

The Ethos of the Envoy and his Treatment by the Enemy in Han History

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Envoys that went back and forth in order to secure good interstate relations are an institution that is probably as old as Chinese civilization. At least, it seems plausible that they must have been important in the time from which our first traditionally transmitted written sources from China date, namely the beginning of the Zhou 周 dynasty (11th cent.–221 BC) when – at least according to the understanding of Chinese historiographers of later times – states had been established as fiefs that were governed by relatives and combatants of the Zhou family. We have ample evidence for the existence of an elaborated system of envoys from such convolutes as the *Guoyu* 國語, a collection of discourses from the Spring and Autumn Period (770–early 5th cent. BC), or the *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (“Strategies of the Warring States”) which cover several centuries of pre-imperial Chinese history. However, the main purpose of these texts is a rhetorical one: They do not want to write history but to give examples of well-done speeches containing devices that had proven successful in persuasions of rulers who in difficult matters of state were known to be reluctant to accept advice.¹

It is only with the Han 漢 (206 BC–220 AD), however, that we have historical accounts that relate to how and why Han envoys were sent to neighbouring states and also *vice versa* how and why these states sent envoys to the Han. Indeed, it can be said that this is the time when truly international relations were for the first time recorded in Chinese sources. In this paper I will concentrate on the material contained in the *Shiji* 史記 and the *Hanshu* 漢書 in order to elaborate on those envoys that we know a little bit more than just that they had been sent out. There is, for example, an account stating that several years after King Xiang 襄 of Zhou 周 (651–619 BC) had been driven away from the

1 See Britton 1935.

capital he sent an envoy to Duke Wen 文 of Jin 晉 to secure help from him – but we do not know much more than that this envoy was apparently successful and that Jin helped the Zhou to establish a new capital in Jin.² The next event that follows in the historical account of the *Shiji* is that the Eastern Hu 胡 barbarians several times sent messengers to the young chieftain Maodun 冒頓 of the Xiongnu 匈奴. But again, we do not learn much about the envoys themselves.³ The Han, too, sent an envoy to the Xiongnu in the beginning of the reign of Gaozu 高祖 (r. 206–195 BC) when they wanted to establish the famous policy of *heqin* 和親 – harmony through family relations.⁴ Not much more is said about this. Later we are informed about envoys delivering letters that apparently were sent back and forth.⁵

One should add here that very much like in the modern Chinese word for the ambassador the term used for “envoy” in Classical Chinese is *shi* 使, a word which is not only used as a noun but also as a verb meaning “to send”, “to employ” or “to let someone do something”. The term used for “sending an envoy” is thus *shi shi* 使使.

The first event from which we learn somewhat more about the reason for exchanging envoys between states in Han China is recorded in the biography of Lu Jia 陸賈. He was sent to the former Qin general Wei Tuo 尉佗 who had pacified Southern Yue 越 and then proclaimed himself as king over this territory. The Han emperor sent Lu Jia to Wei Tuo with the charge to hand over a seal to him, making him a King of Southern Yue officially. Wei Tuo remained unimpressed at first. He received Lu Jia in a most impolite way, his hair bound in the way barbarians used to wear it, his legs crossed. Lu Jia reprimanded him, telling him about the glory of the Han and the fact that the Han generals planned to send a punitive expedition to Southern Yue because Wei Tuo did not join in the campaign against Xiang Yu 項羽, the competitor of Gaozu 高祖. Yet, he said, since the Son of Heaven felt pity for the people who had suffered many hardships during the wars he had decided instead to send him to bestow a

2 *Shiji* 110.2882; *Hanshu* 94A.3746.

3 *Shiji* 110.2889; *Hanshu* 94A.2750.

4 *Shiji* 110.2894; *Hanshu* 94A.2754.

5 Yü Ying-shih (1967, 59) writes: “From the economic point of view, it is well known that the barbarians always took the tribute as a cloak for trade.” This article will show that this view is too simplistic.

king's seal on the King of Southern Yue, to split tallies with him and to exchange envoys or diplomats.⁶ To establish diplomatic relations is called *tongshi* 通使 in the texts, and this *tongshi* implies a certain kind of equality between the two parties involved. Maybe this is the message that Lu Jia wanted to convey to Wei Tuo: By accepting the Han seal he is still being treated as an equal. Maybe this is the reason why Wei Tuo in the end decided to take the seal and even nominally called himself a "servant" or "vassal" (*chen* 臣).

This is a pattern that we can observe until the times of Late Imperial China: During times in which the central government is not strong enough, an envoy is being sent who bestows a high-ranking title to a person who could otherwise hardly be controlled. This occurred frequently in the exchanges between the Qing court and its Central Asian neighbours in the eighteenth century. To some extent this holds true for official relations even today: Once you have accepted a honorary title or award, even though you may not be aware of it immediately, you get entangled in a whole web of dependencies and have already accepted the authority of the one who has the power to give you such an award.

It seems that the second step that is taken when the central government is slightly stronger but still cannot impose too much power on the other side is to press it to send delegations on a regular basis. These delegations are then seen as people who bring tribute. Several cases of this are mentioned in both the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* chapters on Ferghana, the most famous one involving the North-Western state of the nomadic Wusun 烏孫. This state came into contact with the Han after Zhang Qian 張遷 (d. 114 BC) had been sent out as an envoy to the Yuezhi 月氏, maybe the Tocharians, who had settled to the North-West of the Xiongnu. The Han wished to establish diplomatic relations (*tongshi*) with the Yuezhi, because they hoped this would enable them to destroy the Xiongnu. Yet, the Xiongnu detained Zhang Qian remarking that the Yuezhi settled to their north and that the Han would certainly not allow an envoy of the Xiongnu to be sent to Yue in its south.⁷ Only much later, Zhang Qian was sent on a mission to the Wusun, because he had told the emperor that one

6 *Shiji* 97.2697f; *Hanshu* 43.2111f: 遣臣授君王印，剖符通使。

7 *Shiji* 123.3157; *Hanshu* 61.2687.

could bring them into alliance by bribing them with lavish gifts. This is the first time that we see a delegation of Han-Chinese officials – 300 persons in total, 6 hundred horses and tens of thousands of cows and sheep as well as gold and silk worth millions of cash – going West.⁸ They visited several states, among them Ferghana, Bactria, the Yuezhi, Parthia and Northern India. At first the Wusun treated Zhang Qian in the same way as the envoys sent out from the Xiongnu, but when Zhang Qian told them that he would not hand over the gifts to them that he had brought with him, they were willing to bow – and it seems that Zhang Qian achieved exactly what the Qianlong Emperor had hoped to get from Lord George Macartney (1737–1806) in 1793: a nominal gesture of submission, whatever it may have meant in reality.

Zhang Qian got it, and in the end the Wusun also prepared a delegation comprising several dozen people and the same number of horses to accompany Zhang Qian back to Han. When they realized that the state of Han really was a big state, they started to respect it, and the other states from Central Asia, too, sent out missions. This is the first time in history, the text says, that the Han entertained diplomatic relations (*tong*) with all these countries.⁹ Later on the Wusun sent an envoy to present one of their heavenly horses because they were afraid of the might of the Xiongnu and hoped that an alliance with the Han would be of benefit. Although they demanded a princess of the Han in return, this gift was accepted by the Han with the greatest enthusiasm. From the “Treatise on Music” (“Liyue zhi” 禮樂志) of the *Shiji* we learn that in Han times even a song was written commemorating this event, which was presented to the ancestors during the regularly held ceremonies in the ancestral temple.¹⁰ The horse is clearly seen as a tribute that was presented by the foreigners. Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BC) liked the horse so much that he yearly sent out six to ten delegations with loads of presents to Ferghana in order to get more horses of this type until the Central Asian states were finally fed up with the presents that came from Han China – it is plainly stated in the *Shiji*-chapter on Ferghana that they did not value the goods from Han any more.¹¹

8 *Shiji* 123.3168; *Hanshu* 61.2692.

9 *Shiji* 123.3169, *Hanshu* 61.2693.

10 *Shiji* 24.1178.

11 *Shiji* 123.3171. The text is not found in *Hanshu*.

What we see here is what also has become a pattern later on for many centuries and even for millennia to come: Recognition of the superiority of Chinese culture is so valuable for the rulers of a Chinese dynasty that they do not even care whether this recognition has to be bought at a high price. Just as it was the case in later centuries it seems that here as well the price that was paid in the form of gifts and presents to those states with whom the Han had diplomatic relations was much higher than the value of the tribute that was brought back to Chang'an in exchange.¹²

Apart from the remark in the chapter on Ferghana mentioned above, there is no mention of gifts brought to states with whom the Han wanted to have diplomatic exchange in other chapters of the *Shiji*. When the Imperial envoy Lu Jia went on his mission to see King Wei Tuo of Southern Yue, he reprimanded him for having established himself as emperor and also that Wei Tuo had never sent an envoy back.¹³ Mutuality seems to be the least that the Han expected from their diplomatic relations. Yet, as soon as they felt strong enough they forced the other side to accept the status of the inferior party. This can be seen in the case of the successors of Wei Tuo. After it had turned out that the Han were much more powerful than Southern Yue, his grandson even sent his own son to the capital as a guard, obviously in imitation of the Warring States practice to exchange hostages among independent states. When this son later became king, he again sent his own son to Chang'an, too. But that son refused to go there himself, because he feared that he would be treated as a feudal lord and to be forced to use Han law.¹⁴ A visit to the capital by the King of a state that is not a member of the Han *oikumene* is clearly seen as a sign of submission on his behalf.¹⁵

There are no cases recorded in the *Shiji* in which the king of a foreign state actually came to the court in Chang'an. There is one instance mentioned in the chapter on Eastern Yue that it was attacked

12 Cf. Britton 1935, 634; Yang Lien-sheng 1952; Selbitschka, 6, note 26.

13 *Shiji* 113.2970; *Hanshu* 95. 3852.

14 *Ibid.*

15 That observation, too, is interesting with regard to much later material on foreign relations: When the Dalai Lama or other high Tibetan religious dignitaries are invited to Peking and when they actually go, the Manchu side will always understand this as a sign that they accept the superiority of the court in Peking.

by Min Yue 閩越. When a punitive expedition was sent out from Han China the relatives of the King of Min Yue decided to kill him and let an envoy present his head to the emperor¹⁶ – but although this is a serious matter, it is not quite the same as the new king traveling on his own.

Thus, we can see that envoys had a very important function: Since a ruler would never travel on his own to the neighbouring state of Han they were his representatives. And yet, even their coming to the Han court is understood as a sign of submission: In the chapter on the South-Western barbarians we read of several envoys from Han who travelled there. The activities of Han envoys are always described as some kind of scouting or as the delivering of messages issued by the emperor. On the other hand, the messengers had order firstly to convince the barbarians to have Han officials established in their territory,¹⁷ and secondly to convince them that they should “come to court” (*ruchao* 入朝). For example, the Marquis of Yelang 夜郎, a state which is described as the biggest state among the South-Western barbarians, first sides with Southern Yue, but when that state is eliminated by Han, the ruler of this state decides to go to court or to send someone to court. Unfortunately, the text is not clear about this matter, but it does seem that he sends envoys¹⁸ – and the emperor gives him the title of a King of Yelang in return. Afterwards the Han turn to the kingdom of Dian 滇. Their envoy tells the king of Dian that Yue has been crushed and the Southern barbarians had been impressed by the military might of Han, and he suggests that the King of Dian should “come to court”. At first he is not willing to listen, but when an army of the Han arrives he submits, asks to be allowed to establish officials and “come to court”.¹⁹ Again, it is not clear whether this means that he comes himself or whether he accepts to send envoys on a yearly basis – I suggest the second option, although it seems that the Han tried to extend a system that had been invented for kings

16 *Shiji* 114.2981.

17 *Shiji* 116.2993f.; *Hanshu* 95.3838f.

18 *Shiji* 116.2996; *Hanshu* 95.3842: 夜郎侯始倚南越, [...] , 夜郎遂如朝。“The marquis of Yelang at first sided with Southern Yue. [...]. Yelang thereafter went to court.” The title is omitted in the second part of the sentence which suggests that the marquis did not go in person.

19 *Shiji* 116.2997: 諸置吏入朝。 *Hanshu* 95.3842: 請置吏入朝。

and marquises within China proper – the duty to attend a yearly audience at the capital – to foreign states.²⁰ It does not seem plausible that given the infrastructure of Han times this could have worked. The rulers had to be represented by somebody else: envoys.

So the function of envoys sent out from foreign states who come to court is that it is made clear by their very presence that their states have become allies and are regarded as vassals by the Han. The only exception to this rule is the powerful state of the Xiongnu. We do not read anywhere in the text that their envoys were regarded as deliverers of gestures of submission. Rather than bringing gifts at an audience they come with diplomatic letters. It is in connection with the Xiongnu – and to a lesser extent also with some Central Asian states – that we can learn something about the *ethos* of the envoy who is coming as a diplomat on terms of equality.²¹

The virtue which, according to Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145–86 BC), for the Northern nomads was most important regarding envoys is “trust” or “trustworthiness”, *xin* 信. The first instance in which this virtue is mentioned, in the chapter on the Xiongnu, relates to a point in time long before the Xiongnu state had come into being. In Yan 燕 there is a “virtuous general” who had once been a “hostage” (*zhi* 質) among the Hu-barbarians. The Hu therefore “trust him very much”. This trust is betrayed immediately: “After his return he led a surprise attack and put the Eastern Hu to flight so that they had to retreat more than a thousand miles.”²²

Interestingly, this passage has a close parallel in the chapter on Ferghana. Zhang Qian also is described as a strong man who is magnanimous and trustworthy so that the Man and Yi just love him.²³ Only a few pages later it is recorded that because Zhang Qian had once been a hostage in a foreign country – he had been detained by the Shanyu 單于 and during his more than ten years in the territory of the Xiongnu

20 See Dubs 1938–1955, vol. II, Appendix III to the Annals of Emperor Wu, “The Eighth Month Fermented Liquor Offering”.

21 Cf. Psarras 2003–2004.

22 *Shiji* 110.2885f: *Hanshu* 94A.3748: 為質於胡，胡甚信之。歸而襲破東胡，東胡卻千餘里。

23 *Shiji* 123.3159; *Hanshu* 61.2689: 騫為人彊力，寬大信人，蠻夷愛之。

married a woman and had children with her – the leaders of the foreign states trusted him a lot.²⁴ But all he does later is to disappoint them.

It is important to insist on the word *xin* here because there are so many stories in the *Shiji* chapter on the Xiongnu and elsewhere that suggest that the Han themselves were not *xin* at all. When they establish a marriage relationship with the Xiongnu, the Empress is not willing to give the Shanyu a bodily daughter of herself so that a daughter descending from the lower echelons of the Liu 劉 family is selected.²⁵ Such conflicts made the marriage policy difficult right from the beginning.

The case is repeated later on in an even more problematic way: When the Han forge their alliance with the Wusun they send a princess from Jiangdu 江都. She is called “noble princess from Jiangdu” (*Jiangdu wengzhu* 江都翁主) in the chapter on Ferghana.²⁶ In the *Hanshu* she is called a daughter of King Liu Jian 劉建 of Jiangdu.²⁷ This King had committed suicide in 122 BC in the context of the alleged rebellion of Liu An 劉安, King of Huainan 淮南 (179–122 BC), an act from which it becomes obvious that this was not the best branch of the Liu family. Yet, elsewhere in the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* where the biography of this king is also referred to mention is made that this king also committed numerous acts of incest.²⁸ Therefore we know that the Han did not care all too much about the policy of *heqin*, “unity by marriage ties”:²⁹ They provided their allies with women from families that had been disgraced in their own country.

We find another important instance of trustworthiness in a passage that refers to an event that took place shortly after Emperor Wen of the Han (r. 180–157 BC) came to power. One of the kings of the Xiongnu had invaded the territory of the Ordos south of the Huanghe and plundered the Man and Yi barbarian tribes who protected that area for the Han. Interestingly, Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 BC) in his description of the events omits this important remark found in Sima Qian’s account, a detail which may be explained by the fact

24 *Shiji* 123.3169; *Hanshu* 61.2693: 外國由此信之。

25 *Shiji* 99.2718; *Hanshu* 43.2122.

26 *Shiji* 123.3172.

27 *Hanshu* 96B.3903.

28 *Shiji* 59. 2096; *Hanshu* 53.2414–2418.

29 Cf. page 28.

that the territory that the Xiongnu king invaded was not Han Chinese at all. The Han drove the king back into Xiongnu territory. Afterwards, Maodun sent a letter to Emperor Wen in which he politely apologized for the behaviour of the king but blamed the frontier officials of the Han for the invasion. He then continued:

皇帝讓書再至，發使以書報，不來，漢使不至。

Twice a letter of reprimand arrived from you, the August Emperor, so we sent an envoy to answer in a letter, too. But he did not come [back], and no envoy of the Han arrived here.³⁰

He then goes on to explain that he punished the king by ordering him to lead an expedition against the Yuezhi, a military action which later led to the submission of all Western states to the Xiongnu. This, he argues, is a good precondition for making peace and restoring the former treaty. He then announces that he will send an envoy taking a letter with him with this wording and bringing also a camel, two horses and two quadriga teams. In the end he says: “When the envoy arrives, immediately send him [back]”.³¹

The officials all tell the emperor that the Xiongnu are too strong to be attacked and that it would be best to continue the *heqin* policy. We do not know why Maodun ends his letter with the words that the envoy should be sent back immediately after he has delivered the letter, but we can guess that he is implying here that his former envoys had been detained and that the Han had been too arrogant to answer and send an envoy of their own simply because they did not think it appropriate to be asked to send an envoy. Be that as it may, Emperor Wen also writes a letter and apparently sends the Xiongnu envoy back, saying that he will agree with everything that the Shanyu has said, given that he was *xin* 信, “trustworthy”. The letter is accompanied by gifts of gold and silk.³²

When the *heqin* policy is renewed shortly afterwards, the Han force a eunuch to accompany the princess. The man at first refuses to go, but after he is forced to go he announces that the Han will regret that. He submits to the Xiongnu and teaches them how they should deal with the Han. Han envoys who seem to have been sent

30 *Shiji* 110.2896; *Hanshu* 94A.3756.

31 *Ibid.*: 使者至，即遣之。

32 *Shiji* 110.2897; *Hanshu* 94A.3758.

out fairly often – this must have been part of the *heqin* policy – and who on these occasions want to argue with the eunuch over the customs of the Xiongnu are quieted by him briskly:

漢使無多言，願漢所輸匈奴，[...], 令其量中。

You Han envoys should not talk too much. Just look that what you bring to the Xiongnu is up to the correct standard.³³

The last sentence again suggests that trustworthiness was an important matter and that the Han probably did not always obey the treaty precisely in accordance with the law.

Yet there are no great problems reported between the Han and the Xiongnu for the rest of the reign of Han Wendi and his son Han Jingdi 景帝 (r. 156–141 BC). At the beginning of the reign of Emperor Wu, therefore, everything seems to be absolutely fine. Starting with the Shanyu all the Xiongnu came to the border and befriended the Han. In this situation we again encounter an envoy: Nie Wengyi 聶翁壹, an “envoy” from the Han and a lowly man from Mayi 馬邑³⁴, who in a treacherous way starts out to export goods and to deal with the Xiongnu. Maybe the text also wants to say that the Han on purpose “let him” do what follows, which would mean that the emperor himself was seeking for a reason to wage a war. Unfortunately, we cannot decide for certain whether *shi* 使 here means “to order” or “envoy” – but despite all the critical remarks found in the *Shiji* it would be strange if Sima Qian really openly accused Emperor Wu of intentionally breaking the treaty with the Xiongnu. So we have to assume that Nie Wengyi was indeed an envoy who pretends (*xiang* 詳) to be willing to sell Mayi in order to lure the Shanyu. The Shanyu “trusts him” (*xin zhi* 信之) and enters the frontier with a force of a hundred thousand men. The Han try to ambush him, but the Shanyu discovers the plot and manages to escape. This treacherous break of the treaty marks the beginning of the reign of Han Wudi.³⁵

33 *Shiji* 110.2901; *Hanshu* 94A.3760. This episode has been dealt with quite often in recent scholarship. See, for example, T.T. Chin 2010, 324ff. Di Cosmo (2002, 270) has said that Sima Qian may have been seen by his contemporaries as a “barbarophile” man.

34 *Shiji* 110.2905: 漢使馬邑下人聶翁壹。

35 *Shiji* 110.2905; the text in *Hanshu* 94A.3765 is slightly different. It omits, for example, that Nie Wengyi is a “lowly person”.

We do not need to discuss here the various wars that are fought in consequence of the Mayi treachery. In passing it may be interesting that the story of the eunuch recounted before repeats itself when after an unsuccessful expedition a general of the Han surrenders to the Xiongnu. His name is Zhao Xin 趙信, “Zhao the Trustworthy”.³⁶ Zhao Xin was first a king of the Hu barbarians before he had submitted to the Han. The name “Xin” was thus most certainly not his original name. Thus, it does bear significance, and it does seem that he was given this name or had chosen it by himself because others hoped that he would turn out to be trustworthy.³⁷ This person now teaches the Xiongnu what they should do against the Han – again, the reason for successes of the Xiongnu is ascribed to a man who was an unsuccessful general of the Han, not to themselves.

Even more interesting is the fact that at one point of that incident an official of the Han, Ren Chang 任敞, is recorded to have stated boldly:

「匈奴新破，困，宜可使為外臣，朝請於邊。」

“The Xiongnu have only recently been destroyed. They are suffering, and it should be possible to let them become servants outside [of the frontier]. As far as the audience is concerned, we will demand that it will be held at the border.”³⁸

Ren Chang is then sent as an envoy to the Xiongnu. Yet, when the Shanyu learns about his plan, he is greatly enraged, detains him and does not let him go.³⁹ This measure reminds us of the previous case when the Shanyu had asked the Han to send his envoy back imme-

36 *Shiji* 110.2908ff; *Hanshu* 94A.3768ff.

37 The name “Xin” occurs quite frequently in the *Shiji*, but it is interesting that in many instances those who bear this name are persons about whom one would think that one could trust them. This is true, for example, for Han Xin 韓信, the follower of Han Gaozu, who dies a tragic death because Gaozu does not trust him and drives them into a rebellion (*Shiji* 92). The same may be said about King Han Xin 韓信 (*Shiji* 93) who is also a follower of Gaozu and then a competitor because he meets with Gaozu’s suspicion and surrenders to the Xiongnu. Also, it is very interesting that the *Shiji* chapter on the doctors mentions three doctors bearing the name “Xin”: Qin Xin 秦信 (*Shiji* 105.2810), Feng Xin 馮信 and Du Xin 杜信 (both *Shiji* 105.2817).

38 *Shiji* 110.2911. Cf., slightly different, *Hanshu* 94A.3771: 匈奴新困，宜使為外臣，朝請於邊。

39 *Shiji* 110.2911; *Hanshu* 94A.3771: 留之不遣。

diately.⁴⁰ It seems as if there was a real problem here that is described by Sima Qian with the following words:

先是漢亦有所降匈奴使者，單于亦輒留漢使相當。

Before, if the Han had had envoys from the Xiongnu who had surrendered [to the Han], the Shanyu also immediately detained envoys of the Han in order to get quits with [us].⁴¹

There is a lot of rhetoric in this passage, but we probably may guess that, according to Sima Qian, the Han had frequently detained envoys from the Xiongnu, claiming that they had surrendered to them. What is interesting here is that he also says that the Xiongnu did not want anything else than just “equality”.

When an envoy afterwards arrives at the court of the Xiongnu and tries to intimidate the Shanyu in order to make him surrender to the Han the Shanyu immediately bans him to the north. *Shiji* states that

終不肯為寇於漢邊，休養息士馬，習射獵，數使使於漢，好辭甘言求請和親。

He was not willing to rob the Han frontiers but rather gave rest to his men and horses, practiced hunting and sent envoys to the Han several times, with nice speeches and sweet words requesting a [renewal] of peace through marital relationship (*heqin*).⁴²

Very interesting in the above passage is the word “not willing” (*bu ken* 不肯), because it seems to imply that Han had hoped that he would rob the frontiers. This would have been a good pretext for leading another war. The next entry in *Shiji* also describes how diplomatic relations worked:

漢使王烏等窺匈奴。匈奴法，漢使非去節而以墨黥其面者不得入穹廬。王烏，北地人，習胡俗，去其節，黥面，得入穹廬。

The Han sent Wang Wu and his party to the Xiongnu to spy them out. According to Xiongnu law, if a Han envoy did not remove his insignia and tattooed his face with ink, he was not allowed to enter a yurt. Wang

40 *Shiji* 110.2896; *Hanshu* 94A.3757: 即遣之。

41 *Shiji* 110.2911; *Hanshu* 94A.3771.

42 *Shiji* 110.2912; *Hanshu* 94A.3772.

Wu, as a man from Beidi, was familiar with the Hu customs, let go of his insignia, tattooed his face and was allowed to enter the yurts.⁴³

Thus, it seems as if the Xiongnu demanded from the Han envoy what their own envoys had to do in Chang'an, namely to obey the customs of their country. When Wang Wu did so, the Shanyu loved him and even promised to send his own crown-prince as a hostage to the Han – because he wanted peace through marital alliance. The story is only told because the next envoy, a man called Yang Xin 楊信 – again a man named “The Trustworthy One” –, from the Han does the contrary: He is not a “noble servant” (*guichen* 貴臣) of the Han and he does not agree to remove his insignia. So the Shanyu receives him outside of the tents. The envoy tells him that he should send his heir as a hostage to the Han, whereupon the Shanyu answers that this contradicts the old treaty according to which the Han sent a princess to the Xiongnu and presented silk on top of that. So he declares that to send the crown-prince is impossible. The paragraph again ends with a sentence on the general practice of the Xiongnu concerning the exchange of envoys:

匈奴俗，見漢使非中貴人，其儒先，以為欲說，折其辯；其少年，以為欲刺，折其氣。每漢使入匈奴，匈奴輒報償。漢留匈奴使，匈奴亦留漢使，必得當乃肯止。

According to Xiongnu custom, if they see that a Han envoy is not a noble man from the palace, they think that he wants to persuade if he enters like a Confucian scholar. Then they cut off his arguments. If he is [only] a young man, they think that he just wants to sting and so they cut off his courage. Whenever a Han envoy enters Xiongnu territory the Xiongnu immediately respond by recompensation. If the Han detain an envoy from the Xiongnu, the Xiongnu will also detain an envoy from the Han: Only if they have got equality will they be willing to stop.⁴⁴

Here again we see that the Xiongnu are described as people that do not want anything else than just equality. Sima Qian suggests here that the Han always wanted the contrary: For them the purpose of sending envoys was to convince the other side of Han superiority.

43 *Shiji* 110.2913; *Hanshu* 94A.3772.

44 *Shiji* 110.2913; *Hanshu* 94A.3773.

He obviously criticizes this habit, as it estranged the other party. For Sima Qian, what the Xiongnu demanded was simply fair enough.

The story continues: after the envoy returns to the Han without having achieved any success the other envoy who knows and understands Xiongnu customs is sent out again. The Shanyu promises him to come to court in order to conclude a treaty to become “elder and younger brother” again. When the envoy reports this, the Han even build a residence for the Shanyu in Chang’an. Yet, the Xiongnu say: “We will only speak true words if a noble man from the Han comes.”⁴⁵ Then they send an envoy who, upon his arrival in the territory of the Han, falls ill. The Han give him medicine “in order to heal him”, but “unfortunately” he dies.⁴⁶ The Han then send a man called Lu Chongguo 路充國, saying that this is a “noble from the Han” and delivering presents worth millions of cash, but nevertheless the Shanyu thinks that the Han killed his envoy. Sima Qian also reports that everyone said that the Shanyu had never really meant to send his crown-prince to come as a hostage to Han whereupon the Xiongnu several times send troops to surprise the Han and attack.⁴⁷

The whole paragraph is very ambiguous. One never knows whom Sima Qian is siding with. Both points of view seem to be equally reasonable: that the Han killed the Xiongnu envoy and that the envoy died a natural death, that the Xiongnu chieftain really wanted peace and also that he just wanted presents. We do not know the truth. Yet, precisely the fact that Sima Qian wants to be so impartial, has to render one suspicious – he simply does not want to say anything bad about either side, although one would expect him to be on the side of the Han.

Again there is an incident involving envoys in the lines that follow. A new Shanyu accedes to the throne. Because he is a minor, he is called the “Boy Shanyu” (Er Shanyu 兒單于). The Han see that as a chance to seed disagreement in the state of the Xiongnu, so they send two envoys, one to console the dead Shanyu, the other one to console the Worthy King to the Right who also has recently died. Yet, the Xiongnu bring both envoys to the Shanyu, and in a great rage he detains them both. Again Sima Qian inserts a sentence on this:

45 *Shiji* 110.2914; *Hanshu* 94A.3773: 非得漢貴人使，吾不與誠語。

46 *Ibid.*: 欲愈之，不幸而死。

47 *Ibid.*

漢使留匈奴者前後十餘輩，而匈奴使來，漢亦輒留相當。

There had been more than ten teams of Han envoys detained by the Xiongnu in the past, yet if a Xiongnu envoy came, the Han also immediately detained him in order to be quits with them.⁴⁸

There is no real end to this story. It is just very interesting that the words that Sima Qian uses here are exactly the same as before, with the only difference that this time he says that the Han reacted in retaliation to what the Xiongnu did to their envoys whereas before he had said twice that the Han had detained Xiongnu envoys first.

先是漢亦有所降匈奴使者，單于亦輒留漢使相當。

Before, if the Han had had envoys from the Xiongnu who had surrendered [to the Han], the Shanyu also immediately detained envoys of the Han in order to get quits with [us].⁴⁹

And:

每漢使入匈奴，匈奴輒報償。漢留匈奴使，匈奴亦留漢使，必得當乃肯止。

Whenever a Han envoy enters Xiongnu territory the Xiongnu immediately respond by recompensation. If the Han detain an envoy from the Xiongnu, the Xiongnu will also detain an envoy from the Han: Only if they have got equality will they be willing to stop.⁵⁰

Sima Qian perhaps intentionally turns the wording into its opposite, in order to show that he thinks that once a war has started, human beings will get more and more atrocious and will forget about standards of behaviour they had agreed upon before and without which it is not possible to decide who was the one who had started with the atrocities. Yet, it is also possible that Sima Qian uses veiled language here: In the last passage he reports the point of view held in the empire of the Han who think that the bad guys must be the Xiongnu although any careful reader of the *Shiji* will understand that the practice of detaining envoys was actually begun by the Han, not the Xiongnu.

48 *Shiji* 110.2915; *Hanshu* 94A.3774.

49 *Shiji* 110.2911; *Hanshu* 94A.3771.

50 *Shiji* 110.2913: Instead of 每漢使入匈奴 *Hanshu* 94A.3773 has 每漢兵入匈奴.

Conclusion

It seems that in ancient China the mutual exchange of envoys (*tong-shi*) originally suggested equality of both partners involved. There are several passages in the *Shiji* and also in later texts from which such an interpretation becomes quite obvious. Yet, it is also clear that, although the Han sometimes had to accept that they were actually on equal status with other states, they started a practice that was later to become much the standard practice: They conferred seals and titles on their neighbours once these had entered the Chinese cultural sphere. In this way they tried to get at least nominal gestures of submission from them. They also started a system that was to last for two millennia: They tried to bring their neighbours to their court. The visits of foreign envoys or even of kings themselves must have looked to the ordinary Han subject like a parallel to the yearly visits that the kings and marquises enfeoffed by the Han had to make – at least in theory. If a king, such as the king of Dian, came himself to an audience (*ruchao*), then this was a sign of his acceptance of Han rule. Presents brought by the envoys were seen as tribute whereas presents that the Han sent to their countries in order to make them bring tribute were understood as presents. Yet, incorruptible eye-witnesses such as Sima Qian did not buy this story. When the Han sent out delegations, they felt humiliated if a neighbour such as Wei Tuo, the king of Southern Yue, did not send a delegation in return.

There was a problem with a powerful and frightening neighbour such as the Xiongnu. During the time when Sima Qian was writing they could not be forced to deliver a gesture of submission. It is for this reason that we can analyze what sending out envoys among equals entailed in Han times: Their foremost quality was that they had to be “trustworthy”, that one could believe in their words. Apparently, the Xiongnu several times felt and probably really were cheated by the Han, at least according to the narrative that we find in the *Shiji*. A serious matter was the practice to detain envoys. The first time that this is mentioned is in the letter by the Shanyu to the Han. This was obviously considered to be something that was against all good diplomatic custom and it could be a *casus belli*. When the war was at its height, both the Han and the Xiongnu detained envoys, a practice that slightened the chance of making peace.

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