Franz Steiner Verlag

Alte Geschichte | Sonderdruck aus:

# Intentional History

## Spinning Time in Ancient Greece

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Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart 2010

# Contents

# 16. ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE NOMADS AND 'BARBARIAN' HISTORY IN HAN CHINA

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To speak of "intentional history" means also, perhaps, to investigate the process by which the historian brings within the 'fold' of history a given subject – whatever 'history' may mean within the particular cultural tradition to which the historian belongs. This process can be called the 'historicisation' of a subject.[1] In particular, we are concerned here with how the history of 'others' entered Chinese historiography. Posing this question means also asking what historical method was applied to the understanding of the past and present of peoples whose history was perceived as separate from that of the community, culture, or 'nation' to which the historian referred as his own. Assessing the conscious positioning of an ancient historian as an outsider to the history that he was recording may not be a smooth operation, as undoubtedly that positioning is not set in stone, and varies together with the nature of the 'other' in question. Some 'others' are more different than others. Issues germane to this point have been debated in the course of recent controversies about the nature of Jordanes' Gothic history, and, more generally, about the question of 'ethnogenesis' in late antique historiography.[2] Yet, those remote records are still the best conduit that we possess to reach back into otherwise wholly unknowable – save perhaps for the increasingly useful but still hazardous archaeological evidence – corners of human history. Studying such records may also, as has been elegantly argued, shed light on the intellectual tenets, worldviews, and self-representation of the historian's society.

The study of the ancient interactions between China and the steppe nomads depends essentially on written records. The idea that these peoples also had a history, and that their history, albeit constructed in relation to China, had an independent 'identity' and therefore requires the historian's attention, blossoms for the first time with the full dignity of a historical narrative in the *Shiji* (*Records of the Historian*, c. 100 BCE) by Sima Qian (145?–86? BCE). Hence, any study in the creation of an ethnography and history of foreign peoples in early Chinese historiography must take the *Shiji* (*Records of the Historian*, c. 100 BCE) by Sima Qian (145?–86? BCE) as a key turning point. While there are plenty of references to the Chinese states' dealings with peoples perceived as foreign or alien in pre-imperial sources, no specific historical account devoted to them exists before Sima Qian

1 I use this term in the same sense as J. G. A. Pocock's "historisation"; see POCOCK 2005, 4.

2 There is a huge bibliography on this topic. Essential contributions that attempt a synthesis of the different positions on this issue are included in GILLETT 2002. See in particular the essay by POHL.

wrote his *Records*.[3] In part this is the result of the structure of the *Shiji* itself, as Sima Qian reconfigured historical research and knowledge in entirely new forms.[4] In the process, together with a new conceptualisation of the history of the Han empire, and of the political and cultural traditions of the Hua-Xia people that we today recognise as a unified history of ancient China, the relationship between Han and the non-Han peoples came into sharper relief. While still a relatively young field of study, a number of scholars have published on the question of the perception and representation of cultural differences between 'Chinese' and 'barbarians' in early China, pointing out key aspects of philosophical approaches, and political discourses.[5] Archaeology has injected into these debates ideas and hypotheses about cultural and economic exchange that have helped better to define the nature of the relations beyond philosophical and political pronouncements.

The purpose of my discussion of early Chinese historiography of nomads is to isolate what I regard as significant aspects of their historicisation. Whether such an inquiry can be profitably used for a comparative approach to Greco-Roman and Chinese historiography is an important question that must be, however, left for a future study. I shall limit my remarks here to saying that a comparative framework has to embrace issues relevant not just to the representation of alien cultures, but rather to the basic principles relative to the genesis of the actual histories of alien peoples within a given ancient historiographical tradition. In other words, it may be useful to define a space that, in both the Chinese and the European traditions, can be found between a use of history that tends to concentrate on how to qualify 'alterity,' and a use of history that points, rather, in the direction of what has been called 'ethnogenesis,' or 'origin story' of a given people.

In the space between these two concepts, one in which a certain cultural tradition defines the other in relation mainly to itself, the other in which the historical construction is allegedly based on kernels of oral traditions and autochthonous knowledge, we may find the way to advance a discussion that has weighty implications. These have been broached already in the aforementioned debates on the 'ethnogenesis' and identity of 'European' barbarians in late antique historiography. But there are also emerging questions, thus far not well investigated, regarding the 'sense of the past' of 'barbarians' and how these records contributed to the formation of historical consciousnesses among them. The history of the 'imperial nomads' of the eastern marches or Eurasia, which was first conceived as a unified whole by Joseph de Guignes, is especially and critically in need of this type of

3 The most useful and reliable introduction to Han historiography is still HULSEWÉ 1961. See also NG – WANG 2005, 53–78.

4 In addition to the classic work by CHAVANNES 1895–1905 and WATSON 1958, among several new studies of the *Shiji* a notable one is DURRANT 1995. Four volumes have also appeared of a new English translation of the *Shiji*, planned in nine volumes, under the general editorship of NIENHAUSER. The first and in many ways still excellent translation of several chapters of the *Shiji*, recently republished as a revised edition is WATSON 1993.

5 An excellent overview is provided in PINES 2005, 59–102.

historiographical exploration. In chapter 110 of the *Shiji*,[6] dedicated to the Xiongnu (Asiatic Huns), Sima Qian produced the first full-blown history of a nomadic empire, and of a people that has been taken to epitomise the antithesis of the Chinese civilisation.[7] In the context of the historicisation of the Xiongnu, three areas seem to me especially relevant to our discussion. First, Sima Qian's creation of a 'cultural genealogy' established several motives why the Xiongnu were given a separate historical account. Second, ethnographic knowledge was introduced in a systematic manner, an operation that directly relates to the sources tapped for knowledge on Xiongnu history and society and to the organisation of this knowledge. Moreover, we need to assess pre-existing notions of 'barbarism' and 'alterity' that entered the narration, and what elements of the Xiongnu narrative can be traced back to older conceptions that framed the Han approach to foreign cultures.

The Xiongnu chapter belongs to the *liezhuan* ("arrayed traditions") section of the *Shiji*.[8] While most of the 70 *liezhuan* chapters of the *Shiji* (out of a total of 130) are devoted to historical figures, and indeed present themselves as 'biographic' accounts, other chapters are dedicated either to foreign peoples and lands, or to classes of peoples, such as "moneylenders" and "knights-errant." It is apparent that these chapters are not 'biographies,' but collective accounts of remarkable, exemplary, or notorious peoples whose deeds were deemed worthy of transmission. There is surely nothing casual in Sima Qian's placement of the accounts of foreign peoples in this particular section of the *Shiji*, removed from the chapters that provide the history of royal house (the *ben ji*, or "basic records") and of the aristocratic families (the *shi jia*, or "hereditary houses"). Instead, foreign peoples are mentioned towards the end of the "arrayed traditions," together with famous generals and ministers known for their service in the military and in particular for their participation in foreign wars. One important aspect of the organisation of the *Shiji* is that information relative to a given subject, person, or event is distributed across a number of chapters regardless of whether the same subject re-

6 The full translation of this chapter is available in WATSON 1993, 2, 129–86. I have also consulted with profit the manuscript translation prepared by E. Giele for NIENHAUSER forthcoming. A basic history of the Xiongnu, based on Han textual sources, can be found in YÜ 1986, 383–405 and 1990, 118–49. An extensive discussion of this text as well as archaeological research on the Xiongnu can be found in DI COSMO 2002, 161–311. For a discussion on the relationship between the Xiongnu account in the *Shiji* and in the *Hanshu* (discussed below) see HONEY 1999. The claim presented in this article that the *Hanshu* text on the Xiongnu (Chapters 94A and 94B) is closer to the original *Shiji* text than the text actually included in the *Shiji* (Chapter 110) on account of later interpolations needs to be taken into consideration in the analysis of a few controversial points. However, neither Honey nor others question that Sima Qian was the first to write a Xiongnu monograph.

7 The point that Han Chinese and Xiongnu nomads represented opposite civilisations and "alternative lifestyles" is a common trope. For a recent reiteration of this notion see CHANG 2007, 159.

8 On the translation "arrayed tradition" which I prefer to any other, see the explanation in DURRANT 1995, xix–xx.

ceives a dedicated chapter. Hence, we find several mentions of foreign peoples such as the Xiongnu in chapters other than that specifically assigned to them. Nonetheless, the existence of a chapter on the Xiongnu means that they are seen as an especially important topic, and gives chronological coherence and structure to otherwise scattered tidbits of information.

There are no examples of monographic studies of foreign peoples before Sima Qian, and even within the *Shiji* there are no foreign peoples that attain quite the same status as the Xiongnu, even though several chapters are dedicated to external regions and peoples, most significantly Chapter 123 on the oases, statelets, and nomadic tribes of the "Western Regions."[9] While the chapter on the Xiongnu inaugurates a self-consciously new style of ethnographic history, it does so by conforming in format to other "arrayed traditions." Sima Qian did not invent a special form of 'ethnographic account' but rather expanded the realm of historical inquiry by including foreigners. The innovative, even revolutionary aspect of his work consists in the historical method he applied to the investigation of the Xiongnu, once they came to be regarded as a historical phenomenon worthy of having its own dedicated account. How and where Sima Qian collected relevant material and how he 'rationalised' the phenomenon in terms of his macro-scheme of Chinese history is where we can locate the most 'intentional' of his construction of the Xiongnu 'alien' history.

Hence, primary questions are: What are the 'traditions' relevant to Xiongnu history that the historian assembled? How did he collect them? And how did he "array" them into a coherent historical account? Before we move to tackle such questions, we need to look at whatever model or information may have been available to Sima Qian, and at the general structure of the chapter itself. That is, we need to discuss a famously thorny issue: the position of 'barbarians' in early China. Notwithstanding the popular application of the term 'barbarian' to foreigners, it is a fact that every time we meet the term 'barbarian' as a translation of a Chinese term we face something of a misnomer, and one that is potentially seriously misleading. The concept of 'barbarian' in Chinese is not expressed through a single word but rather by summoning one of various ethnonyms used to indicate foreign people in historical sources, not unlike, in a sense, our current use of the word 'vandal.' It is as if the Greeks, not having invented a collective word for 'barbarian,' used a variety of ethnonyms, such as Persian, Scythian, or Egyptian, to express a concept that had generic implications of cultural, linguistic, and other differences.

It is I think beyond doubt that every term used in the Springs and Autumns (770–485 BCE) or Warring States (485–221 BCE) periods to express the concept of an alien people or culture must have been originally an ethnonym of one kind or another. What is confusing is to what extent a certain term may be (a) a pure ethnonym, which indicated only a specific people; (b) an ethnic name used *pars*

9 For a study of the Western Regions under the Han see HULSEWÉ – LOEWE 1979. See also DI COSMO 2000.

*pro toto* to indicate an ethnic or regional 'type' (nomads, or people living in the south, or descendants of people living in a certain region); (c) a term that having lost any ethnic designation was used just to indicate foreign peoples in general, often in a pejorative abstract sense. By metonymy or synecdoche, these names would then be associated with or taken as a component of a larger entity, the uncivilised world. It would be banal to point out that the Chinese could not have had a notion of civilisation without its opposite number, but it is still remarkable that the concept of barbarism remains linguistically fragmented into so many terms: Yi, Rong, Di, Man, Mo, Hu and their several variations: the Nine Yi and the Four Yi, the Red Di and the White Di, the Mountain Rong and the "Dog" Rong, the Eastern Hu and the Forest Hu. In the early records common words used for foreign peoples in any sense can amount to more than two dozen, although in later records those that tend to be used with an abstract or generic meaning are fewer. Often, but possibly not always, when two such ethnonyms are joined in a binomial compound they appear to stand for a more abstract meaning of alien or barbarian people, but the level of abstraction is not always clear, as over time the four main (but by no means the only) words used to indicate foreigners, *di*, *rong*, *man*, and *yi*, were also ascribed directional values. Hence *man* generally stood for the 'barbarians' of the south and *yi* for eastern 'barbarians.' Yet if the two terms were joined binomially as *man-yi* they could indicate barbarians of the west and east, or perhaps stand for foreigners in general, or perhaps designate a special category of foreigners, distinct from others but not otherwise identifiable. The four terms could also be joined with one another in various combinations, such as *man-yi*, *rong-di* and *yi-di*. We assume that these terms are to a certain degree interchangeable, but there are surely hues of meaning that elude us, since a purely random use is doubtful given that they, taken individually, did not extend to the same exact semantic range.

While it is fairly clear that the concept of a foreigner as a cultural alien and also as a political and military adversary develops around a cluster of words that over time lost their original ethnic meaning to acquire a metaphoric abstract one, a metonymic element may have continued to exist for some time. For instance words such as *hu* can be said to be the self-designation of a specific people, or at the same time a generic term used by the Chinese for a nomadic ethnic type. Words for specific foreigners and generic 'alien peoples' that, when translated as 'barbarians,' inevitably lose much of the meanings originally spanned by each one of these terms. With that caveat, it must be said that at times it is inevitable and even desirable to use the term "barbarian."[10]

In pre-Han texts an explicit line of demarcation is drawn between Chinese as a whole and non-Chinese as another but less focalised whole, which can be discerned along pre-eminently ethical and cultural lines. In the *Gongyang* commentary to the *Chunqiu* (*Springs and Autumns*) we find, for instance:

10 See, for instance, PINES 2005, 61 n. 8.

> The *Chunqiu* treats its state [i.e., Lu] as internal, and all the Xia as external; it [also] treats all the Xia [states] as internal and all the Yi and Di as external. The true king's desire is to unify the universe [lit. "All under Heaven"]. Why should he then use the words 'internal' and 'external'? It means that he begins with those who are near."[11]

These foreign and alien entities, the Di and Yi, are, in an ethnographic or historical sense, disembodied. The emergence of an abstract discussion of barbarians in pre-Han China occurs at a time of fierce internal competition among Chinese states, and of expansion into areas inhabited by unassimilated peoples. The condemnation of foreign habits and customs, once taken in its political context, reveals strong 'imperialist' undertones, translated often in a language that stresses the 'convertibility' of such barbarians to the ways of the Central States. They can be conquered because they are likely to accept and convert to the cultural norms prevailing in 'China.' When ethnographic tidbits emerge, with brief references to 'barbarian' customs, this is usually to make a philosophical point that does not concern the foreigners themselves, but serves for instance to emphasise the need for proper rituals, or the reasons used by a given ruler to introduce innovations. A classical example of this is the passage in the *Zhanguo ce* (*Intrigues of the Warring States*) in which King Wuling (r. 325–299 BCE) of the state of Zhao argues for the adoption of cavalry and nomadic ("*hu*") clothing. This is one case in which I believe the term *hu* is not used as a generic term for 'barbarian' but with specific reference to the steppe nomads.[12] The passage, however, includes also references to other foreigners, those of Ouyue who cut their hair and tattoo their bodies, not to mention fastening their garments on the left, an impropriety with which many 'barbarians' are charged. The passage also mentions peoples from the "Great Wu" (whether they can be recognised as 'barbarians' or not is an open question) who had odd habits such as blackening their teeth, scarring their foreheads and wearing strange caps. All these mixed references are summoned to make a general point: the wise king knows how to "change with the times." Ethnographic elements we may find in sources before the *Shiji* are, then, found in contexts to which they are at best peripheral, and reduced to grist for political and philosophical mills. Thus, it seems that a discourse on 'barbarians' in pre-imperial China, on their habits, their possibility to be converted to Chinese ways, and innate difference, developed as a political argument, philosophical reflection, or even cultural pathology, but not as a form of historical *inquiry*.

This situation changed radically with Sima Qian's compilation of chapters on foreign peoples and lands, and it changed forever. In the Xiongnu chapter it is clear that we are discussing a specific people, and that cultural reflections are linked to the need to explain a phenomenon that has actual historical valence, imposing itself upon the consciousness of the Han with the same urgency with which Herodotus' Greeks perceived the Persians. The objective was to take what was known of the history ("traditions") of this people and to arrange it into a coherent

11 Slightly modified citation from PINES 2005, 83; *Gongyang zhuan* 19 (Cheng 15), 2297.

12 DI COSMO 2002, 134–8; PINES 2005, 78.

account. Was this an innocent or mechanical operation? Of course not, but the intentions of the historian, as far as we are able to detect them, are to be considered on two planes. One is surely his own intellectual vantage point as member of an intellectual elite steeped in Han culture and the philosophical views and literary conventions of his own time. Sima Qian, as is well known, was not averse to expressing his own opinions, and such 'judgments' are believed to have been proffered in both implicit and explicit ways. Yet no claims have been made, either in antiquity or in modern times, that he would make stories out of whole cloth. In this, a basic difference can be discerned between the reception of Herodotus, accused at times of being a fabulist and a liar, and that of Sima Qian.[13]

The second plane is the broader scope of his work as a historian, and the method that he applied to the object of his investigation. This is a method based on the presentation of a given person, event, or story by assembling the broadest range of available sources. Some of them are still extant, some are lost, and some are just not known. This method has the advantage of constructing a history that has a rigor and integrity of its own, and can be appreciated regardless of whether the historian has injected into it his own particular political preferences or cultural biases. The issue raised by his method is rather how Sima Qian collected his data and bridged the conceptual gap between inchoate and often legendary notions of a remote world of nomads roaming at the edges of the sinitic world and the actual history of a specific people. The Xiongnu are not mistaken for generic barbarians nor are they located simply at the far side of a moral spectrum in which the Chinese are supposedly occupying the other end. The Xiongnu are given an identity made of different layers of knowledge, some inherited but mostly never recorded before. The ethnographic inquiry that is part of this chapter includes detailed descriptions of their customs, social and military institutions, economic activities, and legal system. Most of the account, naturally, concerns the history of relations between the Xiongnu and Han China as rival empires.

I shall discuss here three aspects that in my view are especially relevant to Sima Qian's strategy of constructing a Xiongnu history. These are, in short: the 'genealogy' of the Xiongnu as a people, their ethnography (customs, language, lifestyle), and finally the declared and explicit motivations that inform Sima Qian's narrative. Pointing to Sima Qian's motives leads inevitably to a comparison with the ideological stance of his successor historian, Ban Gu. A comparison between the two highlights the existence of different degrees of proximity between the historian and the object of his investigation, and of different strategies of mediation of the space between the two. The higher density of statements and accounts that appear to originate from or refer directly to the history of the 'barbarian' in question bespeaks of a search for contents that is descriptive and ethnographic in nature. Contrariwise, the marked reliance on cultural forms that emanate from existing stereotypes and cultural paradigms of representation embedded in the intellectual *milieu* of the historian himself tends to widen the distance be-

13 On Herodotus's reputation, see, for instance, EVANS 1968.

tween the historical narrative and its object. Both elements exist in traditional Chinese historiography, and what this study suggests in the conclusion is that the history of the Xiongnu as established by Han historians may have formed the basis for the emergence of a historical discourse among the northern nomads.

Sima Qian presents the Xiongnu from the very first sentence as having been closely connected to China, through their progenitor, from the dawn of history. A relationship between Han and Xiongnu is thus established in a forceful way, namely, through a kinship that is as remote as it is legendary. A mythical ancestor of the Xiongnu, named Chunwei, is indicated as a person related by blood to the royal clan of the Xia dynasty. The origin of this legend cannot be established as we do not have any other form of corroboration. The purpose of it, however, can be manifold. For instance, we may conceive of it as a device to bring the Xiongnu into the 'fold' of Chinese history by establishing a beginning of their history that was traceable to a very remote antiquity. Or, the ancestry legend may give the history of the Xiongnu a certain added gravity. Whatever the prime source of the legend, in light of what we see as Sima Qian's own stated motivations (which I shall discuss below) the most likely explanation for its inclusion is Sima Qian's idea that the relations between China and the nomads (Han and Xiongnu) constituted a 'pattern' according to which they appear to be the two extremities of a pendulum-like historical motion. That remote relationship creates a fulcrum that gives unity to such a pattern.

In a subsequent section, based on identifiable historical sources, Sima Qian lists a series of names of ancient non-Chinese peoples understood to be all somehow related to the Xiongnu. A long commentarial tradition assumes that at least some of these names (Hunyu, Xianyun, Xunyu) were etymologically akin to the name "Xiongnu."[14] The problem is that non-etymologically related names, such as the Rong, Quan Rong, Rong-Di, Mo and others are also taken to be the ancestors of the Xiongnu, and listed in a series of episodes that contributed to the formation of the 'pre-Xiongnu' history of the Xiongnu. Some commentators have taken the use of 'archaising' names to be an attempt by Sima Qian to make the Xiongnu – doubtless an entirely new historical phenomenon as a unified steppe empire – into something familiar.[15] These were people who had existed for a long time, that the Chinese had confronted before, and whose threat to China was old and, therefore, not particularly threatening. The *reductio ad notum* was meant to neutralise the psychological impact produced by the scary occurrence of a nomadic empire, and make its military power appear less menacing.

Sima Qian attempted a reconstruction of a Xiongnu past by first identifying the Xiongnu as another version of the "northern barbarians" of old, and then summarising the past deeds of these peoples on the basis of available Chinese sources, mainly the *Chunqiu*, the *Zuozhuan*, the *Guoyu*, and the *Zhanguo ce*.[16] But

14 See the discussion in PRŮŠEK 1971, 18–26; see also the study in PULLEYBLANK 1983.

15 MAENCHEN-HELFEN 1961.

16 On authorship and textual history of these texts see the relevant entries in LOEWE 1993.

it is important not to dismiss the novelty of the construct. The criteria used by Sima Qian to select the 'barbarians' reputed to be Xiongnu predecessors were based on: (1) a generic assonance in the name, (2) the geographic location of these peoples (the north) and (3) an implicit cultural affinity based on their warlike behaviour. *Prima facie*, should we be tempted to ask ourselves whether the Xiongnu might have recognised in this genealogy a history that they could claim as their own, our curiosity would seem at the very least unproductive, given the firm Chinese textual basis, and the absence of any Xiongnu 'input' that might provide additional information. Yet the question is not entirely facetious. If there is no evidence to show that the Xiongnu recognised in terms such as Rong and Di their ancestors, then the conclusion is that the history of the Xiongnu written by Sima Qian for all practical purposes becomes the point of origin of the history of the northern nomads for both Chinese *and* nomads. Later nomads, for instance during the Tang dynasty, made explicit mention of a Xiongnu 'precedent' as part of a history to which they felt a close affinity if not direct kinship. A statement that can be regarded as 'diagnostic' with respect to the Xiongnu sense of their own history appears at the very beginning of the chapter:

> From Chunwei to Touman for over a thousand years, whether at times numerous, or at other times small in numbers, [the Xiongnu] have been split and scattered and have been divided. So it was as time went on, and their genealogical traditions (*shi zhuan*) could not be obtained and put in order. However when it came to Modun the Xiongnu were extremely strong and numerous, fully subjugated the northern barbarians (*yi*), and in the south became an enemy state of China. Only then could their genealogical traditions and the titles of the state officials be obtained and recorded.[17]

The history of the Xiongnu as a people begins with Touman, father of the founder of the Xiongnu state and empire Modun. Because the Xiongnu were a confederation of sundry peoples and tribes, it is entirely possible that their beginning as an 'imperial' nomadic state was marked by the creation of the foundation myth, taken by Sima Qian as the ascertainable starting point of their history. In this sense, we may recall the use of the term *origo* in Latin sources, as beginning and history.[18] This consideration introduces us to a question foreshadowed in our previous point on the 'sources' used by Sima Qian, namely, where does the account of the foundation myth of the Xiongnu empire come from? This question relates closely to a larger one: is there a specific Xiongnu voice, in the form of oral accounts, legends, speeches or other material recorded directly or indirectly by Sima Qian? For the time being, I shall limit this question to the analysis of the story of the rise of Modun and of its attendant legendary or epic elements. In a nutshell, the story recounts the adventures of Modun, who as a boy was feared by his father (then a tribal leader) and sent as a hostage to another tribe. In order to have the boy and possible future challenger eliminated, the father attacked the tribe, sure that they would take their revenge by killing his hostage son. The son, however,

17 *Shiji*, 2890.

18 Cf. WOLFRAM 1994.

was a clever boy, and managed to escape and come back home. In a few years he formed his own military bodyguard, trained to blind obedience, in preparation to overthrow his father. To accomplish his 'coup' he conditioned his soldiers by first ordering them to shoot his favourite horse, and killing those who refused to obey. Then he asked them to shoot his favourite wife, again executing those who hesitated. When he ordered the remaining warriors to shoot his own father no one failed to release his arrows.

This account seems on the surface quite different from the songs of heroic *gesta* as they appear in the Chinese tradition, where such feats are found in lyrical hymns and poems, often in the words of the hero himself.[19] It has also been noted that early Chinese historiography, and especially the *Shiji*, lacks the epic elements common in ancient Western historiography.[20] The story of Modun, on the other hand, diverges substantially from more common narrative schemes of heroic feats in the *Shiji* and contemporary Han works, which carry strong ethical and lyrical elements. There is nothing here that lends itself to a moralistic interpretation, as the story is one of betrayal, revenge, and definitely 'unfilial' behaviour, for which the hero is rewarded! However, in structure and content the tale shows a close resemblance to the foundation myths of other 'steppe empires' created to the north of China, including the Türk, Mongol and Manchu. In these stories the founder-to-be is identified as someone either of supernatural birth or "born with a heavenly destiny," who has to go through a series of tests as a young man before achieving military pre-eminence and establishing a new social order that allows him to impose his 'supratribal' authority.[21] In the case of Modun the tests have to do first of all with his survival as a boy, then with his revenge against his father, and finally with his struggle against other tribes. One might object that producing a portrait of the Xiongnu leader that was not particularly endearing (uxoricide and parricide being particularly worthy of censure) could mean that the story was concocted in a Chinese cultural *milieu* to make the Xiongnu chieftain appear as a true-to-form, dyed-in-the-wool barbarian. In the realm of hypotheses, this could certainly be the case, but if we compare the rise of Modun with the story of, for instance, Chinggis Khan's rise to power, we see that an autochthonous origin is not only plausible, but more persuasive than a Chinese one. The "Secret History of the Mongols," an authentically Mongolian literary document based on oral precedents, contains a number of unpalatable episodes relative to the rise of Chinggis Khan, such as allowing his wife to be abducted by his enemies or killing in cold blood his own half-brother.[22] If we take this as a valid analogy for the Xiongnu foundation myth, one that has greater weight than the attribution of unstated prejudices to Sima Qian, then we can postulate that the legend came from

19 KERN 2005, 65.

20 PRŮŠEK 1963. See also SHANKMAN –DURRANT 2000, 104–5.

21 On the concept of supratribal leadership cf. FLETCHER 1986.

22 See DE RACHEWILTZ 2004.

the Xiongnu through oral transmission, and was collected by Sima Qian from a contemporary source.

It is not impossible, however, that the creation of the legend itself, which has to be placed after the time when the events narrated occurred (between 220 and 209 BCE), was immune from influences circulating in a Chinese *milieu*. For instance, the story of the bodyguard training has some similarity with the story of Sunzi's attempt to train a king's concubines as bodyguards.[23] Sunzi wanted to execute those who did not obey his orders, or responded to his threats with impertinent giggles, but the king prevented him from going ahead with such extreme measures. Whether one could see a similarity in the kind of discipline imposed in this type of training, such a similarity does not constitute an element strong enough to establish the Xiongnu story as a calque or as an adapted version of the Chinese story. The most likely solution is that, no matter how it came into existence, the legend became the Xiongnu royal clan's foundation myth, and as such it must have been known to the Xiongnu in oral form. The appearance of this story in Sima Qian's work should not give rise to concerns about proper transmission, given that only about 60 years separated those events from Sima Qian's own birth, and it is unlikely that the narration underwent much modification during this short time. Moreover, contacts with Xiongnu people were sufficiently frequent at every level that we do not need to unduly stretch our imagination to assume that Sima Qian could rely on several 'informants' such as the 'assistant' of the explorer Zhang Qian, a Xiongnu by the name of Kan Fu, or the Xiongnu nobleman Jin Midi, who lived as a hostage at the Han court and whose short biography can be found in the *Hanshu*.[24]

Still, it is true that Sima Qian does not inform us on how he obtained knowledge of the legend. Unlike Herodotus' *Histories*, in which stories regarding foreign peoples are introduced by attributing them to the peoples themselves (and whether the source was real or fictitious is irrelevant here), Sima Qian does not 'interrogate' the Xiongnu.[25] As he says in the sentence quoted above, it is because the Xiongnu have become united and strong, and therefore have established a royal lineage, that their traditions have become known to the Chinese. He reports Modun's foundation story as yet another "tradition" that he has collected, and the source might well be the Xiongnu themselves. The implication is that we probably see here one of the very few examples of an Inner Asian 'tradition' that is reported in the *Shiji*.

The ethnographic inquiry into the Xiongnu, our second theme of 'intentionality,' is subject to the same complications that we have seen in the 'genealogical'

23 SAWYER 1993, 151–3.

24 *Hanshu* 68, 2959–67.

25 The question of barbarian speech in Herodotus is discussed in MUNSON 2005. The treatment of the Xiongnu language by Sima Qian, which I discuss briefly below, is more terse and sparse than in Herodotus, although it is clear, as in the case of Herodotus (MUNSON 2005, 3–4) that the barbarians with whom the Chinese interacted did not speak Chinese, even though language barriers were regularly overcome.

account. We find here elements adapted from a Chinese literary tradition, elements that cannot but come from direct sources such as informants or Sima Qian's own observation, and elements of comparison between Han and Xiongnu that reflect sensibilities that Sima Qian shared with a broader Han intelligentsia. The collective result of these elements is an ethnographic picture that makes the Xiongnu into full-blooded historical agents, not just or simply into a negative 'mirror' of Chinese virtues. The same picture shows them as members of a 'barbarian' universe that continues to constitute a moral *alter ego* to the Han, but the 'negativity' represented by the Xiongnu customs is now based on descriptive and empirically documented data whose collection precedes the intellectual act of comparing and upon which the logic of cultural contrast is built. In other words, the description of the Xiongnu does not emerge from what is missing in their culture from a Han viewpoint, or on the basis of pre-existing assumptions of what barbarians should look like. It is built on the basis of what they actually do. Were this not the case, it would be impossible to explain the extent and the depth of information amassed in this chapter.

Especially relevant for us is the detailed description of the nomadic lifestyle. The pastoral economy in which the Xiongnu, like all steppe nomads, engaged, is described in terms that are taken today as simple tropes, such as the passage which says that "they move about according to the availability of water and pasture, have no walled towns or fixed residences, nor any agricultural activities, but each of them has a portion of land."[26] But, in Sima Qian's time, there was no such conventional way of referring to nomads. Sima Qian's description provides the first written indication that the Chinese understood the seasonal regularity of the movement of herds of the nomadic economy. Moreover, the list of animals used by the Xiongnu is also quite specific, and includes a series of names of equines whose technical meaning eludes us but indicates the extent of Sima Qian's zoological knowledge.[27] The list conforms to the five classes of domestic animals that traditionally form the wealth of steppe pastoralism: horses, cows, sheep, goats, and camels.

The phrase "each of them has a portion of land" presents also a point of interest. We do not know whether the reference to land rights applies here to individual nomads or to families and clans. It can be interpreted, however, as meaning that the Xiongnu recognised certain individual or family rights over the use of pastures, even though the land was not fenced and could not be purchased or sold. This description is perfectly consistent with the lineage-based customary land rights that existed in traditional pastoral societies. The actuality and accuracy of these few sentences, confirmed by anthropological and historical research, implies a gigantic leap in the historian's ability to relate to foreign peoples. Not only there is no comparable example in Chinese texts prior to Sima Qian, but it would be dif-

26 *Shiji*, 110, 2879; cf. WATSON 1993, 2, 129.

27 On these animals see EGAMI 1951.

ficult to find a similar level of technical precision even in Greek and Roman historiography.

More direct observations relate to military training, the nomads' way of fighting, state rituals and sacrifices, and Xiongnu technical terms. The Xiongnu military superiority, at least in the use of cavalry, was evident to all Chinese, such as the statesman Chao Cuo.[28] But whereas Chao Cuo and other theorists were interested in finding ways to counter the Xiongnu on the battlefield, Sima Qian appears to be more interested in finding the reasons for their strength, as we can see from this statement:

> As children they are able to ride sheep, and can shoot birds and mice with bow and arrow. As they grow a little older, they can shoot foxes and hares, which they use for food. Thus as adults they are strong enough to bend a bow, and all can serve as cavalry soldiers. It is their custom to make their living in times of peace by herding the domestic animals and hunting the wild ones, but in critical situations everyone practices military skills in order to set off on raids. This is their inborn nature.[29]

It was truly their way of life, intimately connected with animals, whether they rode, herded, or hunted them, that produced exceptional mounted warriors. The expression "this is their inborn nature" (*qi tian xing ye*) can be related to the pre-imperial debates on the "changeability" of foreign peoples. The Xiongnu, if they were so different by "inborn nature" were not going to be changed, but this consideration is not stated as a primary concern by Sima Qian.[30] The context in which it is made explains why they appear to be different, rather than why they cannot be changed. The nomads were not endowed with special powers, but followed what was to them a natural behaviour, born out of their lifestyle and life necessities. Sima Qian brings their superior military skills onto a plane of rational understanding by clarifying, step by step, the essence of nomadic military training, and how this was the result of a different, but nonetheless 'natural,' process due to the specifics of their society and economy. Riding and shooting were, we might say, second nature to them.

On more specialised military matters, such as armament and tactics, the narrative is matter-of-fact: "they use bows and arrows as their long-range weapons, and swords and spears as their short-range weapons."[31] Yet there are passages reminiscent of older tropes.

> At the beginning of a [military] enterprise, they observe the stars and the moon; if the moon is rising they attack, if it is waning they retreat... They are skilled in the use of troops that lure the enemy into an ambush. As they see the enemy they look for booty, [behaving] like a flock

28 For a translation of Chao Cuo's memorial and comments on its military implications see NEEDHAM et al. 1994, 123–5.

29 *Shiji* 110, 2879; cf. WATSON 1993, 2, 129

30 I would like to thank Prof. Paul Goldin for allowing me to see an unpublished essay of his on this topic. While I hold a somewhat different view, I find Prof. Goldin's discussion on the 'nature' of the Xiongnu (and other barbarians) insightful and provocative, especially from a philosophical standpoint.

31 *Shiji* 110, 2879.

> of birds. When they meet with hardship and defeat, they disintegrate and scatter like clouds. Those who bring back from battle the body of a dead [Xiongnu] gain complete possession of the dead man's household and properties.[32]

The analogy with beasts and birds ultimately goes back to the pre-Han classics, and here we find again a link with the Rong and Di peoples. These archaising references were probably common in Sima Qian's age. In the memorial presented by Zhufu Yan to the emperor Wudi, for instance, it is said that the minister Li Si reprimanded Qin Shi Huangdi for invading the nomadic territories in the Ordos because "the Xiongnu have no fixed cities or forts and no stores of provisions or grain. They move from place to place like flocks of birds and are just as difficult to catch and control."[33] The same memorial also reported that: "it is the nature of the Xiongnu to swarm together like so many beasts, and to disperse again like a flock of birds. Trying to catch them is like grabbing a shadow."[34] Similarly redolent of older tropes is Sima Qian's description of the nomads' behaviour in battle:

> During a battle, if this is going well for them, they will advance, otherwise they will retreat. They do not regard running away as something shameful; they only care about *li* (profit) and do not know of *li* (propriety) and *yi* (righteousness)...[35]

> When they fight in battle, those who have cut [enemy] heads or captured prisoners are presented with a cup of wine, and all the booty they have taken is also given to them; the people they capture are made into slaves. Therefore, in battle each man pursues his own gain.[36]

The Xiongnu behaviour has parallels, for instance, in the *Zuozhuan* statement that the Di are not ashamed of running away.[37] As shameful and reprehensible as such a conduct undoubtedly was in Chinese eyes, and although the emphasis on greediness is directly related to an inherited *cliché*, the description appears to convey more a prejudice of Sima Qian's own age than a 'classical' influence. Or, rather, we may speak of a manner of representation that reflected contemporary Han sensibilities about the Xiongnu, engendered by, rather than being derived from, a sense of indebtedness to or dependency upon classical stereotypes. The Xiongnu had rules of war different from those of the Han, and Sima Qian's reproach can be compared to the sentiments of blame or even horror expressed by Greeks and Romans when describing the fighting methods of the steppe nomads or other culturally different enemies.[38] Yet in classical descriptions of alien ways of warfare the moral condemnation is not there to deny the reality of it, but rather to underscore its cultural distance.[39] Hence, there is in Sima Qian a balance in moral

32 *Shiji* 110, 2892; cf. WATSON 1993, 2, 137
33 *Shiji* 112, 2954; cf. WATSON 1993, 2, 194.
34 *Shiji* 112, 2955 cf. WATSON 1993, 2, 195.
35 *Shiji* 110, 2879; cf. WATSON 1993, 2, 129.
36 *Shiji* 110, 2892; cf. WATSON 1993, 2, 137.
37 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, 1, 322.
38 SINOR 1978.
39 A good example of this is the description of the "Scythians" (that is, nomadic warriors) in Maurice's *Strategikon*, where it is said that "[t]hey are very superstitious, treacherous, foul, faithless, possessed by an insatiate desire for riches." See DENNIS 1984, 116.

judgments that is allowed by his independent and highly personal moral standpoint. He can criticise Han and Xiongnu ways based on the knowledge and experience he has of both societies, and which he conveys with an unmistakable ring of authenticity.

More information is provided on state rituals and sacrifices, whose description is, on the surface, completely 'value free.'

> At dawn the *chanyu* leaves his camp and makes obeisance to the sun as it rises, and in the evening he makes a similar obeisance to the moon... When they sit the place of honour is on the left side, toward the north. The *wu* and *ji* days [i.e., the fifth and sixth of the ten-day week] are their favourite ones... Every year in the first month the important people hold a restricted meeting at the *chanyu*'s court, and perform sacrifices. In the fifth month they have a large gathering at Longcheng, where they sacrifice to the ancestors, Heaven and Earth, and to their divinities. In autumn, when the horses are fat, they hold a large meeting in which they encircle a forest (*dai lin*)[40] and calculate the number of people and livestock.[41]

In many ways, these rituals are reminiscent of Chinese ceremonies.[42] The Xiongnu used a calendar based on the ten heavenly stems; they worshipped Heaven, the ancestors, and their deities on the *wu* (fifth stem) and *ji* (sixth stem) days.[43] The similarities raise the question of whether the Xiongnu were borrowing from the Chinese tradition of rulership, thus acquiring Han symbols of sovereignty into their political and religious system, such as the calendar.[44] Did Sima Qian imply that the Xiongnu were in some ways being 'sinicised' by conforming to rituals of sovereignty that had currency among the Han? Whether this passage could be read in such a way can only be speculated upon, but in any case it remains remarkably free from moral judgments, and some form of cultural subordination, if intended, is not made explicit.

Finally, the *Shiji* reports an unprecedented number of Xiongnu words. To be sure, these are relatively few, and do not provide conclusive evidence of the type of language actually spoken by the nomads.[45] Nonetheless, incorporating Xiongnu words represents a new level of sophistication that dwarfs any linguistic information in works prior to the *Shiji*.

Sima Qian reports words that belong to different classes. Titles are the most common, such as "queen" (*yanzhi*) or the various "kings" at the court of the

40 *Shiji* 110, 2893.

41 *Shiji* 110, 2892; cf. WATSON 1993, 2, 137.

42 On the religion of the Xiongnu, see XIE 1971. Information on the rituals and sacrifices mentioned in the foregoing passages is also summarised in DE CRESPIGNY 1984, 507–8 n. 15.

43 On this see CHEN 1989, 62–70.

44 On the development and use of the calendar among ancient Turco-Mongol peoples, see BAZIN 1991.

45 The possible etymology of Xiongnu words is discussed in the following works: BENZING 1985; PULLEYBLANK 1962; DOERFER 1973; MAENCHEN-HELFEN 1973, 372–3; PRITSAK 1976; BAILEY 1985, 25–41.

*chanyu* [the "emperor"].[46] The most numerous are 'cultural' words, that is, terms specific to a given culture that do not have an exact homologue in the language of reference. Hence, we find a number of words that clearly refer to the Xiongnu material culture: "boot" (*suoduo*), "wagon" (*fenwen*), "bag" or "basket" (*jiadou*), "dagger" (*jinglu*), "tent" or "yurt" (*qionglu*), fermented milk or "*kumiss*" (*luo*), another type of fermented mare's milk called *tihu*, "dried curd" (*mili*), and "fat" or "butter" (*su*).

Again, recording these words reflects a degree of attention towards the 'cultural phenomenon' of the Xiongnu that renders their history all the more compelling. The alienness of the foreigners is demonstrated not by stressing their uncouthness or condemning their lack of civility (defined in Chinese terms) but by probing deeper into nomadic customs. The resulting comparison between the two civilisations does not have a foregone conclusion. One of the most intriguing passages is Sima Qian's description of Xiongnu laws and society in general. Xiongnu society appeared, when compared to the status-conscious Chinese, as a remarkably egalitarian one, with but little difference between common people and "aristocracy." The bulk of the information on laws comes to use in the form of a speech that Sima Qian attributed to the most famous defector to the Xiongnu, the eunuch-diplomat Zhonghang Shuo. While this person was known in Han society as an infamous turncoat and advocate for the Xiongnu, it is possible that the lengthy speech may have also been a disguise to present Sima Qian's own feelings and ideas.[47]

Regardless of whose ideas are reflected here, there is again a level of technical information that, judged on its own merits, adds important knowledge to our understanding of the Xiongnu. One sentence states:

> According to their [i.e., the Xiongnu] laws, those who draw the sword one foot [out of the scabbard] are sentenced to death; those who steal lose their properties; those guilty of minor offences are flogged, those guilty of major ones are sentenced to death. The longest period in jail does not exceed ten days; the imprisoned men in the whole country are very few.[48]

The speech also states that "they have no written language, and customary laws are only verbal." This simple, harsh but fair, and above all egalitarian and free existence compared favourably to the fastnesses of Han society and the draconian laws implemented under Han Wudi. I have suggested elsewhere that it is possible to detect a silent contrast with the Han legal system, openly criticised by Sima Qian in chapter 122.[49]

46 The word *wang*, usually translated as "king," was a common one in Han society and indicated a variety of peoples, including the *zhu-hou-wang*, the sons of the emperor, probably better translated as "princes," and other nobles.

47 An insightful extended study of the speech by Zhonghang Shuo, which however does not query the text from a perspective similar to mine is to be found in SCHABERG 1999.

48 *Shiji* 110, 2879; cf. WATSON 1993, 2, 137.

49 DI COSMO 2002, 274–6.

A deeper reflection about the positive sides of a nomadic society is found in Zhonghang Shuo's point-by-point rebuttal of the alleged superiority of Chinese ways. Here too a moral or philosophical point, such as the defence of alien ways as those that best fit the alien society in question, are not 'empty rhetoric' but based on a description of such ways that at the same time imports actual knowledge into Chinese society. Some of these are well known, such as the system of levirate according to which widows were married to the former husband's brother.[50] Zhonghang's defence of Xiongnu customs, then, is based on the demonstration that it makes sense for them to have rituals and customs so utterly different from the Han ones, and therefore cannot be regarded *ipso facto* as barbaric and inferior. The rejection of Han claims of superiority is based on an argument fairly common in Chinese political thought. Associated most closely with the school of thought of Mozi, the argument essentially denies that certain rituals should be inherently superior to others, and speaks for the relative validity of all rituals within the bounds of the society from which they emanate.[51]

While Zhonghang Shuo (or Sima Qian) was providing rhetorical 'ammunition' to the Xiongnu to counteract Han diplomatic claims, his exhortation to resist the corrupting influence of Chinese material goods is couched in terms that do not appear to belong to the Han debate. Instead, this is a *topos* that can be found in the debates within the body politic of a number of Inner Asian dynasties. It is a portion of the nomadic tribal elite, typically, that fears the mollification of the 'martial spirit' of their people by luxury and (in some cases) religion and strives to preserve the ancestral virtues. Examples of such political rifts can be seen in the Orkhon inscriptions of the early Turks, in the struggle between Khitan emperors and their tribal constituencies, in the court debates of the Jin (Jurchen) dynasty, in the civil war among Mongols between Qubilai Khan and his brother Arig Böke, just to mention a few. It is, in other words, more likely that Zhonghang Shuo's speech may reflect an actual concern held by a faction of Xiongnu leaders who opposed the 'conversion' to a 'lifestyle' felt to be antithetic to their true nature. When Zhonghang says, "Now, the *chanyu* [the Xiongnu emperor] changes the custom and is fond of things from the Han,"[52] he appears to be taking part in an inter-Xiongnu debate and to be voicing the concerns of a Xiongnu party that chastised a real or perceived cultural transformation. This forces us to consider this part of the speech as a window on Xiongnu political debates and internal conflicts within their political elite, which could hardly have been invented by Sima Qian.

Let us now move to our last question, namely, the reasons why Sima Qian decided to write an account of the Xiongnu, explained in his own terms. Within the structure of the *Records* the explicit voice of the historian is preserved in the brief passages at the end of each chapter, introduced by the formula "His Honour the

50 The spread of levirate among Inner Asian nomads, while it was certainly practiced, remains a controversial issue; WITTFOGEL – FENG 1949, 201 and 211.

51 See for example PINES 2005, 75–9. Pines offers an especially articulate discussion of views of "barbarians" in texts of the Warring States period.

52 *Shiji* 110, 2899.

Grand Scribe says." In the Xiongnu chapter this is especially long, and it is worth quoting it in full:

> When Confucius wrote the *Chunqiu* he explained the events of the time between [Dukes] Yin and Huan, but when he reached the periods of [Dukes] Ding and Ai his writing was obscure. When he made the texts related to his own time and there was nothing to praise, it was [all] terms of taboo and avoidance. What ordinary people say about the Xiongnu suffers from their going after temporary influence and devoting themselves to flattering until their advice is accepted, so as to serve their biased opinions – do not consult those. Military commanders and leaders rely on China being large and big, and behave impetuously. The Ruler of all people takes advantage of it to make policy decisions. Therefore, the established merit is not profound. Although [the mythic emperor] Yao was worthy, the work that he undertook did not succeed, only when he obtained the help of Yu, were the Nine Provinces made peaceful. Moreover, if someone wishes to undertake the government of a sage, [success] lies solely in choosing and employing military and civil leaders! It lies solely in choosing and employing military and civil leaders![53]

A second passage is found in the 'table of contents' in chapter 130, where we read:

> From the time of the Three Dynasties the Xiongnu caused worry and harm to China. Wishing to know about their times of strength and weakness, and when preparations for defence or for punitive expeditions could be made, I wrote the 'Arrayed Traditions of the Xiongnu,' the fiftieth [of the Arrayed Traditions].[54]

In these two passages the historian expresses his opinions. The first has been interpreted as a hidden reference to the perils of speaking openly about matters of political import that referred to one's own time. Given that Sima Qian suffered his humiliating punishment (castration) for his refusal to condemn a general who had defected to the Xiongnu, it is entirely possible that he was lamenting here the impossibility of doing the historian's job properly and without risk of retaliation. The reference to Confucius, who insisted so much on the need for the historian to represent the truth free from political pressure, reinforces this interpretation. But it does not say much about the Xiongnu *per se*, except for hinting at this as a most politically sensitive issue.

The short but less cryptic line of the second passage assumes again the Xiongnu to be part of a long line of fiendish foes but, interestingly, it says that Sima Qian (or perhaps the Han, the Chinese text is unclear on this point) aimed to understand the cycles of greatness and weakness of the nomads in order to protect themselves against them or, conversely, attack and subdue them. This confirms our previous interpretation that the Xiongnu are understood by Sima Qian not just as another culture, or as the moral negative image of China, but as a historical phenomenon that merited study because it had risen to represent a part of the history of China itself. Likewise, to understand the treatment of the Xiongnu simply as a critique of an emperor and a society from which the historian felt alienated

53 *Shiji* 110, 2919.
54 *Shiji* 130, 3317.

would miss the essential point of what the nomads represented in the larger scheme of Chinese and universal history.

The *Shiji*, as we know, became the model for the subsequent dynastic histories, the first of which was the *Hanshu* (*History of the Former Han Dynasty*) by Ban Gu (32–92 CE). A comparison between the two accounts, however superficial, is illuminating as we attempt to assess the extent to which Sima Qian's historical model affected the historiography of the nomads in subsequent histories.

The *Hanshu* chapter repeats virtually verbatim Sima Qian's account of the Xiongnu and provides a supplementary narrative that takes it to the end of the Western (Former) Han dynasty. Ban Gu concentrates more on political and military relations between Han and Xiongnu, ending his account in 25 CE. In the "appreciation" or "*encomium*" (*zan*), that is, a series of personal remarks appended at the end of the chapter, Ban Gu explains his position. This text reveals fully the deep conceptual and political chasm between the two historians.

What matters most to Ban Gu is the politics of foreign relations, and in particular the methods that should be adopted by Han rulers and statesmen to deal with the Xiongnu. Ban Gu is far readier than Sima Qian to draw a sharp line between Xiongnu and Han and to explain the relationship between them in terms of an absolute and unbridgeable moral gap, which at the same time compounds and derives from geographical, cultural and historical differences. It is worth quoting the passage in full:

> When the kings of old measured the land, they placed the aristocratic domains in the centre, divided [the land] into nine provinces, arranged five districts, [fixed] the tribute of [each] land according to its products, and regulated the inside and outside. For some [lands] they adopted penal codes and governments, for others they called for the virtues of civilisation. This is because their power on the far and the near was different. Therefore the *Chunqiu* considers those who are inside the Xia and those who are outside the Yi and Di. The people of the Yi and Di are greedy and love gain; their hair is loose and they fold garments on the left; their faces are human but their hearts are beastly; with respect to the central States their ceremonial clothes are distinct, they have different customs, and their drinks and foods are not the same; their tongues cannot be understood. They dwell far away, in the cold, bare lands of the north, driving their herds before them in pursuit of pasture, and hunting with the bow and arrow in order to sustain themselves. They are separated [from us] by mountains and valleys, cut off by the desert. By these means did Heaven and Earth divide inner from outer. The Sage Kings treated them like birds and beasts, neither concluding treaties and oaths with them, nor going forth and attacking them. To conclude an alliance with them is to waste gifts and suffer deception. To attack them is to exhaust our armies and provoke raids. Their land cannot be cultivated so as to produce food; their people cannot be made subjects and tamed. For these reasons they are kept outside and not taken in, they are kept distant and not accepted as kin. Official exhortations do not reach their people; the official calendar is not observed in their land. When they come to court, we must admonish them and oversee their behaviour. When they draw away from us, we must be prepared and on our guard against them. If they are moved to admire righteousness and wish to present tribute to us, then we shall receive them with the appropriate rites. We must keep them under loose rein and not cut them off, allowing any

> wrongdoing to come from them. This is the constant way of the Sage Kings for regulating the Man and the Yi.[55]

Ban Gu makes the point that the Xiongnu are just like all other barbarians; they cannot be educated or civilised as they represent an utterly different human universe with which any compromise is futile, and contact is best avoided. Only when the barbarians draw close to China and come to submit are the Chinese to engage them with the proper rites and in a manner befitting their superior culture. Ban Gu's position cannot be fully appreciated without reference to historical events that happened towards the end of the dynasty, around 60 BCE, about a quarter century after Sima Qian's own life. At this time an internal war caused the Xiongnu to split into two separate and hostile forces. The southern Xiongnu, under Huhanye *chanyu*, chose to submit to the Han emperor, and were subsidised by the Han government through the "tribute" system. The northern Xiongnu, under Zhizhi *chanyu*, chose to stay independent and were eventually defeated by Chinese military forces. Zhizhi and Huhanye came to represent, in later times, two different types of Xiongnu, or steppe-nomads, who embodied two different types of engagements with China, one peaceful, the other violent (see also below). Ban Gu proposed that China reward the submissive and punish the rebellious, while at the same time remaining diffident of their intentions and ready to defend itself at any time as even the tame ones could easily revolt. Ban Gu's interest is not ethnographic but political, his approach appears to be dominated by the desire not to understand the Xiongnu but to seek a way in which they could be neutralised as a threat.

Sima Qian was not interested in whether the barbarians could be 'changed.' They probably were not changeable, but that mattered less to him than what made them into what they were. By documenting their way of life as well as their political and social organization, and of course their interaction with China, Sima Qian hoped to find the 'patterns' or laws of their behaviour. He probably appeared to his fellow Han scholars and statesmen a *philobarbaros* of sorts, who did not show much closeness to the philosophical tradition that stressed differences between barbarians and Chinese, while he appeared to defend the right of foreigners to keep to their own social customs. Even when sentiments of dislike for the Xiongnu emerge in Sima Qian's account, as in the remark that in battle the Xiongnu act in egoistic pursuit of individual gain, these comments are left floating on an otherwise culture-neutral surface, they are not developed into a political doctrine that exploited a sense of unbridgeable cultural difference as a rationale for military action.

For Ban Gu, instead, all that mattered was the unabashed affirmation of Chinese cultural superiority, which had to be put into practice by a show of military superiority that forced the barbarian to concede defeat and surrender or be destroyed. Ban Gu praised Han Wudi for having adopted military means to deal with the Xiongnu from a position of strength and thus make them bow to China's

55 *Hanshu* 94B, 3834.

might. Where Sima Qian was driven by an intellectual search to penetrate Xiongnu history and beliefs, avowedly in order to know what made the Xiongnu strong or weak, Ban Gu is only interested in how to deal with them politically and strategically. Hence, Ban Gu derails Sima Qian's intention to provide an account of a foreign culture based on their own "traditions" and re-states both a belief in Chinese superiority and a disinterest (and distaste) for the culture of other peoples. He has nothing new to learn about the Xiongnu because the past records provide all that one needs to know about them. In line with this ideological approach, Ban Gu strives to demonstrate, however, that the lessons of the past are applicable to the present. He finds in the notions of the "good barbarian" (to be educated and transformed) and of the "bad barbarian" (to be subjugated by force) a fitting representation of the two Xiongnu leaders who had dominated the political scene in the latter part of the Western Han dynasty. Huhanye is the barbarian who can be "tamed," Zhizhi is the barbarian who stays defiant and has to be "smitten."

The application of archaic models to historical figures who lived only a couple of generations before Ban Gu's writing provided a further rationalisation of the link between past and present and resolved the ominous notion of a Xiongnu cyclical rise to power presented by Sima Qian. If, like *yin* and *yang*, an alternation in pre-eminence between Han and Xiongnu was the way that capital-'H' History worked, this required that the Han emperor come to terms, at times, with a greater power, and accept equal or inferior status. Ban Gu thought that it was sufficient to be able to recognise the good and the bad barbarians in order to maintain a steady state of Chinese superiority, by rewarding the compliant and punishing the recalcitrant. He did not realise what Sima Qian had seen far more clearly, namely, that there were cycles in nomadic politics during which steppe nomads managed to form a tremendous unified challenge to China.

What Ban Gu did not (and probably could not) change was that the 'barbarians' had, with Sima Qian, acquired a rightful place in Chinese historiography; nor could he truly alter the manner in which the history of foreign people was written, hence he also included ethnographic, political, and anecdotal information. As we mentioned above, among the main elements of Sima Qian's 'ethnographic' method are the creation of 'ethnogenealogies' of specific foreign peoples, the description of their land and customs, and the attention to their political and military institutions. These elements were preserved and formed a model that later historians adopted, in both official and unofficial historiography.

Chinese historiography became, then, also the repository of Xiongnu history and culture, a well of information from where later nomads could draw historical precedents in which they could identify themselves, and that therefore nomadic empire builders could appropriate for internal and especially external political consumption. Such a hypothesis awaits demonstration and requires more extensive research into the history of later Turco-Mongol "steppe" empires than this essay allows, but a few examples can be cited to show the direction in which it points us. A "Xiongnu" *topos* can be seen at almost every turn when northern peoples came to occupy a position of power against China, founded their own dynasties, invaded China or entertained diplomatic relations with Chinese empe-

rors.[56] For instance, the Tang dynasty's northern foes, Turks and Uighurs, were often compared with Xiongnu leaders, and the discussions of foreign policy based on historical precedents. A Tang statesman explicitly referred to the late Western Han Xiongnu leaders Zhizhi and Huhanye and to their fate, adding: "The Four Yi [barbarians] and hundred Man [barbarians] should use this as a mirror [to correct their behaviour]."[57] It is intriguing to find that historical precedents were not simply to be a "mirror" for Chinese intellectuals and statesmen to determine what to do in the present. They could also be used to educate the barbarians and make them realise the right course of action. Chinese historiography was to be used not just by the Chinese, but also by those foreigners who might be improved by exposure to the knowledge it preserved.

Inner Asian leaders, however, showed ingenuity and creativity in manipulating China's historical record. For instance, the Kirghiz leaders of the Later Tang dynasty (an Inner Asian nomadic state based in northern Mongolia, 923-936 CE) claimed descent from the Han general Li Ling (d. 74 BCE), the Chinese general that Sima Qian had defended from the accusation of cowardliness and treachery who had spent the last 20 years of his life among the Xiongnu. Given that the surname of the Tang imperial house was Li, this meant that the Kirghiz *kaghan* was a blood relative of the Chinese emperor.[58] The implications on the diplomatic side were clear: they were both of the same stock and any attempt by the Tang court to assert themselves as superior to the Kirghiz had to take that into account. In this reasoning one can detect the influence of Sima Qian's architecture of Xiongnu history, which established a genealogical link between the House of Xia and the mythical progenitor of the Xiongnu.

After the Han all major dynasties of northern non-Han origin were entitled to their own dynastic history like legitimate 'Chinese' dynasties even though culturally alien. The last dynasty, the Qing, was founded by the Manchus, a people whose political claims as legitimate rulers of China and construction of a system of government able to rule China were inspired largely by the precedents established by earlier 'barbarian' dynasties and transmitted through China's official historiography. The translation into Manchu of the dynastic histories of the Liao, Jin and Yuan dynasties, respectively founded by the Khitan, Jurchen and Mongol peoples, was an unmistakable act of deference to a historiography that could be claimed on both sides of the 'great wall' and functioned as a repository of 'national' histories beyond the confines of China.[59]

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56 On *topoi* related to nomads and to the Xiongnu in particular see DROMPP 1987; HONEY 1990.
57 DROMPP 2005, 285.
58 *Xin Tang Thu* 217b, 6147.
59 On this issue see ELLIOTT 2005, 48-59..

Why did Sima Qian strive to provide an accurate description of the Xiongnu, enriched by knowledge that could have only come from close observation of their habits and society? The answer to this question, possibly, lies in the quality of Sima Qian's 'alterity.' He attempted to 'explain' and rationalise the Xiongnu as a phenomenon fully consistent with Chinese 'universal' history by linking them with archaic 'barbarians.' At the same time, he brought into his narrative, implicitly, traditions that emanated from the Xiongnu themselves. His account goes beyond the history of the relations between Han and Xiongnu and of the way in which the Chinese were attempting to rationalise a political and military threat. Sima Qian's inclusion of foreign peoples in the grand scheme of the *Shiji* transformed the ways in which Chinese historians construed their relationship with alien peoples and with the steppe nomads in particular. On the one hand, we can say that the monograph of the Xiongnu simply introduced into Chinese historiography a manner of ethnographic enquiry justified by the prominence achieved by the Xiongnu during the Han dynasty. On another level, it validated their historical prominence by inscribing the phenomenon of the northern barbarians in a cyclical notion of history in which northern (nomads) and southern (Chinese) peoples were destined to achieve alternate moments of greatness. The purpose of Sima Qian's study was to make sense of this "cosmic" and universal truth as one of the great themes of Chinese history, not to civilise or otherwise change the barbarians but to understand the universal laws that determined their participation in the events of history.

For Ban Gu the history of the Xiongnu was meant to confirm ancient views about 'barbarians,' transmitted by the oldest authorities. Through a process of synthesis and amalgamation of pre-Han theories about both the "changeability" of the barbarians by exposure to adequate education, and the ontological incompatibility between barbarians and Chinese, he created the dual paradigm of the bad and good Xiongnu, the die-hard enemy and the one that could be tamed (or at least corrupted). Still, Ban Gu does not seem to entertain any illusion that barbarians could be permanently changed. Their nature was such that they could always revert to their old unpalatable ways and therefore China had to be constantly on guard against them. In Ban Gu there is no desire nor need to penetrate further into the culture of these people or to understand their social and political systems.

The two modes of historical representation of foreigners, one that we may call 'ethnographic' the other 'culturalist' – I am ambivalent about these terms but they occur in the sinological literature – form the two dominant modes in which accounts of foreign peoples appear in Chinese historiography. Later accounts both in structure and content are inspired by these earlier models, partly because they constitute the historiographic orthodoxy, partly because they allowed sufficient latitude to include a variety of points of view without veering away too much from the original model.

These narrative accounts, however, also contained materials into which foreigners could tap to produce their own 'national' or dynastic history, or to manipulate the historical record to their own advantage. While preserving also their

own *ethnic* identity, empire builders such as Turks, Khitans, Jurchens, Mongols and Manchus recognised a *historical* kinship with other non-Chinese Inner Asian empires, and used the fictive genealogies and cultural models found in Chinese histories to bolster their claims to imperial dignity. Chinese historio-graphy became a powerful means to transmit an imperial tradition, going back to the Xiongnu, that competed militarily, politically, and culturally with China until 1911.

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