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Essay Three

Ethnicity and Citizenship in Ancient Rome and Imperial China: A Comparison between East and West

Identity is a critical part of any individual’s self-perception in terms of how they place themselves in a given context. Every person carries a number of identities, with some being intrinsic or assigned to them from birth, such as sex, skin color, or membership in a family, while others, such as legal rights, professional affiliation, or religion, are often influenced by the circumstances of one’s birth, but are not completely and totally tied to it. Comprehending these identities, and studying how they take shape and change, is critical to forming a coherent and accurate picture of a society, whether of the ancient era or the present day. In short, a culture is made up of people, and studying them and their relations with each other illustrates what that society values and how it functions. Despite their removal in time and space from the present day, both Ancient Rome and Imperial China played host to a diverse slate of identities, and were states formed in the image of a founding people: in Rome’s case the Romans, and in China’s the Han Chinese. This paper will seek to analyze what it meant for a person to be considered “Roman” or “Chinese,” how these identities related to foreigners, and how they were co-opted and used by the state. In Ancient Rome, the idea of being Roman was firmly tied to the idea of citizenship, and was therefore tightly linked with the Roman state, while in China, to be Chinese was far more connected with methods of being and culture than it was residence or affiliation to the state.

On the first page of his treatise on the study of Ancient and Classical ethnicity, historian Erich Grauen claims that “the Ancients did not have a word for ethnicity.”[[1]](#footnote-0) Given the large time disparity between the Classical period and our own, it is worthwhile to consider whether the term “ethnicity” is worth using or analyzing in an ancient context. For many peoples of the Classical world, the idea of ethnicity based on racial classifications, or even connection to a certain place through extended residence there, might have seemed foreign. In Sparta, for example, a significant proportion of the population was made up of *helots*, who were indeed indigenous to the Spartans’ Peloponnesian homeland, but who were tied to the land they worked and belonged collectively to the Spartan state. Many, like Roman slaves would be centuries in the future, were subjugated descendants of formerly independent Greek polities conquered by the Spartans. One such *helot* population was the Messenians, who lived side by side with the Spartans, working the land for four centuries after their city’s conquest, until their large revolt after Spartan defeat at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BC.[[2]](#footnote-1) During their centuries-long time in Spartan captivity, despite sharing a similar language and customs with the Spartans, the Messenians remained a firmly distinct people, being prevented from intermarrying with the general Spartan population and maintaining the idiosyncrasies of their dialect of Ancient Greek. Once the Messenian revolution against their Spartan oppressors succeeded, they absconded to the hills, founding a new Messene and the “unassimilated Messenian helots reclaimed their ancestral lands and re-established their ancestral identity.”[[3]](#footnote-2) Notably, this episode occurred entirely in Greece, a place considered ethnically homogenous by native son and historian Herodotos, who asserted “the kinship of all Greeks in blood and speech, and the shrines of gods and the sacrifices that we have in common, and the likeness of our way of life.”[[4]](#footnote-3) As shown by the gap between Herodotos’ perception of Greek ethnic commonality and the realities of ethnic strife within Greece, it is difficult to assert that an outsider’s perspective can always be reliable, though residents of the Classical Mediterranean certainly had a concept analogous to what would be today called ethnicity in the form of self–perceived similarities in background, culture, or heritage.

Though in many respects the complexities of ethnicity in Classical Greece can be analogized to the situation in Italy, given that this paper will focus mainly on Rome as a point of comparison with Imperial China, a brief digression into Italian affairs is worthwhile. Prior to the Roman unification of the Italian peninsula, an “Italian” identity did not exist in the same manner as did in Greece. While a Messene would certainly have recoiled at any outsider calling him a Spartan, Herodotos’ belief that all Greeks shared a language and certain customs was true, and the Greeks were able to mobilize if attacked by an outside threat, such as that of the Achaemenid Persian Empire in the fifth century BC. In Italy, at the founding of the Republic there existed four main cultural groups: the Celts in the North, Greeks in the South, Latins in the center, and the Etruscans in Tuscany.[[5]](#footnote-4) Divided by culture and language, to call pre-Roman Italy a unified place neglects the deep fissures between these communities that precluded the formation of an “Italian” identity analogous to that of the Greeks. Indeed, Brennus’ Gauls, whose 387 BC sacking of Rome so traumatized the early Republic, bore far more in common with the inhabitants of the Po valley of this time than the Romans would have. Of course, Roman expansion changed this, as the Latin language and Roman culture would come to dominate the Italian peninsula during the Imperial period, but it is critical to note that Roman identity did *not* start out as synonymous with Italy. The origins of Roman identity specifically occurred within the city, and are tied not to the experiences of the Italian people as a whole, but rather through contact with the Roman state and its values and history. This critical point will be fleshed out later in this essay, but for now, it is necessary to turn east in this discussion of the position of ethnic identity in Imperial Roman and Chinese history.

Having shown that while it is difficult to generalize about the nature of ethnic identity in the Classical Mediterranean, it was certainly present in the politics and daily life of the region, and it is worthwhile to take a look at the nature of ethnic identity in pre-modern East Asia to more accurately assess its status in Imperial China and the region at large. While some regions in Asia, such as Japan and the Korean peninsula, have long boasted strong ethnic homogeneity based on a long tradition of unified statehood and unique, isolated languages, on mainland Asia it would be a mistake to conflate national origin with ethnicity, either in the present day or the past. For example, while Eastern China has long been dominated by Han Chinese, the borders of the Chinese state have often grown to include Jurchen or Manchu people, as well as the diverse peoples to the south and west of China such as the Zhuang or Miao.[[6]](#footnote-5) Despite speaking non-Chinese languages, these ethnicities have been part of the Chinese state for centuries, and have resisted Sinicization for a similarly long time. There also exist notable Han Chinese diaspora populations throughout the world, and particularly in East Asia, with the most prominent being found in Thailand, Indonesia, and Indochina.[[7]](#footnote-6) These populations, while maintaining affinity for their Chinese heritage, often do not identify with China, and may not even speak a Chinese language, complicating the issue of their identity. Indeed, many of those who in China both today and in the past would identify as Han might speak languages related to, but mutually unintelligible with, their fellow Han within the borders of the Chinese state. As such, it can be justly asserted that in East Asia, ethnic identity has historically been shaped by norms and culture, rather than pure allegiance to a state or residence within one, a pattern rather different from that seen in the Occident.

There are two significant origin stories of the Roman people, and only one of them has any grounding in reality. Still, both are quite informative of how the Roman people saw themselves and how their background influenced future behavior, and are therefore worth analyzing in their own right. The true story of the founding of Rome began in the Late Bronze Age, when the Etruscans reigned as the dominant power on the Italian peninsula.[[8]](#footnote-7) Settlements existed in Latium, the region where Rome was founded, and this area saw the rise of a few tiny polities, including Veii, Caere, Livinium, Ficana, and of course, Rome.[[9]](#footnote-8) In this disunited area, classic features of Roman society such as the emphasis on clans, and the practice of unique funerary rites, were developed. The city of Rome likely developed first as a center for agricultural communities in and around the river Tiber, and from its very genesis, was exposed to diverse cultures. Aside from the other Latin communities that surrounded them, the Romans dealt with the mysterious Etruscans, as well as Greek colonies in Southern Italy and Phoenician traders who roamed the harbors of the Tyrrhenian Sea.[[10]](#footnote-9) From the eighth century BC on, Roman culture was strongly influenced by Phoenician and especially Greek culture, and Roman religion and writing, hallmarks of a distinct culture, were both directly borrowed from Rome’s Oriental neighbors and trading partners.[[11]](#footnote-10) Far from being a parochial culture, Rome from nearly its very outset was outward-looking and tolerant of outside influence, a cultural trait borne of the constant exposure to the diverse cultures of the Mediterranean that formed a melting pot in Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Italy.

Despite the historical truth of this narrative of Rome’s humble origins and exposure to the outside world, perhaps the more consequential one is fictitious, as it was the one the Romans told themselves. The technical origins of Rome according to legend lay with Romulus and Remus, and especially with the former, as it was the deeds of these two descendents of Mars that allegedly formed the basis of the culture and society of the Roman Republic, but Vergil’s *Aeneid* describes the journey of its eponymous hero from Troy to Italy, and may rightly be called the source of *Imperial* Roman identity, and it is on this work that will be focused on here. Aeneas, the protagonist of *The Aeneid*, is a refugee from Troy, and goes on an *Odyssey*-esque journey from his home to Latium following Troy’s destruction at the conclusion of the Trojan War. While there, he founded the city of Alba Longa, allegedly the predecessor of the Rome founded by Romulus. *The Aeneid* is particularly notable for its political content, commissioned as it was under the reign of Augustus, but it is also quite pluralistic for the seemingly intrinsically nationalistic subject of a nation’s founding. In Book Twelve, Aeneas proclaims that despite his victory over the native Italians, “may both nations, undefeated, under equal laws, march together,” evoking a spirit of tolerance and acceptance towards the vanquished, rather than imposing Trojan ways.[[12]](#footnote-11) Aeneas’ proclamation does much to highlight the ecumenity of Roman identity, as *The Aeneid* suggests that the success of the Romans derives from a mixing of Italians and the Anatolian descendents of a fallen city, rather than the inherent superiority of native Latins. Underscoring this point is Anchises, father of Aeneas, who commands in Book Six that the Roman descendents of the Trojans “rule with all your power the peoples of the earth—these will be your arts: to put your stamp on the works and the ways of peace, to spare the defeated, break the proud in war.”[[13]](#footnote-12) Though the Romans might possess the greatest martial prowess in the world, their place within it is to assemble all peoples under one roof and to be just to them, accepting them into their community benevolently. For a culture so reverent of the military, the xenophilia of *The Aeneid* is truly remarkable. From its very outset, in both the fictionalized and historical versions of Rome’s founding, its identity was pluralistic, willing and able to accept foreign ways and customs. As we will see later, this tolerance of others and desire to blend Roman and foreign cultures would prove enduring during and following the rapid expansion of the Republican and Imperial eras.

The first stirrings of a Chinese identity come from the ancient Xia dynasty, thought to be the first civilization to take root in East Asia. This dynasty was centered along the Yellow River, and following its collapse, there came to be a sense of cultural and ethnic unity among the people living in the dynasty’s former territory, referred to as *Huaxia*.[[14]](#footnote-13) *Huaxia* was not a racial classification based on literal descendance from the subjects of Xia. Instead, it represented civilization itself, defined by settled agriculture and certain cultural, religious, and philosophical norms.[[15]](#footnote-14) According to historian Herlee Creel, Chinese identity in the ancient period was defined by “a particular way of life, a particular complex of usages, sometimes characterized as *li*,” and to be Chinese was not necessarily a matter of ancestry, but rather of choice.[[16]](#footnote-15) Membership in the *Huaxia* and the general spread of Chinese culture across mainland East Asia was therefore driven by conversion of outgroups instead of their elimination and replacement by those native to the lower Yellow River. This process, often called Sinicization, was a driving force behind expansion in the Han dynasty because it turned conquered foreigners into loyal subjects culturally aligned with the rest of Chinese society. Instead of a polyglot empire marked by a vast diversity of subjects, the Han dynasty, as well subsequent Chinese states, aimed for homogenization and the expansion of *Huaxia* to all their subjects.

The relative homogeneity of the Han dynasty compared with Rome deeply influenced its foreign relations and patterns of expansion. Though the Han dynasty expanded south and westward to include many regions populated by peoples outside the *Huaxia*, warfare was far less emphasized than in Rome. Informed in part by a traditional Confucian aversion to violence, Han rulers focused on the slow Sinicization of gradually annexed territories, demanding adherence to traditional Chinese rites among conquered peoples to foster a sense of cultural unity. Among court elites, “to cultivate moral principles and promote culture among [those outside the *Huaxia*] was more important than to subdue them with a military victory,” as such a policy saved the state from the privations of warfare and formed a bulwark against overextension.[[17]](#footnote-16) While many states throughout human history have formed the basis of their strength based on their military, Han China conceived of itself as being made strong through its cultural superiority to its neighbors in addition to its military strength.

An example of this pattern can be found in the conflicts between the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu, a powerful nomadic empire based in Mongolia. Though the Xiongnu menaced the northern border of Han throughout most of the dynasty’s existence, their propensity for bloodshed and skill at warfare merely distinguished them as barbarians, because Confucianism denounced violence as generally undesirable.[[18]](#footnote-17) This notion of Han legitimacy coming from cultural supremacy helped the Han survive military setbacks, as though the dynasty’s military fortunes oscillated through the years, their foes’ “aggression was only an indication of their barbaric behavior and cultural inferiority.”[[19]](#footnote-18) Notably, despite the remarkable cultural and ethnic diversity present among myriad steppe peoples that would menace the northern frontiers of various Chinese empires, Chinese writers persistently homogenized them, denoting them simply as barbarians. This gross oversimplification of the reality of the ethnic situation in Mongolia reflects Imperial Chinese attitudes towards civilization. Those part of the *Huaxia* represented civilization in its highest form, shaped by the knowledge of Chinese scholars and cultivated by its culture. By contrast, foreign warriors who resisted Chinese modes of life were simply barbarians, regardless of the variations in their customs, language, or dress. Thus, from the perspective of Han China, those who failed to be Sinicized and outside Chinese control merely reinforced their objective inferiority by their continued fight against the Chinese state and its evangelical mission of cultural advancement. Far from being an empire held together merely by its military, the Han dynasty’s perceived sense of cultural superiority and aggressive policies of Sinicization among its vast population allowed it to present itself as the natural cultural and political hegemon of East Asia. By promoting an association between Chineseness and civilization itself, the Han dynasty successfully legitimized its own rule, marginalized its opponents, and created a cultural identity that would remain vibrant long after the dynasty’s collapse, with the concept of *Huaxia* being later replaced simply by the name Han Chinese, a title which has endured to the present day.

Although the Roman Empire formed a cultural lodestar for Europe in much the same way Han China did for East Asia, Rome was considerably more tolerant of regional cultural diversity. Especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, which had hosted complex civilizations for millennia prior to Roman rule, Rome proved quite willing to accommodate local custom. For example, in Egypt, when Emperor Vespasian visited Alexandria in 70 AD, he performed a ritual to heal a handicapped man “by means of magical spitting and trampling, both traditional native ritual techniques.”[[20]](#footnote-19) This practice was alien to the Romans, but a normal part of an Egyptian pharaoh’s coronation, and was thus undergone to legitimize Roman rule in Egypt. Instead of attempting to fully Romanize the Egyptians, Roman emperors consistently sponsored the construction of indigenous temples and consciously portrayed themselves as protectors of native Egyptian culture.[[21]](#footnote-20) This pattern of cultural tolerance, a hallmark of Roman expansionism and statecraft since the state’s very infancy, would continue to be standard policy throughout the Empire’s existence.

While exceptions existed, the Roman Empire tended to pursue a policy of syncretism rather than pure assimilation towards the peoples it conquered. Foreign religious customs like the veneration of Isis and the Mithraic mysteries were tolerated and even promoted within the *pomerium* of Rome, while Roman philosophy and the Latin language spread throughout the empire. Of course, there were limits to Roman tolerance. In the Imperial era, religion and the state remained tightly intertwined, and every subject was required to revere the imperial cult. Those who refused to do so, such as Christians, were brutally persecuted, as “[r]efusal to participate in the official cult of the empire was considered a crime against the religion and sovereignty of Rome” and therefore treasonous.[[22]](#footnote-21) Though the Roman Empire tended towards a policy of religious and cultural tolerance towards those they conquered, those who failed to venerate the imperial cult were not perceived as barbarians in need of a benevolent civilizing influence, but rather as subversive, un-Roman, and seditious, worthy of only the harshest punishments. In this way, while Roman was in most cases more accommodating of varying local traditions than the Han Chinese were, a refusal to accept state ideology could still result in savage repression.

Though the Romans were often tolerant of highly diverse religious and cultural traditions in the regions they conquered, they also spread their way of life to the distant provinces of the Roman Empire, deemed to be an empire-wide process “molding diverse peoples in the image of metropolitan Rome, and in the process creating new Romans” out of peoples previously highly divergent in culture and practice.[[23]](#footnote-22) Though Roman expansion outside Italy began during the Republican period, when the Romans annexed lands previously belonging to the Carthaginian Empire, large-scale Roman settlement and influence in the provinces increased dramatically during the Caesarian and Augustan eras. Part and parcel of the populist agenda of Julius Caesar was the settlement of his legionaries on new farmland, and given the density of entrenched landowners in Italy, such land grants for soldiers were often located in places like Hispania.[[24]](#footnote-23) There, Roman soldiers spread the use of the Latin language, and assisted in fostering a burgeoning urban society that had previously been an uncommon way of life on the Iberian peninsula. As historian Leonard Curchin notes in *The Romanization of Central Spain : Complexity, Diversity and Change in a Provincial Hinterland*, “urbanism was a novelty of the Roman period,” and these cities would play host to a rapidly Romanizing population by the dawn of the common era.[[25]](#footnote-24)

The urban centers of Hispania demonstrate clearly the extensive influence of Roman culture in the Western provinces during the early empire, and residents of these cities often came to resemble their conquerors in many ways. One major transition in Hispanian life brought on by the arrival of Rome was the drastic decline in the traditional role of clans. In Hispania, as in other regions dominated by Celtic peoples like Britain or Gaul, the dominant mode of social organization was through the patrilineal clan. Often, though not always, these clans were endogamous, and played a far greater role in the politics of Hispania than did the equivalent *gentes* in Rome. However, early on in the Roman occupation of the province, and particularly in cities, though indigenous clan signifiers remained among some individuals, “the gentilic [clan] system was declining in importance during the Early Empire,” as more and more especially prominent individuals came to adopt more Romanized forms of family organization.[[26]](#footnote-25)

Instead, Romanized Hispanians tended to come to identify more closely with their city, as a Greek or Italian might, or with either their mother or their father’s family, called the *cognatio* and *agnatio* respectively, instead of with the older patrilineal clan. The large-scale colonization of Hispania by retired Roman soldiers and land hungry members of the Roman lower classes also hastened Romanization, and “many local magnates who earned favor were of Roman or Italian origin,” carrying with them Roman culture, familial noms, and language.[[27]](#footnote-26) Prominent native Hispanians also tended to emulate Roman methods of acquiring social prestige, with one prominent resident of the town of Segobriga emulating the Roman tradition of a patron-client relationship by paving and maintaining a road for common usage at his own expense, despite bearing the distinctly un-Roman name of Spantamicus.[[28]](#footnote-27) Though Romanization varied dramatically between the cities and the countryside, with the countryside naturally tending towards a more conservative approach, it resulted in a radical expansion of Roman social norms and culture to places across the Mediterranean. Local identities were not lost in this blending of cultures, but Roman norms rose at the expense of native ones, resulting in a hybrid, Romanized culture in Hispania as of the Early Empire.

Intimately connected with the process of the adoption of a Roman identity in provinces outside the Roman heartland was the spread of Roman religious practices and language. The Romans tended to spread the their cult of gods most effectively in urban areas, as seen in Roman Britain with the preponderance of clearly Roman religious objects being found in areas like Londinium, the provincial capitol, or near Roman military installations, which would often be populated with Roman citizens in addition to non-citizen legionaries.[[29]](#footnote-28) Of course, these gods would generally be worshipped side by side with native gods, as Roman polytheism did not preclude the veneration of deities not originally found within their pantheon, but the presence alone of gods from the Mediterranean in places like Britain illustrates the widespread influence of Roman religious customs. In the imperial period, only the imperial cult was considered a mandatory religious institution, and those unwilling to sacrifice to the emperor or the deified sovereigns of the past would receive scorn or even be the target of persecution.

The spread of the Latin language was also a key indicator of Romanization, and those who were bestowed Roman citizenship, as well as Romanized urban dwellers in the provinces, were expected not only to use the Latin language, but also to adopt Roman naming customs, in particular the uniquely Roman *tria nomina* system.[[30]](#footnote-29) Aside from the behavioral expectations brought about by citizenship, education, which in the Roman Empire was highly rooted in the Greek and especially Latin languages, also increased local knowledge of Latin in the provinces. Because Latin was associated with the educated classes, which in the imperial period meant those of means, as well as prominent citizens more generally, it became a prestige dialect, marking its speakers as cultivated or privileged. By the mid-Imperial period, even place names in provinces that had long been under Roman control, such as Hispania, came to have Latinized names, as the social pressures and incentives to Romanize mounted.[[31]](#footnote-30) It was never the policy of the Roman state to force its subjects to learn the Latin language, but its association with power and wealth on an interpersonal level enabled it to become the daily spoken language of millions of people in especially cities around the Roman Empire, converting their residents from foreigners into people linked with those around the Roman world through language.[[32]](#footnote-31) With such a tight bond between peoples across the Mediterranean, Roman identity came to expand from a parochial status connected to Latium to one spanning continents, marking a connection to a sprawling empire and its values and culture.

The process of Romanization described in previous paragraphs follows a pattern clearly defined in the Empire’s Western provinces, but in the Eastern Mediterranean, profoundly different historical and cultural realities altered the course of Romanization. Home to ancient civilizations like Egypt and Greece, the Eastern Mediterranean proved resistant to the spread of Latin as an everyday language, as urban culture already existed at a large scale and Greek was an already highly prestigious *lingua franca*. The Greeks and Hellenized residents of many Eastern Mediterranean cities proceeded with a remarkable “readiness to fawn and flatter” impressed many of their Roman masters, who saw a people both willing to peaceably integrate with the Roman Empire and already “civilized” in Roman eyes.[[33]](#footnote-32) Many Eastern religions, such as that of the Egyptians, resisted complete syncretization with Roman gods, while others, like the Greek indigenous faith, bore such a resemblance to the Roman tradition that distinctions were relatively scant. Instead of adopting Roman faith or language, Easterners tended to simply identify as “Roman,” should they like to be considered Romanized, with some Greek speakers referring to themselves as *Rhomaoi* until even the twentieth century.[[34]](#footnote-33)

Despite the radical transformation of many who lived under the rule of the Roman Empire from uncountable local identities into becoming "Roman," the Empire continued to be a place remarkably tolerant of cultural heterogeneity. However, the concept of Roman citizenship (*civitas*) institutionalized what it meant to be a Roman in a legal sense. A concept with some precedent in the Ancient Mediterranean, especially among the Greek city-states, citizenship in early Republican Rome was essentially a social contract between the state and its citizens and offered benefits, such as the ability to vote, marry freely, and own private property, as well as duties, such as serving in the army.[[35]](#footnote-34) These privileges were restricted to foreigners and slaves, and as such those without *civitas* often strove greatly to attain it. In every sense, to be a citizen was to be truly Roman, as only those with Roman citizenship could advance in either the legions or in the realm of politics in the Republic. For most of Rome’s history, citizenship was given out very sparingly and a desire among the Latins to acquire Roman citizenship was a driving factor behind the devastating Social War. While citizenship was a highly prized status in Republican Rome, centered as it was for most of its history in the Italian peninsula, as the Empire expanded, the commonality and prestige of the title would shift accordingly.

During the early Imperial period, citizenship became a way for the state to reward those it considered of use to the state in the provinces, with Augustus “expand[ing] Roman citizenship beyond Italy and Rome at an unprecedented scale.”[[36]](#footnote-35) This was done to integrate the provincial elite into the Roman world and create a sense of Roman identity among individuals unlikely to ever lay eyes on the city itself. Outstanding service in the army or navy, and from the Claudian period, service of twenty-five years in any branch of the Roman military, was also a route for provincials to acquire Roman citizenship.[[37]](#footnote-36) In the early Roman Empire, citizenship, and therefore legal “Romanness,” was no longer only a cultural marker, though it was heavily associated with the city and Italians more broadly, but rather a signifier of service to the state, either real or expected in a time of crisis. The 212 AD Edict of Caracalla, which granted citizenship to all residents of the Empire, represented the final step of this gradual loosening of the requirements for citizenship in the Roman Empire and reflected an increasingly liberal definition of what it meant to be Roman. While legal "Romanness" as defined by citizenship began as a very restricted status, its gradual expansion highlights Rome's transition from a small city state to Mediterranean hegemon and cultural standard-bearer, with peoples from Britain to Syria proudly considering themselves loyal subjects of the Roman state by the late Imperial period. Thus, while Romanization in a cultural sense resulted in varying levels of cultural integration among different strata and geographic subsections of the Roman population, the concept of citizenship remained a legal distinction that marked one as a “true Roman,” and its development from a highly specific and honorable distinction from one applied to essentially everyone in the Roman Empire makes clear the evolving relationship between a Roman identity and allegiance to the state.

In comparison with their Roman counterparts, the Imperial Chinese tended to take a much more wary view of foreigners and their ways. During the Han dynasty, the most important group of outsiders to Chinese foreign policy were the Xiongnu, who headed a nomadic empire based in the Eurasian steppes capable of devastating raids on Chinese territory, displacing its citizens and disrupting its economy. Initially, Chinese rulers, convinced of the inherent inferiority of the northern tribes, advocated for a policy of non-engagement, only dealing with the Xiongnu when they attacked Chinese lands, and historian Ban Gu wrote in his *Hanshu* that “the Sage Kings treated them like birds and beasts, neither concluding treaties with them, nor going forth and attacking them. . . to conclude agreements with them is to waste gifts and suffer deception.”[[38]](#footnote-37) As opposed to the Roman practice of frequently adopting the practices of their neighbors, the Han Chinese viewed their own civilization as clearly superior, and therefore needing only to engage with barbarians when they threatened the state. This proscription on dealing with the Xiongnu included the personal realm, with Ban Gu further stating that the Xiongnu “are kept outside and not taken as relatives, they are kept distant and not accepted as kin.”[[39]](#footnote-38)

As hostilities wore on between the Xiongnu and Han through the centuries, however, more serious attempts were made to make peace between the two factions, and Chinese scholars came to record more Xiongnu practices, and in so doing came to understand more of Xiongnu culture, though often losing little of their scorn. In an episode recorded in Sima Qian’s *Shiji* between Han eunuch and captive of the Xiongnu Zhonghang Yue and a Han envoy, the envoy declares that the Xiongnu “dishonor the elderly” by not giving them the best food in times of war.[[40]](#footnote-39) Despite the fact that this practice violated Confucianism’s central tenet of filial piety by prioritizing the needs of Xiongnu fighting men over the elderly, Sima Qian records Zhonghang Yue’s cogent defense of the practice, showing that some Chinese scholars were willing to look objectively, and perhaps even favorably, at the values of the Xiongnu, and use them to critique or challenge elements of China’s own society. While such a “noble savage” view of an outside people might be viewed as patronizing from a modern perspective, it shows that though the Han were quite secure in their belief of Confucian Chinese identity’s superiority to all others, they were willing at times to engage with outside ideas. In Imperial China, the values embodied by *Huaxia* defined what it meant to be Chinese, and while such a fixed identity served to very easily otherize foreigners, it would be a gross oversimplification to suggest that the defined nature of this identity precluded engagement with other cultures, lopsided and antagonistic as at times they might have been.

Unlike in the Roman Empire or Republic, the defined nature of Chinese identity allowed it to be firmly wrapped up in the practice of statecraft through the method used by the Imperial Chinese court to recruit its officials. In Imperial China, in contrast to uncountable other civilizations throughout world history, the top social class, that of the scholar-gentry, was not a purely hereditary one. Instead, its continued existence was enabled by the Imperial Examination, otherwise known as *Keju*, which tested applicants based on their knowledge of the Confucian Classics that formed the corpus of the values that defined the Chinese nation, and whose passage was required to attain membership in the elite class.[[41]](#footnote-40) Implemented permanently starting in the Tang Dynasty, the *Keju* was an incredibly difficult examination, maintaining extremely low passage rates throughout Chinese history. Due to this profound difficulty, it was never guaranteed that a given candidate might pass, even if they came from a family with a long history in the bureaucracy. Of course, barriers to entry for the exam were quite high, as education was not free, and generally only the well-born could afford the cram schools required to memorize the content required to pass the exam.[[42]](#footnote-41)

While these exams might be criticized for focusing on subjects often philosophical or theoretical in nature, as opposed to the technical skills an administrator might require in the fulfillment of their task as a leader, the Imperial Examination created a class of Chinese bureaucrats with a remarkable degree of similarity in intellectual background and cultural sensibilities. Echoing the sentiment of *Huaxia*, in which a Chinese person was defined by their behaviors and beliefs, rather than necessarily their residence within the borders of a Chinese polity, the Imperial Examinations throughout the centuries produced Chinese officials that were steeped in Confucian thought, giving successive dynasties a remarkably consistent ideological flavor, despite the vast gaps in time they might inhabit. It might be argued that the Imperial Examinations were unfair, given their high barrier to entry, or inadequate in preparing officials for the fulfillment of their jobs once in office, given their abstract content, but one indisputable fact about them is that they codified the values, beliefs, and behaviors of a Chinese government official, and low passage rates ensured that incumbent officials could select those they saw as best able to perpetuate the values believed to define the Chinese state and its people. Though lacking a concept of citizenship analogous to the Romans’ legally defined, state-issued *civitas*, Chinese identity was quite well-defined even early in its history, and the values embodied by *Huaxia*, compiled and refined through the Confucian Classics, were required knowledge for those who wished to administer the Chinese Empire. With a highly cogent belief system that defined both the Chinese people and the Chinese state, the relationship between ethnic identity and the state in China is far more tightly linked than the divergent trends of cultural and political Romanization in the Roman Republic and Empire. In Imperial China, to be Chinese was to behave according to the principals upon which the state predicated its rule.

The task of unpacking identity in a society alien from one’s own is always a challenging endeavor, especially when the differences are as intense as they are between Ancient Rome, Imperial China, and the modern day. Nevertheless, in the past, just as now, identities cannot be foisted upon those who do not wish to carry them, and cultural diffusion and homogenization occurred both when the state wanted them to and when they did not. In Rome, the identity of being Roman, once synonymous with Roman citizenship and residence in Latium at the Republic’s outset, grew from and decoupled with this previous reality due to state expansion creating a large population of people without this background. To maintain these holdings and ensure the perpetuation of Roman culture, the Romans opted to settle their people abroad, bringing with them urban culture, Roman religion, and the Latin language, as well as gradually extending the franchise of citizenship to those without either roots in Latium or a history of meritorious service to the state. In China, identity remained far more fixed, based on *Huaxia*, and perpetuated by a general repulsion to foreign practices and by the norms fostered by the rigorous Imperial Examination system and able to be co-opted by others. In both societies, the scale of their territory and population necessitated the creation of identities designed to incorporate as many people as possible, though the methods and nature of the creation of such identities varied dramatically between the two.

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