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## Surnames and Han Chinese Identity

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Despite enormous geographical diversity and mutually incomprehensible dialects or languages, today more than a billion people consider themselves to be Han Chinese. This situation makes Han Chinese ethnic identity one of the wonders of world history. Whereas Western Europe and the Americas together are home to almost as many people, they divide themselves into several dozen countries and even more ethnic groups. What has made China different? What has made it possible for Han Chinese to imagine such an enormous agglomeration of people as sharing something important, something that makes it possible, even desirable, to live together in a single state? No one would deny that Han Chinese had multiple identities, or that many situations left room for manipulation and negotiation, for choice concerning which identity or identities to assert. But the Han Chinese layer of identity has been and continues to be important in social and political life. In this essay I examine the connection between Chinese surnames and Han Chinese identity.<sup>1</sup> I contend that Chinese understandings of ethnic identity have differed in important ways from ones found elsewhere—ones based on language, race, or place—and that their distinctive features help account for the huge size of the Han ethnic group.

Conventional wisdom has it that the secret to Chinese identity and cohesion was Confucian “culturalism” or universalism, bases for identity fundamentally different from nationalism, racism, and

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay I use the term “Han identity” in its modern sense. In premodern times, the vocabulary used to refer to what is now labeled “Han” ethnicity was much more complicated, with other terms (especially “Hua” and “Xia”) more common in many periods, and no term at all needed in many contexts. For a good discussion of the historical evolution of the use of “Han” as an ethnic term, see Chen 1986.

the sort of ethnic identity that sets up boundaries against outsiders. Culturalism was, without question, an important strain of Confucianism. Confucius and his followers over the centuries saw Chinese culture as superior to any other culture; they also saw that culture as something outsiders could acquire. To them the Chinese state and the Chinese family were perfect forms of social organization because they were based on the truest moral principles, universal principles such as loyalty and filial piety; adherence to these forms and principles were what made China Chinese and what made China superior to other places. Confucianism thus offered little grounds for erecting barriers against absorption of outsiders and indeed saw expansion of China through transformation or assimilation of non-Chinese as the natural state of affairs. Because of Confucian universalism, moreover, this openness applied even at the level of rulers. As long as one accepted that virtue and the ability to achieve order were what qualified one to rule as Son of Heaven, even the symbolic center of Chinese society and culture could, in theory at least, be occupied by someone whose first language was not Chinese and whose ancestors were not Chinese so long as he upheld Confucian political principles. Thus, in the late nineteenth century, traditional Chinese ways of thinking about identity differed fundamentally from the sorts of nationalist passions raging in Europe, and modern reformers and revolutionaries tried to awaken in China new notions that would make China more competitive internationally.<sup>2</sup>

This conventional focus on Confucian culturalism encourages us to overlook or underestimate the genuinely ethnic component of Chinese conceptions of a vast "we group" labeled Xia, Hua, or Han; this is the component that relates to ancestors, to what is primordial; inherited, not acquired. This ethnic dimension of Chinese identity was rooted in the habit of thinking of the largest we-group in terms of patrilineal kinship, that is, imagining the Hua, Xia, or Han, metaphorically at least, as a giant patrilineal descent group made up of intermarrying surname groups (*xing*). If all that mattered to common identity were common customs or a history of common connection to a state, there would be no need to draw attention to common ancestry; indeed, if one truly wished to celebrate the transformation of originally distinct people into Chinese, it would be better to assert that they originally had no

<sup>2</sup> For some recent critical discussions of Confucian culturalism, see Bol 1987, Langlois 1980, Crossley 1990, Duara 1993.

kinship connection. But repeatedly in Chinese history, the vocabulary of kinship and surname was adopted. Thus, thinking about the most inclusive we-group drew on and was colored by familiar ways of thinking about patrilineal kinship and its connections to both identity and solidarity.

The Chinese are unusual in world history in their system of family names (*xing*). There are of course many other patrilineal societies, but few if any in which patrilineality was so closely tied to name from so early a period. The Chinese writing system, which allowed the written form of a name to remain the same over centuries, and the Chinese bureaucratic government, which strove to register every one of its subjects, undoubtedly had much to do with the historical development of this distinctive naming system. What is important here, however, is that over time family names became very important for both personal and group identity. A person's family name was much more important than his or her personal name, a situation uncommon elsewhere. These family names were, moreover, central to notions of ancestors and marriage: ancestors shared one's surname; marriage partners did not. By Han times, Chinese had become accustomed to thinking of those with common ancestors generations or even centuries earlier as forming a natural solidarity group. By Tang times, they had even come to think of those with the same surname (and thus presumably a common ancestor several thousand years earlier) as having something important in common. Over time the number of surnames in common use gradually declined. Whereas a study based on historical records found more than 3,000 single-character Chinese surnames, a study based on the 1982 census in China found only 729 Han Chinese surnames. Moreover, surprisingly few surnames account for a very large proportion of the population. Wang, Chen, Li, Zhang, and Liu are used by 32 percent of the population, and half the population have one of only fourteen names.<sup>3</sup> Although Chinese family names often began etymologically as place names, associations with place weakened over time for all the common surnames.<sup>4</sup> Knowing someone is a Li or a

<sup>3</sup> Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan 1990, 1, 43. To continue the calculations, 25 names account for about 60 percent, 114 names for 90 percent, and 365 names for 99 percent. Besides the decline in the number of surnames in common use, there has been an even more noticeable decline in the proportion of the people with multicharacter surnames.

<sup>4</sup> See the differential distribution of names shown in Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan 1990, 43-67. All of the most common surnames are found in each region, though the percentage of the population with a given name can vary significantly.

Wang does not tell you what province that person comes from or even whether he or she is a northerner or a southerner. And certainly it indicates nothing about culture. The kind of connection provided by surnames thus was a genealogical connection, not a connection based on place, dialect, or local culture.

For evidence of how people conceptualized the connections between surnames and Han Chinese identity, I will concentrate on the Tang (618–906) through Yuan (1215–1368) periods. During this time, Chinese identity needed its symbolic underpinnings shored up. Alien incursions, alien rulers, political division or fragmentation of the country, and large-scale movements of population all were too evident for anyone to think “China” or “the Chinese” were simple, natural products of geography. When the Tang was founded, its rulers may have chosen to hark back to the Han, but they did not hide their connections to the non-Han or partly non-Han ruling groups of the Sui, Northern Zhou, and Northern Wei, reminding all that China was neither continuously unified nor continuously ruled by Chinese and, perhaps most important, that it was often difficult to say for sure who was Chinese or what made a person Chinese. And it was not all that long before similar situations recurred. For five centuries, from the fall of the Tang to the beginning of the Ming, north and south China experienced markedly different fates. The north was at peace and part of a unified China under Chinese rulers for only about a century and a half during the Northern Song (and even then a strip at the northern edge was under the control of the Khitans). North and south evolved along separate paths, so much so that the Mongol rulers classified the Chinese of the north and the south into different ethnic categories and administered them differently. Still, in the imagination, both “China” and “the Chinese” survived the tumult of these centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Confucian culturalism was part of the story of this survival, but not the whole story. There is ample evidence that many people did not fully accept the key premise of Confucian culturalism that others could be transformed into full-fledged Chinese. Perhaps the strongest evidence for their doubts is found in the

<sup>5</sup> Concentrating on the Tang to Yuan period also allows me to set aside questions of the origins of the Chinese systems of surnames and descent paradigms and concentrate on the mature forms. Very little of what I say about the use of surnames would extend much before the Han period. How something came into being is interesting but may not be good evidence of how it later operated, and here I will not consider origins.

genealogies compiled in great profusion from the Song period on. In these it is close to unheard of to claim descent from any of the numerous non-Han peoples of south China. The histories tell of many local officials who set up schools or through other means brought Confucian culture to the local, often explicitly non-Han, population.<sup>6</sup> But if genealogies are to be believed, none of these converts ever left much progeny or at least progeny who prospered. Surely some of those who did well enough in Song, Ming, and Qing times to commission genealogies must have had patrilineal ancestors of non-Han origin. But overwhelmingly residents of the area wanted to tell a story of Han Chinese migration, sometimes in the Han but most often in the Tang, Song, or Yuan.<sup>7</sup> Rather than say they became Chinese the Confucian way, by adopting Chinese culture, they wanted to say they were Chinese by patrilineal descent. If Chineseness was actually something one could acquire by learning, why were so few willing to admit that they had learned it?<sup>8</sup> This reluctance was not just an issue of status. Many people were willing to say their ancestors had been peasants or merchants; they did not all claim to be descended from officials. We have to infer they claimed descent from Chinese migrants either because they wanted to believe it (looking down on non-Han themselves) or because it was in their interest to do so (for local politics, social prestige, or whatever).

As best I can tell from sources like the *Tong dian* and *Tong zhi*, Tang and Song observers saw wide variation in naming practices among the indigenous peoples of the south. Zheng Qiao (1104–1162) once commented that ancient China was probably like the Man (“southern barbarians”) of his day who had surnames for those of high rank but none for ordinary people.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, he, like earlier chroniclers, described some but not all local groups as having a handful of *xing*, names that sound like tribal names. Thus the Ba in Sichuan were said to have five *xing*: Ba, Fan, Shen, Xiang, and Zheng; the “Eastern Xie Man” were said to have hereditary chieftains with the name Xie; the “Western Zhao Man” were said similarly to have chieftains with the *xing* Zhao; the “Man beyond the Pine Trees” were said to be divided into several dozen groups and to have several dozen *xing*, of which

<sup>6</sup> Miyakawa 1960; Schafer 1967, 33–61.

<sup>7</sup> Eberhard 1962, 199; Faure 1989.

<sup>8</sup> See Ramsey 1987, 234–35, for the case of the Zhuang in modern times.

<sup>9</sup> Zheng 1962, 25:439A.

Zhao, Yang, Li, and Dong were aristocratic ones.<sup>10</sup> In all the cases I have found, these tribal names are transcribed as single characters, making them easy to assimilate to Chinese surnames.<sup>11</sup>

In south China, claiming descent from a Chinese migrant might be hard to prove or disprove. The dynamics of interethnic relations were probably such that groups could, over time, become socially accepted as Chinese.<sup>12</sup> The situation in the north with aliens who were enemies or conquerors was different. As long as they were privileged conquerors, it was to their benefit to have distinctive names, but once they were defeated or ousted, if they had become assimilated such distinctive names labeled them as alien, as non-Chinese, perhaps even hated non-Chinese. Moreover the "northern barbarians" had polysyllabic languages, and their names were usually transcribed as multicharacter names. Among the more educated, at least, people would not be quick to forget that Erzhu, Yuwen, and Dugu were names used by the alien conquerors in the Northern Dynasties, for instance. For those with multicharacter surnames, adopting a single-character surname, preferably one that looked like a Chinese surname, was a potent sign of a desire to assimilate. In 496 the Xianbei rulers of the Northern Wei ordered the Xianbei to take Chinese surnames; a few decades later not only was this order rescinded, but the successor states, the Western Wei and Northern Zhou, gave Xianbei names to many Chinese.<sup>13</sup> Changing names both ways also occurred during later periods of alien rule, under the Liao, Jin, and Yuan, with or without government permission.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the frequency with which it was done, altering one's family name seemed wrong to many people. When Zhu Yuanzhang founded the Ming dynasty, he ordered all those who had taken barbarian (*hu*) surnames to cease and desist. Willingness to comply went so far that even people with completely Chinese

<sup>10</sup> Zheng 1962, 197:3158A-B, 3161C, 3162A, 3162B.

<sup>11</sup> On the languages of the southern non-Han ethnic groups, see Ramsey 1987, 230-91.

<sup>12</sup> Fan Chengda (1120-1193), for instance, distinguished between "true" Man, who paid no taxes and were a source of trouble for the local officials, and those Man who had become settled, law-abiding citizens (Fan Chengda, *manzhi* 3a). On the other hand, Du You (735-812) did not accept the claim of one group of Man to be descended from Han settlers (Du 187:1003).

<sup>13</sup> Dien 1977.

<sup>14</sup> Wittfogel and Feng 1949, 8, 220, 471, 607n; Tao 1976, 98; Endicott-West 1989, 81-84.

two-character surnames like Sima, Situ, Gongsun, and Shusun dropped one character, associating two-character names with non-Han origin. But Zhu Yuanzhang's feelings were at least equally aroused by Mongols and other non-Han who took Chinese names. In 1370 he issued an edict that stated,

Heaven gave birth to this people (*simin*); tribes and clans each have their own origins. The ancient sage kings put particular emphasis on this; they [used surnames to] prohibit marriage and emphasize origins, with positive effects on popular customs. I began as a commoner and after pacifying the various warlords became the ruler of all under heaven. I have already proclaimed that the Mongols and other ethnic groups (*seren*) are all my children, and that if they have abilities I will employ them. But recently I have heard that after they enter service, they often change their surnames and personal names. I am afraid that as the years go by and generations pass, [descendants] will be blind to their origins. This is not the way the former kings were meticulous in matters of descent groups.<sup>15</sup>

On another occasion Zhu Yuanzhang pointed out that it was not so bad when people were given names that were not usual Chinese names, but when they were given or took common names, confusion with Chinese (*Huaren*) was much too easy. He quoted an official who had complained about Mongols and others taking Han surnames, citing the line from the *Zuo zhuan* that "the thoughts and feelings of those who are not of our descent group are invariably different" (*fei wo zulei, qi xin bi yi*).<sup>16</sup>

The reason Chinese did not feel entirely comfortable with the idea that other people could be transformed into Chinese is probably that the premises of Confucian culturalism ran up against equally strongly held views about ancestors and the connections between ancestors and identity. Those who had been "transformed" wanted to see themselves (or found it useful to present themselves) as Chinese by descent, and those who took themselves as Chinese by descent were neither confident that Chinese culture could or would transform aliens nor comfortable with seeing assimilated descendants of aliens appear to be denying or hiding their actual ancestry. Cross-surname adoption bothered a lot of people, so it is perhaps not surprising that cross-ethnicity transformations would as well.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Yao Guangxiao 51:5a-b (pp. 999-1000).

<sup>16</sup> Gu 4B:16-17; the allusion is to Duke Cheng, year 4; cf. Legge 1961, 5:355.

<sup>17</sup> On the notions that led to discomfort with cross-surname adoption, see Waltner 1990, 13-81.

So far I have been discussing the relationship between surnames and the line between Han and non-Han identity. This is important because to some extent at least Han Chinese identity was a residual category, comprised of all those who were not barbarians. There is a second part to my argument. I contend that within the huge but vaguely defined category of Han Chinese, descent and kinship provided a framework for grasping the whole in a structured way.

What I want to draw attention to is the habit, established by the time of Sima Qian in the Former Han, of tracing ancestry back to the remote mythical past, to the point where all Chinese are descended from the mythical Five Lords, such as Huang Di, usually called the Yellow Emperor. These ideas were still very much in force in Tang and Song times, and the theory behind them can be found many places, such as Du You's *Tong dian* (801) and Zheng Qiao's *Tong zhi* (1149). This theory is that the Chinese are descended from Shen Nong (also called Yan Di) or from his successor, Huang Di, who conferred twelve surnames on fourteen of his twenty-five sons. These were not the only names in existence; even before Shen Nong, there was Fuxi, and he was born to a mother with a clan name. But most names were regularly traced to Shen Nong or Huang Di (though they frequently were changed several times in subsequent history down through the Zhou).

Modern scholars sometimes write as though the idea of tracing the origins of the Chinese to Huang Di began in the twentieth century, with proponents of the *guocui* (national essence) school. Certainly these activists used the concept in a new way in their attempts to heighten emotional identification among Chinese. But the basic metaphor had been around for a long time. I could easily give hundreds of examples of references to Huang Di and comparable remote ancestors in Tang and Song sources. In early Tang they were routinely used in accounts of individual ancestry. Leafing through the funerary inscriptions in the first volume of Mao Hanguang's *Tangdai muzhiming huibian fukao* I found a couple dozen examples. For instance, the 617 inscription for Wei Kuangbo began by stating that he was a descendant of Di Kao-yang (a grandson of Huang Di). The 627 one for Guan Daoai said he was a descendant of Yu (as in Yao, Shun, and Yu). The 632 one of Zhang Rui traced his ancestry from Di Shaohao (a son of Huang Di). The 642 inscription for a Miss Liu mentioned both the remote Di Gao (a great-grandson of Huang Di) and the slightly less remote Yao as her ancestors.<sup>18</sup> Others did not mention which

of the figures in remotest antiquity were ancestors but did mention the first to receive the surname in the Zhou period. In some cases, a Han ancestor was the earliest one mentioned, but the omission of earlier ancestors did not necessarily imply that it would have been difficult to trace ancestry earlier: for instance, for Lius the author might merely state which Han emperor was their ancestor.<sup>19</sup> He apparently could assume that readers knew of Liu Bang's descent from Yao.<sup>20</sup>

More important to the issue at hand is the use of remote ancestors to ground group identity in the distant past. All through Tang and Song times, remote ancestors remained the dominant vocabulary where surnames, or groups of people bearing given surnames, were the topic at hand. In other words, giving an apical ancestor was not enough; this apical ancestor had to be linked back to the point where surnames began branching. Such accounts are given by Du You in the *Tong dian* (801), by Lin Bao in *Yuanhe xingzuan* (ca. 810), by Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi in the *Xin Tang shu* genealogical tables (1060), by Deng Mingshi in his *Gujin xingshi shu bianzheng* (ca. 1140), by Zheng Qiao in his *Tong zhi* (1149), by Wang Yinglin in his *Xingshi jijiubian* (ca. 1280), by Ma Duanlin in the *Wenxian tongkao* (1224), and by Cheng Shangkuang in the *Xin'an mingzuzhi* (1551), the compendium of families in Huizhou. In these works each surname is commonly followed by a statement on its origins, usually including some reference that takes it back to the most remote ancestors.

Two examples should suffice. The *New Tang History* genealogy of the Dou (Dou means "hole") begins as follows:

The Dou surname (*shi*) branched from the Si surname (*xing*). When Di Xiang [fifth king of Xia] of the Xiahou *shi* lost his state, his consort Youreng *shi* was pregnant. She came out of hiding in a hole and fled back to [her natal family] the Youreng family. She gave birth to Shaokang, who begot two sons, Shu and Long, who stayed with Youreng. Long's sixty-ninth-generation descendant Mingdu served as great officer in the state of Jin and was buried at Changshan. After the six ministers divided Jin, the Dou *shi* lived in Pingyang. Mingdu begot Zhong, who begot Lin, who begot Dan, who begot Yang, who begot Geng, who begot Song, who had

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Mao 1984, 65, 355.

<sup>20</sup> Such references to remote ancestors are not so common in late Tang or Song funerary inscriptions, but they do not disappear altogether. For some examples, see Su 57:868, 872; 58:889.

two sons, Shi and Yi. Shi begot Ying, who was a chief minister of the Han dynasty and marquis of Weiqi.<sup>21</sup>

The Dou thus were descendants of the Xia kings, the word "Dou" chosen for its meaning. More common were names that began as place names, like Chen:

The Chen surname (*shi*) branched from the Gui surname (*xing*). [The Chens] are descendants of Shun, the Yu Di. Yu, [first king of] Xia, enfeoffed Shun's son Shangjun at Yucheng. His thirty-second-generation descendant Efu was chief of kilns for the Zhou state, and King Wu gave him his eldest daughter Daji as his wife. She bore Man, who was enfeoffed at Chen and granted the Gui surname with instructions to carry on the sacrifice to Shun. This was Duke Hu. His ninth-generation descendant Duke Ta of Li begot Jingzhong Wan who fled to Qi and took the name of [his former] state as his surname (*xing*). Since he was enfeoffed at Tian he was also considered of the Tian surname (*shi*). His fifteenth-generation descendant, King Jian of Qi, was destroyed by Qin. [King Jian] had three sons, Sheng, Huan, and Zhen. Huan used the Wang ["king"] surname (*shi*). Zhen was chief minister of Chu and enfeoffed as marquis of Yingchuan. On moving there he used the Chen surname (*shi*). He gave birth to Ying, who served as a clerk in Dongyang in the Qin dynasty.<sup>22</sup>

Here three surnames—Chen, Tian, and Wang—are said to be descendants of Shun (and thus of Huang Di). Two of them, Chen and Tian, are described as based on names of fiefs; one, Wang, on a title. All are shown to be almost alternatives, some Chens becoming Tians, some Tians returning to the Chen name, others taking Wang. This sort of easy convertibility largely ended with the Zhou, however. Records of adopting or receiving new surnames in later periods are much rarer.

But let me complicate the situation further. We have already seen that names were used as ethnic markers. Tracing ancestry back to Huang Di offered possibilities for manipulation, for the creation of charters incorporating or excluding groups whose recent histories were known. The practice of specifying the genealogical connections between alien groups and the Chinese was already in use in the Former Han, for Sima Qian gave the basic genealogy of the Xiongnu in a form repeated by all later chroniclers: they were descended from Yu, the founder of the Xia dynasty.<sup>23</sup> In Sima Qian's time there had been great hostility

<sup>21</sup> Ouyang and Song 1975, 71B:2288.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

between the Xiongnu and the Chinese state, so offering this genealogy should probably not be taken as an effort to claim brotherhood, but it did put the Xiongnu in the category of people with whom one could marry and with whom one could form peace pacts. As the Chinese were confronted by other northern barbarians over the centuries, they attempted to fit them into comparable schemes. The authors of the *History of the Jin*, finished in the early Tang, did this in their accounts of the founders of the "sixteen kingdoms." The Murong tribe, founders of the state of Yan, were said to be descendants of Youxiongshi (=Huang Di); Yao Yizhong, father of the founder of the Later Qin, was a descendant of the youngest son of Youyushi (=Shun, himself a descendant of Huang Di), who became hereditary chieftain of the Qiang; Lü Guang, a Di who set up the Later Liang in Gansu, was said to be a descendant of a Chinese refugee of the second century B.C.<sup>24</sup> Wei Shou in 550 began his history of the Xianbei Northern Wei dynasty by recounting, "In antiquity Huang Di had twenty-five sons; some were arrayed inside among the many Hua, some were sent out into the wilds. The youngest son of [his son] Changyi received his fief in the northern regions. In his state was Great Xianbei Mountain, and from this [his descendants] took their name."<sup>25</sup> Such genealogies for the old "northern barbarians" remained common in Tang and Song times.<sup>26</sup> It was much less

<sup>24</sup> Fang 1974, 108:2803; 116:2959; 122:3053. There were exceptions: the ancestors of Fu Jian, founder of Zhao, were said to be descendants of Youyishi, mentioned in *Book of Documents* as an enemy of the second Xia emperor (Fang 112:2867); and Li Te, the founder of Cheng Han, a Ba, has a genealogy that clearly seems to reflect the Bas' own myths of their origins and does not link him to ancient Chinese history (Fang 120:3021).

<sup>25</sup> Wei 1974, 1:1. For modern scholarly rejection of such genealogies, see Yao Weiyuan 1962.

<sup>26</sup> By Song times slightly more skepticism is occasionally shown. In the genealogical tables in the *New Tang History*, compiled in the Song but probably based on Tang materials, there are two versions offered for the origins of the Yuwen surname. The first is that they are descendants of the Shanyu of the Southern Xiongnu and that Yuwen meant "son of heaven" in the Xiongnu language. The second took them back much further, saying that when Huang Di destroyed the family of Shen Nong, his descendants went to the northern regions, where they were associated with the production of grass, and grass, in the Xianbei language, was called *yuwen* (Ouyang and Song 1975, 71xia:2403). Zheng Qiao similarly sometimes mentioned the existence of more than one theory. Still, his chapter on the northern nationalities (*beiguo*) begins by declaring that their ancestors all descended from Huang Di. Because they lived in the desolate northern regions, they were tough and liked to fight, making them generation after generation the enemies of China (Zhongguo) (Zheng 1962, 199:3179A).

common for such genealogies to be fashioned for "southern barbarians."<sup>27</sup>

Did positing these sorts of genealogies in some way reduce alienness and thus make those involved more acceptable, as marriage partners if not neighbors? In Song and Yuan times, it is worth noting, there seems to have been no effort to develop such genealogies for the Khitans, Jurchens, or Mongols. Those who stood in a position of enmity could be kept outside the common descent group.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, there were groups that were simply too alien to absorb. Non-Chinese who had no surnames or who did not marry outside their surnames could not very well be brought into the Chinese descent group of intermarrying surnames.<sup>29</sup> And truly alien names could be clearly labeled as alien names, with no efforts made to link them to Chinese descent lines. Deng Mengshi, for instance, annotated some names simply as Japanese, Persian, or Central Asian.<sup>30</sup>

What does all this matter? Chinese genealogies were discovered, invented, fabricated, or otherwise artfully produced for those who came to be accepted socially as Chinese; from this one could conclude that what matters, in the end, as Confucian culturalism would predict, is acting Chinese, a set of manners and mores. What I want to argue is that the logic of the rationalization does matter, that imagining the linkage among Chinese as a matter of patrilineal kinship differed in interesting ways from other ways of imagining group identities, such as associating the group with biological substance, with a language community, or with a state.

How did the Chinese way of thinking differ from others we know about? Let me start with one of the easiest: how it differs from our use of surnames as ethnic markers. In the United States today we regularly use surnames this way. We casually ask people if their name is Greek or Polish or Italian. They know we are

<sup>27</sup> See Fan Ye 86:2829 for a story of descent from a daughter of Gaoxin (a great-grandson of Huang Di). See also Fan Chuo 1962.

<sup>28</sup> Deng Mingshi, for instance, after giving a lengthy account of the Xiao surname added at the end the prominent Khitan Xiao family, making it clear that they were in no way related to the Chinese Xiao and not attempting to give them links to Huang Di or other ancient figures (Deng 10:1a-4b).

<sup>29</sup> The xing recorded for many of the southern Man were basically clan or tribe names and did not necessarily mark off intermarrying groups. See, e.g., Du 187:1003.

<sup>30</sup> Deng 12:5b, 7a, 9a.

assuming links between surname and ethnic origin and so will offer supplementary information, saying that although their name is Greek, their mother or grandmother was Italian, for instance. In other words, because we do not see ethnicity as strictly or even primarily patrilineal, we therefore realize it does not map perfectly to name.

Another way of thinking about ethnic identity very common among Westerners—linking it to vernacular language—was remarkably absent in China. In Tang and Song sources that describe non-Han groups, spoken language is occasionally mentioned, but it is treated as merely one of many cultural traits, hardly more significant than hairdos or how lapels are crossed. We should remind ourselves how much we are influenced by theories of the branching of language families and their links to genetic connections between ethnic groups. We tend to assume that those who speak Slavic languages somehow share a common origin. By contrast, Chinese could make the Xianbei descendants of Huang Di without any concern with the language they spoke or its connection to the Chinese language. There was, in other words, no conception comparable to the notion of an Indo-European language, no hypothesis that the links between languages and dialects were evidence of remote genetic links between different cultures or peoples.

What about written language as a basis for identity? One of the most influential books on the larger subject of group identities is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. In it he groups together traditional China, medieval Christendom, and medieval Islam as forms of cultural unity that preceded modern nationalism. He sees each of the three as a nonterritorial cultural entity built on a sacred center and a sacred language that gave those who mastered it special access to truth, since truth was inherent in that language.<sup>31</sup> These observations are insightful but incomplete. They do not explain the relatively large overlap between territory, polity, and identity in the Chinese case. Nor does Anderson's formulation explain why ethnic identity was never stretched to include the Koreans and Japanese, who in medieval times at least used the same sacred language.

Not that I want to downplay the importance of the written language. After all, the true Chinese surname was a character, not a word (sound and meaning fused). Only barely assimilated

<sup>31</sup> Anderson 1991.

barbarians played around with the characters of their names, trying out different ones that sounded the same. And no one thought that those in Guangdong who pronounced their surname "Wong" (using the character for yellow, *huang*) had more affinity to northerners whose families pronounced their name the same way than to northerners who used the same character to write their name. The remarkable powers of the written language influenced Chinese conceptions of kinship just as they did other spheres of Chinese culture.

It is worth noticing that kin-based metaphors of ethnic solidarity like China's do not lend themselves easily to racial categorizing. Patrilineal descent may be biological, but it does not map at all closely to genetic inheritance. In cases of intermarriage, when a Han Chinese man married a local woman, the children of course got genes from both sides and probably even learned ideas and cultural practices from both sides, but identity was very much tied up in the name. Even if we go back only five generations, each person has thirty-two forebears who contributed to his or her genetic endowment, but only one of these thirty-two was the ancestor providing the surname. Going back ten generations, quite commonly done in Chinese reckoning, reduces the average share of biological inheritance from the forebear of one's surname to one part in 1,024. Chinese over the centuries certainly saw patrilineal inheritance as biological inheritance, not thinking in modern genetic terms, but their mental framework made it difficult for them to tie identity to physical traits such as body build, facial features, hair curliness, or skin color, traits inherited from many forebears randomly. The Chinese could be recognized by their surnames but not by their physical appearance. When Chinese in the early twentieth century became interested in Western racial theories of the period, it marked a major departure in their thinking.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See Dikötter 1992. Dikötter does suggest that the Chinese in premodern times had some ideas of outsiders as biologically different from them, pointing mainly to the use of animal metaphors when defaming alien enemies, comparing them to birds and beasts and thus implying a biological difference between Chinese and barbarians. Too much should not be made of this, however, as Chinese, too, could be compared to birds and beasts if one were outraged enough at them. Unfilial behavior, for instance, could be described this way. Thus, animals represent those creatures that have sense and appetites but are not restrained by moral principles, making the comparison primarily a culturalist distinction.

By way of conclusion, let me sum up the features of this Han Chinese way of conceiving of themselves in terms of patrilineal kinship and suggest some ways it helps us understand the vast size of the Chinese *we-group*.

First, like other people's notions of ethnicity, it lends an air of naturalness: it is primordial, tied to sharing ancestors.

Second, it provides a structure for a confusing agglomeration of people, a kind of template for seeing how they all fit together. Benedict Anderson stressed the role of print, especially newspapers, in letting people imagine that others they had never met or ever expected to meet had something in common. But Chinese had long seen people sharing the same surname as having something in common, and this kind of common bond, in weaker form, was also felt by all those who bore names that one's patriline had married with or could plausibly have married with—a group that extended out from the known to the unknown to encompass what was conventionally called the "hundred surnames."

Third, seeing ethnic identity as a kind of kinship makes possible linkages transcending place. Although active kinship groups were rooted locally and people had long labeled families and lineages by their place, people nevertheless recognized kinship ties even centuries after kinsmen had moved away. In a similar way the associations of a surname with a place or region did not limit its capacity to link people in widely dispersed regions. The name Chen was originally the name of a place in Henan, and in modern times the area with the highest proportion of Chens is Fujian,<sup>33</sup> but the inheritance of the Chen surname still has the capacity to link, through images of genealogy and migration, Chens in Shaanxi, Guangxi, Hebei, and beyond China's borders.<sup>34</sup>

Fourth, patrilineal kinship as the key metaphor for connection allows rapid expansion through intermarriage (see the chapter by Brown in this volume). Chinese were never preoccupied with notions of creoles or half-breeds. One Han Chinese migrant in the

<sup>33</sup> Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan 1990, 43.

<sup>34</sup> A good example of the influence of this mode of thinking can be found in Li 1928. Li Chi tried to analyze physical differences among Chinese in different parts of China in his day in terms of the migration of peoples from different places, as judged by the changing geographical distribution of surnames in historical sources. Evidently it never occurred to this well-educated scholar that those in the south whose surnames were first documented in the north might inherit very little of their physical characteristics from their northern ancestor, much less that they might have acquired their characteristics from other than inheritance.



Han, Tang, or Song dynasty could be enough to allow thousands or tens of thousands of patrilineal descendants to lay claim to Chinese ancestry and thus Chinese identity (though naturally unless they had absorbed some Chinese culture, they would have had no reason to want to claim such ancestry).

Fifth, seeing identity and connections in terms of genealogy is flexible; it gives room for myth making to adjust to actual circumstances.

And finally, a patrilineal conception of ethnicity coexisted well with Confucian culturalism. The issue was origins, not purity; emphasis was not on keeping others out, but on knowing who you were and how you were connected to others. Those who left written record commonly believed two things, either of which logically would have been enough by itself: (1) what makes people Chinese is acting Chinese, and (2) what makes people Chinese is Chinese ancestry. These two beliefs each provided context for the other and shaped the effects the other had. If we notice only one we do not see the whole story.

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