Sarmatian Mirrors and Han Ingots (100 BC–AD 100): How the Foreign became Local and Vice Versa

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Concepts such as creolization and hybridity offer inclusive frameworks to study identity formation emanating from cross-cultural interaction. The borrowing of such concepts developed from recent history must contend with their relevance for the past as well as their applicability for understanding objects with mixed cultural features. This article reassesses the hybrid concept by contrasting a cognitive approach that identifies the figurative processes behind the local adaptation of foreign things. Looking at objects from Han China and the northern Black Sea, I examine how nomads and imperial agents conceptualized foreign objects through metonymic and metaphoric associations to influence understandings of self and group identity.

Archaeologists have welcomed the terms creolization and hybridity as innovative concepts for understanding intercultural interaction and change in the premodern world (Alt 2006; Cusick 1998; Deagan 1983; Ferguson 1992; Lightfoot 1995; Liebmann 2008; van Dommelen 2005). The concepts have been used to both describe material culture combining local and foreign cultural elements as well as the specific social processes that generate these material novelties. For instance, archaeologists have shown how elites manipulate local and imperial rituals to meet political ends (van Dommelen 2005), how men and women differentially integrate colonial practices depending on their community participation (Deagan 1983; Lightfoot 1995), how craft producers experiment with local and foreign potting traditions as different techniques present new opportunies for interaction (Alt 2006). These theoretical applications show that indigenous and colonized individuals adapted two material traditions as a means of cultural action in an increasingly complex world beset by ambiguities. In so doing, creolization and hybridity have provided alternative cultural responses beyond assimilation by questioning the permanence of power asymmetries and uni-directionality of change inherent in earlier models (Rogers 1990; Cusick 1998).

While these insights alert us to the complexity of identity formation under periods of intercultural interaction, the lack of specificity in the application of such concepts has led to a celebration of mixedness (versus cultural discreteness) and the proliferation of creole and hybrid variants across time and space (Palmié 2006). For archaeologists, all forms of material culture with mixed cultural features are seen to be important and meaningful representations of new cultural identities. For instance, local ceramic wares made with ‘foreign’ paste recipes once referred to as imitations are now distinguished as ‘invented’ cultural traditions (Ferguson 1992). These artefacts have become the de facto units of culture, representing categories that ‘have taken on ontological status — they are always already there before analysis begins’ (Silliman 2009, 213). And because the materiality of cultural identity helps to realize a discourse about change that is necessary to the study of cross-cultural interaction, creolization and hybridity have gathered momentum in archaeology. At the same time, these concepts are ‘good to think with’ because change is made more accessible and difference is democratized.

Placing ‘hybrid’ and ‘creole’ objects under closer scrutiny, I ask how these concepts can be purposeful in the study of social transformation under cross-cultural engagement. First, if culture change is a creative and negotiated process, can ‘invented traditions’ have any specificity or explanatory potential? By revisiting creolization and hybridity studies in archaeology, I evaluate their understanding of the interrelationship between material representation and cultural
identity to show their appeal and limits. Second, if, as anthropologists have long pointed out, cultures are neither bounded nor constituted by universal understandings of difference, how do individuals negotiate ideas about the ‘other’? How exactly can foreignness become locally embodied? Archaeologists naturally resort to comparing congruity in function and value between the foreign and local. Here I argue that other cognitive frameworks should be considered.

To address these issues concretely, I examine two ‘hybrid’ objects — lead ingots from China and Sarmatian mirror/amulets from the western steppe lands — circulating at two geographic ends of the archaic globalized world linked by the expansion of the ‘Silk Road’ (Fig. 1). Both objects are oddities in the sense they were locally produced and intended for local consumption but featured ‘foreign’ inscriptions (Figs. 2 & 3). The Chinese lead ingots, which date to the first century BC, have inscribed Greek script on the reverse and a dragon figure on the obverse. The Sarmatian bronze amulets bear ‘zodiac’ symbols influenced by Chinese poetic inscriptions associated with Han bronze mirrors. I argue these hybrid objects did not emerge out of cultural change brought on by contact. Rather, I will suggest that in these contexts ‘foreign’ objects provided a domain from which local peoples attempted to objectify different logics using metaphoric and metonymic frameworks of reasoning. In foregrounding the cognitive nature of appropriation it is possible to reveal how ‘foreign’ forms gain concrete local meaning. Contrary to the formation of new cultural identities or invented traditions, ‘foreign’ attributes are not the sources of alterity (sensu Tausig 1993). They provide the means for an appraisal of existing ‘local’ values.

Hybridity, creolization and semantics

Hybridity and creolization are often applied concurrently in reference to objects with mixed cultural origins. Despite recent criticisms of their overuse as a term to re-describe recombination of signs and forms (van Dommelen 2005; Liebmann 2008), archaeologists continue to rely on these objects and terms as a way to capture cultural interaction and change in the material record. In an effort to enhance the utility of these concepts, Alt (2006) has stressed the need to differentiate between the two concepts and their material correlates:

Creolization and syncretism are conceptualized as a mixing, borrowing or assimilation of traits

Figure 1. Map of silk routes and sites mentioned in text. Location names of kurgan burials containing Han mirrors and/or Sarmatian amulets (1–10) and Chinese sites containing ingots (11–15): 1) Kherson; 2) Gradezhsk City; 3) Tyrampa; 4) Chernyshoev and Kazanskaya; 5) Kobylakovskiy, Tanais, Vinogradnoe and Nizhnegilovskoy; 6) Chuguno-Kreptinka and Shevtchenko; 7) Klín-Yarskoy and Mineral’nye Vody; 8) Tretyaki; 9) Staraya Poltavka, Baranovka and Berezhnovskiy; and 10) Tillya Tepe. Han-period sites containing ingots: 11) Hezhou and Lingtai (Gansu); 12) Fufeng and Xichaizhai (Shaanxi); 13) Luoyang (Henan); 14) Changsha (Hunan); and 15) Liu’an (Anhui).
that creates new combinations whereas the focus on hybridity is on invention. Hybridity results in the creation of something new that may not reference its origins in any obvious way and therefore cannot be reconstituted into those original parts (Alt 2006, 292).

Are objects mixed in content (characterized by the application of local and non-local attributes to existing objects) or in form (characterized by the combination of attributes toward the creation of an object without prior antecedents)? In this particular study, the application of inscriptions from Han bronze mirrors to Sarmatian bronze amulets intimates at the adoption of non-local styles to a local object, which figures in Alt’s ‘creole’ category of content based change. In contrast, the creation of lead ingots combining Greek script and Han imperial iconography presents an ostensibly novel form of ‘currency’ in China that resonates with Alt’s conception of ‘hybridity’. Taking into account that objects with mixed cultural ‘origins’ are not created equal (see also Rogers 1990), this acknowledgement of contrasts in object transformation carries different implications about identity formation in antiquity. A corollary is that creolization and hybridity reflect different intensities of cultural entanglement.

The adaptation of creolization allowed archaeologists to demonstrate that local consumption logics constrained the suitability of foreign objects and their possible meanings, emphasizing the resilience of cultural structures. Such a turn in the archaeology of culture contact challenged concepts familiar to Old World archaeologists — Hellenization, Romanization and Sinicization — by questioning the cultural reach presumably exerted by regionally specific global systems (van Dommelen 2005; Dietler 1998). But whether content and form are methodologically distinguishable in the archaeological record undermined the analytical utility of the creolization concept. If a foreign object or attribute is perceived to be the functional equivalent of a local material type, then the adoption of the non-local attribute fits the model’s expectation of locally structured appropriation. However, if the foreign attribute is incorporated into a medium with no antecedent, then the amalgamation of different cultural forms not only does not represent a change in content but also defies existing consumption logics. A reconsideration of the Sarmatian amulet, which would represent a creole object in Alt’s framework, draws out this problem. While the emulation of Chinese inscriptions on Sarmatian amulets is ostensibly a local incorporation, the decision to apply this design to amulets rather than the Sarmatian mirror equivalent shows a transfer in material categories, one that differs from the original Chinese prototype. When patterns of change fit neither one of content nor of form, inferences about the nature of cultural interaction and change are problematic. Linguists and cultural anthropologists have long recognized these issues and eschewed the creolization concept (Palmié 2006).

Where creolization studies stressed the localization of foreign attributes, the hybridity concept helped archaeologists to transcend the local/us or foreign/other dichotomy, envisioning composite cultural practices as representative of new cultural identities. Borrowing loosely from Bhabha’s (1994) notion of the third space, the encounter between different traditions is theorized to create a rupture in time (between present and past) and locality (between colonizer and colony). This rupture is envisioned to be fraught with ambiguities as conceptions of difference and authenticity of traditions are questioned. Rather than positing cultural difference as binary or hierarchically constituted, individuals alter signs and symbols to create new social practices leading to a discursive engagement with the present. It is these notions of cultural ambivalence or inbetweenness that have attracted archaeologists, contributing to the proliferation of hybridity to explain change across all scales of interaction: migration, trade, imperialism (van Dommelen 2005; Alt 2006; Liebmann 2008; Naum 2010). In acknowledging that material signs — taken outside of their original context — can be altered from their original meaning, archaeologists challenged the polarized and asymmetrical nature of cultural influence inherent in colonial and world system models as well as the very idea of discrete cultures.

The incorporation of hybridity into archaeological discourse is not without concern. Where Bhabha (1994) theorized the third-space as particular to the postcolonial condition, archaeologists largely overlooked this historical contingency in subsuming colonialism, trade and migration under culture contact (Silliman 2005; 2009). These different modes of cross-cultural interaction carry different implications about the nature of intergroup relations and change (Gosden 2004) such that culture contact should be distinguished from more overt forms of cultural entanglement such as colonialism (Silliman 2005). Because colonial representations are accountable to a past marked by violence and marginalization, cultural identification can never be neutral since the past remains relevant to the present (Liebmann 2008). Where relations of domination are attenuated — as may have been the case for many exchanges between individuals of preindustrial societies — the concept of hybridity is both anachronistic and ahistorical. The cultural fluidity distilled from Bhabha’s theorized third-space does not generate the sort of democratization of material representations that archaeologists seek for antiquity. As this study will show, composite material
Figurative thinking

Rather than attempting to fit invented traditions into *hybridity or creolization*, I offer a conceptual approach inspired by the seminal works on metaphor and metonymy (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Jakobson 1995) to address the ways non-local objects become meaningful outside of its original context. The approach departs from previous approaches in questioning the assumption that cultural identities are inherently manifest in material objects. This criticism does not exclude the potential for material practices to be culturally meaningful but I believe the fundamental problem is epistemological in nature. As a starting point, what are the necessary conditions that make foreign elements a local possibility in the first place? With increasing intercultural exchange, individuals confront new and unfamiliar peoples, ideas and goods which they attempt to objectify and turn into local forms of knowledge (Taussig 1993). As theorists point out, individuals reconcile ‘otherness’ based on existing frameworks of reference (Thomas 1991; White 1991), which do not presuppose a universal category of difference. Thus, cultural differences may be reasoned from a subjective evaluation of the similarity or dissimilarity of a foreign practice relative to its local counterpart. Archaeologists have likewise relied on this comparative logic and evaluated the adoption of non-local artefacts based on the cross-cultural comparability of their inherent function and value. However, objects — once removed from their origins — likely lose their intended function and value, presenting new possibilities of signification (Thomas 1991). Thus emphasis on the practical qualities of material objects obscures the creative and symbolic significance of such borrowings. What archaeologists face is not merely a pattern recognition (similar versus dissimilar) problem but a conceptual challenge where incommensurate categories are brought together. When presented with incongruous features, how do individuals come to identify correlations and associations?

Insights from the field of linguistics and cognitive psychology have shown that figurative thought plays an important role in making new and abstract ideas conceptually concrete (Tilley 1999; Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Specifically, figurative thought enables an understanding of a novel situation through perceived associations with a familiar or known experience. Primary processes of figurative thought include the use of metaphors and metonyms. In brief, metaphors are based on a perception of correlations between two unrelated conceptual domains, enabling one to reason from one domain of experience to infer similarities of behaviour in the other. For example, archaeologists have used the conventional metaphor of ‘containers’ to identify a correlation between houses and tombs: this similarity in form suggested that Neolithic tomb chambers were understood as houses for the dead (Hodder 1984; Tilley 1999). Metonymic meanings are based on contiguity or a perceived intrinsic association between two signs (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 36). The most common example of a metonym is a crown as an index for monarchy: the part (crown) evokes the whole that is conceived both as a person (monarch) and institution (monarchy). While these correlations and associations provide the basis of cognition, Lakoff and Johnson warn that metaphors and metonymy do not merely facilitate meaning but influence understanding. More specifically, the selection of a particular part (out of other possibilities) to reference the whole carries implications for meaning (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 38). And even though metaphors induce meaning through perceived similarities between experiences, only a range of experiences is ‘highlighted’ while others, which are arguably similar, are ‘downplayed’ and ‘hidden’ (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 152).

Because figurative modes of thinking force us to look beyond the literal and practical nature of material objects, we can think more broadly about the cognitive process by which foreign material elements become local referents. For example, a mirror may not simply serve as a toiletry item in the Sarmatian context. Other properties — colour, texture, inscription style and shape — could have appealed (perception) more specifically to local sensibilities leading to the potential for intrinsic attachments (conceptualizations) to be made. In other words, local consumers perceive distinctive properties that they further mark and distinguish as significant. The perception of distinctive properties likely relies on comparison and association with local frameworks of reference. Determining the local relevance and significance of these properties, however, presents a justification process that transforms these sensory properties into palpable *qualities*. Initial assessments about an object’s physical property are cast against the network of local meaning, throwing into relief considerations of its function, context and value. This naturally induces a process of determining its significance through association — opposition, similarity and contiguity.

The conceptual basis for incorporating foreign *qualities* can thus be either metaphorical or metonymic in nature (see Tilley 1999). This signification process...
depends on how the object articulates coherently within an internal system of meanings. Qualities are conceptually concrete in that they are inherently referential and resonate. For example, the Han Chinese considered the shininess of bronze to be evocative of the brightness and clarity of the sun (Hirth 1907; Needham 1962). This quality is metaphorically adapted to reflect human nature. The examination of Sarmatian amulets must therefore consider inclusively local conceptions and ideologies about bronze and circular disks, rather than mirrors as a unitary object with unequivocal value.

Differentiating perceptual properties from conceptual qualities may seem like an artificial distinction but is nevertheless instructive in forcing the analyst to reconsider our epistemological categories. Not all properties associated with foreign objects are perceived as distinctive or indexical of cultural identity. By thinking figuratively about the referential potentials of an object's intrinsic properties, this approach may better substantiate how foreign elements become locally meaningful. In so doing, we redirect the study of cross-cultural contact from the problems inherent to models of culture change. More important, these mixed material practices may reveal just how cross-cultural realities were alternatively conceived beyond interpretations derived analogously and anachronistically from modern colonialism.

The cultural dimensions of the silk routes
(100 BC—AD 100)

Human migrations along the ancient trade routes across Eurasia occurred as early as the fourth millennium BC (Fig. 1; Christian 2000; Kuzmina 2008). By the third millennium BC, this communication network had transformed the Afro-Eurasian region into a unified world system characterized by migrations, invasions and trade in goods and technologies (Frank & Gills 1993). While cultural interaction at the continental scale is undoubtedly of great antiquity, direct contacts between the east (China, India) and west (Greek states, Persia and Rome) likely began much later during the late first millennium BC. The imperial campaigns of Alexander (fourth century BC) brought the Hellenistic world to the Ganges while Chinese expansion under Emperor Wudi (second century BC) extended Han sovereignty into the Tarim Basin in 119 BC. With the opening of communication routes across the desert and steppes, Han expeditions would eventually reach as far west as Bactria in Afghanistan: archaeological evidence revealing the trade of local products into trans-regional contexts of consumption, in addition to the transfer of technologies and artistic styles. The Han state exported silk to the west while steppe horses, gold and jade were brought into China (Lattimore 1962; Yu 1967).

The complexity of cultural interaction is further drawn out when we consider the valences of interaction ranging from military, diplomatic, slaves, mercantile to personal (e.g. marriage) associations. Chinese texts detail the various forms of imperial interaction, ranging from infrequent encounters (e.g. far-flung expeditions, tributary missions) to lengthy entanglements (e.g. frontier colonies and garrisons). Official encounters left the Chinese with a lasting impression of non-Han lifeways, customs and goods. This transformative encounter is exemplified by the Han envoy Zhang Qian’s report of Bactria and other steppe states between 126 and 115 BC. Zhang Qian compared the sophistication of Bactria to that of the Chinese and appealed to the Emperor to form relations with the central Asian state. Commercial trade, while strictly controlled by the Han state, also brought Han and non-Han merchants into direct cultural contact along the frontier border passes. Besides commercial markets, ‘camp markets’ enabled private exchanges to occur with frequency between Han frontier soldiers and ‘barbarians’ (Yu 1967, 97). Traders from both sides apparently grew wealthy (Yu 1967, 106), suggesting that border exchange became quite lucrative. Envoys and middlemen consisting of itinerant merchants, colonists and pacified barbarians plied a chain of relays bringing goods back and forth across the steppes (Juliano 2001, 28).

The diverse channels for exchange and trafficking meant that states and individuals alike were pulled into this transcontinental orbit, becoming intimately familiar with the customs of ‘other’ cultures. For steppe tribes and the classical world, silk was not only merely an exotic textile but one which originated in China. For the Han court, horses bred by nomads in the Fergana valley (Syr Darya river) were especially sought after and called ‘celestial horses’ (Fig. 1). One could argue that these exchanges generated a heightened sensibility of otherness that was manifest materially. The ability of trade goods to gain the inalienable qualities of a place underscores their role in mediating cultural knowledge.

How did this network alter constructions of cultural identity and local meanings in the context of an expanding ‘worldview’? By examining the Han Empire and Sarmatian state, I not only focus on the eastern and western ends of the silk route but on the two political systems — agrarian and nomadic — that created the economic foundations of the trade network. The Han court represented the civilizational ‘anchor’ with grand ambitions of extending its political and
Sarmatians and Han mirrors

The steppe tribes played a pivotal role in the genesis of the trade routes. Because China and the Classical world did not have direct contact with each other, the steppe world served as cultural intermediaries between east and west. The Classical world’s ignorance of China is expressed by historians’ erroneous understanding of silk as a product of trees (Christian 2000). The nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes extending from the Urals to Mongolia were not only in direct contact with the Hellenic states, Persia and Han Empire but became entangled in the imperial projects of those political powers (Lattimore 1962; Koryakova & Epimakhov 2006). Nomadic migrations during the first century AD from the Kangju kingdom (Tashkent), a state with tributary ties to the Han, suggest that the ‘Sarmatians’ perhaps had even more extensive contacts across Eurasia. While both Classical and Han historians have typically treated steppe tribes as ‘interlopers’ which states seek to pacify, the momentum generated by tribal migrations, fusion and disintegration implicated them in transcontinental politics, underscoring the multilateral configuration of this trade network.

The genesis of the Sarmatians as a political and ethnic entity has been the source of much debate owing to different accounts provided in the Greco-Roman textual sources and the fragmentary nature of the archaeological data across the spatial distribution of Sarmatian ‘complexes’ (Mordvintseva 2008; Smirnov 1964). Were the Sarmatians an autochthonous formation or the result of ethnogenesis following successive nomadic migrations from the east? The overlap of group names and further internal division of Sarmatia into an eastern and western geographic variant reported by Roman historians speak to the complexity of this socio-political formation (Koryakova & Epimakhov 2006, 225). Archaeological finds provide some evidence of tribal movement from an eastern homeland: early Sarmatian materials were initially concentrated in the southern Uralian plain, as represented by the royal Filippovka kurgans (fifth to fourth centuries BC) but become densely clustered in the Volga–Don river basin and the northern Black Sea area beginning in the third century AD (Fig. 1; Yablonsky 2010; Koryakova & Epimakhov 2006). Recent investigations of palaeosols associated with kurgans in the Sarmatian territories indicate that construction activities coincide with regional climatic ameliorations characterized by greater rainfall, which may have provided reliable pastures for livestock. Kurgan construction declined in the southern Uralian plains during the onset of drought lasting from the second century BC to the first century AD, possibly coinciding with the observed westward shift in kurgan construction toward the Volga–Don basin (Morgunova & Khokhlova 2006). Both archaeologists and epigraphers have questioned the validity of the migration hypothesis and instead consider the ‘Sarmatian’ polity to be differentiated nomadic groups with regional territorial claims rather than a single ethnolinguistic or political entity (Tochta’ev 2005; Mordvintseva 2008).

By the first century BC, nomadic societies of the northern Black Sea had become a formidable political presence in the northern Black Sea, occupying the main trade node connecting east and west. This political prominence is evidenced by the opulence of some Sarmatian burials, which included imported luxuries from Persia and Hellenic states, in addition to large quantities of gold ornaments. Elite Sarmatian kurgan complexes were tightly clustered along the major river valleys of Don, Dnieper and Dniester (Fig. 1), indicating the marking of prime pasture and farm lands as well as communication routes. Beginning in the first century AD, a period associated with textual documentation of the arrival of Alan tribes from the east, Han objects (silks, bronze mirrors, iron swords and ornaments) begin to appear in the burials of the Don–Volga basin and north Pontic area (Dyachenko & Skripkin 2000; Koryakova & Epimakhov 2006; Simonenko 2001). Over 200 burial complexes associated with Sarmatian assemblages have been documented in the Don basin alone (Medvedev 2008, 8). In addition, tamga signs, a system of pictographs linked with western Mongolian and Altai steppe groups, become important markers in the Sarmatian landscape. Inscribed on gravestones, petroglyphs and precious metal objects associated with high status (cauldrons, belt buckles, harp), tamgas may have been incorporated either by new clan leaders or new social classes seeking to consolidate their authority through new visual media such as inscriptions (Nickel 1973; Simonenko 2001).

The allure of inscriptions was not coincidental. The Han mirrors found in first to second centuries AD Sarmatian tombs include the ‘linked arc’ (*lianhu*) and zoomorphic-styled mirrors (Table 1; Guguev & Triester 1995; Simonenko 2001). These mirrors were likely manufactured during the first to second centuries BC in China so their inclusion in the Sarmatian context (Fig. 1) more than a century later indicates the effects of either ‘heirlooming’ or long delay in the trade network. Han bronze mirrors were common export items that circulated outside the empire either
as imperial tribute gifts or as contraband (Yu 1967). The ‘linked arc’ mirrors are sometimes referred to as astronomical mirrors. Taking the form of a round disk, the mirror design is defined by a round band resembling a sunburst pattern with a protruding knob at the centre. An outer band usually carries a Chinese inscription expressing the radiance of the sun or the reflective properties of the metal for their ability to illuminate, provide clarity or reveal true nature (Fig. 2). The 17 examples reported in the Sarmatian assemblage are primarily of three inscriptional forms: the ‘radiant’ (riguang), ‘copper essence’ (tonghuan), and ‘illumination’ (zhaoming) (Cline 2008; Swallow 1926; Chou 2000; Hebei Institute of Cultural Relics 1996).

The inscription associated with the mirror found in Vinogradnoe burial (Fig. 2 top left) reads as: ‘By the light of the sun, may you not be forgotten’. This is typical of radiant-type mirrors while the mirror associated with a rich female kurgan burial in middle Don valley (Fig. 2 lower left) reads: ‘Smelt the copper to be pure and radiant. Let it become a mirror with form. May it prolong life and avert misfortunes’, which is typical of the copper essence type. Absent from the Sarmatian assemblage is the dedicatory type, which differs semantically from the other forms in using metaphoric parallels to the brightness of the sun to extol the merit of specific officials; the individual’s title is sometimes inscribed on the mirror.

The appeal of the bronze mirror may have been manifold. Beyond its use as a toiletry item, mirrors carried apotropaic properties for both their Han and steppe owners (Martynov 1991). The formulaic expressions on the ‘linked-arc’ mirrors clearly reflect the auspicious connotations that the Han attributed to these objects. If death was metaphorically conceived as a dangerous and dark journey to the otherworld in early China (Lai 2005), then the inclusion of mirrors in Han tombs was intended to assist with this passage by providing light and clarity. Brashier (1995) has also argued that the metallic and reflective properties of mirrors were associated with durability and luminosity, qualities that preserved the corpse and ‘personhood’ as physical decay threatened to obscure the true nature of the individual (see discussion in Hirth 1907 and Cline 2008). Given the uncertainty surrounding death, the ‘linked arc’ mirror sustained the corporeal and metaphysical being of a person, enabling a safe passage to the next world. The predominance of ‘linked-arc’ mirrors in kurgan burials also suggests that these forms were ritually significant for the Sarmatians. Whether its metaphoric qualities — and by extension Chinese inscription — were understood is however a matter of speculation.

The Sarmatians nonetheless imitated the stylistic design of the ‘linked-arc’ mirror by applying the sunburst design and concentrically-oriented inscriptions to an amulet form that already had wide currency among Iron Age steppe peoples. These amulets/mirrors were produced at numerous locations in the Eurasian steppes and circulated widely from Kazakhstan to Hungary (Guguev & Triester 1995). According to
Medvedev, these steppe-style amulets are present in 10–15 per cent of Sarmatian burials in the Don basin (Medvedev 2008, 56). Because of the configuration of this object as a pendant (a plain circular bronze disk with a side loop), archaeologists have identified it as an amulet but acknowledge its simultaneous function as a mirror (Dyachenko & Skripkin 2000). Resembling the Han mirror in its physical properties, these local amulet forms are also disk-shaped, cast from bronze and reflective. They were in concurrent use with Han mirrors at burial sites but it is not clear if they co-occurred in the same burials. Of the eight amulets so far reported from Sarmatian burials (Table 2, Fig. 2) (Guguev & Triester 1995; Medvedev 2008; Lee 2009), three measure roughly 9 cm in diameter while one is 11 cm. Han linked-arc mirrors are typically of three sizes, 7–9 cm, 12 cm and 18 cm in diameter (Swallow 1926; Hebei Institute of Cultural Relics 1996). Sarmatian imitation amulets thus correspond to the two smaller-size classes of Han mirrors. Functionally the Han mirrors and Sarmatian amulets are equivalents. Additional correspondences in size and shape possibly generated associations between the two forms such that the specific qualities attached to Sarmatian amulet mediated local understanding of the Han mirrors.

The symbolic nature of mirrors in steppe mortuary rituals has long been recognized (Koryakova & Epimakhov 2006, 220). The use of mirrors as a mortuary accompaniment extends back to third millennium bc in steppe cultures of central Asia, and the interment of individuals with a mirror worn around the neck appeared to have lasted well into the first millennium bc in the Tagar culture of southern Siberia (Rubinson 2002). In burials, mirrors are strongly associated with female individuals of important social distinction (Davis-Kimball et al. 2000; Dyachenko & Skripkin 2000); they also appear, however infrequently, in rich male graves (Yablonsky 2010, 139). Placement of the mirror in Sarmatian tombs is almost always on the chest and abdomen or near the arm of the deceased, a practice recalling earlier Bronze Age patterns (Martynov 1991, 69). The close proximity of the mirror to the body and segregation from other objects commonly associated with funerary rites (pottery and animal offerings) distinguishes the inalienable quality of the mirror (Zelezczikov 1995). Noting the re-occurring iconic use of circular discs as representation of the sun by Bronze Age cultures of the western steppes, Martynov (1991) views the bronze mirror as an extension of this ideological concept and believes that steppe societies used these mirrors as ‘solar badges’.

Such patterning in the use of mirrors as mortuary accompaniments apparently persisted even with the introduction of Han mirrors. Excavation of the royal kurgans of Tillya Tepe in the Amu Darya valley (first century AD), a burial complex thought to be affiliated the Alans (Simonenko 2001; Moskova 1995; Koryakova & Epimakhov 2006) revealed three female individuals, each interred with a Chinese mirror on her chest (Rubinson 2008, 58). The most substantive use and emulation of Han mirrors in mortuary display has been documented in the Fergana valley near the Syr Darya drainage (Fig. 1), a critical node along the silk routes and a region adjacent to the Alan’s putative tribal homeland. From the second century bc to the fourth century AD, ‘elite’ kurgan tombs in this valley incorporated a diverse variety of Han mirrors in the mortuary assemblage. However, of all the Han mirror types represented in the Fergana assemblage, the ‘linked-arc’ type appeared to be the most popular mirror form (Zadneprovsky & Lubo-Lesnitchenko 1995). This mirror import was not simply another Chinese trade item synonymous with silk and other like luxuries but had sparked the intrigue of Fergana bronze producers, as evident in the local imitation of their form and inscriptive format in the first century AD (Zadneprovsky & Lubo-Lesnitchenko 1995). The Sarmatian amulets may have been part of this wider trend (Simonenko 2001).

As mentioned earlier, similar physical properties between Han mirrors and steppe amulets mediated the Sarmatian understanding of this foreign import. The imitative amulet was however not a mere emulation of the original, a replica evoking a Chinese luxury item. Understanding why qualities of the ‘linked-arc’ mirrors resonated so strongly among steppe tribes requires a consideration of the cognitive associations triggered by these visual designs. If Chinese mirrors recalled their local bronze amulet/mirror counterpart, then the particular sunburst pattern of the ‘linked-arc’ mirrors may have appealed broadly to religious associations with the sun. Specifically, the concentric rays of the sun and central protruding knob rendered the sun faithfully and provoked the creation of metonymic attachments: the image of the sun pos-

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Table 2. Geographic distribution of Sarmatian amulets carrying tamga-like signs. The low frequency of amulets with tamga-like signs should not be taken as representative owing to the inconsistency of summary information on assemblages for each region (Guguev & Triester 1995; Medvedev 2008).
sibly indexed qualities that were attached to the local bronze disks or ‘solar badges’. While the particular symbolic qualities (light, warmth, etc.) of the bronze disks/amulets remain unclear, the figurative process transforming the ‘linked-arc’ mirror onto the amulet seems to have persuasively articulated a local concept as well as enhanced symbolic coherence.

While the solar design may have correlated with existing beliefs, there was no conceptual basis to support a Sarmatian understanding of the Chinese inscriptions. The Sarmatians did not have a local writing system but were probably familiar with such systems given their interaction with the Persians, Greeks and Romans. However, even if the Sarmatians were familiar with the written form, the Chinese inscriptions were unlikely to have been understood since that would entail a high degree of bilingualism and literacy. Furthermore, the variety of Chinese script styles — from highly stylized archaic to seal forms — characterizing the inscriptions suggests a lack of uniformity, which would have presented challenges to the legibility of the script. Yet the Sarmatians appeared to have imitated and adapted the inscriptive format — a concentric ring of signs or symbols — to their amulets/mirrors. Guguev and Triester (1995, 151) have identified similarities between the inscriptions on Chinese mirrors and tamga signs, which were sometimes incised on mirrors. Interestingly, the only character copied faithfully from the Chinese mirrors appears to be the ‘comma’-shaped sign, which is not a Chinese character at all but a design motif used to either separate characters or as an insertion (Fig. 2).

If the Sarmatians never intended to emulate the Chinese mirrors or the semantic content, then why was ‘inscriptionality’ perceived to be a distinctive quality? How was this representational form meaningful to the construction of Sarmatian identity? The inscriptive format of the ‘linked-arc’ mirrors may have resonated locally because of its figurative associations with tamgas (Guguev & Triester 1995, 151). The Chinese characters appealed conceptually not because of its semantic potential but rather because of its iconic qualities as the Sarmatians ostensibly identified the inscribed characters as discrete sign symbols. As mentioned earlier, the assigning of tamgas or clan signs emerged as a particularly salient practice in Sarmatian kurgan ritual. In providing a prototype format for rendering tamga signs, the ‘linked-arc’ mirrors figure into a broader experimentation with ‘inscriptionality’ that appeared to be critical to the formation of group identity in the western steppes. The tamga-bearing amulets also contribute to an understanding of group or clan identity through their metonymic associations. If kurgans were sacred monuments central to the affirmation of group identity, then the marking of certain individuals with an amulet bearing clan symbols acknowledges the importance of that individual as a member. Moreover, the use of these distinctions within monumental spaces seems even more potent. The inalienability of the mirror/amulet from the deceased person’s body, as implied by its location in the tomb, embodies these ties. Thus the intentional placement of tamga signs on the amulet — in addition to bronze cauldrons, belt buckles, sword hilts, silver dishes and, later on, coins — attached individual and group identity in corporeal ways.

**Han ingots**

How did imperial forays into the Western Region change Han conceptions of the others and themselves? The Han’s expansion into the Western Region was as much motivated by economic interests as by concerns over the Xiongnu threat (Lattimore 1962). By seeking closer ties with western societies, the Han sought to develop alliances that would effectively contain Xiongnu power and stabilize the frontiers. Much of this cultural encounter is documented in the missions of Zhang Qian (139–115 BC) to central Asia. Such textual accounts present a distinctive Han-centred perspective of the ‘other’. With observations almost entirely focused on the organization of these external states, including their geographic location and scale, and animal and agricultural products, Zhang Qian’s formulaic accounts in the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* were instructive for shaping imperial strategies of engagement. Just how much a state resembled or differed from the Han militarily and economically indicated the potential challenges of pacification. While these reports derive from a Han-centred perspective of the ‘other’, it is also difficult to ignore the element of fascination shown by Zhang Qian toward steppe material culture, habits and the environment. Zhang Qian’s accounts are sometimes oblique as he reflects upon the moral nature of the people in conjunction with the environmental conditions unique to the area. As Di Cosmo (2004) convincingly showed in his study of the *Shiji*, entanglements with the Xiongnu had already stirred the Han’s ethnographic awakening.

Material culture from the Han period provides a strong counterpoint to the textual sources by showing the emulation and adaption of foreign forms into the Han repertoire. One of the most enigmatic numismatic finds from the Han period is a saucer-shaped lead ingot characterized by a coiling dragon motif on one side and an inscription on the obverse consisting of debased Greek script, which cannot be deciphered. In 1974, 274 ingots of this form were discovered in a
hoard in Lingtai, Gansu province, and similar ingots have been found in central and western China (Fig. 1). Imitations of these ingots made of bronze and clay have also been found in other hoards and graves dating from the first century BC to second century AD (Dang 1994). The inscriptions on the ingot were thought to resemble Parthian coins of the Arsacid period (Thierry 1995) but because Parthian inscriptions are square rather than circular in arrangement, Cribb (1978) attributes Indo-Scythian and Bactrian coins as the source of the prototype. Whatever the actual source, the western influence is clear and the attempt at emulation is shown by the corrupted Greek inscription. Because of Zhang Qian’s careful reports on foreign currencies, the Han court would have been intimately familiar with their physical appearance. As such the emulation of their form was unlikely to be arbitrary. Zhang Qian’s accounts of central Asia indicate that the coins of Jibin (Kashmir) were characterized by ‘a mounted rider on the obverse and human head on the reverse’ (translation from Hanshu 96A in Hulsequé 1979, 106). Similarly, he notes in Wuyishanli (Herat), ‘the obverse of the coins is exclusively that of a human head, with a mounted rider on the reverse’ (translation from Hanshu 96A in Hulsequé 1979, 115). In Anxi (Parthia), ‘the coins of the country are made of silver and bear the face of the king. When the king dies, the currency is immediately changed and new coins issued with the face of his successor’ (translation from Watson 1993, 235).

The particular properties that sparked Zhang Qian’s attention are not surprising. The use of figurative images and icons (king’s head) contrasts dramatically with Han coins which are inscribed with the standard weight value (e.g. wuzhu coins). Han coins were neither a state monopoly nor identified with sovereign authority; private mints were allowed under certain reigns (Scheidel 2009, 143). Beyond this cultural contrast in the political value or rhetoric of money, the figural depiction of individual kings would have been conceptually novel for the Han. As Son of Heaven, the emperor embodied a universal form of sovereign power that extended beyond the individual and the present; as such, political power did not lend itself to personification.

If the foreign coinage system presented a conceptual alternative completely different from Han conventions, why did the Han emulate this representational form? What are the cultural implications of such representation? More recent discoveries of another hoard at Changxingzhen, Shaanxi province, and in a Han tomb at Liuan, Anhui province, both confirmed the identity of these ingots as a Han product and the specific nature of their production (Li 1996). In addition to a lead ingot with the coiling-dragon motif, archaeologists uncovered a square ingot showing a horse and an oval ingot depicting a tortoise (Fig. 4) (Hu 1994, 100; Li 1996, 72). Chinese scholars have identified these three ingot types with passages in the Shiji and Hanshu that report the issuing of silver coins in three denominations under Emperor Wudi in 119 BC (Hu 1994; Dang 1994). The three denominations, referred to as ‘silver money’, are characterized by a round dragon coin weighing eight liang (125 g) and valued at 3000 cash (unit of denominated value in bronze), the square horse coin for 500 cash, and the oval tortoise coin for 300 cash (Scheidel 2009, 148). The Han court’s experimentation with token currency, based on denominations of defined values, in contrast to the unitary bronze amounts of existing currency system, was an attempt to address the monetary problem facing the empire (Wang 1994, 90–92). The private minting of coins had led to the wide circulation of lighter coins, the bronze weight, or intrinsic value, of which was worth less than their face value. The debasement of standard currency hampered exchange and commerce in the empire, leading Emperor Wudi to issue new currency, which he also hoped would increase the state treasuries (Scheidel 2009). Identifying the historical
context of this new coinage underscores the exigencies that compelled the Han court to reflect upon its monetary policies and search for other alternatives. That the Han considered ‘token’ currency — a system with limited historical precedence in China — as a legitimate option reappraises the directionality of the imperial gaze.

What remains unclear is how the specific qualities of the ingots/cash were perceived to be meaningful in the first place. The use of dragon, tortoise and horse symbols shows the deliberate adaptation of Han icons to a foreign currency type, making a novel concept locally relevant and politically explicit. Since the image of a foreign king carried no significance for Han subjects, substitution with a Han royal insignia seems like a tenable alternative. And in the absence of a royal portraiture tradition, alternative icons of imperial power such as the dragon, tortoise and horse were used. As some of the most sacred animals in Chinese thought, these three animals are often used to signify imperial power and authority (Sterckx 2002). In fact, the use of these animals as icons is also exemplified by gold and bronze seals issued by the court to officials and elites. These stamps display the same array of animals to visually differentiate between official ranks. Like the seals, the weight of these ingots is accordingly scaled, with the coiled dragon motif representing the coin with the highest metal content (Hu 1994, 100). In this light, the ingots can be seen as a metonymic figuration of a foreign concept — the dragon standing in for the ultimate kind of imperial authority — into a hybrid object intended to address monetary issues affecting Han society.

While this explanation reveals the compositional logic of these Han ingots, it does not fully address how these ingots may have facilitated cultural understanding. The dragon, tortoise and horse are not only icons of imperial authority but index the very nature of power itself. Animal symbolism figures significantly in Han political philosophy, providing a visual form with rhetorical dimensions (Powers 1991, 66). Because of its association with longevity, the tortoise, for example, indexes permanence and the sagacity that comes about with age. The tortoise thus evokes qualities of ‘human transience as its longevity outlasted that of ordinary mortals’ (Sterckx 2002, 178). The dragon, which is a composite of bird and reptile, is considered the most powerful animal because of its ability to transform its physical nature while maintaining its markings (Sterckx 2002, 180). Given its versatile nature, the dragon is the most capable of transcending any challenge and thus attaining ultimate longevity. The qualities that are associated with these animals signify — through metaphoric associations — the ideals that society would anticipate of a legitimate authority. Their representation on the ingots may have served to communicate these ideals about the nature of imperial power. Interestingly scholars have noted a punch mark of the character ‘shi’, which carries both the meaning ‘to inspect’ and ‘an omen’, stamped on the obverse side of these ingots (Cribb 1978; Dang 1994). If the latter meaning was intended, then the ingots could be concurrently understood metaphorically as of good omen. Dragons and ‘heavenly horses’ appear when the ruler is virtuous (Powers 1991; Sterckx 2009). There was no cultural precedence in Han society for such symbolic use of currency. The Han court (and private minters) appropriated the rhetorical potentialities implicit in foreign coinage to stir public understandings. Imperial order was made conceptually tangible through metonymic and metaphoric kinds of association.

However, there is still the matter of the corrupted Greek (Fig. 3). The inclusion of Greek script, copied incorrectly from either a Parthian or Indo-Scythian coin, on the dragon ingot suggests an appeal to a wider audience. Chinese scholars have speculated on the cross-cultural nature of these ingots as tokens of ‘global’ value, in particular in handling transactions across central Asia (Zhang 1994; Dang 1994). The emulation of the Greek script certainly verifies Zhang Qian’s observations of, and Han familiarity with, the royal inscriptions associated with these coins. Interestingly only the coiling-dragon ingot, which is associated with the emperor based on metal content and animal symbolism, is inscribed with ‘barbarous’ script. No tortoise or horse ingots are known to have this inscription. The configuration of the coiling dragon with the imitative script thus accords logically with central Asian coinage where inscriptions relate exclusively to the kingly figure. This selective emula-
tion shows that imperial perception of other cultural logics was far from superficial but rather reflexive and nuanced. In effect, the imperial gaze was directed outward as much as inward.

Conclusion

This cross-regional examination of an ancient ‘global’ network shows how intercultural exchange altered the perceptions of not only steppe societies engaged in trade but also those of the Han imperial court. Material objects that circulated along this network presented not only exotic goods but also prototypes that inspired local emulation. What appeared as imitative objects were indeed unique but they were neither inventions divorced from temporal and cultural specificity nor assimilations of foreign elements into local practice. Many studies emphasize the versatile nature of material practice which enables people to mediate identity under moments of cultural tension. ‘Invented traditions’ are however not simply responding to contentions of difference and the intensities of that response (creolization versus hybridity). Here, I have sought to show the range of referential possibilities associated with composite forms of material culture by considering the cognitive basis of cross-cultural appropriation.

In particular, inscriptive and representational forms that were ostensibly foreign to the Han and Sarmatians figured into local thought because they stimulated symbolic associations based on subjective understandings of similarities and difference. In Sarmatian funerary ritual, Han mirrors presented an analogue form that resonated metaphorically with local concepts about the sun. Nomadic individuals perceived physical properties such as bronze metal, reflectivity, and circular shape to be similar with local amulet disk objects. However, the amulets should not be narrowly conceived as an incorporation based on commensurate logics. The Sarmatians conceived of the Han inscriptive format through specific metonymic associations that identified individuals with emblems of membership and status. Inscriptionality, as developed through the system of tamga symbols, became emergent markers of peoples and places in steppe society. The placement of these symbols on personal items possibly facilitated a new way of orienting individual identity with group identity.

The ‘barbaric’ lead ingots also facilitated alternative understandings of ‘Han’ identity. The exposure to ‘western’ coinage compelled a consideration of other cultural logics, which the Han court appropriated in order to reform the imperial currency system. For the Han court, foreign currency offered a contrasting coinage system which found resonance with specific imperial notions of representational power and rhetorical form. The foreign coin form was made tangible through metonymic transformation: celestial animals indexing royal power substituted the portraiture of the king typically found on Greco-Parthian coinage. In drawing on the specific metaphysical qualities associated with these animals, however, the Han court also referenced the metaphoric associations that help conceptualize legitimate authority. Beyond the ingots’ functional qualities, they were conceived to be implicitly rhetorical by appealing simultaneously to local, foreign and ‘global’ semantics. This amalgamation — seemingly novel and transcultural in its makeup — did not, however, represent attempts to mediate new cultural identities. Western currency presented but a logical alternative to influence public sentiment in the Han court.

While the Han court incorporated different conceptual frameworks in creating a new form of currency, the composite outcome is thus neither an invented tradition (sensu Bhabha’s hybridity) nor a creolized formation. The ingots may be understood as an attempt to refine an imperial ideology that was subject to justification. The Sarmatian amulets were central to the construction of personhood as individual and group identity became increasingly intertwined. Contrary to recent archaeological renderings of hybridity, composite material practices do not necessarily represent negotiations on cultural identity. Material representations are rarely self-referential, and therefore the assumption that a foreign feature embodies culture presents serious epistemological issues. By disassociating physical properties from conceptual qualities in the study of these two objects, I examined how the properties of foreign objects are made conceptually concrete. The qualities are perceived to be meaningful not because they reference concepts about the ‘other’, but because they extend and influence existing understandings in the local context. In that respect, they are much more powerful. From this viewpoint, archaeologists can perhaps better substantiate why certain foreign features are preferred and circumvent the division of change in content versus structure to infer cultural transformation.

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