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Zhang Qian

The Pioneer of the Silk Road — The Extraordinary Journeys That Connected China to the West

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PART ONE

The Steppe and the Empire

草原与帝国

Chapter One

The Siege at Pingcheng

平城之围

Under heaven, the strong do not long remain strong, and the weak do not long remain weak.

— a sentiment common to the strategists of the Warring States

In the winter of 200 BCE, the newly crowned emperor of the Han dynasty led an army of more than three hundred thousand men north toward the frontier. He was a former village constable named Liu Bang, a man of peasant birth, coarse manners, and remarkable political instincts, who only two years before had defeated his last great rival in the civil wars that followed the collapse of the Qin dynasty. History knows him by his temple name, Gaozu, the High Ancestor. He had unified China by the sword, and he believed he could secure its northern border the same way.

His enemy was a nomadic confederation that the Chinese called the Xiongnu. They were horsemen of the Mongolian steppe, herders of sheep, cattle, and horses who moved with the seasons between summer and winter pastures, lived in felt tents, ate meat and drank fermented mare's milk, and fought from the saddle with powerful composite bows. Under a ruler named Modu, they had in the space of a few years been forged from a loose collection of tribes into the most

formidable military power in East Asia. When the Qin had fallen, Modu had seized the opportunity. His horsemen had swept across the Ordos, the great loop of the Yellow River, and pushed southward against the frontier. A Han vassal king in the north had defected to them. Gaozu marched to punish the defector and teach the nomads a lesson.

It was the coldest of winters. The Grand Historian records that snow fell, and that between two and three of every ten soldiers lost fingers to frostbite. Gaozu's scouts reported that the Xiongnu were weak; they had seen only old men, thin cattle, and feeble horses. One adviser, a man named Liu Jing, warned that this was a trap: when two countries are at war, he said, each tries to display its strength, and if the Xiongnu are showing only weakness, it is because they want us to attack. Gaozu, impatient and contemptuous, had Liu Jing put in chains and pressed on with his vanguard, outrunning the slow-moving infantry behind him.

Near the city of Pingcheng, in what is today northern Shanxi province, the trap closed. Modu had concealed his best forces. Now he released them: according to the Grand Historian, four hundred thousand horsemen, organized by color, white horses to the west, dark gray to the east, black to the north, and red-brown to the south. Gaozu and his advance guard found themselves surrounded on a hill called Baideng, the White Ascent. For seven days the emperor of China and his men were cut off from their supplies and their main army, freezing, hungry, and waiting to die.

The Escape

How Gaozu escaped is one of the murkier episodes in early Han history. The sources agree that it involved a secret stratagem devised by one of his cleverest advisers, Chen Ping, and that the stratagem was so embarrassing, or so clever, that its details were never recorded. Later writers guessed that it involved bribing Modu's principal consort, the yanzhi, and perhaps persuading her that if the Han were destroyed, Modu would take beautiful Chinese women into his household who would supplant her. Whatever was said, the yanzhi spoke to her husband. The Han emperor, she argued, also had gods on his side; and even if the Xiongnu took Han lands, they could not live there. Modu, who was also concerned that his allies among the defecting Chinese had not arrived as promised, opened a corner of the encirclement. In a thick fog, Gaozu's men walked out with their crossbows drawn and pointing outward, two arrows to each bow, and reached the main army.

The emperor freed Liu Jing and apologized to him. He had learned the lesson that would shape Han policy toward the steppe for the next sixty years: the Xiongnu could not be defeated by direct assault. Not yet.

The Policy of Peace Through Kinship

The policy that emerged from the humiliation at Pingcheng was called heqin, a phrase usually translated as "peace through kinship" or "harmonious kinship." Its architect was Liu Jing himself. The idea was simple and, by the standards of the time, ingenious. The Han would send a princess of the imperial house to marry the Xiongnu ruler, whose title was chanyu. Every year the Han would also send gifts: silk floss and silk cloth, wine, rice, and other foodstuffs. The two rulers would treat each other as brothers. The Great Wall, or rather the network of frontier walls inherited from the Qin and earlier states, would serve as the agreed border.

Liu Jing argued that the policy would work on two levels. In the short term, the gifts would buy peace. In the long term, the marriages would produce sons of Han blood who would become chanyus, and grandsons who would treat the Han emperor as their grandfather; and who had ever heard of a grandson attacking his grandfather? Over time, he reasoned, the Xiongnu would be tamed by kinship and by luxury.

Gaozu wanted to send his own daughter, but his wife, the formidable Empress Lü, wept day and night, and in the end a girl from a lesser branch of the imperial family was sent instead, styled a princess for the occasion. It set a pattern. Over the following decades, a succession of "princesses," most of them distant relatives or palace women given royal rank, rode north into the steppe with caravans of silk, and none of them came back.

The Insult to the Empress

The heqin policy bought peace of a sort, but it was a humiliating peace, and the Xiongnu never let the Han forget it. Around 192 BCE, after Gaozu had died and the Empress Lü had become the effective ruler of China, Modu sent her a letter. It is preserved in the Hanshu, and its tone is unmistakable. The chanyu described himself as a lonely ruler born among the marshes and raised in the wilderness among cattle and horses, who had often come to the borders wishing to visit China. The empress, he observed, was a widow, and he was a widower; both of them were unhappy and lacked amusement. Perhaps, he suggested, they could exchange what each had for what each lacked.

It was an invitation to marriage, and an insult of the most calculated kind. The empress, whose ferocity toward her own enemies at court was legendary, was furious. She summoned her generals and proposed war. One of them, a general named Fan Kuai, boasted that with a hundred thousand men he could ride roughshod across the Xiongnu lands. Another official, Ji Bu, rebuked him: Gaozu himself,

with three hundred thousand men, had been trapped at Pingcheng, and Fan Kuai had been there; to propose such a thing was to deceive the throne. The empress swallowed her rage. Her reply to Modu was a masterpiece of humility. She was old, she wrote, her hair and teeth were falling out, and she was not fit for him to dishonor himself with. She sent him carriages and horses instead.

That exchange tells us more about the balance of power in the early Han than any battle report. The most feared woman in China, who had ordered the mutilation of her late husband's favorite consort and poisoned his sons, could not afford to answer a nomad's insult with arms.

The Shape of the Frontier

To understand why the Han found the Xiongnu so difficult to fight, it helps to picture the geography of the frontier. China's heartland in the Han period lay along the valleys of the Wei and Yellow rivers, in a landscape of fertile loess soil that could support dense populations of farmers. North and west of this heartland, the land grew drier. Rainfall dwindled, the soils thinned, and farming gave way to grassland, then to semi-desert and desert. The boundary between the two worlds was not a line but a broad zone, shifting with the climate, in which farmers and herders lived side by side, traded, raided, intermarried, and fought.

The steppe peoples had advantages that a farming empire could not easily match. Every adult man was a horseman and an archer, trained from childhood. Their wealth walked with them; they had no cities to defend and could retreat into the grasslands faster than any infantry army could follow. Their armies needed no supply trains, because their herds were their supply. A Han army marching north had to carry grain, water, and fodder, and every extra day in the field was an extra day of cost. A Xiongnu raiding party could appear at a frontier town, burn it, carry off people and livestock, and disappear before the nearest garrison had mustered.

The Han had advantages too. They had vastly larger populations, sophisticated metallurgy, the crossbow, a disciplined bureaucracy, and a tax system that could mobilize resources on a scale the steppe could not match. But until those advantages could be brought to bear in the right way, the nomads held the initiative.

The Lure of Han Goods

There was another dimension to the relationship, one that would matter enormously to the later history of the Silk Road. The Xiongnu wanted Han goods. They wanted silk, which was warm, light, beautiful, and portable, and which served as a store of wealth and a symbol of status for the chanyu's court. They wanted grain to see them through bad winters, wine, lacquerware, bronze mirrors, and ironwork. The heqin gifts satisfied some of this demand. Trading markets at the frontier passes satisfied more. Raids satisfied the rest.

A remarkable figure in this period understood the danger that Han goods posed to Xiongnu identity. He was a Chinese eunuch named Zhonghang Yue, who had been sent north against his will to accompany a heqin princess in the reign of Emperor Wen, around 174 BCE. Bitter at his exile, he had warned before leaving that he would cause the Han nothing but trouble, and he kept his word. Among the Xiongnu he became a trusted adviser to the chanyu. The Grand Historian preserves some of his advice. The entire Xiongnu population, he observed, was smaller than that of a single Han commandery. Their strength lay in the fact that their food and clothing were different and they did not depend on the Han. If the chanyu changed their customs and grew fond of Han things, then the Han would need to spend no more than two-tenths of its goods to bring the whole Xiongnu nation under its sway.

He went further. When Han silks arrived, he had them worn while riding through thorny brush, so that everyone could see how they tore and frayed, proving them inferior to felt and leather. When Han foods arrived, he had them thrown away to show that they were not as good

as milk and cheese. He also taught the chanyu's scribes to keep records and count the people and livestock, and he drafted the chanyu's letters to the Han emperor with deliberately haughty phrasing, making sure the chanyu's seal and tablets were larger than the emperor's.

Zhonghang Yue's warnings reveal something profound about the frontier. Silk was not merely a commodity. It was an instrument of power, a solvent of identity, and both sides knew it. When, a century later, silk began to travel westward in quantity along the roads Zhang Qian had opened, it carried that same double character: an object of desire, and an instrument by which a distant empire extended its influence.

Sixty Years of Restraint

For the next six decades, through the reigns of Empress Lü, Emperor Wen, and Emperor Jing, the Han maintained the heqin policy, renewing it with each new chanyu. It did not prevent raids. In 177 BCE the Xiongnu Wise King of the Right invaded the Ordos region; in 166 BCE a force of 140,000 Xiongnu horsemen penetrated deep into Han territory, burned a palace, and sent scouts so close to the capital that their fires could be seen from Chang'an. Each time, the Han mobilized, the Xiongnu withdrew, and the treaties were renewed.

Some officials chafed at the arrangement. The young scholar Jia Yi, a brilliant and tragic figure of Emperor Wen's court, wrote that the situation was like a man hanging upside down: the emperor, who should be the head of the world, was paying tribute to barbarians who should be its feet. He proposed a strategy of seduction he called the "three exemplars and five baits," using Han luxuries, music, food, and honors to corrupt and divide the Xiongnu. Another statesman, Chao Cuo, proposed a more practical program: settle soldier-farmers along the frontier, train Han cavalry in nomadic methods, and recruit surrendered nomads to fight their own kin.

Emperors Wen and Jing listened, but they did not go to war. They were consolidating the dynasty internally, building up the treasury and the granaries, and suppressing the rebellious kings of the eastern regions, who rose in the great revolt of the Seven States in 154 BCE. Their restraint was a policy, not a failure of nerve. By the time Emperor Jing died in 141 BCE, the Han had accumulated wealth on a scale that astonished later historians. The Grand Historian, writing a generation later, recalled that in the capital's treasuries the strings holding the bronze coins had rotted so that the coins could not be counted, and that grain in the state granaries was piled so high that it spilled out and rotted on the ground.

That wealth would pay for one of the great turning points in Chinese history. The young man who inherited it would not be content to hang upside down.

A Name in the West

One more piece of the background must be set in place before we meet him. In 176 BCE, Modu sent a letter to Emperor Wen announcing a great victory. His Wise King of the Right, he wrote, had attacked the Yuezhi in the west and destroyed them, killing or subduing every one. He had also pacified Loulan, the Wusun, the Hujie, and twenty-six nearby states, so that all the bow-drawing peoples had become one family. The north, he declared, was now at peace.

It was a boast, and like most boasts it was not quite true. The Yuezhi had been defeated, not destroyed. But the name of that people, and the grievance they bore against the Xiongnu, would one day send a young Han official on the longest journey of his life.

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