

Ancient China and the Yue: Perceptions and Identities on the Southern Frontier, c.400 BCE–50 CE [book review]

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Abstract:

Tracking Early China's process of sinicization and describing the origins of a separate Yue identity along China's southern frontier are two very complex issues, but Erica Brindley, associate professor of Asian Studies and History at Pennsylvania State University, has adroitly addressed these related trends through historical, rhetorical, and literary representations. Brindley has produced a fascinating study.

Keywords: Ancient China | Yue | identity | book review

Article:

***Ancient China and the Yue: Perceptions and Identities on the Southern Frontier, c.400 BCE–50 CE*. By Erica Fox Brindley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 302 pp. \$103.00, £67.00 (cloth), \$82.00, £53.71 (ebook).**

Tracking Early China's process of sinicization and describing the origins of a separate Yue identity along China's southern frontier are two very complex issues, but Erica Brindley, associate professor of Asian Studies and History at Pennsylvania State University, has adroitly addressed these related trends through historical, rhetorical, and literary representations. Brindley has produced a fascinating study. She starts with the hypothesis that “early empires and the imperial logic of centrality—the latter of which began well before the actual establishment of the Qin Empire in 221 BCE—played an important role in the unification of a Hua-Xia center and self, and, hence, the construction of marginal others in the process” (xii). Her method for proving this hypothesis is an exploration of Yue/Việt/越 identity as described in official chronicles, and the author treats the creation of this regional identity as a process, by which its authors, who associated themselves with Central Plains court culture, strengthen the tenets of their own identity. In a related theme, Brindley finds fault with the wholesale application of “Chineseness” in all periods of Chinese history and throughout all regions of China, writing that “by

examining the mechanics of Chinese identity as it functioned in history, we will break down the act of identifying oneself or another as Chinese... into component parts” (xi). Brindley also regards sinicization as a matter of historiography, revealing how the court chroniclers regarded their changing relationship with the peoples of the southern frontier, and not as an indicator of comprehensive cultural transformation. The Yue (South) was not transformed by, but rather engaged with, the Hua Xia in shaping the ever-changing boundary between these two regions of East Asia.

The Yue region is large (extending from the Hồng River delta to the southern banks of the Yangzi River) and it contains a dispersed population, but Brindley concludes that origins of the people she wishes to focus on are most likely proto-Austronesian speakers that had linguistic contact with ancient maritime communities populating the coastal areas of the South China Sea/Eastern Sea (Biển Đông) region. These communities sustained continual contact with other Austronesian speakers and even Austroasiatic cultures of Southwest China, but clear lines of cultural differentiation are not easily discerned. Brindley notes this confusion when she writes that “it is because scholars and lay people disagree about the divisions of identity—ones that do not at all correspond to the ancient or historical realities—that we sometimes fail to fathom the interconnected history of the entire south China and Southeast Asia/Oceania macro-sphere” (38). She examines evidence of prehistoric mass migrations throughout southern China, some starting from the island of Taiwan, as well as the smaller movements of political elites into the region. Given the profusion of ethnonyms, linked to both real and imagined states in the original Chinese sources, and the variety of languages spoken by the indigenous communities, gaining a firm grip on trends is a difficult task, but the author draws on the work of historical linguists and archeologists to make sense of these migrations.

Brindley explores several aspects of Yue identity, including its connection to modern-day Vietnam and the earliest identity of the Vietnamese people. This issue remains important among Vietnamese scholars, given its implications for the nationalist interpretations of the origins of the Vietnamese state. The politically charged expression of Yue identity in the early imperial period was the emergence of the Nam Việt/Nanyue 南越 kingdom, from which the modern-day name of Vietnam was derived in the early nineteenth century. The strength of the Nam Việt kingdom (207–111 BCE) along the southern frontier of the Qin 秦 and early Han 漢 (206 BCE–221 CE) empires, although short-lived in comparison to Chinese dynastic power, provided an example for subsequent generations of Vietnamese and other local leaders who sought confirmation of their own political legitimacy. When Triệu Đà first named himself the “Martial King of Nam Việt” (*Nanyue wu wang* 南越武王),” and later emperor of the territory, he did so without the approval of the northern court. Brindley holds up the Nam Việt as an unsuccessful act of southern autonomy that helped distinguish the Central Plains elite from the Yue cultural other. This point shapes the Sino-Vietnamese relationship through modern times (In what ways is Vietnam *not* China?), but Brindley’s study ends with the Han consolidation of control over most of the Yue territory in the aftermath of the Trưng Sisters Revolt (CE 40–43). A study of the period following the Han colonization of Jiaozhi/Giao Chi (northern Vietnam) would reveal many attempts by local southern leaders to call forth the Yue legacy to bolster renewed claims of political and cultural separation.

Historical representations of the Yue provide another level of understanding how this regional identity was circulated in the Sinosphere. Brindley sifts through details gleaned from court histories to locate tropes and images of Yue identity circulated in these accounts. She then extrapolates from these images the common perceptions and biases readers of court chronicles would have shared about Yue culture. Brindley finds significant depictions of the Yue in such Warring States period works as the *Mozi*, the *Mencius*, and the *Zhuangzi*, which depict the Yue as “hovering along the physical, cultural and emotional periphery” (125). She adds that “[all] these clues show that the Yue occupied a clear spot in the imagination of Warring States authors as the distant that defines what is close, the unfamiliar that gives meaning to the familiar, and the unworthy that gives value to the worthy” (125). The author finds in later Han works a shift toward the depictions of the Yue that rely on lineage-based attributes and environmentally-determined characteristics. According to Brindley, later Han sources such as Yuan Kang's 袁康 (fl. 40 CE) history *Yue Jue Shu* 越绝书 (*Glory of the Yue*) and Zhao Ye 赵擘 (fl. 1st century CE) historical novel *Wu Yue Chun Qiu* 吴越春秋 (*Spring and Autumn Annals of the States of Wu and Yue*) offer us less about Yue society and more about Hua Xia-based tastemakers attributing Central Plains values to members of the ancient Yue elite.

In the second half of her study Brindley explores the physical attributes and inter-regional engagements that defined Yue identity in the eyes of Central Plains chroniclers. Han and pre-Han sources contain a variety of Yue-style hair-dos, tattooing practices and fantastical weaponry. Recorded episodes of Yue interaction with the Han court, including armed resistance, also offer us a clearer picture of Yue political identity. As Brindley writes, “[the] various acts of appeasement, subterfuge, diplomacy, and rebellion that many Yue leaders demonstrated toward the Han reveal some of the political contingencies surrounding the construction of Yue political and ruling-class identities in the South” (241). After the successful expansion of Han territory under the ambitious emperor Han Wudi, Yue leadership would lose the urge to proclaim political separateness. The author states in her conclusion that “after Han Emperor Wu's conquests of the entire southern frontier, it was simply not advantageous or in an individual's interests to express publicly or cling too tightly to an identity that had lost to Han forces, though many still tried throughout the ages” (248). At various points in Vietnamese history following the period examined in Brindley's study, political proclamations drawing on the Yue legacy were not necessarily seen as defeatist, but the attractiveness of the Confucianism-infused imperial culture would displace in the minds of many Vietnamese leaders the urge to separate oneself from Central Plains values.

Brindley's wide-reaching study of Yue identity touches on many aspects of Yue traits as history, trope, and foil. She manages to present a clear account of how Han court chroniclers created a distinct awareness of the Yue to delineate more clearly what constituted Hua Xia values and identity. Details become densely layered in places, but Brindley's guideposts remain clear throughout her argument. Scholars of both early China and Vietnam will certainly benefit from reading this book. Moreover, as rising tensions in the South China Sea focus attention on political divides between the People's Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, we would all benefit from re-examining the process of ancient identity formation that resulted in a fluid cultural boundary in the region from earliest times.