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## **Fractured Identity: Meanings of Han Across the Chinese Diaspora Community**

Every nation today struggles to find unity in diversity. In the People's Republic of China, official government pronouncements, textbooks and the media unanimously assert that fifty-six ethnic groups unite to form the Chinese nation. Yet within this constellation, the Han constitute the overwhelming majority at over ninety percent of China's massive population. The number of Han now exceeds one *billion*, or twenty percent of humanity, making Han the largest ethnic group not only in China but on the face of the earth. Historically, Han culture equated to Chinese civilization and today the Han ethnic group comprises the core of the Chinese nation. But who exactly are the Han? This study contrasts the many official and popular definitions of Han across segments of the Chinese diaspora community to demonstrate the lack of consensus on its meaning and, by extension, the fundamental disagreement over what it means to be Chinese.

### **I. THE HAN IN OFFICIAL NARRATIVES**

#### **The PRC**

Officially, China's diverse fifty-six nationalities are "united" into a single Chinese nation. But the PRC faces serious challenges to this claim from frequent terrorist attacks by Uighur separatists, protests within Tibet, the democracy movement in Hong Kong,

and the independence movement in Taiwan. Part of the challenge stems from contradicting definitions of what it means to be Chinese. The PRC definition is calculated to maintain its territorial integrity and to rein its lost colonies back into the fold. But this definition of Chinese is contingent on acceptance of a Han identity that, as we shall see, exists in form but entirely lacks substance.

In the PRC's *White Papers*, a kind of state-of-the-union report, an almost paranoid stress on solidarity prevails, with some version of the word 'unity' appearing no fewer than twenty-one times in the three-page passage on ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> According to this document: "China as a united multi-ethnic country was created by the Qin Dynasty and consolidated and developed by the Han Dynasty." It was during the Han dynasty that "the most populous ethnic group in the world, the Han, emerged." Since then the unity of the Chinese people came of historical interaction between Han of the Central Plain 中原 and minorities in the periphery—they "migrated and mingled," with "economic and cultural exchanges" that brought them together in "interdependence" and "cooperation." Due to these interconnections, "all ethnic groups in China have shared common destiny and interests in their long historical development, creating a strong force of affinity and cohesion." After a thorough retelling of Chinese history, one can only conclude that "unity has always been the mainstream in the development of Chinese history." But a closer reading shows that despite modern attempts to overcome the traditional Han/minority division through policies of inclusion and equality, ironically the Han, historically the bearers of civilization and today the core of the Chinese nation, remain

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<sup>1</sup> See "National Minorities Policy and Its Practice in China" section I in *White Papers of the Chinese Government* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2000), also available online at <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/4/index.htm>.

the epicenter of the PRC narrative to which minorities are dependent for national cohesion.

### **Alternative Views: Official Narratives of Han in the Chinese Periphery**

One's view of the Han is largely determined by context and agenda, so that Chinese living in different times and circumstances naturally view the Han through their own distinctive prism. In fact, an examination of the official status of Han in Macao, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—all of which until very recently operated as Chinese communities politically independent of the PRC—confirms this thesis. Despite PRC claims to these regions as inalienable parts of one China, the residents of all four communities adopt different visions of the Han and therefore of the Chinese nation.

#### **Macao**

Macao, a small peninsula and surrounding islands just west of Hong Kong in the Pearl River delta, became part of the Peoples Republic of China in 1999. This transition brought to a celebrated close Portuguese administration of Macao, the last and longest-running foreign possession in China. Over four and a half centuries earlier Portuguese traders had begun arriving in Macao and by 1557 they had established a permanent settlement, erecting European-style houses and administrative buildings that remain a part of Macao's architectural landscape to this day. In the seventeenth century Portugal began leasing the territory and in 1887, as part of the infamous "unequal treaties" forced

on China by the Western nations, the Beijing Treaty ceded to Portugal the right to perpetual occupation and government of Macao. A full century later Portugal and China began negotiating the transfer of Macao's sovereignty back to Chinese jurisdiction, which occurred on 20 December 1999.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly all residents of Macao consider themselves Chinese, but given the history outlined above one would correctly assume that the colonial legacy has not disappeared. Even today, years after transition, Portuguese remains the official language in Macao (though Chinese was added at reversion) and its residents use the pataca rather than Chinese RMB. Macao, like Hong Kong, is administered by Beijing as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) which allows it to retain some autonomy from Beijing. The upshot of this current system is that, although Macao and Hong Kong now belong to the PRC, they have yet to adopt the official PRC definition of the Han; in fact, there is no identification with or recognition of Han at all in either region, whether officially or popularly. A look at Macao's most recent census report provides insights into the former, while popular conceptions of Han are explored in section II.

Every five years the Documentation and Information Centre (DSEC) of Macao's Statistics and Census Service conducts and issues an official census report, the results of which appear in a trilingual (Portuguese, Chinese, and English) publication. In the most recent of these reports, the *Results of 2011 Population Census*, the government of Macao SAR breaks its population down into 族裔 or descent groups rather than the PRC-

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<sup>2</sup> Jill McGivering and David Hartung, *Macao Remembers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

preferred *minzu* 民族.<sup>3</sup> Moreover the English version translates this as “ethnicity” rather than the PRC-preferred “nationality,” although the most recent census has added the statement “Macao is a Chinese community” 澳門是華人社會, which is certainly in step with Beijing’s view. The vast majority of Macao’s residents, 92.4% to be precise, are designated “pure Huayi” 華裔. Although the official translation of Huayi is simply “Chinese,”<sup>4</sup> a more literal translation of Huayi would be “those of Hua descent” or Chinese in the broadest sense (as opposed to the more narrow Han, who constitute the core of the many Hua groups). In the PRC, Zhonghua 中華 includes all of China’s minorities, including Taiwan’s aborigines. Macao’s census figures do not include any categories for Han; in other words, Han as an ethnic or any other type of group does not receive official recognition. The tendency to identify Chinese as Hua rather than Han may be due at least in part to the prolonged Western presence in Macao and the subsequent tendency to divide the colony’s population into broad categories of Chinese and Portuguese—whereas in China proper, in the absence of citizens of Western heritage, the tendency was to distinguish Han from minorities. In Hong Kong and Macao Westerners served as the Other, while in China proper the so-called minorities became the Other. The slim remainder of Macao’s population includes various combinations of descent from Chinese (Hua), Portuguese, and miscellaneous “others.”

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<sup>3</sup> *Results of 2011 Population Census* (Macao: DSEC, 2012), 11. The Chinese version is titled *2011 人口普查*.

<sup>4</sup> *Results of 2011 Population Census*, 11.

The predilection for Hua in lieu of Han may also stem from geography—both Macao and Hong Kong are located in the southernmost region of China, far from the traditional political epicenter and therefore far removed from the Central Plain, ancestral homeland of the Han. In spite of a shared polity, distinctions between northerners and southerners have historically been quite strong. The Hakka, a distinct Han subgroup with large numbers in southern China, believe themselves to be early emigrants from the Central Plain who devoutly maintain the original and unadulterated culture and civilization of China.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile Cantonese emigrants from south China made up the bulk of Huaqiao 華僑, or “overseas Chinese,” literally translated as “Hua bridges.” It was these immigrant Cantonese speakers who established communities in the US and elsewhere known as “Tangrenjie” 唐人街 or “streets of the Tang [dynasty] people”—Chinatown, though in reality it is closer to “Tangtown.” It may be that Cantonese eschewed the term Han because it privileged the north over the south, and acceptance would be tantamount to uprooting their southern heritage and transplanting it in the Yellow River valley. In any case the peoples of southern China, whether Cantonese or Hakka, never did adopt the moniker Han until establishment of the PRC, and even now outside the mainland it has yet to gain acceptance.

The case of Macao’s census also clearly illustrates the amorphousness of the English term “Chinese,” which depending on context could be “PRC citizens,” “people of Han,” “people of Tang,” or “people of Hua,” but each of these carries its own inimitable nuances. Returning to the census of the Macanese government, both Huayi (as ethnicity)

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<sup>5</sup> Nicole Constable, *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996). See Constable’s own introductory essay for an overview of Hakka identity.

and Zhongguoji 中國籍 (as nationality) are rendered into English as simply “Chinese”—the same word but with cultural meaning in one case and clear political meaning in the other; in Macao some of non-Chinese ethnicity hold a Chinese passport while some ethnic Chinese carry passports of other nations such as Portugal, Thailand, and the Philippines, another consequence of the Chinese diaspora.

## **Hong Kong**

Chinese identities in Hong Kong have been shaped by a colonial legacy. For a century and a half, the territory served as the *entrepôt* for the British Empire in China. At the conclusion of the disastrous Opium War in 1842 the victorious British forced the Qing regime to accept the Treaty of Nanjing, which ceded Hong Kong Island to the crown in perpetuity. China’s second defeat in the Arrow War of 1860 saw the cession of Kowloon Peninsula to the island’s north, and in 1898 Britain succeeded in obtaining a lease on the adjacent New Territories. All this comprised the British colony of Hong Kong until the lease expired in 1997, at which time the entire territory reverted to Chinese (though in this case PRC rather than Qing) control.<sup>6</sup>

While the PRC effectively institutionalized Chinese ethnic identities beginning in the 1950s, imbuing the new taxonomy into its citizenry, Hong Kong, like Macao, remained in the hands of a Western regime and out of China’s reach; therefore the fifty-six ethnic group configuration, including the concept of a Han majority, never took root as it did in the mainland. Even earlier in the Nationalist period, despite close contacts

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (London : I. B. Tauris, 2007).

between Hong Kong and southern China, no official and systematic propagandizing of identity prevailed. This becomes clear when examining the most recent demographic statistics from Hong Kong. Like Macao and very *unlike* the PRC, Hong Kong's official census does not include a category for Han, whether defined ethnically, linguistically or otherwise.

Like Macao, the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department is responsible for conducting and issuing demography reports, the most recent of which is the bilingual *2011 Population Census*. Table 3.9 in volume I of the Main Report provides an official breakdown of Hong Kong's population by "ethnicity,"<sup>7</sup> but again like Macao the use of certain key terms reflects the outside position of these communities—a detachment from the mainland that represents not only geographic but political separation. While Hong Kong, Macao, and the PRC all classify their respective populations according to "ethnicity," this is an English translation from original Chinese terms that differ in every territory: *minzu* 民族 in the PRC, *zuyi* 族裔 in Macao, and *zhongzu* 種族 in Hong Kong. Their shared use of the English word "ethnicity" conceals important nuances in their approaches to identity. In Macao the term *zuyi* connotes blood lineage or what we would associate with "race" (indeed one footnote makes clear that *zuyi* is defined by *xuetong* 血統, literally "blood ties").<sup>8</sup> In Hong Kong, "the ethnicity of a person is determined by self-identification, normally on a social and cultural basis,"<sup>9</sup> yet the persistent use of an

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<sup>7</sup> *2011 Population Census: Main Report volume I* (Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department, 2012), 40.

<sup>8</sup> *Global Results of By-census 2006* (Macao: DSEC, 2007), 29 note d.

<sup>9</sup> *2006 Population By-census: Summary Results* (Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department, 2007), 106 n. 19.

antiquated term like *zhongzu*—long ago abandoned in the mainland due to its historical association with ideas of physiology and genealogy—suggests alternate methods of identification, as does Hong Kong’s minority ethnic category “White” 白人 which is more a description of appearance than a legitimate ethnic or cultural marker. In contrast, the PRC employs the more politically correct phrase *minzu*, which places greater emphasis on cultural divisions.

More importantly, neither Hong Kong nor Macao employs the official PRC taxonomy of fifty-six ethnic groups. Rather, in these former European colonies, the finer distinctions among Chinese are eclipsed by more obvious differences between Chinese and foreigners. Macao’s population is simply Chinese (Huayi), Portuguese, some combination of the two, or “other.” In stark contrast, the population of Hong Kong is broken down into such groups as “White,” “Filipino,” “Indonesian,” “Indian,” “Japanese,” “Thai,” “Other Asian” (meaning Asian but not Chinese), and “Other.” So-called “Chinese” constitute 93.6% of the Hong Kong population, but in this case Chinese are Huaren 華人,<sup>10</sup> not Han, again a much broader conception akin to Macao’s Huayi.

Huaren, like the Zhonghua minzu 中華民族, could include not only those the PRC recognizes as Han but also China’s minority groups and Huaqiao—overseas Chinese. What is conspicuously missing from Hong Kong’s (and Macao’s) “ethnic” taxonomy, as compared with that of the PRC, are the divisions among Chinese (in other words, within the Zhonghua minzu) that have been the hallmark and *raison d’être* of ethnology or anthropology in China.

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<sup>10</sup> See Table 3.9 in *2011 Population Census: Main Report volume I*, 40.

Each of these territories retains its own appellation for the “Chinese” majority—Hanzu in the PRC, Huayi in Macao, and Huaren in Hong Kong. In each case the particular historical background and political milieu led to discrepancies in taxonomy and terminology, but beyond this each rubric incorporates substantively different constituents. In other words, differences in demographic reports between territories are not merely a matter of semantics; groupings differ in both form *and* substance. Moreover, radical differences in the composition of domestic minorities—groups that ultimately define parameters of the majority—means that each territory conceives of its majority very differently. In essence, these differences underscore a lack of consensus on the meaning of Chinese.

One final point regarding languages and dialects in Hong Kong and their relationship to Chinese identity: According to the census, 89.5% of Hong Kong residents claim Cantonese as their “usual language,” with a small percentage reporting other Chinese dialects as their mother tongue, while only 1.4% of the population claim Putonghua (Mandarin) as their usual language (although 46.5% speak Putonghua as “another dialect”).<sup>11</sup> There is no mention of Hanyu 漢語, the “language of the Han” and the prevailing dialect of northern China (see the discussion of Hanyu below in the Popular Conceptions section). This detail remains consonant with other characteristics of Hong Kong—where there is no official recognition of either Han ethnicity or Han language.

## **Taiwan**

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<sup>11</sup> Table 3.12 in *2011 Population Census: Main Report volume I*, 43.

In both Macao and Hong Kong there exists no official recognition of Han whatsoever, a phenomenon that coincides with popular identities as discussed in the section below on popular identities. These are both Special Administrative Regions of China, lost sheep only recently returned to the Chinese fold. Ironically the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, which still maintains *de facto* independence from the mainland PRC, *does* officially recognize a Han category. In this case it is due to a shared political history—the ROC regime in Taiwan and the PRC regime in the mainland both share roots in the Nationalist (or pre-liberation) period and both look to Sun Yat-sen as the *guofu* 國父, or father of the Chinese nation, whose revolutionary movement mobilized Han identity against the Manchus and effectively ended the Qing dynasty. While Sun had ties to both Macao and Hong Kong, it may be that because these territories were not directly under Qing governance at the time that revolutionary ideas of Hanness failed to take root as they did within the Qing empire.

Unlike Macao and Hong Kong, the ROC Ministry of Interior's Department of Statistics does not publish a census of the island's population by ethnicity.<sup>12</sup> The Government Information Office, however, does produce a Yearbook, the Chinese version of which includes a brief section on Taiwan's "ethnic situation" 族群情況 with a simple breakdown of the island's population into Han at 96.72%, "indigenous groups" at 2.3%, and "foreign citizen spouses" just shy of 1%.<sup>13</sup> Another section discusses minority

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<sup>12</sup> The department's *Statistical Yearbook* does include basic data on numbers of "Indigenous People" as a whole, but their numbers are broken down by county. No numbers are provided for Han or other ethnicities.

<sup>13</sup> 中華民國施政年鑑 2014 (臺北：行政院, 2014), 56.

policies in some depth, but more relevant here is the demographics section of the English-language *Taiwan Yearbook 2015*.<sup>14</sup> Here Taiwan's ethnic groups are presented in two broad categories: "Han peoples" and "indigenous peoples."<sup>15</sup>

While earlier editions of the Yearbook discussed each indigenous group in detail, the 2015 edition is far briefer and begins with a breakdown of the Han. The Han ethnic group in Taiwan is comprised of Holo 河洛, Hakka 客家, and "mainlander" subgroups, each of which represents a particular migration wave from China. According to the *Yearbook*, "the ancestors of Taiwan's Han people began migrating from China's southeastern provinces to the island in sizeable numbers in the seventeenth century. The majority of these early immigrants were Holo, mostly from areas in southern Fujian Province, as well as the Hakka from eastern Guangdong Province," the two provinces closest to Taiwan.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, immigrants with Fujianese heritage typically refer to themselves in their native tongue as simply Hokkien, meaning "Fujian" 福建, but *Taiwanese* who trace their ancestry to Fujian are known as Holo or Hoklo, which means "beneath the [Yellow and Luo] river," a reference to their roots south of the Central Plain.

Just as the Holo speak a regional vernacular originating from southern Fujian known as Minnanyu 閩南語 (and are alternately identified as Minnanese), so Hakka also retain their own distinct language. The Hakka, historically concentrated in southern

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<sup>14</sup> *The Republic of China Yearbook 2015* (Taipei: Executive Yuan, 2015), 47-50. The content of the Chinese and English versions of the *Yearbook* differ greatly. The Chinese version is devoted to statistics and policies, and does not include a similar section on history and demography.

<sup>15</sup> 原住民族, formerly translated as "aboriginal groups." The number of indigenous groups in Taiwan has fluctuated and, considering this history, may change in the future, but for this study I follow the ROC government's most current published literature.

<sup>16</sup> *Yearbook* 47-48.

China but a significant part of the global Chinese diaspora, maintain the belief that their ancestors emigrated from the Central Plain and they therefore retain elements of China's traditional culture and civilization.<sup>17</sup> As their migrations southward encroached upon the established Punti 本地 peoples of the south they became known as Hakka, "guest people" or "outsider households," new arrivals to a long occupied territory. While Holo comprise seventy percent of Taiwan's population, the Hakka make up just under twenty percent.

The third Han subdivision in Taiwan is "immigrants arriving in 1949," otherwise known as mainlanders or *waishengren* 外省人 ("Chinese from provinces outside [Taiwan]"). The *Yearbook* explains, "The ROC government's relocation to Taiwan in 1949 occasioned an influx of 1.2 million people from the Chinese mainland to the island. The majority were soldiers, civil servants, and teachers. Unlike earlier immigrants, these people came all over the mainland and included not only Han Chinese but also ethnic groups from Mongolia, Tibet, and southwestern China."<sup>18</sup> As demonstrated in these excerpts, Taiwan's official narrative problematizes the PRC category of Han by acknowledging the great diversity among subgroups within the Han ethnicity. These subgroups are recognized both officially and at the popular level (see part II below). More pointedly, the existence of the island's indigenous population challenges the earlier GMD (and now PRC) depiction of Taiwanese as simply fellow members of the Chinese fraternity.

In an official sense, the nine aboriginal tribes of the island have become sixteen officially recognized indigenous groups that altogether comprise just over two percent of

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<sup>17</sup> Nicole Constable, ed. *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 29. See Constable's own introductory essay for an overview of Hakka identity.

<sup>18</sup> *Yearbook* 48.

the overall population, yet they receive coverage equal to that of the Han in the *Yearbook*. The disproportionate prominence of Taiwan's aborigines stems from two interrelated developments that began in the 1980s: first, the rise of organized political opposition after decades of authoritarian GMD rule and, second, the aboriginal rights movement. These together ushered in a new trend emphasizing Taiwanese identity that undermined the PRC and GMD, as both institutions symbolized ties to the mainland. The upsurge in Taiwanese identity gave rise to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which dominated the island's political life from 2000-2008 and is currently in power. As part of its platform of independence from China, the DPP emphasizes the role of aborigines in Taiwanese history and society, and especially their cultural and linguistic links to Austronesian peoples scattered across the Pacific, "from Madagascar Island in the west to Easter Island in the east and from Taiwan in the north to New Zealand in the south."<sup>19</sup> The indigenous population therefore effectively orients the island away from mainland China.<sup>20</sup> When one considers that many of Taiwan's indigenous people have "blended" with Han over the centuries, it suggests that even the island's Han population is now linked to a sphere beyond China.<sup>21</sup> In the PRC, which lays claim to both the island and its inhabitants as part of China, these aborigines are known collectively as the *gaoshanzu* 高山族 or "mountain people," one of the fifty-five minority groups that comprise the Chinese nation (Zhonghua minzu). In neither China nor Taiwan are aborigines considered

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<sup>19</sup> *Yearbook* 49.

<sup>20</sup> Melissa J. Brown, ed., *Negotiating Ethnicities in China and Taiwan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 23-29. See also A-chin Hsiau, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> *Yearbook* 49.

Han; however, in China they *are* considered Chinese while in Taiwan they are *not*, a testament to the differing visions of the Chinese nation on either side of the strait.

In recent years the phrase *sida zuqun* 四大族群 has gained popularity within Taiwanese society as an epithet for the island's four primary population groupings, and includes the three Han subgroups—Holo, Hakka, and mainlander—with the addition of indigenous peoples, a taxonomy quite different from those of the PRC, Hong Kong or Macao. And just as the PRC uses the term *minzu* while Macao employs *zuyi* and Hong Kong uses *zhongzu*, Taiwan has adopted the term *zuqun*, yet another alternative means of organizing and classifying the population. Although all four terms share the character *zu* 族, which alone conveys the somewhat nebulous idea of a group united by kinship ties, still as one would expect, each phrase carries its own unique historical and political implications and should not be considered analogous.

## II. POPULAR CONCEPTIONS OF HAN

Between 2005 and 2015, I spoke with fifty individuals in the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao about what it means to be Han. I initiated discussion using a simple interview questionnaire asking first about personal background including race, ethnicity, language, and nation. The document, provided below, then poses two open questions:

Who are the Han, and what are the special characteristics of Han people?<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For the survey I used two versions of the same questionnaire. The one provided here is the PRC version with simplified characters, while the version distributed in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan used traditional characters. Beyond this the two documents were identical.

调查表 Questionnaire  
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您背景 Your Background

年龄 Age:

国家 Country:

民族 Ethnicity:

母语 Mother Tongue:

种族 Race:

问题 Questions

“汉族”是指谁? **Who** are the Han?

汉人有什么特征? **What** are the special characteristics of Han people?

**Personal Background**

I designed the first section, that on personal background, partly for basic demographic information but more importantly to better understand certain aspects of Chinese identity that, unlike gender, age, and occupation, are often ambiguous and open to interpretation. As shown below, many Han lack consensus on a shared nation, language, culture, race, or even ethnicity.

For instance, when asking about *guojia* (country/state), those in the mainland responded that they belong to either “Zhongguo” (China) or the full political title “Peoples’ Republic of China.” In Taiwan the same query elicited a response of either “Taiwan” or “Republic of China,” *never* Zhongguo and *certainly* never the PRC. Those

in Hong Kong and Macao answered that their country/state is either “Hong Kong,” “Macao,” or “China” (*Zhongguo*), but again *never* did these respondents answer with PRC. Because *guojia* connotes a political entity it comes as no surprise that these Han in Taiwan do not identify with the PRC—the communist government never did control the island, and identification with *Zhongguo* would also infer political ties to mainland China. As for Hong Kong and Macao, one could speculate that since 1997 and 1999 respectively, the two Special Administrative Regions see themselves as reunited with China but not with the PRC government. After all, the two entities were under the control of foreign colonial powers when Mao established the People’s Republic. Perhaps in the future, when a generation has grown up under the PRC, the people of Hong Kong and Macao will identify with that state, but at present this does not seem to be the case.

When asked about ethnicity, those in the PRC answered both readily and unequivocally that they are Han, sometimes with a degree of incredulity (“what else would I be?”). For those in Taiwan ethnicity was either “Han” or “Zhonghua,” but generally they were not as certain as those in the PRC and a few individuals, after hesitating, explained that they have some aborigine (*yuanzhumin*) in their ancestry, which called into question their status as Han. Clearly in this case ethnicity is more closely related to lineage than culture, a salient characteristic of responses in Taiwan. In Hong Kong and Macao only two individuals claimed to be ethnically Han. Instead most reported their ethnicity as *zhongguo* (curiously not *zhonghua*), which is interesting because elsewhere *Zhongguo* is considered a polity or geographic territory rather than an ethnic group. It could be that in this case *zhongguo* was short for *zhongguoren*, which would simply mean “Chinese.” In any case, even among those who consider themselves

Han, little agreement exists about whether this represents citizenship, culture, blood, biology, or some combination of these.

Whereas discussions in the PRC reveal that one's ethnicity is always assuredly clear, asking about race proved far more problematic—after much head scratching and requests for me to clarify the difference with ethnicity (which I declined to do), most respondents guessed their race was Han or, in a few cases, the antiquated *Huangzhong* (Yellow race). For those in Taiwan, fully half believed that race was the “same as ethnicity” and therefore they are ethnically *and* racially Han, but three individuals thought of themselves as racially *Quanzhouren* (a region of Fujian province in mainland China), one considers himself of the “Taiwanese” race, and another is racially “Chinese.” Among those in Hong Kong and Macao, three abstained from answering the question of race because they thought it inapplicable, three answered *Zhongguo* (including one claiming “Han” ethnicity), one considered himself racially “Asian,” and one person is racially *zhonghua*. If dissention exists with reference to ethnicity, the question of race is nothing short of bewildering.

Though in northern China everyone consistently claimed Hanyu (Han language) as a mother tongue, in southern China this was not the case. For instance, in Guangzhou most answered with Cantonese (*Guangdonghua* 廣東話 or *Yueyu* 粵語), or Cantonese *and* Hanyu. In Xiamen many responded with Fujianese 福建話 alone (language of Fujian province) or in combination with Mandarin. Never did anyone in these southern areas claim Hanyu as their sole or primary language. For those in Taiwan, mother tongue was nearly always Taiwanese/Minnanyu (a Fujian derivative), sometimes in combination with Guoyu 國語 (the “national language,” Taiwan's equivalent to Mandarin), with only one

respondent in Taiwan claiming *guoyu* alone as their mother tongue.<sup>23</sup> Among those in Hong Kong, mother tongue is *solely* Cantonese (*Guangdonghua* or *Yueyu*), *never* Hanyu nor even Chinese (*zhongguohua*). Those in Macao also claimed Cantonese as a mother tongue, though many also speak Portuguese and English with varying proficiency. Clearly few people would agree with the dictionary definition of the “Han language,” which suggests Hanyu is a broad category inclusive of Cantonese, Fujianese, Minnanyu, and other regional “dialects.” Instead, according to this sample, Chinese people tend to see Hanyu more narrowly as an equivalent to *Putonghua*, the official national language used across China but native to the Central Plain region of the north.

All these background questions really serve as an exercise in self-categorization. The opacity of the categories, though somewhat confusing, also demands individual interpretation, and the areas of disagreement and difference become just as meaningful as any areas of consonance. Overall it suggests that even the Han cannot agree on a single trait that unites them—whether citizenship, ethnicity, race, language, territory, or other identifiers.

### **Survey in the PRC**

As already suggested by answers to the background questions, in the PRC, where the government codified a system of ethnic groups into law and stamps ethnicity in IDs and passports, everyone confidently informed me of their ethnicity without the slightest reservation. Nearly half of respondents during the course of our discussion also brought up the fifty-six ethnic group configuration unprompted, showing not only an awareness

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<sup>23</sup> This was in Taipei and environs. In southern Taiwan it is likely that the number of those speaking only Taiwanese would have been far greater.

and acceptance of the official taxonomy but a real identification with the label and category. Beyond that certainty, however, their understanding of Han in general reveals a great degree of ambiguity and discord. While minorities exhibit special characteristics, the Han are unique in that they *lack* special characteristics. Most people defined Han by population or simply as the majority. They also tended to refer to Han as “normal Chinese” who (unlike minorities) lack shared beliefs, foods, customs, language, or territory. In fact, rather than listing any defining characteristics of the Han, people were more apt to describe minority uniqueness.

For instance, one Beijing taxi driver, when asked who the Han are, gestured outside the window and said: “Just regular people, like in Beijing.” When asked about the people in the countryside versus urban Beijing, whether they too constitute “regular people,” he said “all Han are basically the same.” When I persisted by contrasting their disparate lifestyles, he explained that they all used to be the same, they all came from the same place (*zhongyuan*), but now differences exist. Nowadays the Chinese people are “all mixed together.” This abbreviated account of the Han narrative certainly jibes with the current official PRC national narrative discussed above. When I went on to ask this same man about the unique characteristics of the Han, he said they have none. “Minorities each have their own beliefs, customs, language, foods, etc. Like the Hui don’t eat pork; but the Han have no special beliefs or dietary restrictions.”

This tendency to define the Han negatively against minorities pervaded my discussions with PRC citizens. Many echoed the prototypical response of another Beijing resident, who reported that the Han are the most populous of the ethnic groups. When asked what, beyond high population, characterizes the Han, he merely replied that they

are *not* Dai or Zhuang or Hui. Another taxi driver, this one in the historic city of Xi'an southwest of Beijing, also characterized the Han as “normal Chinese” 一般的中国人.

For him the defining characteristic of the Han is that “there are many of them. You get ten Chinese people together, nine are Han. The rest are the minority because there are fewer of them.” He also defined the Han against the Hui, saying the Hui believe in Islam. When asked what the Han believe in, he simply replied: “Whatever they want.”

The historical Han/other dichotomy remains a key component of Chinese cosmology. According to convention, the civilized (Han) always occupy the geographic center, are sedentary, literate, and eat cooked food, whereas the feral barbarians reside in the periphery as ignorant nomads who roam the grasslands of the steppe and eat their food raw.<sup>24</sup> These same familiar motifs appear in many popular descriptions of Han (and minority) characteristics. For example, a young female hotel clerk in Xi'an defined the Han as one of China's fifty-six ethnic groups, of which they comprise the greater part. When asked about unique characteristics, she replied that “they have yellow skin. Most are sedentary, not that nomadic kind of the steppe grasslands. The character of most is outspoken and straightforward, honest and kindhearted, and happy to help people.” Her coworker reiterated that the Han are indeed one of the fifty-six Chinese ethnic groups, with the Han comprising two-thirds of the population. “Their lifestyle is pretty much relatively centralized and concentrated [in densely populated areas]. Also they are sedentary. They eat cooked food mostly, Han don't like to eat raw food. Han clothing gives one a feeling of simplicity, taste, naturalness, and neatness. Clothing of other minorities each has its own unique taste and style.”

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<sup>24</sup> See Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

When questioning a woman in Beijing, I once again received the predictable reply that Han are the most populous of the fifty-six ethnic groups, with 96% of the entire country's population. Like the Xi'an hotel clerk, she believed that cuisine plays a part in identity, though she was much more explicit about their diet, explaining: "Han like to eat pork, mutton, dog, and chicken, but Hui people don't eat pork." Also like the Xi'an hotel clerk, she believed that fashion plays a part in Han identity, but she specified that "Han clothing is primarily the *qipao* 旗袍, which was vogue in Tang dynasty times."<sup>25</sup>

Although discussions on the topic of Han identity in the PRC exhibited a great deal of uniformity, I of course also confronted a few deviations. One of the more unique responses came from a man in Beijing who, when asked to explain for me who the Han are, thought for a moment and suggested it may be best to ask a historian. He was completely unaware of the irony that I am a historian who assumed it would be best to ask a Han. But his desire to consult a historian underscores the prominent role that academics play in identity formation, both as experts and the source of "truth."

Generally speaking, popular definitions of Han identity in the PRC seldom touched on issues of race, whether lineage or biology. One exception was the aforementioned female hotel clerk in Xi'an, who just said that Han have yellow skin. In the only other instance someone brought up Han physiology, our discussion did not progress beyond one sentence. When asked about the Han, this Beijing resident gave the familiar reply: "Han are one of the fifty-six ethnic groups of the People's Republic of China." When asked about special characteristics, she replied that they have yellow skin

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<sup>25</sup> The *qipao*, aside from being a twentieth century creation, is a woman's dress designed from the hybridization of traditional Chinese and modern Western clothing styles. See Patricia Ebrey, *China: A Cultural, Social, and Political History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 261.

and black hair. When I mentioned that Japanese and Koreans also have these traits, she had no reply.

To get at a more academic answer I posed the same set of questions to two specialists at the Central University for Nationalities. As both experts in the relevant field of anthropology *and* professors at a university for minorities, one might expect a cogent response. After considering my question for several moments they told me with some confidence that all Han use Chinese characters. I felt obliged to point out that many minorities, including those at their school (where minorities are the majority), also use characters and that I too as a foreigner use characters. I also suggested that some Han may be illiterate, and wondered if this disqualified them from Han status. They seemed aware of this quandary, and agreed that the criteria for being Han poses a complex problem with no easy solution, but that the Han Research Society is now in the process of exploring this question.<sup>26</sup>

Considering all these responses as a whole, it seems that the PRC created a specific category with a quantifiable number of Han, and this official taxonomy has indeed permeated popular views. But like an empty box, the PRC failed to define Han as a people—a phenomenon Dru Gladney referred to as the “undefined majority” with parallels in the official US category “white” or Caucasian.<sup>27</sup>

## **Survey in Taiwan**

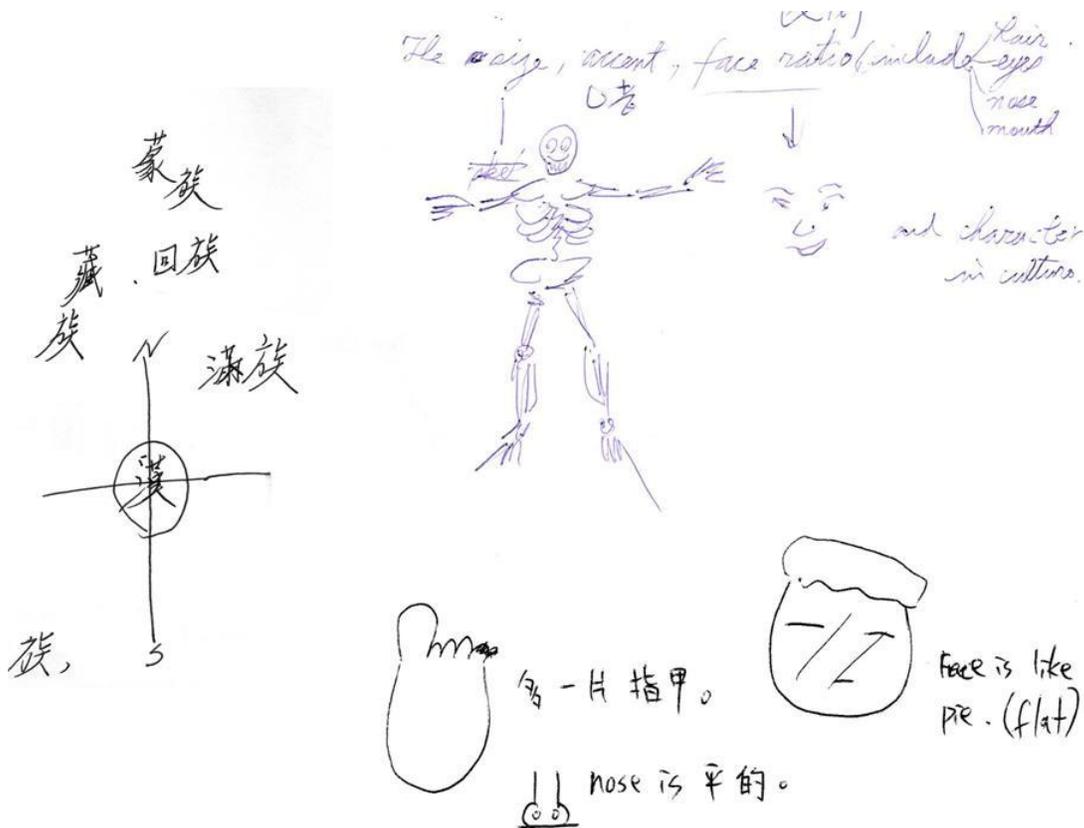
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<sup>26</sup> Thanks to a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, in 2006 I traveled across China to visit with anthropology professors at top institutions about this question, including the Central University for Nationalities as well as Xiamen, Zhongshan, and Tsinghua Universities.

<sup>27</sup> Dru Gladney, “Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994): 92-123. On the fiction of whiteness in America see Ruth Frankenberg, *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

But if responses in China seem relatively uniform or even predictable, those encountered in Taiwan tended to greater variation. And whereas those in the PRC avoided discussion along racial lines, in Taiwan my questionnaire often elicited inventories of Han phenotypes. These definitions seem to reflect vestigial ideas of Han as race, defined primarily by physical characteristics and lineage stretching back to the Central Plain or the Yellow Emperor and *against* the Five Races 五族共和 configuration that prevailed in the Republican era, though in Taiwan the Han are also occasionally associated with Confucian culture.

For instance, in his response to my questions, a professional musician suggested that “the main race in China we call Han” may be recognized by “[body] size, accented features, and face ratio [measurements] including hair, eyes, nose, and mouth” and by “character in culture.” The detailed diagram of Han face and skeletal structure accompanying these remarks appears below. Likewise a biology lab worker indicated that the Han are those whose ancestors lived in the Yellow and Yangzi River valleys. They are recognizable by certain physical anomalies including the nail of the smallest toe and a flat nose. Her twelve year old daughter explained that the Han are a type of race, and elaborated on their physical characteristics such as an extra toenail, a flat nose, and a face “flat like a pie.” Their artwork appears below as well.



The third illustration resembling a compass came from someone who defined the Han geographically. This person employed Sun Yat-sen's familiar five races configuration, explaining that "among the five big races, the Han are principally of the Yellow River valley, different from the Manchu, Mongol, Hui and Tibetan peoples outside the river valleys." But the Han also exhibit observable physical traits, namely a physique smaller than Westerners, a relatively flat facial form, black hair, and black eyes. Culture also apparently plays a role, as the Han subscribe to "all sorts of marriage customs."

Several others offered graphic depictions of the Han homeland, but significantly it had migrated south of the Central Plain. One of these individuals, who considers their country/state Taiwan, and ethnicity, mother tongue and race all "Taiwanese," believes that the Han lived in "southern China...between the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers," and

offered a crude drawing of a region directly across the straits from Taiwan, an area that would be Fujian and Guangdong, surrounded by minority regions of Tibet, Xinjiang, and northern China (perhaps Manchuria). Another person, claiming Han ethnicity, assumed that race was the same as ethnicity, confessing “I really don’t know the difference.” Han characteristics today include a short and small physique, and black eyes. For this young woman, Han “originally indicated the people who resided in the region of the Central Plain, living south of the Yellow River.”

In the past, particularly under the regime of Chiang Kai-shek, the ROC government emphasized the Chineseness of Taiwan’s citizens. The Ministry of Education imposed a strict regimen of Chinese history, language, and geography in Taiwan’s classrooms. Under the DPP, however, the ROC Ministry of Education has been placing increasingly greater emphasis on Taiwanese history, Taiwanese language, and Taiwanese geography, the latter oriented toward the Pacific rather than the mainland. This shift may to some extent account for erroneously situating the Central Plain south of the Yellow River or even squarely in southern China. But the fact that most Taiwanese share ancestral origins in southern China may also influence this misconception—perhaps they equate Taiwanese origins with Han origins.

For a high school literature teacher, the Han are again those “whose ancestors originate from the Central Plain with genealogy traceable to origins with the Yellow Emperor.” Considering her vocation, however, it comes as no surprise that she also associates the Han with literacy and Confucianism, explaining that “because of the influence of Confucian thought and the lengthy history of cultural traditions, in sum the Han are relatively urbane, genteel and cultivated.” Here again, like the professors in the

PRC, the educated seem inclined to ascribe proficiency in characters exclusively to the Han, and because literacy is the hallmark of civilization, by extension the Han enjoy a monopoly on that as well.

A businessman with a graduate degree from the prestigious National Taiwan University said the narrow definition of Han is simply “Chinese people with Han blood lineage, but actually it’s very difficult to discern who has pure Han blood.” A more general definition is “Chinese who grow up under Han culture... peripheral ethnic groups, we don’t consider them Han, especially because their ancestors are different.” He divided the special characteristics of the Han into two types: biophysical and cultural traits. For the first, he says only that there are many sayings, such as that the Han have an extra crease at the elbow joint, “but I myself am not completely sure whether these sayings are correct.” As for the cultural component, it includes “Confucian influence, emphasis on the five relationships, language and script, primacy of exams, and [the Confucian values of] ritual and propriety.”

The tendency of respondents in Taiwan to resort to sketches in order to clearly convey their ideas indicates, I believe, a more concrete set of criteria than in the PRC, where the Han are instead some nondescript, vacuous entity defined only by what they are *not*. Another salient difference in ROC conceptions of the Han lies with Confucianism, and while only about one third of respondents in Taiwan mentioned a relationship between Confucianism and the Han, outside of Taiwan it never came up. This hardly comes as a surprise, however, since Maoist iconoclasm had roundly denounced Confucius and his tradition, thus precluding a return to Confucianism as heritage of the Han. In contrast, Chiang Kai-shek had countered the appeal of

communism with his New Life Movement, which made Confucianism a state religion and Confucius' birthday a national holiday. Since the 1980s, however, the mainland has seen a resurgence of interest in Confucian philosophy, a trend which in the future may mean the reintegration of Confucianism into Han identity.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, a Taiwanese doctoral student of anthropology said that the Han are “ethnically derived from people who originally lived in the yellow earth plains who since migrated to many places in geographic China. They bore the cultural identity which is claimed to have a continuous heritage from Xia, Shang, and Zhou.” The special characteristics of the Han include: 1) General physical appearances which differ from other minorities. 2) The mother tongues of the Han share similar background, traceable to a single region. 3) Culturally they are taught to be the Han, bearing the teaching of Confucius or other doctrines such as shared historical background and ancestral origins in ‘*zhongyuan*.’”

Surprisingly in Taiwan, Han identity is not defined against the island's aboriginal population but against the big four mainland minorities recognized in the Republican era. Because these definitions, whether based on biology, lineage, culture, or territory, all link Han to the mainland, it would seem that the persistence of Han identity in Taiwan would serve Beijing's claim on Taiwan and its people. Conversely, it could be that in Taiwan the increasing identification with parochial Taiwanese identity is steadily displacing identification with the Han and therefore gradually severing ties with China. In any case, Han identity in Taiwan carries clear political implications.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For evidence of the resurgence of Confucianism in the PRC see Guo Yingjie and Baogang He, “Reimagining the Chinese Nation: The ‘Zeng Guofan Phenomenon,’” *Modern China* 25.2 (1999): 142-170.

<sup>29</sup> For further discussion of Taiwan's Chineseness see Melissa Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

## Survey in Hong Kong and Macao

In contrast to the PRC and Taiwan, and in concert with their official taxonomies, in Hong Kong and Macao the term “Han” seldom appears in common discourse. My questions about the Han elicited quizzical looks more often than coherent answers. Individuals consistently identified themselves, both racially and ethnically, as Chinese, Hong Konger, or Macanese rather than Han. When asked to define the term, most people simply equated Han with the Chinese. The only specific traits consistently associated with the Han were decidedly physical—yellow skin, black hair, black eyes, etc., and often these were brought up only after some cajoling.

For instance, when asked who the Han are, one woman in Hong Kong said simply “Han are Chinese.” When asked about their unique characteristics, she replied with a terse “they have none.” A short while later I posed the same questions to a Hong Kong teen, who told me “the Han are Chinese people,” with no distinguishing characteristics. When pressed for elaboration, he shrugged and explained: “I am Chinese in Hong Kong.”

When respondents in Hong Kong and Macao *did* describe Han characteristics, these usually fell under the rubric of phenotypes but still offered little in the way of variation or originality. A twenty year-old female in Macao equated the Han with *zhonghua minzu*, a broad category of Chinese encompassing minorities and overseas Chinese. She maintained that the Han are primarily defined by physical features, including yellow skin, black eyes, black hair, and short frame. But linguistically the Han also speak fluent Cantonese *and* Mandarin (*guoyu*), which would actually exclude most Han by PRC standards. When I pointed out that some people in Taiwan speak *only*

Taiwanese, she added regional “dialects” to her criteria, such as those of Chaozhou and Fujian.

A Hong Kong resident in his forties also said the Han are simply Chinese, with yellow skin and short stature. When I pointed out that this could describe the Japanese, I was told that the Japanese came from China. When asked about differences between the two, he said “the Japanese have smaller eyes.” A Malaysian man in Hong Kong, also in his forties, who considers himself both ethnically and racially Chinese (*zhonghua minzu*), also equated the Chinese with the Han but unlike others, he referred to Sun’s five racial groups. He explained that the Han share black hair, brown eyes, and yellow skin. When asked how this differs from the Japanese, he insisted that the Japanese are Han who moved to the islands during the Tang dynasty.

Despite the general confusion surrounding the question of race, some people seemed to believe that ethnicity is a racial subgroup. Just as one person in the PRC considered herself ethnically Han but racially *Huangzhong* (Yellow Race), so a college student at the University of Macao considered himself ethnically Han but racially Chinese (*zhongguoren*). For him the Han “are one of China’s five great ethnic groups, China’s biggest race.” Once again they are characterized by small stature, yellow skin, black eyes, but also their industriousness. Another young man in Macao initially responded that his country is China, then thought better of it and replaced it with Macao. He considers himself ethnically Chinese (*zhongguoren*), and racially Asian. Perhaps due to his position in the periphery he defined Han in the broadest possible terms, calling them *dazhonghuaminzu* 大中華民族, which again would include minorities and overseas

Chinese. In his estimation the Han all share yellow skin, black eyes, and speak *Huayu* 華語, which encompasses every Chinese dialect.

A college student in Macao also seemed to equate the Han with the Chinese, but defined them politically as: “All races living under the rule of the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China.” Whereas cultural definitions were few and far between in Hong Kong and Macao, for her the Han share an “emphasis on the family and blood lineage.” In contrast, her classmate said that the Han are not simply the same as Chinese people but the *greater part* of the Chinese people. Their uniqueness lies strictly in material culture, as “Han clothing is different, and food is different” from minorities, but their physical appearance is otherwise the same.

In short, it would seem that in Hong Kong and Macao the term Han lacks currency—instead residents use the word Chinese, presumably because as a former Western colony the most important identity was as Chinese or foreigner. The foreign presence, it seems, may have encouraged solidarity within the Chinese community by eclipsing any Chinese subdivisions. Although Hong Kong and Macao now officially belong to the PRC, this happened fairly recently and their Special Administrative Region status keeps Beijing administratively at arm’s length. These factors may explain why perceptions of the Han in Hong Kong and Macao significantly differ from those in the PRC, where no one mentioned race or biology but everyone is familiar with the system of fifty-six ethnic groups and clearly affiliates with one of those groups.

In each case, recent political history can explain the divergence of Han identities. In Taiwan, the meaning of Han seems to be a remnant of the ROC emphasis on Confucianism, race (biology and lineage), and the logic of five races. Meanwhile citizens

of the PRC tend to view the Han as simply ordinary people, the banal majority among fifty-five exotic minorities. Though the term Han is seldom used in Hong Kong and Macao, a vague understanding generally exists that Han means Chinese, a much broader meaning than found elsewhere.

## **Conclusion**

Claims to a shared national identity undergird the PRC's claims to restive Xinjiang and Tibet, but more fundamentally to Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, which are viewed as predominantly Han Chinese and therefore both biologically but also culturally kin to China's majority. Yet crossing both temporal and geographic boundaries in the pursuit of Han identity exposes the fiction of a single, united Chinese nation and the reality of a fractured, contested and changeable identity, even within the presumptive core community of Han Chinese.