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978-1-107-08478-0 - Ancient China and the Yue: Perceptions and Identities on the Southern Frontier, c. 400 BCE–50 CE

Erica Fox Brindley

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Ancient China and the Yue

In this innovative study, Erica Brindley examines how, during the period 400 BCE–50 CE, Chinese states and an embryonic Chinese empire interacted with peoples referred to as the Yue/Viet along its southern frontier. Brindley provides an overview of current theories in archaeology and linguistics concerning the peoples of the ancient southern frontier of China, the closest relations on the mainland to certain later Southeast Asian and Polynesian peoples. Through analysis of Warring States and early Han textual sources, she shows how representations of Chinese and Yue identity invariably fed upon, and often grew out of, a two-way process of centering the self while decentering the other. Examining rebellions, pivotal ruling figures from various Yue states, and key moments of Yue agency, Brindley demonstrates the complexities involved in identity formation and cultural hybridization in the ancient world and highlights the ancestry of cultures now associated with southern China and Vietnam.

Erica Fox Brindley is Associate Professor of Asian Studies and History at the Pennsylvania State University. She is the author of *Music, Cosmology, and the Politics of Harmony in Early China* (2012), *Individualism in Early China: Human Agency and the Self in Thought and Politics* (2010), and numerous articles on the philosophy, religions, and history of ancient China.

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Pennsylvania State University



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Preface

The problem with “China,” “Chineseness,” and “sinicization”

This book, at its core, aims to shed light on identities that many people seem to take for granted. What does it mean for someone to be Chinese, Vietnamese (“Viet” is the ancient pronunciation of “Yue”), or Southeast Asian? As a person of Eurasian descent, I’ve been taught to say that I am a mixture of seven different European ethnicities on my father’s side – Welsh, Irish, Swiss, German, English, Scottish, and Dutch – and only one ethnicity on my mother’s side: Chinese. Clearly, something is amiss. After all, it is not as though the genes on my European side are any more differentiated than they are on my Asian side. What if my mother had instead stressed my heritage as Shaoxing-ese, Hakka, Nanping-ese, Shandong-ese, Cantonese, Taiwanese, Chaozhou-nese, Hokkien, and Hainnanese?¹ This latter way of discussing one’s “Chineseness” may seem unfamiliar or absurd to the contemporary ear, but why would such a way of carving up one’s East–West bloodline be any less valid than the “7+1 = 8” formula that my parents taught me, which is generally accepted by people on both sides of the Eurasian Continent? The way we conceive of ethnicities in China reflects not only the West’s engagement with China as an allegedly monolithic culture with a homogeneous history and people, but also a sinocentric way of viewing, constructing, and reconstructing Chinese identity from within the Chinese mainland and its far-flung diaspora as well.

Every form of identity carves boundaries and assembles some aspects of the self into a package that distinguishes itself in a particular way. While calling oneself “Chinese” functions no differently than any other type of identity, the category of “Chinese” is distinctive in a few ways. First, it is massive in its scope and the sheer number of diverse peoples that it covers. The contemporary label “European” may at first glance seem comparable with the term “Chinese,” and yet, even with all the recognized diversity of

¹ I have just randomly made up and picked a few possible ethnic groupings that seem to correspond in specificity to the European labels.

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the “Europeans,” such a term may not even approach the geographical and ethnic scope of what is encompassed by “Chinese.”² Being “Chinese” assumes an ethnic identity that is intimately linked to a vast cultural history. Even though such a tradition narrates its history according to a continuous, linear trajectory starting from legendary heroes at the dawn of civilization to modern times, such a simplified history is still incredibly broad and inclusive. There are few types of cultural identification in the rest of the world that can compare in terms of inclusivity, except perhaps the relatively recently constructed identity “the West,” which, intriguingly, often contrasts itself with “the East,” and locates its roots in ancient Hellenic culture dating from Homeric times. Even in the case of so-called “Western” culture, one would be hard-pressed to discuss it in the singular, as Chinese culture is often presented, and as though there were but a single, continuous ethno-political entity dating from the ancient sages to today.

Also outlandish is the claim that Chinese people all somehow share the same genetic heritage. While a myth of shared descent is characteristic of many ethnic claims, any historian of China will quickly realize that thinking about Chinese people in terms of a single ethnicity is especially fraught with problems. This is due to the relative permeability throughout the ages of the boundary between what was considered to be inside and outside, or what was Hua-xia (or Han or Chinese) or not, as well as the all-inclusive manner in which Chinese imperial states gobbled up and incorporated those surrounding them into the administrative and cultural fold of the Chinese state.

Chineseness is often expressed these days in terms of the Han ethnicity. Both ethnonyms, “Chinese,” and “Han,” are exceedingly problematic and to a large extent informed by modern notions of the nation.³ Scholars have worked on various concepts of Chineseness during specific periods of Chinese history, and some have even used databases to collect data on various usages of ethnonyms such as “Han,” from the earliest available records.⁴ But to date, no comprehensive account that provides an arc for the development of Chinese concepts of an ethnic or cultural self has been forthcoming.

² Another interesting comparison might be to “South Asian,” or “Arab.”

³ See Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 80. For the recent history of ethnic and racial classification schemes, see Thomas Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), and Frank Dikötter, *Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

⁴ Ma Rong at the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology at Peking University has compiled an extensive database of uses of the term “Han” throughout Chinese history.

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So that we might come to terms with what it means to be Chinese or Han, I offer the following suggestions: rather than assume that “large, continuous, and homogeneous” was the natural state for China and its peoples, I ask that we take a close look at the ways in which such qualities have historically been fought for and only accepted after much time and contestation, if wholly or at all. As for the notion that “Chinese” is a relatively homogeneous and stable identity, I suggest that we focus on the mechanics of one’s identification with Chinese culture as one way of deciphering when, where, and how individuals think of themselves and others as Chinese as opposed to smaller, more local forms of ethnic or regional identification (such as Chaozhou, Hakka, Hokkien, Taishan, Fuzhou, and Putian). 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 (or, in this book, we will use the more relevant labels of “Hua-xia” or “Zhu-xia,” “Central States,” etc.) into component parts. Such parts consist in the various functions and reasons for naming, presenting, and maintaining a sense of self and other within specific contexts. In this book, for example, our focus on contexts of naming and constituting self and other – which, to a large extent, concern relationships of power – will help us better understand how an appeal to a single, unified identity such as the Hua-xia has been part of the political and cultural landscape of China since ancient times.

This book examines the predecessor to the Chinese self – the Hua-xia – by offering a case study of the cultures and peoples associated with its ancient southern frontier: the Yue/Viet. It pores over the pre-imperial and Qin-Han period (221 BCE–220 CE) textual corpus, pitting conceptions of Yue identity against the presumed central identity of the Hua-xia, or Zhu-xia. Analyzing rhetorical strategies, common tropes, and other types of representations of the other, I show the extent to which articulations of the self and Yue other were shaped by specific contextual needs or political exigencies. In addition, I provide an extensive discussion of the various geographies and nomenclature of Yue, as well as a review of current theories in linguistics and archaeology concerning the ancient peoples and regions of the southern frontier that are traditionally linked to the Yue. This establishes a non-textual background for the study of Yue identity in the ancient South, which in turn casts the textual evidence in relief, helping reveal the limitations and biases of our literary sources on the Yue.

By revisiting the question “What is ‘Chinese?’” via the question, “Who were the ‘Yue?’” in the pre-modern history of the South, I touch upon general questions relating to processes of identity construction,

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preservation, and destruction in the early history of East Asia. My abiding hypothesis is 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. The logic of centrality and centeredness, which was accompanied by a cluster of cosmological concepts such as harmony, universality, and the gravity of the central body, served as an underlying and foundational conceptual framework for constructing the self and other.

Critical to such an analysis is the question of how the logic of centrality relates to the historiographical conceit of sinicization, or, the notion that cultures along the periphery of the Central States regions assimilated into Hua-xia culture by adopting it wholesale. Should we accept at face value its implicit assumption that Hua-xia peoples and cultures from the North swept across the Southlands with such political, military, and cultural force that the Southerners were naturally swayed and won over by it? The model of sinicization, which functions much like Confucius' depiction of the gentleman whose *De*-virtue 德 blows over petty people like wind over grass, is clearly a gross oversimplification of modes of cultural change in Chinese history. Yet it remains a stalwart paradigm that has not been rectified, ousted, or challenged significantly, at least not for the early period. In this book, I emphasize ways in which early authors of classical Chinese texts center the Hua-xia self while decentering the other, thereby showing how the model of sinicization is intrinsic to Hua-xia perspectives on the other from very early on. This will help contextualize the very tools of historiography that we have inherited and that continue to exert a force in scholarship today.

The importance of the Yue – or, at the very least, local peoples inhabiting the South (who may or may not have identified as Yue) – as powerful actors in the ancient past serves as testament to the immense diversity and complex history of the East Asian mainland. As this book will show, certain scholarly approaches, as well as the many textual sources on the Yue themselves, are mired in identity politics and enmeshed in the interests of various nationalities and/or ethnic and social groups. The history of peoples associated with the term “Yue” has thus been swallowed up not just by time, but also by a dominant historiography that assumes that sinicization was the core, triumphant process at work. This book will offer a reformulation of the sinicization paradigm while also helping chisel away at incumbent interpretations of China – its history and identity – as a monolithic (i.e., “large, continuous, homogeneous”) whole. Through the lens of how the Yue other was constructed, described, discussed, and

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studied, I will establish a space for understanding the extent to which diverse, indigenous inputs and agents from the South featured in the very creation of Hua-xia and Yue identities.

In examining modes of constructing the self and southern other, we shed light on the very ways that the history of Chinese engagement in the South has been written. I do not ask that we completely throw out the model of sinicization, but I hope that we would approach it critically and come to terms with the ways in which it may be shaping our understanding of the past. If there is historiographical merit to the concept of sinicization, then it is only after the boundaries of time and place have been constructed and the limits and extent of such a process have been set. On the other hand, perhaps Hua-xia culture never really dominated in the South until the last 500 years or so. If the logic of Hua-xia centrality and its concomitant notion of sinicization lead us to a false understanding of the early history of identity relations in that region, then we will need to establish an alternative model of understanding southern and Hua-xia interactions: perhaps by redefining what Hua-xia meant in the context of the early history of the South (i.e., by viewing it as a constantly evolving concept), or by delving into the concepts of local cultures, syncretism, hybridity, and syncretic/hybrid cultures in more detail.

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Acknowledgments

While researching and writing this book, I have wandered a bit off the path with which I am most familiar – that of the ancient classics, philosophy, and intellectual history of China. On other academic shores I found a lively crowd of Southeast Asianists, especially those working on Vietnam, who welcomed me warmly and have been extremely gracious and supportive colleagues ever since I began this project. Archaeologists and linguists as well have mentored me with much patience and persistence, and scholars of frontier studies have generously supported this project. I feel very fortunate to have had a chance to interact with people who are so passionate about what they do and eager to help others at the same time.

Some of my first contacts were in the studies of Vietnam. Stephen O’Harrow, Keith Taylor, Michele Thompson, and Liam Kelley were each very responsive to my early articles on the ancient Yue and never hesitated to pass on suggestions for readings or to discuss certain points of Vietnamese history and language with me. At first I corresponded with these folks impersonally by email. One can imagine my pleasant surprise, therefore, when I met them one by one over the years and realized that they were each in person as delightful and helpful as they were via email. The first time I met Keith Taylor at an Association for Asian Studies panel, we found a nearby Vietnamese café and talked avidly about Vietnamese history for at least an hour. I am grateful to Michele Thompson for sharing her expertise on Southeast Asia and Vietnam during our many hours of chatting and hanging out in Singapore together (along with Nam Kim) in the summer of 2012. I am also grateful to Stephen O’Harrow for his friendship, support, and correspondence. When I sought Stephen out in Hawaii, he took me on a Chinatown adventure that started with the search for fish paste, took me through the bowels of Hawaii’s extensive Chinatown, and ended with a cheap bowl of Thai noodles on the other end. I was impressed to hear him speaking to various vendors in Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Mandarin during his quest for that elusive fish paste. And many thanks to Liam

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Kelley for his support and keen criticism of approaches to the early history and historiography of Vietnam. The works he has sent my way have spared me much time, insofar as I did not have to track down the source for every type of claim – myth or historical fact – concerning ancient Vietnam. Liam has also helped me with issues of textual reliability and confirmed that the ancient Chinese sources that I was taking as primary were indeed more representative of the early period than the earliest textual sources in Vietnamese, which are written over a millennium after the earliest Chinese sources.

My study of the ancient ethnonym Yue/Viet has taken me into unknown disciplinary waters in search of a general understanding of the background of the southern peoples. I would have most certainly drifted off or been sunk if not for the valuable and patient guidance of leaders in the fields of Asian archaeology and linguistics, some of whom became informal mentors to me. In archaeology, I owe much of what I know to the dedicated help of Jiao Tianlong, Francis Allard, and Alice Yao. All three have responded to my incessant queries about archaeology and have influenced my understanding of current debates in archaeology by sending me relevant articles, reading over rough chapters or passages of writing, and otherwise advising me on approaches to or ways of thinking about archaeology. Francis Allard's work on archaeology in the Lingnan 嶺南 region has been of incredible use and significance to my own. He helped me conceptualize the material situation in the ancient South and kindly dedicated his time to reading and commenting thoughtfully on multiple rough drafts of my chapter on archaeology. Alice Yao has guided me deftly in the archaeology of southwest China and the relationships between such an area and the South. She and Francis have both helped me think through some of the important methodological approaches in archaeology and directed me to the most interesting questions relevant to my inquiry. I am so grateful for their dedication and patience.

I could not have had a better introduction to the archaeology of the ancient southern frontier without Jiao Tianlong. Tianlong's monumental assistance on my 2012 trip to southern China allowed me to gain first-hand insight into the archaeological cultures of the ancient Southerners and even acquire hundreds of pictures of important sites and artifacts to boot. I am indebted to him for taking the time out of his busy schedule to travel with me from Fuzhou to Wuyishan, showing me and his students at Xiamen University how archaeologists hit the road with open minds and adventurous spirits, sifting patiently through the earth's sloughed-off layers of skin for material proof of our forebears, their stories, activities, and passions. This was no cerebral exercise of reading and writing as my job as historian tends to be. Instead, it was about physically going to each

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and every site; walking over, beside, under, and past ancient walls, foundations, and burial mounds; and examining and testing shards, remains, soil samples, and rocks. Experiencing the past in this way was certainly very different from the experience of poring over books or copies of bamboo strips to gain insight into another's thoughts. I thank Tianlong as well for pointing me to much of the relevant scholarship on the ancient Wu-yue and Min-yue regions.

My six months in Hawaii in 2011 offered an occasion to meet with the king of Austronesian linguistics, Bob Blust, who further helped me gain an understanding of the Austric hypothesis, as well as the origins of Austronesian languages in and around ancient Taiwan/Fujian. In linguistics, I also wish to extend special thanks to Bill Baxter for his dedicated guidance on the linguistic panorama of the ancient East Asian mainland. As my main mentor early on in this project, Bill helped bring me up to speed on some of the basic controversies and approaches in the historical linguistics of Asia. Especially fruitful was his help explaining some of the fundamental concepts put forth in several key articles dealing with the Austro-Asiatic and Austronesian language families. Bill has also been responsive to the questions I have had over the years concerning Chinese or Asian linguistics; I am very grateful for his help, patience, and insightful responses to my elementary questions.

Laurent Sagart, another leading figure in Chinese historical linguistics, also extended a helpful hand in guiding me in current linguistic theories and recent work on the origins of and possible interactions among East Asian and Southeast Asian languages. He read through a later draft of my linguistics section and was able to point out errors and recommend further readings on areas and issues that I had previously neglected. I especially thank him for his generous help, the many articles he sent me, and the email exchanges we were able to have before this book was sent off to the press.

If I still do not completely comprehend the details of the many linguistic debates introduced to me by Bill Baxter, Laurent Sagart, and Bob Blust, or the archaeological work introduced to me by Jiao Tianlong, Francis Allard, and Alice Yao, and if I somehow fail to present the pressing concerns and debates of archaeologists and linguists adequately in this book, it is certainly all my own fault, reflecting my own limitations as an outsider to these disciplines, and not the commitment of my colleagues to my education in these areas.

My official entrée into the field of Southeast Asian Studies occurred in the summer of 2012 at a conference in Singapore, supported by ISEAS and organized by Victor Mair, on China and its southern neighbors. The conference provided a great forum for meeting a host of people who are

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working on very interesting facets concerning all sorts of cultures and civilizations associated with the maritime networks that connected mainland Southeast Asia and China to the islands of the Pacific and the rest of the Eurasian Continent, especially India. I was particularly thrilled to have finally met the great Wang Gungwu, a true gentleman as well as scholar of prodigious mental capacity and scope, whose 1958 book on the Nanhai trade inspired and informed this book and my entire outlook on the role of the South China Sea in East and Southeast Asian history. I would like to thank the other participants in the conference – Andrew Abalihin, Sylvie Beaud, Andrew Chittick, Hugh Clark, Rebecca Shuang Fu, Derek Heng, Liam Kelley, Nam Kim, Li Tana, Yi Li, Victor Mair, Sean Marsh, Tansen Sen, Tan Chin Tiong, Michele Thompson, Geoff Wade, and Takeshi Yamazaki – for providing me with a better sense of connections between China Studies and Southeast Asian Studies and the interesting problems they are working on in relationship to the maritime networks and cultures of (mostly) the pre-modern periods.

I am indebted to the American Council of Learned Societies for awarding me a Charles A. Ryskamp Research Fellowship. This generous award helped fund a year's worth of additional research time and travel in 2011–2012, which allowed me to meet and work with key linguists, archaeologists, and scholars during a short stint in Hawaii. In addition, I am thankful to Penn State for the sabbatical year they just granted me in 2013–2014, during which I was able to finish up the rough draft for this book. The two reviewers of this book gave me insightful comments that shaped the final product in tangible ways. And I would like to thank the American Council of Learned Societies and Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for their generous support of a conference that I co-hosted with Kathlene Baldanza at Penn State University on April 12–13, 2013, “Maritime Frontiers in Asia: Indigenous Communities and State Control in South China and Southeast Asia, 2000 BCE–1800 CE.” The many stimulating discussions by the participants of this conference helped contribute to my overall understanding of frontier issues in pre-modern China and Southeast Asia. Participants included Hugh Clark, Wu Chunming, Eric Henry, Michael Puett, Francis Allard, Jiao Tianlong, Kate Baldanza, Greg Smits, John Whitmore, Tansen Sen, Wingsheung Cheng, Billy So, Robert Antony, Liam Kelley, Niu Junkai, Michele Thompson, Sean Marsh, James Anderson, Magnus Fiskesjö, Ronnie Hsia, Victor Mair, Stephen O'Harrow, and Paul Smith.

Lastly, without the help and support of colleagues, friends, and family, as well as wonderful caretakers and teachers for my children, I would never have had the time or energy to complete this book. I thank in particular Xiao-bin Ji for being on call for quick, last-minute discussions

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and clarifications of confusing passages in Chinese histories. I thank Dan Shultz for helping me make the three maps for this book, as well as Cynthia Col and Julene Knox for their superb work on indexing and copy-editing, respectively. I also thank Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Todd Colocino, Eric Hayot, and Chunyuan Di for local support in State College, and I am indebted yet again to Derek Fox, my husband, for his efforts at sharing the Sisyphean task of childrearing with me

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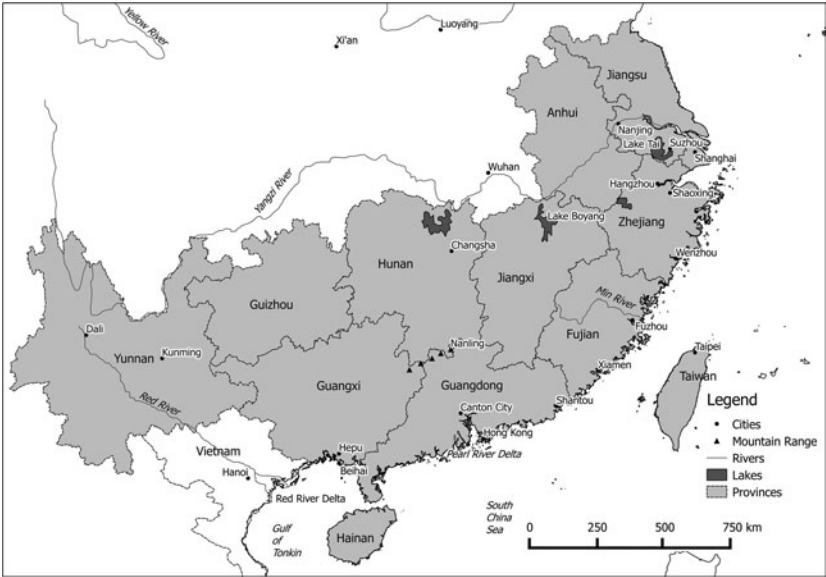
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Note on the text

Parts of Chapter 5 were originally published as “Barbarians or Not? Ethnicity and Changing Conceptions of the Ancient Yue (Viet) Peoples (c. 400–50 B.C.),” *Asia Major* 16.1 (2003), 1–32. Parts of Chapters 8 and 9 of this book, as well as one of the political timelines in Part II, were originally published in “Representations and Uses of Yue 越 Identity Along the Southern Frontier of the Han, c. 200–111 BCE,” *Early China* 33 (2009): 1–35. A version of the section on hairstyles in Chapter 6 was published as “Layers of Meaning: Hairstyle and Yue Identity in Ancient Chinese Texts,” in Victor Mair and Liam Kelley, eds. *Imperial China and Its Southern Neighbors* (Nalanda-Srivijaya Series), Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2015. The author thanks the publishers from *Asia Major*, *Early China*, and the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies for their permission to reprint material from these works in this book.

xx *Maps*



Map 1: Provincial map of modern south China and Vietnam (drawn by Dan Shultz).



Map 2: Warring States China, 350 BCE (drawn by Dan Shultz).

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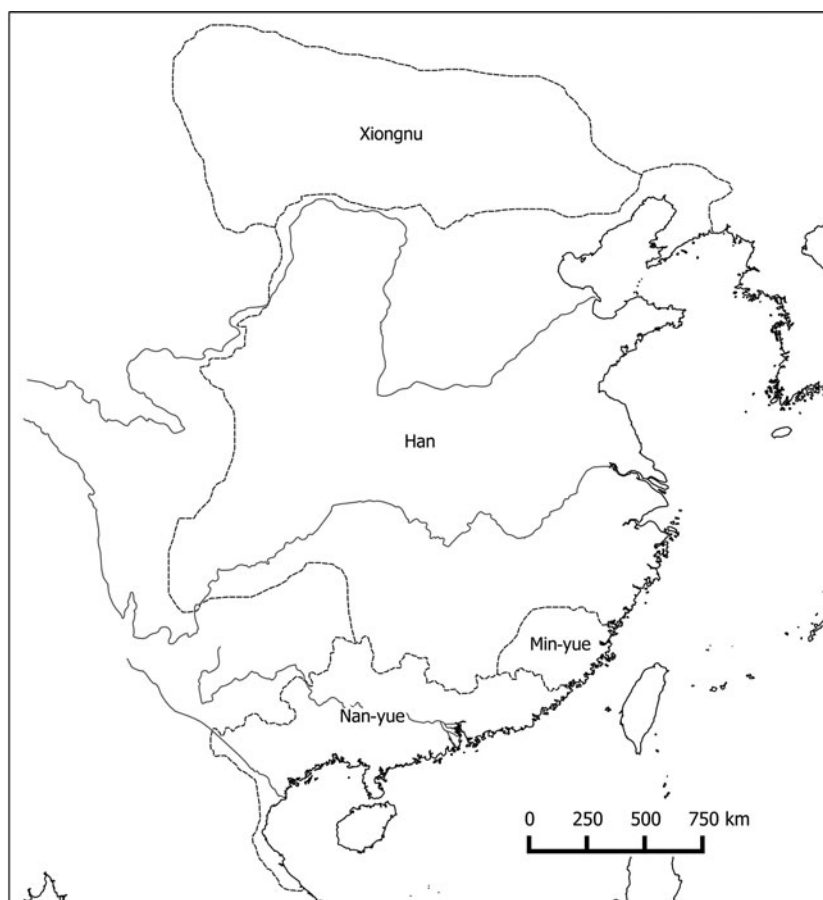
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Map 3: Early Han era, 200–111 BCE (drawn by Dan Shultz).