

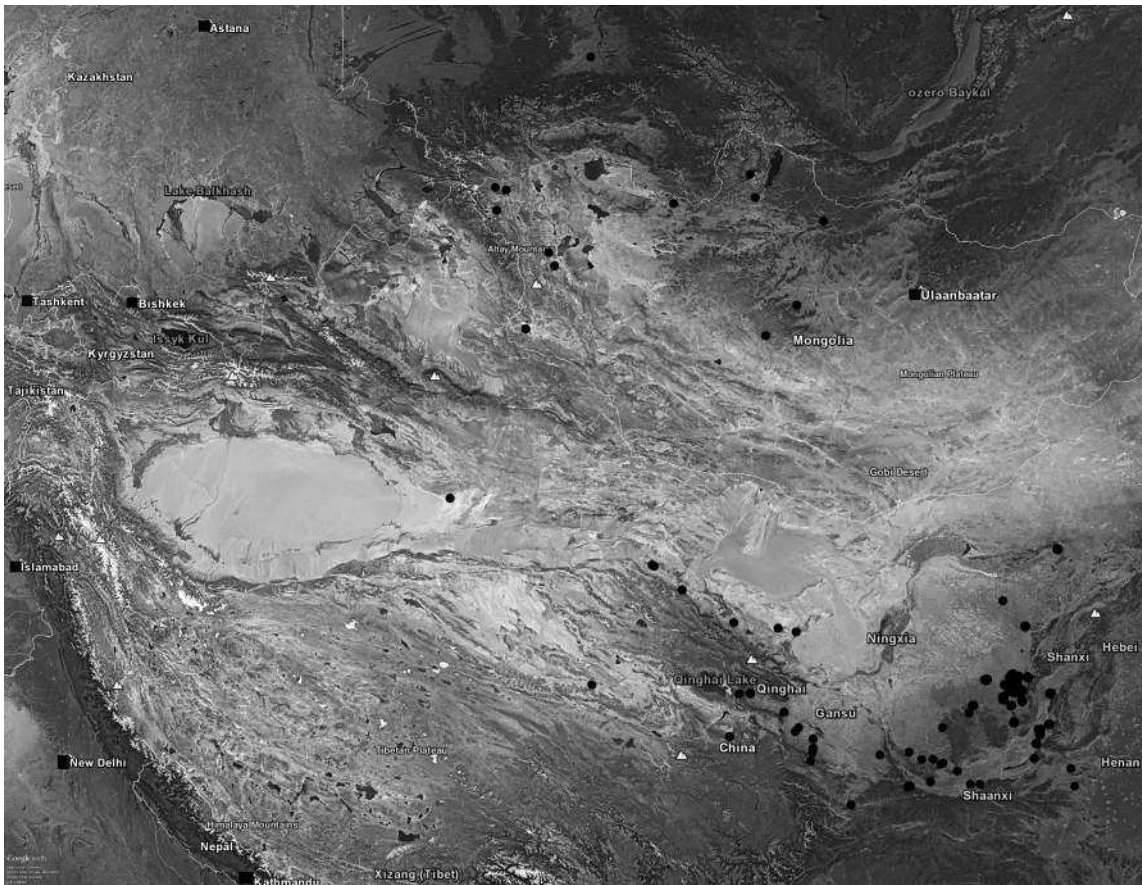
## CHAPTER ONE

# SHAPING THE STUDY OF INNER ASIAN ARTIFACTS AND MENTAL BOUNDARIES

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THIS VOLUME IS ABOUT HOW ARTIFACTS WERE USED IN AN AREA variously called Inner Asia, eastern Eurasia, the *beifang*, or the Northern Zone/Corridor/Frontier. This area forms a vast extent of ecologically varied land that crosses modern national boundaries and embraces northern and northwestern China (Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, northern Hebei, Shanxi, Shaanxi, through Ningxia into southeastern Gansu, from which the ancient trade routes led west by way of the Hexi corridor to Xinjiang and eventually into Kazakhstan) and south central Mongolia to the Altai Mountains. It includes an area that was traversed from the vast steppes of Eurasia into dynastic China. Here it will be called the Inner Asian Frontier region (Map 1.1), a place that was permeable and accessible to many groups, multicentered and quite varied ecologically. It was neither entirely grassland nor rich agricultural land with clear borders or political limits. It was in some parts and in various ways in contact with the dynastic powers of the Central Plain of present-day China.

The steppe region of Asia is characterized by its physical openness, a prairie lying between the 40th and 50th parallels of latitude. The average altitude of this tract is between 500 and 1000 meters. It rises from the Hungarian plateau to the grasslands of southern Russia in the west and drops into the agricultural plains of central China in the east. No major mountain ranges fully obstruct passage across this great tract of land, although on the Inner Asian Frontier, the Pamir, Tianshan and Altai Mountains constrict the channel into Xinjiang and the



MAP. 1.1. Map of the Inner Asian Frontier: Zones of contact across all periods, including all sites listed in the chapters

Gansu Corridor of western China, and in the north across western Mongolia south to the Great Bend of the Yellow River. Northeastern China and the Russian Far East form the easternmost edge of that geographic continuum. This vast open area has been cast as fluid, open, borderless and unsuitable for sedentary village farmers. Ancient writers, and many modern ones as well, viewed the steppe as a no man's land, a place never hospitable for "civilized" habitation (Lattimore 1940). We know today, however, that its inhabitants led either or both mobile and sedentary lifeways, to varying degrees, depending on their particular locations.

We are interested in the intersection of peoples on the Inner Asian Frontier and how visual culture, especially bronze artifacts, was used to construct and mark mental boundaries during their regional Bronze Ages, or between about 3000 and 750 BCE. Our goal is to decipher the role that these artifacts played in life and death in a region that in other areas of the world has been described variously as a frontier (Parker and Rodseth 2005), a middle ground (White 1991), a contact zone (Pratt 1992), an arena of socio-economic-political competition (Dietler 1998) or a tribal zone (Ferguson and Whitehead 2005). The objects basically document places of intersection among peoples who often deliberately saw themselves as different from each other, as we shall see evidenced in displays of material culture. The Inner Asian Frontier was an arena where the dynastic Chinese, local peoples and groups who inhabited the steppe beyond intersected and sometimes vied for domination of each other, making the understanding of the dynamic nature of frontiers important to our goals. Interpretation of the artifacts follows their function in ritual behavior, and especially in death ritual, because most are found in burials. As burial items, they are the materialization of memory; we see them as a sign of current and future sociopolitical aspirations and of the construction of cultural and political identities. We consider them as artifacts in action, as markers of life and death in eastern Inner Asia.

We will concentrate on the ancient employment of metal artifacts, in part because of their high survival rate and abundance in the archaeological record, and in part because we think that they very often were used to display sociopolitical and ritual identity. Over time, their use changed to accommodate political, social and cultural affiliations. It is our contention that the display and behavior of visual culture, and particularly these metal artifacts, had the capacity to define groups and individuals in significant ways that were fluid and fluctuated over time within regional and local contexts. Unlike past scholarship, we hope to see the Inner Asian Frontier from the perspective of its own prehistory and history rather than only in reference to either the steppe (the mobile Eurasian pastoralists) or the sown (the agricultural dynastic Chinese). We will treat the artifacts as agents of cultural, political, personal and group definition and change. They were not merely look-alikes or knock-offs of a

core culture, as they have often been interpreted in the past, when they were defined by means of a canon that described them as representative of either steppic or Chinese aesthetics, styles and types. An understanding of their local function is sought here.

In the early 1990s, Bernard Herman made the useful distinction between studies that are *object-centered* and those that are *object-driven*. Object-centered studies are usually concerned with single or individual objects, often as they relate to technological advances and conceptual issues, or in terms of their aesthetic value. Object-driven studies, however, are interested in the object in context, and it is the interface between the object and context that allows us to determine the gist of their use. It is the second definition that we think best guides our analyses here.

In the past decades, the study of material culture of the archaeologically supplied sort we examine here has shifted from a documentary aim that exploits its evidentiary potential to a “dialectical and recursive relationship between persons and things,” that is, to the fact “that persons make and use things that the things make persons. Subjects and objects are indelibly linked” (Tilley et al. 2006: 4). This dialectical relationship encompasses not only social actors and artifacts but also institutions, spaces and imaginaries, thus assigning “things” an agentive role in the making of culture.

Here we link agency to action, intentionality and consciousness, all of which have frequently not been predicated on things. According to Gell, when “agency” is used to refer to things it shows them as actively having consequences in relation to people, insofar as they may alter their consciousness, systems of values and actions. As such, they are invested with some of the intentionality of their creators. Gell asserts that the significance of things lies not in what they mean in the world but in what they do (Gell 1998). Here we hope to discern what objects, or collections of them, do, especially in the construction of sociopolitical and personal identity.

This change in emphasis suggests that materiality is an integral dimension of culture and that there are elements of social existence that can only be partially understood without incorporating materiality (Delgado 2016). Again, one such dimension of great importance to ancient societies, we argue, is the construction of identity.

#### PAST SCHOLARSHIP

Stories of cultural contact and change have been structured by a pervasive dichotomy: absorption by the other or resistance to the other ... Yet what if identity is conceived not as [a] boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject? The story or stories of interaction must then be more complex, less linear and teleological. (Clifford 1988)

Modern literature on this region and its constellation of peoples, artifacts, lifeways and environments has been shaped around the steppe vs. sown model that was used to equate material evidence with either a sedentary agricultural lifeway and the Chinese, or a mobile herding lifeway of the steppe peoples. That outlook was certainly shaped by Confucian evaluative binary views of the “civilized” and the “barbarous” that were engendered for centuries in literature written as a guide to thinking. The composition of the Confucian canon has been subject to debate in and outside of China, and interpretations of this worldview changed through time, as did the cultural institutions modeled on it. Our goal is not to redefine the boundaries of Confucianism, but to highlight the reality that this way of thinking has been so influential in Chinese circles that it has created a uniform view across the time and space of history, and for our purposes, of the Inner Asian Frontier.

The notion of this historical opposition is also documented with the Greek ethnohistorian Herodotus when he wrote of the contrast between the Amazons and the Greeks (Book Four: chapters 2, 46, 61, and 62) and with the Chinese historian Sima Qian as he recorded the relationship between the Xiongnu and the Chinese of the second century BCE (Book Two). And, in 1940, Owen Lattimore echoed these sentiments and claimed that the gulf between the steppe and the sown would never be bridged and “’twas ever thus” (Lattimore 1940). This intellectual paradigm was set in motion centuries ago and held sway until the late twentieth century. The region studied in this volume is especially suited to examination of this issue since it abuts, stands between, borders, connects or embraces two great lifestyle traditions – the agricultural and the “nomadic” – or so modern and ancient authors have classified them.

Following this view, the diverse forms, iconography and function of objects produced in and for the mobile steppe and the sedentary dynastic peoples were thought to belong to a much larger body of material (styles) suited to ecological and geographic areas and the two distinctive lifestyles that could be documented there. Many have presented the material as a type or set, most often called the “Animal Style” (Rostovtzeff 1922; 1929; Jettmar 1967; Bunker et al. 1970) for the steppe style. Likewise, materials that displayed animal representations and were cast into items such as belt plaques and horse gear found on the Inner Asian Frontier were initially all labeled “Ordos” bronzes, taking the name from the area under the Great Bend of the Yellow River where Tian and Guo argued that the style originated (Tian and Guo 1986). Based on the observation that artifacts such as these were made over a very long period, long after some of their owners were living well within the political borders of the ancient Chinese states and might be assumed to have been assimilated into dynastic culture, they were thought to represent the presence of “alien” folks (Tian and Guo 1986). On the “Chinese” side, the models of that style were taken from the excavated materials from the royal cemetery of the Shang at Anyang.

On a closer look, however, we can see that environmental zones crossing the Inner Asian Frontier included open steppe, taiga steppe, forest steppe and desert and were further subdivided by mountains and rivers into smaller geographic areas. That variability affected not only economic adaptation, but also the desire for and the production and use of metal items. Both Bunker et al. (1997) and Shelach-Lavi (2009) argue that these terrains, ecologies and geographies could and probably did support varied economies and societal identities. Bunker goes further to suggest that regional adaptations – herding, hunting, fishing, cropping, etc. – are reflected in the material culture (Bunker 1997).

Varied ways of life have been documented archaeologically in Kazakhstan for the Iron Age (cf. Rosen et al. 2000; Chang et al. 2003) and within the Inner Asian Frontier during the second and early first millennium BCE (Linduff et al. 2002–4; Shelach-Lavi 2009; Indrisano and Linduff 2013). This archaeological fieldwork has shown that lifestyle practices ranged from seasonal mobile pastoralism and agro-pastoralism to full sedentism (Chang et al. 2003; Linduff et al. 2002–4; Frachetti 2008; Shelach-Lavi 2009; Indrisano and Linduff 2013) according to ecological, political, economic and other variables. Fortunately, most scholars working on the steppe have discredited the terms “nomadic” and “agricultural” as single meaningful terms for adaptation in the region and have sought more nuanced descriptive terms.

Other modern studies have taken Chinese historical texts as the starting point for study of the area (Barfield 1989; DiCosmo 2001), but without the specific aim of explaining the artifacts. Others have catalogued artifacts from the area according to archaeological cultures by type and region (Bunker et al. 1997; Linduff 1997: 18–98; So and Bunker 1995) and have prepared useful outlines, but have not considered the active role that artifacts took in shaping of local identities and circumstances. William Watson (1971) talked of cultural frontiers in a way that characterized regions by the artifacts that they produced. He, among others of his generation, was, however, also bound by the steppe vs. sown interpretive model. Still, these earlier studies were not really attempting to discuss the affective, performative or behavioral purpose of the artifacts. This book will attempt to explain just that.

The artifacts offer evidence of ritualized practice or use, as they were found in burial. And, along with inscriptions that appear on the materials dated to the late second and first millennia BCE (Chapters 3 and 4), the behavior of the artifacts from all periods of interest here offers additional clues to how their owners hoped to be perceived at death and perhaps even after.

Archeological studies published in Chinese on the material culture of the Inner Asian Frontier often begin with the identification of bronzes that were thought of as distinctive to the region. Tian Guangjin and Guo Suxin’s research in the late 1980s was an important early attempt to establish typological and chronological categories of bronzes unique to the region, particularly to the

Ordos area in the second half of the first millennium BCE (Tian and Guo 1986). They coined the term the “Ordos Style” to describe bronzes discovered in the Ordos area under the Great Bend of the Yellow River and other regions on the Chinese frontier. At the same time, two other scholars, En Wu (1978, 1985, 2007, 2008) and Yun Lin (1980, 2003), also studied and identified diagnostic bronzes in the region and traced their morphological changes through time and space. Both scholars believed that the beginning of bronze metallurgy in the region could be traced back to the second half of the second millennium BCE, or equivalently to the Shang and early Western Zhou in the Central Plain, where they are preserved in the burials of the elite. They were not satisfied with using the “Ordos Style” to define bronzes discovered in the entire Chinese frontier area, and instead proposed a new term – “Northern Zone Bronze Complex.” Similarly to Tian and Guo’s research, however, their studies focused on the classification and stylistic development of diagnostic bronzes without much consideration of the archaeological contexts in which they were found. Wu, Lin, Tian and Guo all realized that studies of the northern frontier in China could not be isolated from materials from “the Steppe” and suggested stylistic analogues with bronzes from Siberia.

Their scholarship can be viewed as part of the intellectual environment of Chinese archaeology during the 1980s, when core–periphery cultural diffusion models were being challenged by the discovery of multiple local bronze casting traditions outside the Central Plain. Their efforts were meant to establish a distinctive and independent culture zone by singling out diagnostic bronzes that had little or no connection with those at the Central Plain. Their studies served to highlight the distinctive nature of the artifacts in the north, as opposed to those in dynastic centers.

Since their description of the “Northern Zone Bronze Complex,” archaeological investigations in the region have aimed to establish comprehensive archaeological sequences in subregions based primarily on formal stylistic analysis of bronzes and ceramics. Those studies, including new ones by Lin Yun, compared with earlier ones, have provided more nuanced chronologies of material culture. They recognized cultural diversity within the region, but emphasized local cultural continuities of the late Neolithic to the Bronze Age as distinct from dynastic centers. Recent studies represented by Yang Jianhua and Jiang Gang (Jiang and Yang 2008), for example, have discussed intraregional contacts within the Chinese frontier and ones between there and the Central Plain during the Shang and Zhou period. Most are cultural historical studies in which the aim is to describe the temporal and spatial evolution and distribution of artifacts and to outline their stylistic lineages. More recently, technical studies of metallurgy as well as the local environment have also been introduced into the investigation of bronze production and regional lifeways (Han and Ke 2007).

Since the decentralization of funding for archaeological work in the People's Republic of China in the early 1980s and the beginning of a more open policy toward scholarship and investigation of regions outside of the center of dynastic polities in the Central Plain, archaeology in China has become increasingly more regional in its focus, more accessible to foreign scholars and more widely discussed in terms of its significance within world history. However, even with the greater volume of international conferences, publications and collaborative field projects, the bulk of the literature being published, particularly primary field data, is in Chinese and therefore remains inaccessible to many foreign scholars, students and even specialists.

Moreover, many recent publications in English and other European languages that include interest and/or focus on artifacts and their interpretation are highly specialized according to location, period and methodological focus. For example, recent volumes on the history of Bronze Age Sichuan (Bagley 2001), the analysis of a single set of tomb shrines in Shandong (Liu et al. 2005), a study of artists during the early Empire (Barbieri-Low 2007), Shelach-Lavi's study of prehistoric societies on the northeastern frontiers of China (Shelach-Lavi 2009), and Catrin Kost's dissertation confined to plaques from the area (Kost 2014) have added much to the current understanding of early East Asian history and its visual culture. These volumes have provided systematic, detailed records and analyses of regions and their objects or makers.

Shelach-Lavi reviews the anthropological literature of identity formation and demonstrates, for instance, that the process of both local and regional identity formation is indebted to symbolic expression as an important catalyst of change (Shelach-Lavi 2009: 73–113). He goes on to discuss how to detect “ethnic-like” groups in the archaeological record, arguing, “the new definition which allows for much flexibility, internal variability and boundaries that are cross-cut with other identity groupings also makes the identification of ethnic-like groups much more complex ... the construction of identity is accompanied by, and to a certain degree accomplished through, the symbolic realm. Symbols not only indicate membership in the group and help demarcate its boundaries” (Shelach-Lavi 2009: 78). He confirms the wisdom of Wobst's cautions and questions – how are the symbols used and in what context? Who was the intended audience of such symbols? Who could, technically and socially, see and understand them? And, if certain symbols entail a certain identity, what are the antitheses that mark other identities (Wobst 1977; Shelach-Lavi 2009: 79)? And Shelach-Lavi reminds us that many types of identity such as gender or prestige may cut across the group signs (Shelach-Lavi 2009: 79) and that identity is frequently symbolized through the human body (Fisher and DiPaolo Loren 1992; Meskill 2000). With those questions there is little to quibble about, except the acceptance by Shelach-Lavi that the images and items created in the Inner Asian Frontier context are necessarily antithetical to another expression



or have a single counterpart. We shall argue, however, that image making is not always antithetical, as they claim, but rather can and does have complimentary, or perhaps simply different, connotations in any single context. That is, meaning comes from the beholder(s) and context and not the artifact itself alone.

Something must also be said about the secondary literature that addresses this frontier from its west, or from Russia or Kazakhstan. In most cases, the scholars acknowledge that the areas in which they work were part of a larger cultural area in antiquity that included regions within the current political boundaries of the People's Republic of China, but they, like their Chinese counterparts, are often constrained by language barriers. Evgenii Chernykh, for instance, has assembled and dated metal products chronologically through the Bronze and Iron Ages across Eurasia and has recently crossed the borders of present-day China, aware that the Russian easternmost boundary was not the ancient cultural border (Chernykh 1992). Likewise, Koryakova and Epimakov review the Bronze Age in Eurasia but they, too, stop at the borders of China while aware that contact to the east was regular and significant (Koryakova and Epimakov 2007).

Recently, Kovalev and Erdenebaatar have excavated local Afanasievo-like and other sites dated between the fourth and first millennia BCE in southern Mongolia that yielded materials analogous to metal products and perhaps production in northern China in the third millennium BCE (Kovalev and Erdenebaatar 2007; Kovalev 2014, 2015). These discoveries unlock a discussion about another route of contact to the south, or into lands peripheral to the emerging dynastic lands of the Erlitou culture or Shang. Mei Jianjun and Li Shuicheng are similarly engaged in a project that will review and generate more evidence of routes of contact into central China, but through Xinjiang and Gansu. Their contention is that the presence of Andronovo pottery in several early sites links that area to metal producing groups to the west while stimulating metal production in Xinjiang and Gansu. This route of transmission of metal technology eventually joins the Yellow River Basin, but their focus is primarily on Xinjiang and Gansu. For our purposes, documenting these multiple points of contact is important because we think it is interaction all across the Inner Asian Frontier that created a fluid and dynamic context that carried peoples, artifacts and ideas back and forth from this early period through the first millennium BCE.

Our discussion of the Inner Asian Frontier will, hopefully, shift scholarship from a China- or Steppe-centered to a multicentered regional perspective based on analysis of multiple locations. Naturally our view is affected by what is available in the archaeological record, and although locating and describing patterns of spatial order, disposition and display in tombs will be important, the singularity of sites will also guide our understanding. Scholarship that views

these Inner Asian Frontier peoples in the light of their own prehistory and that takes the archaeological documentation as the primary context of their local significance has just begun (Linduff 1997; Shelach-Lavi 2009). It is our hope that this angle of vision on the Inner Asian Frontier will produce a fresh view of how materials acted within the context of the lives of their users.

#### MATERIALIZATION OF IDENTITY IN METAL ON THE INNER ASIAN FRONTIER: ARTIFACTS IN ACTION

Human populations construct their cultures in interaction with one another, and not in isolation. (Wolf 1982)

Artifacts produced across the Inner Asian Frontier were markers of the process of increasing contact across the region. Bronze-using cultures there date from the period from about 3000 through the eighth century BCE and were contemporary with the emergence and establishment of the Erlitou culture and the dynastic societies of the Shang and Western Zhou. The Inner Asian Frontier stood beyond but adjacent to the early Yangshao, Longshan Neolithic and early dynastic heartland, and increasingly over the period of study here attempts were made to incorporate parts of it into the Shang and Zhou political systems. But the arrows of transmission went both ways, showing that some of the Inner Asian Frontier communities were ambitious and even aggressive about their land and property. From the early period, independent local groups across the Inner Asian Frontier were apparently intent on advancing their own interests, and we can see the emergence of increasingly more complex social differentiation that eventually included military units and economic programs that took them into lands that eventually became contested, especially by the dynastic Shang and Western Zhou. Simply said, why would the area have been so contested through history were it not valued on all sides?

Most primary evidence from this region is found in the excavated debris of burials and in inscriptions on bones or objects buried with the elite in dynastic centers. Such inscriptions looked north to document and explain their neighbors during the Shang (oracle bone inscriptions) or documented them as allies or opponents during the early Western Zhou (bronze inscriptions). The amount of excavated evidence from the Inner Asian Frontier has increased substantially over the past several decades. Most especially, we see the rise of metallurgy and the use of its products in burials as one of the main diagnostic features of the region. The desirability, production, function, style and numbers of metal artifacts changed dramatically and sometimes rapidly across the period of this study. We ponder their deliberate use and increasing variety over the period and argue that this occurred as a result of their utility in the negotiation of identity of several types as evidenced at the time of death. This application occurs on the Inner Asian Frontier, we also contend, because of the nature of