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The roles and functions of Han-ness are most apparent when Han identity is contextualized in relation to the other collective identities that matter to contemporary Han. In a situationally dependent way, Han individuals switch between a number of collective identities, including minzu and nation but also, commonly, place-related identities. Observations of these identity switches give rise to questions of how Han frame these identities, what roles they ascribe to them, and where they situate their minzu identity in relation to the other collective identities they maintain. In order to trace this relationality, I asked my research participants to discuss these attachments and explore their significance in their individualized identity topographies. Although the responses are only a snapshot of the moment-by-moment identity choices in the overall process of identity negotiation, these representations are nevertheless particularly informative. They demonstrate the reasoning behind and the “making sense” of identities, however fluid they may be. The first focus of the analysis below is thus on this “making sense” of identities and on their relationality and interconnectedness.

The second aim is to explore in some detail the Han attachment to jiaxiang and guxiang, conventionally translated as “native place.” As the research data demonstrate, native place assumes a prominent role in identity negotiations of Han individuals. At the same time, these data show
that the notion of native place is anything but well defined. Although
most Han informants claimed attachment to one native place when asked
about it directly, further inquiries and observations revealed that the
majority of them actually referred to more than one place as native. Fur-
thermore, while they concealed or diminished the importance of certain
native places, other places were clearly a source of pride. In addition to the
notion of native place and other understandings of place-based identities,
the complexity of native-place attachments clearly merits investigation.

HOME-PLACE IDENTITY

Place Attachments of Han/Chinese: A Brief Introduction

Individual and collective attachments to place are critical to identity for-
mation due to “shared cognitive maps and embodied social practices that
make place meaningful for a community” (Dautcher 2009, 50). Both Chi-
inese and Western scholars widely agree that place-based attachments play
an important role in how the Han identify themselves and others. Sev-
eral studies demonstrate the influence of place-based bonds in economic,
social, and even, as some argue, ethnic organization and differentiation
among the Han.²

The most common concepts in discourses of place-based differentia-
tion are jiaxiang, guxiang, and jiguan. In their dictionary definitions, the
first two terms, jiaxiang and guxiang, have a similar meaning; they indi-
cate “hometown” or “native place.” Guxiang is also translated as “birth-
place.”³ In the third term, jiguan, ji stands for “record,” “registry,” and
“register,” while guan literally means “being linked together” and “fol-
lowing in the continuous line.”⁴ Although jiguan is translated as “native
place” too, it refers more specifically to the locality identified as ancestral
land along the patriline, the place where the family’s name originates and
where, especially south of the Yangzi River, the ancestral hall is located.⁵

Fei Xiaotong (1992, 121–27) argues that the Han bond with a place,
and more broadly with a region of origin, should be understood as an
extension of consanguinity into space.⁶ In premodern China two kinds
of bonds, blood kinship and spatial kinship, were the determining fac-
tors in the formation of business networks. Likewise, Lin Yutang (1998,
198) writes, “From the love of the family there grew a love for the clan,
and from the love for the clan there developed an attachment for the land where one was born. Thus a sentiment arose which may be called ‘provincialism,’ in Chinese called t’ungsiang kuannien [tongxiang guannian], or ‘the idea of being from the same native place.’ . . . Fundamentally, they spring from the family psychology and do not depart from the family pattern. It is the family mind enlarged so as to make some measure of civic cooperation possible.”

As various historical studies demonstrate, native place in pre-twentieth-century China was the most often evoked organizational principle among migrants in need of assistance in new environments. These migrant communities’ political affairs, work, residence, financial assistance, business cooperation, and leisure activities were organized along the lines of spatial kinship (Rowe 1984; Naquin and Rawski 1987, 47). Communities of fellow locals (laoxiang) tended to share occupational specializations. For instance, in Beijing, an urban center historically known for its large sojourning population of merchants and officials, northwestern merchants were central government bankers, while the “book-and-art” market was run by Southerners from the Lower Yangzi basin (Naquin and Rawski 1987, 142–43). Further, those who ran stands selling steamed buns tended to be from Shandong (Shandong’er), while people from Shanxi (Laoxi’er) traded in salt and oils and worked in the funeral business making coffins. People from Zhejiang tended to operate shops with southern gods, while those from Dingxing in Hebei worked in public bathhouses (Liu Xiaochun 2003, 12).

Networks of fellow locals manifested institutionally first in the form of huiguan (guild hall, provincial guild), gatherings of rich merchants. From 1912 on, the more egalitarian associations of fellow locals (tongxianghui), sometimes also called common or collective place (gongsuo), emerged as an institutional representation of native-place bonds outside of familiar environments (Goodman 1992, 77). In addition to the main cities, guilds also densely covered rural regions of Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, and especially Sichuan (Ho 1966, 120–22). Most of the guilds in rural provinces were established by migrating farmers (kemin) and not by merchants, as they were in the cities.” Though place-based associations that promoted local sentiments could have evoked hostility from the central bureaucracy, this was not the case. Guilds were officially recognized and consulted on various community-related matters; in addition, tax collection and super-
vision of economic activities in the city were conducted in a mutually beneficial way by guild and city officials (Deglopper 1977, 647). With the rise of nationalism, guilds were conceived of not as a threat to the idea of a unitary nation but as entities that undergirded a new understanding of native place as synonymous with the state territory.

The outbreak of the civil war and the economic crisis it caused limited the field of activity of home-place guilds and associations (huiguan and tongxianghui), but some of them did survive into the Communist era. Their importance and number of members decreased greatly, though, as the new regime severed the flow of population between rural and urban areas by means of the household registration system (hukou zhidu). Additional restrictions on freedom of association and the accompanying governmental anxiety about informal associations effected further restrictions on the activities of associations of fellow locals. Eventually, the Cultural Revolution halted the existence of associations in mainland China, but in the reform era native-place networks again gained importance (Goodman 1995, 305–6). Contemporary studies demonstrate that native-place identities, together with kinship, remain the foremost organizing principles for migrants in the cities. These identities manifest perhaps most clearly, but not exclusively, in so-called urban villages, communities that form through native-place networks in large migrant cities (Zhang 2001; Xiang 2005). Native place is not only a paradigm of spatial organization of fellow locals in China’s modernizing cities; similarly to ethnicity, it also manifests in their business specialization. Elisabeth Perry (1995, 323–24) additionally highlights the importance of native-place identities in labor militancy and struggles for migrant workers’ rights in post-1989 China. While the interests of permanent workers employed at state enterprises are officially represented by unions, contract and temporary laborers turn to native-place “gangs” for protection. Clearly, then, the increased labor mobility of the past few decades has again enhanced the role of presocialist forms of social organization alongside kin and native-place networks.

What’s in a Term

Although popularly translated as “native place” in the literature cited above, jiāxiāng and guoxiāng as used by contemporary Han have multiple meanings that cannot be fully rendered with the vocabulary of “nativity,”
that is, being born and originating in a place. *Jiaxiang* and *guxiang* refer
nearly to both nativity to a place by birth and to acquired nativity by
residence. The terms also comprise ancestral nativity as relating to a place
regarded as an ancestral home, even if the person has never actually vis-
ited that place. While some Han apply the terms *jiaxiang* and *guxiang* to
places where they live (but where they were not born), others disagree with
the flexible interpretation and insist that *jiaxiang* and *guxiang* are inborn
or inherited and cannot be individually acquired. For some Han, then,
the two Chinese terms are equivalent to the English “native place” (i.e., a
place where you were born). For others, the terms also refer to a place in
which you become a local by living there. Still other Han will say that *jiax-
iang* and *guxiang* refer solely to the place where your ancestors originated.
Within this last category, it is disputed whether only patrilineal *jiaxiang/ 
guxiang* exists or if matrilineal *jiaxiang/guxiang* exists as well. The variety
of ways in which these two Chinese terms are used demands a rendering
in English that puts less emphasis on being “native” to a place yet is simul-
taneously broad enough to comprise this and other meanings. The English
rendering should ideally convey this ambiguity and at the same time also
convey the meaning of home inherent in the Chinese terminology.

A possible way to discuss *jiaxiang* and *guxiang* identities is to refer
to them as place-based identities. However, this terminology seems too
large and too generic. *Jiaxiang* and *guxiang* are merely one kind of pos-
sible place-based attachment. In the various contexts in which *jiaxiang/ 
guxiang* are used, additional specification of the individualized mean-
ings of place would be required. This would make it difficult to effectively
apply these terms in a translation, as it would ultimately be the author’s
responsibility to determine which meaning(s) of place a Han individual
might have had in mind when, for instance, she said that both Beijing and
Zhejiang were her *jiaxiang*. Did she mean birthplace? Hometown? Native
place? Place of residence? The place where patrilineal ancestors originate?
More than one of these things? The author would necessarily be the one
who “fixes” the ambiguity of the Chinese terms upon translation. Rather,
“home place” emerges in the context of this study as a much more suitable
rendering of *jiaxiang* and *guxiang*. This English phrasing is similarly open
and unspecific and also connotes the notion of home that is implicit in
the Chinese terms. It can render the meaning of an ancestral home place,
a home place acquired by birth, and a place that one makes into a home
by occupying it through residence. Home place is thus broad enough to comprise the idea of spatial kinship and primordiality associated with place bonds by some Han and also open enough to express the notion of individual agency in making a place into a home. Though “home place” may at first sound awkward to some native English speakers, jiaxiang and guxiang are thus rendered in this study. An attachment created through bonds with the home place is accordingly referred as home-place identity.¹¹

**Informants’ Reflections on Home-Place Identity**

More than half of research participants ascribed centrality to home place in their individual identity constellations, recognizing place as a central axis of identification and categorization processes. The analysis below thus sets out to understand how these individuals explain the importance of home-place attachment and how they relate this, in their personalized identity constellations, to being Han and Chinese.

In their answers, respondents tended to cycle through a few main narratives; indeed, these narratives were rather repetitious. What follows are selected statements representative of informant responses, including biographical data where needed to help make sense of the statements:

Hanzu are common; they live all over. Beijing People [Beijingren] make up an entity with boundaries. [Informant was born in Beijing.]

Hanzu are everywhere; one does not have to mention it. In my heart I am a Beijing Person. [Informant was born in Beijing. His parents were born elsewhere.]

Hanzu inhabit almost every region in China and thus the name Hanzu does not reflect regional differences.

There are too many Hanzu. Thus [Han-ness] is not very important when I want to highlight differences between myself and others.

Being Hanzu is the least important [identity] to me because there are many Han. What counts is my home place.

Minzu is not important; it is rather more significant that people from different regions have different characteristics.

All the people I meet are Hanzu. [On the other hand] I meet people who are not from Beijing and thus what I realize the most is that I am a Beijing Person. I am not a genuine Beijing Person though. [Informant was
born in Shenyang, Liaoning, and came to Beijing as a child.] (Fieldwork interviews, Beijing and Shanghai, 2002–3)

The enormous size of the Han minzu and the perceived pervasiveness of this identity pose certain identification problems. Particularly in Han-dominated areas of China, being Han appears too obvious and too vague to be a significant identity. School education, state administration, and ID cards stating minzu membership play a crucial role in raising awareness of minzu categorization among the Hanzu (Gladney 1991, 310–12).12 Obviously, however, this is not sufficient to make this identity meaningful in everyday interactions in communities where a minzu “other,” which could reinforce this identity, is present only vaguely. Consequently, in mundane processes of identity in Han-dominated areas, a need to differentiate oneself from other Han is a much more pressing issue. It causes individuals to turn to identifications that are more concrete, that are spatially and numerically limited, and that are capable of marking individuals as unique amid more than a billion other Han. Home-place identities that preceded the Hanzu identity in the form conceived at the turn of the twentieth century respond most directly to this need for differentiation and specification. The modern Han identity apparently has not caught on enough to be able to compete with home-place identities in terms of their everyday and immediate meaningfulness.

While some informants drew attention to the identifying function of home-place identities, others ascribed primary importance to bonds with home place because of their emotionality. Here, home place is the imaginary space of familiarity, one’s roots, a symbolic parent that “feeds” its children. These individuals stressed that home place had a determining influence on their lives; it determined what would become of them. The tangibility of home place via personal relations to it, whether actual or imagined, stands in a stark contrast with the generality of the minzu:

My home place is important to me because of the nostalgic feelings I have for it, because of the longing I have for relatives there.

All my strength comes from my roots, and my roots are in my hometown.

People always want to return home. I think I will never move to any other city. I am proud of being a Shanghainese [Shanghairen].
This soil gave birth to me and brought me up. This is my home.

One has the feeling of belonging and affiliation with the home place.

I love my home place. It is an honor for me to be a Zhejiang Person [Zhejiangren]. I do not care about the rest.

Native place counts more than Han race. [Interview in English.]
(Fieldwork interviews, Beijing and Shanghai, 2002–3)

These Han informants emphasized the emotionality of home place and its role as the locus of family networks, implicitly suggesting that minzu attachment is by contrast less emotional, less graspable, and more distant. In terms of sentimental appeal, the minzu identity obviously cannot compete with home-place attachments. These two lines of argumentation—the vagueness of Han-ness and the familiarity of home place—dominated conversations with these informants. The interview material further reveals how these informants negotiated their home-place identities and the strategies they employed to position themselves advantageously in relation to other Han with the help of these very identities. In the unfamiliar environments of large cities like Shanghai and Beijing, where Han migrants and ethnic-minority migrants gather from all across China, such strategies are arguably employed more frequently than elsewhere. The following statements of four interviewees, one born in Inner Mongolia, two in Subei (northern Jiangsu), and one in Henan, reflect some of the negotiation processes and strategies utilized. Additionally, they reflect the dilemma many migrants must negotiate, namely, how to reconcile the feeling that home place is essential to one’s identity with the fact that home place can be a burden in social interactions and a source of discrimination.

Beijing People have a dominant position in the whole country; they are in a position of advantage. Inner Mongolians are backward, and that is why I do not like to call myself Inner Mongolian [Neimengren]. I identify myself as a Beijing Person. [Informant was born in Inner Mongolia and currently lives in Beijing.]

I do not use the term Hanzu at all; everybody is Hanzu. I am also not a Beijing Person. I am from Subei but I do not feel like a Subei Person [Subeiren]. If someone asks me where I am from, I answer that I am a Jiangsu Person [Jiangsuren]. More specifically, I am Xuzhou de [from Xuzhou].
I was born in Subei... but this is not important to me. I consider myself Shanghainese. [Informant was born in Subei and currently lives in Shanghai.]

I am from Henan but I do not feel any special bonds with the name Henan Person [Henanren]. In terms of work, I would prefer to be a Beijing Person because it is easier for them to find a job. (Fieldwork interviews, Beijing and Shanghai, 2002–3)

Born in Inner Mongolia, the first informant above refers to himself as an Inner Mongolian when asked directly for his self-denomination. However, due to the negative associations that this label has in modernizing China, he conceals his Inner Mongolian identity in social interactions with other Han. Instead, he prefers to call himself a Beijing Person, identifying with his current place of residence. His Inner Mongolian identity becomes partially reactivated and performed upon his rare visits to his hometown. This and other identity switches highlight the negotiated nature of home-place identities. Such switches also demonstrate that although Han individuals prefer to discuss home-place identities in terms of emotional attachments, these identities are also instrumentalized and strategically employed; in real-life identity politics, these two dimensions are virtually impossible to separate.

It is revealing that despite feeling uncomfortable about their home-place identities, many of the interviewed Han still argued for the centrality of home place in their individualized identity negotiations. In fact, numerous research participants identified this tension themselves, discussing their idealization of home place as a space of familiarity alongside the realization that public manifestations of attachments to these places may be socially disadvantageous. Informants identified being a Beijing Person or a Shanghai Person as socially most advantageous, particularly in terms of employment or housing. At the same time, they were also aware that especially being a Henan Person, Subei Person, or Inner Mongolian was much less desired socially and could evoke discrimination. The Han informants from Henan, Subei, and Inner Mongolia all described experiencing negative consequences of their spatial “roots” in their current lives. They also discussed the various coping strategies they utilized to improve their situations. Among these, one strategy was to maintain a belief that home-place identities are central but to simultaneously conceal or blur one’s own
place identity. Another popular strategy was to refer to one’s home place with a different name. For instance, instead of Henan, an individual may use terms like Zhongyuan (Central Plains) or Jiangnan (South of the River, here meaning the Yellow River), which are geographically synonymous. Instead of Subei, individuals may use the provincial designation Jiangsu or the regional designation Jiangbei (North of the River, here meaning the Yangzi River). One informant who was born in Inner Mongolia—but in a region relatively close to the border of one of the northeastern provinces—referred to himself as a Northeasterner (Dongbeiren) instead of as Inner Mongolian. Some Han individuals also used a “counterattack” strategy, aggressively praising their own home place, despite its negative connotations in popular perception. Still other research participants employed a strategy of playing down the importance of place-based identities in general, instead emphasizing the centrality of being Han or Chinese. Each of these strategies reflects complex processes of hesitation, negotiation, and instrumentalization of identities. Although literature on place-based identities, particularly within mainland China, gives the impression that these identities are neat and well defined, the interviews reveal that there is no clear definition of a home place, nor is there a set number of home-place identities that a person may maintain. Significantly, various locations can function as a home place. They can be emotionally adopted as a home and also be instrumentalized as such, particularly when it comes to highly desirable place-based identities like those relating to Beijing, Shanghai, and other major cities in eastern and southeastern China.

Interestingly, the research participants who identified themselves as Hakka/Kejia, ascribed equal centrality to their Hakka/Kejia and home-place identities. A statement of one Hakka informant is representative of those I collected:

I feel like a Kejia and Jiangxi Person [Jiangxiren] at the same time. We usually differentiate Hanzu according to the region of origin; it is related to our idea of home place. People care a lot about home place. Within such a huge mass of Han People, home place is the primary means of differentiation. (Fieldwork interview, Shanghai, 2002)

Hakka identity was originally anchored in migrant status, the status of not belonging locally (Leong 1997, 129). This was a social category of those
listed in the population registers at their destinations as *keji* (registered as guests). While the guest status differentiated families of migrants from the “native” population in these registers, the families of “guests” shared neither a common ethnic nor cultural identity (Constable 1996, 12–15). Still, the shared experience of migration, displacement, social exclusion, and discrimination from the “locals” resulted in the Hakka becoming a shared identity label in the nineteenth century. What is of particular interest to my later discussion is that the Hakka/Kejia identity is described here as equally central as home-place identities. This implies that Hakka/Kejia and even multiple home-place identities can coexist in a nonexclusive and intertwined way.

To summarize, then, a majority of research participants argued that home place mattered more to them than being Han in terms of how they identified themselves and other Han. The reasons for the primacy of this attachment can be roughly divided into two categories: first, the vagueness of the *minzu* identity and, second, the strong emotional bond to the spatial “roots” associated with home place. There is no regional pattern among the informants who ascribed primacy to home-place identities. Apart from Han individuals from Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Beijing (admittedly somewhat overrepresented here), the Han who ascribed centrality to identification with home place came from all possible locations, from geographically remote regions as well as central ones, from places referred to as economically backward as well as developed (*fada*), and from areas that evoked positive as well as negative associations. The research data show that Han individuals actively engage in the negotiation and formation of their identities; they carefully analyze their options and make decisions, however temporary. By implementing strategies of concealing or switching their home places, they also actively influence the ways in which they are perceived by other Han. Hence, although the inherited home place may sometimes be a difficult legacy to cope with, Han individuals creatively tackle this issue, shifting carefully between emotionality and instrumentalization.

**Informants’ Definitions of Home Place**

Place-based identities are unquestionably relevant and important, including among younger generations of Hanzu. Still, few Han individuals have one home-place identity; the majority of Han move between multiple
place identities they situationally refer to as home. Some of these identities are inherited, some consciously chosen, and some imposed by others. Clearly, home place is a concept defined by extreme flexibility. It appears to be used relatively rarely in its meaning of birthplace, an inherited home place, or a place identified with patrilineal ancestors. Indeed, home-place identities emerged during my research as much less long-term than originally expected, with some exceptions. Home-place identities were more individually determined, consciously negotiated, instrumentalized, flexibly and creatively interpreted, and as with most identities, impossible to systematize. The following informant responses illustrate these processes of home-place identity negotiation:

I feel 90 percent like a Beijing Person, but because my parents are from Shanxi, this is my home place \( jiaxiang \). Owing to this, I am also a bit of a Shanxi Person [Shanxiren]. [Informant was born in Beijing.]

My own home place \( jiaxiang \) is not important to me, but my father’s is. I have a feeling of belonging there. [Informant was born in Hainan, her father in Guangdong.]

My first home place \( guxiang \) is Shandong. . . . Beijing is my second home. [Informant was born in Shandong and currently lives in Beijing.]

I was born in Shandong, but now I live and plan to marry in Shanghai. Shanghai is my home place \( jiaxiang \) now.

Harbin is my home place \( guxiang \). A person can live in different places but one cannot change one’s home place.

Sichuan is my home place \( jiaxiang \) . . . this soil and culture nourished me. Beijing is a place where I pursue my studies. When I say “I am a Beijing Person” it is my individually determined decision (renke).

In fact, Shanghai is not my home place but I consider myself to be a Shanghainese. I refer to myself as Local Shanghainese [Shanghai Ben-diren]. [Informant was born in Zhejiang.]

Being a Beijing Person is most important to me because I have studied here for four years. . . . The second most important is being a Zhejiang Person [Zhejiangren]. My home place \( jiaxiang \) is in Zhejiang. In a broader sense I am a Southerner, but I am also a Northerner, I grew up here. In the eyes of my relatives in the South, I am a Northerner. [Informant was born in Hebei; her parents are from Zhejiang.] (Fieldwork interviews, Beijing and Shanghai, 2002–3)
The places referred to as home place include, among others, the individual’s own birthplace, location of household registration, father’s or mother’s home place, the place of living, the place of studying, and interestingly, in one case, the home place of the spouse. When it fits their identity imageries and individual positioning strategies, some Han emphasize their patrilineal “roots” and stress the primordiality and constancy of home-place attachments. Otherwise, other places can be adopted as home place and practiced as such in social interactions. One of the informants observed that the only occasion when the agency of an individual Han becomes restrained and the individually determined home-place choices do not matter is when a person confronts state institutions. These confrontations occur most often in matters of employment, housing, and education. When state institutions enter into individualized identity politics, the only place-related categories that matter for an individual’s classification are the state-established household registration and the much older but still occasionally used notion of *jiguan*, the place of origin of one’s patriline and family name.

While flexible, the attachment to home place is still extremely prevalent. It is to be expected, however, that personal mobility and the increasing pace of life will variously affect this attachment in the future. Individuals may, for example, increasingly favor more pragmatic or individually determined place-based identifications, for instance, those related to household registration or place of residence. At the same time, the experience of migration and the longing for the familiar may lead to assigning added importance to inherited home-place identities associated with one’s spatial “origins” and “roots.” However the meaning of home place develops, it will likely remain a complex and blurred concept that will allow for a great deal of negotiation and individual agency.

**Identification with the Han Minzu**

In contrast to the majority of informants who highlighted the centrality of home place in processes of identification, some research participants ascribed centrality to identification with the Han *minzu*. The following responses explain these interviewees’ emphasis on their *minzu* identity and illustrate the role they ascribe to it:
Hanzu are one *minzu* and should not be subdivided. Most importantly, I am Hanzu. If it is necessary to differentiate regionally, I was born in the Northeast [Dongbei] and so I am a Northeasterner. A few years ago I came to Beijing, and Beijing became my second home place [*guxiang*].

I am in the first place Hanzu; this is because young Chinese people [*sic*] stress unity.

There is a feeling of belonging with other Han; this originates in the shared culture and *minzu* affiliation. That is why I feel primarily Hanzu.

I have life habits of a Xi’an Person [Xi’anren], but I am Hanzu. My home place is not important.

Hanzu make China different from all other countries and peoples. Only thanks to Hanzu, the numerous *minzu* of China can communicate with each other.

I am proud of being Hanzu.

*Minzu* affiliation marks the biggest and most important difference between me and other people; my home place [Chongqing] is secondary.

I do not have any home place. [Informant was born in Lanzhou, Gansu.]

My home place is not important to me. I have beautiful memories from my childhood but it has degenerated and become backward. [Informant was born in Subei.]

My home place is neither important nor unimportant to me. I do not mind the designation Subei Person, but I am not especially proud of it. I consider myself a Shanghainese. [Informant was born in Subei.] (Fieldwork interviews, Beijing and Shanghai, 2002–3)

These Han argue that Han-ness is a positive, unifying identity, unlike what they identify as the divisive and hierarchical attachments relating to home place. Other reasons they offered for the importance of *minzu* identity were the belief that all Han share a common “essence,” a focus on the political centrality of Hanzu in China, an emphasis on their role as the nation’s unifier, and pride in being Han.

The factor that must be considered here is how much these responses were influenced by what these Han thought their audience expected to hear, particularly when their audience was a foreign researcher. Indeed, conversations with some of these research participants hinted at an overt
political position, one to be defended or protected. If not for these filters, the share of Han who primarily identify themselves through home-place attachments would likely have been even higher than my data indicate. Still, based on the content of conversations and my observations, it appears that the number of Han motivated solely by the obligation they felt as Hanzu and as loyal Chinese citizens conversing with a foreigner was rather small. Rather, a mutually dependent system of individual rationale and assumed political obligation fused to influence their identification. For instance, some Han who experienced discrimination because of their inherited home place emphasized the importance of the Hanzu identity by claiming pride in being Han. On the other hand, Beijing and Shanghai People who emphasized the centrality of the Han identity gave the impression that being a Beijing or Shanghai Person and a Hanzu was principally the same to them, for they assumed that these two powerful regional groups determined the overall definition of Han-ness. Moreover, my research shows that while some Hanzu imagine their identities as a hierarchical structure that situates the all-encompassing Han-ness on top and home-place identities below, others understand identity to be a cupboard with many drawers. When a scale of interaction and an “other” change, one drawer closes and another one opens, as for this informant: “Seen from the perspective of the whole country, I am Hanzu. At a smaller scale, I am Anhui Person [Anhuiren].”

Interestingly, the centrality of identification with the Han minzu was explained in a significant number of cases not so much by directly discussing Han-ness as by discussing the problems and difficulties encountered in relation to home-place identities. Identification with minzu was employed in these cases as something of an emergency exit from place-based differentiation, a differentiation these Han found troubling and uncomfortable and on which they were unable to capitalize. Their statements thus point to one of the presumably most important functions of the Han identity, which is to serve as a symbolic haven. The identity is a strategic resort for those Hanzu who feel uncomfortable in their home-place identities, those whose home-place identities are a cause of social discrimination, and those who through life circumstances (e.g., family conflicts) and personal choices do not feel like they belong in any particular place and thus have no home-place identity. Han-ness, similar to Chinese-ness, can function in such situations as an alternative to and
refuge from discriminating, emotionally difficult, divisive, and shifting home-place identities.

**IDENTIFICATION WITH THE CHINESE NATION AND STATE**

In quite a contrast to home-place and minzu identities, research participants seldom discussed the centrality of the Chinese national identity. If they did, it was usually a deliberate attempt to decrease the importance of identity particulars when judging a person, to emphasize national unity in spite of the dividing boundaries of home place and minzu, or to express patriotic love for the country and pride in being Chinese:

What matters most to me is that I am Chinese. Zhengzhou is my hometown, so it is quite important too. But being . . . Han or Henan Person does not matter to me at all. I look at the character of a person, not at the place where this person comes from. [Informant was born in Zhengzhou, Henan.]

What matters is that I am Chinese; being a Jiangxi Person, a Shanghai, or Hanzu are all equally less important. [Still], having a special feeling toward one’s birthplace is an inherent attribute of Chinese people. [Informant was born in Shanghai; his mother’s home place is in Jiangxi.]

The country is my mother, it brought me up.

I cherish feelings for my home place. [But] the only thing that matters is being Chinese.

First of all, I am Chinese. I am proud of being Chinese. Second, I am a Hanzu Person (Hanzuren). Hanzu are the largest minzu of China . . . They have played a pivotal role in the history of China. Third, I am a Hunan Person (Hunanren). I love my home place.

I begin from the broadest perspective: first of all, I am Chinese. Hanzu have common features. Being a Beijing Person [place of residence] is not at all important to me, apart from having some privileges related to the household registration here. [Informant was born in Chongqing.] (Fieldwork interviews, Beijing and Shanghai, 2002–3)

Chinese-ness is the most extensive and inclusive of all the identities discussed by my informants. It is an identity that ideally should embrace and
protect all Chinese nationals in an equal way, independent of their minzu, home place, occupation, or access to wealth. While it is questionable that the Chinese identity indeed does this, the inclusive and egalitarian potential of Chinese-ness is, at least for some Han, the reason to emphasize its importance. Interestingly, one of the quotations above stresses that it is a Chinese characteristic to have strong home-place identities, yet another example of nonexclusive, fuzzy, and nested identity processes. The final two quotes reflect deliberate switches between component nested identities—identities that are consciously considered, assumed, or concealed and identities that alter with changing scales of interaction.

Among all research participants, those who emphasized the centrality of being Chinese in their everyday processes of identity constituted a clear minority. This is somewhat surprising considering that the person who interviewed them was a foreigner and thus an international scale of interaction was, it would seem, explicit in the conversations. One reason for this small number of Han individuals who highlighted the importance of national identity could be the focus of the present study on identities that mattered in mundane identity processes. Perhaps being Chinese is not that crucial for such processes. Further, it may be that Chinese-ness gains significance when one crosses an international border, which very few research participants had done, or during international tensions that involve China, which was not the case during my fieldwork.

These results clearly contrast with a survey on national identity discussed by Wenfang Tang and Gaochao He in Separate but Loyal (2010). Among the three countries compared in the study, Chinese citizens scored the highest in the survey when it came to attachment to national identity (84 points out of 100), ahead of the United States and Russia. The significant difference between these survey results and the rather modestly expressed viability of Chinese identity in the present study may be a result of the methodology of data collection. The survey was conducted by state officials and thus implicitly enforced the importance of the state and national identity in the collected responses. Further, the survey singled out the Chinese identity by referencing it directly in the statements that respondents were expected to assess, such as, “I would rather be a citizen of China, than of any other country in the world” (Tang and He 2010, 40). Data generated through such a survey accordingly differ from data generated through semi-structured interviews and observations, where
Chinese-ness is merely one identity option discussed. When singled out, virtually any identity is likely to appear powerful—consider, for example, the way Han-ness is discussed in the previous chapter. When contextualized, however, it appears that Chinese-ness seems to have limited implications for the everyday identity negotiations of Han individuals in Han-dominated areas of eastern China.

**IDENTIFICATION THROUGH NEGATION**

A similarly small share of Han research participants identified themselves by negating each collective category of identity discussed in the interviews, including nation, *minzu*, and home place. Some individuals offered other forms of identification that mattered more to them than these well-established, and thus somewhat coercive and arguably worn-out, concepts.

I am indifferent to being a Shandong Person [Shandongren; birthplace], Beijing Person [residence] and Hanzu. I have Beijing household registration. Differences caused by environment are diminishing now; none of the attachments are especially outstanding.

Being a Hunan Person [birthplace], Beijing Person [residence], or Hanzu are all equally unimportant. If not for official papers, none of them would matter to me.

All these things do not matter too much, whatever. Home place is a bit more important. I have a Beijing household registration, but I cannot say that I am a Beijing Person. Maybe later [I will be able to] when I have lived here for some time.

They all do not matter to me. In terms of household registration I am a Beijing Person, but I am from Nanjing.

Hanzu is a *minzu* attribute; Beijing is my birthplace. I cannot change either of them. I identify with people with broad horizons. (Fieldwork interviews, Beijing and Shanghai, 2002–3)

These Han individuals avoided accepting historically constructed identities and equally challenged the importance of *minzu*, home-place, and national attachments. One principal reason for a rejection of these well-established identities emerges in the final quotation above: all of these
identities, as well as the associations they evoke, are beyond the influence of an individual. As such, they cannot convey any personal, individualized meanings, and they possess a coerciveness to which these Hanzu obviously object. An alternative that matters more to them is the state-established category of household registration. The location of household registration determines where one can legally work, buy an apartment at a preferential price, apply for a passport, or take a driving license exam. It may well be that with increasing migration and individualization, the “givens” of minzu, nation, and the primordially conceived home place may withdraw from dominant positions, while social classifiers such as household registration and individual identities will gain further importance.

CONCLUSION

When analyzed out of the social context of everyday identity politics, Han-ness appears as a powerful and tangible identity. When contextualized through its entanglement in identity processes, however, Han-ness turns out to be just one of many identity options that Hanzu individuals select from and switch between. Individual identity constellations often combine Han-ness with flexibly interpreted home-place identities as well as with the national Chinese identity. These three types of collective attachments—and many others—form individualized, complex, and intertwined topographies. Depending on the scale of interaction, any one of these identities may become activated and exposed. Although identity choices are situational, home-place identities seem to matter most to Han individuals in everyday encounters and in the ways they identify themselves and other Han. While the actual reasons they grant primacy to home-place identities are individual and fragmented, the narratives that inspire these Han can be summarized as follows:

- The Han minzu is too large, Han identity too obvious and omnipresent. This leaves some Han individuals feeling “undefined” and identity-less.
- Han-ness is not a meaningful identity in Han-dominated areas; home place is a more concrete attachment that matters in social interactions.
- Attachment to home place is something emotional. Home place is the locus of the familiar (although some interviewees have never
even briefly visited the places they refer to as home). Home place is an environment where family and friends are and where one belongs. It is made tangible through imagined or actual personal relations to it.

- Home place is imagined as the “roots” that determine one’s life. In this imagery, the soil of the home place is a symbolic parent that feeds its children.
- Home place has an important influence on a person’s social standing. Some places enjoy a particularly high social status. These places are more often than others claimed as home and emphasized in social interactions.

Home place is usually inquired about and revealed in the early stages of social interactions; stories associated with these places, the stereotypical characteristics of the people “originating” in them, and comments on local dialects are typically quick to follow. Hanzu like to tease one another about their home places, and knowing the home place of their interlocutors makes individual Han assume certain roles in dealing with each other, roles based on stereotypical qualities ascribed to people “originating” in particular places. In distant migrant locations, Han individuals who find they share a common home place (typically a province, often much larger than most European countries) are likely to celebrate their fellow locals’ relations, toasting each other at the dinner table and offering examples of their languages and dialects.

The Han individuals who ascribed primary importance to home-place identities argued that Han-ness is a concept with minimal significance in their daily social interactions with other Han. Understandably, in Han-dominated regions where minzu “others” are missing, the omnipresent Han-ness can function as a meaningful identity only to a limited extent. Han individuals who wish to distinguish the Hanzu into smaller and more graspable categories rely primarily on the paradigm of home place. Still, although place is well recognized among the Hanzu as an important identity concept and a paradigm of differentiation, the definition of home place is very open. For one, different localities, not necessarily one’s birthplace, can be adopted as a home place. Moreover, in the majority of cases, identification with home place involves referring to several localities as home, each pushed to the front line situationally. The landscape of home-place identities is thus a lively and chaotic field.
Although home-place identities are of great importance in Han-to-Han interactions, wealth, education, occupation, and other factors often dim the significance of place identities and reshuffle place hierarchies in social practice. If a distinguished guest at the dinner table turns out to be from rural Sichuan, the conversation will likely praise the beauty and tranquility of country life rather than discuss the millions of impoverished migrant workers who yearly leave Sichuan to find work elsewhere. Accordingly, then, home-place identities and the associations they elicit, while certainly present, should not be imagined as socially overwhelming. Whereas my research data highlight the importance of these identities, they also highlight the parallel agency of Han individuals in selecting, assuming, swapping, or rejecting home-place identities. Hence, this portion of research material offers four important conclusions: First, home place is a creative process of negotiation between the inherited, the given, the plausible, and the individually desired. Second, owing to this, Hanzu have multiple home-place identities that are situationally activated. Third, home-place identities are relational; they are especially important in situations when Han-ness and Chinese-ness are not meaningful as axes of identification. Fourth, like Han-ness, home-place identities must be analyzed in a relational context with other identities that may sometimes restrain their importance.

Whereas home-place attachments appear to stand in the center of everyday identity politics for the majority of research participants, Han-ness is central to significantly fewer of them. Still, depending on the context, Han-ness has important functions to fulfill and is also cherished as an encompassing and nondiscriminative identity. The Han who emphasized the importance of this identity were motivated by the pride of belonging to the dominant minzu and the pivotal role of the Hanzu in China; the desire to emphasize minzu unity beyond home place-related divisions; and the feeling of belonging together as Hanzu, sharing a “common essence” as a minzu. Some Han ascribed centrality to minzu identity because of the discrimination and discomfort they experienced through their inherited home-place identities. The Han from Subei and Henan seem to be most affected by this discrimination, as do some Inner Mongolians. Informants born in these regions tended to either conceal or swap their home places or to emphasize the importance of Han minzu identity. These practices offered them anonymity and shelter beyond the divisiveness of place-based categorizations.
Interestingly, although most research participants had no difficulty defining Han-ness and its boundaries, as demonstrated in chapter 2, when participants were confronted with home-place identities Han-ness appeared much less appealing and meaningful. Still, even if the majority perceived Han-ness as too common to be meaningful, strong place attachments do not necessarily call into question the sense and role of *minzu* identity. Rather, home-place and *minzu* identities coexist at different scales of reference. Home-place identities *tend to* matter primarily in Han-to-Han interactions, while *minzu* identity matters in inter-*minzu* interactions. Yet as identity processes in China’s multiethnic regions demonstrate, identities are flexibly reformulated, and home-place identities can also be used to establish pan-*minzu* forms of solidarity. For example, while some Han identify themselves clearly vis-à-vis “the Uyghur” in Xinjiang, other Han establish a relationship of solidarity with some Uyghur based on a shared home-place identity, that is, being local to Xinjiang (Joniak-Lüthi 2014). Thus, as home-place identities do not deny the importance of *minzu* identities, *minzu* identities do not exclude non-*minzu* and cross-*minzu* forms of solidarity.

At yet another scale of interaction, the national identity as Chinese is evoked. This identity nominally plays down both *minzu-* and home place–drawn boundaries and draws attention instead to a larger, more encompassing national (or even transnational) community and the territorial state. Although the overwhelming majority of research participants were exposed for at least thirteen years to centralized state education and to the subject of patriotic education as taught from elementary level on, respondents relatively rarely emphasized attachment to the Chinese national identity. The efficacy of state education in influencing everyday identity choices and options in eastern China thus does not seem overwhelming. Further, my research data suggest that among the contemporary Han there is a small but not insignificant group of individuals who distance themselves from the coerciveness of “mandatory” attachments to soil, *minzu*, and nation. The instrumental category of household registration was put forth by some Han respondents as mattering most in practical, everyday terms. These Han rejected “participants’ primordialism” (Brubaker 2004, 9) and refrained from “speaking continuities” (Anagnost 1997), sticking rather to the pragmatic household registration or individually determined attachments.
Identities are enacted across multiple axes (Carrico 2012, 25). Han-ness, as coherent and powerful as it appears in some situations, is merely one of these axes. It must therefore be contextualized in relation to other identities before we can understand its relational significance. The emphasis on the centrality of home place and not minzu indicates that Han-ness has powerful competitors on the “identity market,” particularly in urban, Hanzu-dominated settings of eastern Chinese cities, where a reifying minzu “other” is largely missing in everyday interactions. There, Han-ness has to make space for home-place attachments believed to matter more in everyday social interactions because they establish and maintain distinctions from other Han. At the same time, home-place identities are situationally restrained by occupation, education, and many other factors that may be equally important as organizational and categorizing principles. Moreover, centrality ascribed to home place does not indicate that Han-ness is becoming a useless attachment—far from it. The universality and broadness of Han identity—in some contexts arguably its weaknesses—represent at the same time its great strength. Nominally, the category offers common space for all individuals officially identified as Hanzu, regardless of their origins and social status (both of which may be stigmatized) or their occupation (for which they may be discriminated against, underpaid, or made to feel inferior). The symbolic resources associated with “the Han” as the largest, most advanced, most modern, and most powerful minzu make Han-ness a situationally attractive identity. Attempts to increase the “visibility” of Han-ness for the Han themselves are being undertaken too. The reinvention of silk robes as “traditional” Han clothing is one fascinating example of reversed Orientalism that strives to make Han-ness more graspable (Leibold 2010). In this process, folklorization emerges as a way to “domesticate” the Han minzu by ascribing to it a set of easily definable characteristics.

Despite the relative coerciveness of home-place, minzu, and national identities, many options remain open to an individual who negotiates between them. In a conflict-free situation where none of the identities is mobilized more than others, the most common paradigm seems to be the one in which multiple identities are activated situationally. This process of flexible identity swapping and identity negotiation is obviously not unique to China; indeed, it is arguably present in all identity negotiations in all societies. And yet, the data analyzed above demonstrate that
despite Han-ness being promoted for many decades as a unitary identity, it still cannot compete with home-place attachments in terms of meaningfulness and familiarity. “The Han” remain a deeply divided category. Home place–related divisions are only one aspect of the fragmentation and boundaries that crisscross the Han minzu in contemporary China.