INTRODUCTION

Kinesis versus Stasis, Interaction versus Independent Invention

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Around the fourth century B.C.E., nomads from the steppes to the north and northwest began to impinge heavily upon the East Asian Heartland (EAH). Their ancestors already had been infiltrating southward since at least the second millennium B.C.E. (Mair 2003, 2002), but now the tempo and intensity of their incursions sharply increased. Vainly, the occupants of the EAH attempted to link up the various local and regional defensive walls that they had been building for the previous few centuries, resulting in the massive series of structures known collectively as the Great Wall (Waldron 1990). Although the so-called Great Wall was rebuilt and enlarged on countless later occasions, including during the twentieth century for purposes of tourism, it amounted to little more than a symbolic statement, since it was completely ineffective in halting the movement southward of the north(west)ern peoples. Indeed, more often than not during the past two millennia, it was the north(west)erners themselves who ruled over the EAH and expanded its imperial reach (Mair 2005).

One of the factors (there were many) that enabled the north(west)ern nomads to breach the defenses of the EAH so easily and repeatedly to exercise various degrees of control over its peoples was their mastery of horse riding and the advanced types of weaponry associated with mounted warfare. To sit astride a horse comfortably and fight effectively from such a position, it is best if one wears trousers. And, if one wears trousers, one needs a belt to hold them up. To hold the belt tightly in place (and therefore to keep one’s pants from falling down), one needs either a belt hook or, if one wants to be more ostentatious and can afford the extra metalwork, a belt plaque. It was precisely around the fourth century B.C.E. that the occupants of the EAH became painfully aware of the efficacy of wearing pants, belts, belt hooks, and belt plaques. They started to make and occasionally wear these items themselves (sometimes exporting them to the nomads as trade goods) and even ventured — with much trepidation — to climb up on the backs of those terrifying steeds they managed to acquire from the steppe peoples by one means or another.
On the whole, the inhabitants of the EAH never became fully acculturated to equestrian arts, and they preferred to wear loose robes and gowns with sashes tied around them (except when they went to war or engaged in hard labor) rather than constrictive jackets and pants with tight belts (Shen 1992). Still, to put it mildly, those who did wear pants made a big impression on the occupants of the EAH. Soon, however, the nomadic belt hook and belt became exoticized and estheticized. A line from “Da zhao” (The great summons) by the southern poet Qu Yuan (c. 340 – 278 B.C.E.) describes beautiful women by comparing them to the graceful, sinuous, gaily decorated nomadic belt hooks that were all the rage as cultural imports during his time: “Small waists and long slender necks, in form just like a xianbei” (adapted from Hawkes 1959: 112). Thus, through assimilation and domestication, the mysterious power associated with these alien implements was partially dissipated.

Not only are we blessed with plentiful archeological evidence of belt hooks and belts from the very centuries just before and after the beginning of the Common Era, when Chinese texts refer to the frequent incursions of northwestern peoples, we even know the Sinitic transcriptions of the actual words used to designate these objects, namely, xipi / shipi / xupi / xianbei and guoluo / kuoluo in Modern Standard Mandarin. Judging from the numerous different sinographic forms for these two words (there are at least half a dozen different ways to write each of them) and the fact that the characters used to write them make no sense when interpreted according to their surface significations, these are clearly loan words from some foreign language. When we reconstruct their probable Old Sinitic pronunciations, which would be something like *serbi and *kwaklak (or *k’waklak) respectively, their phonological shape and probable cognates both point to some Indo-European (IE) language as source (Maenchen-Helfen 1944, 256 – 260; Shi 2000, 34; Hu 1998, 92).

It would appear that *serbi is related to IE words meaning “hook, scythe” (cf. Old Irish serr, Greek ‘árpē, Lettish sirpe, Latin sarpio and sarpo, and Old Church Slavonic srъbъ), but it is not certain in which IE language a cognate had the specialized meaning of “belt hook.”* (It is quite possible that the nomadic belt hook was referred to simply as a “hook” by those who introduced it to the EAH.) Similarly, it seems even more obvious that *kwaklak (or *k’waklak) is related to IE words for “wheel,” “cycle,” “collar,” and so forth, all of which derive from the root *kʷel- (see list of IE roots at the back of the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language; Bauer 1994).

The phonological form of *kwaklak (or *k’waklak) merits special attention. IE *kʷ- survives most prominently in Latin (e.g., quàlitās) and in Germanic (as *kʰw; cf. Old English hwēol > “wheel”). It appears as well in such diverse European languages as the “Primitive Irish” of the Ogam inscrip-
tions, Hispano-Celtic (“Celtiberian”), and Mycenaean Greek (“Linear B”). It is also to be found in Hittite and Luvian from Asia Minor, and — under special circumstances (intervocally [yakwe “horse;” sekwe “pus”] [personal communication from Douglas Q. Adams, March 10, 2003] and as a labiovelar [kuse “who? what?”] — in Tocharian (a once obscure language that features prominently later in this introduction). It is noteworthy that IE *kw- is conspicuously not preserved in the classic “satem” languages of the east, that is, Balto-Slavic and Indo-Iranian, plus Armenian and Albanian (personal communication from Donald A. Ringe, March 10, 2003). Since there is no known IE language in which the word for belt sounds like *kwaklak (or *k’waklak) (Buck 1949, 434), nor is there any known IE language in which a word derived from the root *kel- has the precise extended meaning of “belt” (Pokorny 1959, 639 – 640), it is conceivable that *kwaklak (or *k’waklak) was derived from a now lost IE language. However, judging from the phonological characteristics of *kwaklak (or *k’waklak), it would probably have been closely related to one of the “centum” or Western (European) languages.

In the case of xipi and guoluo, the intersection of material, philological, historical, and literary evidence underscores the importation across the breadth of the Eurasian steppes of a pair of particular devices that, though seemingly small and insignificant (not to mention utterly mundane), actually bespeak a profound — even cataclysmic — confrontation (and merging) of cultures.

As will be seen throughout this book, cases such as that of the importation of the nomadic belt hook and belt to the EAH could easily be multiplied indefinitely. Despite the plethora of detailed data indicating contact and exchange among early peoples, there is a strong intellectual bias in favor of the proposition that ancient civilizations arose essentially in perfect isolation. How can we account for this strong predisposition in favor of the independent invention of cultures and its corollary, namely, the deliberate disregard of empirical evidence that demonstrates adoption and adaptation?

There would seem to be two chief factors involved, one political and the other disciplinary. The political factor is the result of a surge in nationalistic consciousness since the end of World War II. As empires withered away during the second half of the twentieth century and liberated colonies and semicolonies asserted their uniqueness, it became impolitic to assert that any significant element of culture needed to be borrowed. At the same time, disciplinary and regional boundaries hardened. One did not only identify oneself as an economic historian or an archeologist, for example, but as an economic historian or archeologist who specialized in the economic history or archeology of the northeast Caucasus during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. This is, more or less, what one did for one’s academic career, and it
was thought almost perverse to stray far beyond the narrow spatial, temporal, and disciplinary boundaries established for one’s doctoral dissertation.

A couple of years ago, an exceptionally talented colleague organized a workshop that dealt with a central conceptual and historical problem concerning China and Japan. He assembled four excellent scholars each from the China side and the Japan side. During the workshop there was minimal cross-fertilization between the China specialists and the Japan specialists. What was particularly distressing, however, is that the university press to whom he submitted the papers of the workshop for publication found it next to impossible to locate two readers who professed to be sufficiently intrigued by China and Japan at the same time to review the manuscript.

During the past decade, a slight amelioration of this lamentable situation has occurred such that Interdisciplinary Studies has now become the shibboleth of those who wish to appear au courant. What this usually means in practice, however, is that specialists from different disciplines focus on a limited topic related to a particular time and place. It is still virtually unheard of to discuss two different cultures together unless one solemnly swears to adhere to the following ground rule: it is acceptable to compare Culture A and Culture B, but it is forbidden to suggest that Culture A and Culture B may have mutually influenced each other. Thus, it is perfectly fine to compare Greek and Chinese thought and society during the fifth through third centuries B.C.E., but one must not under any circumstances suggest that Greece and China even remotely or indirectly actually had anything to do with each other during that period. Such comparisons must be undertaken purely in the abstract, apparently with the aim of illuminating the comparanda by pointing out similarities and differences.

An alarmingly large proportion of scholars have absolutely no interest or curiosity in cultures other than the one they themselves focus on. Recently, upon discovering that ancient Iranian conceptions and practices concerning the retention of seminal essences were uncannily similar to those in late classical Greece and among early sexual hygienists in China (Daryaee 2000), I brought this information to the attention of several of the most noted authorities on sex in ancient China. Their responses were uniformly dismaying, consisting essentially of the following sentiments: (a) I know next to nothing about Greece; (b) I am ignorant of Iran; (c) I do not care about origins and influences; (d) I care only about my research on certain aspects of early China. It is difficult to imagine that one could be aware of the multiple startling correspondences among Iranian, Greek, and Chinese practitioners of sexual meditation during a comparable time frame and not be at least curious about how this remarkable concatenation of highly specific extraordinary ideas and techniques occurred.
Such, however, is indeed the case for the majority of scholars. This is what may
be referred to as “blinded scholarship,” a mode of inquiry that one encoun-
ters at every turn in academe.

As a student of early Chinese civilization, I find such attitudes thoroughly
endemic and deeply entrenched among my colleagues, many of whom are truly
outstanding in their own restricted fields of research. The fact that methods
and images for the circulation of vital energy through channels in the body
closely resemble each other in sixth through second century B.C.E. China and
India does not evoke the slightest enthusiasm (Mair 1990b, 119 – 153 and ap-
pendix, 155 – 161). The identical bizarre medical prescriptions for treatment
of shock due to chest wounds — suspending the victim above a smoky dung
fire and pummeling him soundly on the back (!) — among northern nomads
and the people of south-central China (i.e., the state of Chu) during the second
century B.C.E. stirs not an iota of inquisitiveness.6

These and many other close parallels from roughly the same time period
would appear to be of the utmost significance for understanding the dynam-
ics of cultural development. Yet not only is there a resounding lack of concern
about how to explain them, those who do occasionally hint at the possibility
of cultural transmission are viewed, at best, as lacking good sense or, at worst,
as being reckless renegades. Of course, there are the rare and welcome excep-
tions to the overwhelming absence of attention to cultural interaction (see, for
example, Major 1978), but it is particularly sad to report that those who con-
fess to maintaining an interest in such subjects do so almost uniformly from a
position outside of the intellectual mainstream.7 Whereas a century ago it was
quite respectable to discuss cultural parallels and connections (Conrady 1906),
now it is well-nigh disreputable to do so.

Current academic norms permit investigation of cultural interaction
within contemporary political boundaries, even when those boundaries are
anachronistically projected back to the Neolithic and beyond. On the one
hand, it is customarily forbidden (or at least strongly discouraged) to engage in
serious, in-depth investigations of cultural phenomena that transcend modern
national frontiers. At best, research that touches on contiguous cultures and
states is sanctioned, while that which involves long-distance cultural transmis-
sion is always suspect and often condemned. In some quarters, it is virtually
anathema to raise the possibility of cultural interaction that reached more than
a hundred or so miles beyond the boundaries of modern nations, while the
“extreme indigenists” (see below for a discussion of this term) refuse to believe
that any significant component of culture could have been transmitted from
outside.

On the other hand, it is perfectly acceptable to make forced arguments
simply on the basis of sheer propinquity. For instance, faced with mounting ev-
idence for Indo-European cultural and linguistic elements in the EAH during
the second and first millennia B.C.E., it has become the vogue to seize upon
the Tocharians (who were present in the Tarim Basin during the sixth through
tenth centuries C.E. and whose ancestors may have been there as early as 1800
B.C.E.) to explain all sorts of cultural phenomena, such as the chariot, that are
far more likely to have been transmitted to East Asia by Iranian peoples. How-
ever, since the Iranians (or, for that matter, other IE groups) are not thought of
as having been perched on China’s doorstep in relatively recent times (as were
the Tocharians as late as the tenth century C.E.), those who insist on contigu-
ousness as a criterion for cultural interaction steadfastly refuse to entertain the
possibility that Iranians (or any other IE peoples) may have had an impact on
the EAH in antiquity. (As a matter of fact, the Iranians were perched on Chi-
na’s doorstep in relatively recent times: witness the Sogdians, the Khotanese,
and the Saka, and there are still Tajiks living in the far western reaches of the
People’s Republic of China today, but they are all conveniently ignored in favor
of the shadowy Tocharians, who had become extinct by around the beginning
of the eleventh century.) Thus mere proximity becomes the paramount crite-
rion for determining relevance.

This criterion is particularly problematic when it comes to relying solely
(or almost entirely) on Tocharians as the source of IE elements in the EAH
during prehistory and early history for the following reasons: (a) we can be ab-
solutely certain only that the Tocharians were present in the Tarim Basin dur-
ding the medieval period; (b) the textual and linguistic evidence for the Tochar-
ians is relatively late and highly circumscribed; (c) the archeological evidence
for the Tocharians is likewise limited and largely conjectural; and (d) aside
from its affinities with Italo-Celtic and Germanic, plus certain archaic features
that it shares with Hittite, the position of Tocharian within IE is still shadowy
at best. (All of this is in contrast to the Iranians, who were massively active in
Central Asia and farther eastward from the second millennium B.C.E. to the
second millennium C.E., for whom there is abundant textual and linguistic
evidence from the first millennium B.C.E. to the present, for whom there is
rich archeological and ethnographic evidence, and whose position vis-à-vis the
other groups of Indo-European is not in doubt.) I do not mean to assert that
the Tocharians were irrelevant for the history of the EAH. Quite the contrary,
they most likely did have a sizable impact on their next-door neighbors to the
east. The purpose of this brief consideration of the role of the Tocharians in
the history of the EAH is simply to caution against relying on their physical
closeness as grounds for ruling out the possibility of the involvement of other
IE and non-IE groups (both those that are now known and those that may have disappeared from the stage of history long ago).

Fortunately, political trends and disciplinary fashions wax and wane, but hard evidence remains. While the dedicated researcher who focuses on material, biological, and linguistic data may be ignored or even scorned for his or her findings because of reigning political and intellectual prejudices, the best remedy is simply to go on gathering data. Eventually, one will accumulate so much evidence that only a fool would deny its existence and implications. It is in this spirit of patient amassing of material, visual, and philological proof that the authors of the essays in this volume have undertaken their investigations. Some of their findings are remarkable, if not downright revolutionary, yet each of them presents his or her work in a low-key manner.

Although Jerry H. Bentley’s essay deals with the limited perspective of those who view the past through the distorted prism of the present, it ranges widely both in time and in space. For the last century, the preponderant scholarly fixation has been on the rise of modern nation-states during the last half millennium and the supranational economic organization of still more recent times. A by-product of this overemphasis on the utter distinctiveness of modern peoples is the notion that peoples of earlier times were strictly confined to their own communities, did not engage in long-distance trade, and essentially invented their own uncomplex cultures out of whole cloth. In contrast, Bentley demonstrates clearly that ancient peoples engaged in an astonishing array of cross-cultural interaction and that we are the beneficiaries of the impressive technological achievements that they shared among themselves across the globe and transmitted to the family of man and woman down through the ages.

It is often the case that prehistorians are by no means hampered by lack of empirical evidence. Quite the contrary: there is frequently an abundance of archeological artifacts and textual references. The question, rather, is how to interpret the data in a reasonable manner without distorting them in the process. China is usually touted as the supreme example of a major civilization that — situated at the far eastern end of Asia — grew up in utter isolation from the rest of the civilized world. This impression has only been reinforced in recent decades with the avalanche of newly discovered archeological materials that seem to argue for the pristine quality of all essential aspects of Chinese civilization, and this impression has been solidified by the confident assertions of nationalistic polemicists. By focusing primarily on diagnostic techniques of bronze metallurgy, Andrew Sherratt builds a coherent model for explaining how, when, and why Chinese civilization absorbed these vital influences from the west. Sherratt goes further and elaborates the means for continental cross-
fertilization that casts light upon the natural paths of cultural transmission and interaction. Without taking into account the reality that such networks were operative not only during the Bronze Age but before and after as well, it is impossible to comprehend the development of human civilization as a whole and in its diverse manifestations.

Whereas Andrew Sherratt clarifies the means by which bronze metallurgy came to China, Yan Sun shows — in a highly specific context — what happened after it got there. Since bronze vessels, utensils, weapons, and ornaments were objects of tremendous prestige, they were manipulated for purposes of control — militarily, technologically, and ceremonially. Even such subtle elements as changes of shape and style could be used to impress one’s neighbors, and Sun traces the shifting directionality of such influences among regional centers and peripheries. Depending on the focus of one’s investigation, an interaction sphere might be as large as the Eurasian supercontinent during the third and second millennia B.C.E. or as small as the area around Liulihé in northeast China during the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. What is crucial is the intense interplay that invariably occurred among diverse polities.

To the culturally sensitive prehistorian, bronze metallurgy is thus shown to be far from a dry and technical subject. Historical linguistics might seem to be even less approachable for the cultural historian, in part because it deals with such massive amounts of seemingly (to the layperson) disconnected data. In the hands of a philologist who is attentive to cultural history, however, historical linguistics can be exciting and instructive. Michael Witzel explores early loan words in Western Central Asia as indicators of substrate populations, the complex movements of peoples, and trade relations within the region and with surrounding regions. Witzel’s patient investigations bring to light the existence of an older civilization in Western Central Asia before the Indo-Iranians moved into the region, thus affording a clearer idea of where the Indo-Iranians came from. Through these investigations, we learn much about agriculture, apiculture, viniculture, the sacred beverage known as soma, lions, donkeys, camels, bricks, chariots, irrigation, place and river names, and countless other integral aspects of culture. Linguistic archeology, when painstakingly and intelligently applied, is every bit as revelatory as dirt archeology.

In a stunning solution to a question that has long puzzled sinologists, art historians, and mythologists, Elfriede Regina Knauer provides abundant evidence that the immensely popular Chinese deity known as the “Queen Mother of the West” (Xiwangmu) really did come from the occident to the orient. In the debate over the question of the degree to which all cultures are purely indigenous or the result of elements assimilated from various sources, it
is sobering to think that one of the central figures in the pantheon of Chinese folk religion ultimately derived from the Greco-Roman cultic figure known as Kybele or Cybele. The methods by which Knauer definitively solved the problems of the origin and identity of Xiwangmu are also highly instructive. Namely, she has relied on the most rigorous application of art historical scholarship, intrepid fieldwork, and a keen eye for minute — but telling — details that are all too easily overlooked and ignored.

The cloth we wear on our bodies is perhaps the most quotidian of human artifacts (Barber 1994). Yet, in the hands of a talented researcher, it can yield a multitude of revelations not only about its own composition and structure, but also about social, economic, and technological exchange among early peoples. Through an exacting examination of textiles from Shahr-i Sokhtā, Irene Good documents the intricate economic relations that existed among various far-flung groups during the third millennium B.C.E. in western Asia. Above all, Good’s study reveals dramatically how a common, practical product such as cloth is deeply interwoven, as it were, into the fabric of human myth, trade, and cultural identity.

In a richly documented study of hunting with leopards and cheetahs in Eurasia from the seventh through the seventeenth centuries, Thomas T. Allsen shows how the range of these animals was artificially extended far beyond their natural habitat. What is more, along with the animals were transmitted precise techniques for training them that remained constant wherever they went. This is a superb example of how fashion, prestige, and sport have coincided to propel a cultural practice from one end of Eurasia to the other.

Even the rise of different peoples themselves demonstrates unmistakably that, by and large, human communities have closely interacted with each other throughout history. That is to say, ethnogenesis itself occurs as the result of intricate rearrangements of relationships among social and cultural groups. Using highly sophisticated philological and linguistic analysis, Peter B. Golden follows the Turks from their first appearance in history during the sixth century C.E. as they spread explosively across Eurasia. Surely, if ever there was an example of people who did not “stay at home,” it is that of the Turks. Starting from the very center of the Eurasian continent, in little more than five hundred years they spread their language and their culture far and wide. Those who obdurately maintain that human beings have remained fixed forever in the places we happen to find them now (or at a certain moment in the past) should, as a corrective to such a myopic outlook on human history, be required to study the case of the Turks.

Nothing could be more controversial and contested than the issue of pre-Columbian contacts. The reigning dogma is that, until 1492, the eastern and
western hemispheres of the globe were completely isolated from each other. Despite the hackles it raises, however, this is really a non-issue, because there is actually universal scholarly agreement that — based on archeological and genetic evidence — the Americas were originally populated by individuals from the eastern hemisphere, with the Inuits arriving in relatively recent times. Furthermore, there is undeniable, widely acknowledged archeological proof that the Vikings were present and settled in the western hemisphere (L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland c. 1000) long before the coming of Christopher Columbus. Thus the question of pre-Columbian contacts is (or should be) already a dead issue, yet the vast majority of anthropologists, archeologists, historians, linguists, and other researchers still cling tenaciously to 1492 as though it were a sacred talisman. So intense and so irrational is the devotion to 1492 that one is tempted to regard it as a kind of Eurocentric religion, the central tenet of faith being that — until it was discovered by modern Europeans — no place on earth had meaningful contacts with any other distant place.

To approach the matter of how people traveled across the surface of the globe in prehistoric times somewhat more calmly and dispassionately, we simply must recognize that it was not modern Europeans who invented oceanic travel. We should note the patently obvious fact that Hawai‘i — like all of the hundreds of other inhabited islands in the vast Pacific region, not to mention the continent of Australia — originally was settled by peoples who could only have come long distances by boat. Since evidence from archeology and physical anthropology indicates unmistakably that many of these lengthy voyages occurred thousands and, in some cases, tens of thousands of years ago, prehistoric oceanic travel must be accepted as an incontrovertible fact. A handful of respected historians, such as William H. McNeill and Joseph Needham, have dared to confront the evidence and declare that pre-1492 oceanic voyages to the western hemisphere were a reality (see McNeill 1991, 239 – 243; Needham and Lu 1985). Lamentably, the findings of McNeill, Needham, and others who recognize the existence of pre-Columbian contact between the eastern and western hemispheres are completely ignored by mainstream academicians.

The only alternatives to prehistoric oceanic travel that might be imagined as the means by which the Pacific region was populated are (a) separate, local origins of Homo sapiens sapiens at countless places on earth, (b) innumerable land bridges of enormous length that formerly connected all the inhabited islands of the earth before the fifteenth century but have subsequently disappeared, or (c) multiple extraterrestrial visitations. Since no such ludicrous explanation can be taken seriously, oceanic travel prior to 1492 should be taken as a fundamental feature of human existence, one that is of profound significance for the evolution of civilization on a global scale.
When human beings populated the globe, they often took with them — whether consciously or not — various faunal and floral species. In an attempt to put the emotional debate over pre-1492 east-west hemispheric contact on a more scientific footing, John Sorenson and Carl Johannessen have assembled a burgeoning catalog of plants and animals that could only have been transported from one hemisphere to the other through human intervention. The examples they adduce are numerous and specific. If but a small proportion of the biological evidence they present withstands the severe scrutiny to which it will surely be subjected, the argument for pre-1492 transoceanic voyages will have been made successfully. Since Sorenson and Johannessen have relied on a variety of different types of evidence (archeological, biological, linguistic, textual, and artistic), and since they have themselves exercised scientific caution in making their claims, it will be virtually impossible to dismiss out of hand all of their concrete, detailed case studies. Merely to disprove one or two (or even half a dozen) of their scores of examples will not suffice to overturn the totality of their research. Consequently, the work of Sorenson and Johannessen is one more reason why fair and open-minded investigators will henceforth have to incorporate pre-Columbian contact in their models for the evolution of civilization in the Americas.

All of the essays in this volume rely extensively on hard data to buttress their claims for early contact and exchange. The aggregate weight of these data makes it very difficult to disregard the fact that ancient peoples were not completely isolated and totally self-sufficient. Yet, during the past half century, scholarship on prehistory and early history has been afflicted by a disease that might be called “extreme indigenousness.” The symptoms of this pathology are an unwillingness to entertain the possibility that any aspect of culture was the result of borrowing from another culture. In the most virulent instances of this sickness, it is asserted that all societies developed totally in situ and that even the languages and physical types of human beings of a given locality are completely unrelated to those from anywhere else. The driving force behind this sort of academic pathology may be well-intentioned: to respect the integrity of individual cultures and to describe them thoroughly and responsibly on their own terms. Nonetheless, the noble aims of those who have fallen prey to “extreme indigenousness” are defeated by their inability to recognize a basic characteristic of human existence: now and forever, we are a single species whose languages and bodies evolved naturally from earlier, related forms and whose technology is both cumulative and constantly shared.

There is perhaps no greater fallacy in the study of human history than to
believe that each culture created itself in its entirety. By this logic, wherever the wheel is found, it was invented locally; wherever bronze metallurgy exists, it was created independently; wherever wheat is planted, it was discovered by indigenes; wherever sheep are raised for wool and other secondary products, they were domesticated without any inspiration from abroad; wherever an Indo-European (or Semitic or Austroasiatic and so on) language is spoken, it evolved locally. Those who ascribe to this credo are not only unwilling to examine evidence for external inputs, they mightily condemn others who attempt to study the interactions among ancient societieṣ. In so doing, they actually distort and demean the peoples whose cultures they study, for surely the ancients were not so close-minded and arrogantly uninterested in the goods and ideas of their neighbors as the extreme indigenists make them out to be. We must remember that if I trade with or talk to my neighbor, then my neighbor is trading with and talking to his or her neighbor, and so forth until — no matter where I am located on this broad earth — I am thereby linked to all other neighbors. This is the way human beings interact today, and this is the way human beings have interacted forever. Sometimes we move closer to each other, and sometimes we move far, far away from each other. We teach each other and preach to each other; we tell stories and sing to each other; we argue with each other; we fight with each other; we love each other. Seldom do we completely ignore each other. These are the natural instincts of the gregarious, economically motivated human species. All men and women are neighbors.

Notes

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1. Although we cannot be certain of the ethnic and linguistic affiliations of the earliest steppe peoples who had an impact on the EAH, the totality of their cultural attributes (domestication of ovicaprids and cattle, woolen textiles, wheat-centered agropastoralism, chariot burials with horse and human sacrifice, high regard for dogs, and so forth) indicate that they were most likely some type of Indo-Europeans. Furthermore, there is very strong evidence that Indo-Europeans were already present in the EAH by the eighth century B.C.E. and quite likely by the second half of the second millennium B.C.E. See Mair 1990a.

2. The belts of the nomads were normally made of leather and, depending upon degree of luxury, could be decorated with bronze, gold, glass beads, shells, or other precious materials.

3. Belt hooks, belt plaques, and belts from the time period and area in question are illus-

4. Judging from the Chinese textual evidence cited by Maenchen-Helfen, it is apparent that xipi / shipi / xupi / xianbei also had the extended meaning of “good omen.” This is particularly thought-provoking, inasmuch as H. Güntert has attempted to show that a number of IE words for “good luck; of good omen” originally meant “angle, Krummgebilde” (1928, 135 – 136).

5. Daryaee mentioned the similarity with Greek conceptions, but it was I who noticed the striking resemblances to Chinese praxis.

6. This fascinating, potentially fruitful topic is still waiting for an enterprising, open-minded graduate student to explore and explain.

7. I am thinking particularly of individuals like E. Bruce Brooks, who has written stimulating pieces such as “Textual Evidence for 04c Sino-Bactrian Contact” (Brooks 1998) and “Alexandrian Motifs in Chinese Texts” (Brooks 1999); Richard M. Barnhart, whose “Alexander in China?” is monumentally perceptive (Barnhart 2004); Sanping Chen with his brilliant series of articles on the key role of northern peoples in medieval Chinese history, society, and culture; Elling Eide, who has been relentlessly pursuing the Iranian elements within the Xiongnu confederation for the past decade and more; Serge Papillon, the first scholar to command all of the major languages required for primary, in-depth historical research on the Tocharians; and John Hill, who for many years has been patiently documenting the existence of long-distance trade and cultural exchange between China and the rest of Asia during the two or three centuries before and after the beginning of the Common Era. It would be easy to name many more intrepid researchers who work alone on the fringes of, and unfettered by, the academic establishment.

8. In making this plea for a more tolerant attitude toward research that takes cultural contact and exchange into account, I by no means wish to open the floodgates to unprincipled, irresponsible speculation based on superficial resemblances. All claims for cultural interaction should be data-driven and based solidly on hard evidence. Ideally, assertions of cultural relatedness should rely on multiple lines of evidence (artifactual, philological, biological, art historical, and so forth). Arguments premised on a single item or single type of evidence are not likely to be very convincing.

9. Even various species of animals spread over large portions of the globe, taking their “culture” and “language” with them. There is a type of cuckoo known as the koel (Eudynamyx scolopaceus) that has blue-black plumage (in the male), red eyes, and a stout olive yellow or greenish bill. It is a fairly large bird, approximately 40 to 44 centimeters in length. Like the cuckoo, the koel gets its name from its distinctive call (we pronounce the name with the accent on the first syllable, but the call is very heavily accented on the second syllable). Koel is an extremely apt Anglo-Indian name (Hindi koil, koil, koyal < Sanskrit kōkilah; Yule and Burnell, 1985 [1886], 490b; Klein 1966, 851a). The territorial call of the male is very loud and has the “shape” of a bell curve lasting about a second and a half for each pulse, with the peak (which is stressed) being about a third the height of the total length of the curve and one note higher on the octaval scale. The pulse of the call is emitted throughout with a very smooth and whistlelike quality, more resembling the sliding of a high-pitched trombone than the glissando of a keyed or stringed instrument. These pulses are repeated five to ten times in succession with increasing intensity and elevation until the bird seems to have become so excited that it cannot continue. It is the custom of the koel to begin its call just before the
break of dawn, but it may also be heard around noon or occasionally at other times of the day. Since the call carries so far and the bird itself is rather elusive, the koel is more often known by sound than by sight. Aside from its primary call, the koel also has several secondary calls, one of which has been described as follows: *wreep-wreep-wreep-wreep-wreep . . . or breep-breep-breep-breep-breepbreepbreep . . . *

The koel is distributed quite widely across South Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia, South China, and Central China. Its breeding and wintering grounds may be located at a great distance from its normal habitat, often separated by great stretches of open water, making it a migratory bird of sorts. See Viney, Phillipps, and Ying 1977, 126 and facing plate; Meyer de Schauensee 1984, 262b–263; Robson 2000, 281–282 and plate 18; King and Dickinson 1975, 186–187 and plate 25; Sibley and Monroe 1990, 101a.

Whether its distinctive behavior and call are genetically transmitted or imitatively acquired, the important thing to note is that this species has a shared “culture” (behavioral patterns) and unique “language” (set of calls). It is impossible that the highly distinctive culture and language of the koel could have been spontaneously invented and reinvented at countless places across thousands of miles of land and water in virtually an identical fashion. While the koel may adapt both its culture and its language slightly to local circumstances, it — like humankind — is a gregarious creature that maintains its genome and its behavioral identity through constant interaction (directly and indirectly) with the other members of its species near and far.

References


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