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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Our Roots Are the Same": Hegemony and Power in Narratives of Chinese Linguistic Antiquity, 1900–1949

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a frequent claim among speakers of local Chinese languages (called *fangyan* in Chinese) is that their native languages preserve the language of antiquity better than the Beijing-based national language, Mandarin. This paper explores the origin of these claims and probes their significance in the making of the Han ethnoracial collective identity. I argue that claims of linguistic proximity to the imagined ancient origins of Chinese civilization represent a form of "hegemonic Han-ness"—an idealized form of the Han collective identity that was both internally hegemonic, in that it was meant to supersede other expressions of Han-ness, and externally hegemonic, in that it was meant to uphold the superiority of the Han people over other ethnoracial groups. From Zhang Taiyan, whose work provided a model for drawing linguistic connections between contemporary local languages and the language spoken at the dawn of Chinese civilization, to local gazetteer authors, who used linguistic data to prove their mother tongues directly had preserved the language of antiquity without being adulterated by the languages of non-Han peoples, this paper explores how various groups drew upon the cultural power of an idealized Han-centered past to challenge the authority afforded to the national language by the state.

Keywords: China; language; linguistics; critical Han studies; comparative studies of race and ethnicity; collective identity

Introduction

I am often told that Cantonese is the oldest Chinese language. In casual conversations, interlocutors tell me that Cantonese is much closer to the language of the Tang dynasty (618 CE–907 CE) than the current Chinese national language, Putonghua (Mandarin in English). Read the poems, study the rime tables, they insist, and I will see that the linguistic origin of the Chinese language came not from Beijing but from the southern coasts. As this common refrain is articulated by *South China Morning Post* editorialist Alex Lo, "Cantonese has a much longer and venerable lineage than

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Putonghua (普通话) [Mandarin].… The ancient canonical Chinese texts predated Putonghua, but not necessarily Cantonese."[1]

Cantonese is not the only local Chinese language to which such claims about linguistic antiquity are applied. Enthusiasts make similar claims about local languages across China, including those of Hubei, Fujian, and Sichuan, and this list is by no means exhaustive.[2] Today, while the exact natures of these popular arguments vary slightly, they share several attributes.[3] First, they are made by speakers of *Hanyu fangyan* (漢語方言), a term usually translated as "Chinese dialects," in which the "Chinese" refers not to the national geobody (*Zhongguo* 中國) but the Han ethnoracial identity, an identity often referred to in English as "ethnically Chinese."[4] Second, these claims are almost always comparative. Not only are these languages described as old, but they are purported to have a "more venerable" connection to antiquity than do other Chinese languages, especially the national language. Third, and most importantly, these claims never concern only the particularities of historical phonologies: To be the inheritors of the language that hews closest to the origin of a civilization is to similarly inherit a rightful claim to represent its history. It is cultural legacies, not morphemes, that peddlers of these narratives seek to reclaim.

These claims reveal a profound contradiction at the heart of the Han identity as it was reimagined within the context of Chinese nation-building. As one of the world's largest collective identities, it is deemed by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) the nation's majority *minzu* (民族), a term we normally translate as "ethnic group." With such a designation, the Han identity is presumed to have the same inherent unity as other similarly designated collectives.[5] But among those who identify as Han, there is remarkable diversity, including innumerable unique cultural practices and several distinct, mutually unintelligible, language groups.[6] Today, this contradiction is often masked by a veil of unifying rhetoric, as various actors, including the PRC state, emphasize certain characteristics as representative of Han

[1] Alex Lo, "Why Cantonese Is a Real Language in Hong Kong," *South China Morning Post*, 4 Feb. 2014.

[2] Kejia fangyan he wenzi: Zhongyuan yu Hanyu de 'huohuashi,'" *Kejiaren zazhi*, 25 July 2017; Putonghua he Guhanyu de chaju you duoda? Fayin he na zhong fangyan bijiao jiejin ne?" *Meiri Toutiao*, 23 Sept. 2017, https://kknews.cc/history/4p2xjzq.html.

[3] Many linguists today agree that southern *fangyan* better accord to reconstructions of ancient and archaic Chinese than northern *fangyan*, including Mandarin. See Dah-An Ho, "Chinese Dialects," Chaofen Sun and William S. Y. Yang, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 154; W. L. Ballard, "Aspects of the Linguistic History of South China," *Asian Perspectives* 24, 2 (1981): 163–85.

[4] While "dialect" is the most common translation for *fangyan*, many scholars find this problematic. See Victor Mair, "What Is a Chinese 'Dialect/Topolect'? Reflections on Some Key Sino-English Linguistic Terms," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 29 (Sept. 1991): 1–29. I will either use "non-Mandarin Sinitic language" or "local language," or leave *fangyan* untranslated.

[5] Both the translation of and categorization of the term "Han" are hotly debated among scholars. For explanations of these debates, see Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi, *The Han: China's Diverse Majority* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015); Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi, "The Han *Minzu*, Fragmented Identities, and Ethnicity," *Journal of Asian Studies* 72, 4 (2013): 849–71; Thomas Mullaney, "Critical Han Studies: Introduction and Prolegomenon," in Eric Vanden Bussche, Thomas Mullaney, James Leibold, and Stephane Gros, eds., *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 1–16. This paper will use the term "Han" untranslated.

[6] Gina Anne Tam, *Dialect and Nationalism in China, 1860–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

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identity—a singular linear Han history, philosophical traditions like Confucianism, or holidays like Chinese New Year.[7]

Chief among these characteristics is language. Since the early twentieth century, the Chinese national tongue has been upheld as a core attribute of the Han identity's rhetorical unity. Based on the language commonly spoken in Beijing, it was named the national language (Guoyu 國語) in the 1920s and, in the 1950s, adopted and renamed by the PRC government "the common language" (Putonghua). Deemed today the representative language of both the Chinese nation and its majority ethnoracial group, Mandarin serves as a blunt instrument of power in two ways. On one hand, it represents the superiority of Han people over other ethnic groups. It is forced upon and used to measure the relative "assimilation" and "civilization" of indigenous ethnicities like Tibetans, Uighurs, and Mongols, making it a powerful tool in their marginalization.[8] On the other hand, Mandarin is normalized as the titular "Chinese language" and given near-universal institutional support, making it a powerful mechanism in the diminishment of other non-Mandarin Sinitic languages.[9]

Certainly, efforts to enforce a standard oral Chinese language, and rhetorical pushback against those efforts that relied upon harnessing the cultural power of antiquity, pre-date modern nation-building. In the early Qing dynasty, emperors tried to force the country's educated official class to learn a standard northern-based oral language; speakers of southern *fangyan* balked, emphasizing their own languages' phonological proximity to esteemed Tang-dynasty texts to justify their opposition.[10] But in the context of the twentieth century, these claims that certain *fangyan* are more ancient than Mandarin reveal efforts to challenge the prevailing presumption that state sponsorship matters more than historic legacies in defining the Han ethnoracial identity. The popularity of these claims questioning the hegemony of the national standard raises fundamental questions: How do particular traits of Han empirical diversity become part of, representative of, or erased from the term's rhetorical unity and why? And more importantly, how do these competing expressions of hegemonic identity influence, take away from, or reinforce the relative power of the Han identity within the nation as a whole?

To answer these questions, it is helpful to look at theoretical frameworks outside of China. In particular, I take inspiration from studies on hegemony within collective identity, the best known of which is Raewyn Connell's "hegemonic masculinity." Taking aim at the presumed uniformity of the category "male," Connell highlights the coexistence of multiple masculinities, defining hegemonic masculinity as dominant expressions of masculinity that hold discursive and institutional power.[11] As Connell reminds us, hegemonic masculinity is both "internally" and "externally" hegemonic —it is hegemonic over femininity and other genders, but also over non-dominant

[7]Joniak-Lüthi, *Han*; Mullaney, "Introduction," 2–4.

[8]Jin Li and Danièle Moore, "Multilingualism, Identities and Language Hegemony: A Case Study of Five Ethnic Minority Students in China," *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education* 2, 2 (2017): 42–56; Gerald Roche, "Articulating Language Oppression: Colonialism, Coloniality and the Erasure of Tibet's Minority Languages," *Patterns of Prejudice* 53, 5 (2019): 487–514.

[9]Sheng Ding and Robert Saunders, "Talking up China: An Analysis of China's Rising Cultural Power and Global Promotion of the Chinese Language," *East Asia* 23, 2 (2006): 3–33.

[10]Hirata Shoji, *Wenhua zhidu he Hanyu shi* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2016), 247–56.

[11]R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); R. W. Connell and J. W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, 6 (2005): 829–59.

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expressions of masculinity. Since Connell coined the term, others have extended her ideas to better understand intra-group power dynamics. One application is in studies of "hegemonic whiteness," which explore the shifting, contextual, boundaries of "idealized modes of whiteness" through expressions such as foodways, popular culture, leisure, and, significant for this paper, language.[12] These studies remind us that there were and are multiple expressions of whiteness that co-exist with a presumed rhetorical unity, and in the maintenance of that rhetorical unity, certain expressions gain hegemony over others. More importantly, expressions of whiteness that gain ideal status do so because they buttress white supremacy over nonwhite groups. Internally hegemonic constructions, in other words, become internally hegemonic because they best uphold external hegemony.

These studies also underline the coexistence of competing hegemonic expressions of one identity. Take Nelson Flores's study of bilingual education in the United States.[13] Flores argues that in the wake of the Civil Rights Era, antiracist groups pushed for a deemphasis of monolingualism in formal education, a relic of white supremacist colonialism that marginalized nonwhite bilingual students. Yet the benefits of the 1968 Bilingual Education Act designed to address these inequities were largely reaped by white Americans who learned a second language rather than bilingual Latino students, who continued to experience marginalization. As a result, Flores argues, two visions of hegemonic whiteness—bilingual and monolingual—emerged. And though their coexistence reveals an intra-white power struggle, they both nonetheless furthered the same outcome: the reinforcement of external hegemonic whiteness.

There are, of course, significant differences between these examples and that of Han-ness. For one, these studies focus on identities that are universally externally hegemonic, including whiteness, masculinity, or heterosexuality. Han-ness is not. Because Han people were subjects of imperial violence in the modern period, their power was historically, and remains still, significantly more contingent, especially outside Han-majority countries. Nonetheless, these studies offer an insightful lens through which to examine the significance of battles over representation within the Han ethnoracial group. They encourage us to move beyond merely noting the existence of diversity within the Han identity and focus instead on the issues of "hierarchy and power," in Kevin Carrico's words, inherent to its modern construction.[14]

This paper draws upon these studies' hegemonic identities to probe how proximity to linguistic antiquity became a competing trait of "hegemonic Han-ness"—defined as an expression of Han-ness that is discursively idealized and hegemonic—that challenged the hegemony of the national language in the early twentieth century. It does so by tracing how speakers of non-Mandarin Sinitic languages claimed they preserved the nation's ancient history better than the state-sponsored national

[12]Matthew Hughey, "The (Dis)similarities of White Racial Identities: The Conceptual Framework of 'Hegemonic Whiteness,'" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33, 8 (2010): 1289–309; Jennifer Guglielmo, "Introduction: White Lies, Dark Truths," in Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White? How Race Is Made in America.* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1–16.

[13]Nelson Flores, "A Tale of Two Visions: Hegemonic Whiteness and Bilingual Education," *Educational Policy* 30, 1 (2016): 13–38.

[14]Kevin Carrico, "Recentering China: The Cantonese in and beyond the Han," in Eric Vanden Bussche et al., eds., *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 23–44; 24–25.

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language. I argue that these counternarrative claims had a dual effect. First, they offered a competing vision of hegemonic Han-ness, one in which connection to the imagined origins of Chinese civilization proffered a more powerful claim to representing the nation than state sponsorship. Second, because these counternarrative claims relied upon a national history that was frequently used to validate the ethnoracial superiority of the Han people, they also reinforced, and were reinforced by, external Han hegemony.

This paper explores the relationship between language and hegemonic Han-ness in two sections. I begin in the late Qing, when a faction of Chinese elites, faced with the daunting task of constructing a new nation able to withstand the threat of imperialism, sought to reclaim political and cultural power for the country's Han majority. Focusing on prominent revolutionary Zhang Taiyan, I show, first, how Zhang upheld an idealized antiquity as the source of Han ethnoracial supremacy and inspiration for an idealized Chinese nation, and second, how his research in philology laid the groundwork for later generations to center contemporary *fangyan* in the search for the origin of that antiquity. This section ends by tracing the impact of Zhang's research on continuing discussions about language and Han-ness in the face of the state-sponsored promotion of a national language. The second section examines how speakers of non-Mandarin *fangyan* directly and indirectly capitalized on Zhang Taiyan's research to claim a uniquely direct connection between their own local languages and an imagined Chinese antiquity after being marginalized by state language policy. In so doing, I show how local elites' emphasis on linguistic proximity to antiquity challenged the hegemony of the national language but also, simultaneously, reinforced the broader project of Han supremacy.

National Language and Linguistic Antiquity

The question of Han hegemony in the late-Qing dynasty (1644–1911) was complicated.[15] Han people did constitute the Qing's population majority and most of its intellectual, political, and economic elite. The Qing's imperial examination system—itself the replication of long-established Chinese institution—exalted the philosophical and historical traditions of Chinese dynasties past. Most people, if they learned to read, learned Sinitic script, which served as the common written language for most of the empire's proceedings. And yet, the Qing imperial family was not Han, but ethnically Manchu. It was the Qing rulers who had the power to dictate policy and decide whether to institutionalize Chinese cultural touchstones through education and civil service, and they could also install Manchu men in prominent government and military positions.

[15]The term "Han" was variably used to describe a people beginning in the Northern Wei (AD 386–534) but gained its contemporary connotations in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and absorbed modern ethnoracial significances in the Qing. Mark Elliott, "Hushuo 胡说: The Northern Other and the Naming of the Han Chinese," in Eric Vanden Bussche et al., eds., *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 173–90; Kai-Wing Chow, "Narrating Nation, Race, and National Culture: Imagining the Hanzu Identity in Modern China," in Kai-Wing Chow, Kevin Doak, and Poshek Fu, eds., Constructing Nationhood in Modern East Asia *(Ann Arbor*: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 48–83; James Leibold, "Searching for Han: Early Twentieth-Century Narratives of Chinese Origins and Development," in Eric Vanden Bussche et al., eds., *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 210–33.

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The problem of Han hegemony came to the forefront in the late nineteenth century, as the empire's intellectual class became convinced that Manchu leadership was steering the Qing toward collapse. The empire's defeat in multiple wars, culminating in the loss of territory, infrastructure, funds, and global power, led Chinese intellectuals to propose increasingly radical reforms. These practical proposals also supported a deeper kind of creative construction: new imaginings of what a modern Chinese nation-state, prepared to enter and survive in a world of equally sovereign nation-states, might look like. And while there were certainly debates among reformers about the role of Manchus within this newly imagined nation, few questioned that its cultural and political institutions would be culturally Chinese.[16]

There similarly seemed to be little doubt that any standardized Chinese national language would be a Sinitic language. Faced with the fact that Han people spoke multiple, mutually unintelligible languages, many reformers—looking both at earlier Qing policies that required officials to learn an official pronunciation (*guanhua* 官話) based on northern speech, as well as examples of places like Japan and France that based their national standard on the common language of their respective capitals—suggested instituting the majority language of Beijing as the national standard. Others felt that Beijing was a particularly poor linguistic representative of a nation ruled by Han people because the city was too linguistically, culturally and politically associated with the Manchus. More than that, they feared that choosing just one existing language to represent the collective whole would alienate most of the nation's Han people from the nationalizing project. Any standard language, these dissenters believed, should represent the nation's Han majority in its entirety.

A prominent advocate of this latter position was Zhang Taiyan, one of early twentieth-century China's most influential thinkers. Zhang is notoriously difficult for scholars to categorize, in part because his work was broad, multivalent, and complex. While famed as an anti-Manchu revolutionary, he was simultaneously a prolific scholar of classical Chinese history and philology, an ardent advocate for the restoration of an idealized Chinese past, and a strident critic of global imperialism and the modernity that imperialism defined.[17] But the difficulty also emanates from scholars' own overly simplistic analytical categories. Scholars of late-Qing China have a propensity to "take for granted" a series of dichotomies in our categorization of key figures—traditional or modern, revolutionary or conservative.[18] But in Zhang's work these frameworks were often more complementary than oppositional. Rather than presume that Zhang was simply a revolutionary because he advocated for the end of Qing rule, or a conservative because he advocated for the revival of a traditional past, we ought to, as Viren Murthy argues, see these dual positions as integrated parts of a

[16]Peter Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State (1885–1924)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 147–72.

[17]Shimada Kenji, Pioneer of the Chinese Revolution: Zhang Binglin and Confucianism, *Joshua Fogel trans.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Tang Zijun, *Zhang Taiyan nianpu changbian* (Taibei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1979); Kauko Laitinen, *Chinese Nationalism in the Late Qing Dynasty: Zhang Binglin as Anti-Manchu Propagandist* (London: Curzon, 1990); Wong Young-tsu, *Search for Modern Nationalism: Zhang Binglin and Revolutionary China, 1869–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Viren Murthy, *The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan: The Resistance of Consciousness* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

[18]Murthy, *Political Philosophy*, 3.

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coherent ideology: a desire to "reviv[e] the living nucleus of tradition" in the name of an alternative modernity grounded in the rejection of Western imperialism.[19]

Zhang's philosophical, political, and cultural contributions to late-Qing intellectual history are too numerous to recount here. One of his most influential ideas, though, was that the China nation was, and should be, defined by the history and culture of the Han historic race (*lishi minzu* 歷史民族).[20] His advocacy began after the Boxer Uprising (1900), when Zhang, formerly a reformer, began to call for the Qing's collapse. He reinforced this political position with a Han ethnoracial nationalism built upon virulent anti-Manchuism, emphasizing that the stark embodied differences between the ruling Manchus and the majority Han population required a revolutionary overthrow. In a 1901 essay, "On the Correct Hatred of the Manchus," Zhang called the Manchus "a different *zu* (族 ethnoracial lineage)," "mean and debased," and ignorant of "governmental affairs [as well as] agriculture and commerce."[21] As such, Zhang reasoned, they were unfit for political power. Mobilizing the logic of Social Darwinism, he warned that a nation governed by the Manchus, a less-evolved race, was in peril. Han political hegemony was the "key" to the nation's evolutionary survival."[22]

After suffering a particularly traumatic prison stay from 1903–1906, Zhang's anti-Manchu rhetoric underwent a notable shift. Whereas before 1903 he focused on how the Han people were the more evolved group, Zhang soon began criticizing the idea of historical evolution altogether.[23] Instead, he emphasized, a true revolution for the Han people would not be achieved by advocating for modernity for modernity's sake,

[19]Yamada Keiji, quoted in Murthy, *Political Philosophy*, 15; Shimada, *Pioneer of the Chinese Revolution*, 21.

[20]Joshua Fogel, "Race and Class in Chinese Historiography: Divergent Interpretations of Zhang Bing-Lin and Anti-Manchuism in the 1911 Revolution," *Modern China* 3, 3 (1977): 346–75; Onogawa Hidema, "Zhang Binglin de painan sixiang," *Dalu Zazhi* 44, 3 (1972): 155–76; Kai-Wing Chow, "Imagining Boundaries of Blood: Zhang Binglin and the Invention of the Han "Race" in Modern China," in Frank Dikötter, ed., *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 34–52; Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[21]There is much debate over how to translate Zhang's terms. Zhang usually referred to Han as a "*zu*," which scholars often claim historically translated to lineage or clan, but by the late Qing was better translated as ethnicity. Some scholars, such as Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi and Kai-Wing Chow, maintain that Zhang's emphasis on blood lineages and racial essentialism make "racial lineage" or "race-lineage" more appropriate. To make matters more complicated, Zhang sometimes used "Hanzhong" (種) instead of *Hanzu*, replacing *zu* with a character usually used to describe racial groups like yellow or white. Given that his rhetoric on non-Han indigenous groups was often essentializing, hierarchical, and embodied—characteristics scholars of race would see as constitutional of racialized rhetoric—I use "ethnoracial lineage" for Hanzu. Julia Schneider, *Nation and Ethnicity: Chinese Discourses on History, Historiography, and Nationalism (1900s–1920s)* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 198–202; Chow, "Imagining Boundaries"; Dikötter, *Discourse of Race*; Joseph Esherick, "How the Qing Became China," in Joseph Esherick, Hasan Kayalı, and Eric Van Young, eds., *Empire to Nation-State: Historical Perspectives on the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2006), 229–59; 245.

[22]Leibold, "Searching for Han," 213; Frank Dikotter, "Racial Discourse in China: Continuities and Permutations," in Frank Dikötter, ed., *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 13.

[23]As one of the organizers of the Asian Brotherhood Association, which focused on global struggles against Western imperialism, Zhang often framed his anti-Manchuism within a broader commitment to transnational anti-imperialism. Lin Shaoyang, "Zhang Taiyan 'zizhu' de lianya sixiang: *Minbao* shiqi Zhang Taiyan yu Riben zaoqi zuoyi yundong" (Zhang Taiyan's Pan-Asianism: The Context of Japanese Early Leftist

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but rather, by "restoring" the political systems and power dynamics of antiquity. And for him, that meant the restoration of the "Chinese race … Chinese states and counties … and Chinese political power" (*Zhongguo zhi zhongzu … Zhongguo zhi zhouzun … Zhongguo zhi zhengquan* 中國之種族…中國之州郡…中國之政權).[24] By stressing restoration over evolution, Zhang reconciled his imagined Han-centered nation with a broader commitment to anti-imperialism in all its forms.[25]

Zhang supported his goal of cultural restoration with a reinvented national history.[26] While Zhang was not as prolific a historian as other fellow restoration advocates, he frequently used historical narrative to advocate for the political dominance of the Han ethnoracial lineage.[27] His national history began with the mythical Yellow Emperor, the first ancestor of the Chinese people, and the civilization his descendants, the "Xia clan" (Zhongxia zhi shizu (中夏之氏族), built in the "Central Plains" (*Zhongyuan* (中原)).[28] Zhang's history continued with a sequence of achievements by historical figures who represented his idealized past, from Zhou dynasty philosophers to Ming restorationists.[29] And while Zhang hardly celebrated all descendants of the Xia clan, non-Han groups were always portrayed as fundamentally different and often as inferior. In addition to his dehumanization of Manchu people, Zhang also referred to Mongols, Tibetans, and Turkic Muslims as "less evolved" or "less than human."[30] His later writings shifted, targeting culture rather than biology as the basis for this imagined hierarchy; in some cases, he even maintained the possibility that non-Han groups might eventually be assimilated.

Movement, Pan-Asianism, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Overseas Indian Independent Movement) *Zhang Taiyan sheng ping yu xue shu* (2016): 969–1015 (Lin Shaoyang's translation).

[24]Zhang Taiyan, "Geming daode shuo," in *Zhang Taiyan quanji: di yi ban* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1982[1906]), 292. Given that the essay flatly dehumanizes Jurchens, Mongols, and Manchus, "Chinese race" meant Han, though his emphasis on ethnoracialized power served a broader thesis of anti-imperialism. See Christopher Peacock, "Intersecting Nations, Diverging Discourses: The Fraught Encounter of Chinese and Tibetan Literatures in the Modern Era" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2020), 47. The translation is the same as in Murthy, *Political Philosophy*, 83.

[25]This tone shift is used by scholars such as Kauko Laitinen and Wong Young-tsu to argue that Zhang's rhetoric was not racist but rather "misunderstood" propaganda; his true goals, they claim, were anti-imperialistic rather than racist and "political rather than genocidal." Wong Young-tsu, *Search for Modern Nationalism*, 147–48; and *Beyond Confucian China: The Rival Discourses of Kang Youwei and Zhang Binglin* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 55. Yet, as Julia Schneider posits, Zhang continued to link "different identifications of *zhongzu* to superiority and inferiority" despite his rhetorical shift after 1906. This, she writes, is "racist or racialist … in the very modern sense of racism being equaled with a discrimination of people legitimized by the assumption of humans being divided into 'separate and exclusive biological entities,' some of which are superior to others, irrespective of whether the division lines between these entities are penetrable or not" (*Nation and Ethnicity*, 202). In my view, whether practical or ideological in its impetus, or genocidal or political in its intentions, global racism is defined by essentialization and dehumanization of other groups in the pursuit of power. This definition of racism is consistent with Zhang's rhetoric, and not incompatible with his anti-imperialist project.

[26]Chow, "Imagining Boundaries," 47.

[27]Tze-ki Hon, *Revolution as Restoration: Guocui Xuebao and China's Path to Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 6; Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[28]Zhang Taiyan (Zhang Jiang), "Xin fangyan," *Guocui Xuebao* 4, 6 (1908): 47–55, 52.

[29]Schneider, *Nation and Ethnicity*, 170–208.

[30]Zhang Taiyan, "Zhonghua Minguo Jie (Explaining the Republic of China)," *Par Cassel, trans.*, Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies 8 (1997[1907]): 15–40.

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Yet these shifts did not alter Zhang's fundamental conclusion that Han people were historically and presently entitled to political and cultural hegemony. In other words, Zhang was consistent in his insistence that history proved the Han ethnoracial lineage distinct, and while he did not always imagine the boundaries between Han and non-Han peoples as impenetrable, he did always uphold that the very existence of those boundaries ought to translate into unequal access to political power.[31]

Zhang Taiyan's rhetorical shift from evolution to restoration coincided with his earnest pursuit of philological research. Innovatively combining the methods of philologists from the High Qing with those of scholars in Meiji Japan and Europe, Zhang penned a series of studies focused upon uncovering the origin of Sinitic languages and script and tracing their evolution.[32] One of his most extensive works on this subject was *New Fangyan* (新方言*Xin Fangyan*), named in reference to the first century BC compendium of regional phrases, *Fangyan* (方言) by Yang Xiong.[33] This work, first published as a collection of articles between 1907–1908, traced the etymology of several hundred contemporary regional phrases back to the Han dynasty, in particular to the third-century BCE dictionary *Erya* (爾雅), Xu Shen's second-century dictionary of characters, *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字), and the aforementioned *Fangyan.* Put simply, Zhang's primary goal was to recover the phonological and semantic connections between contemporary phrases and characters from antiquity, using this to both uncover the origins of modern expressions and their evolution through history.

Zhang's methodologies were not new; he drew heavily on the work of High Qing philologists.[34] Scholars like Dai Zhen, Duan Yucai, and Qian Daxin, men who dedicated their lives to understanding the true meanings of the texts they took as philosophical and moral authorities, predicated their study of the classics on the presumption that understanding the Sinitic script used to write those texts required knowledge of the historic languages upon which that script was based.[35] As such, they held that a reconstruction of the dialectical process by which both a character's phonology and its meaning evolved and "stretched" over time could uncover each

[31]Peacock, "Intersecting Nations," 31–35.

[32]Zhang took inspiration from Fredrich Max Müller, who argued that the human tendency to describe the unknown through metaphor resulted in a "disease of language." According to Lin Shaoyang, Zhang viewed the evolution of Chinese written language similarly, in which a "crisis of representation" emerged as characters stretched beyond their original meaning. See Lin Shaoyang, "Xixue xiangyu zhong de Zhang Taiyan 'yinshen' gainian xinjie: yu qi 'wen' lun, yuyan sixiang de guanxi," *Hangzhou shifan daxue xuebao* 2 (Mar. 2020): 60–78. See also Kobayashi Takeshi, *Zhang Taiyan yu Mingzhi sichao* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2018).

[33]Zhang Taiyan (Zhang Jiang), "Xin fangyan zixu" *Guocui Xuebao* 3, 9 (1907) 58–69; 58. The entirety of Xin Fangyan, including its afterwords and addendums, can also be read in Zhang Taiyan, *Zhang Taiyan quanji*, vol. 4 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2018), 1–129.

[34]Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 89–110; Ori Sela, *China's Philological Turn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). Qian Daxin in particular stressed how *fangyan* could help scholars trace oral language change. Wolfgang Behr, "Language Change in Premodern China: Notes on Its Perception and Impact on the Idea of a 'Constant Way,'" in Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, Achim Mittag, and Jörn Rüsen, eds., *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism, and Ideology: Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 28.

[35]Not all scholars agree that mid-Qing scholarship constituted diachronic linguistic study. See Behr, "Language Change"; and Benjamin Elman's review, *T'oung Pao* 96 (2010): 232–34.

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character's "original meaning" (本義) and unlock the texts' true substance. This contention, Zhang explained in his introduction, inspired his own methodology.[36] At the same time, he connected his work to his own political convictions in a way that was specifically modern. In his introduction, Zhang criticized his intellectual predecessors for ignoring the value of contemporary *fangyan*, which he believed acted as "fossils," in the words of Lin Shaoyang, that preserved key information about the "origin of language" and the Chinese ancient civilization that he saw as a model for his restorative politics.[37] As he explained in a later work, "The spirit (性) of the *Zhongxia* are preserved in their [spoken] languages," a quote that shows how his philological research had clear implications for his modern nationalism.[38]

Zhang's work emphasized the evolution of the "phonology of antiquity" (*guyin* 古音) into present-day *fangyan*.[39] Yet he did not view all *fangyan* as equal descendants. For Zhang, the *fangyan* that had strongest connection to earlier periods of Chinese history were spoken in the south.[40] In a 1904 addendum to his *Book of Urgency*, Zhang laid out why, in his words, "only the southern pronunciation(s) evolved perfectly."[41] In the centuries between the reign of the Yellow Emperor and the Zhou dynasty (1046 BC–221 BC), Zhang wrote, the heart of the Xia clan moved from the Central Plains to the southern state of Chu, near present-day Hubei and Hunan.[42] As he explained, "The language from the Spring and Autumn period stretched from the Song dynasty (960–1279) until today. But its roots remained in the state of Chu."[43] As for those populations who remained in the north, their languages had "broken" with the language of antiquity by mixing with the non-Han polities of the borderlands.[44] By focusing on linguistic mixing with non-Han groups, Zhang implicitly connected his diachronic study of language to his beliefs about Han superiority, a connection that an afterword to *New Fangyan* written by

[36]Zhang, "Xin fangyan zixu," 58.

[37]Zhang, "Xin fangyan zixu," 58–59; Lin Shaoyang, *Dingge yiwen: Qingji geming yu Zhang Taiyan fugu de xinwenhua yundong (Revolution by Means of Culture: The Late Qing Revolution and Zhang Taiyan from 1900 to 1911)* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2018), 122; Elisabeth Kaske, *Politics of Language in Chinese Education, 1895–1919* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 362–66.

[38]Zhang Taiyan. "Guoyuxue caochuang xu" (Introduction to the creation of national language studies) *Repr. in* Guogu 3 (1919): 11–12.

[39]Zhang, "Xin Fangyan zixu," 59.

[40]Wang Rui, *Ziguo Zixin—Zhang Taiyan yu Zhongguo chuantong sixiang de gengsheng* (Shanghai: Shangwu chubanshe, 2019). Zhang was not the first to argue this; for centuries, southern scholars emphasized that their mother tongues best preserved the oral language of past dynasties. According to Hirata Shoji, these arguments are rooted in the imperial examination system, as success on the exam required detailed knowledge of Tang-dynasty rime tables, which, generally speaking, better accorded to oral languages spoken in the south. The use of these same rime tables from the Song to the Qing reinforced the belief that their phonological categories—and the southern *fangyan* that consistently matched them—as having scholarly value. Hirata Shoji, *Wenhua zhidu*, 254.

[41]Zhang Taiyan, "Qiushu: Chongding ben—fangyan" (Book of urgency: revised edition—*fangyan*) in *Qiushu: Chukeben, Chongdingben* (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2012), 176.

[42]Kaske, *Politics of Language*, 357–58; Sun Fenghua, *Zhang Taiyan, Lian Huang minzu wenhua sixiang zhi bijiao* (Jiuzhou Press, 2013), 127–30; Schneider, *Nation and Ethnicity*, 169–70; Lin, *Dingge,* 128; Kauru Yoshida, "Zhang Taiyan yu 'Xia yin,'" *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 1 (2018): 167–77, 171–73.

[43]Zhang, "Qiushu," 173–74.

[44]Ibid., 176; Zhang Taiyan, "Chongkan <Guyun biao zhun> xu" (Introduction to the revised edition of the <standard of ancient phonology>). *Taiyan wenlu chubian* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2014 [1915]), 209.

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Liu Shipei made explicit: "As the Hu, Jie, Di, and Qiang moved to live in Zhongxia, there were foreign sounds [in our language]. Then after the chaos of the Mongol [invasion] and Jianzhou [the Manchu invasion of 1408], our customs were replaced … if we want to expel foreign language from our Xia sounds, this book must be our forerunner."[45] Liu's afterword directly tied Zhang's philological work to his broader ideas about history and politics, helping to provide a basis for an intra-Han hierarchy that hinged on proximity to an imagined antiquity.

The intra-Han hierarchy Zhang implied was not significant only in the abstract—it also had concrete applications. While he was writing *New Fangyan*, other reformers had begun earnest discussions about Chinese language and script reform. Zhang played a prominent role in these debates, often pushing back against proposals that, in his mind, were antithetical to the kind of Chinese society he sought to restore. He saved his most ardent vitriol for script reform.[46] Blasting increasingly popular proposals among some Chinese reformers to replace China's script with a Romanized system, Zhang claimed that the nation's rich history was evidenced in Chinese characters.[47] He railed, "Malaysians to the south and the Mongols to the north had phonetic scripts—was their culture truly superior to China's?"[48] Zhang similarly opposed efforts to promote a standardized prose based upon the "congruence of speech and writing" (言文一致), and instead touted the value of teaching various genres of literature, including vernacular prose and classical forms,[49] and denounced proposals to replace Chinese languages altogether with Esperanto.[50]

But the clearest application of *New Fangyan* was in regard to standard oral language reform. Zhang was not entirely opposed to instituting a national standard. Rather, in writings that nodded to his work in *New Fangyan*, Zhang opposed the mainstream proposal to base the national language the majority language in Beijing, arguing instead that a unified national pronunciation should reflect the imagined past he praised. While he upheld the contemporary languages spoken in a central region near Hubei as the "most correct," he was wary of simply picking an existing language as the national standard, warning "north and south, [all languages] have divergences."[51] Instead, Zhang advocated for a new invention: a language reconstructed from philological research to mirror the "correct language" of antiquity. As for the majority language of Beijing, he was resolute: "The correct language is that of Xia and Chu … it cannot be the language of Beijing."[52]

After the Qing fell, Zhang continued to play a prominent role in China's intellectual life until his death in 1936. Yet his late-Qing writings remained the most

[45]Liu Shipei, "Xin fangyan houxu," in Zhang Taiyan, *Xin Fangyan*, 113–16.

[46]Zhong Yurou, *Chinese Grammatology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 30–34.

[47]Zhang was not opposed to a phonetic system altogether, just the Roman alphabet. Indeed, he invented his own phonetic system based on seal script and rooted in the *Shuowen*. Ulug Kuzuoglu, "*Codes of Modernity: Infrastructures of Language and Chinese Script in an Age of Global Information Revolution*" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2018), 119–21.

[48]Zhang Taiyan (Zhang Jiang), "Bo Zhongguo yong Wanguo Xinyu shuo" (On disputing the use of Esperanto in China), *Minbao* 21 (1907): 52.

[49]Kaske, *Politics of Language*, 378–82.

[50]Zhang, "Bo Zhongguo," 49–72.

[51]Ibid., 340.

[52]Zhang made this speech sometime between 1907 and 1910. "Zhongguo wenhua de genyuan he jindai xuewen de fada" (The origin of Chinese culture and the development of modern knowledge), *Zhang Taiyan quanji*, vol. 14 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2018), 74–79, 75.

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impactful. On the topic of language, Zhang's writings took on a life of their own. In policy-making circles, his ideas served as a cornerstone of debates over the new Republic's language policy. Within the scholarly realm, *New Fangyan* played an influential role in the burgeoning fields of historical linguistics and dialectology. But most importantly, Zhang's idea about language, national culture, and ethnoracial purity filtered down, cementing in the national imagination the idea that a Han-centered antiquity should serve as the mainstay of the new nation.

The Lasting Legacies of Zhang Taiyan

The 1911 revolution imbued Zhang's ideas about how language bestowed political and cultural power with new meaning. The new Republican Ministry of Education, helmed by future Peking University President Cai Yuanpei, immediately began spearheading a series of aggressive reforms aimed at modernizing the country, including language standardization. Within this context, reformers who shared Zhang's disdain for the influence non-Han groups had on China's languages, and for that reason opposed making the majority language of Beijing the standard, suddenly had the opportunity to influence policy. Zhang's philological research helped them fortify their positions.

In 1913, competing visions of a national language came to a head at a Ministry of Education conference convened to determine a national oral standard.[53] While the conference was contentious, ultimately the seventy or so men in attendance agreed on an invented language that took the majority language of Beijing as its base but, in an attempt to make their language more inclusive, also included phonological characteristics from other *fangyan* regions.[54] Within these deliberations, Zhang's influence was clear. This radical construction that, in Jeffrey Weng's words, "reflected the nature of the imagined future society it was meant to serve," resembled Zhang's suggestion of an invented national standard that brought together core aspects of diverse *fangyan* to reconstruct the language of Chinese antiquity.[55] The attendees even included several of Zhang's students, who wielded notable influence promoting his vision.[56]

Yet, within a few years, this national language engineered to represent the Han identity in its entirety faced backlash. Criticisms generally focused upon practicality: the new standard lacked a significant body of native speakers to effectively teach it. Once these challenges became clear, reformers who had once promoted the 1913 idealized constructed language began to distance themselves from it and advocate instead for alternatives that would facilitate fast, efficient promulgation.[57] In 1925, a group of reformers proposed a national phonology based solely on the majority language in Beijing, a proposal that was quickly adopted by the KMT-led Ministry of

[53]Oral standardization was only one part of language reform; there were also debates about how and whether to standardize script and prose. See John DeFrancis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950); Zhong, *Chinese Grammatology*; Li Jinxi, *Guoyu Yundong Shigang* (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1934).

[54]Jeffrey Weng, "What Is Mandarin? The Social Project of Language Standardization in Early Republican China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 77, 3 (2018): 611–33.

[55]Ibid., 611.

[56]Kaske, *Politics of Language*, 371–72.

[57]Weng, "What Is Mandarin?" 621–25.

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Education after they had secured control over the Republic's central government. It has remained in place with few significant changes to this day.[58]

In some ways, the institutionalization of the majority language in Beijing represented a repudiation of the Han ethnoracial supremacy of the late Qing. This was, in part, because the revolution had neutralized the power of Han supremacy in key ways. After the revolution, those who advocated a Han ethnonationalist state had to come to terms with the very real choice of either integrating non-Han groups into the national body or seeing the nation's borders substantially shrink—a prospect that, in the age of Western imperialism, many feared would signal global weakness. As a fully realized Han ethnonationalist state seemed no longer tenable, calls for the restoration of the greatness of Han civilization were quietly replaced with celebrations of China as a multi-ethnic community of equals. The early Republic even adopted a five-color flag symbolizing "five races as one family" to signal this shift from a nationalism grounded in ethnicity and culture to a more civic understanding of citizenship.[59]

But these realities did not mean that Han ethnonationalism, or a national language policy to support it, disappeared after 1911. After all, in Benno Weiner's words, the discourses of civic nationalism were "not as convincing or powerful as those that preached a more limited nationhood based on arguments of common culture and descent.[60] As such, post-revolution nationalists, rather than continue to directly advocate for Han superiority or abandon Han ethnonationalism altogether, adjusted: they began to cloak Han supremacy in civic nationalism by wordlessly treating Han-ness as the default, presumed embodiment of Chinese national identity.[61] We can see this in several ways. Widely circulated literature exploring radical changes in Chinese national construction often conflated "Chinese" and "Han." The title personage of Lu Xun's famed "True Story of Ah Q," meant to be a "representation of national character" or even "China itself," was clearly, though never explicitly, coded as Han, allowing Lu to equate China's national citizenry with Han-ness without ever actually saying so.[62] Similarly, school textbooks taught children that the history of China was equivalent to the history of the descendants of the Yellow Emperor—a narrative created and promoted by late-Qing Han nationalists but reimagined for Republican schoolchildren as national rather than Han history.[63]

A Beijing-based national language was well-suited to support Han supremacy in this new guise. As a language spoken by Han people that did not claim its legitimacy from its connection to antiquity, the choice shifted focus away from ethnoracial purity and toward contemporary political power—Beijing was, after all, not the site of the Han ethnoracial lineage's supposed origins, but the current seat of government of a Han-majority nation. More concretely, the national language reinforced external Han

[58]Li Jinxi, *Guoyu Yundong Shigang*, 55–56.

[59]Esherick, "How the Qing Became China," 247.

[60]Benno Weiner, *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 14.

[61]In some cases, Han supremacy was more direct. Matthew Wong Foreman, "Racial Modernity in Republican China, 1927–1937," *Asian Ethnicity* (2020): 377–97.

[62]Peacock, "Intersecting Nations," 54.

[63]Peter Zarrow, *Educating China: Knowledge, Society and Textbooks in a Modernizing World, 1902–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); James Leibold, "Competing Narratives of Racial Unity in Republican China: From the Yellow Emperor to Peking Man," *Modern China* 32, 2 (2006): 181–220; Zarrow, *After Empire*, 212–26.

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supremacy through its explicit ties to state power. Whereas late-Qing claims of Han supremacy were galvanized by a lack of political power, the revolution diffused much of their violent racialized vitriol by placing power officially in the hands of Han elites. This made the state a more trustworthy messenger for Chinese nationalism, and the capital more associated with modern Chinese power than Manchu autocracy. A national language based on Beijing phonology could thus continue the work of Han supremacy: it was supported by a state that now had the legitimacy to articulate a clear, coherent vision of what it meant to be Chinese, one that took Han-ness as its basis.

Yet while the national language project upheld the ethnoracial hierarchies for which late-Qing reformers advocated, it also institutionalized an intra-Han hierarchy. Large swaths of the citizenry were suddenly living in a country in which only one expression of Han-ness had institutional support, and it was not their own.[64] This loss was particularly personal for much of China's intellectual class. Many of China's most famous writers, thinkers, and academics came from southern provinces, which meant that they learned their own country's national language later in life, if at all.[65]

This feeling of collective loss among non-Mandarin *fangyan* speakers fueled a counternarrative about the role the national language could, or should, play in the new nation. Some compartmentalized, treating the national language as simply a practical communicative tool.[66] Others held that all *fangyan* were, at their core, languages of the Chinese nation by virtue of being Han cultural practices; even if only the national language had state support, other *fangyan* remained critical to the making of a national culture.[67] Still others emphasized that the national language could yet be improved to better reflect the diversity of the Han majority. Historian Rong Zhaozu, for instance, explained that for the national language to be "unified, promulgated, expanded, and improved," reformers needed to consider the historical significance of other *fangyan.* Praising Zhang Taiyan by name, Rong credited his work for "using the present to explain the past."[68] Others went further. In a robust debate in the late 1930s and 1940s among leftist writers about the proper model for a written language based upon a spoken vernacular, prominent writers such as Chen Boda and Ke Zhongping argued forcefully that non-Mandarin *fangyan* were critical pieces of national heritage. In the words of Wang Hui, these debates emphasized that *fangyan* were not and should not only be "resources for the formation of local identity, but aid in the formation of national identity."[69]

[64]Weng, 624; Zhu Linggong, ed., *Guoyu wenti taolun ji* (A discussion of the problems of the national language) (Shanghai: Zhongguo shuju, 1921); Li Jinxi, "Guoyu san sa gang ji Guoyin zhi wu da wenti" (Three grand proposals for the national language and five big problems with national pronunciation) *Shishi xinbao*, 14 Oct. 1920: 1.

[65]As one example, see Saito Mareshi, "Liang Qichao's Consciousness of Language," in Joshua A. Fogel, ed., *The Role of Japan in Liang Qichao's Introduction of Modern Western Civilization to China* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2004), 247–71.

[66]Yuen Ren Chao, *Yuen Ren Chao, Chinese Linguist, Phonologist, Composer and Author.* Interview by Rosemary Levenson. Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, 1977, 81.

[67]Zhou Zuoren, "Guoyu gaizao de yijian" (Opinions on the improvement of the national language) *Dongfang Zazhi* 17 (1936): 7–15.

[68]Rong Zhaozu, "Zhengji fangyan de wojian" (My opinions on collecting fangyan), *Beijing daxue rikan* 35 (1923): 1–4, 2.

[69]Wang Hui, *The Politics of Imagining Asia*, Theodore Huters, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 106.

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Yet perhaps the most common reaction to this loss of political power among speakers of non-Mandarin *fangyan* was to find alternative outlets to research, promote, and validate the value of those languages. One such outlet was the growing field of Chinese linguistics. Beginning in the 1920s, prominent academics began to clamor for a more systemic study of Sinitic languages, arguing that they were critical to understanding the nation's culture. In the following decades, dozens of scholars published detailed surveys of contemporary *fangyan*, as well as new, scientific studies of historical phonologies of Chinese antiquity.[70]

These studies frequently cited Zhang Taiyan's *New Fangyan*. Take, for instance, *A Chinese Syllabary Pronounced According to the Dialect of Canton*, published in 1941 by Cantonese scholar Wong Shik-Ling.[71] Wong's goal was to provide a scientific rendering of the Yue phonology—a southern *fangyan* region that includes present-day Cantonese. But in his introductory material, in which he praises Zhang Taiyan for his "meticulous" study of ancient phonology and local languages, Wong articulated stakes beyond rendering accurate data. In particular, he juxtaposed the publication of his book with the national language movement in order to explain the national importance of preserving and studying the Yue *fangyan*. "When we use Chinese characters, we cannot neglect the Yue fangyan … when we read aloud essays, in particular the rhyming verses written after the Wei and the Jin (AD 317–420) dynasties, using the Yue language makes it rhythmic and sonorous … [it] has best preserved the characteristics of these texts."[72] With this statement, Wong argued that evidence of Han superiority—grounded in historical cultural achievements or the longevity of Sinitic script—was directly preserved in his own language. When judged by the extent to which a language embodied and retained that evidence, Wong concluded, the Yue *fangyan* was clearly more valuable than the national language.

By 1941, when Wong published his *Chinese Syllabary*, it was undeniable that the majority language spoken in Beijing had institutionalized power to represent Han people and the Chinese nation. But Wong's work and others like it make clear that there were discursive strategies to challenge institutional support as the only or even primary source of power, and in wielding these strategies these men often cited Zhang Taiyan's work. They consistently argued that the political power arising from historical lineage was absolute; it predated and overrode any power emanating from governmental authority. In their efforts, Zhang's work provided inspiration for using phonological data to prove their language's connections to that historical lineage and claim the power to which they believed they were therefore entitled. In other words, Wong's work shows what Zhang inspired: a blueprint for challenging Beijing's linguistic power by drawing on alternative wellsprings of power.

Claiming Hegemonic Han-ness in Local Gazetteers

The last section focused on a historical rupture. One language had been chosen as the national standard, while the rest of China's Han majority were left with a

[70]Luo Changpei, "Zhongyuan yinyun shenglei kao" (Study of the initials in the Zhongyuan yinyun), *Zhongyang lishi yuyan yanjiuyuan jikan* 2, 2 (1932): 423–40; Dong Tonghe, "Shanggu yinyun biaogao" (Draft tables for ancient Chinese phonology), *Zhongyang lishi yuyan yanjiuyuan jikan* 18 (1948): 1–249.

[71]Wong Shik-ling, *Yue yun yin hui (A Chinese Syllabary Pronounced According to the Dialect of Canton)* (Zhonghua Shuju, 1940).

[72]Ibid., 2.

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well-established narrative of ethnoracial superiority but no institutional recognition of the significance of their own languages to that superiority. The last section also hinted at the cascading effects of that rupture, showing how the national language project created an impetus for Han speakers of non-Mandarin *fangyan* to explore new ways of regaining cultural power. The purpose of this final section is to explore how these strategies were wielded at the local level. In so doing, this section shows not only the evolution of narratives of Han supremacy as the national language project took hold, but also how communities whose culture remained quite distinct from that of the capital found meaning for themselves in the nationalizing project.

To explore how narratives of hegemonic Han-ness evolved beyond high-level academic and political conversations, this section focuses on local gazetteers (*fangzhi*).[73] These compendiums of a locality, composed by local elites, were lengthy, informational tomes meant to promote a locality's uniqueness and, often, superiority.[74] As a genre, they have a long history, systematically produced since at least the Song dynasty. Sometimes comprising thousands of pages, they usually included the same basic information: topographical features, prominent lineages, local economic production, historical relics, and exemplary persons. Gazetteers also served an important historical role. As Maybo Ching notes, gazetteer compilers saw their task as "creat[ing] a chain that connected their localities to the nation," allowing local elites to communicate with the capital and shape policy.[75] Their impact was thus not just political, but also cultural: they highlighted how a locality's ecology, economy, and culture were integral to empire's cohesive integrity. These portraits thus served as a critical space for local elites to both express local pride and ensure they had a voice in the creation of empire-wide narratives.

Given this historic role, twentieth-century gazetteers are excellent sources for examining how localities absorbed, interpreted, and shaped nationally circulated narratives.[76] This includes the discursive devices that reinforced Han superiority discussed above. Authors often treated the Han ethnoracial group as the unspoken

[73]For this section, I consulted the *Zhongguo fangzhi ku* database. I used keyword searches for the terms *fangyan*, *tuyin*, *guyin*, Yellow Emperor, Hanzu, and Hanzhong, as well as others, to locate post-1911 gazetteers on relevant topics. After exhausting keyword searches, to ensure I captured geographic patterns, I read several gazetteers from various localities at random, privileging provinces that were less represented in keyword searches. I also looked at samplings from the Qing dynasty to trace change over time. Altogether, I consulted approximately 130 gazetteers.

[74]"Xiuzhi shi lie gaiyao" (Guidelines for compiling local gazetteers) *Zhejiang minzheng rikan* 7 (14 Jan. 1930): 25; "Difangzhi shu zouzhi banfa" (Methods for compiling local gazetteers) *Zhongyang ribao* 2 (15 May 1944): 5; Chenzhi Wang, "Chinese Local Gazetteers: Evolution, Institutionalization, and Digitization," *Journal of East Asian Libraries* 149 (Oct. 2009): 45–54, 45–47.

[75]Joseph Dennis, *Writing, Publishing, and Reading Local Gazetteers in Imperial China, 1100–1700* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3; May-bo Ching, "Classifying Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Late-Qing Native-Place Textbooks and Gazetteers," in Tze-ki Hon and Robert Culp, eds., *The Politics of Historical Production in Late Qing and Republican China* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 55–78, 58.

[76]For references to nation-building goals, see Ren Yaoxian and Zhang Guishu, *Fushan xianzhi* (Fushan county gazetteer), 42 vols. (1935), 1; Chen Zhisun and Yang Sicheng, *Songming xianzhi* (Songming county gazetteer), 38 vols. (1945), 660; *Chongxiu zhenyuan xianzhi* (Newly edited Zhenyuan county gazetteer), 19 vols. (1935), 70; Zhu Shide, *Junlian xianzhi* (Junlian county gazetteer), 7 vols. (1948), 123; Deng Zhanxian, *Xuxiu Wusu xianzhi* (New edition Wusu county gazetteer), 2 vols. (1921), 99; Na Ruzhen and Jiang Shifang *Zhenkang xianzhi* (Zhenkang county gazetteer) (1936), 260. See also Ren Liao and Chen Tingting, "Mingqing yu minguo shiqi Guizhou fangzhi Zhong minsu shuxie bianhua yanjiu," *Hebei beifang xueyuan xuekan* 33, 6 (2017): 24–28, 26.

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standard representative of both the nation and their individual localities, as Han peoples' biographies, histories, and accomplishments comprised the bulk of the gazetteers' information. Sometimes references to Han superiority were overt. As compared to earlier volumes, the twentieth century saw a sharp increase in local histories that explicitly placed the local population within the lineage of the Yellow Emperor,[77] described as the ancestor of the "exceptional Chinese ethnicity" (*youxiu de Zhonghua minzu* 優秀的中華民族).[78] So too was there an uptick in histories of violent invading outsiders that emphasized either the grit and resilience of the local Han population or espoused the inferiority of those who were "not descendants of the Yellow Emperor."[79]

In some ways, therefore, Republican-period gazetteers mirrored other contemporaneous national histories. What was unique was how gazetteers interlaced well-known narratives with local anecdotes to demonstrate the locality's role in the preservation and representation of those national histories. This was done in several ways: some included sections on historical architecture, others on local heroes or folk tales. But one of their primary strategies to demonstrate the locality's historical importance to the nation was with a laudatory tribute to the local language.

While sections on local language, labeled *fangyan, yuyan* [language 語言], or *tuyin* [vernacular pronunciation 土音], did not appear in the majority of twentieth-century gazetteers, they were fairly common.[80] Their content was highly variable. They varied in length, from just a paragraph to dozens of pages, and in content, with some focusing on vocabulary and idioms, others on phonology. There was also variation in the kinds of expertise the authors cited. Some authors simply provided a curated list of unique local vocabulary, whereas others described the local tongue by citing recent scholarship, or in rare cases, conducting their own *fangyan* surveys.

Yet these sections had some attributes in common. It was typical to begin the section with a short narrative explaining why Han people spoke so many different languages. Authors from Ba county in Sichuan and Songming county in Yunnan, for example, explained how post-Han dynasty southern migration led to the "fracturing" of "local customs" and languages.[81] Authors from Xinfeng county in Henan offered a simpler explanation: "As our ancestors moved and spread around, they lost their original pronunciations (*benyin* 本音)."[82] Yet amidst these varying chronicles, none I

[77]Examples include Wang Weiliang and Liao Liyuan, *Mingxi xianzhi* (Mingxi county gazetteer), 15 vols. (1943), 133–256; Huang Zan and Zhu Ruzhen, *Yangshan xianzhi* (Yangshan county gazetteer), 18 vols. (1938), 397–411; and Zhang Han and Qiu Fu, *Shangkang xianzhi* (Shangkang county gazetteer), 36 vols. (1939), 985–88. In Qing dynasty gazetteers, the Yellow Emperor only appeared as a story cited in the *Shiji* (史記), or as the namesake of monuments. For one example, see Gu Renji and Shen Chengguo, *Shangkang xianzhi* (Shangkang county gazetteer) (1761), 3326–28.

[78]Chen Bojia and Li Chengjun, *Chongxiu Runan xianzhi* (Refurbished Runan county gazetteer), 22 vols. (1938), 1186.

[79]Gan Renjun, *Chongde xian xin zhi* (New Chongde county gazetteer) 18 vols. (n.d.), 1.

[80]Li Lan, Deng Yawen, and He Ling found around 10 percent of post-1911 gazetteers included a language section: "Difangzhi zhong yuyan cailiao jilu qingkuang gaishu" (A summary of the compilation of linguistic materials in gazetteers) *Journal of Changshu Institute of Technology (Philosophy & Social Sciences)* 1 (2019): 102–9, 103.

[81]Zhu Zhihong and Xiang Chu, *Baxian zhi* (Gazetteer for Ba county), 23 vols. (1939), 801–2; Chen Zhisun and Yang Sicheng, *Songming xianzhi* (Songming county gazetteer), 38 vols. (1945), 522.

[82]Xu Zhaoyu and Yang Zhaotai, *Xinfeng xianzhi* (Xinfeng county gazetteer), 10 vols. (1929), 81.

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encountered questioned the core premise of Han historic unity. Authors from Shaotong county in Yunnan claimed that all Han languages shared a root, as "each ethnoracial lineage [*zu*] has their own language"[83]; another wrote, "Our linguistic roots are the same."[84] The gazetteer from Wenxi county in Henan was more specific: "Our [Han] *minzu* has one branch, our language and script have one origin."[85]

A second generalization we can make is that most gazetteer authors described their local language by referencing historic texts. The typical format consisted of a list of local verbiages compared to their corollaries in historic dictionaries and character compendiums.[86] These sections usually began with common words—Mi county in Henan began with the words for father and mother[87]—but some placed local particularities at the forefront, such as Jiande county, which began with words for coal and eggplant.[88] In these comparative lists, most referents were the aforementioned Han-dynasty texts *Shuowen Jiezi*, *Erya*, and *Fangyan*, but other texts appeared frequently as well. Yichun county in Jiangxi explained the origin of their local vocabulary in the Daoist philosophical text *Zhuangzi* (莊子) and the narrative history *Zuo Zhuan* (左傳Commentary of Zuo) from the Eastern Zhou (771–256 BC).[89] Taicang county in Jiangsu listed examples from the philosophical classic *Mencius* and poetry from the Han and Tang dynasties.[90] Chixi county in Guangdong cited all of the above and the fifth-century *Ballad of Mulan*.[91]

This method of describing linguistic histories by comparing contemporary vocabulary to earlier character compendiums appeared in pre-twentieth-century gazetteers as well. As Hirata Shoji argues, language sections began appearing in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and they frequently touted the relationship between the local language and antiquity in a way that exuded regional pride.[92] So, too, was there a long history of exacting cultural capital through associations with classical texts, since these texts had long afforded power to those who could claim connection to them.[93] Yet in the context of Chinese nation-building, this familiar method supported new discourses. In a poetic rhythm of "X is said as Y in our local language," Republican-period gazetteer authors treated millennia-old linguistic texts not simply as cultural authorities, but representations of a Han-centered national history intricately tied to

[83]Fu Tingquan, *Shaotong xianzhi*, 388–89.

[84]Long Yunchang and Zhou Zhongyu, *Xinzuan Yunnan Tongzhi* (New Yunnan gazetteer), 266 vols. (1949), 6664.

[85]Yu Baozi and Yang Yitian, *Wenxi xianzhi* (Wenxi county gazetteer), 25 vols. (1919), 147.

[86]Yu Yimi and Bao Shi, *Wuhu xianzhi* (Wuhu county gazetteer), 60 vols. (1919), 120; Wang Zushi, *Taicang zhouzhi* (Taicang prefecture gazetteer), 28 vols. (1919), 105.

[87]The format mimics Yang Xiong's *Fangyan.* Wang Zhongxiu and Yan Fengwu, *Mi xianzhi,* (Mi county gazetteer), 20 vols. (1924), 241.

[88]Xia Riao and Wang Ren, *Jiande xianzhi* (Jiande county gazetteer), 15 vols. (1919), 176–78.

[89]Xie Zuan and Su Yuxian, *Yichun xianzhi* (Yichun county gazetteer), 24 vols. (1940), 999–1001.

[90]Wang Zushi, *Taicang zhouzhi* (Taicang county gazetteer),101–14. See also Qian Jiang and Fan Yugui, *Jianning xianzhi* (Jianning county gazetteer), 28 vols. (1919), 212.

[91]Wang Dalu and Lai Jixi, *Chixi xianzhi* (Chixi county gazetteer), 8 vols. (1920), 153.

[92]Hirata sees a direct connection between these gazetteer sections and southern intellectuals who protested using *guanhua* to teach canonical texts since "their own languages were direct descendants" of Tang dynasty rime dictionaries (Hirata Shoji, *Wenhua zhidu*, 254–55).

[93]The history of extracting power from ownership of or connection with ancient texts dates to at least the Song dynasty. See Kathleen Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

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language. By connecting their locality to these texts vis-à-vis linguistic lineage, authors leveraged the texts' symbolic power to aggrandize their locality's standing in a nation where connection to an idealized antiquity translated into access to the power of Han hegemony.[94]

Connections between vocabulary and canonical texts were not the only way gazetteer authors drew connections to an invented past. Others focused on phonology. These narrations were also referential, the most common reference being the "phonology of antiquity" (古音).[95] Other times, the authors compared initials, finals, or tones in their language with data from historic rime tables, such as the authors of the Xining county gazetteer in Guangdong, who noted that their *fangyan* had the "opening tone" for characters that also carried that tone in the *Guangyun*, a tenth-century rime table.[96] Other gazetteers referenced particular geographic spaces. Zhongyuan, or Central Plains, was a common referent—Xining county near Guangzhou, Liling county in Hunan, and Yi county in Anhui all claimed that their phonology was either "based in" or "had elements of" the phonology of Zhongzhou or Zhongyuan.[97] And, importantly, these strategies were not mutually exclusive. The Ningxiang county gazetteer compared one character's local phonology to the *Guangyun*, and another character to the fourteenth-century *Zhongyuan yinyun*.[98] Clearly, authors sought to associate their local languages with historic referents, all of which held power as part of the national canon.[99]

Though diverse, many of these strategies were inspired by Zhang Taiyan's use of "the present to explain the past." I found sixteen gazetteers that cited him outright.[100] Sometimes these references were superficial, as authors cited Zhang's explanations of China's linguistic diversity or referenced his map of *fangyan* regions. Other times, gazetteer authors proclaimed that Zhang's specific argument in *New Fangyan* could be used to prove significance of their own language. In the gazetteer for Linqu county in Shandong, for instance, the authors cited Zhang's claim that any national representative of the Han needed to take "*fangyan* as its base" because only through local languages

[94]Zhang Taiyan, "Zhonghua Minguo Jie," 1907.

[95]I counted thirty-seven that used *guyin* as a referent.

[96]He Tianrui and Gui Xiu, *Xining xianzhi* (Xining county gazetteer), 34 vols. (1937), 168; Zhou Zhenlin and Liu Zongxiang, *Ningxiang xianzhi* (Ningxiang county gazetteer) (1941), 1838.

[97]In some cases, this referred to the "Zhongzhou zhengyin," or "Zhongyuan yayin," which implied the language spoken during later dynasties in the northern areas. See Qian Jiang and Fan Yugui, *Jianning xianzhi* (Jianning county gazetteer), 28 vols. (1919), 212; and Xu Ganxiu and Wang Guoxian, *Qiongshan xianzhi* (Qiongshan county gazetteer), 28 vols. (1918), 117. But in others, it referred to the language of Zhongyuan in earlier time periods, such as the "Tang dynasty"; Zhongyuan. *Xining Xianzhi* (1937), 182. Other times, which time period's Zhongyuan was referred to remained unclear; Hu Luoling, "Yi su xiao ji" (A small record of the Yi vernacular), in Wu Kejun and Cheng Shoubao, *Yixian si zhi* (Fourth Yi county gazetteer), 16 vols. (1923), 102; Chen Kun and Liu Qian, *Liling xianzhi* (Liling county gazetteer), 10 vols. (1948), 1771.

[98]*Chuansha Xianzhi* (Gazetteer for Chuansha county), 24 vols. (1936), 1028–35.

[99]Hirata Shoji emphasized that these competing claims over which language denoted *zhengyin* had existed since at least the Yuan dynasty and increased in the Qing amidst imperial efforts to enforce *Guanhua* as the official standard. Hirata Shoji, *Wenhua zhidu*, 247–50.

[100]*Anhui tongzhi* (1934); *Dinghai xianzhi* (1924); *Yaoan xianzhi* (1948); *Xianshan xianzhi* (1926); *Xinxiu Fenshun xianzhi* (1943); *Chongxiu Nanchuan xianzhi* (1926); *Xinzou Yunnan tongzhi* (1949); *Tai xianzhi gao* (n.d.); *Fengtian tongzhi* (1934); *Linqi xuzhi* (1935); *Ba xianzhi* (1939); *Liling xianzhi* (1948); *Zhaotong xianzhi* (1924); *Shiping xianzhi* (1938); *Gaoyi xianzhi* (1933); and *Qingyuan xianzhi* (1937).

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could citizens find the "origin" of *guyin*. Take, they argued, their own *fangyan*—reading Tang dynasty poetry aloud in Linqu *fangyan* revealed traces of *guyin*.[101]

Not all gazetteers emphasized proximity to linguistic antiquity. The authors of the Guangshao county in Shandong offered instead a praise-laced narrative of the Chinese national language movement, excoriating those who sought to "accommodate *fangyan*" thereby "blocking the progress of national language unification."[102] Yet even in instances like these, hegemonic Han-ness emerged in other contexts. In this same gazetteer, the authors praised how Guangshao county honored the memory of Confucius, native son of Shandong, by ritualistically singing a remembrance song, reproduced in the gazetteer's pages. This example should remind us that proximity to linguistic antiquity is one of many expressions of hegemonic Han-ness. It is not one singular narrative, but competing, overlapping, and contextual discursive strategies.

Ultimately, it is clear that references to an imagined past are ubiquitous in Republican-period gazetteers, bringing into sharp relief the power that lay in a connection to antiquity. It is also clear that the contexts and contents that defined antiquity were flexible, diverse, and sometimes contradictory. But in the context of hegemonic Han-ness, the multivalence of antiquity gave it strength. With blurred borders and an ever-shifting core, antiquity could easily be slotted into a diverse array of unique local narratives, and the power it bestowed could be defended by a diverse range of actors. In a word, the ambiguity of antiquity as a referent made the existence of competing claims to represent it possible.

Detailed Claims from the South

The previous section narrated how Republican-period gazetteers described local languages using references to antiquity in order to underscore claims to represent hegemonic Han-ness. Its goal was to show the sheer prevalence of such claims and how, unlike earlier discussions of language in gazetteers, authors from the Republican period took influence from twentieth-century narratives about race and power. This final section moves from breadth to depth, taking two gazetteers as case studies to excavate the kinds of logic, evidence, and strategies local authors used to situate their own languages' histories—and the power they thought those histories ought to rightfully confer—within national narratives.

The first comes from Dabu county in Guangdong near the city of Meizhou. Dabu was, and is today, majority Hakka, a group that migrated to the south of China after the Song dynasty. Published in 1943, the gazetteer focused heavily on the Hakka and their relationship to the Han ethnoracial identity.[103] The reason for this was likely related to a long local history of tumult. In the nineteenth century, a rise in violent clashes between local Hakka and Cantonese populations in Guangdong, as well as the increasing resonance of ideas about ethnoracial purity among local elites, fueled discrimination against the Hakkas, derisively referred to by Cantonese speakers as an

[101]Zhou Junying and Liu Qianqian, *Linqu xuzhi* (Supplemental Linqu county gazetteer), 22 vols. (1935), 858.

[102]Pan Laifeng and Wang Yinshan, *Xuxiu Guangshao xianzhi* (Re-edited Guangshao county gazetteer), 28 vols. (1935), 453.

[103]The Hakka are notably absent in earlier Dabu county gazetteers, such as Zhang Hongen, *Dabu Xianzhi* (Dabu county gazetteer) (1873).

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"outside *zu*."[104] In response, prominent Hakka elites funded a deluge of scholarship to prove that the Hakka had a greater proximity to Han antiquity than did their neighbors.[105] Such scholarship featured prominently in the Dabu county gazetteer. The authors cited these instances of discrimination, repudiating the "mean and shallow" people who claimed that the Hakka were not part of the "Han race" (漢種 *Hanzhong*). To the contrary, the authors proclaimed, Hakka were actually the best representatives of the Han ethnoracial lineage. The gazetteer extolled Hakka accomplishments, citing their business acumen, their industriousness, and the sophistication of their education system. Ultimately, the authors concluded, citing the words of Yale geographer Ellsworth Huntington, the Hakka among the Han people were the "cream atop milk."[106]

To reinforce this narrative of Hakka elitism, the authors devoted a long section to proving how the Hakka had best preserved the lineage of the Xia clan. And here, language served as the primary evidence. According to the authors, other Chinese languages had strayed far from the language of antiquity. Phonological data proved that Cantonese speakers had moved south from Zhongzhou to Guangdong province during the third century; with distance and time, their language deviated from the language of antiquity. And yet, after the fourteenth century, northern languages became influenced by non-Han groups, meaning that the language spoken in the original location of Zhongzhou had similarly mutated. Only the Hakka avoided both of these fates, having moved south from Zhongzhou within those intervening centuries. As the gazetteer explained, though the Hakka "could not avoid" mixing with their southern neighbors over time, their language "remained close to the language of Zhongzhou."[107] Indeed, they continued, the Hakka were the only community to have "handed down the language of antiquity" in an "enduring, long-lasting" way.[108]

Importantly, the authors reminded us, this was not simply about language: the fact that the Hakka preserved the language of antiquity also meant they preserved its customs. For proof of this connection, they cited Zhang Taiyan. In a later addendum to *New Fangyan*, Zhang claimed that the root of the Hakka language exuded the "hat and belt" culture—a reference to Sima Qian's second-century sweeping historical tome "Records of the Grand Historian," in which he uses the term to denote a kind of Chinese civility directly opposed to the culture of non-Chinese groups—rather than that of foreigners. In the Dabu county gazetteer, the authors used this "hat and belt" reference to prove that the Hakka language had a connection not just to antiquity in general, but an antiquity marked by civility. In a word, their language proved a connection to a culture that was distinct because of its superiority over other indigenous groups.

Our second case study comes from Liling county in Hunan. According to the authors, Liling county had a uniquely long, continuous history. First settled in the Eastern Han (AD 25–220), the county's residents oversaw all of the important moments in the "evolution" of the Chinese nation: from the "authoritarianism" of

[104]Nicole Constable, *Guest People: Hakka Identity at Home and Abroad* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 41–47.

[105]Luo Xianglin, Kejia yanjiu daolun, *Repr*. (Shanghai: Shanghai chubanshe, 1992), 7–9.

[106]Liu Zhichao and Xiu Wenting, *Dabu xianzhi* (Dabu county gazetteer), 39 vols. (1943), 1076.

[107]Ibid.

[108]Ibid., 1328–29.

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the imperial period—a direct reference to Manchu rule—to the "democracy" of the present, from the "overthrow" of outsiders (*yizu* 異族) and the creation of a Republic.[109] This emphasis on a national evolution specifically measured by the defeat and expulsion of non-Han peoples—and the anti-Manchu rhetoric inspired by the kind Zhang Taiyan popularized—appeared throughout the manuscript, framing sections on government, customs, and importantly for our purposes, language. In particular, the language section praised the people of Liling county for their ability to withstand historical change and outside influence. To prove the stability of their language, the authors offered an unprecedent amount of evidence. First, they presented original phonological research in a series of charts comparing their *fangyan*'s phonology to the tenth-century rime table *Guangyun*. The authors then offered a philological examination of the origins of local verbiage to the Han-dynasty dictionaries *Fangyan* and *Shuowen Jiezi*. To the authors, the data, meticulously recorded over dozens of pages, definitively showed that the people of Liling had preserved the language of antiquity.

They presented their data according to a familiar model, notable only in their sheer quantity, but their explanation of their language's connection to antiquity was unique. They began with the region's geography. Situated at the crossroads of several *fangyan* regions, the people to the north, east, and south all spoke distinct languages. Only at the center of the county did people speak the unchanged language of antiquity. "Because of the mountains and rivers, the veins of the ancient linguistic system in our language are still detectable," the authors wrote.[110] This connection with antiquity, they claimed, facilitated their ability to both absorb and communicate with neighboring groups. The authors explained, "In the middle of our village is the pure local language. Even though people from the Min and Yue *fangyan* families moved to our location, within a generation or two, they would completely be absorbed into our local language. Even when guests come to our village and have not changed their language, when they are out in our society they can adapt to the local language. [For those who live] to the west of the village … because their language's roots are the same, there are no gaps in communication."[111]

Liling county's language embodied an ideal that strikingly resembled Zhang Taiyan's ideas about a national standard: a language that preserved the historic roots of antiquity that all *fangyan* regions, to varying degrees, contained. Liling's gazetteer authors thus made claims that were at once common among other gazetteers—that their language preserved ancient linguistic roots—and strikingly unique, in that they proved that preservation not just with historic texts, but also with the mutual intelligibility of their language with other *fangyan* regions.

There are clear similarities in the strategies the authors from Dabu and Liling used to emphasize their county's connection to antiquity. In both, authors drew upon well-known markers of antiquity. The *Guangyun* and the *Shuowen* were not just texts; they were evidence of a diachronic history of the language of the Xia clan. Zhongyuan was not just a place; it marked the heart of Chinese civilization. In both, their lengthy section on language was a Republican-period addition, the topic not appearing in Qing-period gazetteers from either place. And finally, both gazetteers combined phonological data with narratives about migration. The Dabu gazetteer emphasized

[109]Chen Kun and Liu Qian, *Liling xianzhi* (Liling county gazetteer), 10 vols. (1948), 1.
[110]Ibid., 1769.
[111]They claim their language belongs to the *Guanhua fangyan* region. Chen and Liu, *Liling xianzhi*, 1771.

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the Hakka's migration from Zhongzhou, while the authors of the Liling gazetteer emphasized migration history to refute the presumption that their language's tether to antiquity was subject to deterioration.

I chose these examples because I found them notable in the quantity of their data and the uniqueness of their narratives. Yet they are not the only gazetteers to examine local language with this much detail. When we include other similar gazetteers, we can draw one final generalization: they overwhelmingly came from the south. Though the peoples of Hainan, Guangdong, and Hunan all spoke different languages, they all cited Zhang Taiyan to prove that "only the south[ern] pronunciation had evolved perfectly." It is impossible to know the impact Zhang Taiyan had on regional notions of Han-ness, especially since beliefs about the connection between southern languages and antiquity predated his work. Nonetheless, Zhang was remembered and exalted in these texts as using philological evidence to prove the preservation of Han antiquity—the source of Han superiority—in southern regions. In a word, his work seems to have helped buttress a particular and spacialized response to the national language project.[112]

It is often difficult to trace the origins of a story or a myth. Sometimes narratives gain institutional backing, and we find them in textbooks, state policies, or public communications. Other times they acquire popular resonance, and we can see them in popular media or hear them via word of mouth. When it comes to the narrative of linguistic antiquity as a marker of hegemonic Han-ness, it seems to have been spread through popular reinterpretations of academic studies that, when taken together, created a unified field of understanding about Han-ness, language, and history across China. While we cannot definitively prove a clear link between these gazetteers and common retellings of similar stories today, these gazetteers reveal how late-Qing ideas about language and Han-ness, many of them inspired by Zhang Taiyan, were wielded by everyday people to battle national language hegemony and claim a competing trait of hegemonic Han-ness for their own mother tongues.

Conclusion: Hegemonic Han-ness in Comparison

This paper has probed why proximity to linguistic antiquity became a competing construction of hegemonic Han-ness that challenged the hegemony of the Chinese national language in the early twentieth century. It has shown, first, how the turmoil of the late Qing fueled an explicitly Han ethnocentric nationalism centered on the exaltation of Chinese antiquity, and second, how that nationalism supported claims by speakers of non-Mandarin local languages that the proximity of their language to antiquity made them better representatives of Han-ness than speakers of the national language. Moreover, once the national language debate concluded, officially precluding other *fangyan* from gaining institutional recognition, local elites latched onto a counternarrative about how languages defined Han-ness: that in the making of the Han ethnoracial identity, it was a language's proximity to antiquity, not its institutionalization by the state, that mattered most.

[112]Other examples include Xu Fengsheng and Zhu Ruzhen, *Qingyuan Xianzhi* (Qingyuan county gazetteer), 20 vols. (1937); Liang Dinfen and Ding Renchang. *Panyuxian xuzhi* (Panyu county gazetteer), 44 vols. (1931); Zhang Yicheng, *Liang Guanxi Yangjiang zhi* (Yangjiang county gazetteer), 39 vols. (1925); Xu and Wang, *Qiongshan Xianzhi* (Qiongshan county gazetteer) 28 vols. (1917); Xu and Yang, *Xinfeng Xianzhi* (Xinfeng county gazetteer); Pu Youwen and Wang Guohui, *Danxianzhi* (Dan county gazetteer), 18 vols. (1934).

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This counternarrative among speakers of non-Mandarin *fangyan*, I argue, had two effects. First, they offered space for those who did not speak the national language to grasp power for themselves in a nation that defined itself as Han. This counternarrative, in other words, broke apart the notion of a top-down, unified Han nationalism, instead revealing a power struggle among those who identified as Han over the ability to define its boundaries. Second, and more importantly, these claims nonetheless reinforced the very basis of Han supremacy in the aggregate. By contending that the value of any Chinese language was rooted in its purity and lack of adulteration by outsiders, this counternarrative devalued non-Han groups in the making of the nation and racialized them as both other and inferior. In the end, these counter-discourses joined state discourses in directly or indirectly establishing that, however Han-ness was defined, its external hegemony was central to imagining what the Chinese nation was and should be.

This power struggles born of these competing discourses have clear resonance today. As was true a century ago, Chinese language policy remains both emblematic of and a tool for reinforcing external Han hegemony.[113] After 1949, while the new ruling Chinese Communist Party harshly denounced what they called the "Han chauvinism" of their predecessors, their purported celebration of indigenous groups never amounted to a dismantling of Han power in bureaucratic, legal, or cultural structures. Even during the high socialist period, defined by a broad effort to rebuild society into one defined by economic justice, central and local leaders silently upheld Han-ness as emblematic of the progressive values of new China while they simultaneously violently forced non-Han peoples into assimilation.[114] As a result, the remarkable societal changes of the Maoist period did little to shake Han hegemony. Indeed, Han dominance has only become more absolute.[115] Today, economic disparities between Han and non-Han regions are stark. Schools throughout the PRC continue to equate Han history with Chinese history much as they did a century ago, whereas space for learning non-Han histories is rapidly disappearing.[116] And within this context of increasingly totalizing Han supremacy, language often serves as a powerful tool for Han dominance. In majority non-Han regions, Mandarin education is frequently touted as a tool for promoting "ethnic harmony," and the achievement, labor potential, and political loyalty of non-Han people are often judged according to their Mandarin proficiency. Perhaps the bleakest example is how, since 2017, the CCP government has seized and detained countless ethnic Uighurs—a Muslim indigenous group that lives in the northwest province of Xinjiang—in extrajudicial camps designed to "re-educate" them and root out so-called "dangerous" activities; within these camps, forced Mandarin education is a prominent part of daily life, alongside "thought education," forced confessions, and bodily torture.[117]

[113]Gerald Roche, "Lexical Necropolitics: The Raciolinguistics of Language Oppression on the Tibetan Margins of Chineseness," *Language & Communication* 76 (2021): 111–20.

[114]Weiner, *Chinese Revolution*, 161–80. Dru Gladney, "Internal Colonialism and the Uyghur Nationality: Chinese Nationalism and Its Subaltern Subjects," *Cahiers d'études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien* 25 (1998): 47–64.

[115]Gray Tuttle, "China's Race Problem," *Foreign Affairs* 94 (2015): 39–46, 39.

[116]Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[117]Ali Çaksu, "Islamophobia, Chinese Style: Total Internment of Uyghur Muslims by the People's Republic of China," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 5, 2 (2020): 175–98, 180.

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At the same time, Mandarin's hegemony over other *fangyan* has expanded.[118] Today it is the only Chinese language regularly taught in schools,[119] and by far the most common language used in news media, television, radio, and public service announcements. It, and it alone, is deemed the "symbol of the Chinese nation" in the PRC constitution. It is also afforded institutional support in more subtle ways. In 2019, a popular video-based social media app called Douyin began sending warning messages to users who posted videos in Cantonese, asking them "please use Mandarin." When pressed, Douyin's owner, Bytedance, responded that their aim was not to censor Cantonese; they simply lacked the infrastructure to effectively moderate Cantonese content.[120]

These current power dynamics raise an important question: Are earlier counter-narratives about the proximity of non-Mandarin *fangyan* to linguistic antiquity still connected to hegemonic Han-ness today? This question would be impossible to sufficiently answer in the space here, but two recent protests offer a glimpse of existing connections. In 2010, protests broke out in the Guangzhou over the city's government's decision to gradually replace the already shrinking selection of Cantonese television offerings with shows in Putonghua.[121] After a series of marches, sit-ins, and sympathetic op-eds highlighting the historical value of Cantonese because of its "long history," the government conceded, maintaining the existing Cantonese offerings.[122] In comparison, in 2020, protestors marched in Inner Mongolia against a government program to replace Mongolian language education with Putonghua. These protests, however, were not met with the same permissiveness, and resulted instead in thousands of arrests and no concessions.[123] Indeed, generally speaking, non-Han peoples such as Tibetans or Uighurs who publicly advocate for the preservation of their linguistic rights tend to face scrutiny, censorship, and state punishment.[124]

There are many reasons why the state might respond more sympathetically to protests for Cantonese preservation than similar demands for Mongolian, which have nothing to do with ethnoracial identity.[125] For one, in 2010 the tolerance for public dissent was greater, and in fact since the seeming success of those protests Cantonese television programming has been quietly disappearing. Yet I propose that these distinct and unequal responses in part reflect the central government's

[118]Tam, *Dialect and Nationalism in China*, 186–218.

[119]Hui Wang and Yuan Zhongrui, "The Promotion of Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese): An Overview," In Li Yuming and Li Wei, eds., *The Language Situation in China* (Berlin: De Grueyter, 2013), 27–39.

[120]Masha Borak, "China's Version of TikTok Suspends Users for Speaking Cantonese," *South China Morning Post*, 3 Apr. 2020, https://www.scmp.com/abacus/culture/article/3078365/chinas-version-tiktok-suspends-users-speaking-cantonese.

[121]Tania Branigan, "Protestors Gather in Guangzhou to Protect Cantonese Language," *Guardian*, 25 July 2010. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jul/25/protesters-guangzhou-protect-cantonese.

[122]Zhang Xiaoling, and Zhenzhi Guo, "Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony: The Politics of Dialects in TV Programs in China," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 5, 3 (2012): 300–15.

[123]Shin Watanabe, "China Arrests 130 Ethnic Mongolians over Language Policy Protests," *Nikkei Asia*, 15 Sept. 2020, https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Society/China-arrests-130-ethnic-Mongolians-over-language-policy-protests.

[124]Chris Buckley, "A Tibetan Tried to Save His Language: China Handed Him a Five-Year Sentence," *New York Times*, 22 May 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/world/asia/tibetan-activist-tashi-wangchuk-sentenced.html.

[125]Yao Li, "A Zero-Sum Game? Repression and Protest in China," *Government and Opposition* 54, 2 (2019): 309–35.

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conceptual reliance upon Han supremacy to ensure the consent and support of the majority Han population. Given that the state has only increased its insistence on the hegemony of Mandarin in the past several decades, claims of proximity to Han antiquity remain a viable way for speakers of non-Mandarin local languages to garner cultural authority. As such, these speakers and their protests theoretically represent a challenge to state power. Yet when Cantonese speakers claim their language is older or more venerable than the national language, their claims rely on a historical narrative that reveres purity of lineage and denigrates non-Han groups—a narrative that ultimately reinforces the Han hegemony the state relies upon. In this way, while these *fangyan*-lauding counternarratives challenge the state's insistence that the state alone speaks for the Han identity, they simultaneously aid the state in upholding the cultural dominance of the Han ethnoracial majority. Put bluntly, both protests sought to challenge the hegemony of Mandarin, but only one challenged the hegemony of Han-ness. Given that the state seems to see the latter as a greater threat than the former, it seems logical that counternarratives about linguistic antiquity still afford their adherents a certain amount of power.

This history of hegemonic Han-ness is not only relevant to understanding China today; it also has comparative potential. To return to Flores's example of the United States, after the Bilingual Education movement, educational and bureaucratic institutions were redesigned to uphold bilingualism only insofar as it supported external hegemonic whiteness. What is unique about China is that there is less leeway for diverse expressions of Han-ness in today's PRC than there is for whiteness in the United States. Yet the Cantonese protest reveals that, sometimes, the PRC government must weigh external hegemonic Han-ness against internal hegemonic Han-ness; in those cases, the state may sacrifice its claim to define the latter so as to reinforce the former. These counternarratives about the importance of local languages due to their proximity to antiquity are therefore still instructive in how Han people leverage external Han hegemony to fight a state-defined internal Han hegemony. The state response, on the other hand, implies that the PRC sees challenges to external Han hegemony as the greater threat.

Ultimately, both examples reveal how power relationships between hegemonic and marginalized groups intersect with dominant and marginalized expressions *within* hegemonic groups. The example of China shows us how those power relations play out when state institutions are not only expressly committed to upholding the hegemony of one group, but also one singular expression of it. It allows us to see how powerful institutions give weight to these levers of control, a story that resonates across the world.

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