

# STEPPE V. SOWN?

A Document-Based Analysis  
of the  
Relationship between the Xiongnu and Han Dynasty

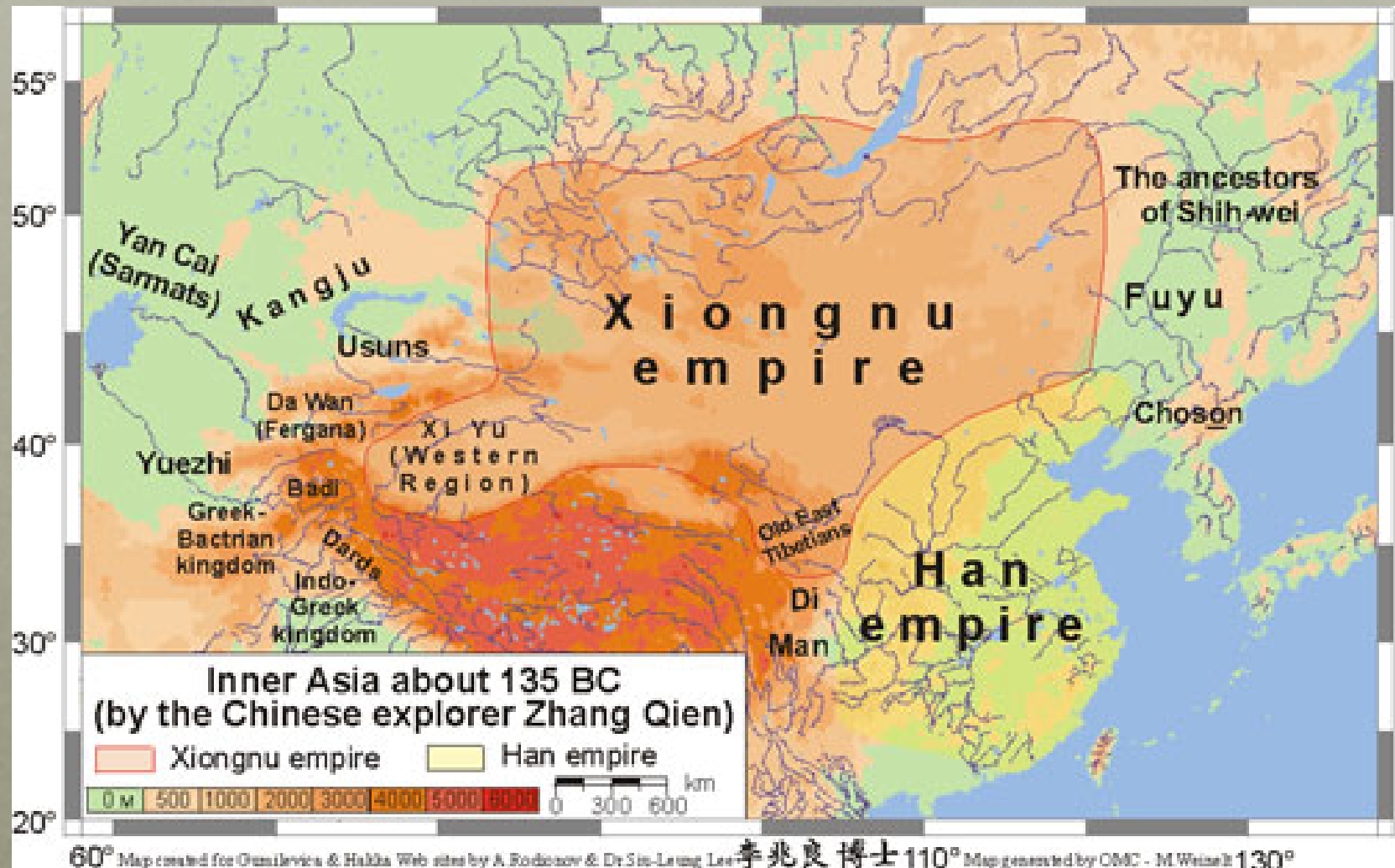
# EURASIAN STEPPE



# NOMADIC LIFE



# THE XIONGNU



# HAN DYNASTY CHINA

206 BCE – 220 CE



Sima Qian

Emperor Wudi



# CENTRAL QUESTION

- Use the following documents to analyze the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han dynasty.
- How did the steppe interact with the sown?

## Steppe v. Sown? Lesson Plan

**Central Historical Question:**  
*Analyze the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han Dynasty.*

### Teacher Materials

- Steppe v. Sown? PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A-D
- Copies of Graphic Organizer
- Copies of Guiding Questions

### Plan of Instruction:

#### 1. Introduction: PowerPoint

##### a. SLIDE 1: TITLE

*Ask students to define both “steppe” and “sown.” Students should explain that steppe is a geographical region with certain features like arid or semi-arid (dry) climate, vast grasslands or prairies, and are mostly located across Eurasia, sections of North America like the Great Plains, and parts of West Africa. Sown in this context refers to places where agriculture/farming takes place. Both groups (steppe and sown peoples) viewed the other as ‘barbarian,’ why do you think this is the case?*

##### b. SLIDE 2: EURASIAN STEPPE

*The Eurasian Steppe stretches across the continent from Hungary in the west, through Central Asia, and into Russia and western China. On the map, the area in blue denotes the Eurasian steppe. Ask students to compare how people’s lives would be different if they lived on the steppe versus places where agriculture/farming takes place. How would the different environments impact peoples’ ways of life? How do people survive on the steppe versus those that practice agriculture?*

##### c. SLIDE 3: NOMADIC LIFE

*Discuss with students their responses about how people survive on the steppe. Compare the responses to the pictures of nomadic life, which include a yurt, horse/mare milking, and sheep herding. Explain that nomadic pastoralism is a way of life that includes movement, either horizontally or vertically in order to graze various domesticated animals like goats, sheep, cattle, and camels. These animals provide food (meat and dairy products like fermented mares milk) and materials for survival like housing, tools, weapons, and clothing. People of the Central Asian steppe live in large portable homes called yurts or gers, which are covered in felt and animal skins. Women were primarily responsible for the*

*set up, which took about three hours and created interior decorations. Horses were used at first for food, then for transportation and military purposes. Steppe nomads became exceptional horse riders and adapted superior weaponry like the composite bow that were used in conjunction with horses to great effect.*

*Ask students to consider what people who live on the steppe might need or want from settled agricultural peoples (sown)? What might settled peoples need or want from nomadic pastoralists?*

*Potential answers might be that nomads needed agricultural products and wanted to trade for finished goods like tools, clothing, and luxury items from settled people (from the sown); whereas settled peoples might want horses, other livestock products like skins and furs from nomads.*

#### **d. SLIDE 4: THE XIONGNU**

*The Xiongnu, sometimes referred to as the Hsiung-nu (pronounced like SHONG-NEW), was one of many pastoral nomadic groups to inhabit the Central Asian steppe between the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Both the Qin and Han empires of China had frequent interaction with the Xiongnu as they shared borders.*

*The Qin Emperor Shihuangdi built sections of the Great Wall to protect his realm from various Xiongnu raids, which only served to slow them down. In 209 BCE, Maodun (Modun), through the assassination of his father, and through other means of terror, ruled over a confederacy of tribes to create the Xiongnu empire. This entity was what the Han dynasty faced for much of its tenure.*

*Ask students what they think might prompt the Xiongnu to raid settlements in China.*

#### **e. SLIDE 5: HAN DYNASTY CHINA**

*The Han Dynasty was founded by Liu Bang and lasted for about four hundred years. Various emperors had differing policies regarding the nomads to the north. Sima Qian, pictured on the left, recorded much of Han Dynasty history in his work Records of the Grand Historian, which detailed aspects of the interaction between the Han and the Xiongnu from a Chinese perspective. Emperor Wudi, pictured on the right, reigned from 141 – 87 BCE and was responsible for expanding China's borders to the north and west by ordering several phases of invasions.*

*Ask students to consider how Wudi's expansions might impact Han relations with the Xiongnu?*

#### **f. SLIDE 6: CENTRAL QUESTION**

*Today you will be examining documents to determine the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han Dynasty.*

2. Hand out the collections of Documents (A-D), the Graphic Organizer, and Guiding Questions. Have students complete the Guiding Questions for Document A.



3. Ask students to share their responses. Students should pick up on the superior tone that Sima Qian has when describing the Xiongnu and acknowledge why he might have this particular view of the nomads. Here's a good point to discuss whether or not Sima Qian's views of the Xiongnu were typical of most Han at the time and whether this would shape how the Han interacted with them.

4. Have students complete the remaining Document analysis and guiding questions. It might be pertinent to go over student responses and address the narrative they see in the relations between the Xiongnu and Han dynasty.

5. *Discussion:* Students should be reminded of the differences between nomads and settled peoples and how that would impact their interactions and relationships. Did students pick up on the change over time in the relationship? Did students realize that each group benefited from one another? Emphasis should be placed on each group thrived when both were strong (Barfield's thesis).

6. Final Question: Have students prepare a thesis paragraph that answers the question using references to the documents to help support their argument.

## **Document A: Sima Qian's "The Account of The Xiongnu"**

*Sima Qian, who lived from 145 – 85 BCE, worked in the service of the Han dynasty as a historian. He wrote an ambitious history of China, Records of the Grand Historian, which served as a model for Chinese historians for centuries. The history was based on Sima's records of state and court ceremonies, his travels, and conversations with people who witnessed events. Excerpts from his most famous work are below.*

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From the time of the Three Dynasties on, the Xiongnu have been a source of constant worry and harm to China. The Han has attempted to determine the Xiongnu's periods of strength and weakness so that it may adopt defensive measures or launch punitive expeditions as the circumstances allow. Thus I made "The Account of the Xiongnu."

They have no writing, and even their promises and agreements are only verbal...It is their custom to herd their flocks in times of peace and make their living by hunting, but in periods of crisis they take up arms and go off on plundering and marauding expeditions. Their only concern is self-advantage, and they know nothing of propriety or righteousness.

**Source: Sima Qian. *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, (trans. Burton Watson) Vol. 2, Columbia UP, 1971, 129.**

## Document B: Ho-ch'in

*With the rise of Maodun in 209 BCE, the Xiongnu had a powerful empire supported by a skilled and threatening army of mounted warriors. The Xiongnu however, did not want to conquer China. Read the excerpt below from historian Thomas Barfield's book The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China for a description of one way the Han and Xiongnu dealt with each another early on. The table shows what was given to Xiongnu leaders upon visits to the Han court later.*

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By drawing on resources from outside the steppe the **Hsiung-nu** state gained a stability it could not otherwise have achieved.

The [Han] emperor sent envoys to the **Shan-yü** to negotiate peace and establish the **ho-ch'in** policy as a framework for relations between the two states.

The *ho-ch'in* policy had four major provisions:

- 1 The Chinese made fixed annual payments of silk, wine, grain, and other foodstuffs to the Hsiung-nu.
- 2 The Han gave a princess in marriage to the *Shan-yü*
- 3 The Hsiung-nu and Han were ranked as co-equal states
- 4 The Great Wall was the official boundary between the two states

In exchange for these benefits, the Hsiung-nu agreed to keep the peace.

### Vocabulary

Ho-ch'in = series of treaties between the Xiongnu and Han Dynasty

Hsiung-nu = Xiongnu

Shan-yü = Xiongnu leader

chin = unit of weight/measurement

## Document B: Continued

<b>Year of Visit</b>	<b>Silk floss</b>	<b>Silk fabric</b>
<b>51 BC</b>	<b>6,000 <i>chin</i></b>	<b>8,000 pieces</b>
<b>49 BC</b>	<b>8,000 <i>chin</i></b>	<b>9,000 pieces</b>
<b>33 BC</b>	<b>16,000 <i>chin</i></b>	<b>16,000 pieces</b>
<b>25 BC</b>	<b>20,000 <i>chin</i></b>	<b>20,000 pieces</b>
<b>1 BC</b>	<b>30,000 <i>chin</i></b>	<b>30,000 pieces</b>

**Source:** Barfield, Thomas J. *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China*. Basil Blackwell, 1989, 46, 65.

## **Document C: Zhang Qian Expedition to the Yuezhi**

*Zhang Qian was a 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE court official in the service of Emperor Wudi. He was charged with a mission to seek an alliance with the Yuezhi (another nomadic group) against the Xiongnu. Here he is pictured leaving on his journey to the Western Regions where he was captured by the Xiongnu and lived for ten years before finally being able to carry out his mission. His accounts of the Xiongnu and the Western Regions (areas beyond Han borders) were recorded by Sima Qian.*

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*Source: Tang Dynasty 8<sup>th</sup> century, Mogao Cave painting*

## Document D: Han Tributary Terms

*The following excerpt comes from historian Ying-Shih Yü's chapter "The Hsiung-nu" found in The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia.*

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The internal struggles of the Hsiung-nu came completely into the open after 60 B.C....

The Hsiung-nu split into five regional power groups, each with its own *shan-yü*. Finally, in 54 B.C. the breakup was reduced to two major contending factions headed by *shan-yü* Hu-han-yeh and *shan-yü* Chih-chih...In the next two decades the two brothers divided Mongolia into two separate Hsiung-nu kingdoms, with Hu-han-yeh in Inner Mongolia, and Chih-chih in Outer Mongolia.

The Han tributary terms imposed on the Hsiung-nu may be briefly described as follows: first, the *shan-yü* would pay homage to the Han emperor at the Chinese court; second, the *shan-yü* would send a son to the Han court as hostage; third, the Hsiung-nu should send tribute to China to return the favor of imperial gifts. In return the Han had the obligation to offer the Hsiung-nu military protection whenever necessary. Moreover, the Han also had to supply the Hsiung-nu with Chinese goods, especially silk and food.

**Source: Ying-Shih Yü. "The Hsiung-nu" in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor, Cambridge UP, 1990, 139-140.**

### **Optional Document: Create Your Own**

Since the Xiongnu did not leave behind many written records, historians are left with mostly Chinese accounts of the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han. For this document, think about what might give you information about the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han from the Xiongnu perspective. Write a description of your document below.

## **Steppe v. Sown? Guiding Questions**

### **Document A: Sima Qian's "The Account of the Xiongnu"**

1.
  - a. Who was Sima Qian?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. Do you think he was qualified to write about the Xiongnu? Explain.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2.
  - a. Identify the tone of the writing.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. Why does Sima write about the Xiongnu?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3.
  - a. What does this document tell you about the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han?



## **Document B: Ho-ch'in**

1.
  - a. How does the ho-ch'in benefit the Xiongnu?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. How does the ho-ch'in benefit the Han?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - c. Do you think the treaty was fair? Explain.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - d. What might be a drawback of the treaty for the Han?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2.
  - a. What does the Barfield excerpt tell you about the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han?

3. a. Does **Document B** support or refute **Document A**? Explain.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. a. Regarding the table, what conclusions can you draw about the changes over time in the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han? What might cause these changes?

**Document C: Zhang Qian Painting**

1. a. What issues might there be with a painting created so long after the fact?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. a. Why would Emperor Wudi want to form an alliance with another nomadic group against the Xiongnu?

3. a. What does this say about the relationship between the Han and Xiongnu at this point in time?

b. How is this different or similar from earlier interactions between the Han and Xiongnu that might have occurred under different emperors?

### **Document D: Han Tributary Terms**

1. a. What type of source is Document D? How do you know?

2. a. How does **Document D** compare with **Document B**?

b. What might account for the differences between Documents D and B?



## Graphic Organizer

Document	According to the document, what is the relationship like between the Xiongnu and the Han?	How is this account similar or different from the other documents?	Why might this be a reliable source of information about the relationship between the Xiongnu and Han? Why not?
A:			
B:			
C:			
D:			

**Final Question:**

**Analyze the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Han Dynasty.**

**Include reference to all the documents to support your thesis.**

## Citations

### Document A:

Sima Qian. *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, (trans. Burton Watson) Vol. 2, Columbia UP, 1971, 129.

### Document B:

Barfield, Thomas J. *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China*. Basil Blackwell, 1989, 46, 65.

### Document C:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhang\\_Qian#/media/File:ZhangQianTravels.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhang_Qian#/media/File:ZhangQianTravels.jpg)

### Document D:

Ying-Shih Yü. "The Hsiung-nu" in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor, Cambridge UP, 1990, 139-140.