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Beyond Bias: Information Poverty's Impact on Shiji's Xiongnu Narrative

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Abstract. This paper asks why the Shiji (史记) chapter on the Xiongnu, the Xiongnu Liezhuan (匈奴列传, ch. 110), contains repeated inaccuracies about Xiongnu life and warfare. I argue that the leading causes are information poverty (Sima Qian relied on mediated envoy reports, military dispatches, and court records), a Sinocentric way of seeing at the Han court, and Sima Qian's own narrative choices under these conditions, where the lack of information added to his choice of maintaining his current accuracy. Using close reading of the text, comparison with later histories (Hanshu, Hou Hanshu), and archaeological evidence often linked to Xiongnu activity (for example, fortified and semi-sedentary sites), I show that claims like "no walled cities and no agriculture" are too absolute. I also examine military stories such as Baideng, where reported troop numbers are likely inflated. A brief comparison with Herodotus suggests this kind of exaggeration was common in early historiography, not just in China. Sima Qian sometimes includes Xiongnu's perspectives, which makes his account more balanced than later works. Ultimately, the "errors" in the Shiji also tell us how the Han gathered and judged information. Reading the chapter in this dual way helps us see both the Xiongnu more clearly and the Han world that described them.

Keywords: Sima Qian, Shiji, Xiongnu, Han dynasty, information poverty, Sinocentrism

1. Introduction

The Shiji(史记), also known as Records of the Grand Historian, is one of the earliest and most comprehensive histories of ancient China, written by the court historian Sima Qian (司马迁) during the late 2nd to early 1st centuries BCE [1]. It covers Chinese history from the mythical Yellow Emperor (c. 2600 BCE) up until Emperor Wu of Han (141–87 BCE). Among its many narratives, Chapter 110, of the 130 chapters in total, Xiongnu Liezhuan(匈奴列传), details the political organization of the Xiongnu, a formidable nomadic confederation that dominated the steppe regions north of China and frequently clashed with the Han over control of the Silk Road trade routes.

Despite its enduring value as one of the foundational works in Chinese history [2], the Shiji is not without flaws, including its depiction of the Xiongnu. Modern scholarship often attributes such inaccuracies to political or cultural bias, for example, the perceived Han need to rationalize and thereby control the Xiongnu entity of the steppe [3]. However, the factors behind are more complex than a singular reason.

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Rather than attributing these solely to political hostility or cultural prejudice, this paper argues that they arose from three intertwined causes: Sima Qian's information poverty (reliance on mediated Han reports and limited direct observation), the constraints of a Sinocentric worldview circulating at court, and his own narrative and generic choices as a historian-writer. Using close reading of the Xiongnu Liezhuan alongside archaeological findings and comparative historiography (e.g., Herodotus), this paper shows that many errors—such as depictions of settlement patterns and inflated military numbers—emerged from gaps and incentives in the information chain. Paradoxically, these inaccuracies preserve something historically valuable: they reveal Han anxieties, priorities, and ways of seeing. Reading the Shiji with this dual lens—empirical critique plus historiographical interpretation—clarifies both the historical Xiongnu and the intellectual world of the Han.

2. Background

To begin with, before analyzing specific inaccuracies, it is essential to understand how information poverty existed for Sima Qian. Firstly, Sima Qian had never visited the Ferghana Valley or its Hellenistic cities, nor did he read any sources written by the Xiongnu (who did not maintain a written historiographical tradition) [4]. Consequently, his writing was constructed almost entirely from mediated sources: reports from Han envoys and diplomats, military dispatches, court gossip, and official state records archived in Chang'an [5]. Each layer of this information chain was itself susceptible to distortion: envoys operated under linguistic barriers, limited direct observation (often confined to diplomatic encounters or frontier zones), and personal biases shaped by their mission, political need, and background. At the same time, generals also had clear motivations to inflate enemy numbers or their own achievements. Courtiers repeated stories filtered through rumor and Han cultural preconceptions.

3. Inaccuracies in the depiction of Xiongnu settlements and lifestyles

Sima Qian's claim that "[Xiongnu] … have no walled cities or fixed dwellings, nor do they engage in any kind of agriculture," [6]is contradicted by archeological findings, revealing semi-sedentary or fortified settlements. For example, the Ivolga site in southern Siberia (dated to the Xiongnu period) includes earthen walls, dwellings, and grain storage, indicating agricultural activity and stable communities [7].

While some scholars interpret such omissions as reflecting a Sinocentric worldview that reinforced Han political narratives, the pattern of similar factual gaps in non-ideologically charged aspects of Shiji suggests another possibility also playing as a factor: limited access to reliable sources. His sources—primarily Han envoys like Zhang Qian focused on frontier conflicts—lacked exposure to Xiongnu inland settlements. Consequently, the "no cities" claim likely arose from absent data, not deliberate distortion. While this framing portrayed the Xiongnu as culturally inferior (aligning with Han ethnocentrism), it reflects practical constraints, not malice, which will be further developed in this essay.

Sima Qian himself acknowledged these limitations. In his Letter to Ren An (报任安书), describing his aim "to gather all the lost records of the past and examine the principles behind success and failure, rise and decline" (网罗天下放失旧闻……稽其成败兴坏之理), while also pledging "not to exaggerate goodness nor conceal evil" (不虚美,不隐恶) [8]. This self-conscious recognition that the records available to him were incomplete, combined with his stated commitment to transmit rather than embellish, may have affected Sima to take a more narrative approach—

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organizing received reports into a coherent account. Yet, this may have inadvertently preserved the biases and gaps of his informants.

This complexity is evident when comparing Sima Qian to later historians. For instance, in Hanshu (汉书) claims that the Xiongnu attack "If it is advantageous, they advance; if not, they retreat, not ashamed of fleeing. Wherever profit lies, they know no propriety or righteousness" (利则進,不利則退, 不羞遁走. 苟利所在, 不知禮義) [9]; similarly, in Hou Han Shu (后汉书), the barbaric nature of Xiongnu is also emphasized as it details the greed of Xiongnu for "wealth and silk" (贪得财帛) as their primary motivation, which sometimes lead them to betrayal [10].

Thus, this further reflects the complexity of the issue. Unlike these works, Sima Qian occasionally incorporates Xiongnu perspectives, notably defending their approach to elder care:

The Xiongnu make it clear that warfare is their business. And since the old and the weak are not capable of fighting, the best food and drink are naturally allotted to the young men in the prime of life. So the young men are willing to fight for the defence of the nation, and both fathers and sons are able to live out their lives in security [11].

This nuanced inclusion—rare in contemporary Chinese histories—suggests Sima Qian sought balance where possible, even where a harsher portrayal would have been easy or expected. It is undeniable that the social norm at the time was to denounce the Xiongnu, as shown in all the other surviving works, all of which have descriptions of the Xiongnu as barbaric (greed is a typical aspect symbolizing barbarianism). Although Sima Qian wants to record history as it is, he also wants his work to be preserved. Hence, both social pressure and limited access to information acting together may have given Sima Qian the thought to be more, as his work will be more rightful to exist while not documenting false or leaving out blank.

Paradoxically, these limitations contain unique historical value. Sima Qian's reliance on mediated Han reports faithfully preserves the Han perspective of the 2nd–1st centuries BCE—revealing not Xiongnu reality, but Han diplomatic anxieties, cultural biases, and frontier policy drivers. The inaccuracy thus illuminates the Han worldview itself.

4. Inaccuracies in battle descriptions and military organization

The impact of information poverty extends to military accounts. For example, in the Siege of Baideng between Liu Bang and Modu Chanyu. In this battle, Modu Chanyu reportedly surrounded Liu Bang with 400,000 elite cavalry. However, this number is widely considered unrealistic given the historical context—the Xiongnu's relatively low productivity would have made it nearly impossible to mobilize such a massive force on short notice [12]. This inaccuracy likely originated with Sima Qian's sources, not solely for the purpose of affecting the Han court. Han envoys and generals had strong incentives to inflate enemy numbers—enhancing their mission's prestige or justifying military expenditures. Lacking independent verification means, Sima Qian recorded these figures as received, demonstrating how source limitations directly distorted military reporting.

This pattern of numerical inflation is not unique to the Shiji but reflects a broader challenge in ancient historiography. In Greek historiography, Herodotus's account of Xerxes' invasion famously estimates the Persian army at over two million men [13]. Modern scholars believe that this number is also inaccurate, in part because of the Persian Empire's limited transportation and supply capabilities [14]. Sima Qian and Herodotus shared a critical constraint: they operated within nascent historical traditions lacking modern tools—reliable archives, statistical bureaus, or field verification—especially for hostile, distant regions like the steppes or Persia. Their dependence on biased oral reports, propagandistic dispatches, and audience-engaging conventions created systemic pressure for numerical hyperbole.

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This parallel underscores a crucial point: Sima Qian's inflated figures are less an individual failing and more symptomatic of the inherent limitations of pre-modern historical practice. Furthermore, the consistent tendency to inflate numbers upwards—never downwards—reveals a deeper historiographical norm, as it is a feature that multiple famous historical works share. Generals and envoys gained nothing by underreporting enemy strength; exaggeration served career advancement, justified resources, or amplified glory in victory. Conversely, accurate or diminished figures offered no rhetorical or political advantage. Thus, information poverty didn't merely permit exaggeration; it actively fostered an expectation of magnified numbers within the genre. In other words, the lack of information here may have acted as a catalyst and excuse for exaggeration of numbers.

5. Conclusion

This paper shows that the Shiji's Xiongnu Liezhuan is best read through a dual lens: as an imperfect record of Xiongnu history and as a clear reflection of Han ways of seeing. Many inaccuracies—claims about settlement patterns and inflated troop numbers—stem from information poverty: Sima Qian worked from mediated envoy reports, military dispatches, and court narratives with built-in incentives to exaggerate. These gaps were filtered through a Sinocentric moral vocabulary and shaped by narrative conventions that rewarded magnitude and coherence. These set up a condition where Sima Qian had two choices: doing deeper research or keeping it correct overall from not entirely wrong sources. The lack of sources may have acted strongly as an excuse to now dive deeper into many areas. Yet, Sima Qian's occasional inclusion of Xiongnu perspectives signals a measured effort at balance when he can, distinguishing him from later compilers.

In sum, the Shiji's errors are not merely failings; they are evidence. They illuminate how knowledge was produced at the Han court and how ancient historiography, like that of Herodotus, often sacrificed precision under structural constraints. Reading the text this way clarifies both Xiongnu realities and Han intellectual culture.

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