

What problems does the use of the words 'China'/'Chinese' raise when talking about a diverse and multi-ethnic country such as China?

China is a country consisting of a multitude of different ethnic groups, languages, regions, religions, and cultural practices. It is for this reason that the terms “China” and “Chinese” can be misleading, vague, and ambiguous. Such terms fail to convey the rich and colourful diversity that exists within the borders of what is now officially known as the People’s Republic of China. When the word “Chinese” is used to refer to people, it’s most commonly used to refer to the “Han Chinese” ethnic group of China, which, according to census data, accounts for 91.11% of the country’s population (Jizhe, 2021). There are, however, other ethnic groups that the term “Chinese” can refer to, such as Mongolian, Tibetan, and Zhuang.

Linguistically, the word “Chinese” is typically used to refer to Mandarin, which is the language spoken by Han Chinese people, and is the most widely spoken language in the world. In Mandarin, the name of the language literally means “Han Language” (Koehn, 2017). However there are other languages spoken in China, such as Cantonese and Wu. Chinese as a language can more accurately be seen as a family of individual languages, rather than a language comprising varying dialects. A Cantonese speaker and a Mandarin speaker could understand each other no more easily than a French speaker and an Italian speaker (DeFrancis, 1986). Thus, to ask someone “do you speak Chinese?” is similarly specific as asking “do you speak a Romance language?” Such a comparison highlights how necessary it is to specify when

discussing Chinese as a language, and how in this context the word “Chinese” can be misleading and even inaccurate.

Lee (2018) argues that “China” and “Chinese” are Western concepts. Indeed there seems to be a specific yet generalised image of “Chineseness” that exists in Western perceptions. Chinatown is perhaps a suitable example of this particular perception. US Visa Update (n.d.) claims there are just under 50 Chinatowns in the US alone, and boasts that they are the “best places in the country to experience contemporary Chinese culture”. It seems ambitious that a small urban area could emulate the vast and diverse cultural identity of one of the largest countries in the world, yet it’s the extent of experience most Westerners have of China, so it’s very influential in shaping people’s perceptions. Interestingly, Chinatowns globally are typically very popular tourist attractions, illustrating the fascination and intrigue Westerners have for China, whilst simultaneously highlighting how questionable it is that they present a rather one-dimensional portrayal of Chinese culture.

One reason it can be problematic and even dangerous to group people together is that it can lead to stereotypes and racist perceptions. One example of that is the racism and prejudice experienced by the East Asian community during the Covid-19 pandemic. On February 24 2020, a Singaporean student in London was attacked and beaten by a group of people, one of whom shouted “I don’t want your coronavirus in my country” (The Independent, 2021). Racist views against those perceived to be Chinese were exacerbated by the media. In 2020, then-president Trump delivered a speech during

which he referred to the virus as “the Chinese virus” as well as “kung flu” (Los Angeles Times, 2020), the latter of which reveals the insular and stereotypical perceptions some people have of China. As a whole, the pandemic provides a prime example of how narrow perceptions of China and Chinese people are, and how problematic it is to perpetuate. It wasn’t only the Chinese community that suffered racism due to the pandemic, but the whole East and Southeast Asian community. When we continue to use language which groups the entire Chinese community together, that group extends to other East Asian countries, the identities of which get lost in the ambiguity.

To recognise the minorities that exist outside the Han population is also a matter of human rights. It’s important to note that the nation of China itself maintains an assimilation policy, consequently nationalist or independence movements of minority groups are considered illegitimate (Hyer, 2006). This policy has been the instigator of many human rights violations, including the ill-treatment and torture of Tibetan monk Jigme Gyatso, who was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment in 1996 for activism in support of Tibetan independence (Jiang, 2011). An Uighur academic, Ilham Tohti, was also imprisoned on charges of separatism, and similarly experienced ill-treatment and torture in detainment (Amnesty International, 2014). This demonstrates the significance of an individual identity amongst minority groups in China. The sacrifices made by these men in the fight to have their own culture and identity recognised should not be in vain.

The words “China” and “Chinese” are, as concepts, generalisations. It is beneficial to recognise the individual regions, languages, cultures, and people that make China such

a rich and diverse nation. Generalisations can often lead to stereotypes and prejudice from which the wider East Asian community has suffered, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ignorance and prejudice towards this community is still a global issue that must be addressed, and to understand and recognise the different nations and ethnic groups affected by this issue is an important step in addressing it. Instances of human rights violations illustrate how it is necessary for not only the Western world, but for the nation of China as well to recognise and differentiate its various ethnic groups. To amalgamate the various ethnic groups and cultures into simply “Chinese” is to silence the voices of minority groups who deserve to be heard.

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