"Chinese" Perspectives on Identity Before the Nation
TJ Hinrichs
Department of History
Southern Connecticut State University
exeasmail@columbia.edu

Table of Contents

Introduction: What is "China"? What is "Chineseness"?

These are good questions for beginning any survey of China, as well as courses on specific questions of Chinese ethnicity and race, empire, and nationhood. There is not one static "China" or "Chinese" — these ideas have changed constantly throughout history even while claiming continuity with the past.

For courses that seek to address these issues in the modern period, it is useful to look at the ways in which similar issues played out in pre-modern China for two reasons. First, it gives a baseline for looking at what is new in the modern period, or in what ways notions of China, Chineseness, and non-Chineseness have changed. Second, much of modern discourse on Chinese nationhood and identity takes history, or myths of history, as its starting point. This includes, for example, the idea that racism and nationalism were entirely alien to the traditional Chinese worldview and were introduced to Chinese culture from the West.

This unit presents strategies and primary and secondary sources for teaching about how identities and differences that we would recognize as analogous to those of the modern notions of ethnicity or nation were constructed in China before the twentieth century. Students can be asked to:
1) look at the ways in which "Chinese" self-identities were constructed vis-à-vis non-
   "Chinese" others in previous centuries,
2) relate these to the historical contexts and social or political agendas of those producing or
   employing these distinctions, and
3) compare Chinese categories to modern notions of race, ethnicity, and nation.

The unit is divided into four sections:
- Section A, "Geographical Extent Through Time," provides a historical overview of the
  territory and borders of Chinese dynasties, and is a useful beginning to any course on
  China.
- Section B, "Where is the Line Between Europe and Asia?" is another useful starting
  point, especially for courses that want to look at the historical contingency of political

and geographical boundaries. This section puts these in comparative perspective (Europe and China).

- Section C, "Historical Indigenous Models of "China," "Chineseness," and "Other" "Other" looks at historical Chinese models for distinguishing Chinese from non-Chinese peoples, and relates these to cultural and cosmological models of China and to approaches to foreign policy and domestic rule over non-Chinese peoples. Readings are divided between secondary and primary.
- Section D, "Ethnic/Cultural/Geographical Diversity in Eighteenth Century Qing China," is a teaching tool developed for a survey course on Late Imperial Chinese history.

For additional related units, see "Not Color Blind: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in East Asia" (http://www.exeas.org/resources/race-ethnicity-intro.html.)

Note: All readings are marked according to the star* system:

***	Most important
**	Recommended
*	Optional

Recommended Textbook

Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

> This textbook looks at China until 1600 in the context of social, cultural, political, and military interactions with other parts of the world. Consider adopting this text for pre-modern Chinese history survey course that views China in a more global context. A good source for student readings, as well as introductory background reading for instructors.

Section A: Geographical Extent Through Time

One of the common ways of defining "Chineseness," whether it be the distinctive Chineseness of acupuncture, kung-fu, the Chinese script, or a claim to sovereignty, is through an assertion of cultural continuity over time reaching back to the first dynasties. Despite changes in geographical extent, each Chinese dynasty claimed to be the direct inheritors of the ancient rulers. The earliest dynasty to be confirmed by archaeological evidence is the Shang (1766 - 1145 B.C.E.). The earliest graphical ancestors of Chinese characters appear on Shang "oracle bones." Geographically, the Shang kingdom represented only a small portion of what would now be considered "China Proper." In fact, many people who we would call Chinese today were considered "barbarian" by the Shang. (See "A Visual Sourcebook of Chinese Civilization," below).

We can speak of successors to the Shang, because until the fall of the Qing (1644-1911) subsequent dynasties laid claim to legitimate succession on the basis of the transfer of the

"Mandate of Heaven" from one regime to the next. The picture is complicated, by periods in which whatever we might decide to call "China Proper" was divided between different dynastic governments, and periods in which parts or all of it was ruled by conquest dynasties of Central or northeast Asian origin. Furthermore, many of the people who now consider themselves to be ethnically "Chinese" (Han or Hua), come from language groups and regions that in earlier centuries were considered to be not Han but, for example, Wu, Min, or Yue.

Readings

*** Most important

***"A Visual Sourcebook of Chinese Civilization," Patricia Buckley Ebrey, http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/index.htm. Explore links: 1) Timeline, and 2) from Contents → Geography → Land and → People.

> The timeline shows maps of Chinese empires and the varying borders of "China" through time. Ebrey includes an additional map of what she calls "China Proper" that centers on the northeast plain around the Yellow River and indicates expansion through time (without specific dates). Although Ebrey does little to problematize what we might mean by "China Proper" or "Chineseness," students can begin to do this themselves by looking at the various political divisions represented on the maps, and by considering how peoples who were once considered to be outsiders by earlier dynasties, such as the Shang (1766 - 1145 B.C.E.), Zhou (ca. 1100-256 B.C.E.) or Han (206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.) get incorporated into later dynasties.

***Valerie Hanson, *Open Empire: A History of China to 1600*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

> Hansen's book also includes excellent maps of dynasties in relation to contemporary boundaries. These are black-and-white and make good transparencies.

Section B: Where is the Line Between Europe and Asia?

These two readings look at some of the ways in which the Eurasian land mass has been divided from both sides.

*** Most important

***Eric Hobsbawm, "The Curious History of Europe," *On History*, (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 217-227.

> This article introduces elasticity and contingencies of the divisions between Europe, Asia, and Africa, and the ideological dimensions of these constructions. It traces the history of the idea of Europe from confrontations between the Greeks and the Persians and

Scythians, continuing through Islamic expansion, European imperialism, and the European Union.

***Thomas Bartlett, "Implications of the name Da Qin in Chinese," submitted to H-ASIA <H-ASIA@H-NET.MSU.EDU>, August 19, 2000. Available online in H-Asia's discussion log at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Asia&month=0008&week=c&msg=RAQy70gasWQxfCftQooTRA&user=&pw=

Bartlett points out that, in a move analogous to naming the whole of the eastern side of the Eurasian land mass after a peripheral eastern Roman province (Asia), in the Han (206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.) the Roman Empire came to be known as "Great Qin," after a peripheral western Chinese province.

Section C: Historical Indigenous Models of "China," and "Chineseness," and "Other"

The major classical model of China envisioned the realm as "All Under Heaven" (*tianxia*) centered on the emperor and his capital, or alternatively in some sources on the northern Chinese heartland.[1] Virtue (*de*, also translated as "Potency" and "Power") emanated from the emperor, and dissipated gradually across geographical distance. Often described as "culturalist," this model emphasized continuity among peoples, while also maintaining a normative hierarchy centered on the heartland of the northern Chinese plains with wild barbarians at the periphery. Ideally, the emperor's virtue transformed his representative officials and the common people, so that they fulfilled their social/moral roles and the world was peaceful and bountiful. Peoples on the periphery of the empire deviated from central imperial norms because of their physical distance from the emperor's transformative virtue. "Invaders" and conquered peoples who failed to submit to the polity were considered to be "rebels." The ideal way to handle them was through education and virtuous transformation rather than military force. This model was the basis of the "tributary system" which most Chinese dynasties used to conduct foreign relations. Under the tributary system peoples on the periphery submit to the moral authority of the Chinese emperor at the center through the ritual exchange of offerings to the emperor and gifts.

Another view juxtaposed barbarians to Chinese, emphasizing barbarian difference and incapacity for "virtuous transformation" and "submission," presenting a vision of China as a bounded realm. In contrast to the virtue model, this view emphasized pragmatic political and military responses to foreign threats over education and moral suasion. This model shares many similarities with modern ideas of the "nation."

Section C Secondary Readings

***   Most important
**   Recommended
*   Optional

---

[1] During the Southern Song (1127-1279), for example, when the northern Chinese heartland was taken over by a non-Chinese dynasty, and the Chinese emperor and his regime resided in southern China virtue was located in geographical place rather than with the person of the emperor. Some authors attributed the Southern Song's weakness to the loss of the north.

***Richard Smith, *Chinese Maps: Images of 'All Under Heaven'*, (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996).

> This book introduces historical Chinese ways of visualizing and depicting China and the world. It is useful both as a source of visuals and for manageable reading assignments. Chapter 2, "The Place of Barbarians in Chinese History," pp. 7-22, has overview sections on "Chinese Attitudes Toward Barbarians," "The Chinese Tributary System," and "Images of Aliens." Besides a wide range of historical maps, it includes the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) *Yugong* diagram of the world as concentric squares with the emperor and capital at the center, moving outward toward the "wilds" at the periphery.

**Joanna Waley-Cohen, "One: Early Chinese Cosmopolitanism," *The Sextants of Beijing: Global Currents in Chinese History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), pp. 11-54.

> This chapter provides a useful overview of Chinese relations with other polities and peoples from the third century B.C.E. to European trade in the seventeenth century C.E. The book as a whole is primarily concerned with putting Chinese relations with Europe and the United States into historical context.

**Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002). (Note: uses Wade Giles romanization.)

> This book could be assigned as background reading for a history seminar on Chinese relations with and views of its neighbors. Part I examines archaeological evidence that points to the emergence of a permeable frontier between a Chinese zone and Inner Asian peoples, and explores diverse political, economic, and cultural activities.
>
> Part II analyzes Eastern Zhou (Chou) Period (771-256 B.C.E.) cosmological and cultural models of a civilized Zhou world placed in opposition to a barbaric one. Di Cosmo examines these models in the context of early policy debates, especially the rhetorical identification of allies (differences deemphasized) and enemies (differences emphasized) in expansionist strategies. He finds "boundaries between presumed cultural communities in [this period] . . . to have been drawn ad hoc, according to ever-changing political circumstances." (Di Cosmo, p. 104) He argues that there were differences between the Hua or Xia (Chinese) and other peoples of this period, but there were also similar differences among Chinese states.
>
> Part III looks at the emergence of the Xiongnu confederacy, triggered by the Qin (221-207 B.C.E.) invasion of Ordos, and the development of a territorially and politically defined frontier and inter-state relations.
>
> Part IV examines historian Sima Qian's (*ca*. 145-*ca*. 9 B.C.E.) seminal account of the Xiongnu.

**Arthur Waldron. *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. (Note: uses Wade Giles romanization.)

> The Great Wall is a key image of China with which many students will be familiar, making it useful as an entrée into issues not only of national myths and identity, but of earlier policy debates over the handling of nomadic military threats. Waldron looks at historical evidence, or lack thereof, for the Great Wall in early periods, its construction in the 16th century in relation to debates over foreign policy, and the modern propagation of national myths about it.

> Chapter 10, "The Great Wall and Foreign Policy," pp. 171-193, discusses dynastic (imperial-territorial) versus cultural (Chinese-bureaucratic) models of "China." Here Waldron also contrasts the modern myth of the Great Wall as representing a timeless Chinese orientation toward foreigners with the sixteenth century political context of its building, in which it was more of a last resort among disputed policy alternatives which also included military offense, diplomacy, and economic accommodation. This chapter might be assigned alone if the instructor provides a short background introduction and provides some key word definitions (for example for "*ho-ch'in* system"), which can be quickly compiled by using the index. The final chapter, 11 "The Wall Acquires New Meanings," pp. 194-226, looks at the history of national myth-making surrounding the Great Wall.

> For a more thorough and up-to-date look at wall-building in the early period, see Nicola Di Cosmo's chapter 4, "Walls and Horses" (in *Ancient China and Its Enemies*) on the emergence of the building of long fortification walls on northern borders in the Warring States period. In contrast to previous interpretations of these walls as defenses against nomadic invaders, Di Cosmo emphasizes the motive force in this period of Chinese expansionism. (pp. 127-158)

*Edward H. Schafer, *The Vermillion Bird: T'ang Images of the South*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967),

> This highly readable book describes Tang (T'ang) period (618-906) views of southern Chinese lands and peoples as both dangerous and exotically attractive.

*TJ Hinrichs, "Discourses of Southern Deviance," from "The Medical Transforming of Governance and Southern Customs in Song Dynasty China (960-1279 C.E.), Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2003, pp. 62-72.

> This excerpt discusses ways in which southern lands, peoples, and diseases were identified and theorized as deviant through the Song period (960-1279). Includes overview of terms for southern and northern "barbarians," and their association with animals.

> For eleventh century historical and political context, see Chapter 2, "Policies for Transforming Southern Customs," pp. 20-60, and Chapter 4, "Education and

Transformation," pp. 76-100. Chapter 4 includes a discussion of the points of reference for the identities of southern-born officials who sought to bring southerners' customs into line with Han-Chinese norms.

*Frank Dikötter, *The Discource of Race in Modern China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

As background to this study of race in modern China, Dikötter examines historical views of foreigners, taking issue with the misconception that Europeans introduced ideas of racial prejudice to China. Chapter 1 looks at classical views of barbarians, derogatory associations with the "white ash" skin color of Europeans and the "black coal" skin color of Africans, and periods of more virulent xenophobia. Dikötter also links early nationalism to 5th century (CE) anti-Buddhism, Song (960-1279) period loyalism, and late Qing (1644-1911) anti-Manchuism. The chapters that follow focus on discourses of race and nation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

<u>Section C Primary Readings</u>

***   Most important
**   Recommended
*   Optional

****Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. 1, Eds., William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. Pp. 415-432. Background overviews: "Basic Teachings of Buddhism," pp. 415-420, "The Coming of Buddhism to China," pp. 420-421.

These primary readings (pp. 421-432), from the Southern Dynasties (317-589) period, address objections to Buddhist practices (from South Asia) that were seen to conflict with Chinese values. The essay "Why Should a Chinese Allow Himself to Be Influenced by Indian Ways?" explicitly addresses this problem. Students can discuss the ways in which Buddhist practices appeared alien or non-Chinese to people in China, the extent to which their non-Chineseness was made an issue, and the strategies by which Buddhists overcame these obstacles to acceptance. Such strategies included finding Chinese classical precedents for Buddhist practices, and making Buddhist ideals appeal as universal, transcending cultural and geographical differences.

***"The Tanguts and Their Relations with the Han Chinese," *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, 2nd. ed. ed., Patricia B. Ebrey, (New York: Free Press, 1993), pp. 139-141.

The Tanguts were rulers of the Western Xia or Xixia state (1032-1227), in what is the Gansu corridor in modern China, to the northwest of the Han-Chinese Song (960-1279) dynasty. Readings include a selection of Tangut maxims, a Tangut ruler's letter to the Song emperor in which he claims descent from the rulers of the Northern Wei Dynasty (439-534), and a Chinese-Tangut glossary.

***"The World Beyond China," *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, 2nd. ed. ed., Patricia B. Ebrey, (New York: Free Press, 1993), pp. 54-56.

>Excerpted from Sima Qian's (*ca*. 145-*ca*. 9 B.C.E.) descriptions of people beyond China, this primary source features descriptions of "Southwestern Barbarians," and northern "barbarian" Dayuan and Xiongnu.

>For analysis and context of Sima Qian's (Ssu-ma Ch'ien's) account, see Nicola Di Cosmo, Part IV, *Ancient China and Its Enemies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 255-312. Di Cosmo points out that this record of other people's customs, especially those of the nomadic Xiongnu (Hsiung-nu), was unprecedented, and became a model for later writers. "Two orientations can be detected in accounts of the Hsiung-nu, and of Inner Asia in general: one empirical, descriptive, and data oriented, the other normative, ideological, and influenced by currents of contemporary thought. Both orientations were consistent not only with the declared goals of the historian but also with the general thinking of an age, the early Han, inclined to the construction of universal cosmological paradigms and unified historical patterns." (Di Cosmo, p. 255)

**Book 4, "The Different Methods of Treatment and the Appropriate Prescriptions," *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, trans. Ilza Veith, New Edition, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949, 1966, 1972), pp. 147-148.

>More commonly translated as *The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* (or Yellow Lord), this text is roughly datable to the first or second century B.C.E. It places differences in physiology, common illnesses, and their treatments in five phases[2] geographical-cosmological context, the mildest illnesses and treatments being those of the Center, corresponding to the empire's Center. This encompassing of difference within universalizing cosmological frameworks is characteristic of Han writing.

*"The Debate on Salt and Iron," *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, pp. 60-63.

>Record of 81 B.C.E. policy debates over the whether the nomadic Xiongnu should be repelled by military force or brought to submit through moral means: "The ancients honored the use of virtue and discredited the use of arms. Confucius said, 'If the people of far-off lands do not submit, then the ruler must attract them by enhancing his refinement and virtue.'"

---

[2] Each of the Five Directions is associated with one of the Phases (also translated "Elements" or "Agents") of Han Cosmology. The Center is associated with Earth, the South with Fire and Summer, the West with Metal and Autumn, the North with Water and Winter, the East with Wood and Spring. For more on this cosmology and these associations, Veith provides an acceptable overview on pp. 13-24. For more recent treatments, see Nathan Sivin, "State, Cosmos, and Body in the Last Three Centuries B.C.," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (June 1995) 55.1:5-37; Ted J. Kaptchuk, *The Web That has no Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine*, Revised ed., (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2000), Appendix H: "The Five Phases."

Section D: Ethnic/Cultural/Geographical Diversity in Eighteenth Century Qing China

***Susan Naquin and Evelyn S. Rawski, "Regional Societies," *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp.138-216.

> This chapter looks at ten "macroregions" in China, and explains what it means by "macroregion." Rather than have students memorize twice this number of provincial locations, the instructor can divide the class into groups to present on each of these (see Instructions for Presentations, below). Some but not all of these macroregions correspond to Chinese provincial divisions: North China, Manchuria, Northwest China, Southeast Coast, Lower Yangtse (Yangzi), Middle Yangzi, Upper Yangzi, Southwest China, Lingnan, Taiwan.

Instructions for Presentations

- Ten groups will prepare presentations on each of China's major macroregions. Presentations will be limited to fifteen minutes, plus five minutes for questions. Presenters should not simply summarize the points made in "Regional Societies," *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century*, but should focus on the place of their region in the Qing (1644-1911) empire. Was this region previously also a part of the Ming (1368-1644) or earlier dynasties, or was it newly incorporated into the Qing? When was this region conquered by the Qing, and how did the conquest affect it? What were this region's economic, political, and cultural roles in the Qing empire? What made it distinctive? How did major changes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries affect this region?

- Preparation of presentations should begin with "Regional Societies," *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century*, pp.138-216. Everyone should read the introduction and conclusion, as well as the section pertaining to their assigned region.

- Students will be responsible for knowing about regions presented on by their classmates. Presenters: Design your presentations to be as clear and useful to your classmates as possible. Visual aids might be helpful. Audience: Be attentive and ask questions.