

# One of the most important things we can learn from China is vocabulary

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## Abstract

In this essay the Author argues that definitions in social sciences are the subject of heated discussions, and that the debates are ultimately unresolvable because the things social scientists describe with their terms are themselves constantly changing. According to the Author, quantitative methodologists call this problem "unit heterogeneity": individual manifestations of a particular phenomenon are not identical. Contemplating about the much fuzzier world of comparative historical sociology, comparative politics, and international relations, the Author comes to the statement that countries are in no sense comparable units. The root of the difficulty in making inter-temporal comparisons the Author finds in the definition of terms in social and political sciences. He argues that the meanings of terms like "country," "nation" and "state" are slippery and always evolving. By questioning the terms of "country," "nation," "state" and "empire" the Author goes through the history of their creation in order to explain contemporary phenomena in social and political sciences. The Author also comes up with the suggestion that we, the scientists, must use more appropriate vocabulary while writing about social and political phenomena.

**Keywords:** social science, political science, unit homogeneity, terminology in science.

## Najważniejszą rzeczą, której możemy nauczyć się od Chińczyków, jest terminologia

### Streszczenie

W swoim eseju autor argumentuje, że definicje w naukach społecznych są przedmiotem gorącej dyskusji, i że debaty są ostatecznie nierozwiązywalne, ponieważ to, co naukowcy opisują za pomocą swojego określonego słownictwa, ciągle ulega zmianom. Według autora, metodolodzy ilościowi nazywają ten problem „jednostkową niejednorodnością”: indywidualne przejawy danego zjawiska nie są identyczne. Rozważając o bardzo skomplikowanym świecie porównawczej socjologii historycznej, politologii porównawczej i stosunków międzynarodowych, Autor dochodzi do stwierdzenia, że kraje w żadnym sensie nie są jednostkami porównywalnymi. Źródła trudności w dokonywaniu porównań międzyokresowych autor upatruje w definicjach pojęć w naukach społecznych i politycznych. Twierdzi, że znaczenia takich terminów jak „kraj”, „naród” i „państwo” są „śliskie” i zawsze ewoluują. Analizując pojęcia „kraju”, „narodu”, „państwa” czy „imperium”, autor omawia ich genezę

w celu wyjaśnienia współczesnych zjawisk w naukach społecznych i naukach o polityce. Autor również proponuje naukowcom używanie bardziej adekwatnej terminologii w opisywaniu zjawisk społecznych i politycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nauki społeczne, nauki o polityce, jednorodność jednostek, terminologia w nauce.

Definitions are the sources of endless debates in the social sciences. Theorists may argue for one or another preferred definition of a term, but these debates are ultimately unresolvable because the things social scientists describe with their terms are themselves constantly changing. Quantitative methodologists call this problem „unit heterogeneity”: individual manifestations of a particular phenomenon are not identical. For a physical scientist, a proton is a proton; all protons are functionally interchangeable. For a biologist, individuals of the same species are mostly (though not entirely) the same; the minor differences among individuals give rise to natural selection, and through that, evolution. Still, the differences between individuals of the same species are so minor that biologists study evolution in aggregate terms, not at the level of the individual progenitor. Even medical researchers and experimental psychologists treat the individual humans in their studies as homogeneous and interchangeable. Given random assignment to experimental and control groups, the idiosyncrasies of individual human beings can be reduced to random error.

In the much fuzzier world of comparative historical sociology, comparative politics, and international relations, however, unit homogeneity breaks down completely. Countries are in no sense comparable units, even if quantitative macro-comparative researchers routinely use the United States and Luxembourg as equivalent units in the same regression model. However, that is a minor problem compared to the challenge of comparing countries over time. How can the Poland of 2020 be studied in relation to the Poland of 1920, or of 1620? And how can one compare the democracy of the United States of 2020 with that of ancient Athens, or the foreign policy of today's United States with that of the Roman Empire? The only possible answer to these kinds of questions is: „carefully.”

The root of the difficulty in making inter-temporal comparisons, particularly over long periods of time, lies in the definition of terms. The meanings of terms like „country,” „nation,” and „state” are slippery and always evolving. Conveniently for macro-comparative research, „state” now seems to have crystallised around the definition „member of the United Nations,” but that definition is only valid for relatively recent times, and even so, it ignores such statistical anomalies as Taiwan and the Palestinian Territories. Physical scientists have similar anomalies in the definitions of elements (which can have multiple isotopes), while biologists continue to struggle to draw the exact boundaries of species. However, no scientist has to contend with the ambiguity of ubiquitous comparative social science categories like „country” and „nation”. Even more challenging is the definition of widely-used but relatively informal categories like „hegemon” and „empire”.

With these kinds of terms, unit homogeneity breaks down completely. Social scientists argue endlessly over whether or not hegemony actually exists, and what qualifies

as an empire. Although some social scientists heroically soldier on with comparative studies of multiple hegemonies or empires, the rest of us might reasonably question how such comparisons are even possible. The problem of unit heterogeneity is so profound, when terms are applied to social phenomena that are separated in time by hundreds (if not thousands) of years that it is doubtful whether statements like „hegemonies remain in power an average of X years” or „empires engage in an average of Y wars per century” are meaningful at all. The units (Roman Empire, Hapsburg Empire, British Empire) just aren't sufficiently homogeneous to be treated as multiple manifestations of the same phenomenon. All attempts to define precisely „what is a hegemon” or „what is an empire” are doomed, if not to failure, then at least to controversy.

Yet we still use the terms, which implies that we still find them useful. We draw on historical experience, with which we are familiar – we can't call them „our” historical experience, since none of us has experienced history – in order to make sense of other historical experience, or of the present. The English word „hegemony” is derived from the ancient Greek *hegeisthai* („to lead”). The word English „empire” is derived from the Latin *imperare* („to rule”). The former was historically applied to the leadership of Sparta over the Peloponnesian city-states, or the leadership of Athens over the Delian League, which has since (but only since) come to be known as the Athenian Empire. Of course, the Delian League couldn't have been conceptualised as an empire by those who experienced it, because the word „empire” was unknown to them. Yet looking back on it today, we find it useful to recognize in it aspects of imperial rulership that go beyond the less authoritative leadership of Greek hegemony.

Classical Greek and Latin scholarship had an outsized influence on the development of the English language (as on other European languages). The classical Greco-Roman tradition is an especially fertile source for the development of social science terminology because Greco-Roman terms have been widely employed for more than two thousand years, giving rise to a multiplicity of cases and usages. We can very productively (if inconclusively) debate the meaning of a term like „empire” because there have been so many self-described empires throughout history. Yet there are other classical traditions besides the Greco-Roman one that have similarly long scholarly traditions, on which to draw: Arabic, Persian, Indian (Sanskrit), Chinese, and perhaps others as well. Their terminologies are not well-known to English-language scholars or scholarship, with the result that scholars of any nationality publishing in English have tended to apply Greco-Roman terms to their historical political forms.

For sure, Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BC), who is now known as the first emperor of a unified China, never styled himself „emperor.” He styled himself *huangdi*, after the fabled Yellow Emperor (there's that word again!). Is a *huangdi* the same thing as an emperor? Like the early Roman emperors, China's *huangdi* was also a kind of *pontifex maximus* (chief pontiff), but while in Rome these were distinct hats that might be worn by the same person, in China the *huangdi* simultaneously and inextricably embodied the roles of *imperator* and *pontifex maximus*, which could not be separated. Thus the *huangdi* who presided over a series of poor harvests or lost a series of battles might be said to

have self-evidently lost the *tianming* („mandate of Heaven”) to rule over and lead the *tianxia* („world under heaven”). No Roman emperor ever lost legitimacy by failing to stop a plague with his prayers, but a Chinese *huangdi* just might.

Were the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, the priest-kings of ancient Israel, the caliphs of Baghdad, and the Kims of today’s North Korea all *huangdi*? There might be a paper or thesis in arguing that they were. The postmodern world-system centered on the United States is arguably much more a *tianxia* than a Greek *hegemonia* or a Roman *imperium*. Many scholars might argue that Donald Trump has lost the *tianming* to act as *huangdi* over the global American *tianxia*, and that the *renyi* (righteousness?) of American global governance can only be restored by his overthrow. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin are unlikely to be turned out of office by a sign from Heaven like a deadly pandemic. Donald Trump just might.

You’d be hard-pressed to find a contemporary social scientist who believes that intercultural academic exchange should be a one-way communications channel, in which scholars from all over the world learn how to implement a terminology derived from the Greco-Roman classical tradition with no invitation or opportunity for dialog based on other historical experience. You would be equally hard-pressed to find a contemporary social scientist who actually uses terms derived from any tradition other than the Greco-Roman one, except to apply them ideographically to the traditions, from which they arise. Thus one may speak of a Chinese *tianxia* or an Islamic *ummah*, but never of a Roman *tianxia* or a Christian *ummah*. If we are to be serious about our cosmopolitanism, we should. Doing so would make our social science not only richer, but perhaps more precise to boot.

China’s social-scientific lexicon is particularly rich, and is reasonably accessible even to those of us who neither read nor speak Chinese. Like the classical Greco-Roman tradition, the classical Chinese tradition has spawned many potentially useful terms, the meanings of which have evolved over centuries or millennia. Their resulting complexity and multiple connotations facilitates their application outside of the Chinese context. After all, if the mythical Yellow Emperor was a *huangdi* and the 20th century child emperor Puyi was a *huangdi*, the term certainly has an extraordinary flexibility, even within its Chinese usage. Why not apply it to a Kim or a Trump as well? And why stop at Chinese terms? Comparative social scientists should be ransacking the classical lexicons of the world for useful vocabulary. It would make our writing more interesting, more accurate, and much more fun.

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