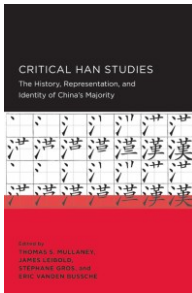


## REVIEW: *CRITICAL HAN STUDIES*

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Thomas Mullaney, James Leibold, Stéphane Gros, and Eric Armand Vanden Bussche (eds). 2012. *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press. vii+410pp, notes, character list, bibliography, contributors, index. ISBN 9780984590988 (paper 49.95USD).

This path-breaking volume is an academic collaboration that emerged out of the "Critical Han Studies Conference and Workshop" at Stanford University in April 2008. Eleven scholars contributed to the question of what it means to be 'Han' in China, both historically and at present. Constituting over ninety percent of China's population, the Han are not only the largest ethnic group in China, but are also one of the largest categories of collective identity in the world. Despite this, the dominant Han group has so far eluded careful scholarly scrutiny, with the Han often referred to as an unmarked majority category in contemporary China. This volume challenges such conventional views by conceptualizing new interdisciplinary approaches to the question of Haness.

The eleven essays of the volume are divided into three themes: 'Han and China', 'The Problem of Han Origins', and 'The Problem of Han Formations'. The first theme, comprised of four essays, analyzes the ties that bind the category of Han to those of Chinese ethnicity, race, and polity. Kevin Carrico in "Recentring China: The Cantonese in and Beyond the Han" questions a single, unitary Haness that he believes conceals "countless other perceived and imagined lines of differentiation" (25). The study examines how multiple identities

such as 'Chinese', 'great Han', 'Northerner', 'Southerner', 'Cantonese', 'urban resident', or 'citizen of the Republic of Guangdong', were employed by Guangdong Province and its people to either relate themselves to an imagined powerful center of China, or re-create themselves as a new center in the reform era (44).

In the second chapter by Emma Teng, "On Not Looking Chinese: Does 'Mixed Race' Decenter the Han from Chineseness", the unique experiences of two Eurasian women, Irene Cheng and Han Suyin, who self-identified as Chinese during the twentieth century, are explored. The limitations of 'Han' as a category of identity in transracial and transnational contexts beyond the geographic and political boundaries of the PRC is shown.

In the third chapter, "Climate's Moral Economy: Geography, Race, and the Han in Early Republican China", Zhihong Chen historicizes the construction of 'Chinese' and 'Hanness' in the early Republican era. This was a time when Chinese intellectuals and geographers in particular, first engaged with Western theories of geography and race. These theories were later used by Chinese nationalists to make claims for Han racial superiority and colonization of the frontier regions.

The last essay of this section, "Good Han, Bad Han: The Moral Parameters of Ethnopolitics in China", further complicates the usage of Han as a state-imposed, innovative category of identity. The author, Uradyn Bulag, explores the ethnopolitical practice of 'Good Han' (who treated minorities fairly) and 'Bad Han' (who treated minorities unfairly) under the PRC. 'Good Han' valued multiculturalism, mutual respect, and collaborative development, and stood apart from their perceived opposites, the 'Bad Han' or 'Great Han Chauvinist'. As Bulag describes, ethnopolitics has been used carefully by the Party to avoid the path of 'separatism' and ensure Chinese state stability.

The three essays in the second section constitute a provocative dialogue on the origins of the Han category among Chinese and Western scholars. Xu Jieshun's "Understanding the Snowball Theory of the Han Nationality" argues for the ancient origins of the Han. This represents a long-standing, dominant view in mainland Chinese

scholarship. Xu supports his arguments with evidence gleaned from ancient Chinese sources.

Tamara Chin in the next chapter, "Antiquarian as Ethnographer: Han Ethnicity in Early China Studies", demonstrates the pitfalls that modern antiquarian scholarship faced when using ancient materials to study Han ethnicity. Chin shows how ancient literacy was recorded and reinterpreted through practices of classical studies to strengthen a Sinocentric, ethnocentric worldview that was later transmitted into the inquiries of modern ethnology and archaeology, whose knowledge helped the formulation of the ancient Han nationality (*Hanzu*).

In "The Han Joker in the Pack: Some Issues of Culture and Identity from the Minzu Literature", Nicholas Tapp carefully examines the term *minzu* in relation to ethnicity. Tapp argues that the *minzu* concept is truly modern and its introduction "changes the nature of the playing field entirely" (148). He contends that "Han appears to be the joker in the pack, the one that supports all visible categories through its own hidden dominance" (170).

The third section focuses on the problem of the Han formation both as a term/label and as an ethnic identity. Mark Elliott, in "Hushuo: The Northern Other and the Naming of the Han Chinese", delineates how the term Han had been used and developed by the Hu, steppe people from the Northern Wei to the Ming. He provocatively argues that it is through this intergroup contact that the Han was transformed from a political concept to an ethnic term.

C. Patterson Giersch, in his chapter, "From Subjects to Han: The Rise of Han as Identity in Nineteenth-Century Southwest China", explores the formation of Han ethnic identity among immigrant groups who competed with indigenous communities for economic resources in nineteenth century Yunnan.

In "Searching for Han: Early Twentieth-Century Narratives of Chinese Origins and Development", James Leibold returns to Xu Jieshun's view on the origins of the ancient Han, and traces such a dominant view of mainland China to a history of Chinese urban male elites' struggle to locate an indigenous origin and unity for China's

culture and people when facing the threat of foreign imperialist expansion in the early twentieth century.

The final essay, "Han at *Minzu's* Edges: What Critical Han Studies Can Learn from China's 'Little Tibet'", is an anthropological study based on author Chris Vasantkumar's fieldwork in Xiahe, a Tibetan tourist town, where Han and non-Han interact in local sites and, through linguistic practices, form more subtle and tenuous forms of community beyond the narrow confines of official *minzu* politics.

*Critical Han Studies* is an important work that anyone who studies Chinese ethnicity, identity, or culture should read. The book draws strength from previous works on the construction of Han identity in China by, among others, Dru Gladney (1991, 2004), Stevan Harrell (1995, 2001), and Kai-wing Chow (1997, 2001). It also looks beyond China for methodological inspiration and theoretical guidance, particularly from Critical Race Theory and Whiteness Studies. Such new concepts and methodological approaches revolutionize the ways in which Han, Chinese, and China may be understood. In this context, this book is of great value to China studies in general.

Despite these very strong points, contributing scholars might have shown more reflexivity in questioning their own objectivity and political stance, as they applied postcolonial and postmodern critical theory to deconstruct, dislocate, and unpack the Han majority. Furthermore, such issues as gender, language, and diaspora remain to be further explored.

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