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<A href="http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid&custid=hadkill&db=khh&AN=25893547&site=eds-live">Xiongnu Tribe.</A>

**Database:**

History Reference Center

**Xiongnu Tribe**

**NOTE:**For guidance on how to pronounce Chinese names and words, see article titled "Chinese Pronunciation Guide" below.

Key words: Bei Han; Great Wall; Han; Liu Yuan; Modu Shanyu; Qin Shi Huang; steppes; Xiongnu

**Summary:**The Xiongnu were a nomadic tribe based roughly in contemporary Mongolia. They were among the earliest "Mongolian" peoples from the north who confronted the ethnic Chinese in what became a centuries-long struggle for domination. The dates of the Xiongnu stretch from the early 200s BCE until about 300 CE, a period of roughly 500 years. The Great Wall was started as an attempt to guard against Xiongnu incursions. For many decades the Han dynasty paid tribute--effectively, blackmail--to keep them at bay. When one Xiongnu leader ceased observing peace in exchange for tributes, the Han Chinese launched an expedition that effectively chased the Xiongnu as far west as the Caucasus Mountains. But chaos in the later Han dynasty saw the Xiongnu return to challenge ethnic Chinese in northern China. Some scholars think the Xiongnu may have been the precursors of the next aggressive nomadic tribe from the Asian steppes, the Huns.

[**At a Glance**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/delivery?sid=ce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%40sessionmgr4006&vid=10&ReturnUrl=http%3a%2f%2feds.a.ebscohost.com%2feds%2fdetail%2fdetail%3fvid%3d9%26sid%3dce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%2540sessionmgr4006%26bdata%3dJkF1dGhUeXBlPWNvb2tpZSxpcCxjcGlkJmN1c3RpZD1oYWRraWxsJnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%253d#toc)

**Where:**Steppes of Asia north of China.

**When:**~200 BCE-300 CE

**What:**A federation of nomadic tribes that repeatedly challenged ethnic Chinese for control of what is now northern China.

**Significance:**The Xiongnu, like many nomads, had little lasting cultural impact as their importance lay in the ebb and flow of their military power, which was largely based on their skills as horsemen.

The Xiongnu (pronounced she-ong-nu) were one of a series of nomadic peoples living on the grassy plains ("steppes") north of China who came into conflict with the dominant Han Chinese. Early in the third century BCE, the Xiongnu, whom scholars classify as a confederation of different tribes, dominated a large territory stretching from Siberia in the north, Manchuria in the east, Han China in the south, to as far west as the Caucasus mountains at the western edge of contemporary Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The center of their civilization largely comprised Mongolia and lands to the west where they grazed animals and developed skills as horsemen.

The origins and ethnic character of the Xiongnu have long led to speculation that they were related to--or, indeed, the immediate forerunners of--the Huns and/or the Mongols. In common with those two tribes, the Xiongnu built a reputation as ferocious warriors who fought from horseback, but who largely failed to build a lasting civilization.

Most of what is known about the Xiongnu comes from Chinese records; the Xiongnu themselves left virtually no written records in their own language. Scholars disagree about the language of the Xiongnu. Some classify it as Turkic (related to modern Turkish); others think it was Mongolic (the language of the tribe later known as Mongols). A theory that has gained popularity recently is that the Xiongnu language should be classified as a member of the Yeniseian language related to a small group of people from central Siberia.

The Xiongnu had a long history of conflict with the ethnic Han Chinese living to their south. The earliest version of the Great Wall was ordered constructed by the legendary first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang (260-210 BCE) of the Qin dynasty to protect his kingdom from the roving Xiongnu.

[**Federation**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/delivery?sid=ce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%40sessionmgr4006&vid=10&ReturnUrl=http%3a%2f%2feds.a.ebscohost.com%2feds%2fdetail%2fdetail%3fvid%3d9%26sid%3dce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%2540sessionmgr4006%26bdata%3dJkF1dGhUeXBlPWNvb2tpZSxpcCxjcGlkJmN1c3RpZD1oYWRraWxsJnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%253d#toc)

A key beginning point in the Xiongnu's rise occurred about 200 BCE when a leader of one clan, named Modu, created a federation of tribes and took on the title of shanyu, meaning "son of the endless sky." By bringing together disparate clans into a unified group, Modu Shanyu (see separate article database), as he became known, steadily expanded the area his new federation dominated and presented a constant challenge to the Han dynasty (206-220 CE), and the two peoples were in frequent conflict.

In 198 BCE the Han emperor, Gaozu, led an unsuccessful military expedition against the Xiongnu, then abandoned efforts to pacify them militarily and resorted to negotiating a peace treaty that included giving Modu Shanyu a Chinese bride and offering gifts to the Xiongnu leader, while agreeing to a mutual border along the Great Wall. This peace treaty lasted for the next 60 years.

Modu Shanyu's successor, Laoshang Shanyu, stopped honoring the treaty, staging raids deep into Han territory, with the result that the Han stopped paying tribute (i.e. giving gifts, which had steadily increased in value) and launched a successful assault on the Xiongnu in 129 BC, driving the Xiongnu north of the Gobi desert.

The Han continued to press on against the Xiongnu, eventually chasing them as far west as the Caspian Sea and into what is now the Ukraine.

However, under the short-lived Xin dynasty (9-25 BCE), when China was in turmoil during what amounted to a coup d'etat against the Han, the Xiongnu staged a comeback and turned the tables, regaining much of their lost territory and even discussing collecting tribute from the Chinese.

[**Division**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/delivery?sid=ce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%40sessionmgr4006&vid=10&ReturnUrl=http%3a%2f%2feds.a.ebscohost.com%2feds%2fdetail%2fdetail%3fvid%3d9%26sid%3dce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%2540sessionmgr4006%26bdata%3dJkF1dGhUeXBlPWNvb2tpZSxpcCxjcGlkJmN1c3RpZD1oYWRraWxsJnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%253d#toc)

Following a pattern that plagued many nomadic tribesmen who would subsequently rise to dominance (such as the Mongols; see separate article), the Xiongnu split in 48 CE over the question of succession of leadership. Subsequently the Xiongnu were divided between southern branch and a northern branch, greatly diminishing their threat to the restored Han dynasty. The southern branch actually entered into a reverse tribute relationship with the Han--paying gifts in exchange for peace--in 50 CE.

Thirty-five years later, in the period 85-89 CE, the shanyu of the northern Xiongnu was defeated by a new federation of another nomadic peoples, the Xianbei, from Manchuria, to the east. Scholars debate whether the northern branch of the Xiongnu later emerged as a nomadic tribes known as the Huns (see separate article database).

[**Afterward**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/delivery?sid=ce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%40sessionmgr4006&vid=10&ReturnUrl=http%3a%2f%2feds.a.ebscohost.com%2feds%2fdetail%2fdetail%3fvid%3d9%26sid%3dce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%2540sessionmgr4006%26bdata%3dJkF1dGhUeXBlPWNvb2tpZSxpcCxjcGlkJmN1c3RpZD1oYWRraWxsJnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%253d#toc)

The seeming subjugation of the southern Xiongnu and the exile of the northern branch did not bring an end to their story. The Xiongnu were drawn into a rebellion against the Han in 188, and their shanyu was murdered by his own people, who feared he was negotiating to contribute troops to prop up the Han emperor.

The end of the Han dynasty (officially in 220 CE, but practically several years before that) introduced a prolonged period of conflict and divided government in China (see separate articles database: Three Kingdoms, Jin Dynasty 265-420, and Song dynasty). Liu Yuan, joined by dissident Chinese, attacked the Western Jin dynasty's capital at Luoyang in 304 under the name of Bei Han (apparently to win popular support by evoking fond memories of the Han dynasty) and established control over much of northern China in 320. A rival general challenged Liu Yuan, and after a decade-long war established a dynasty known as the Later Zhao which lasted for 20 years as one of the "Sixteen Kingdoms" that ruled in a divided northern China.

[**Impact**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/delivery?sid=ce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%40sessionmgr4006&vid=10&ReturnUrl=http%3a%2f%2feds.a.ebscohost.com%2feds%2fdetail%2fdetail%3fvid%3d9%26sid%3dce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%2540sessionmgr4006%26bdata%3dJkF1dGhUeXBlPWNvb2tpZSxpcCxjcGlkJmN1c3RpZD1oYWRraWxsJnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%253d#toc)

Doubts about eventual disposition of the Xiongnu people--and specifically whether they reemerged from the steppes as the Huns--make it difficult to assess their impact. There is no clear evidence of lingering cultural influence, a characteristic common to other nomadic tribes that managed to dominate large areas through military skills but did not have matching administrative skills and whose wandering lifestyle generally precluded cultural achievements.

[**More information**](http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/delivery?sid=ce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%40sessionmgr4006&vid=10&ReturnUrl=http%3a%2f%2feds.a.ebscohost.com%2feds%2fdetail%2fdetail%3fvid%3d9%26sid%3dce2355b6-58cc-4a47-aab3-1ac26d9c01bf%2540sessionmgr4006%26bdata%3dJkF1dGhUeXBlPWNvb2tpZSxpcCxjcGlkJmN1c3RpZD1oYWRraWxsJnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmU%253d#toc)

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Chinese is not a phonetic language; characters in Chinese do not give a clue about pronunciation, as they do in English. In translation Chinese names and words into the English alphabet, the usual pronunciation one might expect does not always apply in the commonly used translation scheme called Pinyin. Below is a list of English letters and combinations of letters (especially vowels) that, when used in Chinese words, sound different than one might expect if they were English words. Most other words are pronounced as one would expect in English.

**ang:**should rhyme with "gong," NOT with "hang." The name "Wang" thus sounds like "Wong."

**c:**like "ts" as in the "ts" sound in "hotspot"

**e:**like the vowel sound in "should;" say "should" without the beginning "sh" or the final "d", EXCEPT when "e" is preceded by "y," when it sounds like "yes" without the final "s" sound.

**ei:**say the letter A

**en:**say "un"

**eng:**rhymes with "lung"

**i:**say the letter E

**ian:**say the letter E, then the letter N - eee-en

**iang:**say the letter E, then "ang" as above, rhyming with "gong": eee-ong

**ie:**like "yes" without the final "s" sound

**in:**een, as in "seen" but without the beginning "s"

**iong:**say "yong" to rhyme with "gong"

**iu:**say "yo"

**o:**like "war" without the final "r" sound

**ong:**rhymes with "gong"

**ou:**say the letter O

**q:**like "ch" as in "chile"

**u:**say "ooo"

**uan:**ooo, then the letter N: ooo-en

**uang:**pronounced "wang" and rhymes with "gong," NOT with "hang"

**ue:**the word "you," then the sound "e" as in the beginning of "elephant"—you-eh

**ui:**say the word "way"

**un:**oon, as in "spoon" but without the beginning "s"

**uo:**like "war" without the final "r" sound

**x:**like "sh" in "shut"

**z:**like "tz" as in the "tz" sound at the end of "pizza"

**zh:**like j, as in "jump; it has no "z" sound

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By Liz Phillips