

Sinocentrism in Relation to the First Han-Xiongnu Heqin Agreement- The Silk Road in Global History

Richard Li^{1,a,*}

¹Shanghai American School Puxi Campus, Shanghai, 201107, China

a. hey52rhl@outlook.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: This paper explores the approval of the first Heqin treaty between the Han and the Xiongnu empire with a focus on unravelling the internal sociopolitical motivations of the Han in making the treaty. Through textual analyses of the Shiji and Hanshu, this paper rejects the depiction of the treaty's military failure as a blind extrapolation of the Han system of centralized power. Instead, it puts forth the argument that the innate inapplicability of the Heqin treaty to relations with nomadic states was ignored by the Han imperial court because of a greater atmosphere of preference for sinocentric policies based on sinicizing other cultures in contemporary Han politics. These findings carry significance through its caused-based nature and approach to the Heqin treaty and provide contextualization for future studies on Han-Xiongnu relations.

Keywords: Heqin, sinocentrism, Han, Xiongnu, politics.

1. Introduction

The Heqin policy has been viewed by many as the epitome of Chinese ineptitude in the face of a powerful nomadic threat in the Xiongnu. This paper intends to investigate the degree to which the approval of the first Heqin treaty was an outcome of the Han state's socio-cultural and political precepts, values, and sources of information. Previous scholars have drawn extensive attention to the Heqin policy in terms of consequences, reasons for its failure, and internal analyses of how its terms are to be represented [1], while its connection to its ideological background has underwent less detailed examination. In this paper, I will make an argument for the prominence of sinocentric justifications for the Heqin in its inherent appeal to a Han political atmosphere of preference for ideas grounded in the sinicization of other cultures. The paper will take the structure of, in the first part, disproving an alternative explanation for the treaty's approval and, in the second, establishing the relevance of sinocentrism as a cause for the making of the Heqin.

The main primary sources used in my argument are the Hanshu and Shiji. The Hanshu, a history of the Former Han, was written by Ban Gu of the later Han dynasty during the 1st century AD as a continuation of his father, Ban Biao's work. The Shiji is a cross-dynastic account of all of Chinese history up to its author Sima Qian's time of writing in 94 BC. An extremely influential work, the Shiji served as a precedent in terms of format and content of future dynastic histories. As the Hanshu and Shiji were written as state-sponsored works, both catered to the intentions of their respective dynastic governments, the later and former Han dynasties. Resulting from this association, they each carry perspectives and tend to make choices based on a sinocentric inclination. This proneness expands

beyond merely writing of these historiographical texts and was prevalent in Han government in general.

2. Historical Background

The first Heqin treaty with the Xiongnu was agreed upon in 198 BC, two years after a consequential Han defeat in the Battle of Baideng. From a position of subordination, the Han agreed to equal “brotherly” status between the former and the Xiongnu, princesses as consorts to the Chanyu, the Xiongnu imperial ruler, and a substantial periodic tribute of various valuable commodities and foodstuffs. These terms resulted in limited success, as despite the Han’s significant concessions and tribute to the Xiongnu’s imperial elite, the Chanyu’s lack of complete authority over Xiongnu frontier subgroups resulted in continued raids across the Han border [2]. Instead of further investigating the contributors to the Heqin’s failure, this paper will build upon the idea of lack of absolute Xiongnu authority leading to its failure to enforce the treaty as a basis for exploring Han motives in producing the treaty’s terms. The Heqin would eventually end under Emperor Wu in favor of aggressive military offensives against the Xiongnu, which led to the ultimate demise of the Xiongnu empire [1]. In the long term Heqin policies in general have been seen by some scholars as possessing vital significance to the present state of Chinese “homogeneity” through the mixing of races [3].

In the context of the Han dynasty, the “court”, instead of an instance of a judicial system, refers rather to the place of political debate between the emperor’s appointed cabinet and ministers. Though the emperor possessed unchallenged authority, his decisions mostly mirrored the majority opinions resulting from these court debates.

3. The Heqin’s Approval as More Than an Assumption

Finalized in 198 BC, the Heqin treaty gave yearly tributes of Chinese commodities and luxuries to the Chanyu, the Xiongnu’s elite imperial ruler. The primary Chinese intention in this agreement was to put an end to the Xiongnu’s raids across China’s northern border. In practice, though reduced, border raids continued to occur because of the lack of complete authority of the Chanyu over the regional and tribal leaders in the frontier Xiongnu region, and in a vast majority of cases, it was not up to the Chanyu’s authority to enforce the ceasing of raids on local levels, but rather the individual chiefs and rulers of regions [2]. This decentralized government structure was a pivotal difference from the absolute authority that the Chinese Emperor and governing authority had above all subordinate positions.

During debates on the Heqin policy between 200 and 198 BC, the Han government, instead of directly extrapolating their political system onto the Xiongnu, debated the potential effectiveness of the Heqin with knowledge of the nomadic state’s differing political system from the Chinese. Some previous scholars including Bryan Miller have provided simplified explanations for the Han’s ignorance of these systemic dissimilarities in approving the Heqin policy, attributing it to a Han assumption that the Xiongnu’s central authority possessed absolute control over the operation of all regions, similar to the Chinese emperor [4]. Yet, examining a *Hanshu* passage quoted within Miller’s writing, records of dissenting opinions towards the Heqin policy can be found, disproving the notion that Han ignorance of Xiongnu political decentralization was based on an assumption:

China is an empire enjoying the benefits of civilization and instruction, and has also its pains and penalties for criminals. Still there are besotted people who transgress the statutes. How much less is the [Chanyu] able to prevent his people breaking the treaty [5]?

Such a statement from a Han court official during debate doesn’t demonstrate a general criticism of the Heqin proposal, but rather dissent based on at least minimal knowledge of the lack of authority of the Chanyu over border subgroups of the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu, as the first nomadic state of such

enormous relative military power, possessed a decentralized structure that was unique from the generally autocratic nature of successful states that the Chinese dynasties had been familiar with in past encounters. This quote directly points out the situation regarding the Chanyu, signalling comprehension of a different circumstance in the Han's dealings with the Xiongnu state and a vague consciousness of the Xiongnu's differences to the absolute imperial authority in the Han system.

This *Hanshu* passage demonstrates a contradiction between the Han historiographical descriptions of the court's political debates and Miller's interpretation of the Heqin as an "assumption", a common second-hand simplification of Han motives that invites further investigation into the true contributing factors to the Han's decision to enact the Heqin policy in spite of opposing opinions suggesting Xiongnu decentralization. In the second claim, I argue for the importance of a sinocentric political atmosphere causing the approval of the Heqin in lieu of an assumption based on lack of knowledge. While it can be pointed out that the Han's recognition of Xiongnu political differences would contradict any case made for the prominence of sinocentrism, and it is true that I point towards the delegitimization of Xiongnu customs as proof for the latter premise, the full *Hanshu* passage quoting doubt on the Xiongnu's ability to enforce the Heqin terms is prefaced with acknowledgment of Han superiority in the advantages of their "civilized" system [5]. This upholds both the validity of Han knowledge, as suggested in historical texts, as well as the dominance of sinocentrism in Han politics which I will argue for in the following section.

4. The Prominence of Sinocentrism as the Context For the Heqin's Approval

Politics and law centered around speech and rhetoric were prevalent throughout Chinese dynasties and are often reflected in writings of narrative histories. Adhering to standards and attempting to appeal to those higher in the Han hierarchy, figures under the immediate control and censorship of the government consistently demonstrated sinocentric rhetoric in the desire to "sinicize" other cultures and dismiss the legitimacy of non-Han peoples' culture, traditions, and government systems. An appropriate example can be seen in the speech of a Han envoy as described in the *Shiji*:

One of the Han envoys said: "According to Xiongnu customs, they dishonor the elderly."

Zhonghang Yue interrogated the Han envoy: "But according to Han customs, when those joining the military are sent out to be stationed in garrisons, do they not have their elderly kin set aside their own warmest layers and richest and finest [food] in order to send food and drink to those working in the garrisons?"

The Han envoy said: "It is so."

Zhonghang Yue said: "The Xiongnu make it clear that they take warfare and attack as their business. Their elderly and weak are unable to fight, and therefore they give their richest and finest food and drink to the strong and vigorous. And because [the strong] make themselves the protectors and defenders of fathers and sons both protect each other in the long term. How can you say the Xiongnu dishonor the elderly?"

The Han envoy said: "Amongst the Xiongnu, fathers and sons bed together in the same tent. When fathers die, [the sons] marry their stepmothers. When brothers die they take all the [brothers'] wives and marry them. [5]"

Zhonghang Yue was a Han eunuch who was sent to accompany a Han princess to the Xiongnu. He defected to the latter and later served as an adviser for Xiongnu policy towards the Han [1]. The unnamed Han envoy's insistence on Xiongnu rituals being subordinate to Han traditions is a clear reflection of the prominence of sinocentrism and a narrative of the Xiongnu's cultural inferiority and negligibility as enforced by Han political standards. As a representative of the Chinese government, the envoy's expressions of opinion can be meaningfully generalized to represent Han traditions in their condescending sentiment towards the Xiongnu.

Chin writes in-depth about the *Shiji*'s end-comment appended to the “Xiongnu liezhuan” and identifies the important and contrasting differences between Sima Qian's warnings against the suppression of historian opinions through the “politics of speech” and the use of skewed, anti-Xiongnu rhetoric to describe the Xiongnu as predominantly “greedy” in the *Yantielun* discussions, *Hanshu*, *Hou Hanshu*, and beyond [1]. Sima Qian's anti-censorship stance can be seen as a factor in his comparatively impartial and rhetoric-less descriptions of the Xiongnu in particular chapters of the *Shiji*. Thus, the *Shiji*, despite not possessing the xenophobic attitude such as found in Ban Gu and Fan Ye's writing, revealed even more significant patterns of censorship and punishment for speech in his addressing the dangers of commenting on Han-Xiongnu politics in his time. Given Sima Qian's well-known circumstance of having to choose to be castrated for not condemning a Han general who surrendered to the Xiongnu instead of committing suicide [5], the *Shiji* reflects the cruel norms prohibiting any hint of sympathy towards the Xiongnu which violated the honor and self-opinion of the Han state. Specifically, the end-comment to Sima Qian's section on the Xiongnu, also known as the “Xiongnu liezhuan”, directly demonstrates the prevalence of “politics of speech” in the Han political atmosphere of the time. Tamara Chin identifies the primary focus of Sima Qian's end-comment in the “Xiongnu Liezhuan” as “those who talk about the Xiongnu,” or in other words historians and voices under the control of the Han government hierarchy [1]. He issues a warning against the censorship of ideas and speech on the Xiongnu, using his influence to challenge the censorship problem he faced while writing on the Xiongnu. This unique commentary, as Chin points out, stands apart from other historiographical writings of the same and later times in its explicit discussion of Han censorship on Xiongnu matters, and points to a major example of Han mechanisms in upholding their belief of inherent self-superiority.

In spite of Sima Qian's warnings, writings of later dynastic historians commissioned by the Han government such as Ban Gu continued to show symptoms of self-censorship in its frequent implications of Han superiority.

If they are moved to admire righteousness and wish to present tribute to us, then we should receive them with the appropriate rites [5].

This passage is placed in the appended appraisal section of the *Hanshu*'s “Memoir on the Xiongnu”, in which Ban Gu presents his support for a “loose rein” policy regarding the treatment of the Xiongnu. See [6] for an extensive textual analysis of Ban Gu's critical appraisal at the end of *Hanshu* 94, the “Memoir on the Xiongnu”. For the Xiongnu to “admire righteousness” in giving tribute implies the rightful status of the Han state being in the position of receiving tribute from the Xiongnu instead of the opposite. As only one of the frequent examples of sinocentrism in Ban Gu's writing, this quote is representative of the deeply ingrained Chinese political standards of glamorizing its “civilized” way of life over other societies. This presents another instance that corroborates the central significance of sinocentrism as an imposed and standardized notion in the discussion of Xiongnu affairs, and adds to it the dimension of remaining present throughout both the former and later Han periods.

These implied sentiments of self-superiority found in Ban Gu's words can also be extended toward a general desire to “sinicize” other cultures, or spread Chinese influence in power, materialistic means, and political, ritual culture. Combined with the other Han actions and policies previously mentioned, including Sima Qian's castration and the censorship of Xiongnu affairs, a pattern of rejecting Xiongnu influence and advancing the Han's own is prevalent.

As such, in a political culture highly influenced by standards of speaking with sinocentrism and denying the legitimacy of the Xiongnu's structural differences, the prominence of sinocentric rhetoric deserves to be recognized as a contributor to the Han's ignorance of dissenting opinions acknowledging the Xiongnu's political differences. In other words, the Han court debates on the Heqin policy would not reasonably take exception to this sinocentric political rhetoric.

Liu Jing, a prominent Han court official who initially introduced the Heqin proposal, made arguments for its efficacy which were largely based on exporting Han “Lijie” rules to the Xiongnu:

If your Honor is sincerely able to have the eldest princess marry [the Chanyu], and to send lavish gifts along with her... Your Honor should each year present quantities of the goods that they lack and of which the Han have a surplus, and, by sending rhetoricians, cajole them to use ritual propriety. While [the Chanyu] Maodun is alive he will already be established as your son-in-law. When he dies your grandson will become shanyu. And who indeed has heard of a grandson who has dared to defy the propriety owed to his grandfather [7]?

The rhetorical appeal of the Heqin, in this instance, was made entirely upon a plan to make the heir to the Xiongnu throne, through birth-giving between the Chanyu and a Han princess, subordinate to the Han emperor in terms of traditional Chinese family relations while rather unrealistically attempting to prove to the Xiongnu with Han rhetoricians that such is the case [1]. This demonstrates the inherent sinocentrism in even the initial pitch for a Heqin policy. Sending rhetoricians to the Xiongnu acts on the Han belief of self-superiority and forms a parallel with the prominent Han rhetoric of “civilizing” and “converting” foreign peoples with Han traditions. Similar sentiments have been coined the analogous terms “sinicization” and “sinification” by previous scholars [1].

With the sinocentric basis for the Heqin policy established in parallel with the prominence of sinocentric political standards, its success in overcoming dissenting opinions in Han imperial court debate can be attributed to an enforced preference for policies that express the desire to disseminate Chinese influence to other cultures. Another major Han motivation behind making the Heqin agreement was to make the Xiongnu gradually dependent upon Han supplies with tributes of Chinese luxuries and commodities, and through this scheme possess more negotiating power concerning other demands [5]. Though to a lesser extent than their intention to manipulate Xiongnu kinship relations, this scheme to cultivate dependence among the Xiongnu also demonstrates the key role that “sinicization” of other cultures played in the Heqin’s terms. Instead of adopting policy ideas that purposely acknowledge the legitimacy of the Xiongnu’s fundamentally different political hierarchy as a nomadic state, the Han’s reversion to the Heqin policy in spite of disagreement in debates can be recognized as part of a larger picture entailing the favoring of sinocentric ideas in Han politics.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, a case was made for the approval of the Heqin policy as an outcome of sinocentric favoritism in Han dynasty politics. The first claim disproved the notion that the Heqin policy was a direct assumption that blindly extended the application of absolute imperial authority to the Xiongnu’s nomadic empire, and the latter part established the influence of sinocentric bias in the Han political atmosphere and integrated this idea into the approval of the Heqin agreement through examining the treaty’s terms and Han intentions. This paper carries importance to the study of Han-Xiongnu relations with a cause and context-centered approach to examining the Heqin policy, which has been developed to a lesser extent than means of evaluation of the consequences and effectiveness of the treaty. The discussion of the Han’s sinocentric rhetoric and its desire to “civilize” other cultures in connection to the Heqin policy could also provide a structure and help explain contextual circumstances and political precepts for future analysis of Han policy, especially towards foreign peoples.

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