ABSTRACT Using the October 2008 slapping incident of historian Yan Chongnian 阎崇年 as a case study, this article attempts to contextualize and critically examine the articulation of Han supremacism on the Chinese internet. It demonstrates how an informal group of non-elite, urban youth are mobilizing the ancient Han ethnonym to challenge the Chinese Communist Party’s official policy of multiculturalism, while seeking to promote pride and self-identification with the Han race (han minzu 汉民族) to the exclusion of the non-Han minorities. In contrast to most of the Anglophone literature on Chinese nationalism, this article seeks to employ “Han” as a “boundary-spanner,” a category that turns our analysis of Chinese national identity formation on its head, side-stepping the “usual suspects” (intellectuals, dissidents and the state itself) and the prominent role of the “foreign other” in Chinese ethnogenesis, and instead probing the unstable plurality of the self/othering process in modern China and the role of the internet in opening up new spaces for non-mainstream identity articulation.

On 5 October 2008, the respected 74-year-old historian Yan Chongnian 阎崇年 was signing copies of his new book, *The Kangxi Emperor* (Kangxi dadi 康熙大帝), at the Xinhua Bookstore in Wuxi 无锡. Professor Yan was the founding Director of the Manchu Research Institute (Manxue yanjiusuo 滿学研究所) at the Beijing-based Academy of Social Sciences, but thanks to a series of popular lectures that had been repeatedly played on the primetime *Lecture Room (Baijia jiangtan 百家讲坛)* programme on CCTV-10, he had also become a household name and a wealthy man. When he leaned down to sign a copy of his book, he was suddenly and forcefully slapped in the face twice. As the offender was pulled away he repeatedly shouted “Hanjian, Hanjian” (汉奸 汉奸, Han traitor, Han traitor) before a crowd of shocked onlookers.1

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The offender, a mid-30s clothing entrepreneur from Shanghai named Huang Haiqing 黃海清, was fined 1,000 yuan and sentenced to 15 days in the Wuxi lock-up. The day after his release, he posted a rambling justification for his actions on the Hanwang 汉网 BBS site that he helped to moderate. Writing under the web-name “Great Wind of Han” (dahan zhi feng 大漢之風), Huang Haiqing argued that Yan Chongnian was whitewashing the brutal and barbaric nature of Manchu rule. Equating Professor Yan with David Irving and other Holocaust deniers, Huang asserted that the professor seemed to relish – with a smug, cheerful expression – the description of blood-soaked Manchu victories over the Han in his CCTV lectures, and even referred to the calculated slaughter of innocent Han subjects during the so-called Ten Days at Yangzhou (Yangzhou shiri 楊州十日) as a case of “cultural fusion” (wenhua ronghe 文化融合) between the nomadic and sedentary cultures of China. After being repeatedly snubbed, Huang Haiqing felt he had no other option but to act, lashing out in anger in order to defend the honour of the Han people and seek justice (zhengyi 正义) for past wrongdoings.2

The intellectual establishment in China quickly condemned Huang Haiqing as an irrational and disrespectful hooligan. But the wind of online opinion blew differently. Within hours, a witness reported the incident on the popular Tianya 天涯 BBS site, eliciting a flood of strongly worded replies. While a few criticized this unprovoked attack on a respected elder, most netizens came to Huang’s defence, with one referring to him as a “truly brave warrior.” Yan Chongnian was tagged a “shameless old dog” and “slavish Han traitor,” while others questioned whether he was Han at all. Racial slurs filled the web, with Yan labelled a “Tartar,” “bastard Manchu worm,” and even a “Tartar-coated” (dazi baoyi 鞑子包衣) Han. “Beat him good that old dog!” wrote one blogger: “It should come as no surprise that a Han traitor who has forgotten his origins should be beaten.” Others went a step further in calling for his death: “If it was up to me, I would spill his excrement!”3 Within days, the incident replaced the milk-tainting scandal as the hottest topic of conversation in Chinese cyberspace,
with millions of internet messages and thousands of real dollars raised in support of Huang Haiqing. During this frenzy of activity, numerous online polls expressed widespread support for his actions, including 93 per cent of those who responded to a People’s Daily 人民日报 online poll on 20 October.4

This incident and the fervour of online reaction reflects a complicated mix of emotions among Chinese youth in reform era China: anxiety about the role of the individual within society; jealousy of famous and powerful individuals; frustration about the growing economic disparity within society; a sense of powerlessness and dislocation from the political and economic processes and the state-controlled media; and social atomization following the dizzying privatization and commodification of the last two decades, among other issues. In this article, however, I seek to use the Yan Chongnian incident to explore the articulation of Han nationalism among a small but increasingly vocal segment of Chinese youth. In the process, I will explore how a group of Gramscian “organic intellectuals” outside the mainstream of what Zhang Xudong 张旭东 has termed “CCP Inc.” are mobilizing the ancient Han ethnonym to seek redress for what they perceive to be the marginalization and discrimination of the vast majority of Chinese citizens within the party-state’s multicultural mosaic and national imaginary.5 By contextualizing the discursive terrain in which Han supremacism has incubated and grown, I seek to complicate the established frameworks and assumptions that have guided much of the discussion on contemporary Chinese nationalism and ethnic affairs, while illustrating the rich diversity of viewpoints which have proliferated in the wake of the technological and socioeconomic changes of the last couple of decades. Let me state clearly at the start: this sort of hate-speak must be condemned as a vulgar, aberrant and potentially malignant expression of mainstream Chinese pride and patriotism; yet its articulation has much to tell us about the complex nature of identity formation in contemporary China.

The Long Shadow of Han in the PRC’s Multicultural Mosaic

Before discussing Han supremacism on the Chinese internet, we must come to terms with the equivocal nature of the Han category. Despite the fact that over 1.2 billion people, or 12 per cent of the world’s population, are officially classified

4 See the screenshot posted in reply to Dahan zhi feng, “Why I slapped Yan Chongnian.” As of March 2010, the tide had turned slightly against Huang Haiqing, with 43.8% agreeing that Yan Chongnian deserved to be slapped, 48.7% opposing the slapping but agreeing that people should have the right to express their viewpoints and 7.5% supporting Yan Chongnian, from over 2.5 million votes cast in the same poll. See “Wangyou reyi: ‘Yan Chongnian aida’ dongkou buru dongshou?” (“Netizen hot topic: ‘The beating of Yan Chongnian’: is moving one’s mouth inferior to moving one’s hand?”), Renmin wang, 15 October 2008, at http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/8174455.html.

by the PRC state as “Han” (Han minzu 汉民族, Hanzu 汉族, Hanren 汉人), this massive category of identity is often conflated with “Chinese” among Anglophone scholars and layman. The “thusness” of Han, Steven Harrell wrote in 2001, means that it largely resists analysis and evidence gathering.6 Among those who have sought to probe this ambiguity, Han is often described as an “empty,” “invisible” or “unmarked” signifier, a seemingly “residual category” that marks all those who are not one of the feminized, exotic/erotic and oppressed ethnic minorities.7 Yet, for many in China, especially those born after Mao’s death in 1976, the category of Han is anything but meaningless. Rather, with increasingly frequency, the ethnonym is being mobilized to accomplish specific personal, political and economic goals in a pattern that is not all that dissimilar to the way in which “white” has been employed in the United States following the backlash against affirmative action policies in the post-civil rights era.8

Like the category of whiteness in the United States, Han is historically contingent: constructed, performed and institutionalized within the specific cultural framework of ethnic difference in Chinese tradition. One cannot speak of the Han as a distinct nationality, ethnicity or race (what is today rendered in Chinese as either the Hanzu or Han minzu) prior to the first decade of the 20th century.9 In this sense, Han is a modern construct. Yet the modern ethnonym builds through a complex process of interaction and distinction between the sedentary dwellers of the Central Plains, who commonly referred to themselves as Zhongguo 中国, hua 华, Zhonghua 中华, xia 夏 or huaxia 华夏, and the nomadic pastoralist communities of the Northern steppes, which were originally termed hu 胡 in the Chinese language but also came to be known as the fan 藩, yi 夷 and hu 虏.10 The inherent fungibility of Han as an ethnic and cultural marker reflects the tension between two competing ideologies of political community in imperial China: an inclusive representation of cultural universalism that identifies all those abiding by sedentary Confucian rites (li 礼) and humanity (ren 仁) as Chinese (Zhongguoren 中国人, huaxia or huaren 华人) or Han (Hanren); and an exclusive representation of

ethnocentrism that stressed the fundamental and unbridgeable gap between the inborn natures (xing 性, zhi 质 or qi 气) of the xia (Chinese) and yi (barbarian), or what the 17th-century intellectual Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 identified as the difference between man and horse, snow and jade.11

In the modern period, the articulation of Han supremacism was most notable during China’s transition from empire to nation-state. Here a new generation of Chinese elites grafted the Western discourse of race (minzu 民族, renzhong 人种 and zhongzu 种族) on to this exclusivist tradition, reconfiguring a pure and untainted Han racial community which was now constructed in opposition to what the 18-year-old revolutionary Zou Rong 邹容 termed the “furry and horned” Manchu race (Manzu 满族).12 Following the collapse of the Manchu Qing dynasty in 1912, bands of young revolutionaries meted out racial vengeance, resulting in the death of tens of thousands of Manchu bannermen and officials. Yet, when calmer heads prevailed, Han political elites merged Western notions of liberal pluralism with the Confucian discourse of cultural universalism in declaring China either a Republic of Five Races (wuzu gonghe 五族共和) or a single, unified Chinese nation/race (Zhonghua minzu 中华民族).13

However, Han ethnocentrism remained a distinct problem for Chinese policy makers throughout the 20th century. Some within the Kuomintang sought to forge a myth of shared racial descent between the Han and minority inhabitants of China, while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) followed the Soviet Union in seeking to protect and preserve the frontier minorities from Han domination.14 Although the Communists came to reject the Soviet model of ethnic-based federalism, the PRC created the same sort of “affirmative action empire” that Terry Martin has documented for the Soviet Union.15 During the 1950s, teams of ethnographers set out to locate, classify and protect the individual cultures, languages and identities of the non-Han population of the PRC, resulting in the official recognition of 56 separate nationalities, comprising what eminent sociologist Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 identified as the unique “plurality and organic unity” (duoyuan yiti 多元一体) of the Chinese nation/race.16

The CCP policy of “regional ethnic autonomy” (minzu quyu zizhi 民族区域自治), which was approved at the first National People’s Congress in 1954 and put into law and expanded upon in 1984 and 2001, instituted a series of “preferential treatment policies” (youhui zhengce 优惠政策), which, it was claimed, were

14 Leibold, Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism, pp. 113–75.
“critical to enhancing the relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among different ethnic groups, to upholding national unification, and to accelerating the development of places where regional autonomy is practised and promoting their progress.”

Over the nearly six decades of CCP rule, the Chinese party-state has institutionalized a vast network of minzu-based interest groups: thousands of autonomous councils and authorities, institutes and schools, commissions and committees, publications and presses, and laws and regulations, as well as dozens of museums, parks, troupes, trading cards and now websites for the promotion, performance and preservation of minority cultures and identities. The Han were formally recognized as a part of this multicultural mosaic, but also singled out as a potential problem. In a 1953 directive to Party members, Mao Zedong claimed that “Han chauvinism” (dahan zhuyi 大汉主义) was ripe throughout the Party and among the masses, and needed to be resolutely stamped out. While he warned against “local nationalism” (difang minzuzhuyi 地方民族主义) among the minorities, Mao identified Han chauvinism as the primary contradiction and the key to solving the “national question” (minzu wenti 民族问题).

Despite the fact that many of these affirmative action policies came under attack during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, they were reinstated and expanded during the period of reform following Mao’s death. Seeking to reduce income inequalities while promoting economic modernization, the post-Mao state provides the minorities with easier access to education and political office, certain exceptions from family planning, and special tax breaks and other economic incentives. Not surprisingly, when the party-state altered the rules on ethnic registration to allow mixed marriage and people previously “misclassified” to re-apply, the minority populations ballooned, nearly doubling from 67 million in 1982 to 123 million in 2005. While the gradual process of acculturation in the wake of economic modernization continues to eat away at non-Han identities, these policies have ironically invested minority identities with renewed significance and utility. Hence, in several senses, the policies have backfired. Not only have they failed to alleviate the income gap between minority and Han regions, they have also created resentment among the majority (especially its non-elite and disaffected elements) who decry the party-state’s wasted resources on a handful of “backward barbarians” at the expense of the

18 Gladney, Dislocating China.
larger, more productive Han segments of society. “In the era of affirmative action,” Stevan Harrell wrote in 2001, “Han identity can be a handicap.”

In 1985 an obscure, maverick scholar named Xu Jieshun was one of the first to give voice to this “silent majority.” Having spent much of the Cultural Revolution teaching high school in rural Zhejiang province after being purged from the Central Nationalities Institute (Zhongyang minzu xueyuan 中央民族大学) in Beijing, Xu started to question the place of the Han majority within the party-state’s multicultural mosaic. “Among the hundreds of social scientific research organizations in our country,” he wrote, “the Han are the only nationality that lacks their own specialized organization.” Unlike minority studies, the Han are “often looked at but largely unseen,” long conflated as a part of “Chinese studies” (Zhongguo yanjiu 中国研究) but now worthy of an independent line of inquiry. While Xu continued to envisage the Han as part of a unitary, multi-ethnic Chinese nation, he helped spark a mini-revival of scholarly interest in the Han, which resulted in a number of international conferences and the establishment of China’s first Han Nationality Research Centre in 1996.

Other members of the Chinese academy have attacked the “politicization” (qu zhengzhi hua 去政治化) of the national question in the PRC. Professor Ma Rong 马戎 of Beijing University, for example, contends that the institutionalization of ethnic difference has created new barriers and obstacles to the development of a collective national consciousness, instead creating 56 distinct “tribal collectives” (buzu jiheti 部族集合体).

This semi-official questioning of the party-state’s nationality policies has helped to shine a torch across the long shadow of Han identity in Chinese history. The core Han nationality, one netizen wrote in reply to the posting of one of Ma Rong’s articles on the internet, is too weak. In contrast, the wild wolves of the frontier have been fattened in the pigpen of the CCP’s misguided nationality policies, leading to the recent riots and unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, and creating the possibility that China will follow the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia on to the path to ethnic implosion. Genghis Khan got it right, another blogger wrote, the only effective solution to the national question is racial extermination (miezu 灭族).

Here, the re-emergence of racial narratives in post-Mao China, as articulated in the blood-based nationalism of neo-conservatives like Xiao Gongqin 萧功秦 and

22 Harrell, Ways of Being Ethnic, p. 308.
The Hanfu Movement and the Birth of Hanwang

Following the Chinese party-state’s crackdown on the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, Sinophone critical inquiry took a sharply conservative turn. This conservatism found expression in a strident and masculine militancy directed at standing up to the West and other external enemies, as illustrated by the popularity of the 1996 ultra-nationalist tract China Can Say No (Zhongguo keyi shuo bu 中国可以说) and its recent sequel Unhappy China (Zhongguo bu gaoxing 中国不高兴). Yet, the rejection of the West and its brand of modernity requires an alternative, and here many have turned to their own traditions and cultural heritage, sparking what is commonly referred to as the “root seeking” (xungen 寻根) and “national studies” (guoxue 国学) movements. Many of those over 40 sought solace in Chairman Mao through a misplaced nostalgia for the socialist revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, while the post-Mao generation tended to look even further back to the heroes of the imperial past. Seeking to exploit this search for roots, Chinese television and film producers responded with a range of historical and costume serial dramas, including a series of positive, revisionist reappraisals of the Qing dynasty. Yet, not all young Chinese were satisfied with the onscreen couture and culture depicted in these programmes. For some at least, the imagery displayed did not represent their own self-identity, but rather that of an alien and barbarian Other. And unlike in the past, China’s internet revolution provided these youths with a powerful outlet for venting their aggravation and new forums for exploring non-mainstream alternatives largely free from direct state surveillance.

The 2001 APEC Leaders’ Summit and its traditional photo opportunity served as the initial rallying point for what is today referred to as the Hanfu (汉服, Han clothing) movement. When the official state media referred to the button-up tunics worn by Summit leaders as “Tang-style” clothing (tangzhuang 唐装), a group of netizens cried foul. In donning these colourful tunics, APEC leaders

28 Song Qiang, Zhang Zangzang and Qiao Bian, Zhongguo keyi shuo bu (China Can Say No) (Beijing: Zhonghua gongshang lianhe chubanshe, 1996); Song Xiaojun et al., Zhongguo bu gaoxing (Unhappy China) (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2009).
30 In contrast to the perception of a panopticon-style censorship regime in China, a recent study found “a great deal of politically sensitive material survives in the Chinese blogosphere, and chances for survival can likely be improved with knowledge and strategy.” See Rebecca MacKinnon, “China’s censorship 2.0,” First Monday, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2009), at http://firstmonday.org/hKIT/bin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2378/2089.
were not honouring traditional Chinese culture but rather, in the words of one critic, “putting back on the braids of racial enslavement.”

Giving voice to this fear, a blogger by the web-name Huaxia’s Descendent (huaxia xuemai 华夏血脉) penned an essay entitled “A lost civilization: the Han race’s traditional clothing,” which was widely circulated among China’s rapidly growing internet population. The author blamed the decline of traditional Han clothing on the Manchu conquest, which was responsible for “sending the Han race’s Mandarin hats and silk robes, which had existed continuously for two to three thousand years, straight to the grave.” In order to consolidate their control over China, the Qing dynasty imposed the Manchu hair and clothing style on the Han people through the famous Queue Order (tifaling 剃发令) of 1645. By imposing alien customs on them, the Manchus sought to humiliate the Han, destroying their self-respect, self-confidence and sense of superiority in order to pave the way for Manchu rule.

For this blogger and other supporters of the Hanfu movement, the Qing dynasty was a period of “alien rule” (yizu tongzhi 异族统治) at the hands of an uncivilized, ignorant and barbarian race, and despite the restoration of Han rule in 1912, the Han continued to unwittingly wear and promote the Manchu magua (马褂, horse jacket) and qipao (旗袍, banner gown) as their traditional clothing. In place of these nomadic vestments, supporters of Hanfu called for a return to the intricate silk robes (shenyi 深衣) worn prior to the Manchu invasion. Why, they repeatedly claim, should the Japanese and Koreans still take pride in their own traditional clothing and the once mighty Han not? Being Han, another supporter declared in 2005, means more than simply ticking the “Han box” on official forms, what another blogger referred to as the concept of “empty Han” (xuhua Hanzu 虚化汉族).

Li Minhui 李敏辉, who writes under the alias Li Li 李理, was one of the early pioneers of Hanfu. He is currently a Beijing-based reporter for the state-owned China International Publishing Group, but seems to spend much of his time online. In a 2007 interview, Li admitted that the issue of Han clothing cannot be separated from the larger issues of racial identity and political power in China. The restoration of Han clothing, he argued, was a fundamental part of the movement to revive the Han race, and here a thorough re-evaluation of Manchu rule was fundamental to the restoration of Han pride and

self-consciousness.\(^35\) Han clothing was but the form (\textit{xing} 形) of the movement, while the Han race was its spirit (\textit{shen} 神).\(^36\) Together with 45 other supporters of Han revivalism, Li helped to launch the website Hanwang (“Han Network,” originally www.haanen.com and today www.hanminzu.com) in March 2003 to promote Han clothing and this larger Han supremacist agenda.\(^37\)

Following an initial series of media reports, Hanwang’s membership soared, reaching 20,000 by the end of 2004.\(^38\) Soon scores of other internet sites dedicated to the revival of traditional Han culture and identity were established across Mainland China, Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora. Today there are over 40 Chinese and English language websites dedicated to the discussion of Han or Huaxia culture and identity, which occasionally spills over into public ceremonies, photo shoots and more mainstream public discourse. In March 2007, a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference even sought to pass a motion declaring Hanfu China’s national costume.\(^39\) In support of the movement, Han clothing can now be purchased for as little as 300 yuan online or in an increasing number of shops in major Chinese cities. The allure of traditional clothing and culture attracts many to the movement, but as one early Hanwang blogger reminded fellow members in 2005: “From its inception, Hanwang was never a purely Han clothing movement,” but rather a forum for exposing those “fake Chinese elements (including those masked Manchu and Mongol descendants)” who are actively hindering the restoration of Han power and consciousness.\(^40\) The movement, the prolific blogger Zhao Fengnian 赵丰年 wrote in early 2007, “does not seek revenge against any minority races,” but rather the restoration of the natural order – bringing mutual benefit to both Han and minorities by destroying the violent, oppressive and pestilent culture of the nomads while

35 Hu Xinliang, “Meiyou Hanxin, jiu meiyou huifu” (“There is no Han clothing without a Han heart”), \textit{Sanyuefeng}, spring 2007, as reposted at http://qkzz.net/Announce/announce.asp?BoardID=16500&ID=529409.


restoring the refined wisdom and magnanimous culture of the Yellow Emperor’s descendents.41

According to Hanwang’s constitution,42 which was posted on the website in April 2006 by Li Minhui, the site and its members “support the leadership of the CCP and the Chinese government, ardently love the socialist system, and abide by all Chinese laws and government policies.” But in explicit violation of these policies, the guiding principle behind the website is described as “Han-centrism” (*Han benwei* 汉本位 or *Han benwei zhuyi* 汉本位主义), the belief in “the paramount importance of racial righteousness and the upholding of the Han race’s position by defending and promoting the legitimate interests and struggles of the Chinese.” Expanding on this core philosophy, the constitution asserts that Han culture is the world’s most advanced and its race is one of the strongest and most prosperous. While admitting that China is a multi-ethnic state, the Han are said to be the “core race” (*zhuti minzu* 主体民族) in China, meaning that the interests of the Han race are equivalent to the interests of China as a whole and the welfare of its people. The Han are described as “one of the purest blooded races in the world,” with over 5,000 years of racial inheritance. Hanwang members are committed to distinguishing and safeguarding the traditional boundary between China (*hua*) and the barbarians (*yi*) and view those historical periods of non-Han rule, especially the Mongol Yuan and the Manchu Qing dynasties, as periods of racial oppression and decline, making only those individuals who thoroughly resisted alien invasion true national heroes (*minzu yingxiong* 民族英雄). In the constitution, the promotion and upholding of traditional Han clothing and culture is only listed at the end of these core principles.

In sharp contrast to the state’s tacit approval and active involvement in the revival of traditional Chinese culture, the Hanist ideology behind this and other websites has set off a few alarm bells among the intellectual establishment. As Professor Peng Yongjie 彭永捷, Deputy Director of the Philosophy Department at Renmin University, admitted in a 2005 interview, Han culture is already the collective identity of all the ethnic groups in China and thus does not possess any unique features that are not shared by the rest of the great Zhonghua nation. Asserting that it is inappropriate to advocate the promotion of a pure Han consciousness, Professor Peng highlighted the fact that as early as the Spring and Autumn Period, Han culture and people melded together with the ethnic minorities making its assimilationist power one of the most important characteristics of the Chinese people.43 Similarly, Beijing-based

41 Zhao Fengnian, “Hanfu chongxian yu Zhongguo de wenyi fuxing” ("The reappearance of Han clothing and China’s cultural renaissance"), *Hanwenhua wang*, 8 February 2007, at http://www.han-people.com/bbs/article/articleshow.asp?id=235&name=%D5%D4%B7%E1%C4%EA&classname=%C8A%CF%C4%8F%CD%C5d.
43 Shi Yi and Dong Yiran, “Why we joined the Hanfu movement.”
academic Zhang Xian 张跣 argues that the promotion of Han clothing is a hollow “totem” which serves to mislead and deceive people about the underlying racist and regressive nature of the movement. By stressing the purity and superiority of Han culture, the Hanists are denigrating rather than reviving national consciousness, and thus represent a deviation and distortion from the mainstream of cultural nationalism in modern China.44

One would be mistaken in believing that all Hanfu supporters share the political agenda embedded in the Hanwang constitution. Rather, the movement encompasses a very diverse group of individuals who find different sorts of meaning and enjoyment in the category of Han. Generally speaking, its core supporters are white-collar workers or students who live in major urban centres along the east coast and came of age during the conspicuous consumerism and political conservatism of the post-Tiananmen era. Unlike the Long March generation of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, or the Cultural Revolution generation of today’s Chinese leaders, these 20 and 30 year-olds have little, if any, direct exposure to China’s vast ethnic frontiers and rural countryside, having experienced neither the Long March nor years in rural exile as sent-down youth (zhiqing 知青). For many Hanists, the category of Han and its cultural attachments seem to provide a refuge – a sense of community, belonging and shared purpose – from the social dislocation, income disparity and market competition which marks the social malaise and tedium of modern urban life.

However the commonalities stop here. The movement not only crosses national boundaries but also a range of interests and objectives: teenage girls who enjoy Japanese-style cosplay and the romance of traditional clothing, chivalry and needlework; students and practitioners of traditional art forms like the guqin (古琴 long zither) and calligraphy, and philosophies like Confucianism and Taoism; struggling entrepreneurs (like Huang Haiqing) who are seeking their fortune through the manufacturing and sale of Han clothing; amateur historians and military buffs who enjoy online role-playing games like the NetEase administered Westward Journey and martial arts films like Hero; and hardened propagandists (like Li Minhui) seeking political power and the digital bully pulpit to promote a new vision of Chinese society. Ideologically, Hanists range from Maoist sympathizers on the left to hard-core fascists who pine for the rise of a Chinese Hitler; professionally, they can be found among students, teachers, reporters, lawyers and even low-level government officials.

This diversity often leads to bitter disagreements and infighting – one of the most notable being over what qualifies as authentic Han clothing and the extent to which it can and should be adapted to meet contemporary needs and modern tastes – which fill the pages of these websites and even spill over into real life. In June 2005, after Li Minhui became the website’s manager and legal licensee,

a power struggle broke out among the committee of management, with Li Minhui eventually banishing the malcontents from the site in early 2008. The exiles accused him of violating the democratic principles imbedded in the Hanwang constitution, and then went onto establish a rival Hanwang in May 2008 on a different internet server.\textsuperscript{45} As of March 2010, the original Hanwang (www.hanminzu.com) has nearly 117,000 registered members (a tenfold increase since 2007), an average of around 1,000 postings per day and a total of 2.4 million postings on its BBS,\textsuperscript{46} while the rival and newer Hanwang (www.haanen.net.cn) has only 5,000 members and 88,000 posts on its BBS in late 2008. Both sites, like many other parts of the Chinese internet, were “harmonized”\textsuperscript{(bei hexie 被和谐, that is, closed down)} following the ethnic violence in Ürümqi in July 2009, but only the original Hanwang was able to re-assert itself quickly, immediately establishing a temporary site before regaining full operation on its URL within a couple of months.

One can only speculate about the total number of Han supremacists in China and abroad today. The regular contributors to these websites probably do not exceed a few thousand individuals, but the number of people who periodically visit or quietly sympathize with at least some of the ideas expressed on Hanwang could number in the millions, if not tens of millions. This larger level of support, and its increasing appeal, was evident in the public furore over the Yan Chongnian incident.

The Slap and the Echo of Han Supremacism on the Chinese Internet

For Han nationalists like Huang Haiqing and Li Minhui the 1980s and 1990s were a dark period, as minority consciousness flowered throughout the PRC following the death of Mao and Deng Xiaoping’s policy reforms. It was hoped that the new century would mark an important turning point, with new communication technologies allowing the message of Han supremacism to circumvent the state-controlled education system and mainstream media and arouse the patriotic spirit of all Han compatriots. Here, the “mighty smack” of Huang (Great Wind of Han) Haiqing on the cheeks of Professor Yan Chongnian instilled new energy, focus and unity into the Hanist community. The slap was “like the opening salvo of the 1911 Revolution,” Hanwang’s semi-official history declares, “a symbolic example of the Huaxia’s revival which awoke countless members of the Han family from their slumber.”\textsuperscript{47} Seeking to rouse others out of their apathetic stupor, one Hanwang blogger wrote after the incident:

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\textsuperscript{47} Wugen qingjing, “Concise chronological history of Hanwang.”
“Think of those days when our forces could leap a thousand li like a tiger, and desired to fill their famished bellies on barbarian flesh while happily drinking barbarian blood to quench our thirst!” However other more cautious elements worried about the effects of the incident on the Hanfu movement, arguing that it could provide an excuse for its critics to attack, a fear that seemed to materialize when Hanwang was temporarily shut down.

The Yan Chongnian incident, much like the March 2008 Lhasa unrest and the July 2009 Ürümqi riots, provided a clarion call for action among Han supremacists and an opportunity to promote their message more broadly across the Chinese internet. Yan Chongnian had been on their radar since 2005, when one Hanwang blogger claimed the Yan lineage sought to strike his name from the clan’s genealogy because of his heretical views on Qing history. Yan’s “nameless eulogizing” about the accomplishments of the Manchu Qing was part of a larger scheme to “distort understanding and hijack historical truth” in the PRC education system. As evidence, the Ministry of Education delisted the great Han warriors Yue Fei and Wen Tianxiang as “national heroes” in 2002, while textbooks now referred to the period of wuhu luanchua (five barbarians create chaos in China) as wuhu ruhua (the five barbarians enter China). And now, according to hardcore Hanists like Huang Haiqing, Yan Chongnian and other historians were attempting to re-write the history of what was long accepted as the darkest and most calamitous period in Chinese history. The Manchus not only robbed the Han people of their wealth and butchered countless innocent civilians but also allowed the Western powers to divide, humiliate and colonize China even further. In reform era China, this movement to eulogize the Qing spread quickly throughout the media, television and internet, with countless “braid-dramas” praising the Qing and its Manchu rulers as the greatest dynasty and emperors in Chinese history.

The Hanists view Yan Chongnian’s CCTV lectures as the crowning moment in this revisionist plot. Following the slapping incident, a list of quotations


49 Lantian, “Yan Chongnian bei da shijian dui Hanfu yundong you he yinxiang?” (“What effect will the Yan Chongnian slapping incident have on the Hanfu movement?”), Tianhan, 9 October 2008, at http://www.tianhan.com/bbs/viewthread.php?tid=34693&highlight=%D1%D6%B3%E7%C4%EA.


52 Zhao Fengnian, “Lun manqing canyu shili de qianzai weihai bing buyuayu taidu shili” (“Discussion of how the latent danger of the remaining forces of the Qing is no less serious than the forces of Taiwan independence”), Hanwang, 23 June 2009, at http://www.hanminzu.com/Article/ssyw/200906/703_5.html; kingsreturn, “A difficult choice: the rise of Hanism and what it warns us.”
attributed to Yan rapidly circulated the internet, claiming, among other things, that he stated:

In the past, today and in the future, the Chinese people should be eternally proud of the Manchu Qing dynasty for three reasons: first, they promoted national fusion, otherwise, China would still be a purely Han state which would have impeded its historical development; second, it perpetuated Chinese culture, otherwise, China’s 5,000-year-old civilization would have suffered destruction; and lastly, it preserved social harmony, otherwise China’s population base and economic resources would have been greatly eroded.53

In other quotations, Yan appears to argue that the glories of the Manchu Qing far exceeded those of the Han, Tang and Ming dynasties, while also disparaging Han clothing as incapable of embodying the national essence.

Yan Chongnian quickly labelled these citations a fabrication, but others remained suspicious. There was irrefutable evidence of Manchu atrocities during the Qing, and Yan’s lectures and books clearly overlooked Han suffering while attempting to downplay incidents of racial conflict. Such concerns spread well beyond the Hanwang community, with the prolific, mainstream female blogger and young media personality Li Yang黎阳 writing: “If someone went to Israel to promote Mein Kampf, or Mecca to promote the sale of pork, or the Nanjing Massacre Museum to advocate the Great East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere and got smacked, wouldn’t they say he deserved it?”54 Another blogger asserted on Tianya that at least 100 million Han were brutally massacred at the hands of the Manchus, reducing their overall population from 150 to 50 million, a crime that far exceeds the 25 million killed by the Japanese during the Second World War.55

For the Hanist community, the official condemnation of the slap reflected the growing cultural, commercial and political power of the Manchus in China. Making repeated reference to the massive swelling of the Manchu population since the expansion of preferential treatment policies during the 1980s, they tended to view them as a dangerous “enemy within” or hidden “fifth-column,” similar to the Jews in Hitler’s Europe or the “capitalist roaders” in Mao’s China. Hanwang and other Hanist websites are filled with facile and at times ridiculous conspiracy theories about the latent and secret nature of Manchu power in Chinese society, with one Hanwang blogger claiming to have exposed the hidden power structure of the Manchus in the Beijing cultural and literary circles, with Lecture Room producer Wan Wei万卫 but one prominent example of a “Manchu with a Han surname” (Hanxing manren汉姓满人).56 While some

53 “Yan Chongnian yulu” (“Yan Chongnian quotes”), Tianya, 5 October 2008 at http://cache.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1437253.shtml.
54 Li Yang, “Da Yan Chongnian yi zuiba suan qing de” (“It was too light to only slap Yan Chongnian on a single cheek”), 10 October 2008, reposted at http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Class22/200810/53652.html.
56 Tianxia zhi zhong, “Jiekai Beijing deng da chengshi quyi yulun wenyi zhi gejiu de gaizi! Bingshan yijiao eryi” (“Lifting the lid on the structure of folk arts, film, public opinion and arts and literature in
called for the rebuilding of the Great Wall to keep these “braided, Tartar pigs” from destroying China, others argued that this is exactly what the Manchus and their Han slaves are conspiring to carry out. In fact, one finds a distinct tension within their discourse between the desire to expel or exterminate “barbarian” elements in order to preserve the purity of the race, and a reluctant acceptance that assimilation is crucial for maintaining the territorial integrity of the national geo-body.

Another Hanwang blogger claimed that the ultimate goal of the Manchus and their supporters was the restoration of the Qing dynasty or, at a minimum, their independence from China, making them a bigger threat to Chinese sovereignty than the Tibetan, Taiwanese or Uyghur separatists. Using loopholes in the CCP’s nationalities policy, the Manchu now dominated CCTV and other media and cultural platforms, while permeating key central government ministries and local administrations as illustrated by the Shenyang city government’s festival of Qing culture and the erection of a bronze statue of Emperor Pu Yi to celebrate the 360-year anniversary of the Manchu conquest. Entire villages in the north-east and Hebei, it was claimed, were now under Manchu control. And they are a clever and two-faced lot:

On the one hand, they want to split the country like the Jews, while on the other hand they shout loudly about “national unity” and the need to strike down “Han chauvinism” on other websites. Who is unmasking them as “Jews,” and who are the Nazis? Who is criticizing the Manchu Qing, and who is promoting contradictions among the races (minzu)? This is truly a case of a thief calling “stop thief.” How despicable!

In another posting, Zhao Fengnian pointed to the “American Revive Manchukuo Organization” and its “Official Website of the Manchukuo Temporary Government” (www.manchukuo.org) as evidence that the plot to break away from China was already well advanced with strong international support. And he, like others in the Hanist camp, makes frequent reference to the Manchus as the “Jews of China.”

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57 Wumaodang, “Concerning the ‘Great Wind of Han’s’ surprise attack on Yan Chongnian.”


59 Zhao Fengnian, “Discussion of how the latent danger of the remaining forces of the Qing is no less serious than the forces of Taiwan independence.”

60 See for but one example, Zhao Fengnian, “Tantan wo ruhe congcong Zhonghua zhuyizhe biancheng
The blame for rising Manchu power was placed squarely at the feet of the CCP and its “foolish policy of preferential racial treatment.” In order to placate the desire for independence, one Hanwang blogger claimed that the CCP offered a *quid pro quo*: if the minorities do not seek independence, the party-state will offer them a series of special rights and policies. Yet, these shortsighted and politically motivated policies have backfired. Rather than reducing inequality and ethnic sentiment, these have intensified. As a result, a Uyghur merchant can stagger around the streets of Shenzhen wielding a knife because it is part of his culture, and officials turn a blind eye to the robbing of Han merchants at a Yunnan farmers’ market in the name of national unity. Far from being the “backbone of the nation,” the Han majority have become second-class citizens in their own country, or even worst, fourth-class citizens, as the “Han independent blog” asserts, placing them below, first, the Europeans, Americans, Koreans and those minorities that seek independence; second, the Hong Kongese, Macauese, Taiwanese, CCP officials, rich businessmen and the ordinary citizens of Asia, Africa and Latin America; and third, those ethnic minorities who do not seek independence from China.

Among the affirmative action policies, the Hanists most frequently criticize those related to education and population control. On the national college entrance exam (*gaokao* 高考), it is claimed on Hanwang, minority students in Western China require only 200 points while Han students need 500 points. As a result, low quality and uncultured people are creating a pestilential atmosphere that hinders the development of advanced culture in Chinese universities. By providing exceptions to the one-child policy, the minority population has soared from a mere 3 per cent of the population in 1949 to 10 per cent today, while the historical trend of Hanification (*Hanhua* 汉化) has been reversed. Like the parable of the boiling frog, the CCP’s population policies have steadily sapped the energy, will and spirit of the Han, moving them slowly towards “genocide” (*miezhong* 灭种). It is strange, another anonymous but widely circulated posting asserts, how Kublai Khan’s Mongol Yuan dynasty, Hitler’s Nazi regime and Mahathir’s Malaysia each implemented policies to preserve the power and privilege of their own race, while the Chinese government is promoting the interests of

footnote continued

61 kingsreturn, “A difficult choice: the rise of Hanism and what it warns us.”
63 Wumaodang, “Concerning the ‘Great Wind of Han’s surprise attack on Yan Chongnian.”
the ethnic minorities over those of the Han majority. In America, another blogger writes, the term “ethnic minority” (shaoshu minzu 少数民族) is a derogatory insult, but in China it is a lofty title which signifies a high position and special treatment.

The more hardcore elements of the Hanist community argue that the Manchus and other minorities are “parasites” (jisheng 寄生) or “garbage worms” (laji chongzhi 垃圾虫豸) looking to bore into the superior and pure blood of the Han. For them, blood is the most important marker of Han identity, and the CCP’s policy of racial fusion (minzu ronghe 民族融合) is nothing short of “mas-turbatory self-defeatism.” Here some argue that the discerning of blood lineage (xuetong 血统), namely the maintenance of an unsullied patrilineal kinship system through the inheritance of surnames and keeping of genealogies, is the most important criterion for distinguishing the Chinese from the barbarians. A person’s character and culture can alter, but blood is innate. While it was only natural for primitive races like the Manchu Tartars to seek fusion with a superior race like the Han, this sort of intermingling must be resisted at all costs, as “melting produces putrid water, causing one to seem dirty, and preventing one from seeming beautiful and sweet, let alone sweeter than those other races.” “A single race radiates glory,” writes one Hanist, “while the melting of various large and small races does not dazzle.” Most Han nationalists begrudgingly acknowledge some degree of intermarriage with non-Han elements, but as one of the original co-founders of Hanwang wrote in July 2007, these tiny amounts of alien blood are like “drops in the ocean” that fail to desalinate the purity of Huaxia blood and instead vanish without a trace. “Is it possible,” another contributor wrote in reply, “for a single drop of black ink to contaminate the entire Pacific Ocean?”

In fact, the extent of Han racial purity is hotly debated among those that frequent websites like Hanwang with the clear reality of centuries of cultural and racial hybridization difficult to ignore. A number of replies to the above posts challenge the significance of blood and racial purity to Han identity. Several argue that culture is more important in determining minzu identity, with one blogger claiming these threads smack of Nazism and would only serve to deceive

67 mcbfaa, “The cross-purposes of the nationalities policies.”
69 Qingping jushi, “Han minzu jiangde jiu shi xuetong chuancheng” (“The Han race that we talk about is the product of blood inheritance”), Hanwang, 18 December 2008, at http://hanminzu.com/Article/jsdt/200812/114.html.
70 Xuanyuan bingrou, “Concerning the question of ‘superior and inferior races’.”
the Han people while failing to end the systematic discrimination against them. According to this writer, it is a proven fact that the Han had multiple origins and only island races like the Japanese can maintain racial purity. By stressing the unsullied nature of Han blood, it is more difficult to assimilate the minorities, asserts another reply; it was during periods of barbarian invasion that the process of Hanification was at its greatest. What is required now is more, not less, assimilation with the ethnic minorities.72

Some Hanists make a distinction between blood lineage (xuetong) and consanguinity (xueyuan 血缘) in their writing. Blood lineage refers to the maintenance of patrilineal surnames, genealogies and associated cultural traditions, while consanguinity is a biological concept and impossible beyond the small scope of endogamous clans and tribes.73 Writing in reply to the question “Why are we called Han?” another blogger claims that the science of blood analysis is distracting the Han people from recognizing their common “blood lineage and culture” (xuetong wenhua 血统文化): “On this account, our surnames and the worship of our ancestors each Qingming 清明 are clear proof that we still remember where we came from and who are our descendants, and thus we cannot be considered unfaithful simply because there are a number of outsiders among the women of our clan.”74 Yet others writing on Hanwang and other Hanist websites have interpreted (or rather misinterpreted) newly published genetic research as scientific evidence that the Han are the world’s purest race.75

The Yan Chongnian incident provoked a great deal of discussion about the relationship between Hanist ideology and Nazi-style racism. In a real-time online interview hosted by Tianya after the incident,76 Huang Haiqing’s critics labelled him a shallow, limelight-chasing racist, committed to the same sort of ethnic cleansing as Hitler and Saddam Hussein, and queried whether his own lineage and ancestors were completely free from alien pollution. Huang replied by denying that he had ever advocated a “bloodline theory,” attacking his critics as the real racists while seeking the moral high-ground by claiming that he slapped Yan Chongnian in order to protect universal human consciousness and morality, and

72 Ibid.
76 “Dahan zhi feng zuoke tianya zatan da wangyou wen” (“The Great Wind of Han answers Netizen’s questions as a guest from rambling talk from the four corners”), Tianya, 24 October 2008, as reposted at http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Class18/200810/55941.html.
that he would have acted in the same manner regardless of the offender’s profession, sex or ethnicity. In Chinese cyberspace, terms like “Nazi,” “racist” and “Hitler” are ubiquitous idioms of slander, bandied about with little understanding of their original context and meaning in the West. The slap, Huang Haiqing repeatedly stressed during the interview, had nothing to do with blood, race or China’s ethnic minorities; rather it was a call for complete equality among all Chinese citizens.

Han as a Boundary-spanner

The wealth of new research on ethnic and national identity in China has helped to paint a clearer picture of what Lucian Pye first identified in 1996 as the “inchoate and incoherent” nature of Chinese nationalism.77 For Pye and others, nationalist sentiment was a tool of state manipulation, used to manufacture public opinion and fill the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of Maoist-inspired socialism. More recently, scholars have focused our attention on another sort of nationalism: spontaneous, grassroots nationalism, and the way the internet and other communication technologies have unleashed a struggle for control over the symbols and signifiers of national identity between the state and civil society elements. In incidents like the popular reaction to the 1999 Belgrade Embassy bombing and the 2005 Japanese textbook controversy, China watchers speak of an angry yet increasingly confident Chinese youth seeking retribution for the so-called century of humiliation (bainian guochi 百年国耻), and a new willingness to call their government into question over its own duplicity with foreign powers. Here we are witnessing not only the appropriation of state-sponsored patriotism but at times its open subversion.78

Writing in Nations and Nationalism in 2009, Allen Carlson provided a forceful critique of the existing academic literature on Chinese nationalism. He argues that we have narrowed our intellectual gaze to the point of a largely meaningless semantic exercise which seeks to identify the unique features of Chinese nationalism, be it “defensive nationalism,” “wounded nationalism” or “Confucian nationalism.”79 In their attempt to define it clearly, scholars have tended to reify otherwise fluid categories of identity, while shying away from viewing the politics of identity in China as a performative process with a diverse set of positions, assumptions and voices. In particular, Carlson notes, the literature on

Chinese nationalism is dominated by “exclusionary dichotomies,” which attempt to demarcate the boundaries between those who are on the inside and the outside of the national divide.

As a cultural sentiment, nationalism seeks to identify where the lines of the community stop. Yet this boundary-making process is never static, single-layered or uni-dimensional: boundaries can shift (often rapidly) depending on the context. To date, the literature on Chinese nationalism has tended to focus almost exclusively on the role of the “foreigner,” here defined largely in terms of the “West” (particularly America but also including Japan), as the dominant Other against which the Chinese Self is constructed, regardless of whether one is talking about state or popular expressions. Similarly, the pioneering work of Frank Dikötter on the discourse of race in China focuses on the role of the “outside barbarians” (waiyi 外夷), chiefly Westerners and Africans, to the exclusion of the “inside barbarians” (neiyi 内夷), as a result of a misplaced assumption that the lack of marked physical differences between the Han majority and the ethnic minorities “precluded the elaboration of racial theories.”

The “Chinese” versus “foreigner” binary hinders a critical appreciation of the dynamic and fractured nature of national identity formation in China. Here the Han ethnic label and its institutionalization as a part of the PRC’s multicultural mosaic functions as a latent “boundary-spanner,” with the potential to destabilize and re-orientate ethnic sentiment in unusual directions, while also unsettling tidy assumptions about the “zero-sum structure of feeling” that divides “China’s national aesthetic” into interactive binary opposites. Incidents like the Olympic torch relay galvanized anti-foreign vitriol and a shared sense of “Chineseness” (Zhongguoren 中國人). Yet, recent ethnic violence in Lhasa and Ürümqi has also shifted the venom of China’s “angry youth” (fengqing 愤青) in the direction of a more familiar Other, the “barbarian” within. It is during times like these that this small group of Han supremacists find themselves at the centre of online attention, attracting thousands of new visitors to their websites while plying them with easy scapegoats and answers for the complex wellspring of frustrations seething beneath the surface of contemporary Chinese society.

80 Ibid. p. 29.
83 Callahan, China: The Pessoptimist Nation, pp. 158 and passim.