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The Qai, the Khongai, and the Names of the Xiōgnú

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THE QAI, THE KHONGAI,¹
AND THE NAMES OF THE XIŌNGNÚ

Christopher P. Atwood

In a recent paper I discussed the names of the Xiōngnú² both in East Asia and in the West. I concluded that the various Western reflexes of “Hun”, such as Greek Ounnoi, Sogdian Hon, and Saka Huna, were indeed derived from the same origin as the Chinese name pronounced (in its modern form) Xiōngnú.³ What was surprising, however, is that all the phonetic evidence seemed to indicate that the Iranian names (and from them the more westerly ones) derived from the Sanskrit intermediary Hūṇa, not the other way around. In other words, the name for Xiōngnû-Hūṇa proceeded west not along the famous Silk Road or the somewhat less famous “Steppe Road”⁴ but by a very circuitous and round-about detour south of the Himalayas and thence northwest into Bactria first and then Sogdiana, only afterwards reaching the Greeks.

This conclusion raises in a very sharp form an issue which has long puzzled ancient Inner Asian studies: the strange disconnect between the names found in Chinese sources and those found in the Western (Greek and Iranian) sources. Before the fourth or fifth century CE these names have hardly any common basis. To take a striking example, in Chinese sources, the Wūsūn 烏孫 are a powerful kingdom and people found not that far from the borders of the Achaemenid and succeeding Greek kingdoms. Yet no convincing reflex of this name has ever been found in Western writings.⁵ And it is striking that the name of the immensely powerful Xiōngnú likewise does not appear anywhere in Greek or Iranian sources prior to the fourth century CE, centuries after they had burst on the scene of Inner Asian history with their powerful empire. This disconnect between Eastern and Western sources needs more attention that it has received so far. Although the problem cannot be wholly solved as present, evidence from later in Inner Asian history can, I believe, outline parts of some potential solutions.
I. Ethnonyms, Dynastonyms, and Lineage Names in Inner Asian Dynasties

From the Türk era onwards, we have access to the autonyms (self-designations) of a wide variety of Inner Asian empires. Aligning the material that we have indicates that there are up to four different levels of designation for Inner Asian polities: a named imperial lineage, a new dynastic term, a mass ethnic term, and as a possible fourth level, sometimes an elite ethnic term, which may merge elsewhere with the dynastic term (see Table 1). After the Mongol empire, the nomad-based empires succeeding it in South and Southwest Asia continued to use separate terms for the imperial dynasty (always based on the personal name of the dynasty’s founder or ultimate ancestor), for the nomadic army upon which it was based, and for the land which they inhabited (see Table 2).

The most exclusive level is the patrilineage or “bone” name of the ruling family: Aishin ("Golden") Giyoro, Borjigid or Kiyad, Yaghlaqar, Ashina(s), etc. Such a lineage name usually remains limited to the particular patrilineage, and rarely becomes a wider ethnonym. As the political name of the imperial lineage, this name is guarded closely by the imperial lineage as an attribute of elite political status. However, the Tabghach (from Takbat, modern Mandarin Tuóbá 拓跋) surname of the Northern Wei 魏 dynasty eventually became the western ethnonym for the North Chinese.⁶

Table 1: Names of Nomadic and Altaic Empires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ruling lineage</th>
<th>Luándí- Xüliántí</th>
<th>Takbat- Tabghach</th>
<th>Qqor</th>
<th>Zhama- Ashina(sh)</th>
<th>Yaghlaqar</th>
<th>Yélǔ- Yilâ</th>
<th>Borjigid- Kiyad</th>
<th>Aishin Gioro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dynastic name</td>
<td>Xiōngnú</td>
<td>Wei</td>
<td>Róurán Türk</td>
<td>Liao</td>
<td>Yuan</td>
<td>Qing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruling ethnonym</td>
<td></td>
<td>Avars</td>
<td>Uyghur Kitan- Khitay</td>
<td>Mongol</td>
<td>Manchu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinate ethnonym</td>
<td>Hú (Xiānbēi)</td>
<td>High Carts Oghur- Oghuz</td>
<td>Toquz- Oghuz Qai</td>
<td>Tatars Jurchen- Jushen</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Countries, Armies, and Dynasties in the post-Mongol West
(based on Levi 2002: 9-11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynasty</th>
<th>Ottoman Empire</th>
<th>Safavid Empire</th>
<th>Uzbek Empire</th>
<th>Mughals Empire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Osmah (Ottoman)</td>
<td>Safavid</td>
<td>Chinggisid</td>
<td>Timurid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Rome/Rūm</td>
<td>Qızılbash</td>
<td>Uzbek</td>
<td>Mughal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital City</td>
<td>Istanbul</td>
<td>Isfahan</td>
<td>Bukhara</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most inclusive level is the dynastonym: a name chosen to designate the whole state and all its people. In Chinese history the use of a separate dynastonym is well known, as is also the tendency of such names to become ethnonyms. Thus Han 漢 became the widely used ethnonym for Chinese in Mandarin, while Tang 唐 became that for Chinese in Cantonese (Ramsey 1987: 98-99). That dynastonyms have been used by nomadic empires on the Mongolian plateau has not often been recognized. But Paul Goldin has recently stressed the importance of such names (Goldin 2011: 224-228). A recognition of the use of such names helps to explain the sudden appearance of numerous names that later became ethnonyms. The names Róurán 柔然 and Türk/Tūjué 突厥, for example, are both marked by a sudden appearance that seems to have no known ethnic precursor before the proclamation of the empire. Both are used in the extant sources for an organized empire with a dominant imperial dynasty. Both names are thus best understood as dynastonyms which were proclaimed together with the founding of the empire, just like Han and Tang. And like them, Tūjué/Türk at least became a widely used ethnonym, even after the disappearance of the dynasty for which it had been originally named. In other cases, however, the dynastonym is based on a pre-existing sub-ethnic term, such as Uyghur or Mongghol. These names were used before the rise of the empire that bore their name, but were designations only of very insignificant groups, barely noticed among the Oghuz or Tatars that were the general ethnonyms of the people from which the dynasty emerged. Finally in other cases, the dynastonym assumed was a Chinese one, such as Wei 魏, Liao 遼, Jin 金, or Qing 清. Regardless, one may say that there is not a single instance of a nomadic empire on the Mongolian plateau using for its primary title an ethnonym that was in widespread use before its rise. The rule appears to be that a new empire must have a new name.

In between the surname of the imperial family and the dynastonym lies the level of ethnonym, that is, the type of name that it has been generally assumed to be the main one...
for Inner Asian empires. Even here, however, there is more than meets the eye. Many Inner Asian dynasties have not one, but two ethnonyms associated with their founders. The best-known example is that of the Mongol empire, where the empire-building ethnic group is known as both Tatar and Mongol. It is commonly assumed that the name Tatar is somehow “wrong” but in the earliest known account of Chinggis Qan’s empire, the only one written during his life, the Song envoy Zhao Gong writes: “I personally saw the Acting Emperor, Muqali, who always called himself ‘we Tatars’, and all these great ministers and marshals always refer to themselves as ‘we [Tatars]’.” (Wang 1962: 436) Nor is this the only case. The term Manchu replaced a previously existing term Jushen or Jurchen in the Qing empire. Jushen eventually comes to mean “slave” (Pelliot 1959: 378; Yao 2012). In the Liao empire, the Qai appear to be a kind of subordinate ethnic twin of the dominant Kitan, the two together called the “Two noni-Han” liangfan. Similarly, the Uyghur empire, while named in Chinese after the elite sub-ethnic group Uyghur, is universally called by the broader ethnonym Toquzghuz “Nine Oghuz” in the Arabic geographical sources (Minorsky 1970: 94-95, 263-277; Martinez 1982: 131-36; Minorsky 1942: 14, 27, 29). In the Türk empire, the Oghuz and the mysterious Sir likewise designate people who seem on the one hand to be the majority population of the empire, but also to be frequently designated as hostile to the dynasty. Finally, in the Northern Wei, the ruling lineage Takbat is on the one hand seen to be part of the Serbi(Xiānbēi) people, but on the other hand, as with the Jushen in Manchu vocabulary, Serbi seems to designate the lowliest people and even comes to mean “slave.”

In short, we find that most Mongolian plateau empires seem to have multiple ethnonyms, in which there is a broader term, which is frequently used by outsiders, but also comes to have low status, and a narrower term, which becomes the empire’s own preferred term.

II. Hú and Xiōngnú: Family Names, Ethnonyms, and Dynastonyms in the Xiōngnú Realm

Looking at the ethnonyms used in the Xiōngnú empire, there is a similar set of dynastonyms, imperial surnames, and dual ethnonyms among the Xiōngnú. The imperial surname is the clearest case. The imperial surname is given as Luándí in the Hānshū, and Xūlíántí in the Hōu Hānshū (Ban Gu 1962: 94A/3751; Fan Ye 1965: 89/2944-45). This name certainly does not appear to have any reflex elsewhere in the names of the Xiōngnú, although Pullyblank sought to connect it both with “Xiōngnú” itself and the obscure Phrounoi
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That “Xiongnu” was in some sense a self-designation of the Xiongnu appears from letters sent by the court of the Darqa (i.e. Xiongnu emperor) to the emperor of China. Such letters were written in Chinese, but preserved a good deal of the original Xiongnu phrasing (enough to be considered highly disrespectful to the Chinese court). Thus in official communications between him and the Han emperor, the Xiongnu Darqa called himself, and was called by the Han ruler in return, the Xiongnu da chanyu (Shiji, 110. 2896, 2897, 2899, 2902, 2903; Hanshu, 94A.3756, 3758, 3760, 3762, 3764). The Xiongnu founder Modun 冒頓 in a letter describing his conquests to Han Wendi writes of the conquered people that “they all already become Xiongnu” (Ban Gu 1962: 94A/3757). Finally the mother of the recently deceased Darqa Huhanye 呼韓邪 in describing the disorder of the Xiongnu realm wrote: “For more than ten years the Xiongnu have suffered disorders, linked up like hairs on a head.” (Ban Gu 1962: 94B/3807)

At the same time, the term Hu 胡 is also attested as a self-designation of the Xiongnu in the same sorts of letters. The Darqa Hulugii 狐鹿姑 wrote to Han Wudi: “In the south are the Great Han, in the north are the Powerful Hu; the Hu are the proud children of Heaven” 南有大漢，北有強胡。胡者，天之驕子也 (Ban Gu 1962: 94B/3780). He also wrote: “When the Hu attacked, they would sacrifice a soldier, constantly saying that they wished to get [the feared Han general] Ershi as a human sacrifice.” 胡攻時祠兵，常言得貳師以社 (Ban Gu 1962: 94A/3781) The usage of Hu for Xiongnu can also be seen in Chinese narrative statements, although these are not so likely to preserve Xiongnu usage as the examples I have cited above (see the citations in Lin 2007: 142-43).

According to the pattern for nomadic empires I have noted so far, in the case of the Xiongnu and Hu one should be the imperial dynastonym, while the other should be the pre-existing ethnonym, one which had a broad usage, and eventually acquired somewhat plebeian connotations. In fact, I argue Xiongnu is the dynastonym, while Hu is the broader ethnic term.

The term Xiongnu is never attested in Chinese document written before the reign of Modun 冒頓, the first great Xiongnu Darqa. Edwin Pulleyblank has found four cases where the term Xiongnu appears to be used in Han dynasty literature to refer to events in the Warring States period, but he argues that most of them are anachronistic, and that an original Hu has been replaced with Xiongnu by later editors (Pulleyblank 1994: 520-21). I will come back to this again, but certainly Hu appears to be much more widely used in the Warring States period than Xiongnu. Thus Xiongnu appears to be either the dynastonym of the new
empire, like Turk, or an elite ethnonym, like Mongol, while Hú was a widespread, pre-existing ethnonym, like Oghuz or Tatar. As Paul Goldin has argued, to speak of the Xiongnu before the founding of their empire, is a “category mistake” (Goldin 2011: 227). It is taking what is a political name anachronistically as an ethnic name, as if one were to speak of the Tsars ruling the Soviet Union or the United Kingdom under the Tudors.

Before the term Xiongnu appeared, northern nomads were generally called Hú. In the famous debate cited in “Strategies of the Warring States” (Zhanguo ce 戰國策), the term Hú was used for those people wearing the trousers and other clothing appropriate for mounted archery (Zhanguo ce, 19.204-211, 29.326; Crump 1996, pp. 288-98, 466). In Sima Qian’s version of this debate under King Wuling of Zhao (307 BCE), the term Hú is used for three specific peoples. One is the “Forest Hú” (Lin Hú 林胡) who from their name must have inhabited a forested region. This may have been either the dense forests of the Yin Shan 際山 Mountains (Mongolian Dalan Khara or Kharagana Mountains) north of Hohhot or a much larger, but not so densely wooded pine and cypress forest along the western borders of Ordos whose remnants can still be seen in a few places. Barren today, both areas were forested up until the mid-eighteenth century (Ai Chong 2012, pp. 270-72, 286, 288-290, fig. 17-2).\[16\] Second was the Lóufán 樓煬, who inhabited the area of the Tümed plain around Hohhot and northwestern Shanxi (Pulleyblank 1994: 518-19). Finally it was also used for the “Eastern Hú,” in the area where modern-day Liaoning, Hebei, and Inner Mongolia meet. These three, the Forest Hú, the Lóufán, and the Eastern Hú together formed the “Three Hú” (Shiji 1982: 43.1809).

As Pulleyblank argued, the expulsion of the Lóufán and other non-Huaxia Chinese from the Ordos-Tümed plain region by Meng Tian 蒙恬, general of the rising Qin 秦 dynasty, was a pivotal event in the early history of the Xiongnu. It was in reaction to this event, the fall of the Qin, and the subsequent embroilment of China in the civil wars that led to Modun and the Xiongnu empire’s confrontation with the new Han dynasty. On this basis, he argues that the Xiongnu were in fact Hú from the Ordos region, related both to the Yiqu 義渠, a Warring States era kingdom in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border area, and to the Lóufán (Pulleyblank 1994: 514-17, 522-23). It was this incorporation which presumably led the Xiongnu to acquire the ethnic self-designation as Hú.

This debate over the historical origins of the Xiongnu has also extended to archaeology. While many Mongolian archaeologists derive the Xiongnu culture from the Slab-Grave culture of Bronze Age and early Iron Age eastern Mongolia, Chinese archaeologists, such as Tian Guangjin 田廣金 and Guo Suxin 郭素新 (1986) have derived it from the culture of
the Ordos-style bronzes. Although this debate is on-going and so far inconclusive (that the proponents as a rule literally do not speak each others' languages—or read each others' writings—makes resolution difficult), it has pointed out the existence of both southern and northern affiliations of the later Noyon Uul culture associated with the Xiongnu (Turbat 2004; Psarras 2003-04).

While I agree with Pulleyblank that the Xiongnu certainly incorporated the southern Hú and Lóufán into their rule, and presumably received extensive cultural influences from them, I do not think it follows that the Xiongnu as a dynasty and ruling family was solely, or even primarily, Hú in origin. Pulleyblank's "Out of Ordos" theory has been criticized in several ways. Archaeologically, Sergey Miniaiev (1991) has pointed out that most of what we know as Xiongnu culture is an imperial creation, postdating the rise of the empire, but that the closest parallels to the "ordinary" graves are found in south-eastern Manchuria, not in Ordos or the northern Chinese borderland. More fundamentally Nicolo di Cosmo 2011 has argued that,

If we are looking for the "roots" of the political culture and institutions of the Xiongnu empire, … we must therefore conclude that events occurring on the Sino-nomadic frontier … cannot be the sole catalyst for the emergence of the Xiongnu empire. Our discussion points, rather, to the existence of a cultural continuum between the nomadic world to the north of China and the "Scythian" Siberian and Central Asian cultures that does, in all probability, account not only for the substantial similarities in their material cultures, but also for the possible similarities in forms of political organization whose paths and roots remain, to date, obscure (Di Cosmo 2011, p. 48).

As I will show later, the self-designation of the empire as the "people who draw the bow" illustrates in a very explicit fashion the "Skythian" origin of the Xiongnu political system. But this perspective does not mean that Inner Mongolian elements were completely excluded from the formation of the Xiongnu. Rather, Xiongnu and Hú were different words with different meanings, but which both ended up designating different aspects or populations of a single empire ruled by Modun and his descendants.

The examples of the Inner Asian dynasties reviewed earlier are instructive here. In the case of the Turks, the dynasty itself was non-Turkic speaking, while the predominant population in the north was Oghuz. In the case of the Uyghur empire, Uyghur was one of the chieftainly lineages within the Oghuz. In the case of the Mongols "Mongol" was another
such very minor chieftainly name, among the partly Mongolic and partly Turkic-speaking peoples universally known as Tatars. Thus on the basis of these examples, one might expect the Xiōngnú dynasts to be anything from completely different from the Hú in language, to being merely one chieftainly family within the range of Hú families.

I believe the evidence indicates the former is closer to reality. Pulleyblank mentions four instances of the name Xiōngnú in Han sources describing events in the Warring States. One reference is found elsewhere as Yiqú, and hence may be discounted as an anachronism (Pulleyblank 1994: 514-15, 520). Another instance occurs in the Shuōyuàn 說苑, which dates from around the end of the Former Han dynasty (i.e. from around the end of the first century BCE), which refers to the Lóufán and the Xiōngnú as enemies of the Zhao 趙 kingdom. Pulleyblank discounts this reference on the basis of the lateness of the source. In another case, Xiōngnú may replace Hú, but the evidence is less clear; the location appears to be to the north of the kingdom of Yan 燕, probably in the Shiliin Gol or upper Shara Mören area. Finally in another case, the name Xiōngnú is used for men attacking the state of Zhao along its northern frontier on the Yīnshan 陰山 mountains. This too would indicate that the Han dynasty scholars placed the original Xiōngnú (whether all or part of them were called by that name then) directly north of the Zhao and Yan states in the high steppe of Inner Mongolia (if not Mongolia proper), not in the Ordos-Shaanbei area.

Thus the sparse evidence available can be combined in a different scenario from Pulleyblank’s: that as the campaigns of Meng Tian drove Yiqú, Lóufán, and other Hú north into the Mongolian plateau, they came under the power of the Luándí dynasty, native to the high steppe of the north, which assimilated many features of the Hú’s borderland culture—names, color schemes, and titles—which Pulleyblank observed in the early Xiōngnú. They even took the name Hú, but also imposed on their Hú subjects in return an imperial designation, identity, and possibly even language, as Xiōngnú.

Thus to summarize, three names are associated with the Xiōngnú empire: 1) the dynastic family name, Luándí 孫翟 ~ Xiüliántí 西氏連題, 2) the dynastic or imperial title, Xiōngnú 匈奴, and 3) the ethnonym Hú 胡. The first refers to the ruling family, the last to the broad population, particularly those of Inner Mongolian origin, and the second is either a dynastic title or an elite ethnonym, originally associated with areas well to the north of the Chinese borderland.
III. The Origin of the Name Xiōngnú

Where do these Chinese-style dynastic names for Inner Asian regimes come from? In China, they are usually derived from a geographical name associated with the early rise of the empire. Often times, this was a place name in the archaic geography of the Zhou dynasty used in enfeoffment language, but where the dynasty took its origin outside the limits of the old Chinese “Central States,” names of rivers were pressed into service. Thus, the Kitans and Jurchen took their dynastonyms from rivers, the Liao and Jin, respectively, that flowed through their native lands. But ethnic Chinese dynasties followed this practice as well. Most importantly for our purposes, the Han dynasty took its name from the Han River, which was the site of the first recognized fief which the Han founder held as a member of the victorious coalition that overthrew the Qin dynasty. I believe that the Xiōngnú did exactly the same in taking their dynastonym from a river.

The main sources on the Xiōngnú make occasional mention of two different Xiōngnú Rivers. The first, found in the allocation Xiōngnú Hénán 匈奴河南 “south of the Xiōngnú river”, is used several times in the Shiji (with parallel passages in the Hanshu) as a location for the Ordos area. Thus the river in question is clearly the Yellow River itself. Somewhat later, a river of this name appears much farther to the north, judging from the indications, somewhere in the area of the Gobi-Altai ranges and the southern slopes of the Khangai. Thus in the reign of Han Wudi 漢武帝, his general Zhao Ponu 趙破奴 marches several thousand li from Lingju 令居 (near present-day Yongdeng county 永登 in Gansu), reaches the Xiōngnú River, and turns back without ever catching sight of the Xiōngnú. In the Latter Han dynasty, another general Wen Mu 文穆 did the same and again found no one there.

The most detailed geographical description of this river’s position comes in the account of a joint Han-Southern Xiōngnú campaign against the Northern Xiōngnú. The armies first set out and reach Zhuōxié 涿邪 mountain. They then split in two, with the left (i.e. western) wing crossing the “West Lake” (Xihai 西海) to the area north of Heyun (河雲). The right (i.e. eastern) column followed the Xiōngnú River west to bypass the Heavenly Mountains (Tianshan 天山) and then forded the Gānzhēng 甘徴 River to rendezvous with the left column.

The understanding of this statement is impeded by the almost complete turnover in toponyms that took place between the Han and the succeeding Türk era, and again with the change from the Türk era to the Mongolian one. But the Heavenly Mountain here is certainly

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the main Khangai Range. Mount Zhuōxié 濁邪 is, along with Mount Jùnjī 浚稽, one of the peaks in the string of mountains extending in a line south of the Khangai from the Gobi-Altai province into South Gobi province. These mountains, then as now, are important sources of water, wood, and cover in the midst of the dry Gobi, and thus were the usual first stop for advancing Han armies and their last stop on the retreat before reaching home.\(^{24}\) Given those basic identifications, the Xiōngnu River must be one of the several rivers flowing south from the Khangai Range to the “Valley of Lakes” (*Nuuruudyn khöndii*) that stretches between the Khangai and the eastern spurs of the Gobi Altai.

Tan Qixiang and the team editing the *Historical Atlas of China* series (1982a, pls. 39, 67) identified the Xiōngnu River with the Baidrag River in Bayankhongor province. This identification cannot, I think, be sustained. What we know of the Xiōngnu River from the Latter Han campaign is that while being relatively to the east of Mount Zhuōxié 濁邪 (since it was the right, or eastern, column which followed the river), by following it one can bypass westward (\(xī rào 西繞\)) the Khangai mountains. The Baidrag river, however, flows straight north in the Khangai and does not give route to bypass the Khangai mountains. The Ongi River, however, can be followed from the eastern side of the Ikh and Baga Bogd mountains upstream as it swings in a big arc eventually going northwest to the northern slope of the Khangai. As it reaches the modern town of Arwaikheer, the valley links up to a number of heavily travelled routes leading north of the Khangai.\(^{25}\) Given what is known archeologically of Xiōngnu geography, the center of their empire after the campaigns of Han Wudi 漢武帝 was around the Khanui, Khūntū, and Tamir valleys which flow north and northeast from the eastern part of the Khangai range (Bemmann 2011, esp. p. 457; cf. Honeychurch and Amartuvshin 2011). The Ongi River is the shortest and most accessible pathway from the Han armies’ jumping off point, the Jūyán 居延 (modern Ejine) lake and garrison, into these valleys. The Baidrag river, on the other hand, is near the western extremity of the valley well away from those centers; to posit Han armies making such constant western detours from the center of Mongolian population makes no sense. Given these factors I think the Xiōngnu river fits the situation of the Ongi far better than that of the Baidrag.

The identification of the Xiōngnu River with the Baidrag appears to be a function of the team’s identification of the Zhuōxié 濁邪 and Jùnjī 浚稽 mountains. Since Mount Zhuōxié 濁邪 is said to be west of Jūyán 居延 (Ejine Banner, Inner Mongolia), Tan Qixiang’s team placed it around the modern Edrengiin Nuruu range in south-eastern Gobi-Altai province, while Mount Jùnjī 浚稽 they identify with the Baga Bogd Uul around the middle of the Gobi-Altai range; Orog Nuur is the “Great Lake” (*Daze 大澤*) between them (Tan Qixiang 1982a,
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(Pls. 39, 67; Li Xueju, 2005: 2763, 2555). But cardinal directions are not nearly accurate enough in Chinese travel records outside China to be relied on in that fashion. I believe, however, that reflexes of at least one name can be found in the area, and they point to an identification well to the east. Jinji is reconstructed by Schuessler in Old Chinese as *Sjuns-khi? and in Later Han *Suin-ghai (Schuessler 2009, §§34-23, 26-6; 271, while Coblin's reconstruction of Old Northwest Chinese is *Suin-ghai (2009; §§0831, 0246). As mentioned, virtually all the oronyms in this area are honorific or descriptive titles with no pre-Mongol time depth. The few non-Mongol mountain names in the area include, from west to east, Edrengiin Nuruu, Sewrei uul, and Ikh Shankhain nuruu. Unanalyzable river names include (again west to east) the Tüin, Taats, and Ongi. Of these I believe Shankhain can be derived from [Suin-ghai] Jinji. If accepted, this identification would move the entire sequence of identifications well eastward, since Ikh Shankhain Nuruu is east of Dalanzadgad, capital of South Gobi province.

That the name Xiongnu is connected to the Xiongnu River is suggested by the similarity of the pronunciation, whether of the Yellow River Xiōngnú hé or the Mongolian one. The Yellow River version of the Xiōngnú hé appears three times in the Shiji (31.1421, 99.2719 [=Hanshu 43.2123], 70.2909). But assuming that the Yellow River or Huanghe derived its name, as has always been assumed, from the yellow mud in the water, how did it come to be associated with the Xiōngnú hé? I believe that the name appealed to the Xiongnu precisely because a coincidental similarity with their own name, likewise derived from a river, enhanced their claim to the Ordos region. While Huanghe does not sound like Xiongnu in modern Mandarin, the reconstructed Old Chinese *Gwân-gài or Later Han *yuaâ-gài (Schuessler 2009, §§23-3, 18-1) or Old Northwest Chinese *yuaâ-ya (Coblin 1994, §§0896, 0019) is fairly close to how I have reconstructed the original Xiongnu name, *XoIJa(i).

There is a similar convergence in the oldest reconstructable form of the hydronym Ongi and the earliest reconstructable name of the Xiongnu. The pronunciation of Ongi can be reconstructed quite exactly back to the Tang dynasty. The modern name Ongi (Onggi in the Uyghur-Mongolian script) is derived from a Yuan-era Uyghur-Mongolian pronunciation of Ongqi(n), which is attested in the works of the Persian historian Rashid al-Din and in Yuan-era Mongol transcriptions. Rashid al-Din's Mongolian forms Ongqi~Ongqin in turn go back to a Turkic Oñin. In the Mongolian form, the inadmissible sequence of /ŋ/ followed by a vowel has been broken up by an epenthetic /q/, thus: /ŋqi/. In Turkic languages, however, there is no such constraint and vowels commonly follow /ŋ/; this indicates that the form Oñi is primary.
Even before the Mongol empire, the name is still attested. In the Tang, a post-road itinerary from Piti Spring to the Uyghur yamen in central Mongolia ran along the river which it names Hünï 渾義.\[^{[32]}\] Given the Middle Chinese pronunciation of these characters as Hon-ngi\[^{[33]}\], this allows the recovery of the Tang form of the river name with an initial h-, as is found in many other Tang transcriptions of Turkic name, thus Honji.\[^{[34]}\] And with this form, we are clearly approaching the *Xonjai which I tentatively reconstructed for the original spelling of Xiōngnú from the Chinese Xiōngnú and Hünï 忽倪, Sanskrit Hūṇa, and Greek Khōnai.\[^{[35]}\]

The convergence of the name Xiōngnú with that of my reconstructed *Xonjai is amplified by an interesting early variant in the name of the Xiōngnú River. In references in the Shiji dating to the campaigns of Zhao Punu, the first Han general to reach the river, its name is given not as Xiōngnú hé 匈奴河, but rather as Xiōnghé shuǐ 匈河水, with Xiōnghé being the transcription of the name (despite containing the word “river” hé 河 in itself) and shuǐ 水 “water; river” being the hydronymic classifier.\[^{[36]}\] Xiōnghé 匈河 in the reconstructed older pronunciations is extremely close to my reconstructed *Xonjai: Old Chinese *hon-gai or Later Han *huon-gai (Schuessler 2009, §§12-5, 18-1) or Old Northwest Chinese *huon-ga (Coblin 1994, §§1199a, 0019). The name appears in the Shiji material related to Zhao Punu’s campaigns as the earliest reference to the “outer” Xiōngnú River, in Mongolia. In the later Hanshu of Ban Gu, the river’s usual Chinese name had switched from Xiōnghéshuǐ to Xiōngnú hé, evidently to make the river’s connection with the Xiōngnú people more explicit.\[^{[37]}\]

Of the two possibilities, the Yellow River or the Ongi, it seems that the true Xiōngnú River must be the Ongi, not the Yellow River. Had the Xiōngnú really named themselves after the Yellow River, I find it hard to believe that this fact would not have been noticed. Thus it is presumably Honjī which should be taken as a later reflex of the much earlier Xiōngnú name. Although this new reflex of the true name of the Xiōngnú is found about a millennium after the first appearance of the name transcribed as Xiōngnú, it, and the punning similarity to Huanghe, further sharpens the understanding of the shape of this name. The following points can be made:

1. Although the initial of Honjī is [h] not [x], I think this is likely to be the result of the glottalization of the original velar spirant [x].\[^{[38]}\] That the original pronunciation was indeed velar is confirmed by the additional examples of the river name in transcription which I have proposed: Xiōnghé and Huánghé, whose initials are [x] and [γ], respectively. Once weakened to [h], the initial consonant disappeared in later Turkic and was never preserved in
The result of this investigation is that the original form of Xiongnu, far from being an early ethnonym, is actually the name of a river in southern Mongolia, the modern Ongi, which the Xiongnu empire founder adopted as his dynasty's name.

What was the significance of the Ongi river to the Xiongnu? Was it some sacred Ötüken land? Not necessarily. In the case of the Han dynasty, the Han river was the political cradle from which the Han empire was built, but once the empire was conquered it was no longer the capital and had no further significance. Thus while we can assume that the Xoŋai (Ongi) valley was of considerable geo-political significance to the dynasty, it need not have been the origin homeland of the Xiongnu dynasts, nor need it have been of any on-going political or spiritual significance. Yet in the years between Modun and the campaigns of Han Wudi, which forced the Xiongnu to move their capital to the Yuwu余吾 (usually identified with the modern Tuul), the “Xiongnu River” (Xoŋai or Ongi) may have been a major political center, a possibility which archaeological investigation might confirm. The Ongi River was the site of one of the high-ranking funerary centers of the Second Türk empire, and other such centers were usually placed in regions with a significant time-depth. [39]

IV. The Hú and the Qai

That Hú is commonly used by the Xiongnu for themselves has long been known, yet little attention has been paid to this intriguing duality. The reason appears to be that “Hú” has generally been assumed to be a word of extremely general significance, one which, in the words of de la Vaissière, “had the general sense of barbarian” or and if more specific, meant rather people from the Northwest (de la Vaissière 2005a: 119). [40] In fact, as Pulleyblank has shown, its early meaning was not just even “northern nomad” generally, but certain specific groups of peoples along the northern frontier of the Chinese kingdoms, such as the Forest
Hu, and the Eastern Hu. From this basis its meaning was gradually extended until it came to mean, as de la Vaissière said, any non-Han Chinese. But this was a later development and as with Hu in Chinese or Scythian or Hun in the European languages, the later semantic expansion was based on an originally much more specific ethnonymic basis (cf. de la Vaissière 2005b: 6-10). The self-references of Xiongnu rulers to themselves as Hu come from a period much closer to this earlier specific sense of Hu as a specific people that to the time of the later vague meaning. As a result, when the Xiongnu call themselves Hu, it appears they are identifying themselves not with “northern nomads” generally, but with one or all of the specific Three Hu people of Inner Mongolia.

I believe that the Hu can also be identified with specific peoples found later in the area. The first step in the identification is understanding the pronunciation of the word. The Early Mandarin (Yuan-era) and Middle Chinese (Wei-era and Tang-era) pronunciations of Hu do not greatly different from the modern Mandarin. The Tang-era version was transcribed in Tibetan as “ho” and the Wei-era Early Middle Mandarin is reconstructed as *γo (Pulleyblank 1991, s.v. Hu 胡; cf. the homonym hú 胡 in Coblin 1994: 154 [§0105]). In the Old Chinese of the Han dynasties, however, the vowel had not been subject to the later rounding and the pronunciation is reconstructed as *ga (Baxter 1992: 763) or *ga< *gâ (Schuessler 2007: 281). Indeed, we can see the same sound change at work in the character nú 奴 of Xiongnu 匈奴 which rhymes with hú 胡. It too was rounded as far back as Middle Chinese [ˌnʊ] or [nɔ] (Pulleyblank 1991: s.v. nú奴; Coblin 1994: 150 [§0088, 0088a]) but was unrounded in Old Chinese, whether reconstructed as *na (Baxter 1992: 779) or *nâ (Schuessler 2007: 404). That this rhyme class had an unrounded “-a” in Han-era Chinese is strengthened of course by the association, such as I have made earlier, of Xiongnu with Sanskrit Hûṇa and Greek Khônai. Thus it may be taken as fairly well established that the original reading intended by Hu was *ga~*ga~*gâ.

I propose to connect this name Hu, generally recognized as having been pronounced as *ga and located originally in the near frontier of northern Shaanxi, Ordos, northern Shanxi, south-central Inner Mongolia, and the Hebei-Liaoning-Inner Mongolian border zone, with two peoples later found in the same area, the Kumo-Xi 庫莫奚 of the Hebei-Liaoning-Inner Mongolian border area and the Ji Hu 稽胡 of northern Shaanxi and Shanxi. I will discuss the Kûmô-Xi 庫莫奚 first.

Transcribed in Chinese from the Sixteen Kingdoms on as Xi 奚, this name was pronounced something like *ghei in Middle Chinese pronunciations[42], and hence has been correctly associated with the Qây of medieval Arabic sources (Minorsky 1942: 30, 95-98; Pritsak 1968:
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157-63; Dankoff 1972: 29-30). This Chinese reflex of this name appears for the first time in the Sixteen Kingdoms period (around 360 CE) as an agro-pastoral people in the Liaoning-Inner Mongolia-Hebei border region, exactly where the Eastern Hú were. The Qai were closely associated with the Kitan, who have been demonstrated by the partial decipherment of Kitan script to have been speakers of a Mongolic language (Shimunek 2007).

While the initial consonant of Hú/*ga and Xi/Qai 西 is relatively easily identifiable, more difficult at first glance is the difference between -a and -ai. However, as I have already pointed out with regard to Xiongnu, in an Altaistic perspective, this is actually part of two well-known series first identified by Pelliot and demonstrated to have produced alternate versions of both common nouns and ethnonyms. They include a two-way series of alternations as -O and -i and a three-way alternation of variants in -O, -i, and -n. This three-way version is found, for example, with the Mongolian adjective ma 'u “bad”: maghu, maghui, and maghun. As an ethnonym its most famous case is that of Kitan, Khitay and Khata, all of which attested in one or another corner of Central Eurasia. The exact semantic valences of -O, -i, and -n in Middle Mongolian, where they were still productive, are still unclear, but they still certainly produced variants in ethnonyms. Up to the present, final “-n” has numerous grammatical functions in Mongolian, in particular, which has led to personal names and ethnonyms being preserved in forms with and without “-n”. In nouns, adjectives, and verbal nouns ending in “-i”, “-n” functions as a plural (Poppe 1974: §§270-272). Finally, there is a widespread phenomenon of the “unstable n” in Mongolian, in which a wide variety of words alternate between -Vn and -V, without regard to the particular vowel (Thompson 2008; Finch 1987).

Given the identical territory occupied by the original Hú/*Ga and the Qai, the general consensus that the Qai and their neighbors the Kitans were Mongolic speakers, and the existence of the -a, -ai, -an alternation described by Pelliot, an identification of Qai as a form in -i of Qa, itself the original of Hú 胡, is quite plausible. As the pronunciation and semantic valence of Hú 胡 changed, however, a new term needed to be coined for those specific people who formerly bore the name Hú 胡. As mentioned, Hú 胡 became extremely vague in its connotations, and eventually came to refer mostly to Sogdians. Moreover, the pronunciation of Chinese *ga rounded to *y, while that of Qa(i) themselves in eastern Inner Mongolia evidently remained unrounded. Thus the original Qa(i) became unrecognizable to Chinese ears and eventually a new Chinese transcription was needed: xī 西, pronounced like *ghei.

It is also significant that the earliest references to the Qai in Chinese sources use a special modifier for them: Kümô 庫莫. This term Kumo would have been pronounced komak in Middle Chinese and is evidently to be identified with Künmö 昆莫 or Künmi 昆彌. 
found as the title of the ruler of the Wusun, and perhaps later as the name of the Kimek people in Kazakhstan, among whom the Qai were a component part.\[^{46}\] It is quite common in Inner Asian demonyms for a broader name to be specified by the title of the ruler. The Qa’ad Merkid in the SHM, the Totoqli Merkid, the Tutughli’ud Tatar, Ongni’ud Mongols etc, are all well-known examples. But if the Komak Qai needed such a term to narrow its designation, the implication is that XI/Qai is actually a more widely applicable name. In fact, however, there is no other instance of Xi known in Chinese history. But if Xi was actually a new transcription of the old Hū, then it would make sense for this new ethnonym to need a specifier limiting its application.

The second people whose name I see as a later transcription of the same word earlier transcribed as Hū are the Jī Hū or Hū of northern Shaanxi, Shanxi and Ordos. As Pulleyblank noted, although they appear under this name in the sixth century, they were descendants of the Mountain Hū (Shan Hū 临胡) from the late fourth century on, right around when the Komak Qai appear under that name as well (Pulleyblank 1994, pp. 503-04).\[^{49}\] Like the Komak Qai, they also appear with a seeming adjectival descriptor as Būluò-Jī步落稽, or *Bo-lâk Khēi (Coblin 1994, §§0079, 0883, 0246). But more often their more modern name, Jī or Khēi appears as a modifier of their older name Hū. Either way, that Jī seems simply a modernized version of Hū seems highly plausible. Similarly, the Old Northwest Chinese pronunciation of *Khēi is very close to the Qai of the Arabic geographical sources and the *Ghiei that his reconstructed for Xi 西. Thus I propose that the remaining old Hū of the semi-pastoral Inner Mongolian steppe at the court of the emerging Wei dynasty were relabeled with new transcriptions that reflected a version in -i of the old Qa (transcribed as Hū) and which more accurately reflected the pronunciation in the current pronunciation of Chinese.

Another reason why a new label was needed for people who originally were designated Hū 胡 was that the term was undergoing rapid semantic evolution. Having originally been enlarged to designate the Xiōngnú, after many of the Inner Mongolian Hū 胡 had been absorbed into their empire, the term also began to designate the residents of the Tarim Basin oasis states. The origin and date of this shift is obscure, but it seems to be attested no earlier than the Latter Han dynasty.\[^{50}\] By the time of the early Buddhist translations, Hū had also come to acquire the technical meaning of Kharoṣṭhī script (Boucher 2000), a usage derived from its use in the areas of the Tarim Basin, Bactria, and Gandhara, all areas which by that time had become Hū lands in Chinese eyes, as well as perhaps the similarity between the word’s Later Han pronunciation as Ga and the first syllable in Kharoṣṭhī. Once again we can see a parallel with later developments, as Chinese characters that originally were meant to
designate the nomadic Uyghurs eventually came to designate all of Turkestan and eventually all Muslims, before being narrowed again to China’s Húi 回 nationality.

V. “The People Who Draw the Bow”

As I discussed in the introduction to this paper, *Xoŋai/Xiongnu did not directly enter the vocabulary of the Greek and Iranian languages of the Hellenistic world contemporary with their empire. Instead, the word entered those languages through the unlikely intermediary of Sanskrit. Qai/Hú, despite being the more common designation in Chinese likewise did not enter the Western vocabulary until much later in the works of geographers and linguists writing in Arabic.

One term for the Xiongnu empire, however, that is found in Western sources, even in the Hebrew Bible no less, is that of “People/Nation Who Draw the Bow.” In this case, however, the term appears to originate in the West and have been adopted by the Xiōngnú.

This name first appears in two of the letters sent in Chinese to the Han court, in which the Xiōngnú rulers twice designate their nation as, “the people (or realm) that draws the bow” (yingongzhi min [or guo 引弓之民 or 国]). In general these letters have been seen as being pure creations of Chinese defectors at the Xiōngnú court, with little or no input from the Xiōngnú themselves (Luo 2012, p. 526). The term “people who draw the bow” or “nation that draws the bow” may seem like a mere poetic fancy of Chinese scribes, but it is actually a direct equivalent of *skuoa-, an Iranian word meaning “the ones who shoot” which was the basis for the Skythians’ own self-designation.

Despite their linguistic difference from the contemporary Xiōngnú, as well as from the succeeding Turkic nomads, the Skythians were in their material culture and economy quite typical of the Central Eurasian steppe nomadic culture. Archeologically and culturally, the link between the Xiōngnú and the Iranian-speaking Central Eurasians, Skythians and Sakas, appears to be quite strong. It is entirely possible therefore that in their dealings with Iranian-speaking westerners, the Xiōngnú court would title their state as the “realm of the *skuoa-” or archers. Indeed the term Skythian is often used in older European literature in a looser sense to include all these Iranian-speaking peoples, or indeed all nomads of the steppe in general.

That the term was used as a common epithet for the Skythians and their allies is confirmed by its appearance in the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, who also speaks of nations “who draw the bow” (drawn from Skythian name). Jeremiah uses these phrases
for the Skythians (called Ashkenaz by scribal corruption in the Hebrew) as well as the Ararat (Urartu) and the Manni who were their allies (Szemerényi 1980, p. 7) and the Lydians and Medes who were also well known for their cavalry. That this term was applied by the Xiōngnú to themselves and then by the Han at least, to the Yuèzhī 月氏 and Qái/Hú 胡 is a remarkable instance of how not just modes of life, but specific phrases and the concepts they imply were also transported across cultural boundaries. For this reason it is all the more puzzling the degree to which the abundant names found in Chinese sources for the pre-Turk period in Central Eurasia still resist identification with the likewise abundant names found in the Greek and Iranian sources.

Conclusions

My conclusions may be summarized fairly briefly in the form of certain historical propositions and identifications:

1) Most Inner Asian dynasties have multiple designations (lineage names, dynastonyms, elite ethnonyms, and plebeian ethnonyms) and widespread pre-existing ethnonyms are usually not taken as the main name.

2) The Xiōngnú empire had a dual self-referential naming practice calling themselves sometimes Xiōngnú and sometimes Hú. This dual autonym seems to reflect the dual origin of the Xiōngnú with the name Xiōngnú/*Xoŋa(i) being associated with the northern Luándí dynasty, and Hú/Qái being an ethnonym associated particularly with the empire’s subjects from south of the Gobi.

3) The name Xiōngnú is not in origin an ethnonym, but a dynastonym, derived from a river name, specifically the then-name of the Ongí River in present-day southwestern part of the State of Mongolia.

4) The name of the river, which in the Tang may be reconstructed as Hoŋi, and in the Han was presumably pronounced approximately as *Xoŋai is, along with Sinqái (modern Shanghai as in Ikh Shankhai Nuruu) for Mount Júnjí 浚稽, one of the few currently reconstructable Xiōngnú toponyms.

5) The word Qái is a transcription (in a variant in -i) of the word Hú 胡, pronounced in Old Chinese as *Ga.

6) In the Takbat Wei dynasty (late fourth century), two groups of former Hú 胡 received
new transcriptions of their names to reflect the changing pronunciation and semantics of Hú 胡, one being the Kūmò-Xī 庫莫奚 of the Hebei-Liaoning-Inner Mongolian border area and the Jī Hú 稽胡 of northern Shaanxi and Shanxi. Both peoples called themselves Qai and received transcription characters which reflected that version.

7) The Xiōngnú also shared the name “people who draw the bow” with the Skythians and other early nomadic peoples, thus showing them to be part of the common Central Eurasian cultural sphere.

Appendix I

At the time when I first published an article on this topic, I was unaware of important and relevant article published by Rahman, Grenet, and Sims-Williams 2006, as well as of the more recent article by Wade 2011. Since both of these articles have important implications for my study, I would like to briefly address the implications here.

Geoff Wade in his “Polity of Yelang and the Origins of the Name ‘China’” has readdressed the old problem of the origins of the Sanskrit word Cīna, which is the origin of Persian Čīn and Čīnistān–Čīnastān, Arabic al-Sīn, and the various European versions of “China”. The traditional explanation, dating back to the research of Pelliot and Laufer is that Cīna is a version of Qin 秦, whose Zhou and Han pronunciation is universally reconstructed as *Dzin. This transcription would also have travelled the same “Bamboo Road” through Sichuan, Yunnan, northern Burma, and Assam for which I propose the transmission of *Xoŋa(i), resulting in Sanskrit Hūña. This is also important for my argument that the -a in Hūña is primitive and its absence in the usual Iranian and other more Western languages is derived, a function of the rule (observable in the Cīna>Čīn progression, as well as many other examples) that both Sogdian and the Tokharian languages regularly omit final -a when borrowing Sanskrit words. By contrast, a pattern of Sanskrit adding a paragogic -a to loan words cannot be demonstrated. Yet if *Dzin gave rise to Cīna this argument would lose some of its force, since here we see an addition of final -a occurring within the same transcriptional context that produced Hūña.

Wade has noted, however, that the name of the Yēlāng 夜郎 kingdom, which appears to have dominated what is now Yunnan and Guizhou and possible parts of Burma in the third century BCE, is found today in Nuosu (Liangshan 凉山 Yi 氏 or “Lolo”) texts both as an historical name and as a clan name, pronounced Ži-na. Chronologically, geographically, and phonologically, Ži-na would be a considerably more plausible precursor to Sanskrit than Cīna. He does not
supply details on the phonological history of Zi-na, but assumes plausibly that it is something like the original of Yêlâng 夜郎, whose Old Chinese and Later Han pronunciation can be reconstructed as *Jah-râŋ or *Jac-lâŋ (Schuessler 2009 §§2-27, 3-43). As Wade points out, there is a number of dialects in southern Chinese where “l” is pronounced as “n”, although it is unclear whether geographically plausible dialects might be relevant to this case. While this proposal thus still needs more philological investigation, into both the history of Nuosu and the relevant Chinese dialects, it may be taken for the present as being the most satisfactory proposal so far for the origin of Cîna. As a result, if sustained by investigation, this proposal would also explain the origin of the -a in Cîna and thus add to the case that the -a in Hûnâ is also likely to be primary and not an artifact of transcription.

Appendix 2

In their 2006 article, Amanur Rahman, Frantz Grenet, and Nicolas Sims-Williams used a newly discovered seal in the Greek-script Baktrian to document the existence of the title Hûnân Shâh “Shah of the Huns” for a ruler of Samarqand. This gives direct confirmation to Enoki’s astute guess that the Sogdian title found in Chinese transcription as Wennâsha 温那沙, with a Middle Chinese pronunciation of *’On(n)a-Sha, is in fact the word “Hun” followed by the word “Shah”. The Chinese form is particularly valuable, because it preserves the second syllable “-na”, which is found in Sanskrit Hûna, but not in the other Iranian and Central Asian reflexes (except for the quite late Saka Huna, evidently derived freshly from Sanskrit). Given the omission of “h-” and the presence of -a, I argued that this form reflected a version of Sanskrit passed not through Sogdian, but through Greek.

In my 2012 article I also proposed that the personal name of this Sogdian *’On (n)a-Sha who sent tribute to the Northern Wei court, given in Chinese as Hûní 忽倪, Middle Chinese *xôŋei, was likewise a form of the ruler’s title, not his personal name, but this time transcribed directly by the Chinese interlocutors from the form as it existed in the speakers’ own language, presumably a form of “Hunnish” (whatever that language is).

With the addition of the Hûnân Shâh, there are now three different versions of this title attested (or two, if one rejects my proposal that Hûní 忽倪 is not a name, but an ethnonym found as part of the ruler’s title). The contrast between *’On(n)a-Sha and Hûnân Shâh confirms that the former, while indeed meaning “Hun-Shah” is not in fact derived from an Iranian language, since the Iranian form (here given in the Baktrian script, but also consistent with the Sogdian), is quite different, with the initial h-, without a final -a, and with a plural
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... ending -ān. The difference in vowel “o” vs. “u” is probably less significant, since the character ṇeṅ is used to transcribe the Sanskrit initial syllable un- in Kumārajīva’s Buddhist translations (Coblin 1994: §0781). Thus the new Baktrian version confirms both that “Hun Shah” was the basic title of rulers in Sogdiana of the fifth century, but also that the version preserved in Chinese transcription is not the Iranian pronunciation, derived like the dynasty itself from Baktria, but a quite different one—one which I have argued is only consistent with the Greek form of the name.

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NOTES

[1] As written here, the spelling of this name is somewhat ambiguous—is it /xongai/ (rhymes roughly with
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“lawn gay”) or /xoŋai/ (rhymes roughly with “long A”)? In fact it is the second which I intend by my reconstruction. As the distinction of these two is rather important, I have generally preferred to use a more strict transliteration as /xoŋai/ in the body of the article, while using a less technical form here in the title.

[2] As in my previous paper on this topic, I have used tone marks on all Chinese words derived by transcribing foreign words, in order to highlight the special issues inherent in using the modern Mandarin pronunciations of such ancient transcriptions.


[5] See e. g. Beckwith 2011: 376-77. Beckwith’s reconstruction as Aswin, while quite plausible, is not based on any attestation in Greek, Iranian or Indic sources, but is rather his reconstruction of a possible Indic root. The problem would still remain: if there is a powerful realm called Aswin in the period of the Achaemenid, Alexandrian, and Greco-Bactrian kingdoms not far from their border, why has no trace of that name been found in the sources?

[6] There may be another example of this, that of the Kereyid. This name designated the eastern of the two central kingdoms in pre-Chinggisid Mongolia. But the name is never found in any pre-Mongol empire source. Instead, we find in the Kitan Liao and Jurchen Jin sources the term Zūbū 阻卜 or Zūpū 阻駝. The recent discovery and publication of the Jurchen inscription at Serwen Khaalga, confirms that Zūbū is in fact exactly equivalent to the word Tatar, and was actually in use during the Jin dynasty (Aisin Gioro 2006: 14; Matsuda 2006: 49). But Zūbū/Tatar certainly includes the people of central Mongolia, who in Mongolian sources are called Kereyid. Rashid ad-Din writes that “Kereyid” was the name of the royal family (Rashid-ad-Din 1952: 128; Rashiduddin 1998: 62). I thus suggest that after the unification of the Mongols, and as the name Tatar was rejected, that what was originally the Tatar kingdom was renamed with a designation taken from the royal family’s surname.


[8] “The Toquz Oghuz people were my own people. Since Heaven and Earth were in disorder, they revolted against us”; see Tekin 1968: 270; cf.268, 277-78, 284-86.


[12] Pulleyblank 1962, pp. 139-40, has argued that these are versions of the same name. Xiǔ 虚 would thus represent some kind of prefix that may be associated with the name. This should also be the same as the surname Hēliàn 赫連 of the Sixteen Kingdoms period.

[13] Pulleyblank’s suggestion of an initial consonant cluster in xiōng 雄 does not seem to have been adopted by
later researchers.

[14] I accept the association of Chinese *chányū 喃于 with the borrowed Turco-Mongolian title *tarqan−darqa(n)

[15] The first instance, emanating from the Darqa’s court, has his full title: 天所立匈奴大單于 “the great Darqa
(=Chányū) of the Xiōngnú, established by Heaven”, which is undoubtedly a title devised by the Xiōngnú
scribes, not one thought up by the Han court.

[16] The forests north of Höhhot are likely those of the Choghay Mountains of the Orkhon Inscriptions which
were evidently wooded (see Tekin 1968: 262, 283-84).

[17] Old Chinese: *Rō-ban; Late Han: *Lo-buan (Schuessler 2009, §§10-29, 24-51); Old Northwest Chinese:
*Lou-buan (Coblin 1994, §§0479, 0716).

[18] Old Chinese *Daih-ga; Late Han *DaiC-gia (Schuessler 2009, §§18-5 and 1-19).

[19] See also the comments by Sergey Miniaev on the page “Origin of the Hsiung-nu” in the “Hsiung-nu (Huns


[22] Hou Hanshu 23.810.

[23] Hou Hanshu 89.2953

[24] See for example Hanshu 94A.3775 where Zhao Ponu gets to Mount Jūnī 頓碻 and turns back, and 94A.3779
where he is ambushed there on his retreat and chased to Pūnú 蒲奴 River. In the Beishi there are several similar
campaigns against the Rouran. For example Cui Hao 崔浩 goes along the Ruoshui 勃水 and west to Mount
Zhuōxīé 撫邪 (Beishi 21.782). In another campaign, the Wei armies march out to Mount Jūnī 頓碻 where
they split up with one column going by “Big Lake” (Daze 大澤 ) to Mount Zhuōxīé 撫邪 and the other goes
north from Mount Jūnī to the Heavenly Mountains (Beishi 98.3254).

[25] Another route through the Khangai would be the Tūn Gol River. Chinese geographers identify this,
however, not with the Xiongnu River, but with the Tūyuán 兔園 (~ 兔園 ). This identification is evidently based on
the similarity of pronunciation (Tan Qixiang, 1982b, pl. 60). Given the early reconstructed pronunciation as
*T’owan, the identification is plausible, although far from certain. But again this route cuts directly through
the Khangai, and does not bypass it.

[26] Old Chinese *Kaʔ-lan; Late Han Chinese *Kia-jan (Schuessler 2009, §§1-1, 24-30).

[27] Schuessler 2009, §§34-23, 26-6

[28] See for example Gurwan Saikhan “Three Beauties”, Ikh/BagaBogd “Greater/Lesser Holy One”, Noyon uul
Nuruu “Silverweed Range”, etc. A few other toponyms can be dated to the Türk-Uyghur period: Tayangiin nuruu,
which derives from the Sino-Turkic Tayang “Great King” (<dawang 大王 ), and Baidrag itself (baytari'gh “rich
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grains”).

[29] Simukov’s 1934 Atlas has Yeke Şangqai Aghula. However, Singqai would be just as correct a reconstruction.

[30] RD has four references to Ongqi(n), two to it as a river and two to Ongqi by itself as a place. *“Ünkîn Mûrân is found in the list of the winter camps of Ong Qa’an and the Kereyids (Rashid-ad-Din 1952:129; Rashiduddin 1998:63) and “Ünqî Mûrân as a winter camping point during Qubilai Qa’an’s expedition against Ariq-Böke in the history of Qubilai Qa’an (Rashid-ad-Din 1960:167 and n.52; Rashiduddin 1999:429). Ünk-qn is found in RD’s account of the camps of Öködei (Rashid-ad-Din 1960:41; Rashiduddin 1999:329) and Unk-qî in the history of Môngke Qa’an (Rashid-ad-Din 1960: 144 and n.32; Rashiduddin 1999:413), in both cases as winter camps.

[31] Onggî 汎吉 is listed as a wintering place of Môngke Qa’an in Yuanshi 3.47. The site where Gûyûg was enthroned in bîng/wu, VII is called 汎吉·宿減·秃里, Onggî Sûme-tür, “at Onggî Sûme” (Yuanshi 2.39). The tür preserves in the Chinese transcription a fossilized Mongolian dative-locative. It is curious that this place is referred to as a temple (sûme); either it was built first as a Buddhist temple or else sûme may have an as yet unattested original meaning as a building.

[32] Xin Tang shu 43B.1148; Tan Qixiang 1982c, pls. 74, 75.

[33] See Pulleyblank 1991, s.v. hûn渋 (p. 135) and yî 義 (p. 368); Coblin 1994, yî 義 (§0289), cf. hûn 婚 (§0782).

The Old Turkic initial h- is attested in Chinese, Tibetan, and Bactrian transcriptions, although it was not written in the Runic or Uyghur scripts.

[34] Mongolian, unlike Old Turkic, cannot have [ŋ] followed by a vowel and always adds an epenthetic -g- or -q- between them so Turkic [höŋ] would inevitably become [höŋi], so the relationship of Höŋi and the Yuan-era Ongqi is absolutely regular. The -n is an example of the unstable -n frequently added to Mongolian names.

[35] One objection to this possibility is that Tan Qixiang and his team have identified the Ongi river with the Rou-Ran 柔然 era Lishûì 栗水 or Li River (see Tan Qixiang 1982b, pl. 60; Li Xueju 2005: 2404). This name appears in the account of a campaign of the Northern Wei in Shenzia 神薊 1 (428CE). Beginning at their capital of Pingcheng (in present-day Helinger county, south of Höhhot) the Wei armies marched west before contacting the Rou-Ran armies on the Li River. The Rou-Ran fled west and the Wei emperor followed them “along the Li River” (yuān Lishûì) until he came to the Tüyûân 蒼園 River. Assuming the identification of the Tüyûân 蒼園 with the present-day Tûin Gol, this would put the Li river east of it. The Ongi is certainly the first large river one encounters going east of the Tûin, but since it flows north-south it is impossible to go “along” it to the Tûin River. There is, however, a Ligiin Gol, which flows southeast to northwest in Bayanlig county in the valley between the Gobi-Altay and the Gurwan Saikhan ranges in south-eastern Bayankhongor Province. It is a small river now, but the old valley has a line of wells and wet grounds that indicate it may have once been larger. Following the Ligiin Gol northwest to its springs leads to modern roads that
cross the Gobi-Altay north into the Tüün Gol valley near Orog Nuur. The ONWC pronunciation of Li is *lit (Coblin 1994: sub §0829). If Ligiin Gol’s stem is Lig (which would imply that the lig in Bayanlig is not the denominal noun suffix it would appear to be), the two could possibly be connected in view of the geographical plausibility, despite the different final consonant. In any case, the identification of the Li with the Ongi does not make geographical sense and can be rejected.

[36] Shiji 100.2912 (cf. 123.3171) and 111.2945; Hanshu 55.2493.

[37] The fact that this early transcription has the word hé “river” in it actually used as a transcription element led to some confusion with certain editors preferring not the form Xiōngnù hé 匈奴河 or Xiōnghé shuǐ 匈河水, but simply Xiōng hé 匈河. The widely used Watson translation, for example, unfortunately followed this tradition, which is now rejected by textual scholars of the Shiji and Hanshu (see the notes to the cited passages). Standard Chinese historical geographical sources now treat Xiōngnù hé 匈奴河 as the preferred form. See Tan Qixiang 1982a, pls. 39, 67; Li Xueju 2005: 1221.

[38] It must be admitted that [x] to [h] sound changes are not particularly common, although they can be found in Spanish for example.


[40] Elsewhere he writes: “hu 胡 is the Chinese word designating the populations of the Northwest” (de la Vaissière 2005a: 57). Hulsewé calls it “one of the most general Chinese terms for the non-Chinese peoples of the North and West” (1979: 80 n. 71). I would change this “North and West” to “North or West” and note that the first signification precedes the second.

[41] Pulleyblank 1994, pp. 518-19 n. 41, notes two cases where a people called Hú in an earlier source are called Eastern Hú in a later source, thus suggesting that in the meantime, the designation of the term had broadened. Pulleyblank dates the narrowing of the meaning of Hú to “Iranian peoples of Central Asia, or even specifically Sogdians” to the sixth century, but notes that Hú continued to be used for northern nomads like the Kitans through the Tang (1952: 318-19 and p. 319 n. 1).

[42] Later Han *ge and Middle Chinese yiei in Schuessler 2009, §7-1.

[43] It should be noted that the q- of the Arabic and Persian transcriptions is often voiced to /g/ and the diphthong -ay also shows a tendency to be fronted and monophthonged as /e/.

[44] The first event recorded in Qai history is being attacked by Mùróng Huang 慕容銳 (reigned 333-348). The earliest appearance of the name in the Basic Annals, which is most likely to preserve the original phrasing and transcription, is in Weishu 魏書 2.22 (under year 386) and the next appearance in 5.113 (under year 452), from which time entries become regular.

[45] There is no good history of the Qai, although material for it may be found throughout the pages of Wittfogel and Fêng 1949.

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[47] *Kūn-māk; Later Han *Kuan-mak (Schuessler 2009, §§34-1, 2-40); *Kūn-me; Later Han *Kuan-mie (Schuessler 2009, §§34-1, 7-20). Coblin’s reconstruction of Old Northwest Chinese would be *Kon-mak and *Kon-mie (Coblin 1994, §§0775, 0890, and 0264). In both cases, usual transcription practice would result in the merger of the -n-m- sequence giving something like Komak and Kome as the real transcription values. The former term is an exact match for the *Kūn-māk in *Kūn-māk, although the latter one is anomalous in the absence of a final -k. As is noted in the *Hanshu 漢書, *Kūn-māk was used in all the early contacts, but from approximately 72 BCE on, the Wūsūn in their letters (as translated into Chinese) used *Kūn-mie instead (*Hanshu 96B.3904 and 8.243). As Pulleyblank notes (1970: 158), *mi actually represents an anthroponymic element found at the coda of all Wūsūn personal names. Its addition was likely due to being actually a common name element omitted at first, but then added. The *mo might then have been omitted to retain the disyllabic form, which is easier in Chinese. His suggestion that it may be a reflex of Tokharian *wal-walo “king”(1962: 227, reiterated in 1966: 29) does not appear to have support from later research into Chinese phonology, and seems semantically improbably pleonastic.


[49] The earliest dated reference in a *Basic Annal is in *Weishu 2.24 (under year 392), followed by another in 3.50 (under year 410).

[50] Of the examples marshaled in Wang Guowei’s old essay on the topic (reprinted in Wang 2009), only the reference in the *Hanshu 96A.3883 can be more or less accurately dated to the latter part of the life of its author Ban Gu 班固 (32-92CE), while the *Shuowen 説文 references can be roughly assigned to c. 121CE. As Wang himself realized, the references in the *Shanhaijing 山海經 are certainly later interpolations and difficult to date.

[51] See *Shiji, 110.2896=Hanshu, 94A.3757 and 110.2902=Hanshu, 94A.3762. The term appears elsewhere designating the Xiōngnú in *Hanshu, 54.2456 and 62.2729. It also appears in the astrological chapters as a designation of the Yuèzhī 月氏, Hú 胡, and other north-western nomads. In these later instances, however, it is unclear if that is a self-designation or an extension of the Xiōngnú usage to them by the Han writers.

[52] Cf. the position of Luo Xin 2012.

[53] On the name *skythai as derived from Old Iranian *skuθa-, see Szemerényi (1980, 5-23), and Beckwith (2009, 377-380).


[55] IPA /̪aː-na/. Each syllable is closed by a sign which marks the mid-falling tone.