From the time of the Three Dynasties on, the Xiongnu have been a source of constant worry and harm to China. The Han has attempted to determine the Xiongnu’s periods of strength and weakness so that it may adopt defensive measures or launch punitive expeditions as the circumstances allow. Thus I made “The Account of the Xiongnu”.

The ancestor of the Xiongnu was a descendant of the rulers of the Xia dynasty by the name of Chunwei. As early as the time of Emperors Yao and Shun and before, we hear of these people, known as Mountain Barbarians, Xianyun, or Hunzhu, living in the region of the northern barbarians and wandering from place to place pasturing their animals. The animals they raise consist mainly of horses, cows, and sheep, but include such rare beasts as camels, asses, mules, and the wild horses known as taotu and tuoji. They move about in search of water and pasture and have no walled cities or fixed dwellings, nor do they engage in any kind of agriculture. Their lands, however, are divided into regions under the control of various leaders. They have no writing, and even promises and agreements are only verbal. The little boys start out by learning to ride sheep and shoot birds and rats with a bow and arrow, and when they get a little older they shoot foxes and hares, which are used for food. Thus all the young men are able to use a bow and act as armed cavalry in time of war. It is their custom to herd their flocks in times of peace and make their living by hunting, but in periods of crisis they take up arms and go off on plundering and marauding expeditions. This seems to be their inborn nature. For long-range weapons they use bows and arrows, and swords and spears at close range. If the battle is going well for them they will advance, but if not, they will retreat, for they do not consider it a disgrace to run away. Their only concern is self-advantage, and they know nothing of propriety or righteousness.

From the chiefs of the tribe on down, everyone eats the meat of the domestic animals and wears clothes of hide or wraps made of felt or fur. The young men eat the richest and best food, while the old get what is left over, since the tribe honours those who are young and strong and despises the weak and aged. On the death of his father, a son will marry his stepmother, and when brothers die, the remaining brothers will take the widows for their own wives. They have no polite names but only personal names, and they observe no taboos in the use of personal names.

When the power of the Xia dynasty declined, Gong Liu, the ancestor of the Zhou dynasty, having lost his position as minister of grain, went to live among the Western
Rong barbarians, adopting their ways and founding a city at Bin. Some 300 years later the Rong and Di tribes attacked Gong Liu’s descendant, the Great Lord Danfu. Danfu fled to the foot of Mt. Qi and the whole population of Bin followed after him, founding a new city there. This was the beginning of the Zhou state.

A hundred and some years later Chang, the Zhou Earl of the West, attacked the Quanyi tribe, and ten or twelve years later, his son, King Wu, overthrew Emperor Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang dynasty, and founded a new capital at Luo. He also occupied the regions of Feng and Hao, drove the barbarians north beyond the Jing and Luo rivers, and obliged them to bring tribute to his court at specified times. Their lands were known as “the submissive wastes”.

Some 200 years later, when the power of the Zhou dynasty had declined, King Mu attacked the Dog Rong and brought back with him four white wolves and four white deer which he had seized. From this time on, the peoples of the “submissive wastes” no longer journeyed to court. (At this time the Zhou adopted the penal code of Marquis Fu.)

Some 200 years after the time of King Mu, King You of the Zhou, egged on by his beloved concubine Baosi, quarrelled with Marquis Shen. In anger, Marquis Shen joined forces with the Dog Rong and attacked and killed King You at the foot of Mt. Li. Eventually the barbarians seized the region of Jiaohuo from the Zhou, occupied the area between the Jing and Wei rivers, and invaded and plundered the central region of China. Duke Xiang of Qin came to the rescue of the Zhou court, and King You’s successor King Ping abandoned the regions of Feng and Hao and moved his capital east to the city of Luo. (At this time Duke Xiang of Qin attacked the barbarians and advanced as far as Mt. Qi; as a result he was for the first time ranked among the feudal lords of the Zhou dynasty.)

Sixty-five years later (704 BC) the Mountain Barbarians crossed through the state of Yan and attacked Qi. Duke Li of Qi fought with them in the suburbs of his capital. Forty-four years later the Mountain Barbarians attacked Yan, but Yan reported its distress to Duke Huan of Qi, who rode north and attacked the barbarians, driving them off.

Some twenty years later the barbarians rode as far as the capital city of Luo and attacked King Xiang of the Zhou; King Xiang fled to the city of Fan in Zheng. Previously King Xiang had wanted to attack the state of Zheng and had therefore married a daughter of the barbarians and made her his queen; then, with the aid of the barbarian forces, he had made his attack on Zheng. Having accomplished his purpose, however, he cast aside his barbarian queen, much to her resentment. King Xiang’s stepmother, Queen Hui, had a son named Zidai whom she wished to place on the throne, and therefore Queen Hui, her son, and the barbarian queen agreed to cooperate with the barbarian attackers from within the capital by opening the city to them. Thus the barbarians were able to enter, defeat and drive out King Xiang, and set up Zidai as Son of Heaven in his place.

After this the barbarians occupied the area of Luhun, roaming as far east as the state of Wei, ravaging and plundering the lands of central China with fearful cruelty. The empire was deeply troubled, and therefore the poets in the Book of Odes wrote:

We smote the barbarians of the north.
We struck the Xianyun
And drove them to the great plain.