

## *Rethinking Han Chinese Identity*

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### *Abstract*

This article explores what we can learn about the history of the Han Chinese by bringing textual sources into conversation with current genetic research. It looks first at what Chinese wrote about their “we group” versus foreign others, especially in the long Middle Period from 400 to 1500, with attention to social and political context. It then turns to the genetic evidence, both from contemporary populations in the PRC and from ancient DNA from archaeological sites. When we look at both sets of evidence together, we are better able to evaluate the significance of each and come to a more grounded understanding of the growth of the Han Chinese ethnic group over time.

The Han Chinese are the largest ethnic group in the world by a wide margin, coming to more than 1.2 billion people. Over time, the Han Chinese expanded the territory they occupied, especially to the south, while the ethnic groups there in early times gradually shrank in their share of the total population of the region. To understand the growth of the Han population and the evolution of Han Chinese identity, how much weight should be given to Chinese ways of thinking about their we group? To their kinship and marriage practices? To their economic practices? To their history of migration? To the successive states that controlled huge territories and aided their migration? It will take a book to consider how these all worked together. In this article I take just one part: ways of thinking about self versus others, interpreted in the light of

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