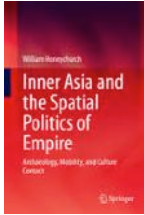


REVIEW: *INNER ASIA AND THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF EMPIRE:
ARCHAEOLOGY, MOBILITY AND CULTURE CONTACT*

Reviewed by Francesca Fiaschetti (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)



William Honeychurch. 2015. *Inner Asia and the Spatial Politics of Empire: Archaeology, Mobility, and Culture Contact*. New York, Heidelberg, Dordrecht, London: Springer. XI + 321. Fifty figures, index. ISBN: 1493918141 (hardcover, 139.09EURO).

How does mobility affect processes of polity building? Are cultural contacts a secondary product of an established form of government, or are they a precondition for it? How can archaeology complement history in researching these issues? These are among the questions addressed by Honeychurch's book, in which evidence from different sources, but mostly the results of surveys and excavation projects at the Mongolian sites of the Egiin Gol river valley, and the Baga Gazaryn Chuluu region, are conveyed (12).

The theoretical premises of his analysis derive from the need to challenge the traditional image of Inner Asian nomads as portrayed in textual sources produced by their sedentary neighbors. The issues related to the usage of such historical documents, and especially Chinese records, are well known. These sources follow a particular rhetoric aimed at legitimizing the processes of state-formation of the cultures that produced them. The image of the Inner Asian nomads that they offer functions to meet this purpose. They are traditionally depicted as barbarians, whose processes of polity-formation are a byproduct of interaction with their sedentary neighbors. The need to counter such stereotypes has increasingly driven the attention of scholars since the analysis in the seminal study by Sneath (2007).

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Honeychurch's work is a further contribution to this debate, with two positive innovations: he focuses on an earlier period – from the Late Bronze Age (1400-1000 BC) to the rise of the Xiongnu 匈奴 confederation (209 BC-ca. 93 AD) - and he brings archaeological evidence to the fore as a means of confirmation or refusal of various historical analyses.

In presenting the material evidence and related theories from his own and other scholars' work, the author addresses these data in ways that are innovative in several aspects. Firstly, he challenges the idea of the liminality of Inner Asian nomads, traditionally described as being at the frontier of a sedentary empire (China under the Han 漢 Dynasty, 206 BC-220 AD, in the case of the Xiongnu). He turns the perspective around by putting Mongolia at the geographical center, and at the core of networks and cultural dynamics that linked it in the Northwest to the territories of present-day Kazakhstan and Siberia, and in the Southeast to the regions of present-day Inner Mongolia and to China, this last being meaningfully situated "at the Edge of Inner Asia."¹

A second, controversial aspect of the traditional "frontier" representation that Honeychurch tries to overcome, is the interaction between nomadic and sedentary populations mostly presented as military confrontation. Furthermore, in the case of the Xiongnu, various scholars have stressed the military element, in terms of large-scale warfare and conquest, as a key-factor for their rise to power.

By looking not only at the elites, but also at the "herders, farmers, hunters, and crafts people who made up the diverse communities of the Eurasian steppe" (3), the author highlights the processes of network-constructions and the management of mobility as an asset for the creation of large complex polities.

In this framework, a key concept for the understanding of processes of polity-formation is "spatial politics," defined as "the harnessing of communal spatial knowledge and movement capacity as a recognized venue for the negotiation of political relationships"

¹ As formulated in Chapter Seven 'At the Edge of Inner Asia: The Northern Zone and the States of China, 1200-700 BC'.

(66). Stressing the element of movement, the author suggests that different kinds of mobility lead to different forms of statecraft, and that a change in the social and spatial scale of the mobility determines a change in the type of politics (66). As a consequence, Honeychurch sees the management of mobility as a precondition for the rise of the Xiongnu polity.

The above-mentioned arguments are mostly dealt with in the first three chapters, in which the theoretical background, the terminology, and the scope of the book are outlined. In the first chapter, 'Voices from the Steppe', the author reviews in detail the main theories on interactions between Inner Asian nomads and their sedentary neighbors. He particularly highlights the work of Lattimore (most notably 1940) as one of the first scholars to seek elements of indigenous development and state-formation in Mongolian culture.

In the second chapter, entitled 'Overcoming the Tyranny of Distance: Culture Contact and Politics', Honeychurch elaborates on key questions that are useful in understanding data presented further on in the book. These focus on the entanglement of three concepts: goods, scale, and the political framework.

In terms of goods, he poses the interesting question of how novelty items affect social dynamics. He takes three examples, one from archaeology (the jew's harp) and two from the modern and contemporary world (Oreo cookies and the role of foreign goods in defining wealth in modern Mongolia). Through these case studies, and the adroit combination of archaeology and cultural anthropology, he shows how objects move and adapt to new contexts, and what the social impact of this movement is.

In his approach, Honeychurch elaborates on Dietler's (2010) idea of "entanglement," which is summarized as "unanticipated but consequential webs of contacts between different peoples that can interconnect conditions locally and globally" (31).

A key element for the construction of these contacts being is, in Honeychurch's view, the indigenous consumption of foreign goods (31-32).

One of the possible outcomes of this entanglement is "upscaling," by which Honeychurch indicates the change in the

interaction between small-scale networked polities "towards a more encompassing collective scale and a new political identity" (41).

This approach towards the dynamics of policy, or even empire-formation, is one of the most noteworthy elements of Honeychurch's line of thought. It is exactly this framework that the author uses in a later section of the book (chapters Eight and Nine) to rethink the chronology, dynamics, and phases of the Xiongnu rise to power. This happened, according to the author, through a tripartite process (68-72):

- the entanglement which created the conditions for the formation of the Xiongnu confederation (1400-700 BC),
- the period of consolidation (600-200 BC), defined by allegiance among local polities, and
- the phase of spatial politics (200 BC-200 AD).

A third aspect of Honeychurch's preliminary set of questions is the understanding of political structures and their formation. What do we understand under the "state"? And are the features of pastoral nomadism incompatible with the state? This is the topic of Chapter Three, ('Solving Contradictions: Nomads and Political Complexity') in which the author reviews the main historical and anthropological theories surrounding these issues. In his understanding:

pastoral nomadism is not a static condition, a mode of production, or an economic type. Rather, it can be considered an ongoing and malleable process of 'change, range and modes' in all aspects of experience including diets, mobility, technology, habitation patterns, landscape arrangements, rituals, and belief (57).

This definition brings forward the perspective of previous analyses showing the complexity of the whole notion of "pastoral nomadism," starting from the seminal formulation by Vajda (1968), whose works should be added to the list of studies reviewed by Honeychurch.

In this context, the author suggests that it is worthwhile to

reflect on the theories by Ingold (especially 2000) on the role of animals in the society of pastoral nomads. According to his studies, herd animals are not a passive element of pastoral society, but an important element to shape the herders' perception of society and social bonds (54). An important result of this predominant function of livestock among pastoral nomads is the enhanced role of mobility. From this point of view, Honeychurch moves to the next question: Does mobility - or pastoral nomadism in general - deny the state as an organizational form?

This obviously depends on how we choose to define the state. Following the very apt formulation of Scott (2009:59) that "the state is less a unity than a complex web of contractual mutualities," Honeychurch convincingly argues that the mobility of the pastoral nomads does not deny processes of polity building, but instead it enables them.

Chapter Four is mainly an introduction to the context of the regions in which the excavations described in the subsequent section of the book took place. The author gives a description of the geographical peculiarities of the sites at Egiin Gol and Baga Gazaryn Chuluu. By looking closely at the geographical features of Mongolia and of Eurasia, he shows that their variety and differentiation contrast with any form of historical generalization of the idea of the "Eurasian steppe zone."

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven constitute the core of the book, focusing on the presentation and evaluation of data from archaeological survey and genetic analyses from Inner and Northeast Asia. Honeychurch comparatively analyses archaeological evidences from the Late Bronze Age (1400-1000 BC) to the Early Iron Age (750-300 BC) in three different areas: in Mongolia (Chapter Five), in the Semirech'e and Kazakhstan regions (Chapter Six), and in the frontier region with China (Chapter Seven).

In doing so, he aims to delineate the context that allowed the rise of the Xiongnu confederation. He particularly highlights the shift in the interaction among small-scale complex-polities during the middle of the second millennium BC, when long-distance transfer of technologies, beliefs, and goods began (69), mainly enabled by the

spread of horseback riding.

In general, the discourse about horses is a very strong point in Honeychurch's analysis. He convincingly shows how archaeological evidence suggests a gradually changing attitude toward horses: from common herds among others, to an important element of burials, to a means of transportation.

Chapter Five ('The Late and Final Bronze Age Cultures of Mongolia: 1400-700 BC') is the richest in terms of information. The author provides a detailed analysis of the monuments found in the West (*khirigsuur* and deer stones) and in the East (shaped and slab burials) of Mongolia. By analyzing their variety, location, symbolism, and ritual connection, the author pursues these questions: Do these monuments suggest the establishment of social differentiation and the emergence of an elite? Or, were they the outcome of inter-regional allegiances and network building? He competently provides a survey of the theories seeking to explain the issues related to these burial structures, whose meaning remains an open question.

His research and considerations highlight two important points: 1) the transfer of beliefs and practices as the result of the interaction between communities, and 2) the importance of domestic horses and horses-centered rituals (121). Of particular note is Honeychurch's observation that the transfer of beliefs and ritual (mostly burial) practices could be the result of the creation of inter-community loyalties, and the construction of an interconnected elite, and an inter-regional form of leadership.

As mentioned earlier, all these elements constitute the conditions for the emergence of the Xiongnu confederation, as outlined in detail in chapters Eight and Nine. Chapter Ten 'Steppe Cores, Sedentary Peripheries, and the Statecraft of Empire' concludes the book by examining the influences of these "mobile legacies" on contemporary Mongolia (305-313). The author returns to the initial issue of the interaction of nomads and sedentary culture, and the problems related to using Chinese sources, challenging in detail Barfield's (most notably 1989, 2001, 2003, 2011) theories (298-299). He even twists the traditional perspective of state-formation among Inner Asian nomads, by examining how the dynamics of the Xiongnu

polity influenced the Han and, previous to them, the Qin 秦 Dynasty (221-206 BC).

This book utilizes a fresh perspective to examine issues that have occupied anthropological and historical discussions for at least the last decade, and the Sinological studies on Han and non-Han interactions for the last twenty years.² In this context, Honeychurch's study makes two key contributions. Firstly, as a result of thorough fieldwork, it collects a broad variety and great quantity of archaeological data and theories about Eurasian prehistory, a period that definitely needs further scholarly attention. Secondly, by combining theories from various disciplines (anthropology, geography, and history), the author challenges the reader to reconsider categories, terminology, and historical and spatial dynamics.

The meticulous explanations of the theoretical framework; the state of the research; as well as the geographical, economic, and historical context of the regions analyzed; along with a clear structure (short paragraphs and frequent summaries of previous ideas or sections of the volume), make the book suitable for teaching and as an introductory tool for anyone approaching the history of Mongolia for the first time. For a specialized audience, this study offers a very useful collection of new archaeological results, a well-informed summary of the state of the research, and a thought-provoking set of questions to inspire further studies on the subject.

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² Rawski (1996) is traditionally considered the starting point of this debate.

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