

REVIEW

Erica Fox Brindley. *Ancient China and the Yue: Perceptions and Identities on the Southern Frontier, c. 400 BCE–50 CE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xxii + 279 pp.

Reviewed by
Brian Lander*

This pioneering multidisciplinary work explores the early history of the area now known as South China and North Vietnam by focusing on the peoples referred to in early Chinese texts as Yue 越. By judiciously combining textual, archaeological, and linguistic sources, Brindley examines what we know, and do not know, about these people, making an important contribution to the study of identity in Early China and to the general history of this long-neglected region.¹

The book can be roughly divided into three parts. The first three chapters employ textual, archaeological and linguistic evidence to examine the origins of the people who inhabited the region from the Neolithic until the first century C.E. Chapters 4, 8 and 9 concern the political and military interactions between the states of this region and those of the north, especially the Western Han Empire. Finally, chapters 5–7 explore how the people of this region are depicted in classical Chinese texts, our only written sources on them, and what this has to tell us about how their authors understood their place in the world and their own identities.

The engaging preface and introduction focus on identity formation, and explain the roles specific historical narratives play in the identities of people in the region today. Chapter 1 then reviews the ethnonyms used in ancient Chinese texts for peoples of the south and considers what we actually know about these peoples. Effectively a second introduction, this chapter is an excellent review of the central questions in the study of the ancient peoples of the region. The following two chapters

* Brian Lander, 蘭德 Harvard University; email: brianlander@fas.harvard.edu.

1. Despite the excellent work of Francis Allard and others, there are still no English-language monographs on the post-Neolithic archaeology of any region of southeast China. There are two recent studies on Yunnan and Northern Vietnam: Alice Yao, *The Ancient Highlands of Southwest China: From the Bronze Age to the Han Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Nam C. Kim, *The Origins of Ancient Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

continue this focus on who the indigenous people of South China really were by tracing linguistic and archaeological evidence for their origins and prehistory over millennia. Chapter 2 provides a remarkably clear overview of the complicated debates on the prehistory of languages in the region, and concludes that all of the language groups still found in the region were probably spoken there in ancient times. Although it confirmed my suspicion that nobody is really sure what languages were spoken by the ancient Yue people, it is nonetheless a very useful introduction to the field. Chapter 3 reviews the Neolithic-Bronze Age archaeology of South China and Northern Vietnam, focusing on evidence for prehistoric cultural groups and interaction between regions. Although very brief, this chapter provides a good concise overview of these issues.

Chapters 4, 8, and 9 review the history of the political and military interactions between the states of the south and northern kingdoms and empires. The latter two chapters are framed as studies of southern identity but, as Brindley acknowledges, her sources (standard histories and the tomb of a North Chinese king in Guangzhou) are not well suited to that task. In fact all three of these chapters are primarily studies of the political and military relations between the Western Han and various Yue states. Chapter 4 is a general review of evidence on the Eastern Zhou state of Yue and the Han-era Yue kingdoms, while chapter 8 concerns the relations between the Nan Yue kingdom and the Western Han. Chapter 9 analyzes three unsuccessful attempts of southern peoples to resist the Western Han and the uprising of the Trung sisters against the Eastern Han. All three chapters are essential reading for anyone interested in the early history of South China and Northern Vietnam.

The careful comparison of textual and archaeological evidence on Zhou-Han-era Zhejiang and Fujian in chapter 4 is a welcome study of a long-neglected topic. Brindley argues that the Han had some degree of direct administrative control over Fujian in both the Western and Eastern Han periods (pp. 106–11). Given the paucity of English language scholarship on early Fujian, I wish she had presented more of the archaeological evidence for this claim rather than citing secondary literature. It would also have been much better to include images from archaeological reports than photos taken in museums of posters and of imaginatively reconstructed models of ancient sites.² But these are minor problems, and this chapter is an important contribution to the literature.

2. Given that it is becoming increasingly necessary for scholars of Early China to employ both texts and archaeology, it is worth noting that archaeologists tend to have much better appreciation of the explanatory power of images and maps, and are trained to produce them. We historians should emulate this or, even better, collaborate with archaeologists.

Chapters 5–7 examine how the authors of classical Chinese texts thought about the Yue people, and themselves. In chapter 5, Brindley explores the implications of the fact that Hua Xia authors thought of the Yue as people who lived at the periphery of the world and shows how the Yue were employed as a cultural Other for a variety of rhetorical purposes.³ The following section rather unconvincingly argues that Sima Qian's description of the Yue ruling family's lineage reveals an idea of ethnicity that was based on inherited descent.⁴ She concludes with the compelling suggestion that the gradual incorporation of King Goujian's story into the shared repertoire of Han culture mirrored the incorporation of the Yue region into the Han culture area over the centuries.

Chapter 6 analyzes references in early texts to stereotypical characteristics of Yue peoples, such as their hairstyles and tattoos. The discussion of Yue unbound, cut, and "mallet-shaped" hairstyles and unusual seating customs suggests that, although these tropes may have had some basis in fact, most people used them as stock phrases for "barbarians" and probably had little idea what real Yue people were like. Brindley does mention two fascinating water-related explanations offered in early texts for why southerners cut their hair and tattooed their bodies, passages that suggest a more sophisticated appreciation of cultural difference than most of the passages cited in this book (pp. 165–66). The chapter concludes with the interesting suggestion that Southern people were sometimes referred to as "pigeon-toed" (*jiao zhi* 交趾), based on a simple pun with a similarly named southern commandery (*Jiao zhi* 交趾), and that other stereotypes about faraway peoples may also have originated in similarly nonsensical ways.

3. Brindley surprisingly never questions whether the concept of ethnicity corresponds with how authors of early texts thought about non-Hua Xia peoples, despite acknowledging that it may not: "intriguingly, this ethnicity is not defined along biological, hereditary lines: it can be acquired and passed on through culture" (p. 126). The authors of early Chinese texts seem to have considered the Yue and other neighboring peoples physiologically identical to themselves, but culturally barbaric. They understood the world as having one cultured group (themselves) surrounded by those without proper culture. Perhaps the concept of ethnicity, based as it is on modern ideas of evolution and genetics, is not very useful for the study of Early Chinese ideas.

4. Sima Qian's habit of tracing the lineage of royal houses (even that of the Yue and Xiongnu) back to the sage kings instead reveals how he thought about aristocratic lineages and political power. His "although the Yue are southern barbarians 越雖蠻夷" passage argues that the Yue ruling lineage was successful because of the ongoing influence of the virtue accumulated by Yu the Great (i.e., precisely because they are not fully Yue), and is not an argument about Yue "ethnic identity" (p. 135). *Shi ji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 114.2984.

This gets at one of the most important contributions of the book as a whole, which is to reveal that although some Yue regions were fully incorporated into the Han Empire in a military and administrative sense, the literate classes clearly knew almost nothing about them or their culture. Chapter 7, for example, shows that early references to the Yue contain few references to water, snakes, and illness compared with texts written in later centuries when people were more familiar with the region. She concludes the section by arguing that references to the Yue in early texts are far more likely to reflect simple tropes of the Other, or the place of the south in imagined geographies, than real knowledge of the region.

Brindley thus makes clear that further research on these people must be archaeological. But this work makes no claim to be a study of the archaeological evidence available for studying the Yue people. Most of the archaeological evidence discussed in this work is concerned with 1) tracing the long-term origins of the peoples of the region, and 2) the tombs and building remains associated with the control of the region by northerners, as mentioned in the standard histories. Her discussions of a Yue tomb (pp. 88–90) and a figure of a kneeling Yue person (pp. 157–59) are the only detailed discussions of the material culture of local peoples during the period delimited in the book's title. I would have liked a few more of these insightful discussions of Yue material culture.⁵

To conclude, this book is truly an impressive achievement, especially given that Brindley's previous work (this is her third book in five years) did not concern linguistics or archaeology. By providing a general overview of relevant issues and texts this work lays an excellent foundation for more detailed studies of smaller areas. This work is not an exhaustive study of any of the topics it covers, but is rather a foundational book on a long neglected region that lays out much of the evidence available for studying it. It will remain a key text for a long time to come as scholars continued to explore the early history of this fascinating time and place.

5. Such as that seen in Feng Puren 馮普仁, *Wu Yue wenhua* 吳越文化 (Beijing: Wenwu, 2007).