

HSIUNG-NU ECONOMIC HISTORY – Trade

Overview Although contemporary historical sources are silent on this subject, it is quite likely that trade between the nomadic Hsiung-nu and the sedentary Chinese had been conducted at a private level for many years. However, with the establishment of their empire Hsiung-nu trade expanded and became more complex, forming an integral element of their empire. Broadly speaking, Hsiung-nu trade was conducted in two main areas, with China to the south and with the oasis communities that ringed the Tarim Basin to the west.

Trade with China

The Hsiung-nu acquired commodities from their powerful neighbor to the south through several methods. Some luxury goods and foodstuffs, primarily for the *shan-yü's* court or for distribution as prestige gifts to the nobles, were acquired through the *ho-ch'in* (和親 pinyin *heqin*) system of marriage alliance. These treaties not only provided royal Chinese brides for the Hsiung-nu ruler, but also included an annual tribute in exchange for peace on the borders.

Beginning in 200 BCE and continuing well into the second half of the 1st century BCE, the *ho-ch'in* peace agreements made by the Han Dynasty at their maximum provided an annual tribute of approximately 2800 bushels of wheat, almost 20,00 liters of wine, over 92,000 meters of silk, and relatively small quantities of assorted luxury goods. While the quantities of wheat and wine were merely sufficient for the needs of the *shan-yü's* court, and the various luxury goods were intended as gifts for the *shan-yü* from the Han, the quantities of silk provided to the Hsiung-nu could be redistributed to nobles and tribal leaders or traded in other locations.

While tribute from China might suffice to meet the demands of the *shan-yü*, his court and the elite of the empire, the demand for Chinese goods by ordinary tribesmen could only be met by raiding or regular border trade. Booty raids could be extremely profitable, but regular trade at border markets was more reliable; as a result, the Hsiung-nu (and occasionally with local Chinese support) pressured Han rulers to open border markets. The Han, however, were somewhat suspicious of cross-border trade fearing both the drain of Chinese resources and that the Hsiung-nu could acquire militarily valuable goods such as iron and weapons.

Despite these reservations, in the reign of the Han emperor Wen Ti (r. 180-157 BCE) officially sponsored border markets were opened on a large-scale. The Hsiung-nu were now able to acquire Chinese foodstuffs, prestige goods, and other goods more readily, and the Chinese purchased horses and other animals for transport, furs, carpets and precious stones. Despite the Chinese ban on trade in iron and weapons with the Hsiung-nu, smuggling was widespread and the Hsiung-nu were able to obtain these restricted goods with relative ease. The end results of both the *ho-ch'in* treaties and the border markets was that the Han gained a degree of influence in developments on the other side of the border and that, in spite of the occasional violence, corruption, deceit and smuggling that accompanied the cross-border trade, the Hsiung-nu and the Han Chinese developed a degree of mutual reliance in this period. However, when the Han were able to engage the Hsiung-nu militarily in the latter half of the 2nd century BCE, one of their first moves was to end cross-border trade.

Trade with the Tarim Basin

Under the leadership of Motun Shan-yü (r. 209-174 BCE) the Hsiung-nu gained control over twenty-six city-states in Kansu and Sinkiang first by inflicting a major defeat on the Han at the Battle of Baideng (白登之戰) in 200 BCE, and then destroying the Yüeh-chih (月氏 pinyin *Yuezhi*), a nomadic pastoral people who inhabited the grasslands of western Kansu, in 175 BCE. These conquests not only gave the Hsiung-nu control over the lucrative trade routes that passed through these regions, but also allowed the Hsiung-nu to collect tribute in goods from these oasis city-states. Rich silk, wool, linen and cotton textiles; metalwork; grapes; alfalfa; jade and other precious stones were collected and then traded to the Chinese at border markets or distributed among the Hsiung-nu elite and tribal leaders as gifts. The

fact that the Han worked to take control of this trade before they attempted to take political control of the region underscores the importance of this trade to the Hsiung-nu.

Trade with Other Peoples

Other than China and the western regions of the Tarim Basin, southern Siberia was the only other region that provided anything of commercial value to the Hsiung-nu. Siberian tribes under Hsiung-nu domination provided tribute in the form of furs that could be traded with China.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the links between trade and politics in the cross-border trade between the Hsiung-nu empire and Han China?
2. Despite their need for certain products of the steppe regions, why was China hesitant to establish formal border markets for trade with the Hsiung-nu?
3. What were the advantages and disadvantages of this cross-border trade for the Chinese and for the Hsiung-nu?

Readings

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