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## The Multifaceted Saga of the Ethnonym Han

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# The Multifaceted Saga of the Ethnonym Han

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## A B S T R A C T

The term Han designates one of the largest categories of collective identity in the world, representing the great majority of the population in both mainland China and Taiwan. However, this same Chinese character han has had persisting negative connotations in both literary and colloquial use, a long tradition that continues to this very day. After discussing the intimate relationship between this ethnic identity and the notion of China being the “central country,” this paper examines the paradox of the derogatory connotations associated with this proud endonym, tracing their origin to the “Barbarian” conquerors of northern China in the early medieval period. The seldom-noted fact that the descendants of these nomadic conquerors continued to dominate China for centuries sealed the Chinese language’s long memory of the Janus faces of the ethnic name Han.

To the memory of Paul Pelliot,  
on the centennial of his “L’origine du nom de ‘Chine’”

## 1. THE JANUS FACES OF THE ETHNIC NAME HAN

As Thomas Mullaney succinctly summarizes the situation in his introduction to *Critical Han Studies*, the latest and most comprehensive collection of analyses and studies on this subject, the term Han is one of the largest categories of collective identity in the world, representing more than ninety percent of the population in both mainland China and Taiwan. One may argue that Han, as the name of a *minzu*, may or may not be a relatively recent creation by the anti-Manchu Han nationalists in late Qing dynasty and early Republican era. Also, there is a considerable difference between the term's modern "nationality" definition and its premodern interpretations. While this difference needs to be kept in mind, Han or Hanzu as the name of a *minzu* clearly originated in an old ethnonym that has had a very long history, going back at least to the early medieval period.

Today, Han is beyond doubt the self-identity or endonym (autonym) for the great majority of inhabitants in both mainland China and Taiwan. Mullaney's claim (p. 9) that the term "disappears" outside these two polities may be a little outdated. As the included "I'm Han 漢" poster for a cultural event celebrating the 2011 Winter Solstice in Singapore attests, the term's use has now spread overseas.<sup>1</sup>

A likely unique peculiarity or paradox of the Chinese language (*Hanyu*!) is that, despite being a proud endonym for the ethnic majority of China and millions of Chinese overseas, the character *han* 漢 has had persisting negative connotations in both literary and colloquial use, a long tradition that continues to this very day.

This negative connotation is evident when the character is used as a suffix referring to a male character with various bad or undesirable qualities and attributes. Examples are *lanhan* 懶漢 "lazybones," *cuhan* 粗漢 "a vulgar or uneducated man, a boor," *manghan* 莽漢 "an impetuous or reckless man," *shahan* 傻漢, *daihan* 呆漢, *benhan* 笨漢 "a stupid man, idiot," *liulanghan* 流浪漢 "a homeless man," *fenghan* 瘋漢 "a crazy man," *menwaihan* 門外漢 "nonprofessional, greenhorn," *zuihan* 醉漢 "a drunkard," or simply *bulianghan* 不良漢 "a no-good man," etc.<sup>2</sup>

A common use, especially popular in newspaper reporting, particularly outside mainland China, is the attaching of this suffix to a geographic origin, to denote the perpetrators from that region or place

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Mr. Cheong Song Hing of Singapore, an organizer of the event, for providing a high-resolution image of the poster.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the *-han* constructs cited can easily be found in an Internet search and will not be individually sourced here.

of various bad acts. When a suicide bomber in Hunan province killed several others and himself on the eve of Chinese New Year, he was widely referred to as a Hunanhan 湖南漢 or Xianghan 湘漢, "a Hunan guy." A Fujian man who abused his elderly mother due to a family property dispute was called a Fujianhan 福建漢, "a Fujian guy." A suspected murderer in Hong Kong was simply named a Ganghan 港漢, "a guy." So on and so forth, and the associated notoriety can take place anywhere. The man who shot into the Chinese consulate in Los Angeles in December 2011, for instance, was reported to be a Meiji Huhan 美籍滬漢, "a Shanghai guy with U.S. citizenship," because he was a naturalized American citizen who hailed from Shanghai.

This geographic marker ranges from designating a city or province to applying to the entire polity. Criminal elements in Taiwan thus often appear in the media as Taihan 台漢, "a Taiwan guy." Many years ago, when several daredevils in mainland China commandeered a passenger airplane to Taiwan, the hijackers were called by a Hong Kong newspaper simply Daluhan 大陸漢, "Mainland (China) guys."

A rather colorful case of usage was seen when Beijing initiated military exercises against Taipei, and Mr. Lee Teng-hui 李登輝, the then president of the Republic of China, dismissed the threats by claiming that people in Taiwan were not jingdahan 驚大漢, "startled-growing men,"<sup>3</sup> meaning roughly that they did not grow up as scaredy-cats (this expression is more a verbal phrase than a noun).

It is apparent that in most of the aforementioned cases, the character *han* is no longer an ethnonym, but rather serves as a generic term for "fellow," "guy," "chap," etc. As such, the term can be applied to non-Han souls, with such examples as 大不列顛國老漢 "an old man of Great Britain," 美國漢 "an American man," etc.

One may argue that the generic term is neutral and may not always be negative, as exemplified by the much-cited word *haohan* 好漢 "a good or rather strong-willed man," a case we shall return to. But the negative applications of this generic appellative seem to significantly outnumber the precious few positive uses. Even when the term is applied to "foreign devils," we read such news headlines as 美國漢求愛不遂刺死女同事 "Spurned American suitor stabs female colleague to death," 法國老漢搶

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3 "Junyan shengji zengjia Taihai weiji 軍演升級增加台海危机," *Xingdao ribao* (*Sing Tao Daily*) 星島日報, November 3, 1996.

劫賭場被警察擊斃 “Old French man robs a casino, killed by police,” 英國漢詐死騙保金, “English man fakes death to get insurance money,” and 加國老漢國內外嬌妻無數 “Old Canadian Don Juan with countless domestic and foreign wives,” etc.

A particular example with persistent negative and even derogatory meaning is *hanzi* 漢子, literally “Han son.” In 1935, due largely to internal squabbles, the noted author Zhou Shuren 周樹人 a.k.a. Lu Xun 魯迅 showed that he despised four fellow left-wing (and secret Communist Party members) literati writers, Yang Hansheng 陽翰笙, Zhou Yang 周揚, Xia Yan 夏衍, and Tian Han 田漢, calling them “Four *hanzis* 四條漢子.” This disparaging characterization was revived by the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution to inflict much misery, including one death, upon these four hapless communists who by that time had lost Mao’s favor.

Even seemingly neutral terms like *dahan* 大漢 “a big and strong man” are nonetheless often used in a negative context. For instance, thugs hired by gangs or commercial interests would appear in news reports as 彪形大漢 “tiger-bodied big men,” or even 持刀大漢 “knife-holding muscles.”

Such enduring negative connotations of the term representing China’s ethnic majority form one of the fascinating aspects of the complicated historical trajectory of the “Central Kingdom.” In the following sections I shall try to reconstruct some parts of the intertwined history of the two diametrically opposed faces of the same term, as both a proud ethnic endonym and a derogative appellative coming from an ancient slur.

## 2. WHAT DID THE NAME ZHONGGUO “CENTRAL KINGDOM” REALLY MEAN?

Historically and presently, the term Han is intimately associated with the geographic name Zhongguo 中國, “Central Country” or “Central/Middle Kingdom” in popular translations. I would first qualify if not correct this standard understanding of the prevailing endonym of China, because it has implications for the meaning of Han.

China has been known by many exonyms. Two popular groups, namely those exemplified by the English word Cathay, still in use today, and the variations of the ancient Turkic word Tabghach, which circulated for many centuries in medieval times, ironically came from ethnonyms of non-Sinitic



northern nomadic groups, as Paul Pelliot elaborated upon exactly a century ago. The Tabghach or Tuoba polity, as we shall see, played a key role in the persistent negative connotations of the term Han. The most common category represented by the English term China and the Latin root Sino- is widely regarded as originating from the dynastic name Qin, which began as the name of a once semi-“Barbarian” dukedom on the western margins of the Sinitic world.

Throughout the ages, the official autonym/endonym of China always followed the last case, namely the ruling dynastic name. However, the generic, somewhat vague, and culturally and ideologically more sublime name Zhongguo 中國, literally “center-country,” also came into existence, long before the Qin unification of the Sinitic world. After the collapse of the Qing dynasty, this became (the shortened form of) the official name of modern China.

The universal modern understanding of the name Zhongguo, “Central Country,” however, was not quite how this name emerged in the first place. The “country” interpretation of *guo*, graphically “a walled realm,” is not too much off the mark. Taking the character *zhong* “center” for a qualifier, on the other hand, deviates substantially from ancient Sinitic grammar.

In a nutshell, in archaic Chinese, a word structure like *zhongguo* 中國 is reversible to *guozhong* 國中, as amply substantiated by similar compounds like 中原 “center-plain,” 中土 “center-land,” and 中河 “center-(Yellow-)river,”<sup>4</sup> which are synonymous with their respective reversed forms 原中 “plain-center,” 土中 “land-center,” and 河中 “[Yellow-]river-center.” To my knowledge, the modern linguist Xing Gongwan 邢公畹 first made this interesting point about archaic Chinese grammar in 1947 (Xing 1983).

In other words, 中 in these old words is not an adjective as the standard understanding “Central Country” would require, but rather serves as a locative or preposition, meaning “in the center of” or “amidst.”

This original meaning is particularly evident in the very first attestation of the term, the inscription inside the bronze vessel Hezun 何尊, which recorded the following words of the Zhou king Wu 武王 when he paid homage to Tian 天, the Zhou people’s “Yahweh,” for having willed his conquest of the Shang, the first veritable Chinese dynasty:

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<sup>4</sup> In ancient China, the character 河, now a generic term for “river,” stood for the Yellow River only.

余其宅茲中國,自茲乂民

We now inhabit the center of the realm, whence we administer our rule of the people.<sup>5</sup>

It may be added that, if we extend the biting comments of the sage Mencius several centuries later, the above smug brag by the son of a “Western Barbarian 西夷之人” is not unlike the “Good reign in Rome” of King Theodoric of the Ostrogoths after he occupied Italy.

Therefore, the original meaning of *zhongguo* 中國 is “in the center of the realm,” often just referring to the state capital, with the extended meaning of “the central region.” Pushing the extended meaning even further, one gets the modern interpretation of this name.

Nonetheless, the above etymology resulted in the tradition that the name *Zhongguo* usually did not stand for the *entire* “kingdom,” or the empire over which the Chinese emperor held sovereignty, but only *part* of it, namely what was customarily considered the central region of the Sinitic world. As such, 中國 was long synonymous with the above-cited 中原 “Central Plains” and 中土 “Central Lands,” as well as the later expression 中州 “Central Regions.” This equivalence has a bearing on the historical meaning of the ethnonym Han.

### 3. ORIGIN OF THE NAME HAN

It is common knowledge that the term Han originated in a dynastic name. As such, it can be regarded as a historical accident, the result of political machination by Xiang Yu 項羽, the most powerful commander of the loosely organized insurgent alliance that toppled the Qin tyranny. For historical reasons presaged by the popular saying 楚雖三戶, 亡秦必楚 “even if down to the last three households, it must still be the Chu that is to destroy the Qin,” the two most prominent ringleaders of the insurgency, Xiang Yu and Liu Bang 劉邦, both hailed from the old Chu territories in the southeastern part of the Qin empire. As the top dog dividing up the territorial spoils of their victory, the politically near-sighted Xiang Yu (despite the legend of having “double pupils” in his eyes) wanted to dispatch his most

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Tang Lan 1995, 187–88.

threatening competitor, Liu Bang, as far away as possible from their overlapping home base in the east. The militarily weaker Chu compatriot Liu Bang was thus given the then-westernmost part of the toppled Qin empire, namely the Sichuan basin, with part of the old Han river 漢水 valley thrown in as consolation.

Given that the Sichuan basin, conquered by the Qin state not long before the Qin unification, was still regarded as largely a "Barbarian" land fit only for criminal exiles (see, e.g., the miserable end of Lü Buwei 呂不韋, the legendary political "investor" and alleged biological father of the First Emperor), the very unhappy Liu Bang was enfeoffed as the Prince of Han 漢王, because the Han River, a northern tributary of the Yangtze, flowed through some of the old Zhou royal territories, hence the beautiful love song "Hanguang 漢廣" "the wide Han river" in the Zhounan 周南 chapter of the *Book of Poems* 詩經. More exactly, Liu Bang's fiefdom's name was said to come from the region of Hanzhong 漢中 (*Shiji* 8.365–66). According to the aforementioned ancient grammar, this name was equivalent to 中漢, meaning "in the middle of the Han (river) region."<sup>6</sup>

A side note on this river name Hanshui 漢水 is a rather peculiar characteristic of Sino-Tibetan languages: the use of the same word to refer to *both* water and river, an aspect still maintained by the modern Tibetan term *chu*, a cognate of the Chinese *shui* 水. Ancient Chinese derived another character, *chuan* 川, graphically almost indistinguishable from *shui*, by adding the collective suffix *-n*, to specifically mean "river." However, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, the oldest etymological dictionary of Chinese, indicates that the character 水 itself likely also had a nasalized pronunciation (水, 準 *\*siuen* 也).<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the Miao-Yao and Tai/Thai languages, such dual use of the word for "water" does not seem to be shared by other major language families, not even the Malay/Indonesian idioms, which the Sino-Tibetan is supposed by many linguists to be closely related to. The curious exception is ancient Turkic (but not the other two major Altaic tongues, namely Mongolian and Manchu). The Turkic word *suv* "water" also referred to river/stream (Sir Gerard Clauson 1972, p.783), suggesting a possible cognatic

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6 *Huayang guozhi* 華陽國志, the earliest (Eastern Jin dynasty) geography treatise of the region, says (2.15) simply that Hanzhong "was named after the river 因水名也."

7 *Shuowen jiezi*, 516. Here *siuen* is the reconstructed Old Chinese pronunciation by Bernhard Karlgren (1964, 128) for 準.

relationship to Sino-Tibetan *shui/chu*. A noted Tang dynasty transcription of this Turkic word is Suiye 碎葉, the name of a “Watertown” in Central Asia that was said to be the birthplace of the great poet Li Bai (Li Po).

#### 4. THE BIRTH OF A POWERFUL AND PROUD ETHNIC AUTONYM (SELF-IDENTITY)

The long history of the ethnonym Han was sealed by the eventual triumph of Liu Bang over Xiang Yu. Had the result of the civil war turned out otherwise, most Chinese today would probably call themselves Chu 楚 instead of Han.

As the Han dynasty, including its restoration after the short-lived “New Dynasty” of the usurper Wang Mang, expanded into a great empire, the dynastic name and the derived term *Hanren* 漢人 “Han person,” inevitably became the self-identifying term of its subjects. Recently Mark Elliott (p. 180) argues that this identity was only political, hence not an ethnonym:

However, examination of these references [regarding the Han dynasty] makes it quite clear that *Han* was purely a dynastic referent: *Hanren* meant the “people of Han,” the subjects of the Han emperor, with no reference to culture, descent, language, or anything we might understand as indicating ethnic identity.

This proposition is in fact derived from selected recent studies by Chinese scholars on the subject. These secondary studies unfortunately suffer from not only certain lines of political correctness but often also perfunctory readings of primary sources and insufficient use of original data.<sup>8</sup> I therefore can hardly concur with this conclusion. The problems of projecting a modern concept backwards by two millennia notwithstanding, there are ample data to show that *Han* and *Hanren* were used in both

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Du Yuting 杜玉亭 (1993, 18) states nearly identically that Han was only a dynastic name, whose reference to ethnicity first appeared in records from the Northern dynasties. The last point is directly belied by histories of the Southern dynasties as cited below.

political *and* ethnic senses, with "reference to culture, descent, language," and many other markers of ethnicity, *during* the Han dynasty.

To start off with, there existed the name *Qinren* 秦人 "Qin person," as cited by Pelliot a century ago, which clearly was understood in an ethnic sense, used foremost by the Xiongnu to refer to the people on the Han side. It was also attested in a Chinese inscription 劉平國作亭誦, dated 158 AD in today's Xinjiang, to refer to people with apparent Sinitic names,<sup>9</sup> the best proof that *Qinren* was an ethnonym in a majority non-Sinitic milieu. Therefore, *Qinren* was palpably both an exonym and an endonym. The evidence from multiple ancient Central Asian languages, the Khotan Saka words *cinga*, *cingga* "Chinese" (Bailey 1979, pp. 101–102), and the Sogdian term *cyn* (Gershevitch 1954, p. 158), for example, show that *Qinren* was not the Sinitic version of a considerably different-sounding foreign equivalent, and that the root cin-/sino- indeed came from the dynastic name Qin, as Pelliot argued, without the help of this important inscription datum.

Naturally, neither the Han court nor most of its subjects would have liked to be called by a name referring to their long overthrown tyrannical predecessor, hence the emergence of *Hanren* "Han person." It would be illogical to maintain that this replacement, or rather update, exemplified by the difference between *Shiji* and *Han shu* in this respect, of the evident ethnonym *Qinren*, was only a political identity. For one thing, the often-cited speeches by the eunuch Zhonghang Yue 中行說 (*Shiji* 110.2899–2900), contrasting *Han* lifestyle, folkways and mores, and societal structure (food, clothing, economy, morality, matrimony, family relation, government, etc.) with that of the Xiongnu, clearly constitute what are understood today as ethnic markers.

Records directly showing "subjects of the Han emperor" as not being regarded as *Hanren* abound. For example, *Hou Han shu* (76.2833) reports that in AD 135, the governor of Wuling 武陵 memorialized the Han court to the effect that the local "Barbarians" had submitted to become subjects, "comparable to *Hanren*, so their taxes can be increased 蠻夷率服, 可比漢人, 增其租賦."

*Hou Han shu* (87.2899) also states that many Yuezhi 月氏 people, generally equated with Tokharians, came to submit and became "subjects of the Han emperor 依附縣官," and their residence intermixed with that of *Hanren* 與漢人錯居.

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance Ma Yong 1990, 24–40.

Furthermore, contemporary sources make it very clear that the reason these “subjects of the Han emperor” were not considered *Hanren* was because they had different customs, cultures, and languages. For instance, when the long-absorbed Zuodu 徼都 region in Sichuan merged into the Shu Commandery 蜀郡 in 97 BC, the Han court had to appoint two commandants 都尉 in two different towns, one to govern *Hanren*, the other “Barbarians,” partly because the latter had different clothing, hairstyle, and habits of speech 被髮左衽, 言語多好譬類 (*Hou Han shu* 76.2854).

*Hou Han shu* (87.2899) also reports that the Liangzhou region had many submitted Qiang (proto-Tibetan) people. Though intermixed with *Hanren*, they had “Barbarian” hair style and clothing, different folkways, and unintelligible languages 羌胡被髮左衽, 而與漢人雜處, 習俗既異, 言語不通.

There is strong proof that *Han* as a proud self-identity was shared by both educated elite and common folk, in the popular personal name Hanqiang 漢強 “Han the strong,” during the Han dynasties. This appears foremost in the rhyming text *Jijiuzhang* 急就章 (or 急就篇) “quick-mastering chapter,” to aid school children in learning Chinese characters, first compiled under Emperor Yuan (reign 48–33 BC) of the Former Han. It contains a likely made-up personal name, Feng Hanqiang 馮漢強. In the twentieth century, a large number of Han military personnel bearing this name were shown on Han wooden strips found at Juyan 居延.<sup>10</sup> This may not be the place to delve into the subject of Han era onomastics expressing “dear personal wishes” before the arrival of theophoric names from Central Asia. But the name Hanqiang, particularly in combination with another equally popular name, Puhu 破胡, “destroy the Hu (Xiongnu),” borne by Han soldiers facing the Xiongnu cavalry on the frontier, can only be interpreted as representing a Self-versus-Other ethnic (or, rather anachronistically, national) pride. I shall return to the ethnic connotation of this name below.

The fact that *Hanren* was the replacement of the outdated ethnonym *Qinren* in the Han proper is also supported by the puzzling, almost oxymoronic, ethnic term *Qinhu* 秦胡. This term, by all indications, represented a militarized group at the service of Han government. The term's exact meaning is still hotly being debated, with the main contenders being “Sinicized Barbarians” and

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<sup>10</sup> Xing Yitian 2011, 84–101.

"Barbarized former Hans" (Hu and An, 2005). In the latter case, this term would seem to be a perfect predecessor of the Qing dynasty designation *Hanjun* 漢軍.

## 5. WORSENING OF ETHNIC ANIMOSITY IN NORTHERN CHINA

We now fast forward to the period of north–south disunion triggered by the collapse of the Western Jin dynasty (265–316), when northern China fell under the dominance of various non-Sinitic groups, mostly former nomads from the Steppe.

Whether the ethnonym Han was a Tuoba creation notwithstanding, Elliott is certainly correct that the presence of a large number of former nomads in northern China highlighted ethnic consciousness and exacerbated racial tensions. The worsening of racial relations in northern China, however, occurred much earlier than the rise of the Tuoba, and, despite the Sinitic narrative of "the five Hu groups disordering China," the initial culprits were none other than the Jin dynasty rulers.

When the old Xiongnu confederacy disintegrated under growing Xiangbei pressure, more and more Xiongnu tribes and offshoots migrated into northern China. With the onset of the "Anarchy of Eight Princes," the fratricidal civil wars between members of the Jin royal family, these non-Sinitic immigrants were exploited at best as mercenaries, and at worst as commodities to profit from. Exemplified by the early life of the Jie 羯 leader Shi Le 石勒, who eventually rose to become the founding "heaven king" of the Later Zhao 後趙 polity (319–351), Jin warlords rounded up large numbers of ethnic minorities and sold them off into slavery as a sort of ancient equivalent of "blood diamonds" to fund their civil wars (*Jin shu* 104.2708, *Wei shu* 95.2047). This demonstrates that, within China proper and among the emperor's subjects, clear ethnic distinctions between the Sinitic majority and non-Sinitic minorities were well recognized at the time. Small wonder that ethnic tension and racial hatred quickly rose in northern China, culminating in the genocidal massacres of the Jie people in 349 (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑, hereafter *ZZTJ*, 98.3099–3100). The humiliating treatment of the two imprisoned Western Jin emperors by their ethnic captors (*ZZTJ* 88.2791, 90.2851) also reflected the much elevated level of racial animosity.

Partly to provide a cute pun for his chapter title, Elliott uses the term "Hu" to designate the Xianbei (Sārbi) and its leading group, the Tuoba. For the period of concern, however, this is an

unfortunate choice. Hu, of course, can be used as a generic name for all “Barbarians.” But at the time it was also a specific epithet for the Xiongnu and its various remnants and offshoots, gradually evolving into the broad grouping known as Zahu 雜胡, “miscellaneous or crossbred Hu.” This coincided with the ongoing shift of the term from referring to the Xiongnu to designating Central Asians, a process prompted by the presence of strong Caucasian elements in the old Xiongnu confederacy. The aforementioned Jie group, formerly a lowly branch of the Xiongnu, exhibiting typical Caucasian physical features of “high nose and heavy beard,” served as an interesting link in this transformation.

The replacement of the old Xiongnu dominance on the Steppe by the Xianbei was not unlike the ancient Turks’ destroying the Rouran (Juan-juan) power, the latter widely recognized as being proto-Mongolic, with little love lost between the respective groups (see, e.g., *Jin shu* 63.1707). Tang Changru 唐長孺 (p. 430) for one has noted this long-lasting enmity between the Xiongnu (Hu) and the Xianbei. Until the 490s, the Tuoba court still regarded the Hu as untrustworthy troublemakers. The Tuoba Wei polity and its two competing successors, namely the Northern Qi and the Northern Zhou, accordingly always regarded the Zahu, particularly the Buluoji (Jihu or Shanhu) as their enemy.

The Tuoba certainly did not consider themselves Hu, nor did other contemporaries. The distinction between the Xianbei and the Hu (Xiongnu) was such that, for instance, a new mixed group, the Tiefu 鐵弗 was formed by the offspring of Hu (Xiongnu) fathers and Xianbei mothers 胡父鮮卑母 (*Wei shu* 95.2054).

A leading Xianbei general, Heba Sheng 賀拔勝, had the style Pohu 破胡 (*Wei shu* 80.1179; *Zhou shu* 14.216), implying that *sheng* “victory” to him was equivalent to “destroying the Hu,” and it was the same popular name adopted by many Han dynasty soldiers facing off against the Xiongnu. When accosted by the warlord Erzhu Shilong 爾朱世隆, the beautiful Tuoba Princess Shouyang 壽陽 bravely cursed the former as a “Hu dog 胡狗,” because the Erzhu clan was identified by its contemporaries as belonging to the Jie ethnicity (*Luoyang qielan ji* 2.74).

To its contemporaries, the Xianbei and the Tuoba in particular were specifically called by Chinese-speakers *lu* 虜 “caitiff,” a much more disparaging term than Hu, which would gradually gain a certain respectability.

The Tuoba were relative late-comers in the epochal ethnic contention for supremacy. But their rise eventually destroyed any hope of a revival of the old northern Han elite. By completing the



debasement of the old Han aristocracy, the Tuoba were in fact responsible for the long-lasting negative connotations of this pre-existing proud ethnic autonym, which evolved in parallel into an unflattering generic term for "fellow," "chap," etc., as presented in my introduction.

## 6. THE "BARBARIAN" DOMINANCE AND THE ABASEMENT OF HAN

From all indications, since the fall of the Western Jin, the fortune and status of the Han people who remained in northern China generally followed a downward spiral. However, because at that time Han literati held a monopoly on writing and were the sole custodians of historiography, one may not get such a clear picture from the written sources, particularly the sorry reality that, even during much of Tuoba rule, the educated northern gentry may have enjoyed a socio-political status not much higher than their successors did under the Mongol Yuan dynasty (unofficially somewhere between prostitutes and vagrants).

Long before the much-touted sinification drive by the Tuoba Emperor Xiaowen, we have a clear case, not only of *Han* serving as an ethnic marker, but also evidence of the Han literati's lowly status. This is exemplified by the famous Tuoba minister Cui Hao 崔浩, from a prominent Han aristocratic clan. An accomplished calligrapher, Cui was asked hundreds of times to pen the rhyming text *Jijiuzhang* for school children. Each time Cui was very careful to change the original text 馮漢強 to 馮代強 (*Wei shu* 35.826–27), doing so using "Dai 代," being the Tuoba's first dynastic name, to show that he "dared not offend the (Tuoba) nation." There were already more than two dozen other dynasties separating Cui from the official Han dynasty! Despite such humility and unsurpassed strategic service to the Tuoba, Cui was executed in 450, together with all members of his extended clan, for "insulting" the Tuoba forefathers.

The three decades after Emperor Xiaowen moved the Tuoba capital to Luoyang were likely the only golden time for the Han literati, until the "Xianbei revival movement," unleashed by the Six-Garrison Revolt in 523 (*ZZTJ* 149.4675), and the wholesale massacre of the entire cohort of over two thousand Han and sinified Tuoba courtiers and ministers in 528 on the south bank of the Yellow River (*ZZTJ* 152.4742–43).

It is somewhat fortunate for posterity that the collapse of the Tuoba Wei resulted in two

competing polities, Eastern Wei/Northern Qi versus Western Wei/Northern Zhou, providing multiple written narratives, with the Northern Zhou being the final winner. A net result is: historical records concerning the loser, the Northern Qi, were subjected to few political constraints and reveal much information about the status of the Han under the Tuoba Xianbei rule, despite the well-known fact that the winner, the Northern Zhou, was in fact the more Xianbei-ized state of the two. Today, nearly all citations concerning the ethnonym Han of the period are from the Northern Qi realm.

More amazingly, all these citations, with few exceptions, depict the Han in a negative light or context. Starting with *Han'er* 漢兒/*Hanzi* 漢子, literally “Han son” (an unflattering term to this day, as used by the author Lu Xun), we have *chihan* 癡漢 (*Bei shi* 38.1394) “a stupid Han,”<sup>11</sup> *kongtouhan* 空頭漢 (*Bei shi* 54.1967) “a brainless Han,” 狗漢 “dog-Han,” 漢狗 (*Bei shi* 88.3053) “Han dog,” *zeihan* 賊漢 (ibid.) “thieving Han,” *wuguanzhihan* 無官職漢 “a Han with no official position” (*Bei Qi shu* 10.138, used disdainfully by a Tuoba prince to refer to his own Han father-in-law), etc. The best example is a Xianbei leader, Liu Gui 劉貴, dismissing the reported death of a large number of Han laborers (*Bei shi* 31.1147): “Those worthless Han 頭錢價漢, let them die!” To sharpen this heartless insult, the Song dynasty historian Sima Guang (*ZZTJ* 157.4882) edited the word to *yiqianhan* 一錢漢 “one-penny-worth Han.”

As an interesting contrast as well as evidence that *Han* was long recognized as a pre-existing ethnonym outside the Tuoba realm, the history of the rival Southern Qi dynasty written by a southern author used the neutral term *Hanren* to refer to the non-Xianbei members of the Tuoba embassies to the south (*Nan Qi shu* 47.819) and the alleged Han mother of a Tuoba emperor (ibid 57.986). Earlier, the history of the southern Song dynasty (*Song shu* 82.2095) commented that some of the northern “Barbarians” were actually *zahan* 雜漢 “miscellaneous Han,” likely meaning partially “Barbarized” frontier Han. This is yet one more proof that *Han* has long been used as an ethnonym, thus not a Tuoba “proposition.”

While most recipients of the cited spiteful designations in the north were indeed ethnic Han, there are two interesting exceptions. In the first (*Bei shi* 28.1032), the Northern Qi court officer Yuan Shi 源師 in charge of ceremonial rites was called a “fussing *Han'er* 漢兒多事,” after reporting a certain

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<sup>11</sup> This term, written as 痴漢 and pronounced *chikan*, has gained the modern meaning of “pervert,” “perverted acts,” in Japan, demonstrating that the negative connotation of the character is not limited to the Chinese-speaking world. See, e.g., Horii and Burgess, 2012.

astrological event, while Yuan was of clear Xianbei decent. The second is the palace murder of a court minister being dismissed as trifling by the Chile 敕勒 (Uighur) general Hulü Guang 斛律光 (*Bei Qi shu* 12.161): "What's the big fuss about the brother of the son of heaven killing a Han 天子弟殺一漢, 何所苦?" Here the murdered minister, He Shikai 和士開, was of Central Asian descent.

One may be tempted to ascribe the two above cases to an early start of the process of *Han* becoming a generic term for "fellow, guy." But I submit that they reflect a long-existing divide between the dominating, mostly Xianbei, military elite and the submissive, mostly Han, literati, civilian bureaucrats. Neither of the above two, wrongly labeled "Han," held military posts. This observation is supported by the biography (*Bei Qi shu* 50.692–93) of a certain Northern Qi general, Han Feng 韓鳳, who "particularly disliked literati officials," calling them "unbearable dog-Han fit only to be killed 狗漢大不可耐, 唯須殺卻," while treating military officers, even low-ranking ones, with respect. One may also note that Yuwen Tai 宇文泰, the actual founder of the Northern Zhou, called a Northern Qi general *chi'nanzi* 癡男子 "stupid man" (*Bei shi* 53.1924), instead of the prevailing slur *chihan* "stupid Han."

To summarize, the true legacy of the Tuoba rule of northern China in this regard is not converting the alleged political identity Han into an ethnic one, but rather turning this pre-existing ethnonym into a negative and derogatory vocative.

## 7. THE ROLE OF GEOGRAPHY: BRAIDED CAITIFFS VERSUS ISLAND BARBARIANS

While its continued wide use by the Sui and Tang elite proves that *Han* was a universal negative vocative throughout the entire Tuoba realm, we nevertheless owe to yet another less-constrained history account of the Northern Qi a precise definition of the term. The Tang dynasty history critic Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (*Shitong*, 954) commented on a since-lost treatise, *Qi zhi* 齊志 (*Gazette of the Northern Qi*): "It often recorded contemporary lower-class colloquialisms 鄙語, such as calling Central Regions [people] Han, and [those residing] west of the [Hángu] Pass Qiang 中州名漢, 關右稱羌."

This precious datum shows that the ethnonym Han was long a common folk term, hence seldom used by educated literati. The term's surfacing into mainstream culture was thus not unlike the same phenomenon regarding the twelve-animal annual cycle, part of the "working class" Sinitic folk

culture with a long history, as both were “promoted” by the Tuoba Xianbei, who despised the “high-brow” Han literati. But it would be equally wrong to claim that the ethnonym Han and the twelve-animal cycle were “Hu propositions.” Some parallels can be found in the Mongol Yuan court’s promotion of vernacular Chinese.

This precise geographic definition also shows that “Han” was restricted to the “Central Regions,” synonymous with “Central Lands,” “Central Plains,” “Central China 中華,” and “Central Country 中國.” Therefore, not all Sinitic-speaking souls were entitled to be called Han, the negative connotations notwithstanding.

Of particular significance were the southerners, a hodgepodge of northern refugee/emigrant communities, descendants of earlier Sinitic settlers, plus sinified southern natives, who upheld what many considered “legitimate” Chinese regimes.

For a long time, in addition to military conflicts, the north and south engaged in a propaganda war by mutual denigrating name-calling: the south named the northerners *suolu* 索虜 “braided caitiffs,” and the north dismissed the southerners as *daoyi* 島夷 “island barbarians.” But these were rather literary terms used by official historians. The colloquial terms, by all indications, were simply *lu* 虜 “caitiff” and *wu’er* 吳兒 “Wu child,” respectively.

As mentioned earlier, *lu* was indeed a standard reference to Xianbei, as opposed to Han, as is perfectly shown by the following verses of a northern folk song (*Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集 25.370):

I am a boy from a *lu* family, and cannot comprehend Han’er’s songs

我是虜家兒, 不解漢兒歌.

Before long, *lu* became a generic, albeit unflattering, term for all northerners, whether Xianbei or Han, in the mouth of southerners (*Liang shu* 39.558, *Nan shi* 9.264). Even the talented Sui poet Xue Daocheng 薛道衡, on an embassy to the southern state of Chen, was named disparagingly by the southerners as a *lu* (*Sui-Tang jiahua* 隋唐嘉話, 1.1). Gradually, northerners, both Xianbei and Han, would accept this term with humor and grace, not unlike an American identifying himself as a gringo, as exemplified by

the following response of the Tuoba courtier Xue Cong 薛聰 to Emperor Xiaowen's inquiry about Xue's ancestry, which was full-heartedly laughed off by the emperor (*Bei shi* 36.1333):

My remote ancestors Guangde [and others] served the Han dynasty for generations, and were called *Han* by their contemporaries. My ninth generation forefather Yong followed Liu Bei (the founding monarch of the Shu-Han dynasty) into Shu (Sichuan), and was called a *Shu* [person] by his contemporaries. Today I serve your majesty, so I am a *lu*, not a Shu [person] any more.

臣遠祖廣德, 世仕漢朝, 時人呼為漢. 九世祖永隨劉備入蜀, 時人呼為蜀. 臣今事陛下, 是虜, 非蜀也.

Among other things, this shows that a subject of the rump Han state in Sichuan could not be called a *Han*. Until the early Tang, Emperor Taizong would still dismiss (*Zhenguan zhengyao* 貞觀政要 5.173) Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮, the unsurpassed Shu statesman, as merely a "minister of a statelet 小國之相," and the Shu region continued to serve as a place for exiles, a far cry from the venerated "Central Regions."

In the end, *lu* would even gain some respectability, as shown by the Sui dynasty nobleman Yang Su 楊素 questioning how a former southern aristocrat, Xiao Cong 蕭琮, could marry off, separately, the latter's sister to a Xianbei, and then his cousin to a Qiang (proto-Tibetan) husband (*Bei shi* 93.3093):

Qian'er is a Qiang, and Houmochen is a *lu*. How could they be comparable?

鉗爾, 羌也; 侯莫陳, 虜也. 何得相比?

Given the usually unrecognized majority Xianbei-ancestry of the new Chinese elite ever since the Sui, the grudging respectability of the term *lu* continued well into the mid-Tang dynasty.

## 8. A GOOD HAN AS AN OXYMORON?

As I have argued above, the lack of political constraints or taboo in historical records about the Northern Qi opened a window into the low social status of the civilian Sinitic population, including the educated literati, epitomized by the term Han serving as a derogative vocative. The rapid increase of written sources under the Tang, both official and private, would soon prove that this “bad Han” slur was not unique in the Northern Qi domain, but rather a general phenomenon under the Tuoba Xianbei rule.

This usage in fact was led by the Tang imperial family. The founding emperor Gaozu complained (*Jiu Tang shu* 64.2415–16) that his second son, the future Emperor Taizong, had been misguided by *dushuhan* 讀書漢 “educated Han,” whereas Emperor Taizong would curse and threaten to kill the trouble-making *tianshehan* 田舍漢 “house-owning Han peasant,” referring to the uncompromising courtier Wei Zheng 魏徵 (*Sui-Tang jiahua* 1.7; *Da-Tang xinyu* 大唐新語 1.13). The third emperor, Gaozong, called an official who dared punish a favored palace eunuch (*Sui-Tang jiahua* 2.33) “this ferocious Han 此漢寧.”

Similar usage of the derogative vocative Han abounded among other members of the Tang ruling class. For example, Princess Anle called another minister (*ZZTJ* 208.6608) “stubborn house-owning Han peasant from Shandong 山東木強田舍漢.” One of Empress Wu Zetian’s favorite courtiers belittled a fellow official whose eyes always looked up with the nickname *xiacuhan* 呷醋漢, “vinegar-drinking Han” (*Chaoye qianzhai* 朝野僉載 4.88).<sup>12</sup> A Ministry of Personnel officer, Zheng Yin 鄭愔, cursed a candidate as *chihan*, “stupid Han” (*Chaoye qianzhai* 4.89). The imperial son-in-law 駙馬 Zhang Ji 張埴 jealously called a talented writer *duoshihan* 多事漢 “meddlesome Han” (*Fengshi wenjian ji* 封氏聞見記 10.94) for downplaying the Zhang clan’s social prestige. And so on and so forth.

The popularization of the derogatory vocative Han demonstrates that the Tang elite were dominated, at least initially, by those with direct Xianbei ancestry. As this ruling group expanded, the new members, whether Han or not, consciously or unconsciously took up the language and snobbery of the old guard.

It is intriguing that Empress Wu Zetian, in her efforts to break the old power structure, explicitly called for recruiting a *haohan* 好漢 “good Han” (*Jiu Tang shu* 89.2849) to help administer her

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<sup>12</sup> It is not certain that vinegar-drinking was already a metaphor for sexual jealousy, as it is today.

government. Given the persisting bad press the vocative *Han* was receiving, "good Han" must have sounded oxymoronic at the time, hence its novelty, to be frequently cited by later authors.<sup>13</sup> As I have posited, to this day similar positive usage remains a precious minority among words with a *-han* suffix.

As an old (Han dynasty) Chinese folk rhyme intimates,<sup>14</sup> urban and metropolitan elite had an enormous influence in popularizing cultural fads. The negative vocative *han* thus quickly became part of the popular language through the Tang and Song dynasties. In earlier chapters of the collection *Zazuan* 雜纂, "miscellaneous popular sayings," attributed to Tang and Song authors including Su Shi 蘇軾, we find numerous such words as *qionghan* 窮漢 "a poor man," *cunhan/cunlihan* 村漢/村里漢 "a village bumpkin," *feihan* 肥漢 "a fatty," *zuihan/bingjiuhan* 醉漢/病酒漢 "a drunkard," *mudahan* 木大漢 "a big idiot," *wukunhan* 無褲漢 "a man with no pants," *yahan* 啞漢 "a mute," *chouhan* 醜漢 "an ugly man," and *miuhan* 謬漢 "an illogical or irrational man," etc. (*Zazuan qizhong* 雜纂七种 passim). Some of these deprecating appellatives continue to be used today. These examples show the "naturalization" of the derogatory slur *Han* during the Tang and the Song, into a generic term meaning "fellow, guy, chap," and the Chinese language's long memory of the negative connotations bestowed by the Tuoba and other nomadic conquerors.

Nevertheless, a joke concocted by Su Shi on a henpecked husband made use of the famous Han general Hán Xin 韓信 for a pun between the homonymic *pafuhan* 怕負漢 "reluctant to betray Han" and 怕婦漢 "a man afraid of his wife" (*Jile bian* 雞肋編 3.98). This highlights the historical link between the negative appellative and the powerful dynasty.

After many centuries, the late Yuan dynasty author Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (ca. 1320–1403+) seemed to be the first post-Tuoba scholar to note the origin of the derogatory meaning of the vocative *han*. He attributed the fact that "people today call lowly men *hanzi* 今人謂賤丈夫曰漢子" to the term's first recorded utterance by a Northern Qi monarch (*Nancun chuogeng lu* 南村輟耕錄 8.104).

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<sup>13</sup> Both *Xin Tang shu* and *ZZTJ* changed the term, likely due to its vulgarity.

<sup>14</sup> *Hou Han shu* 24.853: 城中好高髻, 四方高一尺; 城中好廣眉, 四方且半額 .... See also *Yuefu shiji* 87.1223. For a slightly different version, see *Yutai xinyong* 1.27.

## 9. NORTHERN CENTRICISM, SOUTHERN INFERIORITY, AND THE HANREN/NANREN 漢人/南人 DICHOTOMY

One of the difficulties in applying the modern Self-versus-Other paradigm of ethnicity to premodern China is that not only were there multiple “Others,” there was also the concurrent presence of multiple “Selves.” The history of the ethnonym Han is a perfect case.

The passage cited by Liu Zhiji of the since-lost *Qi zhi* makes it clear that during the Tuoba era, Han was applied only to people of the Central Regions. Neither the “Island Barbarians” in the south nor residents of the remote Sichuan region were entitled to this ethnonym. Not only did the Xianbei leader Gao Huan (*Bei Qi shu* 24.347) disparagingly call an elderly southern emperor a *Wu'er* 吳兒, not *Han'er* 漢兒, but also a Tang dynasty candidate seeking a government position self-deprecatingly corrected a bureaucrat’s calling him a *chihan* “stupid Han,” by stating that Han was in fact the bureaucrat himself, whereas the job-seeker was merely a *Wuchi* 吳癡 “Wu idiot” (*Chaoye qianzhai* 4.89).

These cases epitomize what may be termed a “northern-centricism” now long left behind in China, namely the political and cultural prestige and domination of the old “Central Regions” in the north, and a persisting “southern inferiority complex” vis-à-vis the north.

This subject is probably too complex to be examined in detail here. Suffice it to note that, despite allegedly holding the Sinitic tradition and “legitimacy,” and enjoying a whiff of dual loyalty of some northern literati members, the southerners during the north–south division still viewed the old “Central Regions” or “Central China” in the north with admiration and even awe. Examples include the famous racially charged letter 與陳伯之書 by a southern author (*Liang shu* 20.314) venerably calling the north “old country of Ji (the royal surname of the Zhou dynasty) and Han 姬漢舊邦,” and the southern general Chen Qingzhi’s 陳慶之 heartfelt admiration during a brief expedition to the old capital Luoyang, averring “how can one not respect the northerners 北人安可不重!” (*Luoyang qielan ji* 2.101–02; *ZZTJ* 152.4753 dates the event to 528).

Such northern centricism led to the taxonomy of the “multiple Selves” of the Sinitic world, in which southerners (as well as inhabitants of the western Sichuan region) were not entitled to the ethnonym Han, despite the graduate southward migration of China’s key economic regions starting in the Tang dynasty.



A little noticed historical fact demonstrates the depth of the "southern inferiority complex" and its political submission to the north. In the year 947,<sup>15</sup> for a few short months before retreating to their home base, the Khitan Liao troops led by their second khan (太宗耶律德光) occupied the city of Kaifeng on the bank of the Yellow River, then the capital of the disintegrating Later Jin dynasty. Despite the fact that large parts of southern China were controlled by de facto independent warlords, and despite the fact that the Khitan invaders were not even Han, much of the south would recognize the Khitan khan as their sovereign, and adopt the Khitan reign title Huitong 會同.<sup>16</sup>

Other than this lingering north-south distinction, further highlighted by the Mongol Yuan's official *Hanren/Nanren* division, Han, *Hanren*, and *Hanyu* as ethnic markers close to their modern sense had pretty much solidified by the Song dynasty. The best evidence is the introduction to the bilingual Tangut-Han pocket lexicon *Fan-Han heshi zhangzhongzhu* 番漢合時掌中珠 dated 1190 that includes the following passage (p. 5):

If one does not know *Hanyu*, then one cannot join the ranks of *Hanren*.

不會漢語, 則豈入漢人之數.

With the flourishing of education and schools supported by the rapidly expanding economy, the south was quickly catching up and surpassing the north in cultural attainments and achievements, helped in no small degree by the imperial examination-based meritocracy. The political and cultural prestige of the old north was receding all the time. The Jurchen Jin dynasty author Yuan Haowen 元好問, curiously a descendant of the Tuoba royal clan, perhaps represented the last major effort to uphold the northern stature, as shown by the title *Zhongzhouji* 中州集 (Anthology of the Central Regions) of the collection of works by poets in the Jurchen-occupied north, that Haowen painstakingly compiled for posterity.

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<sup>15</sup> *ZZTJ* (285.9320) dates the fall of the city to the seventeenth day of the last lunar month of 946, which was January 11, 947, in the Julian Calendar.

<sup>16</sup> The Qing dynasty scholar Qian Daxin 錢大昕 (15.364-65) was the first to observe this intriguing fact, not recorded in any written records, based on archeology and inscription data in the south.

Fast forwarding again, the Jurchen-Southern Song confrontation, the Mongol Conquest, and Yuan rule, which assigned the southerners to the lowest-ranked ethnic category, all helped to bring about a strong Sinitic nationalism in the south in the modern sense. It was no accident that the Ming was the first ever, as well as the only, national government established by a south-centered and southern-based power group in premodern China. The spell of southern inferiority was finally broken, and Han became the endonym for all Sinitic-speaking souls under the son of heaven, albeit not necessarily fitting the modern concept of a *minzu*.

#### 10. HAN WAS SELDOM AN EXONYM

I conclude this essay by presenting a string of linguistic data to show that Han has largely remained a self-appellation (autonym or endonym). Over two millennia, few of China's ethnic minorities or ancient neighbors were known for certain to have adopted this name for China or her Sinitic majority.

When *Han* was used as a slur or negative vocative by the Xianbei rulers, it was palpably an exonym. It would seem to have been uttered in a language intelligible to the targeted recipients, i.e., Han Chinese. At any rate, few words of the Xianbei tongue survive. It is said that the Tuoba probably called the Han people *ran'gan* 染干, as cited by Elliott. To my knowledge, the Chinese historian Miao Yue 繆鉞 (1963, p. 77) was the first modern scholar to note this term, recorded in *Bei shi* (24.884). However, this was an unproven speculation (時唱染干, 似道我輩) by a Han observer who did not understand the Tuoba language, much less whether it was linked to the Sinitic vocative. It may well be an unfortunate misunderstanding, given that *ran'gan* was a rather popular Xianbei *and* Turk personal name, attested numerous times.

Various ancient Central Asian languages, from Sogdian to Saka Khotanese, called China and Chinese by variations of the state/dynasty name Qin. Ancient Turks called China/Chinese simply Tabghach, a metathesized form of Tuoba, as Pelliot has proposed. Then the Tanguts called the Han *giwi* or *zar*.<sup>17</sup> Both the Jurchens and their Manchu successors called the Han people *Nikan*, which according to Pelliot (1913, pp. 465–66) was not related to *Han*. Since Genghis Khan, Mongols have always called the

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<sup>17</sup> Li Fanwen 1997, 967 and 1067.

Han *Kitad/Khitan*. During the Yuan, they called the southern Han *Nankias*, if not the derogatory *Mangi/Manzi* used by Marco Polo. To this day, Tibetans call the Han *Rgya*.

In addition, both Tangut and Jurchen left direct transcriptions of Han in the sense of a Han dynasty and its emperors. They differed considerably from what the two groups called Han people respectively.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jin Qicong 1984, 79; Li Fanwen 1997, 994.

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