

Thomas S. Mullaney, James Leibold, Stéphane Gros, and Eric  
Vanden Bussche, eds., *Critical Han Studies: The History,  
Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*  
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In studies of the peoples of China-based empires and succeeding republics there are two streams of work on group identity that have never really intersected despite engagement with some common theoretical problems. On the one hand there is the inquiry into the nature of “Chineseness” carried out by Tu Weiming 杜維明, Allen Chun 陳奕麟 and others. On the other hand, there are the more historicized investigations of ethnicity, which usually focus on groups that are now ethnic minorities of the People’s Republic. Scholarship in the latter vein is often framed with the idea of the ‘frontier’, but it rarely defines ‘frontier’ clearly, and one often gets the impression that the term just means places where Chinese are a minority. Also, as Chris Vasantkumar notes in *Critical Han Studies*: “the division of labor between Han studies and minority studies that has historically shaped Chinese social science has to some degree been perpetuated in the practices of foreign scholars” (p. 236).

It is not an easy gulf to bridge as the two fields occupy very different scholarly terrain. Discussions of “Chineseness” tend to situate their subject in a global (or at

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least Asian) context, and unfold either over the full length of recorded history, or within the less historicized domain of cultural theorists. By contrast, analysis of Mongols, Manchus, Uighurs, or the tribal peoples of the south has tended to be grounded in particular dynasties or revolutionary regimes, and very often focused on the relationships between ethnicity, community and state power. In the introduction to *Critical Han Studies*, Thomas Mullaney promotes the volume as a “new domain of critical inquiry” (p. 9). But rather than asking questions about issues that have not emerged in either the recent studies of ethnicity in China’s imperial past, or the older and ongoing debates on Chineseness, *Critical Han Studies* feels more like a coming together of the two streams of scholarship. It features well-known scholars of the “New Qing History” (Mark Elliott and C. Patterson Giersch), who turn the lenses of that inquiry to the cultural group that it has thus-far largely overlooked: the Han 漢. In other chapters it asks questions about being Han today that largely continue the spirit of Tu Weiming’s study of Chineseness, and in a sense the idea of “Critical Han Studies” can seem like an echo of Allen Chun’s call to “Fuck Chineseness”, with Chun’s activist style neutralized so that outsiders can participate. The union is not without disharmony and conceptual difficulty; the main issue being that the relationship of “Han” and “Chinese” remains somewhat under-theorized. Nevertheless, the book is consistently thought-provoking.

For most of the contributors, the “critical” part of “Critical Han Studies” proves easier than the “Han studies”. In this volume, being critical means dispelling any notion that “Han” is a stable, eternal, objective, or natural category, and showing instead that it is changing, contested, and contingent on political developments. Mark Elliott’s chapter does this very well by outlining the different meanings of the term “Han” throughout history. “Han” was first the name of a river, which gave its name to the Hanzhong prefecture 漢中郡, whence Liu Bang’s Han state got its name. In the time of the Han state, “Hanren 漢人” indicated “subjects of Han”, not an ethnic

identity. The Sārbi (Xianbei) rulers of the post-Han state of Wei began to use “Hua 華” (the old “quasi-ethnonym” of the Chinese-speakers) to refer to themselves and needed a new word to differentiate themselves from the communities of Chinese-speakers already long established in the central plains. Choosing “Han” for the job, they established a connection between the term and the people who primarily spoke Sinitic languages and were heirs to an intellectual heritage based on (reconstructed) Zhou-period Classics. But the alignment of the ethnonym with this community was quickly broken. The Khitan Liao used “Han” to mean former Song subjects living under Liao rule, but not Song subjects still under Song rule, whom they called “Nanren 南人” (Southerners). For the Mongols, the “Han” category included Khitan, Jurchen, as well as Chinese-speaking former subjects of the Liao and Jin, and excluded southern Chinese. A rough realignment of Han identity and the speakers of Sinitic languages only occurred in the Ming, for reasons that are not explained here.

Diverging slightly from Elliott, Tamara Chin suggests that occasionally “Han” was used in a “quasi-ethnonymic” way during the Han dynasty (p. 145). This is intriguing, and grounded in a close and insightful reading of Sima Qian’s *Shiji* that engages well with Elliott’s chapter. But what is “quasi-ethnicity” (a term that Elliott uses too, p. 182)? It appears that Chin and Elliott both see faint clues that ethnicity existed in the classical past, but a clearer statement on this, or what exactly they mean by “quasi-ethnicity” would have been welcome.

Even after the Ming, the term Han was still not used in the same way as it is today. C. Patterson Giersch argues provocatively that “despite the fact that millions had migrated from central China (*neidi*) to the Southwest during the Ming and early Qing periods, there were no Han in Yunnan until the nineteenth century” (p. 191). Migrants were called just that: migrants, or else they were identified by their native regions. As the chapters by James Leibold, Tamara Chin and Zhihong Chen’ show, the idea of the Han was not stable in the twentieth century either. Neither scholars

nor nationalist leaders were united in their understandings of who the Han were, where they came from and what their relationship with other groups was. Gu Jiegang 顧頔剛 (1893-1980) denied that the Han really existed at all.

Giersch suggests the nineteenth century violence between Muslims and migrants led to the adoption of “Han” as a way of referring to the latter. This argument works well for Yunnan, but the rise of Han identity in the late Qing was hardly a Yunnan-specific phenomenon. Giersch refers briefly to Pamela Crossley’s argument in *Translucent Mirror* about the production of new cultural identities by eighteenth century Qing ideology, but a deeper analysis of whether and how her thesis applies to the Han would be a worthwhile endeavor. In any case, when considering the problem of how Han identity became so normalized by the second half of the twentieth century, despite sparse references to it in the eighteenth century, and Gu Jiegang’s doubts in the early twentieth, one feels that there are some pieces of the puzzle missing.

Identity labels are rarely neutral indicators of self and other, theoretically equal to one another and empty of emotive and moral connotations. A critical approach to an identity also means interrogating its various social meanings. Bulag Uradyn’s chapter shows that the idea of “Han” has often been infused with moral meaning; there have been “good Han” (who treated minorities fairly) and “bad Han” (who bullied and oppressed minorities). This is not completely surprising, given that the term “Han” mostly surfaces in discussions of ethnic relations, and such discussion has been charged with political sensitivities and moral meaning throughout the twentieth century. Another implication of Uradyn’s piece is that Han identity is not only constructed in opposition to external others, but also an internal other in the form of the “bad Han” (one supposes that nobody self-identifies as “bad Han”).

Being critical about Han identity also means showing how it is woven into a tapestry of other identities, in order to avoid presenting a one-dimensional view that

ethnicities are the primary units of human social interactions—a problem with some studies of ethnicity. Chris Vasantkumar deals with this well in a chapter that shows how *minzu* 民族 categories appear and disappear amid other forms of identity and division. In Amdo rifts between rural and urban that may be more significant than the Han-Tibetan divide. In urban contexts, Tibetans and Han appear to get on quite well, while both groups distrust the Hui, who are seen as mercantile, profit-driven adherents to an alien religion that prohibits consumption of pork. Vasantkumar also demonstrates the adoption of non-Chinese culture by Han on the periphery of the Han world: in Xiahe in southern Gansu, Amdo Tibetan is a lingua franca spoken by Han and Tibetans.

One chapter that is not critical in its approach to identity is Xu Jieshun's 徐杰舜. Via Jason Patent's fine translation, Xu gives a summary history of Chinese civilization, and the character-based language and state policies that he argues have held it together, without paying any critical attention to changes in names and their meanings. Xu identifies this civilization as the "Han". Juxtaposed with the other chapters, this can seem horribly anachronistic. But to write a history of a cultural community that transcends one particular ethnonym, one must call it something. Elliott calls it "Chinese", as in "traditional Chinese historiography", "Chinese-style clothing", and "a Chinese world". It would not be fair to criticize Xu for a non-critical approach to "Han", if a critical approach to "Han" must rest on the crutch of non-critical use of "Chinese". In any case, unless one is to adopt the absurdly constructivist position that a cultural group begins and ends with a single ethnonym, so that a new name heralds a completely new group formation, anachronism is inevitable. There is no clear reason why Xu is wrong to use "Han" and Elliott is right to use "Chinese" for the broader civilizational entity. So Xu's chapter is not as problematic as a casual contrast with the others might suggest. However, without any critical examination of identity, it is a definite misfit, and one feels that it was

included primarily to demonstrate what “Han studies” is in the Peoples Republic.

Except for Xu, most of the other authors demonstrate a critical approach to identity. A bigger problem for some is nailing down a clear identity for “Han studies”, as differentiated from what people have long known as “Chinese studies”. Some chapters suggest the historical possibilities for being Han but not “Chinese” (as in the Khitan and Jurchen under the Mongols), or Chinese but not “Han”, (as in migrants in Yunnan in the eighteenth century). But in the present day, the question of who is non-Han Chinese can be a thorny one. A 2009 post on the prominent Tibetan blog ‘High Peaks Pure Earth’ highlighted the unease and annoyance that many Tibetans feel with Westerners’ differentiation of “Han” and “Chinese” (see “走向‘民族’”, <http://www.highpeakspureearth.com>, January 2009). The writer argued that the term “Han Chinese” opened up a space for the possibility of “Tibetan Chinese”. She wrote: “Many foreigners like to respect the Chinese government terminology, and also use “Han” to refer to “Chinese”, pretending to be unaware of the political implications of this choice of vocabulary”. None of the authors in this volume argue that the Tibetans are really non-Han Chinese, but scholars need to be aware of the potential political implications of distinguishing “Han” from “Chinese”. Not all Western academics are fully signed up to a project to differentiate between the two categories either. Probably aware of the Tibetan complaints, Gray Tuttle writes: “the ethnicity to which the English language refers as “Chinese” is designated “Han” by the PRC government. This book [*Tibetan Buddhists in the Making of Modern China*] accords with the convention of equating the English term for Chinese with the Chinese language term “Han”, because the phrase “Han Chinese” seems redundant in the context of Chinese and Tibetan relations” (*Tibetan Buddhists*, p. 243). Stevan Harrell has shown that in southwest China, there are, in fact, many people who see themselves as Chinese but not Han (*Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China*, p. 27). None of the chapters in this book discuss these people and the places they live, but

there is probably no more fertile territory for theorizing the relationship of Han and Chinese

Emma J. Teng's chapter tackles the connection between "Han" and "Chinese" in a modern context in her analysis of the writing and reception of Han Suyin 韓素音 and Irene Cheng (He Ailing 和艾齡), two authors of mixed Chinese-European descent. Teng notes that both writers were considered Chinese, though neither was labeled "Han". But it is unclear whether this is because of their mixed heritage, or because neither they nor their critics tended to discuss their identity in the context of "non-Han" peoples of China, which is the primary context in which anyone is labeled "Han", as Thomas Mullaney's introduction makes clear. Which Chinese language terms would Han and Cheng have used when describing their identity in relation to Tibetans? As Teng points out, we certainly cannot say that Cheng and Han were not Han.

Teng's main conclusions relate less to "Han" identity specifically, than to the already well established debate about the extent to which "Chinese" identity is based on lineage, as opposed to cultural practice at any particular moment in history. Teng argues that having a European parent does not disqualify one from being Chinese, but that it does not follow that there is no hereditary component to Chinese-ness. Having one Chinese parent is important, and Han and Cheng both had to "work extra hard to prove" their "Chineseness and loyalty". Teng's points here are important, but the debate is not substantially changed by calling it "Han studies" rather than "Chinese studies". Likewise, Kevin Carrico interrogates stereotypes about northern and southern China in Cantonese popular culture. It is an interesting chapter, but it tells us more about what it means to be from Guangdong, than what it means to be Han.

Mullaney also ponders the danger of the analysis of Han becoming "merely an examination of China by other means" (p. 4). In this regard, the book is a bold, stimulating, worthwhile, but ultimately perhaps only half successful experiment. It

succeeds in subjecting the term “Han” to some much needed critical analysis. But in many places it really is a continuation of the scholarship on Chineseness pioneered long ago by the likes of Tu Weiming. The volume could probably have avoided this by concentrating more specifically on the usage and meaning of the term “Han”, and excluding the chapters that focus more on other forms of identification (like Carrico and Teng’s), or on Chinese culture more generally (like Xu’s). On the other hand, if “Han studies”, as a separate sub-field, were to exclude examination of things that have hitherto been known as parts of “Chinese” culture, it runs the risk of becoming an overly discourse-focused enterprise with little to say about the people identified in discourse. Examinations of Han identity will have to steer a difficult path between the Scylla of repeating older debates under a new name, and the Charybdis of a narrowly conceived philological inquiry into what was meant by “Han” in different documents. It is not an easy field of endeavour, but *Critical Han Studies* raises enough interesting questions, particularly regarding the imperial past, to indicate that it will be a rewarding one.