Han Expansion

Internal Expansion

At its founding, the Han empire was unable or unwilling to claim many of the territories recently conquered by Qin. Although this might have undermined Han prestige, most outer regions posed little military threat. But things were different in the north, where groups of pastoral nomads had united under the Xiongnu empire, led by a charismatic *chanyu*, or supreme chieftain. Over the course of its history, the Han rivalry with the Xiongnu would be a driving force behind much of its expansionary efforts.

Han expansion began "internally," with the establishment of centralized control over the kingdoms. Because these semi-independent regions might rebel against the Han or ally with the Xiongnu, Gaozu took steps toward eliminating this threat. Gradually, he replaced their rulers with his own brothers or sons. Gaozu's successors continued this process by further devising policies that weakened or abolished the kingdoms. This process created tension between the kingdoms and the central court, which exploded in 154 BCE when seven kingdoms rebelled against the imperial throne. After the rebellion was suppressed, the Han government abolished many of the kingdoms and converted them into commanderies.

HAN EXPANSION

INTERNAL EXPANSION

THE NORTH

CENTRAL ASIA

THE SOUTH

A major turning point in the history of Han expansion came with the reign of Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE), who initiated a series of conquests that projected Han power far beyond its original borders. By the end of his reign, the Han Empire had added more than a dozen new commanderies and extended its influence into Central Asia. But, by then, the enormous costs of imperial expansion under Emperor Wu had taken their toll, and court elites were searching for ways to avoid expensive military campaigns.

The rest of this reading will cover three key areas of Han expansion:

- The Xiongnu in the north,
- Central Asia and the Tarim Basin in the west,
- and the south.

Later in the module, you will get a chance to explore one of these regions in more detail. For now, this essay will give an overview of the inhabitants of these areas, and the history of their interactions with the Han Empire in the last two centuries BCE.

Key Terms:

Chanyu

Emperor Wu

Xiongnu

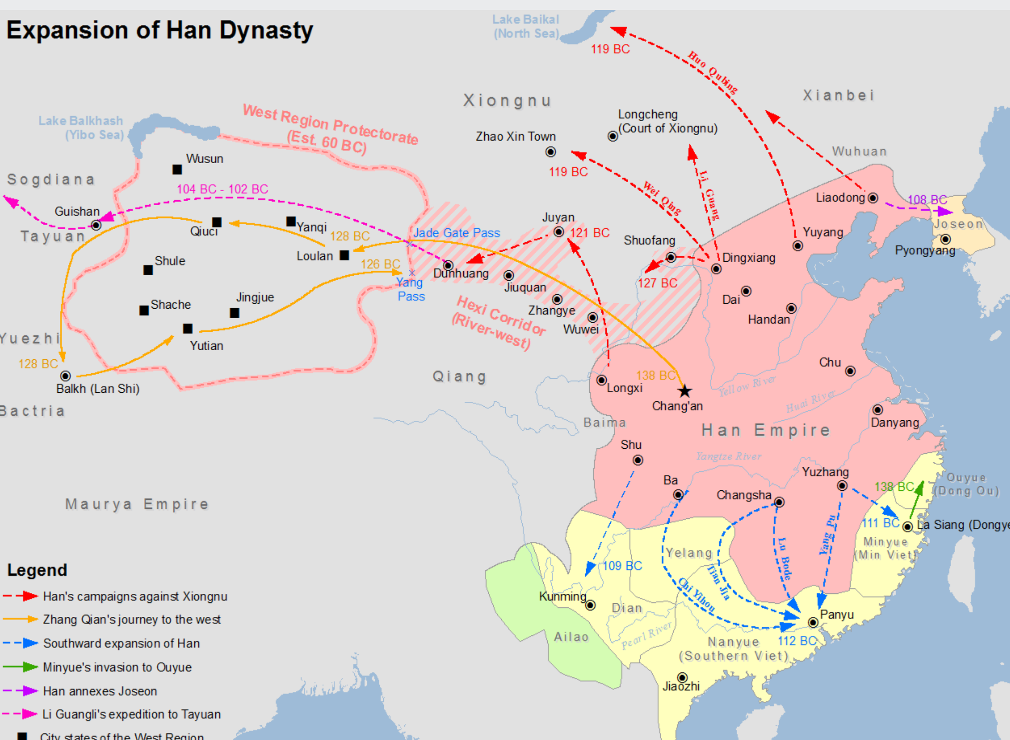
Heqin

Tarim Basin

Southern Yue

Minyue and Dong-ou

Dian, Mimo, and Yelang



Map of Han imperial expansion north, west, and south

The North

Plaque depicting Ibexes, 2nd-1st century BCE, Xiongnu

The Xiongnu were one of many nomadic groups that had settled along the northern frontiers of the Central Plains, especially in the Ordos Region, which lay within the great bend of the Yellow River, not far from the Qin-Han capital region. Because the grasslands of the Inner Asian steppe were unsuitable for agriculture, these peoples had adapted by herding livestock as their principal food source, a lifestyle which required perpetual migration in search of new pastureland. At the same time, nomads acquired additional foodstuffs and manufactured goods from nearby agricultural communities through trade or plunder. In the late 3rd century BCE, the Qin led a successful campaign to drive the Xiongnu out of this area, creating a buffer zone between the Xiongnu and the Qin heartland, protected by a long line of defenses along the Yellow River.

Around time of the Qin unification, the Xiongnu also began to create a vast empire. A new *chanyu* named Modun (reign, 209–174 BCE) brought an enormous expanse of Inner Asia under Xiongnu power. Unlike the Qin and Han, the Xiongnu Empire was more like a confederation of tribes under Xiongnu leadership, with various regional chiefs ruling their peoples autonomously. Although the *chanyu* could not exercise much direct control, he could summon vast armies and demand payments of tribute, especially from agricultural communities who had submitted to the Xiongnu. The *chanyu* used this stream of manufactured goods such as silk, ornate dining ware, wine, and other fine foodstuffs to maintain his authority. By distributing this wealth to the aristocrats below him, the *chanyu* reinforced his position as supreme chieftain, and in turn provided local rulers with their own status symbols.

For most of the second century BCE, the Han military was far weaker than the Xiongnu's. The Han's infantry-based armies were simply no match for the Xiongnu's enormous cavalry forces. At the same time, the Han military faced serious logistical issues. Because there was no food supply available to Han forces in the barren steppe lands, no expedition could last longer than one hundred days. After the Qin collapse, the Xiongnu had moved back into the Ordos region, and threatened Han settlements all along the frontier. In 200 BCE, Gaozu led an expedition to drive the Xiongnu further north, but he was badly defeated and narrowly escaped. Faced with a much stronger enemy, the Han were forced to negotiate a truce.

Territory of the Xiongnu in the 2nd century BCE

Belt buckle with animal design, made in China for the Xiongnu, 3rd-2nd century BCE

The policy that defined Han-Xiongnu relations until the reign of Emperor Wu was called *heqin*, or "harmony through kinship." Under this agreement, the Han sent a daughter of the imperial clan to marry the *chanyu* and make regular payments to the Xiongnu of the goods they desired: silk, cloth, and grain. In exchange, the Xiongnu agreed not to raid Han settlements (a promise they frequently broke). At the same time, the Han emperor and the *chanyu* would be considered "brothers" of equal status. The terms of this agreement starkly contradicted key Han assumptions about their place in the world order. Whereas the Son of Heaven was ideally the supreme ruler on earth, with all less "civilized" peoples acknowledging the Han emperor's superiority, now he was forced to call a "barbarian" chief his equal.

Fresco of Han man with crossbow

The turning-point in Han-Xiongnu relations came in 134 BCE, when Emperor Wu decided to attempt offensive military action against the Xiongnu. By this time the Han had managed to make up for earlier disadvantages. Decades of centralization had placed more resources, manpower, and authority in the hands of the imperial court. The Han military had also gradually developed a sophisticated cavalry, equipped with crossbows. Although many of Emperor Wu's campaigns were costly and ended in catastrophic failure, over time, the Han managed to shift the balance of military power.

During this time, the power of the Xiongnu Empire began to wane. Succession struggles after the death of Modun in 174 BCE fragmented the confederacy and weakened the Xiongnu militarily. As we will see in the next section, Han incursions into Central Asia also deprived the Xiongnu of key resources. In 51 BCE, Han-Xiongnu relations entered a new phase. By that time, the Xiongnu Empire had split into several groups led by rival claimants to the title of *chanyu*. One of these leaders, named Huhanye (reign, 59–31 BCE), seeking Han recognition of his claim, came to the Han capital to acknowledge the Han emperor's supremacy. From that point on, a large number of Xiongnu would be considered as dependents of the Han. Later in the dynasty many were settled in the interior of the empire, becoming essential components of the Han military.

Bronze seal, impression, and transcription (right to left) of a Xiongnu chief, conferred by the Han government. The seal reads: "The Chief of the Han Xiongnu, who have returned to righteousness and embraced the Han."

Map of Han expansion into Central Asia, 60 BCE

Central Asia

The series of trade routes extending across Central and Western Asia that connected the Han and Roman empires became known to later historians as the "Silk Roads." But, when the Han first began expanding into Central Asia, there was little evidence of a robust transcontinental trade. In fact, until the 120s BCE, the Han had almost no knowledge of the regions immediately to the west.

By 60 BCE, however, the Han had established a major military presence in the Tarim Basin—in modern Xinjiang province—coordinated by an official called the Protector General. The peoples of this area had formed small agricultural kingdoms throughout the basin which maintained frequent contact with the nomads around the periphery. In the late 3rd century BCE, many groups in this region submitted to the Xiongnu as they gained strength under Modun.

The Han rivalry with the Xiongnu provided the initial motivation for expansion into Central Asia. In the early 130s BCE, Emperor Wu's court discussed the possibility of forming an alliance with a nomadic group called the Yuezhi, who had migrated west after being defeated by the expanding Xiongnu. The Han emperor sent an emissary named Zhang Qian on an exploratory mission to establish diplomatic ties with the Yuezhi. On the way, however, Zhang Qian was captured by the Xiongnu and held prisoner for over ten years, during which time he married a Xiongnu woman and had a son. When Zhang Qian finally managed to escape and reached the Yuezhi, they were uninterested in joining the Han in hostilities against the Xiongnu.

Although Zhang Qian's diplomatic mission had failed, when he returned in 126 BCE, he brought back information that raised the possibility of a new strategy. Zhang Qian had discovered that many of the peoples in the west paid tribute to the Xiongnu. If these peoples could be convinced to submit to the Han instead, then the Xiongnu would be deprived of resources. This would particularly damaging to Xiongnu since—as we saw above—the *chanyu*'s authority depended on his ability to maintain the circulation of luxury goods among elites. In Zhang Qian's words, extending Han influence over the Tarim Basin would be like "cutting off the right arm of the Xiongnu."

Mural depicting Zhang Qian leaving emperor Han Wudi around 130 BCE for his expecition to central Asia.

Over the next few decades, the Han began sending envoys bearing gifts of silk and other manufactured goods to the leaders of Central Asian peoples, hoping to win them over by demonstrating the wealth and might of the Han empire. The Han also adapted the *heqin* policy to this region by sending Han princesses to marry Central Asian kings. In return, Central Asian leaders sent gift-bearing envoys to the Han court, presenting the emperor with distinctive local products. The Han court developed an especially robust demand for the excellent horses of Ferghana, on the western edge of the Tarim Basin, who were said to sweat blood. Soon, a regular pattern of political gift-giving was established that laid the foundations for the transcontinental trade that would later be called the "Silk Roads." To facilitate the expansion of this network, the Han established new commanderies in the Gansu corridor, a thin strip of land stretching to the northwest of the core Han area. In these new territories, the Han set up military garrisons to serve as waystations for envoys. At the same time, this placed Han armies within striking distance of the Tarim Basin.

The politics of the Tarim Basin during this time was marked by intense competition between the two "superpowers"—Han and Xiongnu—for influence over region. Central Asian leaders often attempted to balance ties to both empires. In 108 BCE, the Han began attempting to assert influence through military force, defeating the nearby states of Loulan and Turfan. But when Ferghana sought to break off ties with the Han Empire 101 BCE, the imperial court tried to demonstrate its power by launching an expedition across the desert. The first attempt at this failed miserably due to provisioning issues. But after an expensive four-year campaign, Ferghana submitted to Han forces.

As Han influence in the Tarim Basin increased, it began conferring seals of office and Han titles on Central Asian rulers, incorporating them into the empire by using Han symbols of authority. While these credentials became important for the legitimacy of some rulers, other states appear to have formally acknowledged Han superiority merely as a way of gaining access to Han goods. Han political influence was supported by an increasing power of its military in the region. Beginning in the 80s BCE, the Han government began establishing military colonies in the northwest and in the Tarim Basin. These colonies were based on farms worked by a mixture of convicts, volunteers, and non-Chinese peoples from the surrounding area. In times of military need, these farmers could be called up as soldiers. In 60 BCE, the Han emperor established a general with the title of Protector General, who was responsible for coordinating the activities of Han envoys and troops in the area. This marked the high point of Han influence, indicating that the Xiongnu had largely been eclipsed as regional hegemons. But as the 1st century BCE wore on, many Han elites began to question the value of engagement in Central Asia, and to worry about the mounting costs and obligations that came with maintaining such a far-flung empire.

Xiongnu Noin-Ula carpet depicting figures believed to be Central Asian Yuezhis

The South

During the Qin and Han dynasties, the southern regions were notoriously difficult to control. Populated by a multitude of tribes with distinct languages and lifestyles, the sheer diversity of these areas posed a challenge to any would-be imperial administrator. At the same time, the geography of the south made military expeditions extremely difficult. Mountains and swamps made passage difficult, while the subtropical climate created a fertile breeding ground for diseases that could easily decimate an expeditionary force.

The history of Han expansion into these areas involved complex negotiations over symbols of authority, always balanced against the willingness and capacity of the Han court to risk expensive military campaigns. Here, we will consider three distinct regions of the South—the kingdom of Southern Yue, the Southeast coast, and the Southwest—in which these dynamics played out.

Southern Yue: The regions along the south China coast—in modern Guangxi and Guangdong province—were populated by numerous peoples which the Han grouped together using the general term "Yue tribes." While the Qin had conquered these peoples and established three commanderies in the region, the actual extent of Qin control in this region is unknown. Following the empire's collapse, a local Qin official named Zhao Tuo claimed its former territories and established himself as the King of Southern Yue.

Map illustrating southward expansion of Han

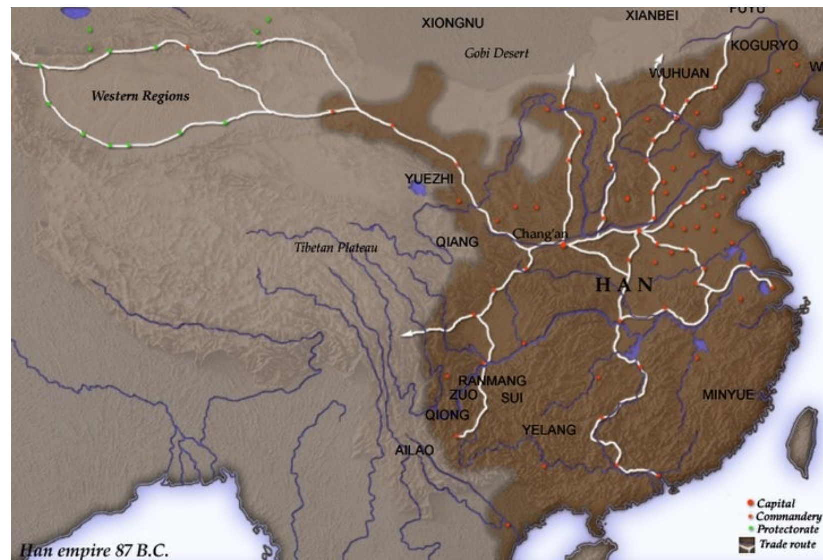
The relationship between the kingdom of Southern Yue and the Han empire was ambiguous and constantly shifting. In 196 BCE, six years after the founding of the Han dynasty, Gaozu sent an emissary to "confirm" Zhao Tuo's title. Although Zhao Tuo formally accepted Han superiority, it was clear he had other ambitions. Claiming the title of "emperor," he sought to expand his influence in the southern regions. In the 180s BCE, he even made several raids in the southern territories of the Han kingdom of Changsha. Although he eventually agreed to renounce the title of "emperor" and reaffirm his subordination, his compliance with this agreement was never fully certain.

In this way, while the Han attempted to use the same language of authority and subordination used for other "kingdoms," the reality for Southern Yue was far more complex. Its degree of incorporation shifted back and forth, depending on the extent to which Southern Yue complied with the rules and rituals in place for the other kingdoms. By 113 BCE, different factions had formed in Southern Yue between those who favored greater incorporation—led by a queen dowager who had been born in the Han empire—and those in favor of independence. When the latter faction murdered the queen dowager in 112 BCE, the Han court sent a punitive expedition to finally conquer Southern Yue and incorporate its territories as commanderies.

Mural from the Han Dahuting Tomb, depicting a banquet

The Southeast: The Southeast coast of China—roughly in the area of modern Fujian province—is a rugged mountainous region with limited flatlands along the coastline. Han elites perceived the peoples in this region as especially "barbaric" and prone to fighting one another. Because this land was of little value from the perspective of an agrarian empire, the major question for the court was whether this region was worth bothering with at all.

Initially, the Han government recognized two kingdoms in the area—Minyue and Dong-ou—which were in constant conflict. When Dong-ou appealed to the Han court in 138 BCE to intervene on its behalf, the Han emperor decided to resettle its entire population in the interior of the empire. Another intervention in 135 BCE stopped Minyue from attacking Southern Yue, and split Minyue into two separate kingdoms. In 112 BCE, the leader of one of these kingdoms declared himself an "emperor" and killed Han officials in the area. At this point, the Han government apparently abandoned any efforts at controlling the area. Sources claim that the whole region was evacuated and resettled, but in fact this would have been impossible.



Extent of the Han empire in 87 BCE showing trade routes in white

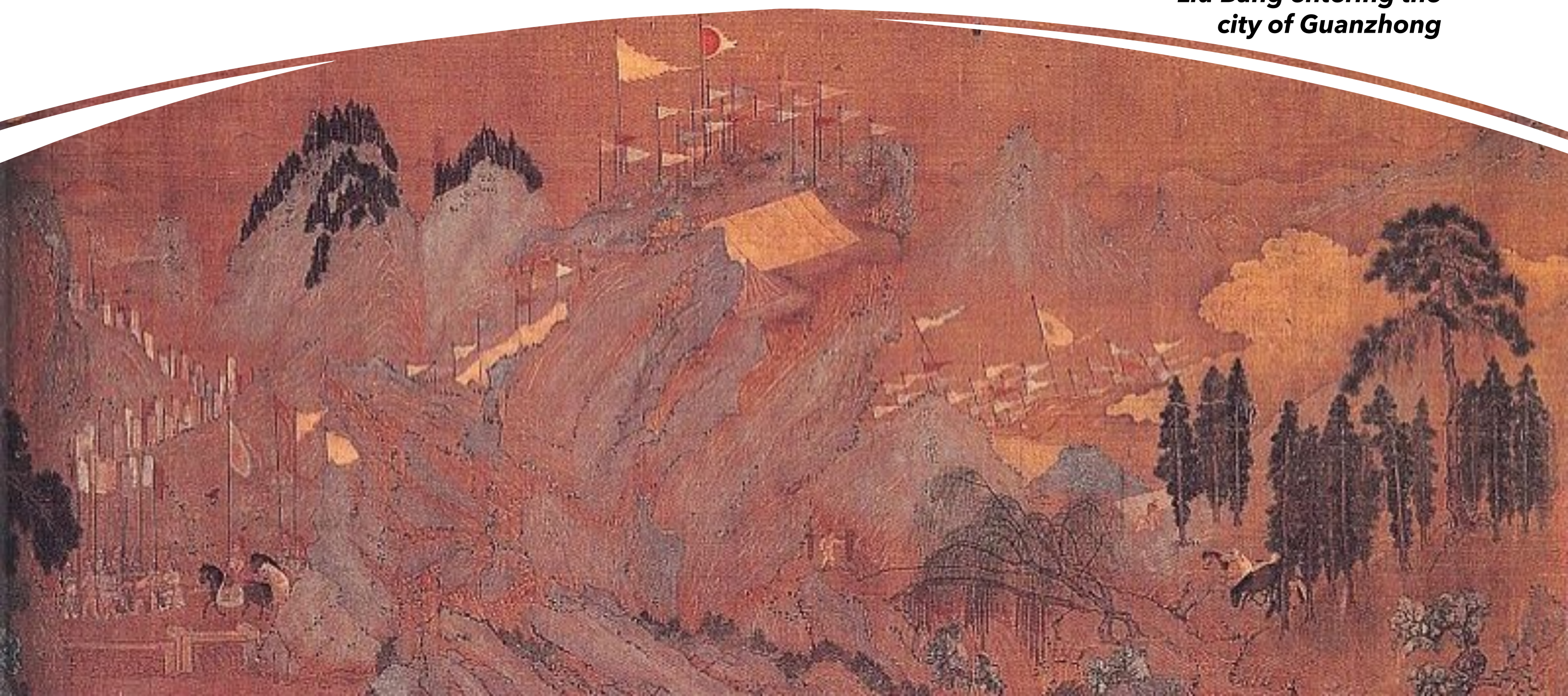
The Southwest: The Southwest—in modern Yunnan and Guizhou provinces, as well as parts of present-day Vietnam and Myanmar (also called Burma) —was yet another mountainous region filled with diverse peoples, some sedentary, some nomadic. A few of the agrarian peoples—such as the Dian, Mimo, and Yelang—had formed large kingdoms capable of producing stunning bronze goods. The Dian kingdom in particular was known for its enormous, ornate bronze drums that likely served as symbols of authority. The nomadic peoples further into the interior, by contrast, did not have a clear hierarchy of political authority. The whole region was situated at the crossroads of important trade routes linking the periphery of the Han Empire to South and Southeast Asia.

Portrait of Emperor Wu of Han

As Han knowledge of these trade connections increased, the court became interested in exerting more control over the area. Early in the reign of Emperor Wu, a Han emissary discovered the existence of a trade route linking the southwestern Han commandery of Shu to Southern Yue by way of the Zangge river. The Yelang people, he reported, had grown wealthy from their advantageous position as intermediaries in this network. Soon the Han established a commandery this region, and commenced road and canal building efforts intended to strengthen links to the empire. Yet another revelation came in 122 BCE, when Zhang Qian returned from a mission in Central Asia. While staying in Bactria—a region to the west of the Tarim Basin in modern Afghanistan—he discovered bamboo canes in a market that had been manufactured in Shu, which the Bactrians had acquired from Shu merchants in Shendu (India). This proved the existence of a southern route to Central Asia which could allow Han emissaries to avoid the Xiongnu entirely. However, Han attempts to explore this route were thwarted by the Kunming peoples living in the southwestern interior. Nevertheless, in the Southwest the Han discovered transcontinental connections of which it had previously been unaware.

Han attempts to exert control over the Southwest were a complex mixture of administrative strategies used in other regions. On one hand, the Han recognized local chieftains as "marquises" and sometimes—when they were especially important—as "kings." On the other hand, the Han established several "commanderies" in the area over the course of Emperor Wu's reign. While historians know little about the actual administration of these areas, it appears to have involved a combination of indigenous and Han rule. By 109 BCE, many of the major Han military incursions into the southwest had been completed, but imperial control over the area remained unstable over the course of the dynasty, with major outbreaks of rebellion in the 80s and 20s BCE.

Liu Bang entering the city of Guanzhong



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