Chapter 1
Voices from the Steppe

The campaign had not gone well. Han Gaozu, China's Son of Heaven and founder of the glorious Han dynasty, reached that inevitable conclusion after assessing the circumstances in which he found himself and his army in the winter of 200 BC. The expedition to punish and defeat the Xiongnu nomads of the northern steppe had begun auspiciously, but as his massive army pushed into unfamiliar and seemingly endless snow-covered mountains and grasslands, the Han emperor began to see signs of doubt in the faces of even his most stalwart generals. The enemy had fled on horseback in front of the advancing army, easily outdistancing his forces. Every now and again, a small contingent of nomad archers suddenly appeared from nowhere, intercepted a flank guard, and shot dead several foot soldiers before charging off northward on swift mounts.

For the past 2 weeks, such sporadic attacks had enraged the Han military ranks and bolstered the determination of commanders to wreak vengeance on the people of the Xiongnu nation. Standing on a low hilltop surrounded by cold sky, Han Gaozu could not remember just when he found his army encircled by thousands of heavily armed steppe cavalry. The trap was sprung all too swiftly, and while the emperor a moment before had been enjoying the final warmth of a dying winter sun, he and his soldiers now faced a dark wall of creaking bows, notched arrows, and sweat snorting horses. The armies of the Han empire stood their ground, surrounded for seven long days.

Sima Qian, the eminent Han dynasty historian, tells how Han Gaozu would live to fight another day and set his youthful dynasty on an historic path that would culminate in one of the political and cultural apogees of China. But on that day in the steppes, the emperor's safe return to his protected capital was made possible only by the intervention of Maodun, the Xiongnu ruler, who provided the Han emperor and his army a narrow corridor of escape. After 7 days of complete encirclement, Maodun permitted the Emperor of China and his forces to slowly

withdraw.[1] Maodun's order for the cavalry to pull back was secured by a guarantee of annual tribute payments from the Han state to the steppe aristocracy in the form of luxury goods, wine, grain, and abundant colorful silks (Watson 1993: 138). These events would forever alter China's notion of world order. The established idea of an expanding and inclusive civilization meant to unify "all under heaven" was replaced with a new world view—a view of exclusion and dichotomy where frontier truncated any possibility of China's expansion northward (Pines 2005).

By the time of Sima Qian's writing, 100 years after these events at the outset of the Han dynasty, the significance of nomadic power had become all too clear. Under the warrior Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BC), the Han dynasty had plunged into total war against its northern nomad neighbors, an effort that would continue for decades and nearly impoverish the empire. Distinctive traces in the material record from this era of the Sino-Xiongnu wars remain today. Archaeologists working in Mongolia's southern Gobi Desert have uncovered unsettling evidence of the extreme violence along the northern frontier. This evidence comes from the ruins of a walled settlement known as Bayan Bulag which lies in an arid and windswept plain. Near its western wall, a small green patch reveals how people were able to live here over 2,000 years ago by drawing water from precious nearby springs. Artifacts strewn about the collapsed walls include corroded Han dynasty coins, simple gray ware ceramics, crossbow lock mechanisms, and dozens of triangular bronze arrowheads that once tipped powerful crossbow bolts.

Based on these materials, Bayan Bulag was among the farthest outlying garrisons of the Han dynasty during the first century BC and was likely populated by soldiers and laborers from China. The site was walled and fortified on the north against the swift advances of horsemen coming across the desert, making daily life a constant and fearsome struggle. Testament to these conditions came to light in 2009 at a location 400 m to the east of the Bayan Bulag walls where archaeologists uncovered a large pit strewn with human skeletal remains (Kovalev et al. 2011). Interred in a makeshift grave, excavators unearthed the piled skeletons of 20 individuals. Among the bones, they also revealed 33 distinct but still mostly articulated body parts, ranging from hands and arms to legs and heads. On closer inspection, the archaeologists found that each body part belonged to one of the skeletons and could be refitted with the bones of its original owner like a gruesome jigsaw puzzle. Evidence for violent trauma included weapon impacts that had crushed the skulls of some individuals and cleanly severed the limb bones of others. The bones tell of individuals having been brutalized and either hacked to death or dismembered soon after they had died. Based on a handful of personal artifacts included in the mass grave, the excavators suggest these skeletons represent the remains of Han dynasty cavalrymen who had been attacked, killed, probably frozen in the cold of winter, and later retrieved and buried near the garrison (Kovalev et al. 2011: 492–493). With additional work, physical anthropologists

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[1] This event is known as the battle of Pingcheng which is thought to have taken place 70 km southeast of Liangcheng in south-central Inner Mongolia (Indrisano 2006: 145–146).

might provide more evidence to confirm this scenario and the origins of these individuals. Nonetheless, whoever they were, the grim narrative these bodies tell of frontier life is indisputable.

The Han empire of China and the Xiongnu nomadic state on the northern steppe brought about a new political era in the history of eastern Asia. In this book I attempt to explain the anthropological significance of interactions between these two axial traditions of the Far East. The meeting of the Han and Xiongnu rulers on that cold day in 200 BC and the massacre of Han soldiers in the Gobi Desert a century or more later represent cultural and political demarcations on the boundaries of what has been described as one of the most absolute frontiers in the history of the world (Lattimore 1940: 21). From this early conception of a fundamentally divided existence came an enduring mythology about a civilization centered in China and the distant lands and inhabitants of Inner Asia who became known as the people beyond civilization.

This book explores the lesser known side of the Inner Asian frontier, a world of nomadic societies representing a different kind of civilization that arose from lifeways of herding and movement across the landscape. These mobile peoples built expansive polities that challenged, conquered, and ruled many of the great civilizations of the Old World. Although histories recount these exploits as the workings of great leaders who were as ruthless as they were charismatic, in fact, steppe history is not just a narrative of kings, emperors, and aristocratic elite. It is a narrative that cannot be told without the common herders, farmers, hunters, and crafts people who made up the diverse communities of the Eurasian steppe. From these grasslands comes a mystery that continues to perplex historians and anthropologists to this day. How did these people—who lived primarily as nomads, moving their animals with the seasons, and living in tents—manage to build marvelously large states and empires, some of which, like Genghis Khan's Mongol empire, time and again took over the better part of Eurasia?

1.1 Geographical Contexts

To begin addressing this question, some background on the area, its peoples, and their histories is needed. Most interpretations of early East Asian history take for granted the primacy of China as a main point of reference, the dominant culture, and the organizational center. In contrast, my investigation focuses on the steppe zone, a place where pastoral nomads to this day still drive their herds among a wide range of grasslands interspersed with mountains, rivers, forests, and deserts. The geographic term I use for these steppe lands and surrounding regions is "Inner Asia" which consists of Mongolia, Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, much of southern Siberia, Xinjiang, and eastern Kazakhstan (Fig 1.1). Another area I identify is "East Asia" which includes the present extent of China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan. These two geographic terms overlap significantly, but together, they comprise the vast macro-region pertinent for a study of the first empires and states on both sides of the frontier. This area is quite large and accordingly, the question
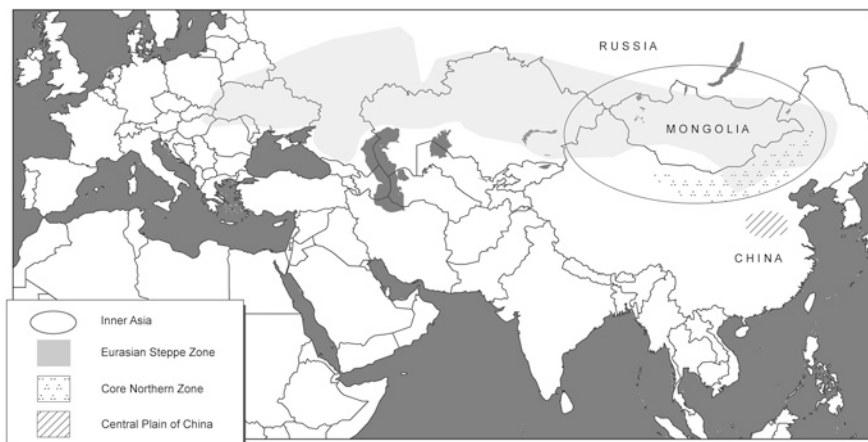
Fig. 1.1   The Eurasian steppe zone, Inner Asia, and other geographical regions of importance

of how to effectively organize politics over such expansive distances has been an enduring issue for nomadic states as well as the many empires centered in China. It is also a key theme of this book and is central to understanding East and Inner Asian forms of statehood.

Another notable aspect of the East and Inner Asian macro-region is its diversity of cultures, languages, lifeways, and environments. Inner Asia marks the eastern most extent of the Eurasian steppes stretching from the fringes of Europe to the forests of Manchuria. This interior swathe of grassland is itself quite diverse, but there are a few general characteristics that give a measure of cohesion to the region—it is arid and cold, with extreme shifts in seasonal temperature, and it has low population densities, animal-centered subsistence economies, and peoples whose mobility adapted them to this fairly harsh setting. Given these characteristics, and especially its mobile cultures, the eastern steppe is often thought of as a territory of migration, interaction, and exchange (Christian 2000). In contrast, beyond the margins of the steppe zone are the rivers, forests, and temperate plains that gave rise to early literate societies built upon intensive agriculture, village life, and aggregated urban populations. In East Asia, these regions include China and its Central Plain cultures as well as the Korean Peninsula and Japan.

1.2   Historical Contexts

My focus is on the end of the first millennium BC, a time when East and Inner Asia experienced a fascinating series of transformations in the way diverse peoples lived and related to one another. But the roots of this narrative begin much earlier than that and extend back more than a thousand years before the rise of the

Xiongnu and Han states. At around 1,050 BC in the heartland of China, the late Shang dynasty suffered a series of major defeats and collapsed, to be followed by the victorious and emergent Zhou dynasty. Although it was different from Shang, the Zhou court continued many of the Shang practices including the use of archaic Chinese script, monumental burials with human and animal sacrifices, sophisticated bronze production, and chariot and infantry-based warfare. Conflict, trade, and alliances with outlying peoples also continued during the Zhou dynasty, and through a process of gradual conquest and assimilation, the political territory of Zhou expanded. At this time far to the north, peoples of the Inner Asian steppe zone had established a mobile herding lifeway with horse-riding techniques, powerful belief systems, and artfully made prestige goods that were destined to have appeal for the expanding aristocracy in China. These steppe peoples were organized into small-scale polities which sometimes cooperated and at other times competed. In doing so, steppe peoples constructed intricate networks of exchange and collaboration among the many differentiated groups living within the steppes, deserts, and forests of the north.

These two distinct worlds gradually came into contact along the margins of Inner Asia and northern China. By the final centuries of the Zhou era, a time fittingly called the Warring States period (481–221 BC), the territory of Zhou was divided between seven highly organized and competitive states. Some of these states expanded their territories northward into the fringe of steppe and desert marking the boundary of a region known today as the Northern Zone, which for the most part comprises Inner Mongolia and Manchuria. Peoples of the Northern Zone had long interacted with both the Zhou dynasty in the south and with nomadic groups in present-day Mongolia (Shelach 2009: 127–133). As the quality of interactions changed and contacts increased among peoples of these three distinct regions, Northern Zone communities found themselves occupying a turbulent frontier between what was an emerging state on the Mongolian Plateau and the states of China. This frontier zone was not fixed in space nor was it founded upon great walls, different lifeways, or environmental zones. It was a creation of politics and dual ideologies of division which arose in China and on the steppe simultaneously. These early interactions chart the contemporaneous formations of the Xiongnu state (c. 209 BC–93 AD) and the Qin (221–207 BC) and Han (202 BC–220 AD) empires.

1.3 Conceiving of Nomadic Peoples and Their Polities

The rise of the Xiongnu state in Inner Asia presents a challenge to current theories of political complexity and state organization. Prior to the twentieth century, information about pastoral nomadic polities came from the accounts of ancient observers like Sima Qian mentioned above and Herodotus. Herodotus' *Histories* (c. 450 BC) contains one of the best known and oldest reports of the Scythian nomadic state located in the European steppe north of the Black Sea. The Scythians were a horse-riding pastoral people whose military exploits included resisting the amassed

armies of Darius I, the Achaemenid Persian emperor, during his Scythian expedition of 513 BC. In a narrative passage reminiscent of the encounter between Han Gaozu and the Xiongnu ruler Maodun above, Herodotus tells of horse-riding Scythian archers swiftly retreating into the grasslands with Darius' armies in pursuit. The Persian fighters quickly find themselves in unfamiliar territory, while the Scythians exploited their mobile advantage by launching rear action attacks against the slow-moving infantry (Herodotus 2003: 286). Herodotus recounts that Darius, in his frustration with these tactics of flight, sends a message to the Scythian king Idanthyrsus asking, "why on earth, strange man, do you keep running away?" To this Idanthyrsus answers, "I have never yet run from any man in fear … there is, for me, nothing unusual in what I have been doing; it is precisely the sort of life I always lead, even in the time of peace" (Herodotus 2003: 282). Clearly, mobility was a lifeway as well as an effective military strategy for the nomads of the Scythian state. For the Greek audience, however, Herodotus' narrative was not about nomads per se, but was an instructive comparison for how another enemy of Persia persevered against the expanding empire (Tuplin 2010; Hartog 1988).

The use of such idealized images of nomads has a long and ongoing history in social science (cf. Sneath 2007: 198–202). For example, another influential historical analysis in which nomads were seen in both an instrumental and metaphoric light was developed in late medieval North Africa by historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 AD). In the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun provides an Arab-centered world history and argues for a theory of civilization in which powerful states gradually weakened over time and became corrupt, only to be conquered and replaced by unadulterated nomadic groups from the desert periphery. Once formerly pure nomads arrayed themselves with the finery of statehood, their states would in turn decline and the cycle then repeated. As Bonte (2003) has argued, this is a simplistic but by now an almost canonical reading of what is a complex text of much greater depth. It has, however, had substantial influence on the general interpretation of relationships between states and their nomadic neighbors who, for better or for worse, have historically been viewed as untouched by and incompatible with "civilization" (Sowayan 2005).

These somewhat curious ideas about pastoral nomads from the ancient world developed into a historiography of nomads within modern academic discourse—as if these early observers had reported genuine cultural ethnographies of their neighbors. The work of Ibn Khaldun appealed strongly to twentieth-century Western historians and most notably to Arnold Toynbee who adopted the idea of cycles in world history from the *Muqaddima*, though nomadic societies received a less-than-prominent role (Irwin 1997). Toynbee describes nomads as having developed a culture extremely well adapted for marginal environments, so much so that further development was not practical or possible. He argued that nomads, "have a society without history and once launched on its annual orbit, the nomadic horde revolves in [that orbit] thereafter and might go on revolving forever" (Toynbee 1934: 16). This conception of nomadic society with its timeless resistance to political, economic, and social transformation was not unique to Toynbee's work, but in fact reflected cultural assumptions that were widespread in academic research

of the time (Sneath 2007: 121). These historical models, however, speak more to representations of nomads by literate and urban peoples than about the actual lifeways of mobile herders.

Perspectives on pastoral nomads began to change as historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists increasingly spent time and did fieldwork among nomadic peoples and engaged firsthand with nomadic lifeways and politics. In the western part of Eurasia, colonial figures like Richard Burton and T.E. Lawrence are remembered for living among indigenous nomadic groups and adopting their customs and learning their languages. Likewise, three researchers on the other side of Eurasia stand out as informed observers of nomadic society with genuine anthropological interests and language expertise; these were Andrei Simukov (1902–1942), Henning Haslund-Christensen (1896–1948), and Owen Lattimore (1900–1989). Simukov's important ethnographic work on Mongolian pastoralism makes up a good portion of Chap. 4 and will be discussed there in detail. Christensen was a Danish researcher who travelled to northern Mongolia in 1923, learned Mongolian, and spent a significant number of years living among nomadic communities. He subsequently authored some of the earliest anthropological treatments of Mongolian society and focused especially on traditional Mongolian music (Haslund-Christensen 1934).

Of these three, Lattimore's work has the greatest pertinence for this study of pastoral nomads and their regional political organizations. More than any other scholar, he is responsible for adding the Inner Asian perspective to an emerging anthropology of pastoral nomads. Lattimore had spent his younger years riding the camel caravans from China deep into Inner Asia and thereby became intensely interested in Mongolian society, language, and history. While his early writing was of the travelog variety and tended to reinforce some of the stereotypes of nomadic peoples, including those of Toynbee's (Irwin 1997: 474), Lattimore's mature and scholarly work led in a different direction. Not long before the 1940 publication of his classic study on nomadic civilization *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, Lattimore issued a strong rebuttal of Toynbee's position on the absence of long-term change among nomadic peoples. In a 1938 lecture to the Royal Geographic Society, he stated that, "… the established opinion, so learnedly and ably represented by Toynbee, that there is no 'inner evolution' in the history of the steppe, needs to be modified. The processes are there, though the details are largely hidden from us" (Lattimore 1962: 251).

1.4   Lattimore and Anthropology: Approaches to the Nomad as State Builder

It was Lattimore's ambitious and monumental pursuit of these hidden details that made his book an immediate classic in the fields of history, anthropology, and geography. The ideas he set forth mark the first detailed consideration of a number of anthropological topics using Inner Asia as the case study in question. These include regional-scale political process among nomads, the creation of frontier, and

interactions between differentiated cultural groups. *Inner Asian Frontiers* traces patterns of cultural and political change beginning as early as the Neolithic up to the Sino-Xiongnu confrontation of the late second and first centuries BC. As such, the study covers several millennia of cultural process during which both the settled agricultural and pastoral nomadic lifeways came into being and took on organizational significance. The culmination of these long-term historical processes, according to Lattimore, was the emergence of two competing states each of which derived from very different backgrounds of environment, culture, and ways of organizing.

Lattimore asks why the net expansion of China's impressive society and culture that had unfolded over the span of more than 3,000 years had not advanced significantly northward of the original area of Chinese state formation (Lattimore 1940: 12–13). This question was all the more puzzling given the tremendous level of organization, productive capacity, and massive population that were ancient China's foundations. Despite productive and military might, Chinese state suzerainty did not extend into the nomad-dominated steppe areas until the later second millennium AD and, even then, only under a Manchurian dynasty. The answer Lattimore gives to this question represents his early excursion into a theory that later would become known as cultural ecology. He conceived of China and the eastern steppe zone as two very different adaptive core areas. Lattimore pointed out that the technological, demographic, productive, and social adaptations of the Chinese and nomadic civilizations were maximally effective in their respective core, and this led to development and expansion in both cases. As the two cultural traditions expanded beyond each respective core region, their adaptive infrastructures became increasingly ineffective and unsupportable, which resulted in a shifting and contested frontier between them. This frontier zone was inhabited by populations of variable allegiance and cultural composition (Lattimore 1940: 249). The Inner Asian frontier marked the southern and northern limits beyond which the lifeways and political organizations of the steppe and China would experience diminishing returns from further expansion.

In support of this theory, Lattimore proposed a sequence of major developments that contributed to the making of "nomadic civilization" in eastern Eurasia. He suggests that with the widespread introduction of horse-riding, steppe peoples developed a unique sociocultural configuration built upon a sustainable subsistence system of mobile pastoralism with rapid transport and unprecedented military strength (Lattimore 1940, 1962: 253). The emergence of the Xiongnu state and the unification of the Qin empire seemed to Lattimore to be a case of co-development articulating two different trajectories in distinct and autonomous regions (Lattimore 1940: 408–409, 462–463). Lattimore's research during this early period introduced three ideas important to the study of steppe sociopolitical organization and interaction. He argued that nomadic societies, much as any other human society, had potential for complex sociopolitical process. Next, because of the nomadic setting, the organizational forms of these societies were different from those of neighboring polities in China. Finally, Lattimore suggested that inter-societal contacts shaped the major transformations that took place in both China and the steppe zone. In other words, the history of the Inner Asian frontier

was not unidirectional and had to take into account perspectives from both sides of the Great Wall (Lattimore 1940: 475).

Not long after the publication of *Inner Asian Frontiers*, Lattimore's ideas on steppe societies began to change in response to new sources of data on nomadic peoples mainly from Africa and Southwest Asia. During the early to mid-twentieth century, professional ethnographers trained as social anthropologists began taking interest in Old World nomadic societies. As a result, researchers published a number of ethnographies including some of the first participant–observer accounts of nomads such as *The Nuer* by Evans-Pritchard (1940). This work in particular helped to solidify an anthropological image of pastoralists as stateless warriors with segmented lineage organizations. Where nomads were intimately involved with states and their exchange systems, anthropologists advanced the idea of nomadic "half-cultures" which were made whole through dependence on neighboring sedentary and urban societies (Kroeber 1948: 276–278). A different approach was taken by Fredrik Barth (1961) in his ethnographic work on the Basseri of Iran. Barth's research was the first to call attention to pastoral nomadic encapsulation within dominant states and colonial empires, a condition shared by most if not all nomadic groups of the twentieth century, but not one necessarily indicative of the past. Barth's observations raised the important question of the relationship between powerful and highly organized nomadic groups and the modern states with which they often contended.

Many of these early ethnographic ideas were re-packaged by cultural evolutionists interested in classifying societies according to stage models of organization. Research that investigated the causes behind hereditary social inequality, centralized authority, and economic specialization initiated a more detailed ethnographic and historical examination of societies with and without these characteristics (Sahlins 1961, 1963; Fried 1967). In the case of pastoral nomads, Sahlins discussed two ways that herding societies might have become organizationally complex. He argued that low population density and uncertain production among nomadic groups were not conducive to the emergence of permanent social hierarchy, but where unusually high densities of population and resources existed, a chiefly form of political organization could provide benefits to pastoral nomads (Sahlins 1968: 37). The second pathway involved a kind of pastoral nomadic adaptation to sedentary society in which the consolidation and centralization of herders would have been functional and probable (Sahlins 1968: 38). In this case, settlements rich in agriculture and industry attracted and tended to aggregate dispersed nomadic groups interested in these products. According to Sahlins, the resulting interactions between herders and more highly organized sedentary groups, whether peaceful or not, necessitated higher degrees of permanent leadership and political solidarity among nomads. Such a process would then explain the rise of regional-scale nomadic confederations such as those known from the Eurasian steppes.

Mounting evidence collected by ethnographers and historians seemed to indicate that nomadic organizational change approximated this second pattern best and was therefore directly predicated on nomadic people's desire for the products of sedentary neighbors. Using cross-cultural ethnographic data, social anthropologists

argued that relationships between nomadic and sedentary societies were the primary source of development among peripheral herders, to the exclusion of endogenous process (Burnham 1979; Irons 1979). Still other researches cast doubt on the possibility that pastoral nomads who employed a high-risk subsistence strategy in marginal regions could have ever been productively independent of the agricultural surplus of neighboring states (Khazanov 1978). Based on these sources of information, therefore, complex pastoral nomadic groups on the margins of state societies could be explained as a kind of specialized economic subsector intimately related to, but not necessarily integrated within the state.

Lattimore's final work shows great attention to these anthropological ideas calling into question the economic and organizational independence of nomads. In 1979, he revisited his initial model for steppe and frontier development. While still maintaining the fundamental difference between China and the northern steppe as two separate developmental regions, he hypothesized a structural dependence between steppe polities and the states of China. This dependence can best be described as a political economy in which nomadic elites sought to transform pastoral production into politically important luxury and subsistence goods through exchange along the frontier. Goods acquired from China could then be redistributed among followers in support of elite leadership. When the Qin dynasty emerged in 221 BC, frontier trade was curtailed triggering competition, warfare, and conquest among steppe groups. The end result was the Xiongnu state of 209 BC which had the military strength and organization to coerce resources from its southern neighbor (Lattimore 1979: 481, 483–484). This is an entirely different explanation for nomadic statehood than the one Lattimore had offered in 1940, and this change was largely due to anthropological understandings of pastoral nomads and state interaction as documented during the modern era. However, neither the modern state nor the twentieth-century nomad is necessarily a good analog for those of 2,000 or more years ago.

The rise of complex regional polities in Inner Asia and the eventual emergence of nomadic empires is truly a remarkable sequence of social and political transformation. Although Lattimore's early and later theories made great strides toward unraveling the mysteries of this political history, Lattimore recognized the limitations under which steppe scholars like himself worked. In order to address the question of politics and interaction within the steppe regions, researchers had to rely on the textual records of early China and ethnographic studies from the twentieth century, both of which are problematic sources of information (Sinor 1970: 108–109; Chin 2010). Although historical documents and contemporary ethnography are of indisputable value, Lattimore placed his hopes for future scholarship in recovering a genuinely indigenous record of the nomadic past, as promised by the emerging field of Mongolian archaeology (Lattimore 1979: 479–480). In the decades since, archaeologists have substantially increased their understanding of eastern steppe prehistory and are in a position not only to evaluate textual and ethnographic models, but to offer new models and theory based primarily on the material remains left behind by Inner Asian nomads themselves.

1.5 Shaping Alternatives for Inner Asia: Mobility, Politics, and Interaction

Like Lattimore's inquiries, my questions about Inner Asian prehistory are far-reaching and are intended to involve eastern steppe nomads in pivotal discussions about the ways human societies change. To do this, I approach Xiongnu statehood by using new evidence from archaeology and the innovative critiques of historical sources by a new generation of Inner Asian historians. Equally important, however, I also develop new theory and hypotheses better suited to the constitution and conditions of nomadic society. In contrast to prevailing cultural stereotypes, I show pastoral nomadic peoples to be more than a mere extension of their subsistence economy, and neither simplistic nor unsophisticated, but rather engaged in forms of political complexity that were quite unique. These are topics at the forefront of discussions in anthropological archaeology, and as such, they make an exploration of Xiongnu state formation both timely and pertinent to a number of areas of research.

Throughout this book, I assess and revisit the comparative value of studying Inner Asian prehistory. For example, eastern steppe polities emerged within expanding networks of inter-regional contact not only with China but with groups in eastern Central Asia, Manchuria, and Siberia. As such, any explanation of Inner Asian statehood first requires a theory of interaction, of political relationships, and specifically a set of theory addressing connections between regional and local scales of sociopolitical process. Such a statement of ideas complements a number of related discussions on the prehistory of politics and interaction in other parts of the world (e.g., Stein 2002; Parkinson and Galaty 2010; Frachetti 2012). Moreover, the past two decades have witnessed numerous critiques of archaeology's reliance on narrowly defined political types to analyze organizational change (Wynne-Jones and Kohring 2007; Smith 2012). The problem of political complexity and statehood among pastoral nomads, a case not at all typical, is well positioned to contribute a new and potentially useful perspective to this ongoing theoretical debate (Honeychurch and Amartuvshin 2007; Hanks 2010). Still another comparative point of interest is that Inner and East Asia, much like Persia, the Andes, or the Mediterranean, had a long history of generating large states and empires. Each of these regions share a number of characteristics in common, including mobile cultures and technologies, substantial records of long-distance interaction, and multiple varieties of state organization. This begs the question of whether organizational diversity, intensive interaction, and political synthesis may have favored organizational traditions well suited for supporting large-scale empires on a cross-cultural basis (e.g., Mann 1986: 130–133; Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997: 84–88; Smith 2003: 82–83; Turchin 2009).

The present study sets out to specifically address these topics by first proposing a basic re-conceptualization of nomadic herding societies of Inner Asia. Pastoral nomadism is a term indicating groups whose lifeway and worldview are shaped by domestic herd animals and their potential for movement. Anthropological approaches have emphasized economic typologies intended to categorize these lifeways, but Inner Asian pastoral nomadism has never been a stable and unchanging economy

amenable to fixed categories of analysis. In fact, there is good reason to believe that Inner Asian societies cultivated the capacity to transform practices in both habitual and innovative ways relative to changing conditions. Pastoral nomadism as a lifeway was (and still is) a flexible strategy enabled by co-community with herd animals and the cultural embedding of mobility (Honeychurch and Amartuvshin 2007; Frachetti 2008). These adaptations created social and productive expertise in socio-spatial dynamics and movement that included ways of binding together and maintaining human communities in the face of geographic dispersal. I argue that this capacity gave a unique spatial and temporal foundation for social relationships among Inner Asian nomads, and as a result, we should expect that politics and statehood assumed quite different configurations from those of sedentary and agricultural peoples.

In order to analyze the political importance of mobility within a movement-oriented culture, I offer the concept of "spatial politics." This term is intended to highlight the quality of political negotiations where relationships have long been mediated by various modes of movement, spatial remove, and indeterminacy of location. I intend for this concept to capture a quality of political organization more appropriate for horse-riding pastoral nomads because their experience was shaped by a very different mix of geographical distance, transport, communication, and face-to-face interaction. This approach offers a better explanation for how nomads built extremely large complex polities while also solving the universal problem of sustaining authority and political order over distance (Feinman 1998: 112). This is not a concept that pertains to all pastoral nomads, nor does it pertain only to pastoral nomads. The idea of mobility-adapted statecraft is useful for any society in which forms of mobility become implicated in political arenas, and especially in the case of geographically expansive empires and states.

The information I draw upon to make these arguments comes from several sources including ethnographic, textual, and material studies. Of primary importance is the material evidence provided by two archaeological survey and excavation projects in different parts of Mongolia. The first study area is the river valley of Egiin Gol, located in the forest-steppe zone of north central Mongolia, and the second is the arid granite peaks of the Baga Gazaryn Chuluu region along the northern edge of the Gobi Desert. These two regions are substantially different in terms of environment and geographic location. Taken together, they provide an opportunity to compare the changes that transpired among local steppe communities as they participated in political processes related to Xiongnu state formation. I contextualize these specific datasets with the cumulative archaeological records as known from the rest of Mongolia, eastern Kazakhstan, northern China, and southern Siberia, in order to assess local and regional patterns of long-term social, economic, and political transformation.

1.6 Outline of Chapters to Come

This book focuses primarily on the making of the first Inner Asian nomadic state toward the end of the first millennium BC and the political traditions it inspired. I weave this narrative together from two separate strands of history from Inner Asia:

one ancient and one modern. The story of Xiongnu statehood occupies most of the study, but I conclude with a contemporary account of Mongolia's transition from a socialist state to a globalized and developing modern nation. I pose the question of how the steppe nomad has played a central role in these strangely similar worlds of inter-cultural connections separated by two millennia. Chapters 2 and 3 develop theory needed to pursue these questions in depth. Chapter 2 explores what anthropologists know about long-distance interaction between different cultures and its affect on political transformation. I review major anthropological and historical ideas about culture contact and then propose a framework that describes how long-distance interaction can influence and change the quality of local political relationships, and vice versa.

Chapter 3 examines different and sometimes competing approaches to eastern steppe political complexity and statehood. I suggest a definition for the "nomadic state" that better conceptualizes the process of state formation in Inner Asia. Current models draw on the long-held idea of nomadic political economy as inherently unstable and unmanageable due to residential movement and productive risk. When indigenous economic and political institutions are assumed to be too weak to support the kinds of polities known to have existed on the eastern steppe, historians and anthropologists logically point to external influence from China as the major cause behind nomadic political complexity. In contrast, I argue that mobile societies structure relationships in ways that are not easily amenable to the standard political and economic frameworks used to understand sedentary complex societies. Instead of making indigenous political complexity untenable, the pastoral nomadism of Inner Asia fashioned a different social and relational idiom for how people interrelated and organized. These ideas set the foundation for the "spatial politics" approach to steppe political organization. Taking advantage of this concept, I propose that long-distance contacts did not occur because of the economic weakness of pastoralism and dependence on external goods, but rather as a logical outgrowth of a movement and transport-enabled culture. Complex steppe polities emerged from a tradition in which movement was normal, and maintaining political relationships over great distances constituted a primary part of statecraft. In short, a sophisticated politics of networking is a better way to understand how steppe states were constituted.

Chapter 4 situates the above theory in the world of the eastern steppe and the pastoral nomadic peoples that inhabit Inner Asia today. I focus on recent ethnography at the two study areas of Egiin Gol and Baga Gazaryn Chuluu where modern mobile herding is the dominant local lifeway. Chapters 5 through 7 introduce the archaeology of Mongolia and the surrounding regions of Inner Asia during the Late and Final Bronze Age (c. 1400–750 BC) and the beginning of the Early Iron Age (c. 750–300 BC). It is often maintained that state formation on the eastern steppe drew upon political precedents established many centuries prior; however, the nature of those precedents and how they influenced later political transformation is rarely explained by prehistorians. I offer one such explanation, and to substantiate these ideas, I compare and contextualize the Mongolian record with research from Kazakhstan, South Siberia, and Inner Mongolia. This broad overview documents dramatic changes over the centuries in Inner Asian lifeways that led up to state emergence. These include an increased reliance on herd animals and movement, the initial use of domestic horses for traction and riding, the

creation of substantial networks of long-distance contacts, and the spread of technologies, ritual systems, beliefs, and material culture—all of which set the foundation for political re-organization at the beginning of the Xiongnu period.

My main interest in Chaps. 8 and 9 is the material record of the Xiongnu state as known from Mongolia, Siberia, and Inner Mongolia. Evidence for this period includes artifacts, habitations, cemeteries, and entire landscapes, and these can be used to investigate the politics and organization of the Xiongnu polity as it emerged and changed over time. I suggest that Inner Asian state formation is best conceived of as a social movement of collusion between peoples of different statuses and positions rather than as a top–down process driven by elite leaders. Institutions established during the initial years of Xiongnu statehood involved the following: (1) the creation of new mortuary rituals and ideologies, (2) a novel collective political identity, and (3) approaches to mobility that supported pastoralism while at the same time empowering local and regional political leadership. These important events on the eastern steppe gave early impetus to parts of the Silk Road and also consolidated the frontier between the two enduring centers of power in Inner Asia and China.

The final chapter highlights the outcomes and broader importance of this reassessment of formative Inner Asian politics. Chapter 10 inverts the assumption that the civilizations of China were "central" and Inner Asia was therefore, by definition, "peripheral." Following Lattimore, the gradual knitting together of this macro-region by way of interaction suggests that instead of an established core and a later periphery, the co-development of multiple differentiated centers was likely the case. Diversity in political models combined with interaction and long-term competition between these centers of power constituted a developmental process of inter-cultural indigenous innovation. Through macro-regional engagements, the Han dynasty expanded geographically and created new approaches to supporting a more distant geographical and political reach. The Xiongnu state experimented with varying forms of centralized authority to stabilize the long-distance reach nomads created early on. Both of these experiences in China and in Inner Asia produced synthesized versions of statecraft which I argue were essential to the development of the large and powerful imperial states that later appeared across Northeast Asia, most notably the Mongol and Manchu empires. In conclusion, I bring forward in time the mobility and spatial politics argument to assess modern Mongolia's integration within the globalizing world. Given a long tradition of sociopolitical mobility and inter-regional relationships, Mongolia is well situated to participate in a world that increasingly relies on these very same capacities on a global scale. These historical trends should be heeded in the current process of managing Mongolia's development as a strong, self-sufficient, and stable member of the international community.

Exploration of Inner Asia's nomadic past reveals a challenging history fraught with contradictions. In the opinion of some scholars, the eastern steppe was marginal, remote, and at the very edge of civilized life; but to others it was a heartland whose peoples time and again configured the dynamics of large parts of the Asian continent. To confront these very different images is to embrace the complexities of the past and its study. By asking new questions, using a different conceptual vocabulary, and considering multiple kinds of evidence, contradictory images of Inner Asia can be reconciled and made more informative about past lives as they were lived, understood, and

transacted. My approach is one that views steppe communities not as dependent herders, belligerent world conquerors, or inhabitants of a peripheral backwater, but as a people, like any other, whose actions arose from relationships, understandings, needs, and precedents. What made these early Inner Asians so unique and interesting were the varied processes they experienced in creating a political tradition that significantly shaped Old World history. It is the conceptual linking of those Inner Asian relations, understandings, needs, and precedents to the eventual shaping of the Old World that I hope to accomplish through this study of the unique politics of the eastern steppe.

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