The fragmentation of the Hanzu is substantial and all permeating. In mundane social interactions, “the Han” disintegrate into multiple identity groups that engage in relationships of competition, exclusion, and discrimination. Despite this fragmentation, many Han simultaneously understand Han-ness as a powerful identity, and they imagine “the Han” as sharing a set of common markers—the “essence”—and unitary feelings. The notion of relationality that understands Han-ness as entangled with other collective identities allows us to see Han-ness but also home place, national, rural, urban, native, outsider, and other identities as transient and situational. This helps us develop a clearer understanding of an apparent paradox: the extreme fragmentation of the Hanzu through a variety of spatial, social, and linguistic boundaries, on the one hand, and their parallel “unity in Han-ness” exhibited at other times, on the other. The integrity of the Han *minzu* depends on a complex set of relationships—relationships between the multiple identity categories into which “the Han” disintegrate in everyday life, and between these fragmented identities and Han-ness. In some contexts Han-ness is a tangible identity, one that most of my research informants talked about extensively and felt strongly related to. However, when contrasted with other collective attachments, particularly those relating to home place, Han-ness becomes vague and situationally invisible. Thus, Han-ness can, paradoxically, be at once
meaningful and invisible, immediate and distant. Ethnicity may offer a framework to analytically grasp these multiple identities of the Hanzu, the ways they are constructed and practiced, and their mutual relationships. First, however, Chinese-language terms must be explored, revealing the contextuality of collective identities assumed by Han individuals and the intertwined networks of relationships that link them. The question of ethnicity proves to be directly related to the scales at which identities are enacted, their degree of “density,” and their transitory nature.

**FRAGMENTATION AND HAN-NESS**

Social exclusions, discrimination, and othering among Hanzu in eastern China are likely as strong as they are between the Hanzu and other minzu elsewhere. Apparently, the Han identity does not have the potential to create the social solidarity necessary to mediate these asymmetric exclusions. At the same time, when directly asked to discuss Han-ness, most Han research participants had no trouble composing a favorable unitary image of the Han minzu, one to which they declare attachment and are proud to belong. This appears somewhat contradictory. To better grasp how Han individuals understand Han-ness and the simultaneous fragmentation of those classified as Hanzu, I concluded every interview with the three questions below, bringing the attention of informants back to this relationship.

**“Do Hanzu all over the Country Share the Same Culture [Wenhua]?”**

A clear majority of my research participants answered this question in the negative. These individuals believed that Hanzu are culturally distinct according to their place of “origin.” One informant argued, “Hanzu are like the Slavs; they divide into many branches.” Others expressed the view that Han are generally the same but with many local differences. This suggests that the feeling of sharing something with other Hanzu is situated elsewhere than in the notion of shared culture, and that this feeling refers to things other than the social fragmentation manifest in place-based, urban/rural, native/outsider, and North/South modes of distinction. Yet another informant suggested, “As there are different countries, so there are different Hanzu.” In contrast to these opinions, a clear minority of research par-
participants argued that Han do share the same culture, defined as the mainstream culture (*zhuliu wenhua*), which, they said, “is the same everywhere.”

The research participants who conceived of the Hanzu as culturally fragmented discussed the many local or regional cultures (*diqu wenhua, diyu wenhua, quyu wenhua*) into which Han divide. A number of interviewees focused on differentiating between the “culture of the North” and “culture of the South”—a distinction discussed in the previous chapter. More spatially restricted regional cultures were also mentioned. Informants referred to the Shanghai area as “the culture of the Wu language” (*Wuyu wenhua*) or “the small family of Wu” (*Wu xiaojia*). Guangdong was referred to as “the culture of the Yue language” (*Yueyu wenhua*). Informants also differentiated between “the coastal culture” (*haipai wenhua*) of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai; “the hutong culture” of Beijing; the culture of the Sichuan basin; the cultures of the Yellow River, Yangzi, and Pearl River basins; and the culture of the Central Plains. In the perception of these research participants, these “regional cultures” differ to a considerable degree.

My informants imagined the so-called regional cultures as neat, traceable spatial-human formations comprising both places and people who “originate” in them. Linguistic differences were among the principal dimensions of distinction between these regional cultures. Informants argued that “in Sichuan, language is soft and gentle” or that “in the South, there are many local dialects and thus people there are not as integrated as in the North.” Another informant stated, “Although in the South they are also Hanzu, language differences make contact difficult.” Character (*xingge*) was also a popular theme in discussing regional cultures. For instance, several research participants described Hanzu from western China as “conservative,” “hospitable,” as those who like “singing and dancing in front of others and sharing things,” but also as “lacking a sense of competition.” Conversely, Hanzu from coastal areas reportedly “hate when others touch their belongings” and “have brains for business.” My informants also posited that each regional culture has specific habits and customs (*shenghuo xiguan, fengsu xiguan*), like different ways of celebrating festivals. Regional cultures were further detailed as having specific, traditional cuisines; as characterized by different modes of thinking (*siwei*); as having distinct paces of life, traditional opera styles, climate, architecture, education, and economies.
How informants framed “regional cultures” is similar to the stereotypes ascribed to place-based identity categories discussed earlier. Yet when compared with markers of Han-ness, the ways in which informants described regional cultures is indeed strikingly distinct. As already revealed, Han-ness was framed by research participants in terms of shared history and ancestors, powerful culture, and a dominant position in relation to “the minorities.” Han-ness also emerged through language (as an instrument of national unification), Confucianism, the notion of “the Han” as an omnipresent and encompassing population, and through links to state power. In quite a contrast, the way that regional cultures are narrated focuses distinctly on diversities in speech, character, regional customs, diet, and mode of thinking. Han-ness and, on the other hand, the regional differentiation are thus clearly located at two different registers, registers that only partly and situationally overlap.

“Are All Hanzu Inherently Alike [Tongzhi]?”

Informants responded to this primordial query differently than to the first one. A small majority professed that Han do share a “common essence,” or that they are “inherently” alike. These Han argued that Hanzu “have mixed to such a degree that one cannot see any significant regional differences.” Interestingly, just a few minutes earlier in our interviews, a majority of the very same informants posited that Han were culturally diversified and formed distinct “regional cultures.” One reason for this inconsistency might be semantic: the Chinese term tongzhi translates literally as “sharing a common quality,” “being inherently alike.” It is thus likely that some research participants imagined the Han as sharing a common “essence” (zhi) but simultaneously as distinct in terms of “local cultures.” For instance, one informant observed, “The Han are tongzhi, but there are also many local differences.” This seemingly paradoxical perspective offers further clues for understanding the simultaneity of identity processes relating to Hanzu identity, and processes of fragmentation linked to other social and ethnic identities to which Han individuals relate. My research data suggest that the two processes are thought to operate on two different, rarely intersecting scales. These parallel scales allow processes related to the making, performing, and imagining of the Han minzu identity and processes related to the making and performing
of non-minzu identities to continue largely undisturbed and independent of one another.

“Do All People Classified as Hanzu Have ‘Enough’ in Common to Form One Minzu?”

I posed this provocative question at the end of each interview, allowing informants to reflect once again on what they had shared about Han-ness and the boundaries crisscrossing it. In answering it, an overwhelming majority of research participants maintained that, indeed, all people classified as Hanzu shared “enough” in common to be classified together as one minzu. They found this classification well grounded.

Though this question was similar to the first two, its reference to the politicized category of minzu made it distinct; accordingly, it evoked very different responses. In its simplistic formulation, it was meant to incite research participants to confront the abundance of identity categories that surfaced in our talks and to consider them in light of the official state classification that lumps all these identity categories together into one minzu. Informants reacted by closing ranks to defend an apparently important stake. Their arguments included the following:

The important things—history and culture—are the same; regional differences are secondary.

What is important are ancestors and history; regional differences are secondary.

There are, of course, differences, but the character of the minzu is unitary [tongyi].

Even if local customs are not the same, the spirit remains the same for all: diligent, patriotic, and simple.

They all share common territory and Confucian thinking; the central government supports harmonious development.

It is just like this, it is something you cannot change; you simply are Han. (Fieldwork interviews, Beijing and Shanghai, 2002–3)

These individuals argued that history, blood, ancestors, culture, land, and minzu character or minzu spirit—generally, the primordial “givens”—were the binding elements of the Hanzu. When considering these “givens,”
the overwhelming majority of informants identified the boundaries and exclusions performed in everyday social interactions as secondary in importance. A few of them emphasized the “given-ness” of Han-ness as an imposed identity out of their control. Others stressed the centrality of the Han minzu in the Chinese state and its leading role in maintaining Chinese statehood:

The Han form the center, they do not change. It is others who assimilate and adopt.

Hanzu are the center, they are most numerous. The country needs this strong center to be strong itself.

We [Hanzu] believe that we are the masters of China. (Fieldwork interviews, Beijing and Shanghai, 2002–3)

These responses further reinforce the link between the Chinese state and the Han minzu. They reveal the success of Han-making projects to date in the sense that individual Han appear to have internalized the centrality of the Han minzu in the Chinese national narrative and in Chinese nation- and state-making projects. The political awareness of how much depends on “the Han” is well established. The responsibility for the mission that “the Han” have to play in the Chinese state, also in relation to “the minorities,” is also well established. So too is the responsibility for protecting this classification when it is challenged, as I did in our interviews. The responses to this query show that, although perhaps not overwhelmingly important in mundane identity processes in eastern China, Han-ness as an overarching identity is something Hanzu individuals are willing to defend. Whether they do so because they internalized the identity during patriotic education lessons, because they feel emotionally attached to it, and/or because Han-ness is a resource to draw upon in negotiating their social standing vis-à-vis other minzu is impossible to distinguish. Several of these motivations likely merge together.

Although minzu categories were rather arbitrarily conceived in the Minzu Classification Project, since then they have assumed a life of their own (Harrell 2001). Han minzu, conceived primarily for nation-making purposes, has become an identity and a way of thinking that many Hanzu voluntarily identify with today and internalize in their interactions with other minzu. It is an identity that they assume at this scale of interac-
tion. Informants’ observations of the political status quo appeared to only strengthen their opinion that “the Han” must have “enough in common” because the minzu has indeed so far succeeded in accommodating all fragmentation and power asymmetries existing between the various Han. Because minzu are state-conceived and enforced categories, fragmentation and power struggles among their members have no impact on group cohesion, which is institutionally established and maintained. It is likely that the majority of my informants have never considered whether it makes sense to pack 1.2 billion very different people into one Han minzu. Accordingly, the interview question elicited quick, almost rote recitation of the familiar rhetoric of minzu unity.

Still, while an overwhelming number of informants responded in this manner, some did express serious doubts about this classification. They argued that the boundaries dividing Hanzu were too significant to unequivocally classify all Han as members of one minzu. Others believed that while Hanzu shared some things (“history,” “tradition”), other and no less important differences existed (“languages,” “cultures”). Similar to discourses transmitted through national language, questioning a social institution from within—in this case the minzu classification—is obviously a difficult task for those who had grown up with it. Still, more than one-tenth of my informants challenged the official classification and questioned its sense.

SIMULTANEITY OF HANNESS AND FRAGMENTATION

The majority of my research participants stressed that Hanzu are culturally heterogeneous and fragmented by boundaries of “regional cultures.” Socionyms and stereotypes analyzed earlier highlighted numerous other salient boundaries and forms of differentiation. Yet an overwhelming majority of informants supported the official classification, in which these fragmented identity categories are packed together into one Han minzu. Despite differences and divisions, they argued, all the Hanzu still have something important in common. These responses suggest that regional and social fragmentation is perceived by many Han as detached from the political mission that the Han minzu has to fulfill, and from the politicized understanding of minzu identity. That “ancestors,” “history,” “tradition,” and “spirit” are framed as the Han “essence” (zhi), whereas “mentality,”
“culture,” and “language” are framed as regional and secondary differences—differences with no significant impact on that “essence”—is arguably not accidental. Behind these constructions of “the essential” and “the secondary” exist substantial efforts by imperial and postimperial governments to develop an identity framework that would unify the Han despite the many boundaries that divide them.

Unlike scholars in the Herderian tradition, who assumed a “natural” equation of culture = people = nation (see Denby 2005), Edmund Leach (1970, 40) critically argues that “uniformity of . . . culture is correlated with a uniformity of . . . political organization,” in the sense that political organization determines the “cultural dress” it assumes. On the other hand, differences in cultural practices do not necessarily imply belonging to different social systems (Leach 1970, 17; see also Bentley 1987, 25). My research data engage with this debate in several ways. Basically, the data show that culture, language, and the idea of community do not have to coincide, not even in participants’ primordialism. Rather, communal identity is constructed flexibly out of what is available and feasible (Wallman 1979, 2–3). The distinction into the aforementioned “essentials” and “secondaries” shows the effects of the Han-making process in China. Interestingly, and contrary to Herderian understanding, culture is perceived by some members of the Han minzu as an uneasy subject that can augment unitary feelings as much as it exposes uncertainties and discontinuities. The challenge in the making of “the Han” has thus been to create an understanding of elements that have a unifying potential as essential and of those with a divisive potential as secondary. The government and a majority of the Han minzu closely collaborate in this process.

Although Han individuals “domesticate” the minzu identity by investing it with personalized meanings in their identity negotiations, Han-ness has a crucial political dimension, one that Han individuals become aware of through socialization in and beyond the educational system. The notion of historical responsibility becomes enmeshed with individualized identity politics, where the role of “the Han” as the core and leader of the nation can be utilized to establish specific, asymmetric relationships with minzu “others.” The categorical togetherness of the Hanzu coexists with the actual social fragmentation. This is illustrated by the informants who argued that Hanzu are “all the same” in the sense of “mainstream culture” but who also spoke extensively about significant differences between
“regional cultures.” The scale of regional cultures and the other social differentiations is where boundaries are registered, admitted, and permitted to exist.¹ These boundaries only in minor ways affect the minzu unity imperative that is located elsewhere and sensed differently. Due to this, and to the relationality and situationality of these identities, it is perfectly possible for the Hanzu to be fragmented and unified at the same time.

The “Secondary Cultural Differentiation” Paradigm

The interest and enthusiasm with which research participants discussed “regional cultures” and “regional differences” proves that place-based diversity of the Hanzu is not a taboo topic in China; on the contrary, it is to a certain degree celebrated, gauging from the number of scientific and popular publications that address the subject. Still, while the state admits to differences among the Hanzu, political considerations determine how this “regional diversity” is represented in the literature. I refer to this form of narration as the “secondary cultural differentiation” paradigm (Joniak-Lüthi 2009).

This paradigm identifies the territory of China, including the Hanzu who are imagined as anchored in it, as divided into “place-bound cultures” much the same as my informants did. The core of the paradigm lies in four interrelated assumptions, assumptions that are present in many Chinese-language publications and that underpin this permissible discourse of Han diversity. The first assumption is that the non-minzu identities of the Hanzu are local and have a minor to nonexistent political significance. The second assumption is that “regional cultures” are secondary in the sense that they all originated from a “common source” (tongyuan) in northern China. Alternatively, they have distinct regional origins but have blended with and been powerfully influenced by the northern “culture of the Central Plains.” In this process of evolutionary melting and historical progression, it is argued that cultural “diversity” has merged into a “unity.” In the first variation, regional identities are secondary in relation to the core “essence” (zhi) that is Han and believed to be inherited from earlier peoples of Xia, Shang, and Zhou (Weng 2001). In the second variation, regional, ecologically determined differences blend into the Chinese “snowball,” which they enrich as they melt with the “core” (Fei 1989; Xu 1999). The third assumption is that “regional cul-
tures” each have unique characteristics that distinguish them from one another. These unique qualities, however, do not challenge the regional cultures’ broader shared “essence,” which is Han/Chinese (see, e.g., Xiong 1996, 100–104; and Zhang 2000). The fourth assumption is that, unlike the ancient “culture of the Central Plains”—which is narrated as the trunk line in the development of the Chinese nation and state—the ancient “regional cultures” are considered minor contributors to this predominant line of national unfolding. Significantly, regional histories are not used to weave distinct national narratives of regional cultures or to advance federalist ideas (compare Liu 2002, 2–13).

Although these four assumptions are popular, the parallel revalorization of southern cultures—like that of Chu (state of Chu, eleventh to third century BCE)—as important components of the Chinese national narration does occur. Among the Southern Han, the notion that the South developed culturally independent of the North, even in racial terms, is also gaining popularity (Friedman 1994). For instance, it is questioned whether the culture of Chu indeed had northern origins, as long represented in the Chinese historiography. Instead, Chu is increasingly regarded as an indigenous culture of the South, one that perhaps even influenced the North (Friedman 1994; Gladney 1995). There is also significant resistance to prioritizing the North in the framing of Han/Chinese origins and in the Chinese national narration, for instance among Sichuan People proud of the ancient Shu culture. Moreover, Cantonese and Hakka ridicule the Northerners, considering them barbarized Han tainted by Mongol and Manchu influences, unlike themselves—Southerners who retained Han-ness/Chinese-ness in its “pure” form.

Nevertheless, my research results demonstrate that the North, and in particular the basin of the Yellow River, is still popularly understood as the geographical source of Han culture. A great majority of my informants located this source in the Yellow River basin, in the Central Plains, or in the North more generally. This occurred even though informants who called themselves Southerners were actually a majority among my research participants. At the same time, however, every fifth informant also posited that the basin of the Yangzi River and southern China in general are the “source of Han culture.” Some said that as the Yellow River basin is the place of origin of the Northern Han, so is the Yangzi River basin the place of origin of the Southern Han. Still, no matter how
revalorized, southern and other “regional cultures” are not imagined in ways that would challenge the notion of them all being Han. The geographically dispersed origins of “the Hanzu” also do not challenge the paradigm of evolutionarily developed national coherence and national unity, which developed out of the diversity that had once existed but long since been bridged (compare Fei 1989). Hence, although the national narration has evolved from a focus on the North to also include influences of southern “regional cultures,” the framework within which this diversity is discussed remains unchallenged and backwardly determined by the current political imperative, that is, the need to strengthen both the idea of a unitary Han minzu and a unitary, peacefully developed Chinese nation.

“Regional cultures” are imagined as stable, objectively definable units with distinct, ecologically determined characteristics. Despite this “secondary diversity,” these cultures reportedly share a certain homogeneity that highlights either their cultural consanguinity or, in the other narrative, the successful blending with the core of the “snowball.” As an extremely elaborate example of this narrative, Xu Jieshun (1999) argues that the Han minzu is a conglomerate of many minzu (Hanzu and “minority” minzu) that became assimilated by “the Han” in the course of history (compare also Xiong 1996; and Huang 1998). In his discussion of “the culture of the Guangdong Hanzu,” Huang Shuping (1998, 386) offers another example of an attempt to reconcile regional fragmentation with the political imperative of cultural and historical continuity of the unitary Han minzu. Guangdong Hanzu, he posits, are divided into three main branches (minxi): Guangfu (People of Guangzhou Prefecture), Chao-Shan (People from Chaozhou and Shantou), and Hakka. Cultures of Guangfu, Chao-Shan, and Hakka, Huang suggests, “all originate in Han culture; [at the same time], each of them has also local characteristics [difang tedian]” (Huang 1998, 386). The Han culture, he argues, was introduced in the South by migrants from the North carrying with them “excellent technologies of production,” “advanced material culture,” “brilliant culture of the Central Plains” (canlan de Zhongyuan wenhua), and “lineage organization” (Huang 1998, 388–91).

These attempts to discuss the history of “the Han” revolve around an inherent tension. One side of this tension is created by sensed attachments to home place and the perceived importance of “regional cultures” in everyday identity performances. The other side of this tension is created by
the assumed necessity of streamlining the histories of “regional cultures” and independent kingdoms that existed within the territory occupied by China today to construct a unitary national narrative and a progressive national history. This tension is negotiated in daily lives by both academics and nonacademic Hanzu like my research participants.

The zealous, nationalist search for historicity is integral to the Chinese-language literature on “regional cultures.” However, while historicity with regard to regional cultures is claimed, it is largely done without questioning or challenging the three other assumptions of the “secondary cultural differentiation” paradigm. Constructing the historical narratives of regional cultures in this way is similar to how “minority” histories are constructed in China: these are namely featured as long established but also as an integral part of China’s national history from its earlier stages onward (Xu 1999, 44; Weng 2001, 4). Just as “minority cultures” are narrated as having contributed to the splendor of the Chinese nation, so “regional cultures” are framed as contributing to the splendor of the Han minzu.

The “secondary cultural differentiation” paradigm frames much of what has been written about social, and arguably also ethnic, differentiation among the Hanzu. That the majority of my research participants admitted and even celebrated cultural diversity is as much a manifestation of this narrative as is the parallel claim (by the very same majority) that the Han minzu is a proper vessel for accommodating this fragmentation. As long as the politicized Han minzu category remains unchallenged, multifarious cultural, linguistic, or even racial differentiations, categorizations, and forms of discrimination and competition are visible, admitted, and extensively discussed. As soon as minzu enters the conversation, the optics of fragmentation is replaced by primordial references to the Han “essence” and narratives of common history, ancestors, and political centrality. This suggests that political awareness of the critical role of the Hanzu in the making of China and the Chinese nation is a well-established dimension in individual topographies of identity.

**Terminological Deliberations**

How to grasp in analytical terms the multitude of non-minzu identity categories that remain in competition with one another and simultane-
ously exist alongside the common Hanzu identity was a central question that informed this study. There exist many different analytical approaches to this issue. In Chinese-language publications, the predominantly place-based fragmentation of the Hanzu is framed in terms of distinct “communities of Han People” (Hanren shequ), “subgroups of Hanzu” (Hanzu cisheng jituan or Hanzu yaqunti), “human groups” (renqun), and “groups” (qunti) or “branches within the minzu” (minxi). Also, the term lineage group or ethnic group (zuqun) is sometimes used. In Western scholarship, Shanghai People, Sichuan People, Hakka, Hokkien, Cantonese, Chaozhou, and other non-minzu identity categories are sometimes discussed as subethnic distinctions, divisions, and groups, implying that the Han minzu identity is the ethnic one. Countering this approach, other scholars argue that conceiving of these categories in sub-ethnic terms is unwarranted and misleading, as they are ethnic in their own right (Crossley 1990b, 15; Brown 2004, 7). Much in the same way, it is argued that the southern Hakka, Hokkien, Swatow, Cantonese, and Boat People are each an exclusive ethnic identity (Blake 1981; Gladney 1998, 70; Skinner 2001). The argument that “conventional definitions of ethnicity cannot contain the variables—dialect, native place, economic status, immigration history, among others—that divide and unite groups of people in China” (Lipman 1996, 97–98) succinctly summarizes these approaches.

This ethnic framework turned out to be difficult to meaningfully apply in the early stages of my analysis. Though differences between the minzu and non-minzu identities of the Hanzu are apparent in my research material, the ethnic approach subsumes them all as ethnic. Other scholars suggest that minzu are too different from ethnic groups to be analyzed with the concept of ethnicity. Putting aside the term ethnic group to explore locally used identity labels became the first step to address this tension and establish a more differentiated understanding of these attachments. Only after that can the concept of ethnicity be reintroduced and its usefulness probed to grasp the quality of the relationships that bind these fragmented identity categories to one another and to the Han minzu.

Minzu, Ren, Min, and Jia

In this study, I have so far refrained from employing the term ethnic group when discussing the identity categories identified in the research
material, the relationships they create, and their intertwinnings, because the term would reify and conceal data in troubling ways. *Ethnic group*, “a term brought in from western sociological discourse, is a poor translation of indigenous categories . . . and hinders the analysis of their subtleties and ambiguities” (Tapper 1988, 31). From my research material, especially the hundreds of socionyms collected, and the secondary literature, four Chinese-language terms for the collective identities assumed and performed by Han individuals emerged: *minzu*, translated as “nationality,” “ethnic group,” or “nation”—but also comprising the meaning of racial lineage (*zu*) inscribed in it at the turn of the twentieth century—and *ren*, *min*, and *jia*, all of which can be generally translated as “person” or “people.”

Although more than four hundred groups applied for recognition as *minzu* in the 1950s, only fifty-six (some of them combinations of several ethnic groups) were officially recognized by the state following the Minzu Classification Project. These groups were officially designated as *minzu*, “nationalities” in the terminology of the 1950s and 1960s. Because of this, *minzu* are often considered stiff categories, conceived of and imposed by the state onto a fluid ethnic reality. “What ultimately makes a group a *minzu* is that the government, more precisely the *Minzu Commission* . . . says it is one” (Harrell 1989, 181). While this is true in regard to ethnic groups with limited access to power, the Han *minzu*, representing a powerful majority, appears to require a different conceptual approach. The question thus becomes, who were the actors who narrated the fragmented Han/Chinese into a *minzu*? It is particularly crucial to emphasize that “formations which appear as ethnic groups, as cultures, or as nations . . . should be interpreted as the products of history, therefore as resulting from concrete acts that are motivated by people’s interests. Such formations are constructions naturalized by social actors in the interest of their own social standing” (Wicker 1997, 1).

Han-ness is not a modern invention, even though the usage and reference group of the Han identifier has historically been unstable (Elliott 2012). In a complex interplay of local and empirewide processes, those who identified with Han-ness constructed and maintained boundaries between themselves and “uncultured others” by, among other things, cultivating specific rituals or emphasizing the importance of Han family names and genealogies. Alongside transformations in the political
arena at the turn of the twentieth century, political and intellectual Han/Chinese elites dramatically redefined the role and meaning of Han-ness in an effort to reimagine the Han as a national community with common ancestors and a linear national history. This national imagery was later adopted by Han Communists, who additionally glorified the Han/Chinese as leaders of the proletarian revolution. Parallel to this development, individuals who thought of themselves as Han/Chinese narrated Han-ness and reproduced the meaning of minzu belonging in terms that were understandable and meaningful in their daily social interactions and identity negotiations. Hence, Han minzu is not a category produced by distant state institutions. Rather, it is a collective actor that has emerged from a complex interplay of local and statewide processes. These processes were initiated by Han/Chinese revolutionaries who tried to generate a national majority that would act as the core of the Chinese nation and fulfill the role of the Stalinist “unifier of nationalities.” The Han minzu (as synonymous with the Chinese nation but also as one of the fifty-six “nationalities”) thus emerged from processes that were driven by those who identified themselves as Han/Chinese in pursuit of localized but also large-scale political agendas.

When it comes to other identity categories, three popular Chinese-language terms can be identified from my research material and from secondary literature. These are ren, min, and jia, all of which can be translated as “people” or “person” but each of which also has its own distinct connotations. Most of the identifiers collected in my research comprised the term ren, which additionally indicates “person from,” referencing the home-place identity. The locality aspect of the term is clear, as in identifiers such as Beijing People (Beijingren) and Sichuanese (Sichuanren). The spatial aspect is also manifest in some identifiers related to rurality and urbanity, such as Xiangxiaren (Ruralites, or People from the Countryside) or Nongren (Peasants), the latter common in Taiwan and formerly in mainland China. The spatial aspect is also indicated in identifiers such as Pingdiren (Flatland People) and Shandiren (Mountain People), which are locally used as substitutes for Han and non-Han, respectively.

While ren is indisputably the most common term, some of the non-minzu identity categories are referred to as jia, for instance in the socionym Kejia. The term jia can be translated as “people” but it also can mean a “family,” “household,” “members of one family name group,” or
a “family engaged in a certain occupation,” which implies a stronger kinship relationship. The third term, *min*, which is present in the secondary literature in terms like Boat People (Danmin) or Fallen People (Duomin), translates as “people” or indicates a person of a certain occupation or a civilian. The term emphasizes occupational identity. Now classified as Hanzu, Fallen People of Zhejiang and Boat People of Guangdong once belonged to the category of the demeaned people, who engaged in occupations of low social status that were often hereditary (see Eberhard 1962).

Thus, in addition to their common meaning as “people,” *ren*, *jia*, and *min* each has other connotations. *Ren* is spatial and refers to home-place identity; *jia* is kinship related, connoting a household or a family; and *min* refers broadly to occupation and civilian status. These terms and their associations are critical in understanding the historical background of non-*minzu* identities of the Hanzu and the paradigms in which they were constructed. The terms confirm that home place, occupational specialization, kinship, and family bonds were important identity coordinates in premodern China. As they are used today, these identity labels connote multiple memberships and nonexclusivity. It is possible for one person to simultaneously be, for instance, a Kejia, a Fujian Person, and a Hanzu. Understanding the connotations and intertwined nature of these identities is crucial to the following discussion of ethnicity.

That most, though not all, of my research participants did not object to home place–, occupation–, and kinship-based identity categories being lumped together under one Han *minzu* suggests that Han-ness has been established as a meaningful, overarching identity. It thus seems legitimate to venture that only very few people classified as Hanzu today would insist on being recognized as members of the distinct Hakka *minzu*, Shanghai *minzu*, or Cantonese *minzu*. It seems unlikely that any of my informants would voluntarily give up Hanzu membership entirely to become exclusively Cantonese, exclusively Hakka, or exclusively Shanghainese, despite the importance they may attach to these identities. As “the core of the nation,” the Han *minzu* is ascribed extreme political and social relevance, as well as historical and cultural greatness. Accordingly, membership in this category offers access to symbolic resources that most individuals seem unwilling to give up. This was clearly evidenced during the interviews when I challenged the sense of the Han *minzu* classification or referred to non-Han *minzu*; the majority of the research participants
promptly abandoned their discussion of intra-Han fragmentation and boundaries and turned instead to reiterating “the Han” as a powerful national majority and the big brother of other “nationalities.”

Is This Ethnicity?

The focus on local categories of identity such as minzu, ren, min, and jia has been essential in the early stages of my analysis. At the same time, it is equally important to go beyond the local specificity of the Chinese context and consider more universal queries, namely: Are both minzu and non-minzu identities, like those that relate to home place or kinship, ethnic? Are the relationships they form relationships of ethnicity? What are the limits to the concept of ethnicity?

Ethnicity is most often referred to as an ongoing process of identification between two collective actors, “us” and “them” (with possible multiple “thems”). As Sandra Wallman (1979, 3) argues, “Ethnicity is the process by which ‘their’ difference is used to enhance the sense of ‘us’ for purposes of organization or identification”; hence ethnicity can only exist at the boundary of “us” as it is in contact or is contrasted with “them” (Barth 1996; see also Jenkins 1997, 53). While the interactive relationship between “us” and “them” is certainly critical to ethnicity, the state is a third crucial component in processes of ethnicity (Barth 1994, 19–20; Harrell 1996b; Gladney 1998). Ethnic identity arises namely “in a three-way interplay between a group that considers itself distinctive, neighboring groups from which the group distinguishes itself, and the state, which establishes categories . . . and distributes benefits” (Harrell 1996b, 274). Accordingly, local processes of boundary making can only be understood in light of the workings of the state and the global-scale developments with which they remain in a relationship of mutual dependence (Cole and Wolf 1999). Ethnicity thus lives in the “us”/“them” paradigm but is also entangled in the politics of the state and in local-global interfaces.

Students of ethnicity further draw attention to the imaginative component of ethnicity and to the agency of those who do the imagining. Although “all communities are imagined,” the ways in which they are imagined differ (Anderson 1983, 15). Ethnicity is one form of imagining. Hence, whereas processes of identification and categorization are universal, they are not always ethnic (see Martiniello 1995; Brubaker 2004).
What is it, then, that makes ethnicity different from other social categorizations? Unlike many forms of social organization, ethnicity is not always voluntary. Nor is it necessarily instrumental. Moreover, ethnicity, particularly in times of confrontation, tends to employ essentialist discourses of shared culture, shared blood, common origin, and common history (Roosens 1989; Jenkins 1997; Eriksen 2002). The belief in common descent, history, and shared culture as well as the sense of shared destiny are essential to ethnicity. Ethnicity builds on continuity in time, both imagined and actual. Reliance on ideologies of common ancestry, history, and culture, all of which project the present onto the past, constitutes the core strategy of ethnic boundary making and maintenance (Barth 1996). Ethnicity can manifest in various ways but typically combines culture (the so-called ethnic markers that make “us” similar to one another but different from “them”), kinship (imagined and actual), and history (the invented continuity within “us” and a history of conflict with “them”) (Harrell 2001). When not in situations of confrontation and conflict, ethnicity seems quite flexible; it does not need to be framed in essentialist terms and can be practiced as a nontotal, nonexclusive, instrumental, and situational paradigm. This flexibility is however restricted by the relational quality of ethnicity, which necessitates recognition of the identity switches and negotiations performed not only by other “us” but also by “them.” Nevertheless, until the moment of confrontation such as an “ethnic” conflict beyond which switches in ethnic identity are made more difficult by exclusivist and essentialist narratives, distinguishing between social and ethnic identities in daily practice is a difficult task.

Still, the underlying premise here is that it makes sense to draw boundaries around the concept of ethnicity. If we label every form of categorization processes “ethnic,” the concept will quickly lose its meaning and relevance. To keep it useful, ethnic, national, and other social categorizations should be kept analytically distinct to the extent permitted by a fluid, changing reality. This will allow for an understanding of each categorization process in its own right, for a thorough recognition of its specificities and a discussion of its effects. To meaningfully apply the concept of ethnicity to my research material, the minzu and non-minzu identities that mattered to my informants are below contrasted in terms of four criteria: exclusivity, flexibility, the scales at which identities matter, and their place in the regulatory workings of the Chinese state.
Minzu and ren, min and jia identities have much in common. They are all imagined, if not always practiced, as primordial and given identities relating to descent, inborn qualities, origins, and shared history. As such, they can each be classified as ethnic. Even rurality as constructed in opposition to urbanity, and nativity as constructed in opposition to outsideness, can be argued to be ethnic, as they are based in discourses of descent, shared inborn predispositions, and shared destiny. At the same time, these identities, as well as ren, min and jia identities, differ in important ways from how Han minzu identity is imagined and practiced. I suggest here that the concepts of scales, density, degree of ethnicity, and transitory ethnicity are helpful in grasping these differences.

Exclusivity
The first difference between the minzu, home place–based, and other non-minzu modes of distinction my informants referenced is related to the concept of exclusivity. As I have demonstrated above, the different connotations of ren, jia, and min identities allow, and indeed almost necessitate, membership in multiple identity groups. As they are conceptualized and used, these categories are thus nonexclusive. Hence, the home-place identity and other collective non-minzu identities as they are practiced by my research participants are much more mutually inclusive and overlapping than minzu.

The relationship between the ren, min, and jia identities and Han-ness has undergone significant changes since the late nineteenth century, particularly as the mobilizing power of home-place, kinship, and occupational identities has been challenged by the increasingly powerful notion of minzu. Throughout the twentieth century, China’s central governments—assisted by scientists, as in the Minzu Classification Project—invested great effort into narrating the ren, min, and jia identities as secondary to Han-ness. Likely because of this, the overwhelming majority of my research participants perceived the boundaries between the Han minzu and other minzu as obvious, clear-cut, and impassable, a markedly different understanding than that pertaining to the non-minzu modes of differentiation through which they moved more fluidly. Hence, in terms of exclusivity, or in terms of the mode in which minzu and non-minzu identities are narrated and practiced, these attachments are quite distinct. Obviously, the fact that the interviews were conducted
in Han-dominated cities significantly shapes this observation. In multi-ethnic areas, other paradigms of identification may be practiced as more exclusive than minzu. In Zuosuo, for example, minzu identities co-exist with ethnic identities from the pre-Communist period that are no less important in regulating mundane interactions. Though classified as one minzu, some ethnic groups still today do not intermarry (e.g., Prmi and Bo, both of which are classified as Tibetans). At the same time, others that are classified as two different minzu do intermarry (e.g., Prmi classified as Tibetan and Na classified as Mongol). In southern China, where long-standing distinctions between different ren, min, and jia categories exist, minzu boundaries are not necessarily narrated in the most exclusive terms or practiced as the least negotiable. In eastern Chinese cities, however, and also for instance in Xinjiang, this seems to be the case.

Flexibility

The second point of difference refers to flexibility, a notion closely linked to exclusivity. My research material demonstrates that there is a great deal of individual agency involved in the negotiation of home-place and other non-minzu identities. These identities are much easier to assume and easier to switch between than the minzu identities. Because they are not state regulated, shifts between these identity categories are widespread and individual agency in negotiating these ascriptions is more explicit. While my research data show multiple ren identity switches and negotiations, minzu tend to be discussed and practiced as flexible and negotiable to a significantly lesser degree. With one exception, none of my research participants in Shanghai, Beijing, Zuosuo, and Xinjiang practiced situational minzu switches as they did, for instance, in regard to home-place identities.

The Han-dominated state agencies of the twentieth century have clearly enhanced an understanding of Han-ness as a stable identity, one not subject to negotiation but to maintenance. In relational terms, the home-place, rural/urban, local/outsider, and other ren and jia identities of my Hanzu informants were much more negotiable, flexible, and dependent on the individual than the minzu identity.\(^{13}\) For example, although most research participants emphasized that home place was crucial to how they identified themselves and other Han, what they actually defined as home place was extremely situational. Moreover, Han individuals shifted between multiple
such individually negotiated home-place attachments. For instance, if a person from rural Sichuan has lived for some years in Xi’an, she may refer to herself as a Xi’an Person and an Urbanite when confronted with more recent migrants. When confronted with Han from her birthplace, Han with whom she wishes to establish a friendly relationship, she is likely to “return” to her birthplace identity and call herself a Sichuan Person. On yet other occasions, she may try to ascribe to herself ren identities located higher on the social hierarchy, such as Beijing Person.

Although Han-ness and other minzu identities are also instrumentalized and negotiated in terms that make sense in local, individualized contexts, the same sort of flexibility can hardly occur at the scale of minzu categorization. Unlike ren, min, and jia categories, minzu are imagined and to a great extent also lived by Han individuals as stable, given, and mutually exclusive categories of identity. This representation of minzu identities is obviously enforced by a powerful state apparatus, which contributes significantly to the prevalence of such imagery.

Scales and the State
Scales of interaction and the role of state policies in regulating the categorizations is a third crucial point of consideration. As I have observed in non-Han-dominated areas, particularly in Xinjiang, divisions between Rural and Urban Han, Shanghai People, Henan People or Cantonese, and Northern and Southern Han are quickly downgraded when Han are exposed to a minzu “other.” Otherwise fragmented by numerous boundaries, Hanzu on such occasions tend to promptly disregard this fragmentation and identify with their Han-ness. When a Sichuan Person comes across a Uyghur in Xinjiang, she tends to de-emphasize her Sichuan home-place identity. Rather, she typically highlights being Han. This is because the Han minzu and the Uyghur minzu exist in Xinjiang in a mutually reifying relationship that has a clear ethnic quality as discussed above. While important in other situations, the home place-, occupation-, and kinship-related fragmentation of the Han has little bearing on this relationship and has a limited power to negotiate minzu boundaries. These identities relate to and exist at different scales of interaction. With regard to the Han, the scale of minzu-to-minzu interactions appears more ethnic than the scale of home place, North, South, urban, native, and other categorizations.
In order to fulfill its purpose, ethnic identity must be performed in relation to one or more “thems” or “others.” The Han minzu has obvious “others,” namely China’s fifty-five “minorities.” In contrast, the ren, min, and jia identities assumed by Hanzu do not have clear “others”; rather, they coexist in a relational system of identification with some and against others. As an example, many informants posited that Northerners were distinct from Southerners but that Shandong People were similar to Northeasterners, or that Zhejiang People and Shanghainese were very much alike. These “alliances” and their “others” shift based on selected and situationally specific criteria. Thus, while clearly constructed vis-à-vis one another in one process of othering, Northern and Southern Han jointly form a category of Mainlanders when contrasted with Taiwanese Islanders in another form of othering. Further, the identity categories regarded as similar to “us” change depending on whether one is utilizing the criterion of language, “cultural quality,” “rurality,” or, for example, “mentality” for categorization. The processes of othering at the non-minzu scale of distinction are extremely fragmented and fluid. The aim of these differentiations and distinctions is not so much to draw excluding boundaries between a specific “us” in relation to specific “them.” Rather, the goal involves locating and positioning oneself in a relational system formed by multiple “us” and multiple “them” that fluctuate in relationships of othering depending on selected reference points.

To summarize, then, when compared with minzu, the home-place, occupational, and kinship identities of the Hanzu do not possess a similar degree of “density” and exclusivity. Moreover, they rarely travel across different scales of interaction. For example, would the boundary between Uyghur and Han become insignificant if they met outside of China? Would the international scale of this encounter render Han-ness and Uyghur-ness insignificant? From my observations, it would not, even if situationally and in individualized contexts the boundary is renegotiated and does become less salient. Still, the national Chinese identity does not have the power to render boundaries between the Han and Uyghur minzu irrelevant. Likely driven by similar observations, calls for increasing the importance of the Chinese identity and decreasing the role of divisive minzu identities have been formulated by some Chinese scholars concerned about the integrity of the Chinese nation and state (Ma 2014). Arguably, the Uyghur and Tibetans are the most politicized and most
othered non-Han *minzu* in China. These identities are further strengthened by their involvement in international and transnational politics. It is possible that some *minzu* boundaries may disappear in Chinese-ness at the changing of scales. More focused studies of such relationships would need to be conducted to provide insights into why, how, and when some *minzu* boundaries become invisible with changing scales and why, how, and when other *minzu* boundaries travel globally.

In the case of the Han/Uyghur *minzu* othering discussed here, the international scale of interaction that would favor mobilization of the Chinese identity does not have the power to make Han and Uyghur *minzu* identities insignificant in social interactions. The same cannot be said *in a similar degree* about the home-place, rural/urban, local/outsider identities when these “meet” outside of China. Although differences in language, occupation, or home place may be registered, their influence on social practice is *in relative terms* less significant than *minzu* identities today, more than a hundred years since the launching of the nation-making project by Sun Yat-sen and fellow revolutionaries.

Before the modern period when Han-ness became institutionalized, home-place identities did have determining influence on mundane interactions among Han/Chinese who settled abroad. The role of the state, the third actor in processes of ethnicity, is explicitly manifest in how this relationship changed over time. Because home-place, kinship, and occupational identities are not systematically promoted as collective identities by the state, they are not capable of achieving the same degree of “density” as the institutionalized *minzu*; they thus do not travel across different scales in the same way, or at all. In China, where the government presence is so pervasive, the state component in processes of ethnicity should be given even more weight than elsewhere.

**CONCLUSION**

The notions of relationality, density, degree of ethnicity, and scales of interactions are of great importance to any discussion of ethnicity. The *minzu* and non-*minzu* identities of the Hanzu could both be potentially rendered as ethnic with regard to the notion of shared descent, history, and some of the cultural markers that many of the non-*minzu* identities comprise. Yet *minzu* and non-*minzu* identities also differ significantly.
Hence, I suggest that while Han minzu identity is more ethnic in relation to other minzu identities in China, the multiple home place-, kinship-, and occupation-related identities of the Han are less ethnic in relation to one another and to the minzu identity. They obviously overlap and they do not claim exclusivity. Their importance fades when their Han-ness is challenged or when scales of interaction change. Lacking the institutional support of the state and not being part of its biopolitical classification attempts, these identities are formulated less in either-or terms than in terms of networks and relations. Access to them is not guarded by state institutions; accordingly, switching between them is a more fluid process.

At the same time, in regions where a salient minzu “other” is not present in daily interactions, the ren, min, and jia attachments become ethnic, albeit in a transitory way. Likewise, the relationships of Urbanites and Ruralites or Locals and Strangers may become ethnic, especially in Han-dominated environments of eastern Chinese cities. In such settings, these identities are felt to be more meaningful and emotional than Han-ness; they assume the cloak of primordiality and have clear organizational functions. From my observations, however, whenever Han-ness of these identities is perceived to be challenged, their ethnicity diminishes. Accordingly, the great success of Han-making projects is manifest in the fact that most home place-, kinship-, occupation-, and language-based identities of Han/Chinese have become to a significant degree naturalized as Han.15

As my informants demonstrated, these identities are currently conceived of as parts of the same symbolic entity, the Han minzu. In this sense, these identities have since the early twentieth century become successfully “nested” in the Han minzu identity.16 Although not critically important in mundane identification processes in eastern Chinese cities, Han-ness is an overarching identity that few Hanzu permit to be questioned or deconstructed. Consequently, it is discursively essentialized and practiced as a given, primordial identity to a much greater degree than non-minzu identities. The apparatus of state-constructed myths of national unfolding in which “the Han” play a central role effectively enforces such an understanding of this identity. As a significant contrast, switches between non-minzu identities are rather fluid and to a great degree individually determined. This extent of individual agency and voluntary flexibility is not practiced with minzu identities. There, not only “us” and “them”
but also the state guards the classification. Therefore, I suggest here that home-place, occupational, and kinship identities are relatively less ethnic than minzu and more transitory in their ethnicity. The role of the state, a crucial component of ethnicity processes, cannot be overestimated in establishing and regulating this relationship.