

Item 1.D: “Han Diversity and Unity,” an essay

The differences among regional and linguistic subgroups of Han Chinese are at least as great as those among many European nationalities. Han Chinese speak seven or eight mutually unintelligible dialects, each of which has many local sub-dialects. Cultural differences (cuisine, costume, and custom) are equally great. Modern Chinese history provides many examples of conflict, up to the level of small-scale regional wars, between linguistic and regional groups.

Such diversities, however, have not generated exclusive loyalties, and distinctions in religion or political affiliation have not reinforced regional differences. Rather, there has been a consistent tendency in Chinese thought and practice to downplay intra-Han distinctions, which are regarded as minor and superficial. What all Han share is more significant than the ways in which they differ. In conceptual terms, the boundary between Han and non-Han is absolute and sharp, while boundaries between subsets of Han are subject to continual shifts, are dictated by local conditions, and do not produce the isolation inherent in relations between Han and minority groups.

Han ethnic unity is the result of two ancient and culturally central Chinese institutions, one of which is the written language. Chinese is written with ideographs (sometimes called characters) that represent meanings rather than sounds, and so written Chinese does not reflect the speech of its author. The disjunction between written and spoken Chinese means that a newspaper published in Beijing can be read in Shanghai or Guangzhou, although the residents of the three cities would not understand each other's speech. It also means that there can be no specifically Cantonese (Guangzhou dialect) or Hunanese literature because the local speech of a region cannot be directly or easily represented in writing. (It is possible to add local color to fiction, cite colloquialisms, or transcribe folk songs, but it is not commonly done.) Therefore, local languages have not become a focus for regional self-consciousness or nationalism. Educated Chinese tend to regard the written ideographs as primary, and they regard the seven or eight spoken Han Chinese dialects as simply variant ways of pronouncing the same ideographs. This is

linguistically inaccurate, but the attitude has significant political and social consequences. The uniform written language in 1987 continued to be a powerful force for Han unity.

The other major force contributing to Han ethnic unity has been the centralized imperial state. The ethnic group takes its name from the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220). Although the imperial government never directly controlled the villages, it did have a strong influence on popular values and culture. The average peasant could not read and was not familiar with the details of state administration or national geography, but he was aware of belonging to a group of sub-continental scope. Being Han, even for illiterate peasants, has meant conscious identification with a glorious history and a state of immense proportions. Peasant folklore and folk religion assumed that the imperial state, with an emperor and an administrative bureaucracy, was the normal order of society. In the imperial period, the highest prestige went to scholar-officials, and every schoolboy had the possibility, at least theoretically, of passing the civil service examinations and becoming an official.

The prestige of the state and its popular identification with the highest values of Chinese civilization were not accidents; they were the final result of a centuries-long program of indoctrination and education directed by the Confucian scholar-officials. Traditional Chinese society can be distinguished from other pre-modern civilizations to the extent that the state, rather than organized religious groups or ethnic segments of society, was able to appropriate the symbols of wisdom, morality, and the common good. The legacy for modern Chinese society has been a strong centralized government that has the right to impose its values on the population and against which there is no legitimate right of dissent or secession.

Source: Robert L. Worden, Andrea Matles Savada and Ronald E. Dolan, editors. *China: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987.

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