

## THE HAN EMPIRE AT THE ORIGINE OF MODERN CHINESE DIPLOMACY

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### ABSTRACT:

*P.R.CHINA, ACKNOWLEDGED AS THE FIRST ECONOMIC WORLD POWER, SURPRISED EVERY ACADEMIC PREVISION DUE TO HER FAST AND DYNAMIC ASCENSSION, IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS. NOT WILLING TO COMPROMISE THE COMMUNIST REGIME, THE POLITICAL ELITE FROM BEIJING COORDINATED ALL DIPLOMATIC MEANS IN ORDER TO PRESENT THE CHINESE STATE AS BEING EQUAL WITH THE WESTERN STATES IN TERMS OF DEVELOPMENT. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY LIKE PANDA DIPLOMACY AND VERY CHEAP PRODUCTS AS AN ECONOMIC WORLD WIDE POLICY ARE ONLY A FEW PRACTICAL DEFINITIONS OF THE NOWADAYS CHINESE DIPLOMACY. BUT, THE REALITY OF TODAY IS JUST A CONSEQUENCE OF THE DIACRONIC MILLENAIRE HISTORY LIVED BY THE CHINESE STATE DURING 22 ROYAL DYNSTIES. THE HAN EMPIRE, FAR FROM BEING JUST A WELL-KNOWN PERIOD, IS CONSIDERED TO BE A REFEREENCE MOMENT FOR THE LATER MULTILATERAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE STATE.*

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**KEY WORDS:** China, diplomacy, Han Empire, ceremony, war.

### INTRODUCTION

The national history of China presents the spatial and temporal evolution of Chinese people during more the 6 millenniums, and gives through this experience of maturation and permanent innovation, a lesson of longevity which taught humanity many aspects of politics, diplomacy and leadership. Over the succession of 22 Chinese dynasties, from 2000 B.C. until 1947, the moment when the country changes his regime by the rule of communist party, the nation who believes being on the Celestial lineage, excelled at the art of war (Sun Tzu), diplomacy (the present tactics and ceremonies), technology (numerous

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inventions that directed the development of science) or administration (the political Han model proved to be an alternative for the Roman example); and succeeding, in the end, to become a reference point in the history of mankind.

The Han historical period is considered to be a foundation of the nowadays Chinese state as many important reforms were given at this time and whose effects are visible until today. The Han dynasty has the merit of continuing the unification started by Zheng, a leader of Qin period, a dynasty from which we have the name of *China*, a terminology used to delimitate the population who lives on both sides of the Yellow River. We appreciate that the heritage of the Chinese dynasty established by Liu Bang influenced many aspects of Chinese society, especially the customs and the rituals of collaborating with friends, as well as with *the others*. Accordingly, we hope to make a systematic analysis of Chinese diplomacy in order to highlight all details of its style of negotiation. Therefore, we propose to make a short presentation of the historical evolution from the moment 202 B.C., when Liu Bang triumphs over Xiang Yu (his most important enemy in taking the throne). For a better understanding of the historical favorable context we will underline the critical measures adopted by him in order to legitimate the leading power. In the end, we will describe the role of rituals and ceremonies in Han Empire, exemplifying on the case of external bilateral relations with *barbarians*.

The purpose of this paper is to make a clear and concise presentation of Han period's cultural heritage that founded the Chinese diplomatic practice. Moreover, this article is aimed to fill a gap in the scientific research derived from the lack of preoccupation to cover analytical topics regarding this specific issue. Thereby, the methodology used to build our argumentation was based rather on qualitative means, than the quantitative aspects, by the close examination of different articles and books that had touched, in a particular way, the question of particularities regarding the Han period: military, politics, economic, administrative or cultural. The accessed studies were written by native researchers who had access to primary sources, but also historians that are well-known to speak about topics from Chinese older times. The assumptions and conclusions belong to the authors, as well as the logical reasoning.

## **MAIN TEXT**

The historical evolution that determinate, first, the creation of Great Qin Empire, and after it, the transition to the Han dynasty leadership, may synthesized in a few successive

stages that were presented by Walter Scheidel, in his book, *Rome and China : comparative perspectives on ancient world empires*<sup>2</sup>. What is important is the fact that after the unification made by Qin, the new political power was interested in further developing the military capabilities in order to start a new conflict to expand the land and annex new territories, a generalized factuality of 5th – 4th centuries B.C. This contributed to the foundation of a *hegemonic leadership* mentality that was favored by geopolitical aspects, giving to the political elite the possibility of stabilize the internal authority of the new established dynasty as the representative of monarchy. The principal achievement of Qin authorities were legislative, particularly, the abolition of privileges<sup>3</sup> and permitting the ascension in public function through personal merit. This led to a professionalization of the bureaucracy and an effective national management.

At the same time with the increasing in power of Han dynasty, the new regime of Liu Bang had the obligation to demonstrate the capacity of directing the new, young and fragile state to a distinct road, different from the Qin experience (whose authority was known to be *tyrannical and cruel*<sup>4</sup> and by comprising the internal security, it determined the continuation of conflicts). Apart from the any legislative measures, the government considered the importance of constructing the new nation identity based on a common ethic and spirituality: the Confucianism. Theorized in the 6th century B.C., by a Chinese philosopher, Mencius or Confucius (he is known by those two names), this philosophical thought is understood to be rather a way of living than a belief, valorizing the role of a harmonized society, where the mind and the body should be disciplined by rules and principles of behavior.

Other factors that contributed to the construction of the Chinese Empire are Confucian education or Asian genetic predisposition (discipline, permanent self-improvement and perseverance in reaching any goals). The military conflicts were responsible for creating the environment which permitted the instauration of Han dynasty, whose first leader, Liu Bang, became king after the defeat of his adversary, Xiang Yu, who was thought to become a leader in his place. After he ensured the collaboration with his

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Scheidel, ed., *Rome and China : comparative perspectives on ancient world empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> David Curtis Wright, *The history of China*, (Oxford: Greenwood, 2011), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Sanft, "Environment and Law in Early Imperial China (Third Century BCE–First Century CE): Qin and Han Statutes Concerning Natural Resources", *Environmental History* 15, 4 (2010): 702, accessed January 24, 2013, doi: 10.1093/envhis/emq088.

closest allies, Liu Bang took all the measures to validate his mandate as the new leader of an imperial state that was mostly finalized, territorially speaking, with the involvement of the army that conquered the majority of the Chinese kingdoms. In the end, the unity of Han Empire was founded on a strategic, military and administrative thought which was demonstrated by the political elite as the authority legitimized the imperial power in accordance with the principle of heavenly representation. Either political or imperial, both were based on two fundamental elements: the Confucian doctrine that influenced the social, moral and ethic behavior of all citizens by forming the sentiment of loyalty in rapport with their leader, and cosmology gave the validity of the new regime with a discourse that called upon a divine lineage.

Externally, one of the causes of Han expansion was known to be the pressure exercised by nomads, especially Xiongnu<sup>5</sup>, whose power was based on a military strategy and aimed to frighten any opponent (using horse riding and powerful weapons), but also to reduce any intention of building a resistance. The influence of Han Empire in the international relations relied upon the economic national strength that valorized very well the agriculture potential and the productive sector with strategies viable for the geography: for a semiarid zone a good water management influenced the rise of internal production with intensive farming. The development of an economic power was a trump card for the Chinese Empire who used it as a way to diminish the external vulnerabilities and sensitivities. Moreover, the external policy of Han Empire did not used only *hard* attributes of the power (e.g. military), but combined them with *soft* ones and reached a hybrid combination that, today, we name it *smart power*: elements like the economical potential and a diplomacy of presents and marriages were fundamental for the success of the Han Empire as well as for the construction of the most long and important ancient commercial route, *the Silk Road*.

The instauration of Han dynasty took place in the specific turning point of the old Chinese dynasty: after centuries of numerous wars between kingdoms that aimed to impose their own personal supremacy, moreover, when the Qin unification experiment proved to be a failure. In order to not follow the same regressive pattern, the new political authority prioritized as an external policy, the use of diplomacy strategies to ensure the stabilization of the Chinese Empire's role in the region. As the bilateral contact with the Western States

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<sup>5</sup> Sanft, "Environment and Law in Early Imperial China (Third Century BCE–First Century CE): Qin and Han Statutes Concerning Natural Resources, 706.

were reduced until the second part of Han period, the interest in the external policy concerned the maintenance of the status quo, and, just afterwards, a potential external extension of imperial borders.

The perception of *the other* in the Antique Chinese mentality was similar to the Greek philosophy and was related with the equation, *we and the barbarians*, where the term *barbarian* designates the populations that spoke another language than Chinese. Thus, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., when the people that lived near the Yellow River experienced another national unification, it was felt mandatory the creating of a common imperial identity that would become a reference point for any other contact with the external world. Apart from the geopolitics aspects that influenced the consolidation of the new state, the most important danger came from the submission to the strangers, the *barbarians*, which contributed to the affirmation of the Chinese superiority<sup>6</sup> based on the Confucian thought. Therefore, everything that was not Chinese was *other*, was inferior, culturally speaking<sup>7</sup>, and the new Han contribution to the world would be quantified by its assumed civilization purpose. Confucian philosophy will become the essence of the political thought and the social actions: the world is seen as *a construction of concentric cultural circles*, where the central circle was represented by the Chinese Empire who assumed this mission to civilize the other nations that surround the Han Empire and are *positioned at an equal distance with their cultural inferiority*<sup>8</sup>.

The imperial Court was always preoccupied with diminishing the state military vulnerabilities in the bilateral relationship with Xiongnu, nomad populations, a dependence that was maintained a long period, as a threat for the territorial integrity. If during the Qin leadership, the authorities took more aggressive measures like building the Great Wall from the north<sup>9</sup>, at the beginning of Han dynasty, the decisions regarding the external policy were made by taking into account some effects that may change the identity of the new and fragile state. The political elite proposed a more practical and realist vision that would preserve the status quo for a long period. There was a need for using tactics which would create the impression of willingness and a humble attitude of the Chinese Emperors,

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<sup>6</sup> Mu-chou Poo, *Enemies of civilization: attitudes toward foreigners in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 100.

<sup>7</sup> Poo, *Enemies of civilization: attitudes toward foreigners in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> Poo, *Enemies of civilization: attitudes toward foreigners in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 142.

in the external relations with nomads. Ho-Qin<sup>10</sup> was the most used strategy and meant assuming the position of *vassal state* and acknowledging the obligation of paying an annual tribute of money or Chinese products. At a first look, this successive supply of goods from the Empire may determinate the dropping of internal supply capacity and would facilitate the continuation of depending on the exterior. But, the reality was different: Xiongnu felt more and more in need of utilizing the Chinese goods and, slowly, the balance of power was reversed. In 133 B.C., the emperor Wu made a good use of a later well-known strategy from the foreign policy, *divide et impera*, whose result sanctioned the division of Xiongnu state in two parts (the north and the south), a measure that premeditated their submission before the Chinese authority<sup>11</sup>. In the case of the mongoloid Hsiung-nu, the Han dynasty acted in the name of the assumed *civilization role*, using the economic and cultural superiority to weaken the foundation of any tie that provided cohesion to these people. Nicola Di Cosmo speaks about the usage of any *civilization* means, even those that corrupt the leaders and make them loyal to the Empire: The Pace Treaty respected the fundamental elements of Ho-Qin strategy with mentions like marriages between Chinese princesses and Hsiung-nu leaders, but also about the same material support that we mentioned in the case of Xiongnu.<sup>12</sup>

This policy determinate more and more states to become dependent on the Han Empire internal goods production<sup>13</sup>, and through this generalization, by involving other actors from the international system, it would create the commercial route that later will be known as the *Silk Road*. Eventually one of the most important realization of the Ancient World, this well-know commercial road was preserved a lot time even after the fall of Han dynasty. Its name comes from the principal Chinese product, the silk, which represented the essence of the economical strategy adopted by the Chinese Empire in order to dominate the world commerce. Being the only provider of exotic goods, the Chinese were interested in securing the route and involved the military in the Gansu corridor<sup>14</sup>, a passage whose role was to enlarge the horizon of communication that reach even to the Roman Empire.

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<sup>10</sup> Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History*, 192.

<sup>11</sup> Nicola Di Cosmo, "Ancient Inner Asian Nomads: Their Economic Basis and Its Significance in Chinese History", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 53, 4 (1994): 1095, accessed January 24, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2059235>.

<sup>12</sup> Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History*: 193-194.

<sup>13</sup> Raoul McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, (Londra: Continuum, 2010), 3-4, 84.

<sup>14</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*,, 86.

Therefore, it created the possibility of initiating ties between the two empires, but, in reality, the first contacts were sensibly timid: two imperial constructs were similar in terms of formation and administration, but different in their historical evolutions that show how the Chinese Empire persisted and the Roman Empire disintegrated. *Da Qin*, the appellative used in the Chinese documents to name the Roman world, fascinated the Easterners who in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., sent a diplomatic representative, Gan Ying<sup>15</sup>, to make a tie between the Han dynasty and the Romans by a bilateral dialogue with mutual benefits. However, all the efforts did not attain success as Gan Ying could not sail over the sea to reach to the Roman Empire and, thus, the Chinese authorities believed that these were signs of fate showing the lack of importance of this potential collaboration. On the other side, the Romans became interested and fascinated by the exotic products which came from the Orient, and Marcus Antonius felt the necessity of making direct connections. The first Roman explorations were dated 282<sup>16</sup>, when the Chinese Emperor, impressed by the presents received, showed signs to be available for constructing this relationship. But, the same fate that prevented the establishment of a connection a century before, seemed to have showed the same negative attitude as this collaboration was made to late<sup>17</sup>, to redirection the two empires from the inherent transformations that were going to occur in the close future.

The second important aspect of Han diplomacy was the gift-giving ritualistic. In the society with a strict hierarchy where the loyalty was thought to be a necessity for the persistence of social harmony, any ceremony or ritual was realized with piety and respect for the difference. In the Asian culture, we observe a special attention to the fundamental relationship of *giving* and *receiving*. From the ancient times and until today, like Japan and Korea, China has also promoted the Confucian ethic that accentuated the individual as having his own place in a structured society where he has to maintain his status and obligations. In this equation, we must understand the symbolisms of *giving* and *receiving* as different in function of each one's position. It is consecrated that the inferior will always *receive* with submission something that the superior is *giving*, showing at the same time

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<sup>15</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, 124-125.

<sup>16</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, 139

the honor he has to receive the present, but not altering the subordination. On the other side, the individual that is superior in hierarchy will interpret the necessity of giving as a reconsideration of the inferior's loyalty.

In the Han period, there were 8 categories<sup>18</sup> of imperial ceremonies of gift-giving, but only a few of them were prioritized. Firstly by importance was the recognition of any exceptional merit and capabilities of an individual from the imperial administration by giving military grade or promoting<sup>19</sup> in the social hierarchy (material benefits and special privileges). Secondly, sparing the life of a convicted person was considered to be a divine present given through the imperial edict<sup>20</sup>. It was a part of the imperial benevolence attitude of giving lands and money to the poor<sup>21</sup>; because the celestial grace was something that only the emperor, as the representative of the Heaven, could offer to his loyal subjects.

Apart from the categories of present, already mentioned, that were for the Chinese citizens, we have another ones whose beneficiaries were strangers. Any act of gift-giving that was addressed to strangers (ambassadors, emperors, kings or other leaders), had to be very ceremonial and to look too expansive (silk, money) in order for the receiver to feel overwhelmed by it. These presents were meant to show the good intentions of Han emperor towards his counterpart and, eventually, to reach a consensus for a bilateral collaboration or treaty. Both aimed to obtain some kind of benefits from the partner of that cooperation. The Ho-Qin policy, already mentioned before, was one of the strategies utilized in the external policy by the Chinese authority. Over the time, the Chinese elite have developed this custom of impressing *the other* with luxurious presents or ceremonies, and, today, it is a specific of Chinese diplomacy to utilize these practices during different diplomatic dialogues. Rather than debating over the divergences of visions, China preferred to speak about his culture and traditions as a measure to hide the economical or political intentions. The Asians are well-known for lack of frankness as they never speak out their mind, and the Chinese developed this diplomatic style of transferring the interlocutor into a world all possibilities and pleasures, as a technique to manipulate and weak his determination in order to strike more easily in achieving their purpose. What we

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<sup>18</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, 120.

<sup>19</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, 120

<sup>20</sup> McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> I McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, 126.



name today by the Chinese negotiation style represents just the evolution in time of the Ho-Qin strategy, a policy that meant to diminish the national vulnerabilities.

## CONCLUSION

The Chinese contemporary diplomatic experience claimed to have developed from glorious period of Antiquity when the Han Empire is recognized to be at his top and amazed all the world with its extraordinary capacity of development. Accustomed to *surprise* of others, the Chinese state has built his own diplomatic style which is individualized between other national styles as being specific of Chinese diplomacy. Having its roots in Ho-Qin politics practiced by Han king, strategies that were intended to reduce the Empire vulnerabilities against external pressure, the Chinese diplomacy still preserves a still that emphasizes on grandeur and submitting the intellect to basic pleasures of senses: hearing, sight, smell or touch.

In the ancient period, the political elite of Han dynasty have prioritized the gift-giving as a technique to overwhelm the interlocutor and to transmit, at the same time, the cultural superiority of the Chinese Empire. Moreover, the start of constructing the most important trade route of the Antiquity coincided with the increase in agricultural production, a fact that gave the imperial authorities the chance of changing the balance of power in bilateral relations with nomadic populations: Hsiung-nu and Xiongnu. If the inferiority in military personnel and the lack of a military technology led to the signing of humiliating treaties, the Chinese exotic products, especially silk, gave the opportunity of the manifestation of a strong commercial Chinese state because it was the only one who could supply other countries with those rare products. The valorization of this advantage in building the Silk Road is until today, one of the best foreign policy decisions taken by the Han emperors. Thus, descendents of Heaven and stability or harmony factors in the society, the representatives of Han Dynasty, offered not only to the Chinese people but to the whole world the example of efficient administrative governance and a coordinated diplomacy that promoted the national interest with *soft power* means; in the end, a lessons of history and success in international relations.

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