

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

HSIUNG-NU POLITICAL HISTORY - Government

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Overview The Hsiung-nu (匈奴, written *Xiōngnú* in the pinyin romanization system) were a pastoral nomadic people originally based in the Ordos region in the large northern loop of the Yellow River who dominated the eastern Eurasian Steppe from the 3rd century BCE until the late 1st-early 2nd century CE. First mentioned in 318 BCE in Chinese sources from the Zhou Dynasty, the Hsiung-nu were defeated by general Meng T'ien of the Ch'in Dynasty in 215 BCE, and driven north of their homeland in the Yellow River valley which was subsequently fortified. Led into the region of the Mongolian Plateau by T'ou-man, their first known *shan-yü* (or *ch'an-yü*, 單于, pinyin *Chányú*, the title of the Hsiung-nu ruler), the Hsiung-nu were reunified under T'ou-man's son Mo-tun in 209 BCE. Mo-tun proceeded to expand Hsiung-nu territory by defeating neighboring peoples, and in 200 BCE defeated Gaozu, the first Han emperor. In 198 BCE Emperor Kao-tsu implemented the policy of *ho-ch'in*, the marrying of Chinese princesses with foreign rulers together with regular supplies of gifts and goods, in exchange for peace. In addition, the lands in the Ordos beyond the Ch'in defensive walls were returned to the Hsiung-nu. In the following years the Hsiung-nu would state became a confederacy of tribes in the eastern steppe zone. The arrangement with the Han continued to 134 BCE when hostilities between the Han and the Hsiung-nu resumed, resulting in the Hsiung-nu being driven north of the Gobi Desert in 121 and 119 BCE.

Governmental Organization

According to the *Shih chi*, a Han dynasty history from the 1st century BCE, the Hsiung-nu government was a three-level hierarchy:

a. The *shan-yü*, the *T'u-ch'i* ("wise") Kings of the Left and the Right, the *Lu-li* kings of the left and right, the generals of the left and right, the commandants of the left and right, the left and right household administrators and the *Ku-tu* marquises of the left and right. This class of officials administered the empire as a whole with the *shan-yü* being the single point of contact between the Hsiung-nu empire and the Han government, both in war and negotiations.

b. Twenty-four leaders, usually imperial governors, with the title "Ten Thousand Horsemen", a reference to the number of cavalry soldiers they were supposed to have under their command. They were almost always either members of the Hsiung-nu aristocracy, or relatives of the *shan-yü*. Despite their title, only the most important officials actually commanded ten thousand men; less important members of this class might command only a few thousand men.

c. A group of various indigenous leaders and officials (vassal kings, tribal leaders, advisors, commanders, etc.) of unknown number based in their own territories.

Although the *shan-yü* was theoretically an absolute ruler, in reality tribal leaders remained relatively autonomous within the confederacy that constituted the Hsiung-nu empire. This flexibility contributed significantly to the Hsiung-nu's long dominance of the eastern Eurasian Steppe.

Policy

Internal policy of the Hsiung-nu was primarily aimed at maintaining the delicate balance of power that existed between the tribal leaders within the Hsiung-nu Empire and the *shan-yü* and his officials. Should a tribal leader become dissatisfied he had only three options: rebel, go south and seek refuge in China, or move west to lands beyond the *shan-yü*'s control. Any one of these actions could seriously impact the strength of the Hsiung-nu state.

External policy of the Hsiung-nu was concerned with two major issues: maintaining the physical security of their empire in the face of the much larger, wealthier and populous Han state; and maintaining its economic security. Security could be achieved through diplomacy alone, or through the use of military power followed by diplomacy. However, in order for the Hsiung-nu to counter the Han dynasty's larger armies, the Hsiung-nu needed to utilize classic nomadic tactics such as the feigned retreat and skillful employment of mounted archers, and their attacks had to be quick and hard-hitting in order to impress the Han with their military power. Impressing the Han with their military might also aided the Hsiung-nu in maintaining one of the most important elements in their state's economy – free trade in the border towns. Although annual tribute from the Han as agreed to in several treaties was symbolically important, and perhaps helped the *shan-yü* to maintain the loyalty of his closest nobles, the free movement of goods and products in both directions across the Hsiung-nu – Han border was vital for the economic health of the Hsiung-nu state.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. What was the relationship of the Xiongnu *shan-yü* to the other two tiers of government and what were the restrictions on the *shan-yü's* power?
2. What were the two main concerns of the Xiongnu rulers and how did they attempt to attain results favorable to their state?