

Chapter 2

Overcoming the Tyranny of Distance: Culture Contact and Politics

Distance, difference, contact, and interaction are concepts that are still coming into their own in archaeological understandings of the past. It was as recent as the 1980s that anthropologists felt the need to remind colleagues that in the affairs of human beings nothing transpires in isolation (Wolf 1982: 76, 1984). In particular, the kind of social and political transformation that archaeologists see as their topic of expertise cannot be explained without assigning importance to local, medium, and long-range interactions (Kohl 1987: 29; Trigger 1984: 286; Schortman and Urban 1992: 235). In the case of Inner Asia, these factors cannot be ignored. Nor can Inner Asia's long record of complex polities, states, and empires be explained without somehow interrelating distance and interaction to the politics they shaped. To that end, this chapter proposes a model for social and political process that links local interactions to interregional dynamics.

Although the East Asian researcher Owen Lattimore developed his innovative ideas based on a polycentric emphasis, he still drew upon a fairly linear model for the geographic spread of complex organization. Based on his analysis of why it was that the powerful and highly organized civilization of China could not expand beyond the frontier, he concluded that China's expansion ran into an Inner Asian environment and lifeway that was ill-suited to the basic premise of Chinese civilization. Lattimore's underlying assumption was that a dominant adaptive pattern and its organizational expression expanded outward by subsuming and acculturating differently organized groups until those processes were no longer practical. In other words, inter-group interaction was mainly a product of expansion taking place after the polity, culture, or society in question had been fully formed, not a formative factor from the very beginning and throughout.

Instead of beginning with a core state that gradually expands outward, there is another way to approach the same process that draws on a multicentric perspective. From that point of view, the question could be phrased differently: i.e., given a large sample of geographic space, how was interaction across its diverse

communities and centers variously configured over time? In other words, how did a particular region become socially interconnected and how did that social process relate to the rise of new political groups, territories, and boundaries as older boundaries diminished? This version of the question removes priority from any one center, polity, or civilization and stipulates that in order to understand any particular region, diverse inputs from surrounding areas and peoples must be factored in (Wolf 1984: 395–396). Accordingly, theorizing interaction as a fundamental characteristic from the earliest stages onward encourages attention to the different qualities of interaction that may have begun as indirect and tentative but later took on a more definite shape with greater social and political consequence.

Archaeologists have described these kinds of interactions as social fields, interaction spheres, world systems, peer-polity networks, and so on. Importantly, each of these terms embodies different ideas for how specific sets of interaction pertain to the growth of new forms of organization. The objective of this chapter and the following one as well is to provide a foundation and definitional clarity for a theory of interregional interaction that pertains to the nomadic politics of Inner Asia. In order to do this, some basic but challenging questions need to be addressed about the nature of interaction, distance, and social organization. By considering recent anthropological work on these issues, I propose a theory of interregional interaction that is well-suited for the East and Inner Asian setting and helps to clarify the nature of nomadic complexity on the eastern steppe.

I begin with three case studies each involving a material object or a material practice that moved across cultural boundaries and became entwined in new social contexts. In examining what it means to have items and ideas from distant cultures among and between us, I seek to clarify the social impact of “novelty.” In other words, what happens when novel materials, products, practices, and ideas are encountered, in what ways do they change by way of a new context, and can they likewise promote change within that context? These material and social examples set the stage for a consideration of three foundational questions about cross-cultural process: How do things move and become novel in the first place; how do we define the terms “long distance,” “cross-cultural,” and “interregional,” and finally, how does cross-cultural process transform social settings in ways that affect social organization?

2.1 Novelty from Afar: The Jew’s Harp

My first case study concerns the curious history of the Jew’s harp, a musical instrument which in North America is seen mostly in toy stores and trinket shops. What in America is sometimes a knickknack or a play thing, in Mongolia is a time honored and even mystical instrument connected with traditional forms of music and shamanic ritual (Fig. 2.1). The deep history of this small object’s movement across the globe is fascinating but known to only a few historians and ethnomusicologist, some of whom take the Jew’s harp as their principle topic of research. The etymology of its name in English is still debated but it likely has nothing to

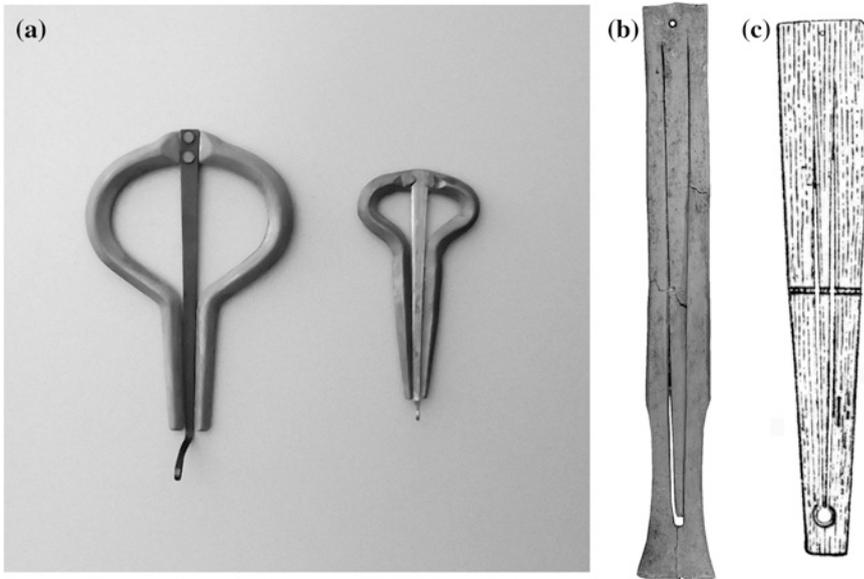


Fig. 2.1 Modern and ancient Jew's harps. **a** Two instruments purchased in the USA (*left*) and Kyrgyzstan (*right*). **b** Xiongnu period Jew's harp from the Morin Tolgoi cemetery, Mongolia (photo by D. Tseveendorj). **c** One of the oldest Jew's harps ever recovered, excavated from a burial in the upper levels of the Xiajiadian cemetery, Inner Mongolia (adapted from Inner Mongolia 1974)

do with the Jewish religion or culture. The name may be a corruption of an earlier English or German term such as “jue” or “jaws” and in historical documents this has been paired with either “harp” or “trump,” suggesting primarily a musical function (Wright 2005).

The Mongolian Jew's harp is called *khel khuur* or literally the “tongue(d) instrument” probably because there is a tongue-like strip of metal or bone which must be plucked to make a sound using the player's mouth as a sound box. In Mongolia and Siberia, the original purpose of the “*khel khuur*” was not as a musical instrument per se, but as a ritual device which later became included in the musical repertoire. Shamanistic ceremonies use material items to symbolize other processes, and, in the case of this instrument, its sound is heard as the trot or gallop of a horse which is meant to transport the shaman upward in order to communicate with nature spirits (Badamkhatan and Tserenkhand 2012: 446–447). In this sense, the Jew's harp might more accurately be described as a sound-producing tool rather than a musical instrument, but in fact the local meaning and function of that particular sound can be quite diverse in different cultures.

Interestingly, this particular sound-making tool has become a “traditional” object to peoples across Asia, in parts of Europe, Africa, Australia, Melanesia, and in the Americas (Fox 1988). While the manufacture of the Jew's harp changes slightly over time and from place to place in terms of materials, styles, and design, the essential principle employed to produce its twang-like acoustics cannot be

modified too radically. Despite variation in the instrument's shape and different methods of producing vibration, these are all still easily recognizable as essentially Jew's harps. Given the vast geographic range of this instrument's distribution, a good question to ask is how did it travel so widely? Or are we to assume that it was perhaps independently invented in many different regions? Even though the evidence is still somewhat limited, the latest research points to its origin in Asia, and while it could have been independently derived in northeast and southeast Asia, the earliest unequivocal dates for its appearance are from Inner Asia and specifically from archaeological contexts in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, and in northern Hebei province of China.

The oldest known Jew's harp is from the cemetery of Xiajiadian near the modern city of Chifeng in southeastern Inner Mongolia. Burial 14, from the upper levels of the cemetery, yielded an object with a central tongue cut from a single flat piece of worked bone (Inner Mongolia Archaeology Unit 1974: Fig. 30, number 8). The archaeologists who excavated the bone Jew's harp did not identify it as such but described the artifact as being 9.8 cm in length, with a narrow tongue carved from the center, and having the general shape of a weaving shuttle (see Fig. 5 caption, Inner Mongolia Archaeology Unit 1974). The burial and the surrounding cemetery are part of the type site that defines the Upper Xiajiadian archaeological culture (see Chap. 7), which has been dated between 1200 and 600 BC. Additional discoveries of early Jew's harps have been documented in burials at the site of Jundushan in north central Hebei province of China and dated between 700 and 500 BC (Beijing Municipal Institute of Cultural Heritage 2009: 1362, nos. 3–6). According to the excavators, the region surrounding Beijing and southeastern Inner Mongolia were occupied by groups having strong cultural affinities with steppe regions farther to the north.

More than a decade after finds were made at Xiajiadian and Jundushan, a very similar artifact was discovered in a Xiongnu-period burial from central Mongolia (Tseveendorj 1990: Fig. 6). This instrument also is made of bone, 12.5 cm long, and, like the Inner Mongolian artifacts, it has a small hole at the base of the tongue for attachment of a plucking cord. The Xiongnu-period site of Morin Tolgoi where the Mongolian instrument was discovered is a medium-sized cemetery constructed within an older ceremonial site having monuments of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age. While this exact burial has not been dated by radiocarbon analysis, most dates established for similar contexts fall into the range of the third century BC to first century AD. Members of the Mongolian excavation team immediately saw that the artifact they had unearthed was similar to Jew's harps still used in Mongolia today made of bone, horn, or bamboo (Tseveendorj 1990). In order to verify that these Inner Asian artifacts were indeed ancient Jew's harps, the musicologist and Jew's harp historian, Frederick Crane, reviewed drawings and photographs and positively identified them as such (personal communication 1997). He then passed this information on to others doing historical research on the origins and worldwide distribution of early Jew's harps (e.g., Kolltviet 2006: 4; Wright 2004).

While we cannot completely rule out multiple independent inventions in different parts of Asia and Europe, the British musicologist Michael Wright has recently made an argument, based on all available evidence, for the transfer of this

instrument from east to west through Silk Roads interaction and from Europe to Africa and to the New World through later shipping, trade, and migration (Wright 2004: 53). Given that the earliest examples are associated with Inner Asia and probably with peoples having mobile cultures, Eurasian Silk Roads exchange as one means of transfer is entirely plausible. Wright also makes the point that across these continents and across cultures, the Jew's harp is known by more than 1,000 unique names. Ethnographically, its peculiar twang has assumed extremely diverse functions including involvement in magic, healing, courtship, initiation into adulthood, protection, burial ceremony, gaming, and of course, as musical expression.

If this unassuming implement did in fact move across the globe at a slow pace measured in centuries between so many different cultures and language groups, then it is a good example of what might be called "incremental globalization." The widespread use of the Jew's harp is a case of contact and transfer of a particular material object between many different peoples who then adopted it and gave it new meanings as befitted their local needs. In this instance, cross-cultural transfer represents a diversification of the meanings and functions of a single material and acoustic form. Novelty came from afar but was received and transformed locally according to each different cultural context (e.g., Thomas 1991: 28, 29, 87). Instead of seeing the Jew's harp as a unitary, essential object that traveled across world cultures, we might just as well see its history as a thousand new inventions wherever this object was appropriated.

This process of local innovation demonstrates some themes that offer insight into the material correlates of interaction. First, in the course of cross-cultural transfer, the Jew's harp was repeatedly taken up as a novel item and was accepted locally because in some way it appealed to local tastes and systems of value. Different groups, for whatever reasons and by whatever diverse pathways, encountered this instrument and chose to adopt it. Second, the many names, meanings, and uses of the Jew's harp suggest a gradual, indirect, and adaptive diversification based on circumstances of transfer and local traditions of understanding. Indirect, incremental, and essentially innovative transfers of foreign products, materials, and technologies were primary processes in the past related to low-level, episodic, and down-the-line forms of contact. This kind of transfer contrasts dramatically with today's rush of electronic flows of information and the rapid transport of materials, products, and designs (Appadurai 2002). Perhaps one casualty of modern day instant communications and global mobility is this rich diversification of meanings and functions derived from the innovative power of slowness.

2.2 Do New Foods Beget New Appetites? The Oreo Cookie that Wasn't

Even with rapid transmission between different cultural regions, the priority of local reception and understandings of a novel item still operates. The Oreo cookie, my second material case study, demonstrates this point quite well, and compared to the Jew's harp, it is presumably a subject more familiar to Westerners. This case

begins as a frustrating marketing problem originally described in the *Wall Street Journal* (Jargon 2008). Since its introduction to China in 1996, the iconic Oreo cookie had not been selling very well. After a decade of disappointing sales, rather than pulling the product from shelves altogether, marketers asked how the cookie might be made more desirable for Chinese consumers. Targeted surveys revealed that given taste expectations in China, the cream inside the cookie was too sweet and the cookie itself was too bitter. Furthermore, the Oreo's round shape was not very functional for dipping into a drink. Based on these problems, the famous Oreo was in need of an overhaul that included adjusting the product's sweet to bitter ratio and shifting from a round to a long rectangular shape. To promote sales of the new Oreo, an advertisement campaign was launched with cute kids who demonstrated how to eat the snack "American style." By the time the cookie began to sell in the Chinese market, it was so different from the original that the "Chinese" Oreo could be sold in Canada and Australia as an entirely new product.

This recent history of the Oreo in China points to something that transpires every day in market economies: Designing products to appeal to a particular market. What is interesting is the way in which this particular product with an established history and function in one corner of the world assumed an entirely different form in order to suit the same criteria, that of a snack food, in another part of the world. In order to make it a success, the cookie was redesigned according to local tastes to such an extent that its original form diversified into something altogether new. The Oreo scenario is a good illustration of two major processes in inter-cultural transfer. First, it demonstrates the strength of local tastes and practices in governing the reception or rejection of a novel item. It also suggests that in the process of accommodating a novel item to a new cultural setting, changes in both meaning and form might be expected (Thomas 1991: 105–106). In other words, this process should not be seen as simple cultural borrowing, or as straightforward transmission, or even as cultural translation. The Oreo cookie case study argues that by virtue of its arrival in an arena of different sociocultural assumptions and precedents, a foreign form may be reinterpreted into an entirely new entity. The Oreo in China was quite literally subject to a kind of improvisation upon an established theme (Barber 2007).

The cookie case study tells of intentionally trying to fit the essence of something, such as a snack experience, to a new cultural idiom and thereby having to transform the thing itself. This raises a related question of whether such a process of cultural adaptation likewise transforms the indigenous cultural and social context to which the novel item is introduced. In the case of the Chinese Oreo, the advertising campaign promoted an image of children "teaching" their parents about Western snack culture. While this is an advertising gimmick, I wonder whether it does not also encourage a new role for children in the Chinese family as the gateway for Western cultural practices. I use the next case to argue that foreign products, material practices, and ideas not only take on new meanings and forms through indigenous contexts, but they also introduce a powerful potential to transform those very contexts depending on how such novelty is implicated in ongoing social relationships.

2.3 Walls and Relationships: Building New Inequalities

Moving northward from China, the steppe capital of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, has witnessed some important socio-architectural changes over the past decade which are pertinent to this discussion. These changes were made possible by the precipitous fall of the former Soviet Union and its abandonment of political and economic influence over Mongolia. The Mongolian Democratic revolution began in 1990 and initiated a mass pullout of Russian troops as well as the end of Soviet economic support for the nation. Facing economic collapse, the revolution rapidly transformed into a free market revolution under the auspices of international development agencies like the World Bank. The final section of this book looks in more detail at the post-socialist changes in Mongolia, especially relative to its nomadic past. For now, I explore a single transformation that has occurred since the fall of Soviet hegemony: The growing divide in wealth and lifestyle between the “haves” and the “have nots” in Mongolia. What is significant for the present study is how prevalent the role of foreign goods and practices has been in this very recent process of social change. In particular, I examine the role of gated communities, a material configuration imported from the West that has played a conspicuous role in the formation of a new social class made up of the Mongolian moneyed elite.

In Mongolia’s rapid transition to a market economy, one of the primary economic priorities has been transferring state-held resources into private hands. This was done prior to changes in the legal and administrative system. As a result, no functioning regulatory or legal framework guaranteed that the country’s wealth was distributed broadly and equitably among citizens. During the period of transition from the Soviet era, those few individuals with political influence took hold of existing resources to pave the way for their continued political power and access to wealth. The impacts of inequality have been widely discussed in the Mongolian media and have entered into the everyday conversation of both advantaged and disadvantaged Mongols (Buyandelgeriyin 2007). Today, this national discourse is fueled by the highly visible subculture of individuals with wealth, such as those residing in the relatively new gated communities springing up in prestigious parts of the capital city. These Western style complexes began appearing in Ulaanbaatar around 2004 and quickly became part of the rapidly changing cityscape. While walled cities, palaces, and monasteries are nothing new in Mongolian history, what makes these gated structures novel is how they participate in a specific social context of rapidly changing relationships (Fig. 2.2).

Unlike other walled precincts in Mongolian history, the small residential groups within these gates are defined solely by wealth. Having adequate means to buy a residence and pay fees makes one a community member and bestows a particular identity arising from his or her exclusive membership. Such identities constitute part of an elite subculture that actively builds and supports class emergence. Such a visible and pronounced denotation of class distinctions has not existed in Mongolia since the 1920s and 1930s when socialists violently repressed the indigenous aristocratic lineages supported by the Manchu dynasty (Lkhagvasuren



Fig. 2.2 A new gated community in Ulaanbaatar replete with a military style guardhouse (photo by William Gardner)

2009). While political privilege with enhanced living conditions existed for those well-connected in the Soviet era from 1921 to 1990, it was not at all comparable to the present day social process of elite emergence through ostentation. Gated communities along with designer clothing, expensive foreign cars, trips abroad, frequent club and restaurant dining, and even speaking English all constitute new forms of asserting social difference. The interesting questions are why would non-indigenous products, practices, and ideas be so prominent in the process of producing social difference and how do these novel imports function socially to establish such differentiation?

To understand why novel materials figure into this process, it is useful to think of contemporary class distinctions in Mongolia as a social negotiation that unfolds step-by-step among multiple interest groups, factions, and ad hoc associations. None of these groups are homogenous, permanent, or necessarily “real” in the sense of frequent face-to-face association. The new “elite” in Mongolia is not an actual social group as much as an abstract collective that takes on social consequence by being consistently referenced in interactions and expectations between individuals. Building a class is indeed about wealth and power but from a social perspective it is also about creating new relationships based on daily engagements that follow certain behavioral and interactive patterns: Specifically those that outwardly signal distinction and inwardly impart a sense of difference between interactants.

In this respect, Tilly (2003: 34) argues that one way “distinction” comes to be socially understood, enacted, and consistent is through an expenditure of wealth and power that is socially demonstrable and actively distinguishing. Introduced materials and material practices from foreign cultures have great potential to play this kind of role in ongoing negotiations in two ways. First, novel materials from

afar lack indigenous social context and therefore are endowed with a capacity to elicit new kinds of relationships (Robb 2010: 502). Because these materials are possessed by one party and not the other, the possibility of enacting a new relation based on distinction (i.e., having versus not having) is accentuated. Second, new relations are just that—they are new and therefore neither widely recognized nor stable in the face of continuing interactions which may suppress differentiation. If class formation arises from social encounters transpiring day-to-day, then those material items implicated in this process can be seen as social statements which are particularly insistent and persistent due to their concrete permanence (Robb 2004). Having once acquired social meaning, materials make assertions that occur over and over as part of any ensuing social negotiation.

In the case of gated communities in Ulaanbaatar, interactive episodes plainly visible day-to-day along many streets in the city provide apt illustration. These include individuals being turned away at the gate by uniformed guards, children outside the gated walls staring at children playing inside on imported play sets, and passersby lambasted for being in the way when a resident's car exits or enters the gateway. A single afternoon's observation is enough to reveal how the presence of walls and gates affects interpersonal relations within adjacent neighborhoods and beyond. If two unacquainted individuals, one a member of the gated community and the other an outsider, meet at the gate, what portion of that social encounter registers the operative social statements about privilege and exclusion, especially in terms of the expectations for how each should treat and be treated by the other? Given the climate of social change in Ulaanbaatar today, I would guess there is quite a marked effect, especially given that the gated community is only one of multiple material codes that consistently and simultaneously enact these expectations for differentiation between individuals. To the degree that these expectations are carried through in daily interactions and persist over time and are genuinely believed in, a real and tangible class distinction comes to exist within Mongolian society.

This process is not intentional and cannot be described as the result of strategizing on the part of ambitious elite individuals. Gated community designs were not imported to Mongolia as a way to promote class per se, rather they were selected by land developers intent on marketing housing for a profit. Those purchasing the housing did so for a wide range of reasons including the desire for a functional home, for financial investment, and perhaps because their peers did so. However, these designs were introduced into an ongoing social negotiation and became socially meaningful according to a process that both represented and enacted broader asymmetries. In other words, the role of this particular architectural layout was not necessarily predetermined to be a prestige symbol, although such an effect may have been known to occur elsewhere. After all, in purely material terms what we are discussing is no more than brick and mortar. In fact, how any particular novel material or material pattern takes on local meaning is subject to the ways diverse individuals proceed to interrelate with reference to that novel material. A modal social pattern associating a new material practice with status, exclusion, or inequality comes about only over time and by way of a complex composite of multiple intentions, interactions, and outcomes.

The power of such material assertions to impact the broader social fabric is appreciable and herein lies a pathway for organizational change. Nevertheless, this change is still part of a socially negotiated process regardless of how asymmetric that might be. In the case of the Mongol *nouveaux riche*, social resistance to their privileged lifestyles has been palpable. Growing numbers of ordinary Mongols dislike the new inequality and resent the new elite with their accumulations of wealth and the politics of corruption that supports them. By publicly protesting with demonstrations, media and internet campaigns, and even street violence, citizen groups have opposed the grab for wealth and power that marks this new social divide. Gated communities play an active role in this discourse. Mongols who oppose the process of wealth-based distinctions have directly used the gated communities to comment, whether by graffiti or opportunistic vandalism. Most ordinary people, however, express their disapproval of the gated communities quietly but pervasively in thousands of daily conversations. As such, the social negotiation over class continues in Mongolia today.

These three case studies reflect the “nuts and bolts” of how materials and, by extension, non-materials such as symbols and beliefs, move geographically, culturally, and socially. The formula involved intermingles materials, novelty, social contexts, and social relations into a negotiated process that is neither predictable nor inevitable (Helms 1988: 266). Novel materials are introduced by design or by accident, but local reception and meaning derives from involvement of the particular item in a dynamic indigenous social setting. This unique involvement transforms novel materials from an undefined novelty per se into a wide variety of local meanings and forms. My three case studies attest to such transformations: Simple bricks and mortar become an enduring symbol of privilege; a Western cookie becomes a Chinese cookie by altering its very essence; and what is a revered ritual implement in Mongolia becomes a mere plaything elsewhere. In none of these examples are essential qualities or meanings maintained across cultures because the process of transfer is neither simple nor straightforward. Instead, cross-cultural sharing is improvisational and innovative rather than merely replicative (Thomas 1991: 28). It is driven by the inclusion of novel items, materials, ideas, and techniques in local social negotiations which can potentially remodel local relationships and simultaneously confer new social meanings on imports and even refashion them altogether (Hodder 2012: 65). These relational changes play out locally, but when they involve the resupply of materials, information, or infrastructure by way of far flung networks, then local relations become enmeshed in larger spheres of long-distance interaction.

2.4 Interregional Theory and Social Transformations

Archaeologists use a range of terms to discuss encounters between spatially discrete cultural groups. These include acculturation, interregional interaction, culture contact, and even ancient globalization. What each of these terms has in common

is a focus on the transformations brought about when people, ideas, and things from different cultures (i.e., novelty) move by various means into other cultural settings. Given this diverse vocabulary, it is helpful to clarify a number of the basic ideas and concepts used for this body of theory. I am guided in this discussion by Gideon Shelach's (1999, 2001, 2009), thoughtful work on interregional interaction in East Asia which sets a foundation for extending macro-regional analysis to other periods of time and across more distant Asian geographies. With regard to defining terminology and concepts, a few questions need to be addressed forthright: How did transfers between regions and cultures occur in the past and what range of activities count as interaction and contact? Moreover, what is meant by the terms "interregional" and "cross-cultural" and how and why are they related? Finally, how did changes in the way people interact across geographical space contribute to political and organizational change?

2.5 How Do Things Move and Become Novel?

Considering the first of these questions, I agree with Shelach's assessment that the methods of movement and transfer in the past were relatively few and straightforward: Either things moved person to person or people moved and transported things (Shelach 2009: 117). In most cases, ideas, techniques, and practices moved in conjunction with people and people moved in a wide variety of ways. For example, individuals or groups might move for long or short periods of time spurred by events as commonplace as seasonal change or as catastrophic as endemic warfare and environmental collapse. Ancient peoples moved for many different reasons including relocation, displacement, military forays, territorial occupation, exchange, itinerancy, and slavery among many others. As apparent from the material case studies already discussed, material goods also moved in diverse ways through exchange or gift giving, by incremental down-the-line transfers, or by sudden exposure and discovery.

However, if movements of people and goods were the key processes, why not focus on studies of migration and trade; especially since both of these topics have substantial traditions of research among archaeologists (e.g., Frachetti 2011; Dillian and White 2010)? Trade and migration are indeed pertinent, but the broader topics of interaction and contact treat a different social, temporal, and spatial question about how disparate and distinct peoples began to learn more about their neighbors as part of an expanding social environment. Moreover, a focus on interaction and contact goes far beyond the direct face-to-face encounters or conflicts that receive the majority of attention in research and historical imagination. For instance, the Inner Asian frontier is commonly understood in terms of direct confrontation and warfare between Xiongnu and Han dynasty troops, but what exactly preceded these confrontations? Very likely, there was a period of occasional and opportunistic long-distance contacts meshed into regional networks, and, prior to that, incremental regional exchange and indirect circulation of foreign materials,

technologies, and information. Before that, however, we can only imagine how groups separated by a thousand or more kilometers must have had imperfect and piecemeal stories, myths, and legends about other peoples far off who lived in different ways and in strikingly different lands.

All of these incidental, direct, and indirect modes of contact between dispersed groups figured into long-term social trends involving greater knowledge, more interaction, group re-configurations, and political action. As I will argue, these less direct, gradual, and distant forms of contact which often preceded more regular face-to-face encounters are subtle, harder to detect, and difficult to conceptualize; however, they were just as significant and influential (Dietler 1998: 298). Both direct and less direct forms of contact were transformative for societies in East and Inner Asia but these processes had different timelines, histories, and impacts that require careful study if we are to explain the rise of something as complicated as the Inner Asian frontier and the Sino-Xiongnu wars.

2.6 What Counts as Long Distance, Cross-Cultural, or Interregional?

The second question is what do we mean by social interaction that is interregional or cross-cultural in character? Archaeologists use descriptive terms like “interregional” and “cross-cultural” without always defining them clearly, but in the simplest sense, they all mean the same thing: Social interactions carried out across large geographical extents (i.e., spatially defined) and across areas of cultural difference (i.e., socially and symbolically defined). The assumption linking one to the other is that cultures are tied to specific geographical areas and, as distance from or across an area increases, cultural differences should also increase (Barth 1969: 11). The problem arises in how we define geographic-cultural units since who is to say where one region ends and another begins much less where a so-called discrete culture is located in space (Barth 1981: 32–40; Wolf 1982: 387). How then might we conceptualize the intersection of space, place, and culture in order to begin addressing differences across them? The answer to this question must be formulated both theoretically and practically. Since my main argument about Inner Asian statehood concerns space, difference, and organizational change, the way in which these geographic and sociocultural terms are conceptually understood is quite important and deserves close consideration.

Shelach (2009) presents the practical side of this issue in his study of the Inner Mongolian frontier. In order to analyze the movement of people and things across different regions, he breaks up the continuum of interaction into discrete geographical-cultural regions that consist of the Central Plain of China, the Northern Zone, and the Eurasian steppes. Shelach speaks of “regional-scale” interactions occurring within these zones and “interregional scale” interactions taking place between them at distances ranging from between 700 to 1,000 km. His regional definitions are not arbitrary but are based on a contextual knowledge of material

cultures and long-term histories that mark real distinctions between inhabitants of these areas. I employ a similar breakdown and add even more geographical-cultural zones to the north, east, and west; however, these spatial representations of cultural difference are extremely coarse when considering the fluidity of interaction and the cultural variation within any one designated space. Shelach uses his categorization in a heuristic manner and appropriately avoids the temptation to essentialize or homogenize these regions and their peoples.

Although this practical approach to local, regional, and interregional geographic extents is effective and convenient for archaeologists, it raises a deeper theoretical question of how to understand and work with the concept of scale. I agree with a number of other anthropologists that interlinking global and local social scales are central to answering questions about long-distance interaction and social change (Dietler 2005; Stein 2002; Schortman and Urban 1992; Helms 1988). Given this, how might the Inner Asian interregional/cross-cultural question be restated in terms of processes of interlinked scales? I turn to the thought-provoking work of Richard Howitt (1993, 1998, 2002), an Australian geographer very much involved in seeking a definition of scale as both a social and spatial phenomenon. Howitt points out that scale is usually handled with descriptive terms of either size extent or social level, all of which are likewise used in archaeology. For example, social level is commonly arranged in a nested hierarchy consisting of household, community, and polity/nation or state. Size-extent hierarchies include local, regional, macro-regional, and global scales. Howitt (1998) contends that these descriptive hierarchies are metaphorical and intuitive, and while they do address real aspects of scale, they cannot capture its implications as a social dynamic.

Instead, Howitt suggests considering scale not just in terms of size extent and social level, but also in terms of relation (Howitt 1998: 49). He proposes that when it comes to social process, scale is not arranged hierarchically such that larger levels contain smaller order levels, but rather these scales interpenetrate, co-constitute and are dialectically related. In other words, global scales contain smaller scales but are also contained within these smaller scales of process and interaction. For an example of this, he points to the dialectical link between national culture and individual values such that “each clearly contains, responds to, encapsulates, and is constructed from the other” (Howitt 2002: 305). To quote Howitt directly:

Any locality (local scale space) is constituted not only by things that are directly manifested within the locality, but also by cross-scale relations. These relations operate not hierarchically or uni-directionally, but simultaneously; not just sequentially but also in different orders ... It is also clear that a shift in scale is simultaneously a change of both quantity and quality. A shift in scale produces consideration not just of more (or less) but also of difference (Howitt 2002: 305–306).

Two of Howitt’s points are pertinent for a scale-informed analysis of the Inner Asian past. The first is that his plural, compounded, and dialectical understanding of scale applies globally and locally at the same time. This has consequence for primary social processes involving relationships, identity, group formation, and politics. The second is his recognition that shifts in scale represent qualitative differences in terms of both perspective and emphasis as well as information

and content. To be concise, increases in scale and in heterogeneity are strongly correlated. If scale is indeed inter-defining, then the expansion of scale pertinent to a social process will inevitably introduce to that process novel arrangements, information, and content even at the micro-level of interaction between individuals. As such, social life becomes substantially more entangled in affairs that are both immediate and elsewhere at the same time (Giddens 1990: 18, 64).

Over the second and first millennia BC, the social history of East and Inner Asia clearly involved a process of expanding scales of relevance with regard to local interactions. An individual living in 2000 BC on the northern extreme of the Gobi Desert was not greatly affected by events 1,000 km away in the heartland of China. Fast forward the same individual and location to 100 BC and this person's identity, political stance, and local relationships were deeply interwoven with external events at that distance and even farther away. Therefore, the expansion of East and Inner Asian interactions can be thought of in terms of linear and nonlinear frames. Analysis and model building should address both how people of a given region gradually came into contact and expanded social interaction with peoples of other regions, and how expanding scales of contact figured into and shaped interactions at local areas on a day-to-day basis. Again following Howitt, as interaction expanded across and between new geographical areas, these processes necessitated an involvement of "difference" and "novelty" in the quality of activities and interactions locally. As such, a global-local perspective on interregional interaction represents how geographic-cultural differences are encountered, tolerated, rejected, exploited, or politicized as a function of ongoing social negotiations between individuals at the local level.

2.7 How Does Inter-cultural Process Change Social Organization?

The primary objective of this study is to discern how these subtle factors of difference, scale, and interaction became implicated in centuries of sociopolitical change that eventually contributed to the rise of the first eastern nomadic state. For Inner Asia and for other parts of the ancient world where similar questions apply, such inquiries have led to decades of theorizing, debate, and re-theorizing. Given different sociocultural and political contexts, organizational outcomes of inter-cultural contact have varied widely. This has led anthropologists to necessarily draw on an eclectic range of models and frameworks. Despite this diversity of ideas, many of the approaches still focus on powerful centers, usually in the form of states or empires, as constituting the primary drivers of regional and macro-regional process. Such thinking has played a substantial role in explanations for how and why states formed in Inner Asia. Existing models tend to emphasize the role of China as a regional center that is thought to have provided both political models for imitation by others and the catalysts for macro-regional complexity on its periphery.

These state-centric ideas highlight the initiative of the most complex society within a growing interactive network rather than the unique dynamic of the network itself. There is, however, a trend in archaeological thinking away from state- and empire-centered perspectives toward multi-polity and multilateral approaches. This shift moves away from a simple sequential emphasis on primary, secondary, and tertiary complexity to a complexity framework that is simultaneous and dialectical but also differentiated in terms of diversity of process and formats of complexity. The most recent archaeological models to address the association of interregional interaction and organizational change explore new ways of implicating long-distance contact in local sociopolitical transformations (Schortman et al. 2001: 325; Parkinson and Galaty 2007: 117). These offer promising perspectives based on concepts like connectivity (Pitts 2008), common difference (Wilk 2004), social fields (Kohl 2008), nonuniform institutional alignments (Frachetti 2009, 2012), and dynamic networks (Knappett 2013). Unlike earlier approaches, these new theories of interregional interaction emphasize multilateral and multi-directional contact, the importance of local choice, diversity of cultural response under conditions of contact, and attention to different scales and inter-scale linkages.

Considering the Inner Asian context and the processes leading up to state emergence, I find Dietler's (2010) use of the concept of "entanglement" particularly promising. Dietler borrows this concept from innovative work by Nicholas Thomas on material culture and European colonialism in the Pacific (Thomas 1991; also cf. Hodder 2012: 89), but Dietler's goal is to analyze the eventual incorporation of southern France into the Roman empire (c. first century BC). His analysis begins with the very first steps of contact that occurred centuries earlier between indigenous French populations (i.e., Gauls or Celts) and Greek wine merchants on the Mediterranean coast. He focuses on the role of alcohol in competitive feasting that provided an arena for local politics among groups in southern France. These groups had long employed their own forms of alcoholic beverages during feasts but the availability of Greek wine and imported drinking paraphernalia greatly changed conditions. Those with access to the wine and the use of fancy drinking implements were able to stage and host feasts which led to their attainment of politically influential positions. In ways that no single set of actors could possibly have anticipated, the wide availability of Greek wine and drinking gear gradually expanded access for junior members of society to compete in feasting ceremonies. Rising competition periodically transformed into unprecedented violent conflicts that spilled over to impact the adjacent Greek trading colonies that supplied wine. These colonies were under Roman protection and as a result, the alliance with Rome expedited imperial involvement in what were essentially small scale and far removed local processes among the indigenous Gauls. Direct Roman military action against the Gauls ended with the colonial occupation of the region and integration of its indigenous peoples into the empire.

In Dietler's case study, entanglement refers to the unanticipated but consequential webs of contacts between different peoples that can interconnect conditions locally and globally. These webs arise between distinct cultural groups through new forms of exchange and the indigenous consumption of foreign goods which become

central to local social negotiations. The strength of Dietler's approach is in describing the social, temporal and most importantly, the scalar intricacies, of the way in which indigenous choices can have large ramifications over time (Dietler 2010: 336–344). Three key concepts distill this interaction model down to its foundations: (1) Contacts between differentiated societies, (2) inter-dependence or “contingency” as one outcome of these contacts, and (3) the unintended consequences of how such conditions then play out. According to Dietler, consumption of foreign goods promotes a process of entanglement that links societies together in new cultural, economic, and political relationships. Over time, inter-dependencies arising from these relationships can have unintended consequences with many possible transformative effects, depending on the nature and history of entanglement (Dietler 2010: 74)

This framework accomplishes a good deal of analytical work in structuring a diachronic narrative of colonialism for southern France. For my purposes, however, the other “possible transformative effects” mentioned above are of interest when it comes to Inner Asia. I find that Dietler's ideas could apply equally well to entanglements in which colonization was not the eventual outcome. On the opposite side of the Old World, the Sino-Xiongnu wars were in full force at the same time as the final Roman colonization of the Gauls (c. late 2nd to mid-1st centuries BC). Whereas these broader entanglements in Europe led to an expanding Roman empire able to colonize distant peoples and lands, the contemporaneous story of macro-regional entanglement in East and Inner Asia played out quite differently. Instead of imperial conquest and colonization, the Qin/Han and Xiongnu states emerged almost simultaneously, provoking centuries of conflict and an eventual stalemate between two equally powerful but very different rivals. How then might Dietler's concepts be expanded to fit an alternative history in which entanglements resulted in diversified forms of statehood counterpoised across a macro-regional frontier?

2.8 Foundations of Entanglement: Relationships, Negotiation, and Contingency

In order to re-orient entanglement toward the Inner Asian experience, I examine more closely Dietler's three assertions about links between distant societies, contingent processes, and unintended consequences. Each one of these important points needs to be considered within the particular context of Inner Asia to work out the precise nature of inter-societal links and how these links may have configured contingent processes of articulation. In particular, I am interested in exploring what exactly “unintended consequences” might mean in the Inner Asian case and investigating how such factors could have facilitated the emergence of statehood among nomads. However, answering these kinds of questions first requires a clear statement of what these concepts mean and how they relate to social transformation. Although words like “contact,” “link,” and “articulation” are expressive, from a social standpoint they all refer to one and the same process: the making and maintenance of relationships. Taking advantage of Howitt's model for

co-constituting local and global scales, Dietler's approach to entanglement can be re-formulated in the shape of a two-part inquiry: (1) How did a given set of local relationships transform as a larger-scale context of interaction, contact, and cultural difference became implicated as part of that particular local setting, and (2) how did larger-scale dynamics simultaneously transform because of these changes within local communities?

I place conceptual emphasis on the range of ways that local and regional relationships might intermingle in order to generalize Dietler's theory for other historical contexts. If questions about relationships are to be central, then recent ventures by archaeologists into relational social science provide a good starting place. A consciously "relational archaeology" has been emerging parallel to, but distinct from, relational approaches in sociology, geography, and political science (Emirbayer 1997; Donati 1995; Archer 1995). Whereas in other fields these approaches derive from diverse sources ranging from social network analysis to symbolic interactionism (Mische 2011), archaeological relational perspectives arise from work on selfhood, practice theory, social identity, and material culture (e.g., Fowler 2001; Brück 2004; Hutson 2010: 23–35; Robb 2010: 501–502; Dietler 2010: 58–60).¹ Relational social science is far from a cohesive set of ideas but these ideas all share an analytical focus on the relationships that tie individuals together and how the quality of such relations constitute groups. To use a network metaphor, it is not the nodes (i.e., individuals) that are the loci of process nor the focus of inquiry, but instead the articulations as they exist and develop between nodes that are of primary interest (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994: 1417; Robb 2010: 502).

In the simplest sense, a relational take on the question of long-distance contacts suggests that content contributed by such interactions can transform the quality and course of local relationships and thereby affect local social negotiations. I place added emphasis on the word "can" since long-distance inputs do not cause local transformation but instead are caught up in and create new pathways for ongoing social negotiations. Clearly defining these complex terms would help to describe how distant and local processes become entwined. First of all, since social relationships will be the focus of analysis, it is important to decide what a social relationship actually consists of. In step with Rogers' examination of culture contact (2005: 338–339), I take interaction between individuals as the building blocks of relationships and social process. Social interaction can involve many kinds of transfers but fundamentally it is a co-exchange in which information is shared and intermingled (Braun 1986: 122). By way of social interaction, individuals are constituted as "persons" and their behaviors, likewise, become relationally referenced and meaningful (Toren 2002). However, this observation raises some

¹ For useful and brief overviews of relational sociology in Europe and North America see Donati 2007 and Mische 2011. Informative discussions of the differences between structuration and practice theory and recent relational approaches are provided by Crossley (2011: 24–28), Bottero (2009), Dépelteau (2008), and Emirbayer and Mische (1998).

sticky questions for those advocating relationships and networks as the proper units of social analysis. For instance, how do relationships come about and how do they have consequence? Furthermore, if they are “real” phenomena, where do they reside? Still more challenging, how can we connect microscale relationships to the big picture of social organization?

2.9 Social Relationships

To answer these questions and, in so doing, establish clear definitions for a discussion of entanglement and organizational change, I begin with a model for social process built up from one-to-one interactions. I start with the most basic question: What is a relationship? To my mind, a relationship is the sum of those social interactions that accrues over time (cf. Crossley 2011: 35). A relationship between two interactants is a history of their interactions that is remembered differently by each individual and referenced in ensuing interactions. This relationship is overwritten and remade whenever there are new encounters between the interactants, but remade in the context of its prior making, i.e., it unfolds with reference to precedent. Precedents guide co-action in the present and expectations for the future. Therefore, a relationship is more than just a history past and gone; it is an active history that provides an idea of what went before, an assessment of what is presently transpiring, and expectations for what comes next. Each interactant in a pair holds different versions of this history which have reality only in tandem and in process. As such, it is a shaping of both to the pair. The properties of this social relationship cannot be reduced to the individual constituents nor realized in their absence. For these reasons, some refer to this unique social information space as “actors-in-relation” (Crossley 2011: 23).

The above definition refers mainly to a dyadic relationship between two interactants which is the most convenient way to describe and make sense of the co-process of interaction. However, in the pursuit of clarity, this example greatly simplifies the nature of relational dynamics since there is in fact no such thing as a simple dyad. All relationships are informed by many other multiple and overlapping relationships (Hutson 2010: 28). This encompassing network locates the immediate relationship of interest within an interconnected field of information, consideration, and contingency. Forthcoming interaction within a particular relationship will be influenced by the unfolding of exterior relationships perceived as pertinent and vice versa, i.e., our choices are shaped in part by the relevant choices made by others around us. Therefore, social relationships are inter-contingent in terms of how they play out. I define the term “contingent” using both of its common meanings: Dependence on a process and the possibility that said process may or may not play out as expected.

Inter-contingency of relationships makes any given interaction potentially global in consequence and meaning. To make the point perfectly clear, I take advantage of the common experience of high volume traffic as a metaphor to

capture a sense of inter-contingency as it occurs at the moment of action. Because rapid commutes in traffic are a daily practice for many Westerners we often take them for granted, but in reality these actions are anything but simple. In fact, the daily commute could be thought of as a complex multi-agent collaboration continually hovering between more or less successful collective movement forward or collective disruption. This process is minimally regulated by a set of traffic rules but these in no way account for the order of the process. In place of rule-governed behaviors, what might be called “contingent order” is configured by immediate conditions mediated by constant perception and communication. The dynamic flow of multiple drivers makes collective safety entirely dependent on the shifting relationships between individuals and the way interactions of the moment play out in terms of assessment, anticipation, choices, execution, and accommodation (cf. Dépelteau 2008: 60). A misstep on the part of one and the inability to accommodate on the part of others portends a pile-up with subsidiary consequences for all. In this way, individual actions can have collective effect, precisely because they are never entirely individual but rather constantly inter-contingent.

2.10 Social Negotiation, Groups, and Social Order

While a traffic metaphor helps to describe the dynamic process of closely coupled multiple relationships, it does not address the fact that our social relations comprise a great deal of additional information. Any given relationship unfolds with reference to the multiple relationships informing and contingent upon it, but unlike traffic interactions, it also implicates groups of all kinds: ad hoc associations, families, communities, factions, ethnicities, or polities. All of these terms imply a grouping of relationships which are socially recognized and which have a self-recognized membership over short or long periods of time. Contrary to common usage in archaeology referring to “interaction” between states, communities, or families, I try to avoid statements implying that groups are entities that can and do interact (e.g., Schortman and Urban 1992: 237). In fact, groups per se cannot interact; individuals interact but they do so by contextually referencing a group or groups in the quality of their interactions (Barnes 1986: 82). I would even go so far as to say that the relational impact of a group in “coloring” interaction and relationship building between individuals is what gives that group a social reality beyond momentary, periodic, and often partial, face-to-face aggregations. It follows that any social collective is as much imagined as it is associative.

This provides a pathway for defining “social negotiation” as discussed earlier in the section on elite gated communities of Mongolia. In that case study, a *nouveaux riche* elite engaged a largely disenfranchised public in material patterns of exclusivity and privilege appropriated from the West. However, I locate this process in the daily encounters between individuals on the street where interactions, perceptions, expectations, and precedents are formed, even though it would appear to be a process driven by different groups. In this case, the term “social negotiation”

implies give-and-take between interest groups in Mongolia, but in fact there was no readily identifiable group or groups on the ground. Rather, there were perceptions among individuals of distinctive groupings that came to have real-relational consequence by way of communication between them. Individuals who are self-recognized members and non-members of such a perceived group have potential to interact in ways that reference their different understandings of that respective grouping as a part of their unique relationship. Therefore, social negotiation, as I use that term, is an intrinsic part of relationship building that implicates perceptions of a group or groups in the quality of interactions between individuals. These perceptions influence the behavior of interactants as they respond to one another in the progression of a relationship through time.

All human societies are differentiated according to various “groupings,” and these are organized by culturally defined arrays of distinction and affiliation. To the degree that these are consistently enacted and reified within relationships, they represent a social order that continues to impact behaviors and interactions. One interesting point from this observation is that groups (i.e., distinctions and affiliations) cannot exist unless people behave as if they do. Since social negotiation is a dynamic and inter-contingent process, failure to enact behaviors that implicate a particular set of distinctions between individuals lessens the social impact of those distinctions. This can effectively diminish the perception and influence of a particular social grouping and thereby re-arrange social order. On the other hand, inventing, emphasizing, and enhancing novel or former distinctions as a part of relationship building can likewise shift social order through the emergence of a social group. In this sense, every relational interaction is a choice made at the spur-of-the-moment that has meaning in terms of whether it reinforces or subverts existing categories of social difference. Because relationships are inter-contingent, that choice has some potential, however great or slight, to subvert and therefore to change the arrangement of society.

2.11 Politics and Social Organization

As the example of recent class formation in Mongolia suggests, social groupings are flexible, dynamic, and enacted; but they are also associated with privileges and limitations. Resources, information, access, capacity, and responsibility are socially allotted according to these arrangements of social groups. How these arrays of distinction and affiliation are defined and then matched to sets of privileges and limitations is the very stuff of politics. This observation allows for a useful definition of politics and political order that is independent of the artifacts produced by political process (e.g., power and authority). Politics is a venue of social negotiation that contests the social makeup of distinctions and affiliations (i.e., differentiated groups) and the allotment of privileges and limitations across those respective social differences. In other words, political negotiation is an ongoing social discourse concerning who does what, who gets what, and how to

conceive of the distinctions and affiliations that arrange groups of stakeholders (Wolf 1990: 590). The basic tools of this discourse are accommodation, deference, resistance, coercion, and violence, and these tools are available to all participants in some form. Likewise, the perceived costs and benefits of exercising these tools are often part of the negotiation process and these are usually distributed asymmetrically across groups in ways that are understood in terms of institutional differences in power and authority.

Politics, seen in this light, suggests that social order and the allotment of privilege and limitation among social groups are dynamic and cannot easily be captured by static concepts like structure, system, or network. Like the traffic metaphor above, social order is constantly on the move but is “orderly” to the extent that multiple, inter-dependent relationships more or less redundantly play out in a somewhat anticipated manner. Built into this perception of social order are a number of historical, relational, symbolic, political, and psychological factors that inform individuals that they in fact engage in a more or less predictable social arena that likely will continue to be so. I emphasize the word “likely” since given diverse and complicated inputs, every single relationship is ultimately probabilistic in terms of its anticipated course of interaction. At the spur-of-the-moment, how an incipient set of interactions unfolds between two individuals is never entirely predictable nor completely unpredictable (Barber 2007: 25–26).

As argued above, these interactions can and do have significance for the way other interactions unfold and how differentiation, privilege, and limitation are socially emphasized or diminished in favor of alternative arrangements. Therefore, as Giddens suggests (1984: 257), political negotiation on the part of all participants is very much about anticipating multiple outcomes, and, in particular, about assessing and increasing the probability that a relationship or a set of relationships plays out in an expected way.² As such, political negotiation is this interactive social process of weighting and balancing agendas, costs, and benefits with regard to individual and collective/group outcomes (Campbell 2009: 823). These negotiations are therefore extremely sensitive to perception, anticipation, probability, and uncertainty in relationships. It follows that when such negotiations perpetuate differences between people that are not only exclusive but also unequal with respect to access to important social resources, negotiations will be all the more elaborate and contentious. They may involve violence, theatrics, protest, material symbols and forceful ideology, and the bestowal of titles, ranks, and wealth to incur loyalty, as well as factional alliances of opposition (Baines and Yoffee 1998). If such a social dynamic is to be prolonged, it must draw upon a substantial history of experience and experiment; i.e., a multi-party negotiative capacity that is both top-down and

² In contexts where political negotiations have become highly formalized and controlled (i.e., institutionalized), the predictability of these outcomes might even be compared to scripted public theater (Scott 2009: 4). However, I would argue that such political arenas are a relatively recent phenomenon derived from centuries of experimentation with state techniques for political monitoring.

bottom-up and assumes an investment in political technique on the part of all participants whether commoner or elite.

Finally, how is social organization implicated in these dynamics of social process? Political negotiations involve a number of different kinds of shifting and contested groups with degrees of latitude in the daily “give-and-take” of interactions that reinforce or subvert these “groupings.” The extent to which contested distinctions and allotments of social resources play out over a short time period may be highly variable, but over a longer period of time, a composite pattern emerges when the outcomes of these many negotiations are more or less broadly consistent. Social organization, therefore, can be thought of as a modal pattern of social negotiations over some period of time and at some prescribed social scale rather than as a structure or a system. It is, as Donati (1995: 72–73) argues, an arrangement of enacted relationships consistent enough to be observable across a given social space and time. Re-arrangement of these more or less consistent relationships indicates organizational change.

2.12 Entanglement, Inter-contingency, and the Uncertain Politics of Change

This framework for social process is abstract and admittedly far removed from the survey transects and excavation units of archaeology, but in my opinion, it sets a groundwork for clarifying one or another of the equally abstract concepts archaeologists habitually draw upon such as “complexity” or “statehood,” as well as “entanglement.” In the case of entanglement, the above sociopolitical interaction model helps to make clear the potential “tangling” that can occur between local and interregional scales through local consumption of novel imports, e.g., objects, materials, ideas or beliefs, practices, technologies, foods or drink, and so on. The power of novelty is not so much that it is new per se, but that it is relationally undefined and therefore represents a space around which new interactions can be generated and new relationships shaped (Dietler 2010: 59; Alt 2006: 290–293). As such, a novel import has potential to become implicated in the way relationships are negotiated and sustained among an indigenous group, and this is particularly pertinent in the case of negotiating local politics.

When political negotiations depend upon the ongoing availability of an import for perpetuating relationships of distinction and privilege, a more stringent connection between local and regional social scales comes about. The playing out of local politics becomes contingent on the anticipated unfolding of longer distance relationships allowing access to and acquisition of these imports. Entanglement, then, is a scalar process in the sense that Howitt describes above. It implicates distant groups, their respective relations, and regional dynamics in the affairs of an immediate group, and vice versa. These articulated large-to-small scale sets of interactions are well depicted by the imagery of being “entangled.” Dietler makes

similar points in his work on the diachronic entanglement arising from the indigenous Celtic consumption of Greek wine in southern France. The one addition I wish to make concerns the specific quality of political dynamics as this condition of scalar inter-contingency expands between regions and across cultures. In Dietler's account, the outcome of such conditions over time was an increase in local competition and violence among Celtic groups, eventually spilling over to impact the fringes of the Roman empire. The instability and potential threat represented by indigenous warfare on the frontier eventually paved a pathway for direct colonial occupation and control of the region by Rome (Dietler 2010: 342–344). In a more general sense, however, I believe that entanglement will always lead to a qualitatively different form of politics among the local groups so engaged and this can have various organizational outcomes.

Though colonialism was the primary result in Dietler's account, under somewhat similar conditions of entanglement in Inner Asia, the result was state formation among the northern nomads. What drove these Inner Asian political processes that seem so reminiscent of the Mediterranean example, but which yielded a substantially different outcome? For a possible answer, I consider the association between entanglement and uncertainty. I argue above that politics is a collective negotiation in which assessing the probability for the way certain relationships will play out is critical. If we understand uncertainty as making these assessments more challenging, then periods of heightened uncertainty imply a qualitative change in the overall conditions for politics. When local political relationships in turn are partly contingent on other relationships at local, regional, and potentially interregional scales, local negotiations must take into account a great deal more information coming from farther afield. In other words, the addition of scales of contingency makes the anticipation of local relational outcomes and the hedging of probabilities at the local scale that much more complicated. Entanglement is not just a situation where external articulations become important for reproducing social conditions locally, as some have argued (e.g., Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997: 28; Parkinson and Galaty 2007: 117). Rather, it is a condition in which the extent and scale of contingency transforms politics in a way that incorporates greater uncertainty in the unfolding of all relationships. In short, we cannot discuss long-distance interaction, connectivity, or articulations without considering the very real social effect of heightened uncertainty.

Consider in real terms what heightened uncertainty would have represented for the common man or woman living under these conditions on a daily basis. I argue that entanglement and heightened uncertainty simultaneously change the quality of social negotiation and the ways in which relationships and group stability are perceived. When uncertainty in politics increases, so does the possibility of competition, challenge, alternative arrangements, attempts at backing-up and reinforcement, shifting affiliations, and growing factions. For individuals involved in this setting, no matter their social standing, the portion of relationship building that becomes overtly political increases and overall a more fractious politics

becomes embedded in the daily life of the community. James Scott describes this kind of political questioning as “infrapolitics” or the underground discourse of resistance, alternative visions, and new factional affiliations that abrade against established relationships of inequality (Scott 2009: 183–184). Scott’s ideas pertain to systems of highly formalized and decidedly asymmetric political negotiations (i.e., systems of domination), but the basic principle is the same for any political arena: An unsecured politics invites alternatives for change.

The condition of entanglement over large spaces and over time increases the probability for organizational change at expanded social scales. Generally, how change comes about is a matter of precedents, setting, and context, but in the case of Inner Asia three general processes stand out. The first of these is the classic “web of multiplied effects” or simply the idea that small events can call forth big effects under specific conditions. This process arises from multiple contingent relationships across and between local, regional, and macro-regional scales making it more likely that small changes ramify and have large organizational impact (e.g., Hodder 2012: 163). Another process is the making of new factions that crosscut local communities or small polities. These can emerge from either elite or commoner connections, communications, and experience shared across local areas. During periods of uncertainty and potentially rapid organizational change such trans-local collectives have greater potential to become self-recognizing, to possess common agendas, and to take part in larger factions or incipient social movements as a way to negotiate a transformation. The third and final process is the innovation of new negotiative techniques adapted to higher levels of uncertainty. Because people “learn” to negotiate new versions of relationships by participating in them, the political uncertainty associated with entanglement encourages shifts in relational range, tolerance, and fluency. This implies that over time both commoners and elite gain greater capacity to work within uncertain political settings relative to their own situations.

These three processes together imply that political practice has the potential to become more sensitive to distant events and larger scales and more sophisticated in terms of possible pathways for negotiation. At the same time, the fractious politics brought about by uncertainty can enfranchise warfare, coercion, violence, and ideologies of loyalty and valor as cogent ways to remake, enforce, and bolster political relationships. Likewise, political techniques among commoners might emphasize other methods of choice including “voting with one’s feet,” ushering in and supporting new leadership, or armed resistance. Given unique historical contexts, the long-term outcomes of entanglement, uncertainty and fractious politics played out in very different ways in different regions. For example, Dietler’s case study describes one way that powerful imperial outsiders acted to impose control over and disrupt the increasingly fractious and violent politics among indigenous groups. In addition to direct conquest and colonization, the same objective has been accomplished elsewhere by imperial strategies of co-option, displacement or genocide, frontier creation, and the support of some groups against others. In those cases where no dominant political or military power is present within a macro-region, a very different outcome may transpire.

2.13 Upscaling and Political Community as a Pathway to Statehood

Such an alternative outcome of entanglement brings us back to the Inner Asian context and the question of state formation. By the fourth and third centuries BC, many regions in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, and parts of southern Siberia were entangled in political alliances that effectively networked local politics into larger scales of interaction. Most models for Inner Asian statehood view emergence of the Qin empire in China at 221 BC and nomadic warfare as the primary drivers of sociopolitical change on the eastern steppe. In contrast, I argue that a focus on indigenous political process within this context of far reaching but loosely articulated local areas provides a better understanding of what led to the first state among nomads. Events in China were not unimportant, but they were certainly far removed and indirect in terms of what eventually transpired on the steppe. Moreover, the pertinent period for focus in China's history was not the rise of Qin but the preceding Warring States period (481–221 BC) during which time political turmoil and devastating military confrontations produced subtle ripple effects across East Asia. Archaeological evidence suggests the possibility that an indigenous sequence of “upscaling” among numerous small-scale nomadic polities contemporaneous with the instability in China was the first step toward a nomadic state.

I define “upscaling” as one possible outcome of entanglement. It is a process that alters articulations, contingencies, and uncertainty among small-scale networked polities by way of a series of shifts toward a more encompassing collective scale and a new political identity.³ The relational logic behind this explanation draws on the very conditions that make for a setting of “fractious” politics, i.e., the high degree of uncertainty generated by multiple relational contingencies from beyond, across, and between a number of local political arenas. Upscaling is a rearrangement of these relationships at a larger social scale that diminishes uncertainty despite a constant and consistent degree of inter-contingency. In other words, relationships continued to be differentiated and unequal, and they were inter-dependent on the enactment of other differentiated relationships. Despite this, interactions were carried out with a higher degree of predictability such that, by and large, they supported and furthered this arrangement of inter-contingency despite (or maybe because of) the shift to a more encompassing scale. I think of this as a set of political negotiations that comprised a higher degree of consensus among participant parties. Consensus by definition is a process of delimiting uncertainty through negotiation, belief, and mutually perceived benefit, and initially this is what knitted together a series of formerly autonomous small polities into a larger multi-polity organization. This transpired, I argue, despite pervasive group distinctions based on hereditary privilege and inequality.

³ For two entirely different concepts of “scaling-up” see Knappett 2009: 16–17 and Turchin 2009: 198–197.

The term “consensus” is shorthand for suggesting that for some reason, numerous constituents initially bought into and participated in the making of a greatly expanded but highly differentiated polity and more or less behaved in ways that supported that process. Loyalty, ideology, material or social gain, desire for a better life, religion and ritual, fear of the unknown and the unpredictable—all of these are factors that could have served to order and stabilize interactions as they played out day-to-day at larger scales. When such factors become a major part of negotiating political relationships, they reduce uncertainty within a social field of exclusive and unequal relationships. Leadership, in this case, is neither managerial nor coercive but operates as a continually renegotiated, tentative, and unstable consensus among participants relative to their own agendas and shifting conditions. Notably, this enlargement of political scale is participatory and more akin to a social movement in relation to contextual events of a particular time. Anthropologists today would not call this larger collective a “state” or a “confederation” or even a “complex chiefdom,” but it was regional in scale, internally differentiated, and it brought together multiple communities that had formerly been distinct. As a matter of fact, it does not fit neatly with any of the usual political typologies, precisely because it was relatively short term and transitional.

A concept I find useful for discussing this kind of regional organization is “political community.” A political community has been defined in various ways by archaeologists but generally it refers to a novel collective, formed at an expanded social scale and composed of those who identify with a respective political process by virtue of their participation (cf. Smith 2003: 109; Pauketat 2008: 244). I use the term specifically to discuss a change in group affiliation that has the capacity to dissolve prior forms of political identity and boundaries. A regional-scale political community is not held together by an established statecraft of formalized relations, beliefs, or institutions, rather, it is precisely informal, fluid, and dynamic conditions that motivate diverse peoples to participate as a way to negotiate their own outcomes in the midst of an unpredictable but undeniably critical social event. Because it arises from a political setting in which many small-scale polities with elite privilege and inequality had long been the status quo, these aspects of political life were both universally understood and tolerated as initial conditions, even at larger social scales. For my purposes, therefore, a regional political community is a trans-local political identity marked by consensus and participation that is simultaneously asymmetric and differentiating, but also integrative because of a social movement-like mentality.

In my opinion, the strength of this concept is that it marks a transitional point in the upscaling of political relationships that cannot be adequately described as a “state” per se, but has some qualities that are definitely state-like. This introduces a focus on smaller increments of time and potentiality in state formation, and it suggests that many such regional political communities may have come together in the past but just as rapidly fell apart without leaving much to be detected in the archaeological record. On the other hand, if a regional coalescence offers genuine benefits to those caught up in it, the potential exists for these negotiations

to modulate toward a more formal and normalized version of a regional political community perpetuated in the form of statehood. No matter what we might call such a political coalescence today, steppe peoples more than 2,000 years ago probably referred to this novel and emerging organization by still another name: Xiongnu. The obvious question is under what conditions would the people of multiple autonomous communities have participated in such a larger-scale collective? In order to better understand the context behind upscaling and what a nomadic state might have eventually looked like, we need to know much more about the politics of mobile peoples and how political negotiations might have been carried out and sustained among nomads of the eastern steppe.

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