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Mullaney, Thomas S., "“The Rise of the Hans”: A Critique" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 913.
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“The Rise of the Hans”: A Critique

January 21, 2011 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

By Thomas S. Mullaney

“*Rise of the Hans*,” by Joel Kotkin, is a troubling article to find published in a high-profile venue such as *Foreign Policy*. It reinforces misleading ideas about China and is problematic for a variety of specific reasons, the biggest of which has to do with Kotkin’s use of key terms.

Words are the building blocks out of which all arguments are constructed. If these building blocks are made of compromised or substandard material, then even the most carefully crafted, intentionally provocative, or aesthetically pleasing arrangement thereof cannot prevent the structure from ultimately collapsing. Approaching this article as a “building inspector,” and looking closely at the substance of each of the most important, load-bearing words—race, ethnicity, nationalism, tribalism, Han, and Chinese—there is only one conclusion to be reached: a complete and immediate evacuation of the building, because the structure cannot hold. For Kotkin, “race” and “ethnicity” are interchangeable concepts, as are “nationalism” and “tribalism,” and “the Han” and “the Chinese.” None of these commensurations are accurate, however.

Let’s consider Kotkin’s use of the terms “race” and “ethnicity,” for example, both of which he employs to describe the Han (or “Hans” in his phrasing), who are his main concern. Race is a specifically biological conceptualization of collective identity in which greatest weight is given to consanguinity and the idea of genetic predisposition—i.e., that people “are the way they are” because of their genetic make-up. It is further tied to a specifically hierarchical view of human difference, in which certain biologically defined communities are regarded as superior to others. What’s more, the concept of race disallows for the possibility of changing identities within the span of a single lifetime (which is one of the reasons that acts of genocide have almost always involved defining the targets of extermination in terms of biological, i.e., unchangeable, difference). Ethnicity, by contrast, is a form of collective identity in which the primary criteria of identification are not biological or body-based, but cultural, affective, and sometimes linguistic. Indeed, the very origins of the term are in part related to efforts by social scientists who rejected primordialist or biologically determined ideas of identity, the idea that people “are who they are” or “act the way they act” because of their genetic make-up. As has been amply demonstrated by anthropologists, ethnic boundaries can form between communities that, from an outsider’s perspective, do not seem to exhibit strong cultural or linguistic differences. Likewise, ethnic groupings can emerge that encompass communities that, from an outsider’s perspective, seem to differ markedly. What’s more, unlike biological notions of identity, it is understood as possible for a person to undergo ethnic transformation within a lifetime (which itself is one of the reasons that assimilationist programs have historically defined their targets in terms of ethnic, i.e., fungible or plastic, difference). So what kind of identity is Han, then? Is it a race? Is it an ethnicity? Is it a tribe? Is it the same thing as “the Chinese”? The author evades these questions entirely and, in a bizarre move, lumps them all together. For Kotkin, the Han is a kind of “3-in-1 shampoo” of human identities: it is a “race” *and* a “cohesive ethnic group” *and* “a tribal superpower” all in one package. What a deal!

Beyond this type of basic, linguistic structural flaw, the article is virtually an evidence-free zone that amounts to little more than a long, unoriginal cliché that trades on prejudicial stereotypes. Although this might not be fair, since the author may well not have selected it himself, the most direct way to summarize the article’s characterization of Han is by looking closely at the image that accompanies the piece: a Photoshopped montage of expressionless Hu Jintao clones staring back at the reader with a creepy equanimity.



Whoever at *Foreign Policy* thought of this image—in particular, thought of using the metaphor of clones—captured the essence of Kotkin’s argument flawlessly: the Han, we are meant to believe, is a singular mass of physically, politically, ideologically, socially, culturally, and linguistically indistinguishable replicas, one that brings to mind the clone troopers of Kamino in *Star Wars* or, perhaps, hive-like, sci-fi adversaries, such as the “Buggers” in Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Trilogy*, the Arachnids of planet Klendathu in Robert Heinlen’s *Starship Troopers* (who, incidentally, was writing in the aftermath of the Korean War and was also fascinated by the racist idea of an ego-less, self-less, and homogenous Asian adversary), or the Borg of *Star Trek* (a tendency that some commentators have explicitly used to refer to the PRC—something that one of the co-founders of *China Beat* criticized in a piece that appeared in *Foreign Policy* itself last year). Kotkin omits, or perhaps does not know, that the Han is one of the least homogenous groups history has ever known: contained within its ranks are people who literally cannot understand each other’s spoken languages and people who—let’s just be basic about this—exhibit the same sort of diversity of worldviews as one would expect to find among a group of one billion people *anywhere on earth*. To imagine even for a second that one billion people could ever think alike, believe alike, act alike, or look alike is a delusion.

But Kotkin doesn’t mention any of this. Rather, like each of the eerily coordinated and unflinching sci-fi adversaries mentioned above, the “Han race” (or ethnicity, or tribe, or...) possesses a “very homogeneous worldview” that, if we follow the author’s advice, should strike a mixture of admiration and fear in the “less tribally cohesive, more fragmented West.” Even the author’s closing admonition—that we must, in part, adopt the ways of the Han in order to counteract its rise to global domination—reads like something straight out of the imagination of Card and Heinlen. In place of a conclusion, let me finish with a brief juxtaposition of passages:

Kotkin: “English-speakers may not straddle the world like the 19th century empire-makers, but they are likely to remain first among equals well into the current century. Ultimately, this will depend on how the English-speaking world evolves and learns to embrace its multiracial population without losing its sense of a common identity. Ideally, the Anglosphere can offer an alternative that embraces not merely a language but a set of historically achieved values such as democracy and freedom of speech, religion, and markets. Already many of the English-speaking world’s exemplary writers, artists, industrialists, and entrepreneurs hail from a vast and ever expanding array of backgrounds. It is in the melding of many into one dynamic culture that the Anglosphere may retain a powerful influence over our emerging world of tribes.”

Card: “[M]aybe it was just that Ender had got inside the hivemind somehow, when he was studying them in order to defeat them. Maybe he had simply learned to think like a bugger.” (Xenocide)

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Photo from Foreign Policy.