

A Reflection of Ideology Conflicts Between Hsiung-nu and China during the Han Dynasty

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Abstract

Ideology refers to the manner or content of thinking of a certain group or culture. Different countries have various ideologies that influence their thinking manners, social structure and foreign policy. The Han Dynasty (206BCE – 220CE) is said to be an important period for the relationship between Hsiung-nu and China, during which the political, economic and military relevance had been getting more intense than before. Through some primary sources written by Chinese historians, we can see that they represent Huns as “Barbarians”, and we have wondered the reasons behind it. In a sense, the representation of “Barbarian” adopted by Chinese can be a reflection of Hsiung-nu and Han Dynasty’s ideology conflicts. These conflicts may had caused the understanding barriers between the two countries, with conflicts in other aspects intensifying thereafter. This work will compare the differing ideologies between Hsiung-nu and China of their respective formation backgrounds and reflections on philosophical and moral ideas. Afterward, the work will think about the representation of “Barbarian” adopted by Chinese in *Han Histories* from the perspective of ideology conflicts to find out the reasons and influence of such representation. This work will further explore the development of relationship between Hsiung-nu and China during the Han Dynasty to see if the relationship had eased down due to communication and approval of their contrasting ideologies. The work reveals that the ideologies of Hsiung-nu and China during the Han Dynasty had differences and similarities. In particular, the differences were caused by several reasons, such as production mode and political system. The Huns and the Chinese had contrasting cultural identities as reflected in their philosophical and moral ideas, and had different ways to deal with a certain thing, which definitely resulted to conflicts and misunderstanding.

Keywords

Ideology conflicts; Hsiung-nu; China.

1. Introduction

The relationship between Hsiung-nu and China has always been explored , and the Han Dynasty (206BCE – 220CE) is said to be an important period for the relationship between Hsiung-nu and China, during which the political, economic and military relevance had been getting more intense than before. Through some primary sources written by Chinese historians, we can see that they represent Huns as “Barbarians”, and we have wondered the reasons behind it. In a sense, the representation of “Barbarian” adopted by Chinese can be a reflection of Hsiung-nu and Han Dynasty’s ideology conflicts. These conflicts may had caused the understanding barriers between the two countries, with conflicts in other aspects intensifying thereafter.

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I understand that from the perspective of Han Dynasty, referring to those ideologies on Hsiung-nu may seem particularly anachronistic; nevertheless, I believe that it is still a relevant means of finding out Hsiung-nu's social structure and philosophical and moral ideas, which are the components of a country's ideology. This work will try its best to depict the reality of Hsiung-nu by objectively exploring the connotation of "Barbarian" in Han Histories, and illustrating their political conflicts thereafter. In the concluding part of the paper, this work will explore the communications between Hsiung-nu and China to see if they had moved towards detente due to relaxed ideology conflicts.

2. Comparison between Hsiung-nu's and Han Dynasty's Ideologies

For countries, ideology serves as a way of their principles and their very nature. The formation of an ideology relies on a country's productivity, political system. Hsiung-nu and China's social structure are different in Han Dynasty, they had their own mode of production and political system, which led to the difference of their ideology.

Hsiung-nu's mode of production was totally different from that of China. The Huns were accustomed in migrating to wherever water and grass were available; they had no city or regular place to live in, and they had no agricultural production [1]. Instead, Hsiung-nu's traditional mode of production was nomadic herding, making the Huns in favor of chasing freedom. They were unwilling to be bound and did not care about ethics, hence their ideology centered around liberty and personal profit. In contrast, for China, agriculture was an especially important and basic mode of production during the Han dynasty. According to Han Histories[2], most Chinese men had to farm with their families, and parts of cultivated grain had to be handed in. Thus, the Chinese abided by the rules and behaved themselves. Unlike the Huns, they hardly migrated and had pursued a steady life, hence they attached great importance to family and inheritance. Influenced by agricultural civilization, China's character was milder than that of Hsiung-nu. The Chinese preached harmony as the most precious thing, and emphasized on hierarchy, respect for elders and family royalty.

Hsiung-nu's political system was also totally different from that of the Han Dynasty, which may have caused the differing ideologies between Hsiung-nu and China. Hsiung-nu's political system was a pyramidal hierarchical society. Shen-yu was the supreme power of the Hsiung-nu regime. However, the highest political order was occupied by not only Shen-yu, but also by constituent secondary lineages [3]. Hence, Hsiung-nu's society consisted of clans and unstable tribal alliances, and Shen-yu was the leader of the said alliances. The ruling structure of Hsiung-nu was quite loose and unstable; the nature of its regime comprised only a military and administrative union, which was quite temporary and unstable. On the contrary, China's political structure was highly centralized, as the Chinese emperor's power was strong enough to control fiefs. Thus, the two countries' differences in political structure led to their contrasting ideologies, as reflected by Hsiung-nu's not-so-strong emphasis on hierarchy as opposed to China.

Ideology can be reflected in lots of aspects; philosophical and moral ideas are two of its most obvious reflections. The Huns had advocated a valorous spirit. They would persuade children to learn riding and hunting, and feed themselves once they would become older, making themselves always ready for an invasion or attack. They did not have a strong ethical consciousness, thought that it would render no shame to retreat or run away, were willing to marry their died brother's widow, and treated the old and feeble with contempt[2]. Hsiung-nu's moral ideas were different from China's; influenced by their traditional ideas, the Chinese had

emphasized ethics and respected their seniors. They would never treat their elders with contempt, and they were loyal to their superiors. From a comparison of moral ideas, we can see obvious differences between the countries.

With regard to philosophical ideas, Hsiung-nu and the Han Dynasty had some similarities. The Huns believed that Shen-yu's power came from the gods, and that he was a specially privileged person. Shen-yu would go outside the camp to worship the rising sun; in the morning, he would worship the moon [2]. So, in the eyes of the Huns, the gods were supreme, and nature worship was a typical characteristic of Hsiung-nu. Meanwhile, the Chinese had also emphasized nature worship during the Han Dynasty. They respected the Confucian culture since Emperor Wu-ti proposed to depose other schools of thought and to respect Confucianism alone in 134BCE, which theorized that man is an integral part of nature. In this case, we can definitely perceive that Hsiung-nu and China's ideologies were somewhat similar. They both manifested utmost royalty to the gods and nature, which could be a basis for their cultural communication.

3. Influence of Hsiung-nu and China's Ideology Conflicts

As previously mentioned, several differences had existed between the two countries, which had resulted to ideological differences. Such ideology conflicts could be reflected in many aspects, especially in the philosophical and moral ideas. Those conflicts had also influenced the relationship between Hsiung-nu and China.

According to Han Histories, we know that Hsiung-nu had no written documents, and had performed only oral contracts, such that we can only find out situations about Hsiung-nu from the perspective of Chinese historians. Han Histories was written by historians during the Han Dynasty, and the most obvious reflection of ideology conflicts was the writers' generally barbaric attitude. One of the reasons for this attitude was that Chinese historians could not fully understand Hsiung-nu's thoughts and behaviors, which were guided by their own ideologies.

The representation of "Barbarian" means that the Chinese had adopted an attitude of superiority against Hsiung-nu. They described the Huns as overbearing persons as the latter would cross boundaries, killing and carrying off people and cattle in immense numbers. According to Chinese ideology, robbing and invading are behaviors that transgress morality, as such, everyone should work in his own land and trade with his own possession. In contrast, Hsiung-nu's ideology guided itself to gain things through strong power. The Huns did not care much about morality since the winner could win everything, so they crossed boundaries to battle and gain what they wanted [2]. Such ideology conflicts had made China hold a barbaric attitude towards Hsiung-nu, which thought that there was no way to reach a treaty and send precious things to China in order maintain a harmonious relationship. Indeed, China's diplomacy towards Hsiung-nu was laid down from the perspective of Chinese ideology, as the former firmly believed that the latter would always obey the rules imposed by treaties. However, Hsiung-nu's ideology was totally different from that of the Chinese; as the Huns had become unsatisfied with their lives, they would never care about any treaty, thus invading China by crossing its boundary.

The content of the treaty proposed by Hsiung-nu in Han Histories seemed overbearing and ridiculous, like the one proposed by Shen-yu that China should transmit to Hsiung-nu 10,000 piculs of wine, 5,000 bushels of millet and rice, 10,000 pieces of silk of various kinds, and other objects as in former treaties. After several years of campaign with Hsiung-nu, China had no choice but bear with it. In Chinese ideology, peace is extremely precious, as the diplomacy during the Han Dynasty was deeply influenced by an ideology of cosmopolitanism; especially when China regarded Confucianism as the dynasty's official ideology, all diplomatic ideas must take into account the relevant concepts of cosmopolitanism. Thus, China would try its best to satisfy Hsiung-nu's demands.

It was also apparent that although the Chinese came to adopt an attitude of superiority to Hsiung-nu who were “Barbarian” outsiders, China could not act as a counterweight against it during the Han Dynasty. China wanted to set up a great relationship with Hsiung-nu through the most efficient means of finalizing treaties, which was drawn up by the guidance of its ideology. It further believed that everyone would firmly adhere to their respective commitments, yet the treaty had given Hsiung-nu more chances. The Huns had become more contemptuous against the Chinese, and their demands had become much worse than before. Moreover, if the old Shen-yu would die and pass on the throne to his heir, there would be a supporting chance that the new Shen-yu would tear up the treaty and invade China.

The fact that the treaty came only after military losses had strongly suggested that negotiated peace was hardly the preferred option during the Han Dynasty. Ironically, the Han emperors’ distaste for being subservient to a foreign state had led themselves to consider diplomatically engaging with other tribes in an attempt to secure allies for a military expedition in order to “renegotiate” terms with the Hsiung-nu. In what was perhaps the beginning of regional geopolitics in Chinese statecraft, Emperor Wu-ti (156 – 87 BCE) attempted to send Zhang Qian on a mission to propose a military alliance with the Yuezhi, who were also having military conflicts with Hsiung-nu. Indeed, the ideology conflicts between Hsiung-nu and China had forced the Chinese emperor to change diplomatic strategies. To some extent, this strategy had also promoted the connection between China and Central Asia.

4. The Move Towards Detente Due to Cultural Communication

During the Han Dynasty that lasted about 400 years, Chinese ideology had changed. Initially, around 206BCE to 143BCE, there was a state of contention amongst hundreds of schools of ideological thoughts, and emperors like Emperor Gaozu were inclined to adopt the ideology of Taoism [3]. Taoism strongly advocated benevolence and frugality, both of which had influenced the dynasty’s diplomatic strategies towards Hsiung-nu during that period. The Chinese were anxious about wars; they hoped to rehabilitate themselves, so the emperor adopted expedient measures by sending a princess of the imperial house to Shan-yu to be his consort. In addition, they sent presents like raw and woven silk, wine and food to Hsiung-nu yearly [2]. However, the policy had little effect; the cessation of Hsiung-nu’s incursions would only last shortly.

By the time of Wu-ti’s reign (140BCE – 87BCE), in order to consolidate power, he dethroned other schools of thought and upheld Confucianism. Since then, Confucianism had begun to become orthodox. Influenced by this thought, China’s ideology had turned to strongly emphasize hierarchy, ethics and peace. The relationship between Hsiung-nu and China also had subtle changes during that time. Initially, China still adopted its diplomatic strategy of sending yearly presents to Hsiung-nu; however, as it developed over time, its military strength had become stronger such that Hsiung-nu became anxious about the war. Moreover, part of its strategies was to send an emissary to the west to explore the possibility of making an alliance with Hsiung-nu’s enemies in Central Asia. As a result, Hsiung-nu began to seek peace with China. In 135BCE, Shan-yu had requested a treaty of peace, and he was even willing to send his oldest son to the Chinese court as a hostage [2]. Since then, Hsiung-nu had become firmly attached to China.

The ideological clashes had intensified conflicts between China and Hsiung-nu in many aspects, and the negotiations between the two were more than ever before. There were some periods throughout history that the relationship between Hsiung-nu and China had developed towards detente, for example, in 157CE, a market was opened at the barrier [2], which was likewise continued, as China had maintained selling grains and precious from China, for which the Huns were strongly anxious, hence the trade relations between Hsiung-nu and China became

increasingly close. In the reign of Emperor Wu-ti, due to the intensification of the frontal war, the situation of surrendering to the Han Dynasty in Hsiung-nu was common. According to Shiji, the leaders of the Hsiung-nu who surrendered were basically granted fiefs and vassals [1]. This policy showed that Chinese were more willing to accept Huns than ever before, their tradition of treating Huns as “Barbarian” had eliminated gradually.

There were many reasons that had contributed to the relaxed conflicts between China and Hsiung-nu, but one definite reason was the cultural communication between the two. Chinese had since known better about Hsiung-nu's ideology, hence they treated the said country liberally. Truly, we can see that it is possible that with cultural communication, Hsiung-nu and China's ideology conflicts could be eased, and they could eventually move towards detente with such intensive communication.

5. Conclusion

The ideologies of Hsiung-nu and China during the Han Dynasty had differences and similarities. In particular, the differences were caused by several reasons, such as production mode and political system. The Huns and the Chinese had contrasting cultural identities as reflected in their philosophical and moral ideas, and had different ways to deal with a certain thing, which definitely resulted to conflicts and misunderstanding. From the perspective of the Chinese, the Huns were barbarians without morals and standards. The policies of Hsiung-nu were always changing, and due to intensified ideology conflicts, political and military conflicts between the two countries had deepened as well. Nevertheless, we can still see that the conflicts had eventually toned down as a result of cultural communications between Hsiung-nu and China; eventually, hostile consciousness and misunderstandings had also weakened. Indeed, regardless of whether it was during the Han Dynasty or today, ideology conflicts may never be an insurmountable barrier.

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