INTRODUCTION

Being Han marks the biggest and most important difference between me and other people.

Hanzu are the center. . . . The country needs this strong center to be strong itself.

Minzu is not important; instead, it is that people from different regions have different characteristics.

Fieldwork interviews, Beijing and Shanghai, 2002–3

The Han minzu—minzu translated variously as “nationality” or “ethnic group” but generally used to indicate a state-recognized population category—officially constitutes 91.5 percent of China’s population. The Hanzu are recognized by the state as the national majority and as the core of the Chinese multiethnic nation, which officially comprises also fifty-five other minzu, together referred to as “minor minzu” or “minorities” (shaoshu minzu) and often labeled with Stalinist vocabulary as “minority nationalities.” While critical research on the “minor minzu” and the Minzu Classification Project (Minzu Shibie) began to emerge in the late 1980s, critical studies on the Han as a minzu and the making of this category in mainland China seem to have lagged behind. The field is slowly gathering momentum, but the size, distribution, and internal variety of the Han minzu continue to challenge both anthropologists and historians. Some scholars have embarked on studies of localized Han communities. Others have grappled with the Han from the perspective of broader historical or contemporary political and social processes. This study is perhaps best situated in the latter category, because it does not focus on any specific localized Han community, instead considering identification and categorization processes among the Hanzu in the broader context of
state interventions in identity politics. At the same time, it is significantly
different from most of this literature (but see Blum 2001), as the primary
materials it draws on are not historical sources but interviews and observ-
vations. Moreover, this study refers to ongoing identity processes from the
perspective of individual actors. As demonstrated by my research partici-
pants, these Han individuals are, on the one hand, agents who skillfully
create and manipulate numerous identity options. On the other hand, how-
ever, their lives are simultaneously influenced by greater players, such
as the state. As my research reveals, these dynamics significantly shape
identity options and choices.

During my fieldwork, I was often struck by the ease with which iden-
tities are evoked and switched, by their situational nature, and by their
dependence on scales of interaction and on “others.” Han assume various
identities deliberately to create the feeling of intimacy, to achieve some-
thing materially or symbolically, to evoke the feeling of belonging, to cre-
ate the feeling of community, and to draw boundaries against “others.” In
other words, depending on their circumstances and interlocutors, Han
individuals activate different identities, a process surely not unique to the
Han but displaying specific characteristics in the case at hand. When con-
fronted with people of other minzu, a Han will likely first evoke her or his
Han minzu identity. When confronted with other Han, the options for
self-identification expand. In these Han-to-Han interactions, Beijing Peo-
ples (Beijingren) may set themselves apart from Shanghai People (Shang-
hairen). They may position themselves as Locals in relation to Migrants,
Urbanites as opposed to Ruralites, and white collar as opposed to blue
collar. At the scale of Han-to-Han interactions, the Han minzu disinte-
grates into myriad identity categories that depend on access to wealth,
occupation, home place, place of temporary residence, kinship, hukou
(household registration), and many other factors.

To draw attention away from such fragmentation, the Chinese govern-
ment reiterates the significance of minzu boundaries. Often that occurs
through the language of “minzu problems” or “ethnic conflicts,” as when
the government identifies unrest in Inner Mongolia or Xinjiang as “a minzu
problem” as opposed to, say, a social problem rooted in job inequality. Such
characterizations reestablish minzu as important categories of identifica-
tion and perception. On the other hand, in parallel attempts to downplay
the significance of the particular minzu boundaries that divide the Chinese
nation (Zhonghua minzu), the central government also regularly reactivates its most significant external “others,” namely Japan and the United States of America, relying on powerful catchphrases such as nation, national independence, and national integrity. Through this reemphasis on boundaries between Han and other minzu and between the Chinese nation and other nations, government agencies regularly mobilize and reinvent the identity categories they generated in the Minzu Classification Project of the 1950s and the category of nation as established in the nation-making processes since the late nineteenth century. Individual identity politics of the Hanzu are unavoidably greatly influenced by these workings of the state.

MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY

I launched the research for this book with a number of questions in mind: What does being Han mean to those classified as Hanzu? What are the narratives of Han-ness today? What other collective identities matter to the Hanzu? What are their roles and meanings? How do they relate to one another and to the minzu identity? In what analytical terms can we grasp minzu and other identity categories predominantly related to home place? Are they ethnic? Is the Han minzu an ethnic group? And finally, How can Hanzu seem so united in their Han-ness but at the same time be so fragmented and divided?

In order to discuss these questions, I explore narratives and discursive boundaries of Han-ness and then the boundaries that divide Hanzu into multiple, often mutually discriminating identity categories. In a majority of cases these categories are spatial, yet they exceed the conventional understanding of “native” place. I trace the meanings and roles of these identities, their relationships with the minzu identity, and the role of the state in determining these complex identity negotiations. Exploring the relationality of these various collective identities is necessary to understanding how the Han minzu is able to effectively accommodate such a great number of distinct identity groups.

“The Han” as a Narration

Before moving on to an analysis of the research data, it is crucial to reflect on the very notion of being Han and the historical transformations of this
identity. One of the central arguments of this study is that different eras have produced different categorical understandings of “the Han” as well as different “Han-nesses,” or markers and enactments of the Han identity. Before the modern era of institutionalized, state-controlled, and state-enforced Han minzu as we know the category today, Han membership was more negotiable. Though Han-ness indisputably had boundaries in pre-modern China—premodern referring here most prominently to the Ming and Qing periods—these boundaries were relatively flexible. Han identity existed in an indistinct relationship with other identities such as Zhong-guo, Zhonghua, Xia, Hua, and Huaxia, all of which tend to be rendered in English as “Chinese.” Moreover, territorial and lineage identities seem to have been much more significant for social mobilization, even if Han identity was meaningful in local contexts and likely provided some Han with a sort of community feeling beyond the more immediate kinship and place attachments. Yet because the imperial biopolitical controlling mechanisms were limited, the boundaries of “the Han” could not have been set and guarded by state institutions to the degree possible today. Imperial Han-ness was, accordingly, less regulated, and it likely claimed less of a person than nationalist-era identities. The increased capacity of the modern Chinese states—first the Republic of China and, in a much more pervasive way, the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—effected an unprecedented institutionalization of Han-ness. It resulted in the reification of the Han category as a unitary and powerful national majority with a linear history of social and political consolidation. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the markers of Han-ness that both the first republic and the PRC relied on for projects of state and nation making have comprised distinct products of the new nationalist symbolic order.

Because we can observe major changes in the ways Han-ness has been framed in the premodern and modern periods, I argue that, following the idea of nation as narration (Bhabha 1990; Anagnost 1997), “the Han” is a historically contingent narration dependent on those who “speak” it and on the ways in which they narrate it or imagine it (Anderson 1983). These narrations are generative in the sense that they generate the subject of which they speak; they are also historically contingent and creatively responsive to changing tasks and “others.” Hence, most significantly, premodern and modern temporalities have produced different Han and distinct Han-nesses that have reflected contemporary understandings of
the world. The premodern Han/Chinese were framed in terms of differentiation between culture and barbarism, and the premodern Han-ness/Chinese-ness was enacted with the help of certain rituals, family names, occupations, descent, genealogies, and customs (Watson 1988; Brown 1996; Ebrey 1996). The modern mode of Han narration has increased as a site of state intervention, with the Han imagined as a national majority that has developed in a linear process of historical growth. During the twentieth century, the Han became an institutionalized category (*minzu*), its boundaries guarded not only by members of the category itself but also by the state, an entity that depends on these very Han for the maintenance of social and territorial integrity. Still, although the mode of narration changed dramatically during the nationalism-motivated transition, my research shows that the roles assumed by the Han identity in individualized identity politics remain fragmented and diverse.

The Unity in Han-ness versus Fragmentation

Current representations in China tend to reify “the Han” as a coherent group that has evolved through millennia in a linear, progressive way to become the nation’s core. While Western scholars of China have extensively discussed the impossibility of a linear history of “the Han” (e.g., Duara 1995; Elliott 2012), the Communist central governments have consistently represented the Han *minzu* as an outcome of a teleological process of national unfolding. In so doing, they have followed in the footsteps of early twentieth-century intellectuals and revolutionaries, individuals who created and popularized a vision of “the Han” as a unitary nation (*minzu*), with the intent to mobilize these very Han to rise against the Manchu of the last imperial dynasty of Qing.8 Revolutionaries and nationalism-motivated intellectuals acted on a notion of the Han as a national community that originated from one ancestor (the legendary Yellow Emperor) and formed a singular, powerful national lineage.9 The idea that the Han nation would become the backbone of the first postimperial state in China undergirded the Xinhai Revolution of 1911. As elsewhere in the world, nation building in China coincided with homogenizing attempts to create a national community, national history, national identity, national language, and national majority that would cement together the nation and the territory. Clearly, then, there is a strong state-related dimension of
modern Han-ness. The Han category, in the form of a minzu as we know it today, is eventually the result of the massive state-driven biopolitical Minzu Classification Project launched in the 1950s. The Han minzu has since been officially shouldered with the role of national unifier, a narration specific to the process of nation and state making in twentieth-century China.

Although the Han minzu is a handy political category for nation- and state-making projects, the Han identity was not invented a century ago solely for nation-making purposes. Han-ness draws a significant part of its power from the local society and from the need for identification beyond the most immediate kinship and home-place community. It thus clearly predates any nation-making efforts. The reason that the identity is perpetuated has not changed: then and now, Han-ness—intertwined with Chinese-ness—has been maintained by the people who find it meaningful and useful in their fragmented identity politics. Though highly unstable in its scope and meaning, Han-ness/Chinese-ness was a significant identity in the pre-1911 period, widely utilized in negotiations on social positioning by those who identified with it in local as well as empirewide contexts. Similarly, its meanings and roles today extend beyond national politics. Han-ness is a tangible and situationally important identity to people who are classified as Hanzu. My field observations demonstrate that this identity is also meaningful and viable to those who are excluded from this classification. However, this relationship is complicated by the fact that in contemporary China there are as many Han subject positions as there are people classified as Hanzu. Whereas certain ideas of “being Han” are common throughout China, the roles and meanings of this identity are fragmented and individualized by each Han in her and his identity negotiations. Han-ness concurrently exists in these two dimensions: as something private and enacted locally and as a link to state politics and state discourses (Harrell 2001, 295–96). Motivations for self-identification with Han-ness are fragmented, and the personal narratives collected during my fieldwork illustrate this. However, Han-ness also has a larger-than-individual dimension that links it directly to nation making, the official minzu policy, and the political discourse of ethnic diversity. Many of the Hanzu I talked with discussed not only how they feel as Han and what this identity offers them (or what it deprives them of) but also their awareness
of how these state-generated and enforced dimensions of Han-ness influence their identity choices.

When discussed individually, Han-ness appears to be a powerful and meaningful identity. At the same time, the material collected proves that only by contrasting this identity with other collective identity categories can we contextualize its significance. Such contextualization helps reveal Han-ness for what it actually is, namely, one of a number of intertwined and relationally dependent collective identities relating to, among other things, ethnicity, nation, language, and place, between which Han individuals switch. Put differently, Han-ness is one component of complex topographies of identity. One of the central objectives of this study is therefore to demonstrate how the coherence of “the Han,” as the category is conceived of and advertised by state institutions and by many Han themselves, disintegrates upon closer inspection, revealing multiple identity categories engaged in struggles over social positioning and control of both symbolic and tangible resources. Many of the identity categories that Han individuals put forth are related to home place. They are also constructed using more universal social boundaries—by dividing Urbanites and Ruralites, for instance, or Natives and Outsiders. These boundaries that divide the Hanzu are deep and multiple. On another level, Han-ness must also be contextualized in relation to the Chinese national identity—an identity even larger in scope and more inclusive. Some of my informants advocate Chinese-ness as a positive, egalitarian identity that incorporates minzu fragmentation and veils other social divisions. However, my observations in Beijing and Shanghai, as well as in China’s multiethnic western borders, prove that both Han and people of other minzu have great difficulties in distinguishing between Han-ness and Chinese-ness. Chinese-ness seems too much like Han-ness to be a possible identity option for many non-Han people. A Uyghur man I became acquainted with in Xinjiang in 2011 perhaps best reflected this complex intertwining of Han and Chinese identities: he posited that China is not a Zhongguo (Central Country) but a Hanguo (Country of the Han).

To summarize, Han-ness has powerful competitors on the contemporary “identity market.” These include home-place, occupational, and national identities that fragment or exceed Han-ness. In order to understand the complex topographies of collective identities, it is important to
focus on the relationality and situationality of various identities, as well as their dependence on scales of social interaction. The notion of relationality highlights that Han-ness is merely one of many identities that people classified as Hanzu relate to, an identity entangled with others to form a mutually dependent network. When one identity is situationally mobilized, others become situationally less visible. In other circumstances, actors switch between identities relatively flexibly. Because the various identities have specific roles and relate to different scales of interaction, they are not mutually exclusive. Accordingly, one of the central arguments of this study is that the Hanzu, similar to many other large ethnic and even social groups, are concurrently united and fragmented. Each of many identity categories—Chinese, Han, Urbanite, Local, or Northerner, for example—actively creates and reifies categorical understandings of distinct “others.” Because of this, such categories do not contradict one another. A Han can concurrently be a Hakka, a Zhejiang Person (by birth), a Beijing Person (by residence), a Chinese, a Ruralite, a Local, an Outsider, a Northerner, and a Southerner. Each of these identities is situationally meaningful, enacted vis-à-vis different “them,” and has a specific social function. Depending on the situation, one or more identities will be activated. These identities are linked relationally and not in either-or terms, unless in instances of social and ethnic confrontation, when either-or discourses will likely prevail. Han-ness is thus perfectly compatible with other, even multiple, social, ethnic, and national identities. By assuming some of these identities the Han enact unity; by assuming others, fragmentation and division.

Home-Place Identities

The importance of home place (jiaxiang, guxiang)—rendered conventionally as “native place”—in Han topographies of identity is widely recognized by China scholars but has not been intensively explored within contemporary China studies (but see Honig 1992a; Leong 1997; and Xiang 2005). Thus, another major objective of this study is to explore the notion of home place and the attachments to it that contemporary Hanzu maintain.

Despite the past two decades of the extensive internal migration in China, the notion of home place and “home-place-determined mind-set” (jiaxiang guannian) remain critically important to the ways in which
Han individuals identify themselves and other Han. The majority of my informants described the centrality of home-place identities in their individualized identity systems. In contrast to Han-ness, home place was represented as more concrete, emotional, and familiar.

Still, as tangible and primordial as home-place identities feel to the Han, research results vividly demonstrate that the notion of home place is extremely unspecific and flexible. In a great majority of cases, Han individuals maintain attachments to multiple places they refer to as home. Some of these places are inherited (through either the patriline or matriline); others are based on the location of work or study or are connected to locations to which individuals feel bound through other personal experience. Han switch between these home-place identities situationally, depending on whom they confront. A person’s birthplace (chusheng di), location of household registration, mother’s or father’s birthplace, ancestral home place, place of living, place of studying, spouse’s place of living, and more were referred to as “home place” by my Han informants. Accordingly, home place, as it functions in contemporary China, is a process of negotiation between inherited, socially plausible, and individually desired place identities. Thus we must discuss the politics of home place and how places come to be claimed and practiced as “home.” Some research participants fervently expressed that home place is assigned and unchangeable; others (though significantly fewer) argued the opposite with equal fervor. In social practice, when it fits a person’s identity constellation and social-positioning strategies, a Han might emphasize her or his patrilineal ancestral home place and stress the primordiality and constancy of this identification. At other times, a Han may adopt different places as home. Additionally, because of the discrimination that results from association with some places, as well as a certain coerciveness of home-place identities, some Han reject the importance of home place entirely and turn instead to other social, ethnic, and national attachments. These Hanzu emphasize their identity as Han and Chinese, or they deny the importance of collective identities in general.

My research data confirm that place and particularly home-place attachments are strong and important for the Han. These attachments play the central role in identification and differentiation processes among the Han. At the same time, the data show that home place is an extremely flexible identity concept, lacking the stability ascribed to it in scholarly
literature on China and by many Han themselves. While attachments to home place are surely emotional, some Han do not hesitate to switch between home-place attachments or to employ them purposefully and strategically. Furthermore, home place–related designations and stereotypes reveal social hierarchies of home places, where some are prestigious and socially privileged (large cities in general, Shanghai and Beijing in particular) and others (Henan, Subei, Sichuan, and Inner Mongolia more than others) provoke discrimination in the marital, job, and housing markets. Home place thus has significant influence on one’s life chances. Because of this, despite the domination of primordial discourses, identity switching occurs often in practice, and competition and mutual discrimination take place to influence the positioning of “us” and to determine the positioning of “others.”

In this research, home place emerges as a temporary, situational, and individually determined identity. The collected data demonstrate that many Han individuals feel attached to multiple home places and that a great variety of places may actually be referred to as “home.” Obviously, every identity choice is restricted by its credibility to and recognition by both “us” and “them.” Still, as one informant argued, the only time when individually constructed home-place identities lose their significance is when individuals confront state institutions. In these situations, it is solely the state-invented and enforced categories of minzu and household registration that matter for the categorization of an individual. Outside of this relationship, many options are open to skillful actors. The multiplicity, complexity, and intertwined nature of home places must be reflected in scholarly discussions of the potential of home place-related categorizations to oppose Han-ness and Chinese-ness and to possibly introduce political fragmentation (compare Gladney 1995). That many Han individuals have multiple home-place identities suggests rather that these have a centrifugal effect, as each individual unites her or his attachments to a number of often distant regions, provinces, and cities. Moreover, although home place is important to how the Han identify themselves and other Han, the resulting identities should not be imagined as socially overwhelming. In numerous situations such identities will matter less than, for instance, being Chinese, Han, urban, or migrant. Or they will be concealed and downplayed to expose situationally more important axes of identification and differentiation.
Introduction

Ethnicity, Degree, and Scale

The last major objective of this study is to explore whether Han minzu and other non-minzu identity categories to which Han express attachment (for instance Shanghai People, Urbanites, or Locals) are ethnic. Can we refer to these as ethnic groups? Are these processes of categorization and identification ethnic?

One conclusion is that the term ethnic group should not be introduced too early into analysis due to its conceptual ambiguity and on the other to its reifying and objectifying power. Instead, locally produced identity categories that matter in everyday identification processes must be identified, as well as their mutual relationships and dependencies. In my research and the related literature, four generic terms manifest in many designations used by the Han to identify themselves and other Han: minzu (nationality, ethnic group, nation, as in Hanzu or Zhonghua minzu), ren (person, native of, as in Beijijingren), min (people, a person of a certain occupation, as in Danmin), and jia (person, family, members of one family name group, as in Kejia). Ren, min, and jia share the meaning of “a person” or “people” and thus in some contexts are used interchangeably or form compounds, as in Hanzuren (Han Minzu Person) or Kejiaren (Kejia Person). At the same time, each of these terms has semantically different connotations. Ren refers to identity as bound to locality, jia is kinship related, and min refers broadly to occupation. Minzu, on the other hand, belongs clearly to the nationalist symbolic order. It is critical to reflect on these semantic fields in order to understand the paradigms in which these identities are constructed and the ways in which they coexist.

Analysis of my research data suggests that ethnic and other social processes of identification and categorization should be differentiated. While it is impossible to neatly disentangle these processes, they should be kept analytically separated as much as possible. In this way, we might avoid overextending the scope of ethnicity to cover all possible identifications, classifications, and exclusions. Moreover, this approach allows for more sensitivity to local forms of differentiation, forms that may be distinct from what Western scientific discourse defines as ethnicity or that may only partially or situationally overlap with this definition. The concepts “degree of ethnicity” and “transitory ethnicity” that I propose may be helpful in addressing this question.
Even though ethnic, national, and other social categorizations should be kept analytically distinct, ethnicity should not be turned into a stiff concept with neat, artificially drawn boundaries. The boundaries of ethnicity are obviously blurred. Thinking in terms of “degree of ethnicity” helps establish the flexibility of ethnicity without diminishing its meaningfulness. Although the size of the Han minzu demands respect and exceeds the scope of what scholars usually conceive to be ethnic, Han identity in this study emerges as ethnic to a much greater degree than non-minzu identities. Han identity is imagined as a historically evolved, given identity that binds people through common ancestors and shared destiny. As such, it can be explored using the theories and analytical instruments developed in the field of ethnic studies. At the same time, however, the Han minzu also has a clear national dimension. It is represented as the centerpiece of the Chinese nation and in some contexts as synonymous with Chinese-ness itself. Accordingly, it must also be examined with a nationalism-studies approach. That Han-ness appears more ethnic and national than the other collective identities maintained by the Hanzu is not accidental. Indeed, this draws attention to the fields of power in which these identities have been conceived and in which they operate. These fields of power determine which identity categories become a minzu or a nation and which are made into and represented as “regional” and “local.” The state promotion of the Han minzu makes this identity very different regarding degree of “density,” institutional recognition, and potential for mobilization. At the same time, the framing of non-minzu identities as “secondary” and “regional” symbolically indicates their ascribed place in the political order.

The second concept I propose, “transitory ethnicity,” emphasizes the transient aspect of ethnicity, highlighting that social formations may become ethnic from time to time or may oscillate between being social and ethnic, as do many non-minzu attachments of the Hanzu. In regions where minzu “others” are not present in daily interactions, attachments to home place may emerge as transiently ethnic. In these contexts, the boundaries between Cantonese and Beijing People, but also between Urbanites and Ruralites or between Migrants and Locals, may become ethnicized for reasons of organization and mobilization. However, these forms of ethnicity weaken—though do not disappear—where their Han-ness, or Chinese-ness, is threatened, confronted, or mobilized. It is thus
crucial to study these moments of confrontation and mobilization when individualized identity politics becomes explicitly entangled with ethnic and national discourses of belonging.

Han minzu identity on the one hand and home-place, occupational, and kinship-related identities on the other are parts of two distinct symbolic orders. While minzu originated in the nation-making projects of the late nineteenth century and was reinforced and invested with political importance during the project of Minzu Classification, other categories of identity originated with politics of differentiation that significantly pre-date these nation-making efforts.\(^\text{12}\) As elsewhere in the world, the rise of nationalism in China introduced and induced new ways of categorizing the populace and was accompanied by large-scale homogenizing efforts to bridge prenationalist boundaries. Minzu is a product of this symbolic order of nationalism. Ren, min, and jia, on the other hand, are products and legacies of the prenationalist order. In the latter time period, significant regional and economic disparities were recognized and kinship played a central role in political, social, and economic organization. In this study I refer to these different symbolic orders as scales. The scale of occupational-, kinship-, and home place–based differentiation is inherently nonexclusive. This scale operates through multiple situationally activated identities. In contrast, the scale of minzu classification is a product of nation making; as such, it is discursively, if not always in practice, formulated in exclusionary, either-or terms.\(^\text{13}\) Similarly, Chinese-ness is an identity that for Hanzu in mainland China is directly linked to state and citizenship and is located at yet another scale.\(^\text{14}\) These scales are not hierarchical but coexist as parallel social dimensions belonging to different symbolic orders. Yet it is in the interest of the Chinese state to try to “verticalize” them and to ensure that, first, Han-ness prevails over the fragmented scale of non-minzu differentiations and, second, Chinese-ness prevails over minzu-related fragmentation.

**RESEARCH LOCATION AND RESEARCH METHODS**

The centerpiece of this book is material collected during field study in two major migrant destinations of Beijing and Shanghai between December 2002 and March 2003. Most of the direct quotes in this book are extracted from the almost one hundred semi-structured interviews I conducted
in the two cities. Research participants came to Beijing and Shanghai from different locations, which allowed me to gather input on Han-ness detached from any specific locality. The majority of my interviewees came from urban areas in eastern and central China but some also arrived from distant regions such as Xinjiang, Guangxi, and Guangdong. Most had already experienced migration, either for work or studies, and quite a few had lived and worked in two or three other places before moving to Shanghai or Beijing for work or study. I obtained access to research participants through local contacts and notices that I posted at university campuses in both cities. Due to the nature of my project design, research participants were largely from my peer generation, between twenty and forty-five years of age. The informants were either students or university graduates. An overwhelming majority of research participants came to Beijing and Shanghai from other urban areas, and very few originated from rural families. Moreover, they all spoke fluent Putonghua, or standard Chinese (Mandarin).

That this study’s core interview material derives from predominantly urban, mobile, educated, and relatively young Putonghua speakers has important implications. This is especially true in terms of representations of rural Han and the urban-rural divide, the structure of individualized identity topographies (with multiple home-place identities), and the relatively small significance attached to local languages as a divisive factor. The relative mobility and young age of my research participants could imply that they are less rooted or, perhaps, that home-place identities matter less to them. Quite on the contrary, my data suggest that the experience of migration and leaving home actually made many of them more keenly aware of the importance of home-place attachments and the exclusionary and divisive discourses and practices that operate at the scale of place-based categorizations. Because all interviewees had at least fourteen years of state education—which particularly promotes the Han minzu and Chinese national identities—it can be expected that this schooling boosted participants’ awareness of these identities. A population with fewer years of state education than my informants, then, may more strongly focus on “local,” non-state-promoted identities. At the same time, siting research in Shanghai and Beijing—places where a minzu “other” is largely missing—likely enhanced the importance of Han-to-Han boundary-making processes. Had I conducted research in ethnic borderlands, the Han minzu
identity would probably have been more prominent in identification and classification processes.

Semi-structured interviews constitute the core material from my research in Beijing and Shanghai. As I was interested in topographies of identity, narratives, and discourses, interviews emerged as the appropriate research tool. The interviews were “problem centered” (Flick 1998, 88–91), as I deliberately circled around the main issues of my study: identification, ascription, categorization, and differentiation. During an interview, which typically took two to three hours, my informant and I jointly wrote down on paper the responses to my questions. These sheets of paper lay between us on a table or desk. I found it important that research participants had control over and could correct what was written down. Moreover, when interviewees witnessed me writing down what they had just said, it made them more conscientious about what they were actually saying. This process also provided space for informants to reflect on their own opinions. Interviews were conducted primarily in standard Chinese, with the exception of two informants who insisted on speaking English. Much of the interview results are not directly referenced in this study, but they powerfully influenced my analysis and grounded many of my assumptions and interpretations.

Although my research in Beijing and Shanghai comprises the core of this study, the overall research context is much broader. My analysis is also based on data collected between February and July 1999, during ethnographic fieldwork in the village of Zuosuo, located in the multiethnic Yunnan-Sichuan borderlands, where the Han constituted a numerical minority. Through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and short questionnaires, I collected material on interethnic relations and the position of the Han in this multiethnic village community. The material I collected importantly influenced my analysis of the data in the present study, especially in terms of the discourses of Han-ness and the ways they are transmitted across the country.

Finally, ten months of field research in 2011–12, primarily in the district of Aqsu in southern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, also informed my analysis. Participant observation, hundreds of spontaneous conversations, and more than eighty semi-structured interviews illuminated identity politics and categorization processes among the Han living in Xinjiang, and also the interethnic relations between these different Han
and the equally diverse Uyghur. This research significantly influenced my thinking about the importance of “scales” of interaction in identity processes, with the specific concept of “transitory ethnicity” being directly related to my research in Xinjiang. The major implication is that I may have reached different conclusions in the present study had I collected research data in an area less affected by violence and divisive identity discourses.

My aim during research in Shanghai and Beijing, cities to which Han migrate from all over China, was to collect data on Han-ness that would not be bound to any specific local community. The data from Zuosuo and Xinjiang add important localized insights to this material. Indeed, they illuminate interesting parallels and divergences between how Han-ness is articulated in Han-dominated locations of eastern China, an area where Han constitute a minority, and in western China, a region where Han have significant minzu “others.” These data offer interesting insights into processes of categorization, identification, ascription, inclusion, exclusion, social positioning, and discrimination. With the combined interview data and observations of categorization processes in Shanghai and Beijing, Zuosuo and southern Xinjiang, I believe this book will provide valuable insights to the developing field of critical Han studies.