenge. The reasons for this reticence were complex, but one noteworthy point is that, in the eyes of most Han Confucian officials, the barbarian territories on the periphery of the Han empire were not worth occupying. Yan Zhu 嚴助, a senior official in the reign of Emperor Wu, for instance, claimed that from time immemorial the territories of Hu and Yue had been uninhabited places and that conquering them would be a pointless undertaking.⁷² Such a Sino-centric outlook was ubiquitous among the upper echelons of the Han empire, as various examples have shown above.

From the foregoing discussion it has also emerged that, by the late third century BC, the chasm between the pastoral nomadic culture of Inner Asia and the agrarian culture of the Chinese Central Plains had become so great that the emperors of the early and mid-second centuries BC showed little interest in extending their authority into the barbarian lands. In fact the reverse was true. The early Han emperors tried to limit the interactions between their subjects and the barbarian nomads. In this context it is worth pointing out that, throughout the Western Han period, the Great Wall of the northern frontier zone not only served to keep the barbarian enemies out but also performed an important function in preventing such Han subjects as peasants, slaves, convicts and traitors, from fleeing to the barbarian territories.

When Huhanye Chanyu visited the Han court in 33 BC and married a court concubine (cf. above), for example, he offered to garrison the Han northern border between Shanggu 上谷 and Dunhuang with his men, allowing the Han frontier troops to be demobilized. Hou Ying 侯應, one of the elder statesmen of the Han government who was well-versed in frontier matters, gave ten reasons this proposal should be repudiated. Finally, Emperor Yuan vetoed the proposal on the grounds that the Han forces of the frontier zone had been posted there not only to fend off barbarian invaders, but also to prevent Chinese villains from escaping to barbarian territory.⁷³

⁷¹ Jagchid and Symons (1979) 245.

⁷² *Hanshu* 64a, 2777.

⁷³ *Hanshu* 94b, 3819.

In light of these considerations, it is not surprising that the Great Wall was regarded as an official and fixed boundary line demarcating the territories of the Han empire and the Xiongnu. Nonetheless, during the first half of the third century, the military superiority of the Xiongnu made it easy for them to violate the terms of the peace treaty, revealing the concept of a neat dividing line between the two empires to be an illusion. When marriage alliances, subsidies and the establishment of frontier markets failed to achieve lasting peace, the only option left to the Han emperor was to end the threat posed by the Xiongnu confederacy by military force. In other words, there are good reasons to think that the decision to invade the territories of the Xiongnu was the outcome of a long-term policy whose main objective was to defend and secure the northern territories of the Han empire.

5. The boundaries of the Western Han empire and the functions of the Great Wall

The radical territorial expansion and the extension of administrative networks, coupled with the expansion of military fortification works into the Western Regions during the reign of Emperor Wu and subsequent Han rulers, lead neatly to a discussion of the military and ideological functions of the Great Wall during the Qin and Han periods. One of the questions which has to be raised is whether or not the Wall can be seen as a clear demarcating line separating the territory of the Western Han empire from the external regions.

As already mentioned, Chinese written sources referring to the situation existing during the first half of the third century BC clearly identify the Great Wall as the boundary between the Han empire and the Xiongnu. What is more surprising is that this concept persisted after the collapse of Xiongnu power and the expansion of the Han empire into the area to the west of Yumen Pass and into the Western Regions beyond the Hexi Corridor under Emperor Wu. One piece of evidence which points in this direction is a passage from the *Hanshu* dealing with the first years of the first century AD. In the reign of Emperor Ping 平 (r. 1 BC-AD 6), five Chinese officials were sent from the Han capital Chang'an to the Chanyu's court to carry out an investigation after two Han officials from the Western Regions had fled to the territories of Xiongnu with their wives, children and subordinates. The Chanyu, in response to the rebuke that the Xiongnu should have not harboured the fugitives from the Western Regions for the reason that these regions now belonged to the inner

subordinate areas (*neishu* 內屬) of Han, claimed that, during the reigns of Emperors Xuan and Yuan, the Great Wall had been confirmed as the borderline between the Han and Xiongnu. The Chanyu seized this opportunity to argue that the Western Regions were not a part of the territory of *Zhongguo* (the middle state, referring to Han), so that the decision to allow the two officials access to the Xiongnu territory could not be regarded as a violation of the treaty. The answer given by the Chinese envoys is quite interesting. They did not give a direct response to the Chanyu's explanation. Instead, they emphasized that the Xiongnu should hand over the fugitives as a gesture of their gratitude to the Han empire:

*The Xiongnu people engaged in internecine attack which nearly led to the extinction of the state. Thanks to the grace of Zhongguo, which enabled (the Xiongnu) to evade this pitfall, they could keep their wives and children keep safe and unharmed, and ensure that their generation will be succeeded from generation to generation. Therefore, the Xiongnu people should recompense such a great kindness.*⁷⁴ 匈奴骨肉相攻，國幾絕，蒙中國大恩，危亡復續，妻子完安，累世相繼，宜有以報厚恩。

According to the *Hanshu*, the Chanyu was persuaded by this argument, apologized and handed the two fugitives over to the Chinese envoys. Thereafter, new rules were drawn up which stipulated that four kinds of fugitives, namely: Chinese from *Zhongguo* (Han), people from Wusun 烏孫, peoples from the states of the Western Regions (西域諸國) and the people from Wuhuan 烏桓, would not be allowed to enter Xiongnu territory without the consent of the Han.⁷⁵

This episode suggests that, until the end of the Western Han at least, the Great Wall continued to be regarded as marking the borderline between Han China and the Xiongnu. On the other hand, it also appears that, as the result of the massive westward expansion which had taken place after 129 BC, the geographical limits between the Han and the Xiongnu had become ambiguous. Not only were the Western Regions situated outside of the Great Wall, they also lay beyond those areas which had been used to settle the large numbers of Xiongnu who had surrendered to the Han government. If these regions were to

⁷⁴ *Hanshu*, 94b, 3818.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3819.

be regarded as belonging to “the inner subjects” of Han, the Great Wall no longer constituted the demarcation line between Han and the Xiongnu.

This is not the place for an extensive discussion about the origins and functions of the Great Wall in Chinese history, but a few short observations directly relevant to the argument of this chapter are unavoidable.⁷⁶ First and foremost, the English term “Great Wall” is a misnomer, since the Chinese phrase “Long Walls” 長城 is to be interpreted as referring to a series of walls rather than to one single structure. During a period of two thousand years running from the Qin period down to the Ming dynasty 明 (1368-1644), various walls were built, destroyed and repaired. Although these walls clearly fulfilled multiple purposes, the principal aim of the emperors in the Chinese Central Plain who built, repaired or rebuilt them was to protect the sedentary agricultural society of the south against the nomadic pastoralists of the north.

In reality, the aim of keeping the barbarians out was achieved only during certain periods of Chinese history. For instance, after the end of the Eastern Han in 220, Chinese history succumbed to a long period of chaos and division which lasted nearly 300 years until the Sui 隋 (581-619) re-unified China. During the Tang 唐 dynasty, Chinese power was again extended beyond the Wall, penetrating deep into Central Asia. After the decline of Tang more than ten nomadic tribes built up states in the Central Plain. The Song 宋 (960-1279) dynasty was of Chinese origin but was engaged in a permanent struggle against a variety of northern nomadic states. Of the last five unified dynasties in Chinese history two, the Yuan 元 (1271-1368) and Qing 清 (1636-1911), were established by nomadic peoples who had invaded China from beyond the Great Wall.⁷⁷

These observations do not alter the basic fact that these walls were built primarily for the purpose of defending the agricultural areas against the

⁷⁶ For a general study of the Great Wall over time, see Waldron’s seminal monograph (1990). Waldron argues that it was not until the late period, probably by the Ming dynasty, that the Great Wall came to be regarded as marking the cultural and ecological border between Chinese and barbarians in the north. For a critical assessment of this theory, see Tackett (2008), a study focusing on the concept of the Great Wall as marking the border between Northern Song and its northern neighbours.

⁷⁷ For a brief chronological synthesis of peace and war in the northwestern frontier regions and for a short discussion of the rise and vicissitudes of Chinese dynasties from the Han to the Ming, see Jagchid and Symons (1989) 52-78. Tackett (2008) 104-108 surveys the early history of the Great Wall between the pre-Qin period and the Tang dynasty.

barbarian nomadic peoples from the north. Similar defence systems were created to secure newly conquered areas. Sima Qian reports that, after expelling the Xiongnu from the Henan area, Qin Shi Huang established forty-four counties along the Yellow River which were protected by military posts 塞 on the banks of the Yellow River. After the Qin general Meng Tian had established control over the areas of Gaoque 高闕, Yangshan 陽山 and Bei Jiazhong 北假中, military posts and barriers 亭障 were constructed to keep the Rong people 戎 in check.⁷⁸ As Di Cosmo has demonstrated, some sections of the Qin walls were built in newly conquered areas, supporting the view that some of the walls which were constructed in various periods of Chinese history served offensive goals, but of course that observation, valuable as it may be, is fully compatible with the view that *most* of the wall-building projects of the Qin-Han period were carried out to increase security and as part of a long-term strategy for dealing with the threat posed by the Xiongnu.

The migration policies of the Western Han emperors were also informed by defensive considerations. Large numbers of Chinese convicts were moved into Gaoque, Yangshan and Bei Jiazhong to populate these remote areas, primarily with the aim of blocking any future barbarian invasions. During the Western Han period, Emperor Wu's decision to set up five Subordinate States to accommodate about 40,000 Xiongnu who had surrendered also served this purpose.

In his book about the economic relationship between the Han and the Xiongnu, Yu Yingshi raises the important question of whether the five states were located within or outside the Han borders. Although the exact whereabouts of these states cannot be determined, the fact that they bore the names of the five newly established frontier commanderies shows that they must have situated in close proximity to these commanderies.⁷⁹ According to the *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, those Xiongnu tribes which had surrendered were

⁷⁸ In the *Annals of the First Emperor*, Sima Qian does not make clear what kind of barrier was constructed.

⁷⁹ The five subordinate states were Longxi 隴西, Beidi 北地, Shangjun 上郡, Shuofang 朔方 and Yunzhong 雲中. According to the study by Xin Deyong 辛德勇, the term *gu sai* refers to the defensive fortification lines built by the state of Qin in the reign of the king of Zhaoxiang. Until 127 BC when Wei Qing recovered the area, these lines functioned as the real border between Zhongguo and Xiongnu. See Xin Deyong (2009) 256-284.

accommodated not far beyond the “old military posts” (*gusai* 故塞) in the area of Henan.⁸⁰

During the first years of the Western Han, the area of Henan was re-occupied by the Xiongnu and Emperor Gao was forced to conclude a peace agreement which made the Great Wall the formal boundary between the Han and the Xiongnu. However, because various systems of walls existed in the northern regions, it was not always easy to tell where the boundary line ran. After the Han re-conquest of the Henan area around 120 BC, the military posts and forts along the bank of the Yellow River which had been erected by the Qin people in the era of Meng Tian were repaired. As just stated, although the five Subordinate States must have been located near these posts, unfortunately, it is unclear whether they were situated within or just outside of the wall built in the Qin dynasty.

The absence of a clear dividing line between the Han empire and those areas controlled by neighbouring political entities has led Owen Lattimore to formulate his well-known theory that one should think in terms of a frontier zone rather than in terms of “an absolute line of cleavage”.⁸¹ As observed by Yu Yingshi, the five Subordinate States were situated beyond the frontier commanderies, and at least some military fortifications might have been constructed beyond the area of permanent settlement in order to prevent the people of the frontier zone from fleeing to the barbarian nomads.⁸² Viewed in this light, the settlement of large numbers of submissive Xiongnu in the newly established subordinate states might be seen as one element in a defensive policy whose purpose was to protect the Han empire against future invasions, not only with the help of fortification walls, watch towers and garrison posts but also by creating a buffer zone inhabited by barbarians who were controlled by the Han government.

6. The impact of territorial expansion on Han worldviews

Emperor Wu's successful campaigns against the Xiongnu extended Chinese imperial hegemony to the distant Western Regions. This led to a broadening of geographical horizons. In the course of the first century AD, with the further development of Confucian thought and the theory of the Mandate of Heaven, a

⁸⁰ *Shiji* 110, 2887-2888 (蒙恬死……匈奴得寬，復稍度河南，於中國界于故塞).

⁸¹ Lattimore (1941) 341.

⁸² Yu (1964) 73.

partial resurgence of an unbounded worldview of the pre-Qin period can be observed. Wang Chong 王充 (AD 27-97), a philosopher living in the early Eastern Han dynasty, highlights this idea in two passages from his *Discourse Balance* (*Lunheng* 論衡):

*Now the emperor has received the Mandate of Heaven and ascended the throne. He has inherited the accomplishments of the past, and in every aspect all was replete. The sihai (four seas) now became unitary, and all under Heaven presented a stable and peaceful order. The auspicious heavenly objects are so abundant, and the resonance between Heaven and Man is so highly tuned...The people of Yuechang used to pay the House of Zhou a white pheasant as tribute. Nowadays, the Xiongnu, the Shanshan and the Ailao pay cattle and horses [to the House of Han]. In the time of Zhou, the royal domain was limited to five thousand li, whereas now the territory of Han has been extended beyond the huangfu area (wild zone). Cattle and horses are more precious than white pheasants; the tribute from nearby submissive lands is less valuable than that from the distant regions. The people of Rong and Di in ancient times have now become Chinese. Those who were naked in the past are now dressed in Han garments. Those who used to have their heads bare, now wear Han caps. Those who had bare feet now wear shoes with thick soles. Rocks are now transformed into fertile lands and the savage have become civilized people. Pits and mounds are smoothed, and the intransigent transformed into civilians. If this is not peace, what else is?*⁸³

今上即命，奉成持滿，四海混一，天下定寧，物瑞已極，人應訂隆.....周家越常獻白雉，方今匈奴、鄯善、哀牢貢獻牛馬。周時僅治五千里內，漢氏廓土，收荒服之外。牛馬珍於白雉，近屬不若遠物。古之戎狄，今為中國；古之裸人，今被朝服；古之露首，今冠章甫；古之跣跣，今履商舄。以磐石為沃田，以桀暴為良民，夷墉圻為平均，化不賓為齊民，非太平而何？

*Holding a candle in the night, wherever the light shines, all can be measured. All under Heaven is exposed to the sunshine, which can hardly be measured/which is impossible to measure. Sailing a boat on the Rivers Huai and Ji, all the twists and turns can be discovered. Venturing on to the East (Yellow) Sea, south and north cannot be distinguished. As a consequence its breadth is difficult to assess and its depth can scarcely be measured/is impossible to measure. Han morality is so vast it is like unto the sunlight or the outer expanse of the ocean. People know this. Those who are not wise do not comprehend how powerful the Han is.*⁸⁴

⁸³ *Lunheng*, Xuanhan.

⁸⁴ *Lunheng*, Xusong.

夜举灯烛，光曜所及，可得度也；日照天下，远近广狭，难得量也。浮于淮、济，皆知曲折；入东海者，不晓南北。故夫广大，从横难数；极深，揭厉难测。汉德酆广，日光海外也。知者知之，不知者不知汉盛也。

As discussed in Chapter 2, this broad worldview had come into existence long before the creation of the Han empire. However, as the two passages just quoted show, by the time of the early Eastern Han, the idea that the Han emperor exercised a kind of universal dominance had become closely bound up with the ideological claims about the emperor's moral superiority and his relationship with Heaven. The central point Wang Chong is making is that the power of the Han morality reaches the farthest regions under Heaven.⁸⁵ In this sense, as Michael Nylan has recently put it, by the Eastern Han period the term *tianxia* was generally used to refer to “the imagined community that depended upon the moral ruler's exemplary consciousness that he held his lands in trust for the ancestors above and the people below.”⁸⁶

Although some Han scholars claimed that the lofty virtues of the Han emperor and the mandate he had received from Heaven entitled him to rule the entire terrestrial world, most of them did not subscribe to Wang Chong's highly rhetorical vision that morality had been raised to Han standards in every part of the inhabited world. When the Xiongnu ruler Chanyu Huhanye visited Chang'an in 51 BC, a conversation took place at court as to how the Chanyu was to be received. Chief Minister Huang Ba 黄霸 and Imperial Councillor Yu Dingguo 于定国 suggested that the etiquette which was used during visits of subordinate kings of the Han empire should be also accorded the Xiongnu, since the shining light of the emperor's sacred morality had reached the four quarters of the earth and because the Xiongnu had expressed their submission by offering gifts and pledges of loyalty. Nevertheless, this proposal was criticized by Xiao Wangzhi 萧望之 who offered the following counter-argument:

The Xiongnu's ritual customs and calendar are different from those of the Han, and [moreover] they used to be Han's enemy. (Therefore) it would be better not treat them as a subject, but to rank them above Han's subordinate kings. Now the outer

⁸⁵ I shall discuss this point of view in Chapter 6.

⁸⁶ Nylan (2008) 43.

barbarians have gone down on their knees and called themselves fan⁸⁷ of Han, and the Central State extends them courtesy but does not make them subjects. This is the amity of the Jimi (loose reign policy), and the reward/harvest of modesty and success.

單于非正朔所加，故稱敵國，宜待以不臣之禮，位在諸侯王上。
外夷稽首稱藩，中國讓而不臣，此則羈縻之誼，謙亨之福也。

Eventually, the emperor did follow Xiao Wangzhi's advice and issued the following decree:

I have heard that the Five Emperors and Three Kings [of legendary antiquity] were not able to achieve a civilizing transformation and administration [throughout your area]. Nowadays the Chanyu of Xiongnu sees himself as a subject fan on the northern frontier and has adopted the Han calendar. I am not yet prepared to extend the morality to your people, but I shall treat you kindly as guests, and order that the Chanyu's rank be superior to that of the Han subordinate kings. I admire [the fact] that you regard yourself as a Han subject but I shall not allude to it.

蓋聞五帝、三王教化所不施，不及以政。今匈奴單于稱北藩，朝正朔，朕之不逮，德不能弘覆。其以客禮待之，令單于位在諸侯王上，贊謁稱臣而不名。⁸⁸

These texts show that even when the Han emperor had achieved hegemony over the barbarian peoples in the mid-first century BC, no attempt was made to incorporate these peoples fully into the civilized world of China.

7. Rome and China compared

To what extent did the pattern of imperial expansion which can be observed in the case of Han China resemble the pattern followed by the Roman conquests of the last centuries of the Republic and the first centuries of the Empire? And what can be said about developments in Chinese and Roman worldviews following the establishment of the Han and Augustan empires?

⁸⁷ The term *fan* 藩 generally means “foreign” or “barbarian”. It is a discriminatory word which was widely used to denote all non-Chinese peoples, tribes or foreigners who were regarded as culturally inferior. It remained in use until the period of the Qing dynasty when it was used to refer to the foreign peoples mainly from European countries. For a good discussion of this term, see L. S. Yang (1968) 10. By demoting themselves to the rank of *fan*, the Xiongnu leaders were expressing their submission.

⁸⁸ On the event see *Hanshu* 78, 3282-3283; 94b, 3833.

As stated, Roman expansion during the Republic followed a centrifugal pattern in which clearly defined boundaries with neighbouring political entities played an insignificant role. In the course of the first century BC, when Rome established control over the entire Mediterranean and parts of North-West Europe, Roman generals, politicians and members of the educated elite borrowed the Hellenistic ideology of world domination to define the logical outcome of this centrifugal process. The Virgilian phrase *imperium sine fine* refers not only to the ultimate goal of Roman imperialism, but also implies that Augustus pronounced that the whole world (*orbis terrarum*) acknowledged Roman superiority, on the basis of its unrivalled military strength.

Although the rhythm of Roman expansion did slow down in the latter years of the reign of Augustus, various later emperors still thought it necessary to embark on ambitious military campaigns and hence the worldview which had been formed in the Late Republic was not radically transformed during the first two and a half centuries of the Empire. As late as the early third century, the Roman emperors continued to assert that Roman world was spatially unlimited, as revealed in the inscriptions on the triumphal arch of Septimius Severus.

From the late first century AD onwards, the boundaries of the Roman administration did gradually become more clearly defined as increasing numbers of allied kingdoms on the periphery of the empire passed under direct Roman control and Roman emperors, although provincial governors continued to claim the right to intervene in the affairs of barbarian kingdoms or tribes. In the military sphere natural barriers and man-made military installations, such as legionary and auxiliary camps, watchtowers, palisades and ditches certainly played a part in protecting the provinces of the empire against barbarian attacks, but it is not an inevitable corollary that these natural and man-made features were regarded as boundary lines separating Rome from non-Roman territory. The gradual development of a more or less permanent system of defence-works was paralleled by an increase in a sense of 'frontier consciousness', but this development did not influence Roman emperors and educated members of the Roman upper class to abandon the open worldview developed since the Late-Republican and Augustan periods.

The early Chinese empire had a very different approach to territorial expansion. Not least because the gap between the economy and society of imperial China and the pastoral nomads of the north had become unbridgeable, the Chinese emperors tried to demarcate their empire from the barbarian tribes occupying the northern steppes. When Qin Shi Huang established the first

unified Chinese empire, the concept that the emperor's power was, or should be, unbounded coexisted with the idea that the *tianxia* ruled by the emperor was a relatively closed political and cultural entity from which the barbarians were excluded. As Drompp has pointed out, in Han China, since "natural boundaries" were believed to exist between the agricultural regions of the Han empire and the northern pastoralists, geography was conceived as a dimension of identity.⁸⁹

The Han conquest of the vast Western Regions under Emperor Wu could have strengthened or revived ideological claims to world domination. However, although the establishment of Han hegemony over the Western Regions certainly broadened Chinese horizons, it did not result in the abandonment of the traditional worldview. The way in which Huhanye Chanyu's offer of submission was dealt with in 51 BC shows that, even as this late date, no attempt was made by the Han emperor to incorporate the Xiongnu into the administrative and cultural *tianxia* of his dominion.

Did the contrast between the basically open worldview which dominated Roman ideology in the early Principate and the far more closed Chinese mental map correspond to a differences in policies or strategies for dealing with neighbouring states and external threats? In recent scholarship, the question of whether Roman foreign policy was fundamentally aggressive (B. Isaac) or primarily reactive and based on *ad hoc* considerations and decisions (F. Millar) has been a matter of dispute. Although this issue continues to be debated, consensus can be easily reached on the fact that, throughout the whole period of the Principate there was no state in the Mediterranean which had the capability to challenge Rome's hegemony. In my view, this situation made it possible for Roman responses and policies in the field of foreign relations to remain highly flexible, thereby rendering the debate about whether Rome was fundamentally expansionist or primarily passive more or less meaningless. As the history of the Principate demonstrates, the Roman empire could either undertake aggressive moves (such as Claudius' conquest of Britain, Trajan's Arabian and Parthian Wars and Septimius Severus' British campaigns) or merely respond to changing circumstances on the frontier (as happened during the last decade of Tiberius' reign and in a sense even when Marcus Aurelius launched the Marcomannic War).

From its very foundation, the Western Han empire found itself in a totally different situation. Since the final years of the third century BC, the

⁸⁹ Drompp (1989) 141; Rogers (2012) 215.

aggressive southward expansion of the Xiongnu under their charismatic leader Modu Chanyu had put the Chinese northern border under pressure, and during the first phase of Han-Xiongnu relations the highly mobile and formidable Xiongnu cavalry forces placed the Han military in a weak position. Senior Han officials, mainly literati, maintained a strong Sino-centric tone in their responses to the threats posed by barbarian nomads, who were described as birds or beasts, living beyond the four seas, outside the civilized world (*bua wai zhi di* 化外之地) and even as not deserving to be ruled as the Han subject.⁹⁰ Some scholars, among them Jia Yi and Chao Cuo, were less rhetorical and more realistic and therefore criticized the imperial government for its acceptance of the military inferiority of the Han empire. The first emperors of the Han dynasty tried to neutralize the Xiongnu threat by means of the “harmonious kinship” (*heqin*) policy, but this proved not only financially burdensome but also failed to prevent the Xiongnu from raiding the frontier provinces. In the long run these factors prompted the Han government to rethink its policy. From the early 120s, Emperor Wu’s military campaigns radically reversed the relationship between Han and Xiongnu, carrying Han military power as far as the Western Regions.

In Chapter 3 it has been argued that the Roman conquests of the first and second centuries AD should not be interpreted against the background of an expansionist tradition which had deep roots in Roman republican history. In striking contrast to this situation, Chinese imperialism did not begin to take shape until about a century after the establishment of the first unified Chinese empire. In other words, whereas Roman imperialism was driven by an old tradition of aggressive militarism, Chinese imperialism should be seen as the byproduct of a policy whose principal aim was to put an end to the continuous pressures emanating from the grassland regions.

Another interesting point of comparison concerns the presence, or absence, of what Luttwak has called a “grand strategy”. The current majority view is that, contrary to what Luttwak has suggested, the Roman emperors of the late first to early third centuries AD did not develop any coherent strategy for the defence of the empire, and that what Luttwak sees as a coherent policy is largely the product of modern hindsight.⁹¹ If, however, the concept of a

⁹⁰ The non-Chinese barbarian peoples were stereotypically described as birds or beasts in the classical Chinese literature which predates the imperial period. For the discussion, see Pines (2005) 59-102.

⁹¹ Whittaker (2004) 29; Gruen (1978) 564.

“grand strategy” is interpreted to refer to a series of disconnected attempts to steer Roman frontier policies in a new direction, it is actually possible to maintain that certain decisions taken by Roman emperors were indeed informed by strategic considerations. Examples include the *consilium* which Augustus left for Tiberius, Domitian’s withdrawal of the Roman army from Scotland and Hadrian’s approach to frontier policies in the Near East and Britain. On the other hand, Luttwak’s critics are right to the extent that such measures never developed into anything closely approaching a coherent and long-term frontier policy. Instead, the surviving sources tend to convey the impression that emperors did not feel bound to the policies of their predecessors, so that frontier policies fluctuated in an almost random manner.

Compared to their Roman counterparts, the emperors of the Qin and Han empires adhered to a fairly coherent long-term policy in their dealings with the nomadic tribes and states of the north. From the late third century BC, this policy was designed to maintain a relatively clear separation between the agricultural zones of the south and the vast grasslands of the north. It was this policy which prompted successive Qin and Han emperors to build, extend or repair the series of Great Walls.⁹² Of course, this is not to suggest that the Great Wall was an insuperable obstacle to interaction between the inhabitants of the Han empire and the nomadic peoples living beyond it. As emphasized by Lattimore, it is better to think in terms of a symbiotic and interactive relationship between the agricultural and nomadic zones.⁹³ What is sometimes overlooked, however, is that the Great Wall played an important part in supervising and controlling all movements generated by this symbiotic relationship and that Lattimore’s observations are fully compatible with the idea that the *primary* function of the Great Wall was to deny the nomadic population of the northern grassland free access to the agricultural regions within the wall.

As mentioned earlier, the First Emperor sent Meng Tian with about 300,000 troops to attack the Hu tribes on the northern borders. As a result, Qin

⁹² As early as the pre-imperial age of China in the fourth and third century BC, the western and northern fringes of a number of Chinese states experienced increasing tensions with various nomadic tribes on the northern frontier. However, various states, among them Zhao, Qin and Yan, did manage to achieve territorial expansion in their struggles with the northern tribes. Thereafter walls were built in an attempt to consolidate control over the expanded agricultural zone. In this sense, it can be argued that the construction of the Great Wall in the pre-imperial period was the outcome of the military expansionist policies of the agricultural states. This theory is developed and presented in full in Di Cosmo’s 2004 monograph.

⁹³ Rowe (2007) 760-761.

gained the area of Henan, and a new wall was built between Lintao and the Ordos region. Since the newly acquired areas were not very suitable to arable farming on account of their arid climate and poor opportunities for irrigation, the conquest of Henan and the construction of a new wall must be understood as aimed at achieving the dual aim of imposing control over the Hu people and of keeping the Xiongnu out of the Hetao Plain.⁹⁴

Later emperors continued to adhere to the Qin policy of protecting the empire against the Xiongnu and other nomadic tribes living beyond the northern and western frontiers, and invested further resources into strengthening the frontier fortifications. As noted above, Chao Cuo wrote three essays in which he urged Emperor Wen to pay attention to the security of the northern and western frontiers, namely a Proposal on Matters of Arms (*Yan Bingshi Shu* 言兵事疏), a Proposal on Guarding Borders and Encouraging the Development of Agriculture (*Shoubian Quannong Shu* 守邊勸農疏) and a Proposal on Migrating People to Man the Garrisons (*Mumin Shisai Shu* 募民實塞疏).⁹⁵ Although these treatises cover three different topics, they are all based on the idea that strengthening the defences of the frontier zone is the best way to keep the empire safe from barbarian attack.⁹⁶

An explicit statement concerning the defensive function of the Great Walls is to be found in the *Book of the Late Han* (*Houhan Shu* 後漢書), composed by Fan Ye 范曄 (394-445) during the Eastern Han period:

*Heaven created the mountains and rivers, the Qin built long walls and the Han constructed fortresses and walls. The purpose of all these [activities] is to divide the interior from the exterior, and to distinguish those [people] of different traditions.*⁹⁷ 天設山河，秦築長城，漢起塞垣，所以別內外，異殊俗也。

Although this is a late text, it supports the conclusion that, at least during the Qin and Han periods, social separation and military defence were the most important functions of the Great Walls. As the treaty between the Han and the Xiongnu shows, it was still seen as the boundary line between two states, at least until the late 130s BC. The military victories of the period 129-90 BC

⁹⁴ The area was roughly bounded by the Great Wall of King Zhaoxiang of Qin and the loop of the Yellow River. See *Shiji* 112, 2954; Xin (2009) 262-263.

⁹⁵ On these proposals, see Chang (2007) Vol. 2, 9.

⁹⁶ See the notes about Chao Cuo in the pages above.

⁹⁷ *Hou Hanshu* 90, 2992; Waldron (1990) 42.

changed the balance of power between the Han empire and the Xiongnu. Besides the vast lands of the Hexi Corridor formerly held by the Xiongnu, even the Western Regions were now brought under the Han control. Nevertheless, even these very ambitious military campaigns could be interpreted as examples of “active defence” which stemmed from the desire to end the threat posed by the Xiongnu.⁹⁸

In the Roman world there were similar stone-built walls (such as Hadrian’s Wall), palisades, ditches, legionary forts and watchtowers. It cannot reasonably be denied that these constructions, as well as various major rivers, such as the Rhine and the Danube, helped to protect the provinces of the empire from barbarian attack. Nonetheless, there are strong reasons to accept the current consensus that the principal purpose of these installations was to facilitate control over the populations of the frontier zone. The Great Walls of the Qin and Han empires likewise played a part in keeping the population of the empire under control, but in these empires this purpose was clearly seen as a secondary function of walls which had been built primarily for defensive reasons.

The foregoing observations help to achieve build up a better understanding of the logic of territorial expansion in the early Roman and Western Han empires. Since the 1970s specialists in the field of Roman imperial history have tried to find an explanation for the slowing down of Roman territorial expansion after the Augustan period. According to J. C. Mann, the pace of the slackening of imperial expansion was not planned but simply the result of “inertia”.⁹⁹ Brunt argues that military expansion became less important because the emperors of the Principate were expected to play other roles in addition to that of military *imperator*.¹⁰⁰ Focusing on the material benefits of warfare, Sidebottom claims that Roman emperors had multiple ways of

⁹⁸ For the concept of “active defence”, cf. Di Cosmo (2004). The principal focus of the discussion which took place between the two senior officials, Han Anguo and Wang Hui, in 135 BC was on the question of whether the Han empire should send troops to attack the Xiongnu enemy. Although Wang Hui’s proposal was strongly opposed by Han Anguo and his supporters, the two officials were agreed that campaigning deep into the Xiongnu lands was too dangerous. Eventually, Emperor Wu accepted Wang Hui’s proposal to send troops to capture the Changyu alive by trickery. Only when this plot failed, did the Han emperor decide to embark on a more aggressive course to deal with the threat posed by the northern barbarians.

⁹⁹ Mann (1979) 181.

¹⁰⁰ Brunt (1990) 169-176.

enlarging their territory.¹⁰¹ Whatever the best explanation might be, it is imperative not to lose sight of the fact that imperial expansion continued after Augustus, albeit in a more piecemeal fashion. In the next chapter the discussion will show that territorial expansion through conquest was still seen as an effective way by which emperors could win personal glory and prestige and by which to reaffirm the power of Rome.

The vast majority of Qin and Han emperors showed little interest in foreign wars and military conquest. Nevertheless, this disinterest which did not stop these emperors from claiming unrestricted imperial sovereignty throughout all under heaven, but as will be shown in Chapter Six, they did so from a very different perspective than their Roman counterparts.

¹⁰¹ Sidebottom (2005).