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Ancient China and the Yue: Perceptions and Identities on the Southern Frontier, c. 400 B.C.E.–50 C.E. Erica Brindley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 302 pp, 12 b/w illustrations, 3 maps, 3 tables, Bibliography, Index. US \$103.00. ISBN 9781316355282.

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It is fair to say that substantially more has been written about China's northern neighbors in pre- and early imperial times than about its early southern populations. This is perhaps not surprising, considering the perpetual need of Bronze Age and later dynasties to monitor, engage, and appease those powerful and mobile steppe polities that agitated at their doorstep. In contrast, not only was the south geographically distant from the dynastic centers of the Central Plains, it never emerged as a serious military threat. Textual, archaeological, and linguistic data combine to paint China's vast southern region (from the Yangzi River to northern Vietnam) as a highly segmented ethnic landscape populated by mostly small-scale, pre-literate populations who spoke non-sinitic languages. The absence of any coordinated resistance to – or possibly even awareness of – the southern march of armies is evident from the recorded speed at which China's early empires managed to incorporate the southern regions into their realms. Thus, by 214 B.C.E., Lingnan (consisting of present-day Guangdong and Guangxi) in southeast China had become

part of the Qin empire, while troops dispatched one century later by the Han emperor Wudi are said to have taken no more than 3 years to reach and conquer a vast swath of territory covering present-day Fujian (along the southeast coast), Lingnan, northern and central Vietnam, and portions of Yunnan (in southwest China), all of which were soon partitioned into commanderies and constituent counties.

Viewed from a comfortable historical distance, these early southern campaigns take on the appearance of effortless expansion which laid the foundation for the subsequent political integration and sinicization of China's southern populations. In reality, however, the process of military, administrative, and cultural incorporation was also marked by serious challenges. Contemporary and later texts refer to regular and occasionally successful native uprisings, as well as debates at court regarding the wisdom of administering and holding on to such distant regions. Still, even as historical studies of the south have incorporated into their narratives details of these setbacks and the tasks faced by imperial

officials and military personnel, meta-accounts of China's enlargement south of the Yangzi have viewed the expansion primarily as an inevitable sinicization process, the outcome of which was achieved through the gradual but insistent replacement of native political and cultural forms. Thus, while early western accounts of the expansion – most notably Herold Wiens' (1954) *China's March Toward the Tropics* and C.P. FitzGerald's (1972) *The Southern Expansion of the Chinese People* – differ in regard to the manner in which native society was altered through sustained contact with Chinese soldiers, officials, traders, and colonists, they remain consistent in their adherence to the fundamental assumptions of the sinicization model.

The view of early China's southern region as an uneven ethnospace whose weak constituent populations were irreversibly drawn into the Chinese political and cultural sphere is now tempered by research conducted on more recent periods by western historians and anthropologists. This scholarship – much of it focused on ethnic groups located in southwest China – offers a more critical assessment of China's infiltration of native territories by calling attention to the crucial fact that native acculturation to Chinese customs and views remained very much incomplete as recently as a few hundred years ago in some peripheral areas. Beyond the obvious relevance of such findings to discussions of earlier periods, these studies also highlight the reality that military, administrative, and cultural borders were likely never coterminous. These recent studies rely on a number of ideas (i.e., resistance, identity, acculturation, hybridization, agency) developed by Western scholars interested in the fate of peripheral populations that have been impacted by imperial expansion or touched by economic and cultural currents flowing from the center prior to the arrival of imperial agents. Finally, and in parallel with such approaches, archaeological research in southern China over the past half century has revealed – beyond a few notable instances of correspondence between texts and recovered materials – the existence of significant cultural diversity within south China (both before and following imperial expansion) and identified locally distinctive

developmental trajectories, some of these leading to socio-politically complex societies.

Erica Brindley's *Ancient China and the Yue: Perceptions and Identities on the Southern Frontier, c. 400 B.C.E.–50 C.E.* stands as a valuable addition to the existing scholarship on the topic of China's early southern populations. Importantly, and in contrast to the preponderance of locally-focused studies, she tackles the whole of southern China. While a portion of the book is devoted to discussing the relevant linguistic context and reviewing the results of archaeological work carried out in the region, the main thrust of Brindley's study remains a critical consideration of the "Yue," an appellation which scholars of early China have at least passing familiarity with, but which few have attempted to define with any historical or geographical rigor. As Brindley demonstrates, the Yue label stands as both an authentic designation of peoples, albeit one of frustratingly poor resolution, as well as a conceptual foil against which processes of identity formation and maintenance played out among the "Hua-xia," here identified as the inhabitants of Central Plains polities whose self-defined distinctiveness was closely tied to cultural descent from dynastic ancestors and set against the culture of less civilized near and distant neighbors.

Who were the so-called Yue? The term was ascribed by Hua-xia writers to pre-literate populations said to have inhabited much of coastal southern China and northern Vietnam both before China's expansionary push and following the incorporation of these regions into the Qin and Han realms. Scattered across texts dating from the mid-first millennium B.C.E. (late Spring and Autumn, early Warring States periods) to the first centuries C.E. (Eastern Han dynasty), references to the Yue leave no doubt about the cultural heterogeneity of its constituent peoples and their association with southern regions. More specifically, the Yue label was used to identify a wide range of ethnic groups and polities (or groups said to have had historical or genealogical links with the Yue). Alongside the more inclusive Bai-yue ("Hundred Yue," first mentioned in 239 B.C.E.), these included a number of populations ranging in scale from geographically constrained ethnic groups to

larger kingdoms and states, including the Yu-yue, Gan-yue, Dong-ou, Dong-yue, Luo-yue, Yang-yue, Xi-ou, Luo-luo, Yue, Wu, Nan-yue, and Min-yue.

Despite the many textual references to the Yue, the term is marked by limited historical, temporal, and geographic specificity. It comes into clearer focus only in the case of those few southern polities whose size, resilience, and actions merited more extensive treatment by early historians. Beyond the fact that we do not know what the southern Yue groups called themselves and how or whether they consciously distinguished themselves from one another, the label was itself inconsistently applied by Chinese authors for reasons that are not immediately apparent to us. Still, the texts do provide some points of reference. For example, references to the Xi-ou and Luo-luo (jointly known as Ou-luo) appear to speak of populations centered in western/southern Guangxi or northern Vietnam. The comparatively derogatory term Man-yi (“aliens from the southern direction”) likely referred to a more extensive area encompassing southeast, central, and southwest China (including the territories of the Chu, Ba, and Shu) than that covered by the label Bai-yue, who occupied the southeast coastal areas. Brindley devotes a significant portion of the book to introducing a number of Yue or Yue-related polities: the states of Yue and Wu centered in Jiangsu and Zhejiang; the kingdoms of Min-yue, Dong-ou, and Dong-yue in Fujian; and the kingdom of Nan-yue in Lingnan. Much more is known of these polities, with references providing specific information about the actions and motives of named personages, the march of political and military successes and reversals, as well as the friendly and adversarial relations that tied these southern polities to one another and to the Han court.

Given the absence of recorded self-representations among China’s early southern populations, even among the better known Yue kingdoms, one can understand the wish to extract from scattered references information about the physical appearance, behavior, and mindset of southerners. The Yue, or specific subgroups of the Yue, are variously described as “stupid, sickly, and filthy” (p. 133); as behaving “like deer, birds, and

beasts” (p. 128), with “the young order[ing] about their elders [and] the elderly fear[ing] the able-bodied” (p. 128); as having little *yin*, much *yang*, and thin skin (akin to the thin furs of local birds and animals), giving them the ability to withstand heat; as fierce individuals prone to shifting military allegiances; as proficient swimmers, naval warriors, and sword makers; as worshippers of snakes; and as people who exhibited other unusual and unrefined non-Hua-xia customs, such as wearing one’s hair unbound (loose), sheared, or formed into a mallet-shaped bun, tattooing the body and “engraving the forehead” (p. 167), and sitting “in the dustpan style” (i.e., sitting with buttocks on the ground and legs stretched out or bent) (p. 141).

As many have remarked, descriptions of the Yue by Hua-xia writers often present southerners in a negative light. Such comments – for example the above statement indicating that Yue youngsters abused their elders and therefore lacked filial piety – are in fact best seen in relation to the ethnocentric tenets of a Confucian orthodoxy which contrasted the cultured and superior Hua-xia to the perceived barbarians living at and beyond the margins, untouched by the civilizing currents which guided the lives of those claiming Hua-xia cultural descent. Without denying the existence or importance of such observations, however, Brindley provides a multi-faceted and in the end more interesting analysis of references to the Yue. She points out, for example, that not all Hua-xia writers denigrated the Yue; some of their descriptions and comments are best viewed as non-judgmental, and in some cases even positive, assessments of their southern neighbors.

Brindley also questions the specificity of such “tropes of the savage” (p. 141), some of which were applied liberally to non-Hua-xia groups regardless of location or ethnic identification, a view that tallies with the likelihood that Hua-xia writers (especially those living during the Warring States period) had limited knowledge of southerners and their customs. In support of this view, she devotes Chapter 6 to discussing the above-mentioned customs of tattooing, sitting in “the dustpan style,” and wearing one’s hair loose, sheared, or in a mallet-shaped bun,

pointing out that these practices were also mentioned in relation to other non-Hua-xia populations (except perhaps for the combined customs of sheared hair and tattooed bodies, which appear to have been more closely tied to the Yue than to other groups). In any case, as she argues, the strong likelihood of significant cultural variation among the numerous Yue groups which inhabited China's southern regions should temper text-based attempts to isolate traits which apply to the entire Yue cultural and political realm.

A core idea explored by Brindley is that while descriptions such as those discussed above allowed – even when unsupported by evidence – the Hua-xia to paint themselves as unambiguously superior to non-Hua-xia peoples, authors also sometimes presented milder views of the Yue. Some references relativized or rationalized the customs of southern populations, while others even served as veiled self-criticisms of the Hua-xia. For example, a form of environmental determinism appears to emerge during the Han dynasty, by which time the empire had become more familiar with, and intent on, systematically recording and classifying its southern populations. Thus, one previously mentioned reference associates Min-yue ferocity with the fact that “the lands of Eastern Yue are narrow and full obstructions,” while another states that Yue people are “stupid, sickly, and filthy” because “the water in Yue is muddy, heavy, and easily floods” (p. 133). In somewhat the same taxonomic vein, Han dynasty writers such as Sima Qian were more likely to define ethnicity in relation to a fixed (but not necessarily verifiable) ancestral lineage than to a Confucian sense of inherited cultural descent open to the possibility that a civilized mindset and comportment can be learned through proper cultural exposure and resolve.

Brindley reviews a number of other non-derogatory references to Yue behavior, some of which are best viewed as neutral or universalizing. One author explains that people in the state of Yue do not wear “ceremonial hats” for no apparent reason other than that they follow different customs (including wearing their hair short). Others point to a number of equivalences between

the Yue and the Central States (e.g., the universal existence of political corruption and the natural wish of people everywhere to please their leaders). Finally, a number of references express disapproval of the Hua-xia through their praise of the Yue “other.” Thus, we read that the Yue and Hu were more likely to cooperate with one another than were the Qin among themselves, and that, although admittedly uncouth, people from the far south lived in harmony with the Dao (Way) and should therefore be emulated. As Brindley reminds us, however, even as they offer positive assessments of the Yue, the above references must still be viewed within the context of a Hua-xia centered worldview dependent on comparison with the peripheral Yue other.

As one proceeds through *Ancient China and the Yue*, one quickly recognizes that Brindley is tackling two separate but related topics: the Yue and early southern China. As discussed earlier in regard to the former, the book relies on early texts to convey information about the Yue and comment on the construction of Hua-xia identity from the perspective of the relevant references. Perhaps not surprisingly, considering Brindley's training as a historian, much of her analysis is devoted to exploring these issues. Her clearly laid out sources and well-argued interpretations serve as a warning to researchers not to assume single motives when examining Hua-xia references to marginal populations. They also illustrate how references of this type can be used more constructively to speak about the writers themselves. While the book admittedly does little to resurrect “Yue” from its present status as a fluid label standing for various poorly-understood peoples, this stems from the reality of a limited and biased textual record rather than any shortcomings in Brindley's approach.

Independent of her study of textual references to the Yue, Brindley devotes two chapters to what linguistics and archaeology can tell us about early southern China. The complex linguistic landscape of present-day southern China is informative. Aside from the many varieties of Chinese now spoken throughout the entire region, major language groups include Tai-kadai, Hmong-mien (or

Miao-Yao), and a small number of Austro-Asiatic (AA) languages. The majority of these are spoken in southwestern and south-central China (i.e., not in coastal southeast China). Brindley devotes Chapter 2 to the region's linguistic landscape. While it is generally agreed that pre-imperial southern populations spoke non-sinitic languages, there remains significant disagreement among historical linguists about their taxonomic identification and geographical extent. These debates are grounded in the realities that language groups expand and contract over time and that they regularly borrow from one another. For example, it is likely that forms of pre- or proto-Austronesian (AN) languages, which are known to have been spoken in Taiwan prior to their expansion from the island to Southeast Asia and the Pacific, were spoken along China's southeastern coast (where they would have originated). The proposal that Tai-kadai may be an off-shoot of proto-AA offers the additional possibility that these language groups may have been spoken over much of southern China. Other models put forward by linguists point to the greater geographical coverage of Hmong-mien and AA, the latter possibly sharing an "Austic" ancestral base with AN languages.

Regardless of which of the above linguistic models best represents reality, I agree with Brindley that Hua-xia imposed ethnonyms were likely not based on the recognition of linguistic categories (for example identifying "Bai-yue" as speakers of proto-AN languages), since "Hua-xia authors . . . may not have noticed or been aware of significant linguistic differences among groups that inhabited the Southland" (p. 60). In summary, the early linguistic landscape of southern China remains poorly understood, with research at this point providing no more than a broad outline of possible languages spoken by populations living in different areas of the region. Having said this, it is important to note that the work of historical linguists remains essential, particularly as it holds the potential to generate data on population movements, interactions among speakers of different languages, and details of how and where those speakers lived.

Of the methods and approaches discussed by Brindley, archaeology offers the highest

resolution depiction of southern China during the pre- and early imperial periods.¹ At various points throughout the book, she discusses the history of southern states and kingdoms (i.e., Yue, Wu, Nanyue, Minyue) and offers brief descriptions of some of their relevant sites and burials. Chapter 3, which focuses entirely on the region's archaeological record prior to the emergence of these polities, reviews some of the better known archaeological cultures and sites that played a role in local developmental sequences. Although uneven and by necessity incomplete, Brindley's account of southern China's archaeological landscape does allow her to recognize – as others have – the significant amount of cultural diversity that marked the region during the pre-imperial period. The high level of diversity revealed by the archaeological record also precludes attempts at defining the Yue, or any Yue subgroup for that matter, in terms of specific material and behavioral attributes. As discussed earlier, not only do we remain unable to pinpoint the spatial extent of any one Yue group on the basis of historical references, it is now well-established that archaeological cultures cannot be blindly equated with ethnic groups, a fact that Brindley also wisely acknowledges.

Not addressed in the book's archaeology chapter is a discussion of how western-inspired theoretical models have been applied to the region's existing archaeological record. Developed from cross-cultural research, such models can help us better understand the workings of localized social systems and chart the development of socio-political complexity over time. Importantly, this type of research is not intended (or expected) to result in a better understanding of the spatial and temporal parameters of the textually defined Yue. Instead, archaeological remains such as burials – of which many are now known in the region – permit us to consider how both indirect contact with northern areas and the later arrival of imperial agents impacted developments at the local level. No less pertinent, archaeologists now routinely use material culture and site patterning data to comment on processes and responses such as acculturation, resistance, accommodation, and hybridization. Such approaches, one

can argue, will remain crucial in guiding future advances in our understanding of early southern China, while also giving voice to the hitherto silent and enigmatic Yue that populated China's early texts.

NOTES

1. In the spirit of full disclosure, I provided assistance to Erica Brindley when she was writing the chapter on the archaeology of southern China.

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