

WHAT AND WHEN IS CHINA?

So when and what is China? If we attempt to unpack the proper nouns and adjectives used in Chinese to define and describe the country, people and language that in English we call China and Chinese, we then understand immediately the inadequacy of these two English words. If we compare everything that is hidden behind the terms ‘China’ and ‘Chinese’ in English with the words employed in what we now call modern standard Chinese (or ‘Mandarin’) to name this entity, this ‘people’ who are not, by any definition, one people—to describe this language which seems monolithic and yet is multiple—we start to grasp their complexity. Below is a list, not an exhaustive one, of terms in Chinese which contain within them a number of meanings and nuances, but which are often, innocently or otherwise, simply translated into English as ‘China’ or ‘Chinese’—by the Chinese authorities and their English-language media, by sinologists and China experts. Each of these terms, both proper nouns and adjectives, needs to be unpacked, historicized, contextualized. This may seem a forbidding exercise, but bear with it and you will see the extent of the problem of this under-translation, of both the Chinese reality today and what preceded it.

Let us take first the proper noun adjective *Zhongguo* 中國, which translates the polity and/or territory, China. The range

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of meanings it has to cover is vast. It can refer simply to China, today's modern nation-state, which officially is called the People's Republic of China or PRC. It may also signify the Chinese government or authorities, as in 'China's policy on pollution', when we mean the Chinese government's policy. 'China' is also used transhistorically, or ahistorically, to mean not only China the modern nation-state, but also the state during the dynastic periods, and the prehistoric civilizations found within the space now occupied by the PRC. The word *zhongguo* can also translate as the 'central states' or 'central kingdoms' that existed before their unification—or rather absorption—by the Qin state and what became the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE). The unified state was consolidated by the Han dynasties ('Western Han' 206 BCE–9 CE; 'Eastern Han' 25–220 CE), which would give rise to the denomination 'Han' to describe the subjects of China's dynasties thereafter; however, the connotation that links 'Han' to an ethnicity is a modern one. Geographically, *Da Zhongguo*, literally 'Big China' but usually translated 'Greater China', refers to China as a spatially larger unit which includes mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.

The proper noun and adjective *Zhonghua* 中華 (China/Chinese) also denotes the territory and polity that is China. However, *Zhonghua* is a higher register of language than *Zhongguo* and is used in the official names of both modern republics: *Zhonghua minguo* 中華民國 for the Republic of China (1912–49); and *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo* 中華人民共和國 for the People's Republic of China (1949–). The former is still the official name for the state known as Taiwan, where the nationalist government sought refuge when it fled the mainland in 1949. The proper noun *Da Zhonghua* 大中華 translates as 'Greater China' and again is used more broadly to designate mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and even the Chinese Diaspora.

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Zhongguoren 中國人 may refer to a Chinese (person) or the Chinese (people). The word became known in Britain to a whole generation of Monty Python fans when the popular comedians recorded the 1980 song ‘I Like Chinese’, which included a verse sung in Chinese: ‘*Wǒ ài Zhongguoren*’, literally ‘I like Chinese’.ⁱ *Zhongguoren* may more specifically refer to a citizen of the PRC, and thus include Tibetans and Uighurs.

The word *Huaren* 華人 is an inclusive term meaning ‘a Chinese person’ or ‘Chinese people’ and may refer to all those in China proper while also denoting those outside China proper in the diaspora. The term *Huaqiao* is usually translated as ‘Overseas Chinese’ and more specifically refers to Chinese living abroad or descendants of those who have emigrated.

As for the term *Han* 漢, it is assumed by scholars trained in the dominant tradition of sinology that ‘Han’ is generally equal to ‘Chinese’—a convention maintained by the current regime. Han is used in China today to refer to what the authorities have defined as the main ethnic group in China. However, originally it referred to those seeing themselves as descending from the first relatively long dynastic period, the Han, which consolidated the process of unification and homogenization started by the short-lived Qin. There originally was no connotation of race or ethnicity. Nowadays, the term *Hanren* 漢人, literally ‘Han person’ or ‘Han people’, which again we generally translate outside China as ‘Chinese’, refers to a member of

i. The song is to be found on the album *Contractual Obligation* released on the Charisma (UK) and Arista (US) labels in October 1980. It was also issued as a single in the UK in the same month, and again in 1989, with the Chinese characters for ‘I like Chinese’ (我愛中國人) featuring on the sleeves. The song’s lyrics were infused with orientalist and racist stereotypes redolent of George Formby’s 1930s lyrics recounting the adventures of Mr Wu the Laundryman. When the Pythons were reconstituted for a 2014 concert, some of the offending lyrics were replaced.

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the Han majority ethnicity (91 per cent of China's current population as officially defined by the PRC state). This group is, nevertheless, 'comprised of a wide variety of culturally and ethnically diverse populations, including eight mutually unintelligible linguistic groupings (Mandarin, Wu, Yue, Xiang, Hakka, Gan, Southern and Northern Min).'¹

Similarly, 唐人 *Tāngren* is a term used by those who see their 'Chineseness' as stemming from a later period, the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), when the southern parts of what is now China and their populations were absorbed into the dynastic territories of the Tang. The term *Tāngren* is used primarily by Cantonese-speaking southerners, especially in Hong Kong, and by those in the diaspora who emigrated in the nineteenth century from the south. Thus what is called 'Chinatown' in English was called *Tāngrenjiē* 唐人街 in Chinese, which translates literally as 'Tang-Person Street'. The word for Chinatown used by the Chinese authorities, *Zhōngguóchéng* 中國城, now found inscribed on the world's Chinatown arches—which are often paid for by Chinese municipalities—is a late twentieth-century neologism and is no more than a back-translation of the English 'Chinatown'.ⁱⁱ Again a wealth of complex history is erased in the translation of *Tāngren* by 'Chinese', an erasure the authorities have been happy to embrace.

Then come the terms we use to describe the language(s) spoken in China today and in the past. In English we refer indiscriminately to 'Chinese'. In China itself we find *Zhōngwén* 中文, which we could translate literally as 'China writing'. The word carries no connotation of the historical moment

ii. For instance, the Liverpool arch constructed in 1999–2000 was financed by Liverpool's sister city Shanghai and built by engineers and artisans from China. It was squeezed into the narrow confines of Nelson Street, the post-World War II Chinatown, where it towers over nothing in particular. See Figure 2.

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concerned, and is thus a transhistorical and transregional term used to refer to language(s) which, when written down, use ‘Chinese’ characters. But *Zhongwen* may refer to both oral and written Chinese; to the national language—*Guoyu* 國語, as it was called in the first half of the twentieth century, and as it is still called today on Taiwan—or *Putonghua* 普通話, the ‘common language’, as it has been called since 1949 in the PRC. This national language or *lingua franca* is also based on northern Chinese. ‘Mandarin’ or ‘Mandarin Chinese’ is the term often used by non-Chinese to describe this national language, to distinguish it from Cantonese and other languages of China often mistakenly termed ‘dialects’.ⁱⁱⁱ *Zhongwen* would also cover the premodern written vernacular, *baihua* 白話 (‘plain talk’), as well as the premodern literary language, *wenyanwen* 文言文.

In the PRC, Chinese is often referred to as *Hanyu* 漢語 (‘Han language’). Again this may refer to oral or written Chinese, the language of the officially determined majority Han ethnicity, even though many within the Han ethnic category use another language such as Cantonese, *Minnanhuà* 閩南話 (the language of Fujian and Taiwan), or *Wu* 吳 (the language of the Shanghai region). When referring to today’s China, *Hanyu* is effectively modern standard Chinese (MSC), in other words *Putonghua* or what foreigners call Mandarin. But *Hanyu* may also refer to the premodern language, so the term is often qualified as *xian-dai Hanyu* 現代漢語 (‘modern Hanyu’) as opposed to *gu* 古 or *gudai* 古代 (‘ancient Hanyu’). But more on this modern/ancient divide later.

iii. Strictly speaking, ‘Mandarin’, or *guanhua* 官話—literally ‘functionary-speak’ or ‘mandarin-talk’—refers only to the spoken language, since it served only as the oral *lingua franca* of the officials or Mandarins, *guan* 官話, who for written communication used the literary language, *wenyanwen* 文言文.

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Huayu 華語 is often used to designate standard Chinese for a non-mainland Chinese or overseas Chinese public, who associate more readily with the idea of *Hua* than they do with *Han*. It is for instance used in Singapore to designate Modern Standard Chinese, and is found in the expression *Xinjiapo Huayu* 新加坡華語, or Singapore Mandarin.

‘Chinese’ may also refer to ‘Chinese literature’ just as ‘English’ may refer to ‘English literature’. However, there are several terms in Modern Standard Chinese today. *Zhongguo wenxue* 中國文學, which sinologists translate as ‘Chinese literature’, literally means ‘China literature’ or ‘literature of China’. This could be understood quite innocently—after all, we talk of British literature and American literature to distinguish between national literatures within the larger family of English literature, which many in any case still understand as pertaining to England, and perhaps Britain and Ireland. ‘Literature in English’ would be a more inclusive way of referring to the many literatures that exist in the English language. But just as the term ‘British literature’ would not evoke in most people’s minds the use of Welsh and Gaelic as a literary language of Britain, so ‘China literature’ refers to literature in Chinese, and thus excludes literature of China in Tibetan, Uighur and other minority languages such as Korean.

Zhongguo wenxue is also used transhistorically, to refer to the literature written in the premodern language for more than 2,000 years, even though during those two millennia no writers ever referred to their writings as *Zhongguo wenxue*. To sum up, in the dominant collective imaginary, ‘China literature’ refers to literature written in ‘Chinese’ characters, within the space that is now China, in either modern Chinese or the premodern vernacular or in the premodern ‘literary’ language *wenyan* 文言; but it excludes what is written in languages such as Tibetan. There is, however, also a specific term for literature written in

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Hanyu (the language of the Han) written down in *Hanzi* 漢字 ('Chinese characters'), and that is *Hanwen wenxue* 漢文文學, or 'literature in Han writing', where *Hanwen* 漢文 (Han writing) refers to the written language from the Han dynasty onwards.

The term *Hanwen* is also used to specify language written in characters as opposed to Romanized script. During the Republican period (1912–49) there existed projects to spell out characters in the Latin alphabet not merely as an aid to learning them, but so as to replace them altogether. Indeed, abandoning characters, in order to universalize the use of a national standard language, was seriously considered by intellectuals and the political authorities. In the years just after the 1911 Chinese Revolution, the prominent intellectual Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) discussed in his diary the question of 'Whether or not our country's language can become a language using letters', and concluded that the abandonment of characters was not desirable: 'The reason Han writing [writing in characters] is difficult to popularize lies not in Han writing itself, but in the imperfect way it is taught'.²

Hu Shi distinguishes between 'letters' (*zimu* 字母) and 'Han writing' (*Hanwen*); and, writing in 1915, he still expresses himself in the old literary language (*wenyan*), rather than the modern, national vernacular he advocated. It is also noteworthy that he refers to 'our country's language' *wo guo yu* 吾國語, refraining from referring to 'Chinese' with use of *Zhongwen* or any of the other ways we have seen to describe Chinese language or literature. Today, a century later, 'letters' are confined to the pinyin Romanization system, used merely as an aid to identifying the pronunciation of characters and in representing names in foreign language texts. There is no further discussion of using the Latin alphabet to replace characters.^{iv}

iv. Hanyu Pinyin Romanization is the official romanization system of the

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All of the terms explored above translate into English as simply ‘China’ or ‘Chinese’. It is easily understandable how simple it is to mask, intentionally or unintentionally, the complexity of the lexicon. When translating from Chinese into English, everything becomes ‘China’ or ‘Chinese’; but when we attempt to translate from English or other languages into Chinese, what becomes obvious is the extent to which these two terms are extremely reductive of the diverse and complex political and historical issues foregrounded by the process of translation. In short, the English subsumes a host of historically, geopolitically and ethnically distinct significations.

People’s Republic of China. Developed in the 1950s, it has been used to represent Chinese names in foreign-language publications since the end of the 1970s. Thus, Mao Tse-tung became Mao Zedong, Chou En-lai became Zhou Enlai. It was preceded by several other systems, mainly developed by missionaries and sinologists, which aimed to spell out and represent the written language. While pinyin works fairly well in rendering the sounds of *Putonghua* (the ‘common standard language’), throughout China many speakers of the language pronounce the sounds quite differently. Pinyin is discussed further below.

ZHONGGUO AND THE HISTORIC VOCABULARY OF NATIONALISM

As for older historical uses of the term *zhongguo* 中國, the sinologist Wolfgang Behr has succinctly traced the usages and semantic possibilities in his work on premodern translation.¹ The term *zhongguo* is found as early as the Western Zhou dynasty 西周 (1046–771 BCE) on a bronze inscription excavated in 1963 and dating from around 1042–06 BCE.² Behr translates *zhongguo* 中國 in this context as ‘the central states’; he also suggests the meanings ‘capital’ and ‘royal domain’. The centralization of multifarious, vying states did not occur before 221 BCE, when the homogenizing Qin dynasty imposed itself militarily.ⁱ Before that, multiple vassal states coexisted around a principal or dominant state, which was more a fortified city-state or *yi* 邑 where the dominant sovereign raised his banner or *zhong* 中, ‘a symbol of the centrality of the royal domain’. This central state became known as the *zhongguo* 中國. Under the Eastern Zhou 東周 (770–221 BCE), the term became associated with the central states as a whole, distinct from the barbarian ‘outside world’. But at no point until the modern era was there a direct correlation between *zhongguo* 中國 and the West’s ‘China’.

- i. Beyond historical reality, it was Mao Zedong’s championing of the Qin monarch’s achievements in the 1960s that made the Qin dynasty loom large in the popular imaginary.

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As to the terms employing the character Han 漢 / 汉, Behr traces *hanzu* 漢族—which today would translate as ‘Han ethnicity’—to the end of the Northern Wei Dynasty 北魏 (386–534 CE), but only in the sense of ‘Han clansman’.³ *Hanren* 漢人 in the sense of ‘Han people’ occurs in Sima Qian’s *Shiji* 史記, known in English as *Records of the Grand Historian* (second century BCE).⁴ As for expressions relating to the language, in the mid-fourth century CE, we find *Hanyan* 漢言 in the Annals of the Later Han *Hou Han Ji* 後漢紀; and *Hanyu* 漢語 in the *Nan Qi Shu* 南齊書 (537 CE). Both of these terms may be translated as ‘Han language’.ⁱⁱ ‘Han’ language, then, was quite simply the language used by the court and the administration of the Han sovereigns and their successors over the succeeding millennia; it cannot anachronistically be called a national language. It was the written literary language that unified the bureaucracy, and the medium of an elite written culture throughout the territory ruled over by the dynastic powers at any given time. Let us recall that all functionaries were ‘men of letters’, and that to become a Mandarin a mastery of the written culture was essential.

Even when foreigners took over the reins of the state, as was most notably the case with the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 CE) and the Manchu Qing (1644–1911 CE), the written language that had served the philosophers Confucius, Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子 remained the language of bureaucratic communication and elite cultural expression. However, the twentieth-century Republic needed, as all nation-states do, a unifying, homogenized language accessible to the greatest number. Only for a brief moment at the beginning of the 1912

ii. After the brief rule of the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), which so efficiently unified the territory and standardized weights, measures, coinage, transport, and, not least, writing systems, the Han consolidated and extended this unified polity over a period of four centuries (206 BCE–220 CE).

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Republic was the written language what would come to be known as *gudai Hanyu* 古代漢語, literally ‘old-time Han language’, or what is commonly known in English as ‘classical Chinese’. It was rapidly succeeded by *kuo-yü* or *guoyu* 國語 or the ‘national language’, a kind of written-down version of the oral lingua franca that was Mandarin.

The later use of the term Han, signifying the dominant ethnic group and its language, is an affair of the twentieth century; the category ‘Han nationality’—‘*Han minzu*’ 漢民族, a homogeneous, unified Han ethnic entity—was ‘an entirely modern phenomenon’, invented to facilitate the creation of a nation-state. It achieved ‘its greatest popularity under [China’s first President] Dr. Sun Yat-sen.’⁵ We should also recall that, in the Cantonese-speaking region of the south, the region annexed to what is now China under the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), the populace refer to themselves as *Tangren* 唐人 or ‘Tang people’ rather than Han, despite being officially classified by the authorities as ethnically Han.

As to the naming of the form of state ruled over by a paramount sovereign, Western observers and scholars would call it the ‘Empire’; but, once again, the name and conception of empire did not exist. The sovereign, inheritor of the mandate of heaven, *tianming* 天命, simply reigned supreme over the entire, ‘civilized’ world, that which was under the heavens, or ‘under the sky’ (*tianxia* 天下).ⁱⁱⁱ So this was not an empire in any European sense, and, as we have seen, the state that Westerners called ‘China’ existed neither nominally nor conceptually. This state, ruled by a succession of dynastic houses, was what

iii. Indeed, the late nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century ‘nationalist’ revolutionary Sun Yat-sen’s democratizing slogan was *tianxia wei gong* 天下為公, ‘all under the sky for the public’—‘all under the sky’ meaning everything under the Manchu sky, and implying the need for emancipation from Manchu rule.

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Europeans would call the ‘Chinese Empire’, or quite simply ‘China’, but was both a space and a time before China as such, predating the imagining of China in the nineteenth century. It was what I call China-Before-China. China proper, China the modern nation-state—a really existing China with a shared, global, national consciousness—is entirely an affair of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. All the rest is invention, reinvention and anachronistic projection back into the past: a modern vision of ‘history’ that serves the present.

In the nineteenth century, the proper noun *Zhongguo* 中國 came into use, in reaction to colonial aggression—to what is innocently and unthinkingly called China’s ‘encounter’ with West, as if ‘China’ happened to bump into the West while out for a stroll. When using the term, some may have been imagining the land of the Han last governed by the Ming, but for foreigners such as the British, *Zhongguo* referred to the territory governed by the Manchu dynasty, the *Daqing* 大清 or Great Qing, and in this sense it started to be used by the literati; the proto-intellectuals of the nineteenth century. We find *Zhongguo* alongside ‘China’ in the unequal treaties, and notably in the Nanjing Treaty drawn up by the British after the First Opium War and signed on 29 August 1842. While the two signatory states are given as *Da Qingguo* 大清國 (Great Qing) and *Da Yingguo* 大英國 (Great Britain), the term *Zhongguo* 中國 also occurs in the treaty a total of eight times, to designate a nation imagined and identified by the British as ‘China’.

We have already seen how translation leads to conflation of meanings, and this may be further illustrated in Fairbank’s and Teng’s translation of the 1905 ‘Manifesto of the *Tongmenghui* 同盟會宣布’, the revolutionary movement that campaigned for the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty. The Manifesto, with its four-point strategy, was a key text in the conceptual model of the yearned-for republic, a founding text or blueprint

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against which the resultant Chinese state would later be judged.^{iv} It was drawn up by the future first president of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙 (1866–1925), also known as Sun Zhongshan 孫中山.⁶ Let us take a closer look. Fairbank and Teng translated the opening of Sun's first point into English thus:

- 1) *Drive out the Tartars.* The Manchus of today were originally the eastern barbarians beyond the Great Wall. They frequently caused border troubles during the Ming dynasty; then when China was in a disturbed state they came inside Shanhaikuan, conquered China, and enslaved our Chinese people. Those who opposed them were killed by the hundreds of thousands, and our Chinese have been a people without a nation for two hundred and sixty years.

Here is the original text:

驅除鞑虜。今之滿洲，本塞外東胡，昔在明朝，屢為邊患；後乘中國多事，長驅入關，滅我中國，據我政府，迫我漢人為其奴隸，有不從者，殺戮億萬。我漢人為亡國之民者二百六十年於斯！

The text is in 'literary Chinese' and so gives greater latitude when translating into English than modern standard Chinese. While Sun twice uses the word *Zhongguo* 中國, translated here as 'China', what Fairbank and Teng give as 'enslaved our Chinese

- iv. Founding principles, such as the French republican motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, are the building blocks of what political theorist Cornelius Castoriadis calls the 'instituting imaginary': the original blueprint of a national community. What practically results from this blueprint is called the 'instituted imaginary'. When the gap between the two becomes too great, popular confidence breaks down and a new 'imaginary' must be devised. When this gap appeared in the early Chinese Republic, student contestation, warlord domination and attempted monarchic restoration ended in civil war between nationalists and Communists that ultimately resulted in a new imaginary: the People's Republic of China.

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people’ would be more accurately translated as ‘pressed our Han people into slavery’, the original specifically mentioning Hanren 漢人. Similarly, the last sentence should be: ‘Our Han people have been the populace of a perished country for 260 years.’ But the translators have chosen to employ the modern vocabulary of the nation-state; the Han become ‘the Chinese’ and the ‘Chinese ... a people without a nation’, whereas the original refers to the Han as the people or populace of a ‘des- titute’, ‘ruined’ or ‘perished’ *country* or *state*, the sense that *wang- guo* 亡國 had for over two millennia in the literary language.

Here is the text of Point 1 again (emphasis added):

- 1) *Drive out the Tartars.* The Manchus of today were originally the eastern barbarians beyond the Great Wall. They frequently caused border troubles during the Ming dynasty; then when China was in a disturbed state they came inside Shanhaikuan, conquered China, and enslaved our *Chinese people*. Those who opposed them were killed by the hundreds of thousands, and *our Chinese* have been a people without a *nation* for two hundred and sixty years.

In the above translation, the word ‘Chinese’ is used twice to refer to the population. In the original, in my translation below (emphasis added), it does not occur at all. There is also no mention of the equivalent for ‘nation’:

- 1) Drive out the Tartars. Today’s Manchus were Eastern Bar- barians outside the current frontiers. Formerly during the Ming dynasty, they repeatedly menaced the borderlands. Later when China was in a disturbed state, they penetrated Shanhaiguan [the terminus of the Great Wall that adjoins the sea], snuffed out our China, took over our government, pressed our *Han people* into slavery. As for those who refused to submit, they were slaughtered in their thousands and

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millions. *We Han* have been the people of a defeated *country* for the past two hundred and sixty years.

That Sun had already adopted the vocabulary necessary to his instituting imaginary of a Chinese republic is undeniable. However, the original text, written in the old literary language of the bureaucracy, is not yet imbued with the nationalist language of an instituted, or extant, nation-state or republic. Again the nuance of the original is masked or even reduced by the translation into English some fifty years later, after the foundation of the current PRC. In this first point, Sun Yat-sen is making a stark distinction between Han and Manchu; the word for nation does not occur; and while the text mentions China, it makes no mention of Chinese. In Sun's second point there is a shift into a comprehensive nationalist discourse replete with anachronistic terms, calling up a sovereign, Han-ruled nation-state:

- 2) *Restore China*. China is the China of the Chinese. The government of China should be in the hands of the Chinese. After driving out the Tartars we must restore our national state...

恢復中華。中國者，中國人之中國，中國之政治，中國人任之，驅除鞑
虜之後，光復我民族的國家

Here the translation more or less accurately represents Sun's political slippage from Han to Chinese; the Han are no longer singled out, but have given way to the Chinese of *Zhongguo* 中國. 'Restore *Zhonghua*' starts point 2, as if *Zhonghua* had already existed before the Manchus; that is, before 1644—as if their reign constituted a mere hiatus. And what the translator gives as 'we must restore our national state' is rather 'recover/reconstitute the (nation) state of our ethnicity/race.'⁷ In either case, the implication is that a return to the status quo before the

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1644 Manchu invasion and occupation would simply entail a 'return' to a pre-existing 'Chineseness'. But, merely in terms of territory, the state boundaries the Republic of China inherited from the Manchus exceeded anything that a non-foreign sovereign had ever ruled over. Indeed, the 'geographical instantiation of the modern Chinese state involved ... a highly problematic legacy from the Qing', not least because the Manchu expansion had brought within its bounds several large ethnic groups and their homelands.⁸ These included Tibet and Mongolia, all the territory in between Lhasa and the Gobi Desert, and of course what would become known as Manchuria. Not since the Mongol khans of the short-lived Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 CE) had these territories briefly been ruled by dynastic sovereigns. The surface area governed by the Ming stood at 2.5 million square miles, while that passed down by the Qing in 1911 covered 4.4 million; for comparison, the surface area of the USA today is 3.5 million square miles.

Moreover, relative prosperity had brought about a further demographic change in the Manchu era: a huge rise in population figures. The expansion of the frontiers alone did not account for this explosion, since the populace was mainly concentrated in the space previously controlled by the Ming, and not in the newly acquired territories. In the mid-seventeenth century, the population of the Ming lands stood at somewhere between 160 and 175 million.⁹ When the Qing collapsed in 1911 and gave way to the Republic, the population was over 400 million, and this despite the cumulative impact on the economy of the Opium Wars, rebellions, and mass emigration.¹⁰ These were the geographic, ethnic and demographic foundations of the new, really existing, 'China'.

In the fourth point of Sun Yat-sen's manifesto, 'Equalize land ownership' or 'Equalize land rights' 平均地權, the term *guojia* 國家 refers to the state, while *guomin* 國民 is translated by

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Teng and Fairbank as ‘people of the nation’; more usual translations would be ‘citizen’ for the noun and ‘national’ for the adjective. As a southerner, a Cantonese-speaker, and a returned diasporic subject (he was born in Guangdong but spent his adolescence in Hawaii), Sun Yat-sen’s identity was itself ambiguous. Similarly many of the revolutionaries were from the largely Cantonese-speaking Guangdong province, which ‘hosted’ the foreign colonies of Macao and Hong Kong, and so had experienced greater exposure to foreign imperialism and its culture; they were also far removed geographically from the northern heartland of the ‘Mandarin-speaking’ majority. Some decades later, in the elaboration of his ‘Three Principles’, Sun would significantly modify his concept of how the nation was composed, but at this moment in time, he needed to establish as wide a ‘national’ base as possible for his new republic. To do so, he adopted a discourse that not only assembled several ‘ethnicities’ into an imagined Chinese ‘nation’, but also one that glossed over linguistic and ‘racial’ differences.

In fact, there had been and there continued to be debate amongst the elite at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries over the contours and composition of the desired post-Manchu state. The more radical elements of those contesting the Qing Dynasty wanted the new nation-state to consist uniquely of the Han; the Manchus, considered alien, were to be excluded altogether from the imagined Chinese nation. The more moderate thinkers saw the Manchus, and others identified as non-Han peoples, as belonging to a broader ‘national’ family. In 1912, once the new state was established, all parties agreed to a Republic of Five Peoples or nationalities or *wuzu gonghe* 五族共和, represented by the five horizontal coloured bands of the national flag. Popularly known as the Five Colours Flag (*wuseqi* 五色旗), it served as the national flag from 1912 to 1924 and was intended to represent the ‘five peoples [of China] united in harmony’.

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From top to bottom, the colours were red (*Han* 漢), yellow (*Man* 滿 Manchu), blue (*Meng* 蒙 Mongolian), white (*Hui* 回 Muslim) and black (*Zang* 藏 Tibetan). The term *Hui* was used to refer to all Muslim and Islamic peoples, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic background, and was first institutionalized under the nationalist republican government.^v These five peoples or nationalities were all said to belong to the *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族 or ‘Chinese nation’, although, confusingly, *minzu* 民族 at the time also translated the English words ‘race’, ‘nation’ or ‘people’. Thus a ‘territorial conception of nationhood’ became integral to the Chinese national imaginary.¹¹ This was even more the case when the Communists came to power in 1949, with their universalist Marxist-Leninist ideology, and expanded the number of ‘peoples’, ethnicities, or ‘nationalities’ to a total of fifty-six, including the Han.

Western notions of both ‘race’ and ‘historiography’ were necessary to historically justify the category *Zhongguoren* 中國人, so whether in order to include certain ‘racial’ or ethnic groups within the national family, or to exclude them the better to define Chineseness, Western ‘scientific’ categorizations were once again invoked. The vociferous reformer Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) adopted a Western historiographical approach. Rejecting the millennia-long dynastic regime of historical classification, he divided ‘Chinese’ history into three periods: ancient, medieval and modern. At the same time, Liang adapted Western anthropological theories of race, claiming in an essay on the relationship between race and history: ‘There are historic peoples and non-historic peoples’¹² and that naturally the Chinese belonged to the historic peoples.¹³

v. Under the PRC, *Hui* acquired a more limited and specific usage, denoting ‘only those Muslim peoples not distinguished by language and locality’. In Taiwan, the term is still used to refer to all Muslim peoples. See Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, p. 30.

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He drew up a table in which appear the 'yellow races' and the 'white races'. The category 'yellow' was divided into three sub-categories: in the first were Chinese, Japanese, Korean, 'Siamese', and 'other East Asian peoples'; in the second category were Mongols, Tartars, and Tungu ('today's Siberians') and 'other North and Central Asian peoples'; in the third category we find Turks, Hungarians, and 'other people of Yellow race in Europe'.¹⁴ Where we might expect to find *Han* in Liang's text for Chinese, we find instead *Zhongguoren*. Like the Japanese in the case of Japan, the Chinese 'people' or 'race' thus became synonymous with the national territory itself.¹⁵

By 1924, Sun Yat-sen had made fundamental and explicit the link between nation and race. In his 'Three Principles of the People' lectures, he made his case for the particular situation of *Zhongguo*, China, asserting that 'race' and 'nation' were one and the same:

In China since the days of Ching [Qin] and Han, the country has been made up of one race; while in foreign countries, one race may form several states or one state may comprise several different races. The British Empire is made up of the white race as the principal people, and the black people, the brown people, and others. The statement, then, that the nationality is the nation-group cannot be applied to Great Britain.¹⁶

Sun's previous insistence on the Chinese nation being multi-ethnic or 'multi-racial' seemed to have now been elided. In line with contemporary, dominant theories of race, he added:

The reason for this multiplicity of races may be summed up as natural forces; although difficult to analyse, the main force is 'heredity' [literally: blood system]. The reason for Chinese people's yellowness is simply due to our yellow heredity. The heredity of ancestors is forever transmitted down to a people, so the force of heredity is very great.¹⁷

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Despite the official rhetoric of China being a multi-ethnic state, this notion of China consisting of a single race persists in the twenty-first century. During Donald Trump's state visit to China, as he was guided around the Forbidden City by Xi Jinping, the American president undiplomatically suggested that the world's oldest culture was Egypt's. The Chinese president, obliged to agree, retorted with the staid shibboleth:

However, there is only China that has an uninterrupted culture. The way we look now is also the way earliest [Chinese] people looked. Black hair, yellow skin, passed down to us. We call ourselves successors of the Dragon.¹⁸