

Before Chinese and Vietnamese in the Red River Plain: The Han–Tang Period

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Abstract:

The identification of people as Chinese and Vietnamese in Vietnam, that has caused much suffering in the last half-century, has been projected back into distant pasts where it does not belong. Almost all historians of the Han–Tang period in the Red River Delta use modern ideas of “Chinese” and “Vietnamese” ethnicity to discuss this era, contrasting “Chinese” invaders with indigenous “Vietnamese”. Using textual analysis and historical linguistics, this essay argues that no Han–Tang period texts recognise these ethnic divisions, meaning these terms cannot accurately reflect social divisions of the period. Furthermore, none of the national ethnonyms Vietnamese historians claim as their own (like Việt and Lạc) referred exclusively to Red River Delta people. Where Chinese are concerned, the article explores how the equally problematic term “Chinese” became applicable to northern migrants, and when it became a useful analytical category of ethnicity in early Vietnamese experience.

Key Words:

Ancient Vietnam; Han–Tang southern China; Lingnan; origin of Vietnamese; Yue

Defining Chinese and Vietnamese—An Exercise in Retrospective History

The division of people into Chinese and Vietnamese in modern Vietnamese history has caused violence, dispossession, and forced migration. As an intensely politicised subject in an age of ingrained identity politics, it has even influenced perceptions of the distant past. The result has been that, almost without exception, historians of the Han–Tang period in the Red River Delta (111 BCE–938 CE) have projected modern ideas of “Chinese” and “Vietnamese” ethnicity into the distant past, contrasting “Chinese” invaders, rulers, and colonisers with the indigenous “Vietnamese”—a people whose identity had supposedly persisted eternally through the struggle to expel the foreign invaders. A result of this is that when we read about the distant past of the area now known as Vietnam, we find that long-dead individuals have been forced to take sides in the eternal struggle, and end up as either Chinese officials or Vietnamese freedom fighters. In Western languages, the division between Chinese and Vietnamese has already been subtly suggested to us for over a century through the choice of discrete transcription systems for individual names.¹ Henri Maspero, for instance, made a distinction in French through his choice of transcription system for personal names. He used the *École française* transcription for those he regarded as Chinese names and the Sino–Vietnamese transcription (in *quốc ngữ*) for Vietnamese;² Keith Taylor largely followed the same convention in *The Birth of Vietnam*.³

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1. Ironically this does not occur in even the most politicised Chinese or Vietnamese scholarship; characters make the pronunciation of names in Chinese ambiguous, and in Vietnamese all names in Chinese characters are transcribed into Sino–Vietnamese.

2. Henri Maspero, “Le protectorat général d’Annam sous les Tang,” *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 10, 1 (1910): 539–51. On p. 549 he notes: “For the names of individual people, titles of books, reign periods, I have adopted the Chinese pronunciation for Chinese people, books, and periods, and the Annamese (Hanoi) pronunciation for the names of Annamese people etc.”

3. Keith W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 361. Although I criticise Taylor’s published interpretation of this historical period for being divided along Vietnamese and Chinese lines, I

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Only Jennifer Holmgren was consistent in her use of a single transcription system for names taken from ancient texts, making an exception only where “common usage dictate[d]”.⁴ As the choices of transcription systems that Maspero and Taylor made resulted from their decisions about the historical status of individuals as either “Chinese” or “Vietnamese”, it is necessary to look at the actions of individuals that invited these authors to allocate them to one side or another. The rule of thumb seems to be that anyone who rebelled against imperial rule appeared in modern Vietnamese, while most administrators appeared in modern Mandarin Chinese. Taylor makes exceptions for members of the Du 杜 family (who lived outside the era discussed in Maspero), some of whom held the inspectorate of Jiaozhou post for three generations in the early fifth century. This choice was presumably on account of their being “unquestionably the most Vietnamese of all the imperial clans to govern Vietnam”.⁵ But, in the main, Taylor’s distinction seems to be based on the assumption that those who rebelled against imperial rule did so because they identified as Vietnamese, not because of other factors such as opposition to corrupt officials or local power struggles.

Yet, if we turn to historical texts, we find no evidence to support these divisions. If any group consciousness existed over one thousand years ago among those peoples of the Red River Plain who spoke the Austroasiatic language ancestral to modern Vietnamese, it did not give rise to any distinction in names in contemporaneous Chinese texts. None of the Han–Tang period texts contain any ethnonyms that correspond to “Chinese” or “Vietnamese” in any sense at all.⁶ There are many terms that scholars have traditionally associated with these modern names, but not one single historical term that corresponds to any of them, either linguistically or geographically. The concept of “Chinese” was mostly absent from pre-modern texts. Inhabitants administered by empires we now associate with the term “China”—the Han Empire, the Tang Empire and so on—were usually referred to as either “people” (*ren* 人) or “subjects” (*min* 民). As regards the “Vietnamese”, only peoples who lived beyond direct imperial rule, or had social and political structures that were markedly different from those of the imperial heartlands, were given special names in Chinese texts, and such names were usually pejorative terms with connotations “barbarity”. The “Chinese–Vietnamese” dichotomy we are so used to is entirely absent from texts of the Han–Tang period. In its place is a loose, fluid distinction between what might be termed “barbarians” and “subjects”.

Given this, the question naturally arises: is the distinction between Chinese and Vietnamese at this time based on anything other than a retrospective view of history? What evidence is there of a shared sense of “Vietnameseness” or “Chineseness” among groups of inhabitants of the Red River Delta in the Han–Tang period other than those we have been conditioned to believe because of later events? Those are the central questions that

am aware that he no longer holds this view. Unfortunately, no new major study of the Han–Tang period in the Vietnam area has yet appeared to supersede Taylor’s work. The only one even close to doing so for the Tang period is Charles Holcombe’s “Early Imperial China’s Deep South: The Viet Regions through Tang times,” *T’ang Studies* 15–16 (1997): 125–56, in which he regards the Red River Plain in Tang times not as a rebellious nation-in-waiting but as an “oasis of civility,” controlled by great localized families and surrounded by untamed barbarian peoples, and therefore little different from what existed at the lower end of the Pearl River around modern Canton.

4. Jennifer Holmgren, *Chinese Colonisation of Northern Vietnam: Administrative Geography and Political Development in the Tongking Delta, First to Sixth Centuries A.D.* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1980), p. v.

5. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*, p.111

6. I exclude the mediaeval Vietnamese works *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* 大越史記全書 [Complete history of Đại Việt] and *Việt Sử Lược* 越史略 [Short history of the Việt] from this discussion as neither is a primary source for the Han–Tang period. They can only be considered primary sources for Vietnamese historiography of the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. In many cases, particularly in *Toàn Thư*, the descriptions of events in the Han–Tang era are copied from the standard histories, with a few details altered.

this essay seeks to answer by using the tools of textual analysis and historical linguistics. I begin by analysing terms for “barbarians” and their referents.

Part One: Where are the Việts?

“Việts” are not “Vietnamese”

In a Vietnamese context, historians have usually understood various historical terms as referring to the ancestors of the modern Việts, the people who identify themselves as *Kinh* and speak the Austroasiatic language known as Vietnamese. This identification is highly problematic. None of the words that Vietnamese historians have claimed as national ethnonyms (*Việts* and *Lạc* for example) are used exclusively for inhabitants of the Red River Delta area in ancient texts. The assumption that the *Việts*/*Yue* 越⁷ of old Chinese texts are somehow equivalent to the Vietnamese of today is one of the most persistent myths in Vietnamese national history, and it deserves to be thoroughly discredited.

In the first place, it is vital to realise that catch-all terms for barbaric peoples were commonplace in old Chinese texts. Before the appearance of *Yue* as a name for the inhabitants of what is now southern China, the usual terms employed were *Man* 蠻 and *Yi* 夷. These early names for barbaric foreigners are two of a set based on the four points of the compass, the *Man* being the “Barbarians of the South” and the *Yi* the “Barbarians of the East”. It is widely recognised that these terms did not refer to anything resembling ethnic groupings. *Yi*, for example, referred variously, at different times in different texts, to people of the eastern Chinese mainland, of the Korean peninsula, of Japan, Yunnan, and even of Britain! *Man* was generally fixed in meaning, referring to any “barbaric” peoples who dwelt to the south of the Chinese empires, but without any specific geographical marker. By contrast, the term that emerged later for these people—*Yue* or *Việts*—has typically been regarded as denoting a single ethnic group in most modern Chinese language scholarship.⁸ In Vietnamese scholarship, the term *Việts* refers to all the *Yue* mentioned in ancient texts and the *Việts* of modern Vietnam as well as everything in between. An added confusion arises from the fact that most Chinese scholarship on prehistoric and protohistoric Southern China also uses the term *Yue* for archaeological cultures and in so doing pushes back the scope of the term historically to a time before there was any written record of it.⁹

The use of “*Yue*” in historical texts is complex even without these modern accretions of meaning. Basically it should be understood in one of two related senses: the first is its ethnographic sense as a name applied to “southern barbarians,” and the second its political sense when it appears as part of the name of kingdoms or empires. A failure to differentiate these two different usages has led to the assumption of close connections between the *Yue* Kingdom of the Spring and Autumn Period (conquered by the state of *Chu* in 334 BCE), the *Nan Yue* Kingdom (204 BCE–111 BCE), the *Hundred Yue* and *Mountain Yue* people referred to at various times, the Kingdom of *Đại Việts* (eleventh century CE onwards), and the *Việts* people of modern Vietnam. To understand what is

7. This is merely the difference between the modern Mandarin and modern Vietnamese transcriptions of the word. In this paper I use them interchangeably.

8. This practice is almost universal in Chinese and Vietnamese scholarship, with Meng Wentong’s work a notable exception (see below). For critical discussion of this assumption and its background, see Heather Peters, *Tattooed Faces and Stilt Houses: Who were the Ancient Yue?* Sino-Platonic Papers 17 (Philadelphia: Dept. of Oriental Studies, University of Pennsylvania, 1990) and William Meacham, “Is an Anthropological Definition of the Ancient Yue Possible?” in *Lingnan gu yuezu wenhua lunwen ji* 嶺南古越族文化論文集 [Collected essays on the culture of the ancient Yue people in south China], ed. Chau Hing-wa (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council, 1993) pp. 140–55.

9. Since this last usage did not occur until the modern period it is irrelevant to the meaning of the name in pre-modern texts. I mention it only to put readers on their guard whenever they see *Yue*/*Việts* applied to prehistoric contexts.

wrong with such a linear construction we must first get a picture of what Yue refers to when it appears in Chinese texts and why it was popular as a name both for “barbarians” and for political structures.

In its ethnographic sense, Yue was most commonly used in Han texts; thereafter it was largely replaced by other terms. Often prefixed with *bai* 百, meaning “hundred” or “many”, it was applied to indigenous people in the area from “Guiji to Jiaozhi” that is, the districts along the coast south of the Yangtze to the Red River Delta. When used in this sense, Yue seems little different from Man, as both contain the idea of “barbarians who live to the south”, and it was commonly used as a contrasting term for *Hu* 胡 meaning “northern barbarians”.¹⁰ Hu was also a name for the people on the northern and western frontiers of the Zhou, Qin, and Han Empires. In his longitudinal study of the nomadic peoples of central Asia and their relations with Chinese polities Nicola Di Cosmo noted that in Han times a shift occurred in Chinese naming of peoples in those areas from names based on the cardinal points (the *Rong* 戎 “Barbarians of the West” and *Di* 狄 “Barbarians of the North”) to an “anthropological type” of name (Hu), but that even so this name still did not imply that its referents were ethnically or linguistically similar.¹¹ This mirrors the appearance of the name Yue in its ethnographic sense. “Yue” usually referred to people of the south who lived in stilt houses and practiced slash-and-burn cultivation, but it did not necessarily imply that all Yue spoke the same language or belonged to the same political structure. Unlike Hu, the term Yue did not endure long as a name for southern “barbarians” and by the fifth century it had been largely superseded.¹² Also unlike Hu, and unlike other names for “barbarians”, Yue carried few negative connotations. Unlike “Man” and “Yi”, neither of the two written forms of the name Yue carries an implication that the bearers have some relationship to insects or dogs or bow-wielding savages,¹³ and unlike the other “barbarian” names, the word does not form part of compound words with negative meanings.¹⁴ This offers an explanation both for why Yue passed out of fashion as a “barbarian” term and for its popularity as a term of self-designation for local power structures in the Lingnan region (modern Guangdong, Guangxi, and northern Vietnam). The use of Yue as a self-designation is connected to the history of the term as a political idea rather than to its connotations of barbarism.

In its political sense, Yue had a long historical pedigree. It was the name of a well-documented kingdom in the Spring and Autumn Period that had interacted long enough with the ancient “civilised world” to have been considered a part of it. The name also had associations from an even earlier period with the term *Yuechang* 越裳, a distant country who had recognised the moral superiority of the Chou in ancient times and presented two white pheasants as tribute to the Chou court.¹⁵ Sima Qian also recorded that the people of the southeast coast of the Chinese mainland had descended from refugees from the old Yue kingdom on the east coast which had been destroyed by the kingdom of Chu in 331

10. See Meng Wentong, *Yueshi congkao* 越史叢考 [Collected investigations into the history of the Yue] (Peking: Renmin chubanshe, 1983) p. 24

11. See Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 102 for the use of Rong and Di, and p.129 for Hu, which Di Cosmo explains as “a blanket term that included mounted bowmen who practised pastoral nomadism as their main economic activity.”

12. “Mountain Yue” (*Shan Yue* 山越) survived as a designation for “barbaric” people up until the Tang, but it was not common and was used mainly for people living in modern Jiangxi and Zhejiang. Aside from its use as a term for the Yue dialect group that includes Cantonese, the name Yue does not survive anywhere in China as a self-designation by any ethnic grouping.

13. The graphic form of Man contains an “insect” radical, and the character for Yi was originally a pictograph of a man bearing a bow.

14. Such as the words *yeman* 野蠻 “barbarous, uncivilised” and *hushuo* 胡說 “to talk nonsense”.

15. See Meng Wentong, *Yueshi congkao*, p. 26–28 for discussion of the early records of these people.

BCE.¹⁶ This famous sentence provided a tenuous connection between the lands of the “Hundred Yue” in the south and the old Yue kingdom in the area south of modern Shanghai. At the fall of the Qin, Zhao Tuo chose the name *Nan Yue* 南越 for his independent kingdom centred on modern Canton, affixing “Nan” (south) to the name presumably because it lay to the south of the old territory of the kingdom of Yue. Because of the detailed records in the widely-read *Shiji* and *Hanshu* concerning Zhao Tuo and the kingdom he founded, Nan Yue then picked up a pedigree of its own as a name for the region around the Pearl River drainage area. The name Yue, or Nan Yue, became a local symbol of historical legitimacy for future generations of aspiring leaders, creating, as Keith Taylor put it, “a tradition of kingship on the southern frontier of the Chinese imperial world”.¹⁷ It was this connection with famous kingdoms of the past that made the name Yue quite different from other pejorative “barbarian” designations such as “Man” or “Yi”. There was never a kingdom containing the terms “Man” or “Yi” in its name, although Zhao Tuo did refer to his subjects as “Man” in a self-depreciatory sense.¹⁸ Also unlike “Man” and “Yi”, Yue came to refer to two more-or-less defined geographical areas, the territory south from the old Yue Kingdom around the Lower Yangtze, and the Pearl River drainage area. The latter was sometimes, but not always, prefixed with “Nan” meaning “south”.

Around seven centuries after Zhao Tuo, Li Bi (Lý Bôn) became the first person in the southern provinces to call himself “Emperor of Yue”. This act has been traditionally interpreted in Vietnamese historiography as a restoration of the independent Vietnamese nation. The assertion of continuity is founded on little more than the almost religious belief in the idea of ancient Vietnam as an occupied nation; yet Li Bi’s choice of the imperial title of Yue actually indicates quite the opposite. As we have seen above, “Yue” originally had very little connection with pre-Han traditions of leadership in the Red River Plain. They had been utterly forgotten, and were only gradually reconstituted from local folklore and old Chinese texts in the centuries after the consolidation of Đại Việt as an independent polity.¹⁹ Li Bi’s identification was with pre-existing Chinese concepts of local leadership, which becomes obvious when we consider the fact that he was not the only one to call himself “Emperor of Yue”.²⁰ The historical precedent inherent in the term later inspired others to do the same. In the early years of the Tang Empire, before it had consolidated power in the south, an advisor to Feng Ang 馮盎, the powerful local ruler of the lands along the coast of the South Sea, suggested he take the title “King of Nan Yue”, but the ruler refused out of fear that he might lose the riches and influence his family had built up in the area over generations.²¹ A century later, in 722, one of Feng Ang’s relatives, Feng Lin 馮璘 did take the title “King of Nan Yue” as part of a rebellion organised by the “Man” chieftain Chen Xingfan 陳行範 in the lands to the west of Canton.²² The first emperor of the kingdom known retrospectively as the “Southern Han”, Liu Yan 劉龔, was the last to use the term in

16. *Shiji* [Records of the grand historian] (Bona edition), 41:10b.

17. Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, p. 42.

18. He referred to himself as “great leader of the Man and Yi” in an apologetic letter to the Han ambassador Lu Jia, in *Shiji*, 113:3a. Liu Yan 劉龔 of the Southern Han also said he was “ashamed of ruling over the Man and Yi.” See *Jiu wudai shi* 新五代史 [Old history of the Five Dynasties] (Bona edition) 135:11a.

19. For a genealogy of these traditions and the rather late appearance of the “traditional” Vietnamese national history, see Esta S. Ungar, “From Myth to History: Imagined Polities in 14th Century Vietnam,” in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, eds. David G. Marr & A. C. Milner, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986) pp. 117–38.

20. Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, p.138, notes that both *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* and *Việt Sử lược* state that he declared himself “Emperor of Nan Yue” in contrast to the Chinese sources that say only “Emperor of Yue”. He believes this was based on the Chinese writers’ wish to disassociate Li Pi’s actions from Zhao Tuo’s “rebellious precedent”. Because of the late appearance of the Vietnamese texts, and the use of Nan Yue in other “rebellious” contexts, I find this explanation highly unlikely.

21. *Xin tang shu* [New Tang history] (Bona edition), 110: 1b; *Jiu tang shu* [Old Tang history] (Bona edition), 59: 1b.

22. *Zizhi tongjian* [Comprehensive mirror of government] (Zhonghua shuju edition), 213, p. 6781

the region that is now south China. He named his empire Da Yue (the same as Đại Việt) for a year in 917, before the associations of his surname led him to adopt the name “Han” and presumably the grander ambition (to be the emperor of All-Under-Heaven) that such a name signified.²³ Similarly, in 926 Wang Yanhan 王延翰, the second king of Min 閩, also used the historical precedent of the Min Yue kingdom in the same area one thousand years before to justify his independent rule.²⁴ As all of these examples indicate, it was common for states to re-use the names of famous kingdoms of the past, and the eventual localisation of “Việt” as a self-designation for the people of the Red River plain was a product of this custom.

Ironically, the Red River plain was in fact peripheral to the geographical region where “Yue” or “Nan Yue” was most commonly applied. Its reference to modern south China rather than to the Red River plain is evident in the way the name was used during the Han–Tang period: it was an important historical allusion or poetic reference to the two Yue areas around modern Shanghai and Canton. “Nan Yue” was a poetic reference to the Lingnan area during the Six Dynasties, while the fifth century *Nan Yue zhi* 南越志, was a geography of the entire Lingnan region which mainly contained information about the Pearl River drainage area. “Yue” was also re-cycled for two administrative areas (Yuezhou 越州), one south of the Yangtze, and the other, Yue Province, in the Lingnan region. Yue Province, which was founded in the 470s, covered only the area around Hepu and the Leizhou Peninsula, a region now well within the boundaries of modern China.

However, the best evidence that the term did not refer to modern “Vietnamese” areas or people comes from the seventh century, during the period of political confusion between the downfall of the Sui and the consolidation of Tang power. In a record of this time, the peoples described as “Việt” or Yue resided within the boundaries of modern China. Ning Changzhen 寧長真 was an influential leader in Qinzhou 欽州, now on the Chinese side of the modern Sino–Vietnamese border. When he heard that the Sui had fallen he reportedly led several provinces and counties of Lingnan to give their allegiance to Xiao Xian 蕭銑 a descendent of the Liang royal house who in 618 declared himself emperor of a restored Liang empire.²⁵ In the same year Xiao Xian sent an envoy to Qiu He 丘和, the governor of Jiaozhi. Since Qiu He did not know that the Sui had been overthrown he refused to recognise Xiao Xian’s claim to the throne. Ning Changzhen then attacked him militarily, an action described in this text as “leading an army of the Hundred Yue to attack Jiaozhou.”²⁶ Here those whom we would expect to be Việt are just “Jiaozhou” people, while the “Hundred Yue” are the half-civilised folk from the “Chinese” hill country to the north-east!

Moving from ancient texts to historical linguistics, we find that the ancestors of the people now commonly referred to as Việt (the “Kinh” of Vietnam) were rather late in picking up the term Việt as a group designation for themselves, and that they do not appear to have had any name for themselves that was not gleaned from a Chinese literary model. The phonological form of the term “Việt” as used in modern Vietnamese reveals that it was borrowed relatively late into the language ancestral to modern Vietnamese. The term “Việt” in Vietnamese is pronounced according to the rules of the stratum of Sinitic loanwords which developed from a system of Late Middle Chinese pronunciation borrowed during the late Tang. Outside of this system, among the words considered “colloquial”, and which could only be written with demotic (*Nôm*) characters, is the word *vưọt*, meaning “to

23. *Wudai shiji* [Historical records of the Five Dynasties] (Bona edition), 65: 3b.

24. *Ibid*, 68, p. 847. Showing his generals a copy of the *Shiji* he announced: “Min has been a kingdom since antiquity, who will we wait for to be king if I don’t take the throne now?”

25. *Xin tang shu* (Bona edition), 87: 1a/1b.

26. *Jiu tang shu* (Bona edition), 59: 4b/5a.

surpass”. Not only does this word carry one of the regular meanings of the word *Yue* in literary Chinese (and hence presumably in older spoken forms of Sinitic), but its pronunciation also corresponds nicely with the remnants of an older Sino–Vietnamese system of reading Chinese characters that developed from the Early Middle Chinese of the sixth or seventh centuries.²⁷ The absence of any old, colloquial self-designation for Việt people which was not borrowed from a Tang dynasty pronunciation of Literary Sinitic suggests that the use of “Việt” to refer to people was transmitted through Chinese books rather than oral usage. Adoption of the name thus has more to do with the top-down political associations of the word (Taylor’s “tradition of kingship”) than with any long tradition of ethnic identification.

“Li” are Not “Vietnamese”

The only indicator of perceived difference between the writers and the referents which could be read in modern terms as a shared sense of “Vietnameseness” is the use of “barbarian” names. The most commonly used terms for barbarians during the Han–Tang period were Li 俚 and Lao 獠. Of these, the name that indicated locals who were recognisably different from the people or subjects of other parts of the empire was Li. Under the Tang there were households in Jiaozhi classified as “Li households” *lihu* 俚戶 who had a special administrative status and only paid half the taxes of ordinary citizens.²⁸ Taylor believed that Li indicated “Vietnamese” people who led a settled existence in the plain as opposed to “Chinese” settlers and administrators.²⁹ However, the special taxation status of the Li applied throughout the whole Lingnan region, not just in the area that is now Vietnam. Since there were Li recorded further north than modern Canton, and as far east as modern Chaozhou, it is highly unlikely that Li was a term for any ethnic group. Most likely it indicated both a special administrative status and mild degree of barbarism—people recorded as Li tended to be lowland dwellers and less “wild” than the people of the highlands and narrow valleys, whose distance from imperial administrative centres usually attracted the term “Lao” instead.³⁰ Both aspects of “Li” are evident in the record of Li Sishen’s 李思慎³¹ rebellion against the Tang administrator in 687, after the protector general of Annam, Liu Yanyou 劉延祐, decided to levy full tax on the Li of Jiaozhi, and then punished their leaders for not obeying him. Because of this Li Sishen joined with other leaders to sack the seat of the protectorate and kill Yanyou. The rebels were finally suppressed by Cao Xuanjing 曹玄靜, a sub-prefect (*sima*) from Guizhou 桂州 (modern Guilin). From this record it is evident that the “Li households” in Jiaozhi were ruled by a semi-autonomous leadership with Chinese-style surnames, whose members acted as intermediaries between them and the imperial government, in particular, with taxes collected from or through them.

27. *Vuot* and *Việt* correspond to *[wuat] and *[yat] according to Pulleyblank’s Early and Late Middle Chinese pronunciations. See Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991) p. 388. *Vuot* was sometimes written differently in Nôm to distinguish it from the character that read as *Việt*.

28. *Zizhi tongjian*, 204, p. 2445.

29. Taylor, *Birth of Vietnam*, p.147.

30. This was not always the case, however, and there are texts that specifically mention the existence of Lao close by Red River plains. The *Chen shu* [Chen history] (Bona edition, 34: 24a) records that “the Yi and Lao of Jiaozhi constantly group together to commit banditry,” and that Li Bi was killed by Qulao 屈獠 in a valley not far to the north-west of modern Hanoi [*Chen shu* 1: 4a]. None of these names was unique to what is now the Vietnam; but the description of their activities and habitat indicates something different from the ordinary “commoners” or “people of Jiaozhi” and is similar to the way the names were used in other provinces that are now southern China.

31. In this case, the “Li” in Li Sishen, Li Bi, and Li Fozi is a surname, and has nothing to do with the name of groups of people.

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The most famous named “Li person” in the Jiaozhi area was the sixth century rebel Li Fozi 李佛子, noted both as a “Li commander” and as a kinsman of Li Bi.³² The Lê dynasty annals, *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*, said the Li family were originally “northerners” who became “southerners” after seven generations of dwelling in the south.³³ If Li Fozi was actually a member of the same Li family, then this would be early evidence of the possibility of shifting from “Chinese settler” to “barbarian leader”. In isolation and in retrospect, this might be taken as evidence the “Vietnamisation” of Chinese people; but in the larger picture of southern Chinese history it is not an unusual event: during the Sui and Tang there are several examples of lineages in the Pearl River drainage area that had assumed “barbarian” status in the eyes of Tang writers, and who ruled their people as chieftains rather than as governors and magistrates. Like the Li family, these lineages had a long association with the local “barbarians” from their long residence in the area.³⁴

The existence of individuals such as Li Fozi, who ended up known as Li despite their northern ancestry, casts doubt on the existence of any permanent, definable boundary between Vietnamese and Chinese as we would understand the terms today.

“Local People” are Not “Vietnamese”

Other names were used for the inhabitants of the Red River plain in the Han–Tang period, but they were certainly bestowed by outsiders. Two such terms were applied throughout the Chinese empires to the farming folk of most provinces. They were *turen* 土人, meaning “locals” or “indigenous”, and *baixing* 百姓, meaning “commoners”.³⁵ It is hard to tell precisely what these words refer to, as the terms were in common use for so long, but they do indicate that the writers who used them saw the ordinary folk of the Red River plain in much the same light as those of other provinces.

“People of Jiaozhi” is in fact one of the oldest ways of referring to “Việt”. It survives today in the Tai-Kadai languages (surrounding the Austroasiatic “Việt” people of the plains) as *Keeu*,³⁶ and in Malay as *Kuchi*.³⁷ Both terms derive from old pronunciations of Jiaozhi, and are not traceable to any word or name in an Austroasiatic language. *Kuchi* is well-known as the origin of the first part of the name “Cochinchina”, which was applied to the area of modern central and southern Vietnam by Europeans from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. These two names, and their phonological shape, indicate that the people who lived around the “Việt” people of the plains associated their lowland neighbours with the old Chinese name of the urban administrative centre. Most interesting of all is that these Tai peoples refer to others as “people of Jiaozhi”, even though they themselves inhabited the hinterland of Jiaozhi for centuries.

32. *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (1697 edition), 4: 14b.

33. *Ibid.*, 6: 19b, in which context “northerners” and “southerners” respectively connote “Chinese” and “Vietnamese”

34. Liao Yu-hua has made a study of four clans, the Ning, Chen, Wei, and Deng. Their ancestors could be traced back to the far north a few centuries previously, and they held administrative positions, yet they also appear as Man, Li, or Lao in Tang texts. Liao Youhua 廖幼華, *Lishi dili xue di yingyong – lingnan diqu zaoqi fazhan di tan tao* 歷史地理學的應用 – 嶺南地區早期發展的探討 [Applying historical geography—Investigations into the early development of the Lingnan region] (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 2004) pp. 253–76. Fang Guoyu also discusses a similar process that occurred in the Yunnan area with the rise of the great surnames who became the hereditary local nobility after generations of ruling over non-Sinitic peoples. See Fang Guoyu 方國瑜, “Shilun han jin shiqi di nanzhong daxing de zhengzhi huodong” 試論漢晉時期的‘南中大姓’的政治活動 [Discussion of the political activities of the ‘great clans of the south’ in the Han–Jin period] (*Xueshu yanjiu*, 1962), 3, pp. 1–7.

35. The biography of Tao Huang 陶璜, governor of Jiaozhi in the late third century, includes both terms. *Jin shu* [Jin history] (Bona edition), 57: 4b/6a.

36. This name is also still used colloquially in Lao and by Tai-speaking groups as far south as Thailand.

37. Henry Yule, *Hobson Jobson, a Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, ed. William Crooke (London: John Murray, 1903), p. 226.

What Might “Viets” have Called Themselves?

All of the names for “Việt” were imposed from above and became part of people’s everyday vocabulary through their use as the name of political structures. All the names for Vietnamese that are still used today, by themselves and their immediate neighbours (*Kinh*, *Việt*, and *Keeu*) are related to political structures and ultimately all were borrowed from the Chinese geographical imagination.³⁸ So what name did the people of the Red River plains call themselves? It is possible that they referred to themselves as something that sounded like *Lạc*, at least when the word was first recorded in Han times. In this case the phonological structure of the name may well have predated the Sino–Vietnamese reading system of the late Tang.³⁹ Unfortunately, the term *Lạc* was also used for people living in what is now Guangxi and therefore, like *Việt*, it is highly improbable that it referred to a single linguistic group. What the Austroasiatic-speaking ancestors of the modern *Kinh* or *Việt* might have called themselves, assuming they felt any group identity in relation to their rulers, may have been similar to the self-designation inherent in the modern Vietnamese first-person pronoun *ta* (“we”, “us”, or “I”). In older colloquial usage “*ta*” corresponded to “ours” as opposed to “theirs”. In colonial times, for instance, *nước ta* was “our country” and *tiếng ta* “our language” in opposition to *nước tây* and *tiếng tây*, “western countries” and “western language” (French). The use of a term basically meaning “us” to designate the social group to which one belongs is commonplace in anthropological literature.

Part Two: Where are the Chinese?

Equally as elusive as the “Vietnamese” in the Han–Tang period are people who might now be labelled retrospectively as “Chinese.” The difficulty in finding them is due to the fluidity of the concept of the barbaric. Throughout the empires that ruled the East Asian mainland at this time the behaviour of the inhabitants of urbanised administrative centres was considered the civilised norm, and they were most often referred to as “people” or “subjects” and only very occasionally as “Hua” in contrast to the “barbaric” peoples outlined above. “Han”, the term now used in Vietnamese historical scholarship alongside Chinese, was only ever used retrospectively, in post-Han texts, to refer to people who had lived during the Han Empire. Those whom we might now call Chinese appear unexceptional to the writers of ancient texts, so to find the “Chinese” in the Han–Tang era one must first look at the people in the spaces left over after the barbarians were labelled. Since the use of barbarian terms was partly based on administrative categories, it is likely that non-barbarian “people” and “subjects” included Austroasiatic-speaking subjects who lived in or near urban areas as well as Sinitic-speaking people.

Unlike in central China, urban centres in the southern regions were a mix of administrators, traders, and settlers (or descendents of settlers) from the north, who probably communicated with each other in some kind of Sinitic language. These centres were surrounded by hinterlands inhabited by people who were linguistically and culturally different from the urban people. Such a pattern of settlement was the norm in many pre-modern societies.

The relative peace and stability enjoyed by the Red River plain compared to the northern provinces of China made it a desirable destination for migrants from other parts of the empire who wished to escape military or political turmoil in the centres of imperial power. Major migrations to the Red River plain occurred in the chaos surrounding the disintegration of the Han Empire in the first decades of the third century. At this time most

38. *Kinh* is a much later term, so I have not discussed it in detail. Its derivation is the Sino–Vietnamese word for “capital” written as 京 and pronounced *jing* in Mandarin Chinese.

39. It is difficult to tell because the pronunciation of the word seems to have been more stable over time. Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation*, p. 204 gives *[lak] for both Early Middle Chinese and Late Middle Chinese.

of the western half of the Lingnan region was under the rule of Shi Xie 士燮 and the plain was a popular place of refuge from the chaos further north. It was reported at that time that “scholars fled there in their hundreds.”⁴⁰ Migration from the north in the same period is also attested by numbers of Han-style brick tombs excavated in the Red River Delta. These were either built by migrants or by locals influenced by the material culture of the migrant population. In this period, even the areas most remote from the seats of Chinese dynasties, such as Jiuzhen and Rinan commanderies (modern north central and central Vietnam) were desirable refuges and homes to communities of migrants from the north. One example appears in a letter sent by Yu Yiqi 俞益期, a sojourner down the coast in the later half of the fourth century, to his friend Han Kangbo 韓康伯. It included an account of people whom he called Maliu 馬流, a group of about two hundred households who lived to the north of Linyi (modern central Vietnam), all with the surname Ma 馬 which they shared with the Han general Ma Yuan. They were said to be descended from ten families of soldiers who had come with Ma Yuan three hundred years previously. Their language and eating habits were reportedly the same as other “Hua” people.⁴¹ Yu Yiqi’s record of the Maliu does contain some less credible elements,⁴² but recent excavations at Trà Kiệu near Hội An, show clearly that there were people who made Han-style roof tiles and pottery and who owned seals written in Chinese characters living far down the coast into what is now central Vietnam.⁴³ So even though the origins of the Maliu may have been exaggerated, it is clear that there were communities of northerners living far to the south of the Red River plain who had been there for centuries.

Records of large-scale migration to the Red River plain after Shi Xie’s time are less frequent, but the area still remained a desirable refuge from troubles in the north well into the fourth century. A late third-century work records: “There are constantly people who take their families and cross over (the sea) to Jiaozhi.”⁴⁴ A record from 306 noted that famine and pestilence had killed tens of thousands of people in Ningchou (modern Yunnan) and that Wuling 五苓夷 barbarians there had become so strong that they had defeated the imperial troops on several occasions, resulting in a flight of crowds of officials and commoners from Ningzhou into Jiaozhou.⁴⁵ During the early years of the Liu–Song (the first few decades of the fifth century) Du Huidu 杜慧度 began his career as both assistant magistrate *zhubo* 主簿 and “protector general of refugees” *liumin duhu* 流民督護 of Jiaozhou. This title occurs only twice in the standard histories, and only in relation to Huidu and his son Hongwen 弘文, to whom he passed the title. Although the origins of these refugees are unknown, there must have been a significant number of them if a special administrative post was required to supervise them. It is likely that many were migrants from the southern commanderies of Jiaozhou, escaping from areas subject to raiding or

40. *Sanguo zhi* [Records of the Three Kingdoms] (Bona edition), 49: 9a.

41. Wang Guowei 王國維, *Shuijingzhu jiao* 水經注校 [Critical comparisons of the commentary on the river classic] (Taipei: Xin wenyi chuban gongsi, 1984), 36, pp. 1146–47.

42. For instance, he says that the bronze pillars planted by Ma Yuan were once beside the Maliu settlement but that they had since sunk beneath the sea, and that there were originally only ten families of soldiers but they had married only amongst themselves to increase their number to two hundred families.

43. Nguyen Kim Dung et al, “Excavations at Tra Kieu and Go Cam, Quang Nam Province, Central Vietnam,” in *Uncovering Southeast Asia’s Past: Selected Papers from the 10th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2006), pp. 216–31.

44. *Bowu zhi jiaozheng* 博物志校證 [Proofreading and correction on the records of wide gleanings] (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), p. 11. Elsewhere (p. 25) the *Bowu zhi* refers to Guangzhou and Chaozhou as separate provinces, meaning it is likely that Jiaozhi here refers to the Red River plain rather than the entire Lingnan region as is usually the case in Han dynasty texts.

45. *Zizhi tongjian*, 86, pp. 2718–19.

occupied by the armies of the new rising power on the southern frontier known as Linyi.⁴⁶ Finally, in the third month of 468, Li Changren 李長仁 reportedly punished northerners, either “refugees from the north” or “troops of the department magistrate from the north”, when he rebelled.⁴⁷

The decreasing number of Chinese-style brick tombs in the post-Han era, as shown in the archaeological record, may also indicate a drop in the number of migrants. Tombs dating from before this period can be found not only throughout the Red River plain, but also in other areas around the Gulf of Tongking south to modern Thanh Hóa and north to Hepu. To date, the discovery of tombs after this period has become restricted to a smaller area around modern Hanoi and Bắc Ninh.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, nothing conclusive can be drawn from this as the lack of tomb finds in the Red River Delta may result mainly from the reluctance of Vietnamese archaeologists to research the period there.⁴⁹ A change in burial customs need not necessarily indicate population change through mass migration; it could instead indicate the diffusion of custom from the Sinitic new migrants to the local populace. One skeleton found in a Chinese-style tomb at Hoàng Mai in 1963, dating from the late third century, showed evidence that its teeth had been dyed black.⁵⁰ Was this a local who had adopted northern burial customs, a northerner who had taken up the local custom of tooth dying, or perhaps a descendent of acculturated northerners? It is impossible to tell.

There are a few scattered records of ordinary “men of Jiaozhi” from the third and fifth centuries that provide interesting vignettes of life in the Red River plain. These people might well be “Chinese”, in that their virtuous actions prompted Chinese writers to praise them, but they were definitely inhabitants of Jiaozhi rather than rulers sent from the north.

Li Tao and Ding Mo of Jiaozhi were both remembered for their extreme filial piety. Li Tao lived by his mother’s tomb in order to construct it himself, refusing any help from his neighbours. It was said that birds brought clods of earth to help him build it.⁵¹ Ding Mo carried earth on his back to build his mother’s tomb, and planted rows of firs and cedars so that white deer frolicked around it.⁵² Huang Hao 黃豪 was a man of Jiaozhi appointed as the magistrate of Waihuang 外黃 County (in northern China, east of modern Anyang). Known for his moderation and generosity, it was said that on account of his virtuous rule the county was able to avoid a locust plague that afflicted the surrounding country.⁵³

46. Liao Youhua, *Lishi dili xue di ying yong*, pp. 63–64.

47. *Zizhi tongjian*, 132, p. 4144 gives the date and follows the *Nan qi shu* [Southern Qi history] (Bona edition) 58: 15b in referring to those who were punished as “troops” *buqu* 部曲, *Song shu* [Song history] (Bona edition) 94: 15a records the same event but refers to them as “refugees” *liuyu* 流寓.

48. Nishimura notes a decline in numbers of Chinese-style brick tombs and attributes it to a shift in trade patterns and cultural change among the ruling elite which led them to abandon the practice. Nishimura Masanari, “Settlement Patterns on the Red River Plain from the Late Prehistoric Period to the Tenth Century AD”, *Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association Bulletin* 25, Taipei Papers, vol. 3 (1999): 99–107.

49. Annette Kieser has also commented on this. See “Nur Guangdong ist ruhig und friedlich”; Grabkult und Migration während der Sechs Dynastien im heutigen Guangdong,” in *Guangdong Archaeology and Early Texts (Zhou–Tang)*, eds. Shing Müller, Thomas O. Höllmann, and Putao Gui (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2004) pp.101–24. How little interest this era holds for Vietnamese archaeologists compared to other periods is revealed in the annual collections of archaeological reports in *Những Phát Hiện Mới về Khảo Cổ Học* [Catalogue of new archaeological discoveries], published annually since 1972 by the Viện khảo cổ học in Hanoi. In the last ten years single issues have run to over 800 pages each, but until recently the millennium between the end of Đông Sơn culture and the foundation of Đại Việt was passed over in silence.

50. Philippe Papin, “Géographie et politique dans le Viêt-Nam ancient,” *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 87, 2 (2000): 609–28.

51. *Xiao zi zhuan* 孝子傳 [Biographies of filial sons] by Wang Shao 王韶 a lost work from the Liu–Sung period (420–479) quoted in the Tang encyclopaedia *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 [Collection of literature arranged by categories] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chu banshe, 1965), ch. 92, p. 1592.

52. *Guangzhou xianxian zhi* 廣州先賢志 [Records of former worthies of Guangzhou] by Lu Yin 陸胤 governor of Jiaozhou in the mid-third century, quoted in *Yiwen leiju*, 95, p.1648.

53. *Ibid.*, 100, p. 1731.

Who were these people? The first two were celebrated for their adherence to the cult of filial piety, and the last was a virtuous official. None of them are explicitly referred to as Li or Việt, only as “men of Jiaozhi”. Is it possible to say they were Chinese? Huang Hao must have been able to speak some kind of Chinese, and certainly to have been literate in Chinese in order to carry out the duties of his post, while Li Tao and Ding Mo were being commended for their good moral character, not as exceptional examples of morally superior barbarians. Did they speak a Sinitic language, or an Austroasiatic language, or both? It probably did not matter, provided they behaved in a manner commended by those who could record their stories and had a similar relationship to their local administration as people in other parts of the empire. It is highly unlikely that the term “person of Jiaozhi” carried any significance as a marker of Vietnamese-ness; in an ethnographic sense it was as nondescript as “person of Guangzhou”.

Concluding Remarks

Looking at the texts from the time, at the clues from historical linguistics, and the archaeological record, the absence of a separate name for Việt people makes me deeply suspicious of any attempt to push back the history of the distinction between “Chinese” and “Vietnamese” people any further than the tenth century. Texts from the time do not reveal any static dichotomy between ethnic or linguistic concepts of Chinese and Vietnamese, but rather they suggest more of a fluid distinction between people who were civilised “subjects” and vaguely “barbaric” people who were not completely absorbed into the imperial administrative system. The process whereby “barbaric people” became ordinary subjects is often termed sinification or sinicization. However these unsatisfactory words only describe a one-way process of change from “barbarian” to “Chinese” when the opposite process was also clearly at work. What distinguished “barbarians” from “people” in the Red River plain, in texts of the Han–Tang period, was usually their own administrative status (or that of their rulers), their class, their social practices, and their length of abode in the area. Except for the last factor, none of these were fixed by ancestry and all could change within a single generation.

“Barbarian” names in old texts fit only those whom the writers considered as being barbaric in behaviour. When these terms ceased to be used for populations of certain areas, it did not necessarily mean that these people had become identical in language or custom to those who wrote about them; local variations in language and material culture were an ordinary and readily observable feature throughout pre-modern East Asia. What the disappearance of “barbarian” terminology indicates was most probably that “people” had become outwardly close enough to the common folk of other parts of the empire in their day-to-day habits and membership of political structures that they were considered simply regional variations on a larger theme. Conversely, people picked up barbarian names as they diverged from the norms of political and social behaviour adhered to by imperial administrators.

What this meant for how the people of the Red River plain saw themselves during the Han–Tang period is much more difficult to determine. Unfortunately Red River plains people did not write about themselves until they had been deeply influenced by others’ views of themselves and by assumptions about civility and barbarism that they had learned from Chinese texts. The best we can do is to try to read between the lines of Han–Tang texts and to augment that knowledge with what we know about Red River plains’ demography at the time. The absence of records of large-scale population shifts indicates that there was a fairly stable group of people in Jiaozhi throughout the Han–Tang period who spoke Austroasiatic languages ancestral to modern Vietnamese. The treatment of

some of these people in Chinese texts as members of the civilised world indicates that they were able to adapt fairly quickly to the administrative structures imposed by the Han and successor empires. If this flexibility did not preclude them from retaining characteristics, such as their own language, that would eventually become markers of difference in the independent polities in the Red River plain after the tenth century, it did preclude them from being in any serious way comparable to “Vietnamese” people of the subsequent millennium.

Furthermore, in Han–Tang Jiaozhi as we have seen, clear evidence shows that new “Chinese” arrivals from the north ceased to be outsiders and became incorporated into local society. No matter where their ancestors originated, they could and often did end up tarred with the barbarian brush on account of their own behaviour. Those who remained “Chinese” were usually people who stayed in the south only for short periods of time; people whose families settled, on the other hand, might adopt the habits and customs of their surroundings and become the new local ruling classes. In the wider context of Chinese empires, this localisation process was not unique to Jiaozhi. Nor is it unique in world history—consider the case of the Anglo-Irish, who picked up Irish language and customs through their long residence in the country and eventually sided with the locals against the later arrivals.

The Red River Delta did not become an exceptional case in its relationship with the centres of Chinese power until the tenth century. Once the area was self-governing, its rulers could make their own decisions about the norms of behaviour and administration, and the status of migrants and traders from the north. It is thus only from the time of Đại Việt’s political independence in the tenth century that a more definable boundary began to develop that finally resembled something akin to our modern concepts of Chinese and Vietnamese, or indeed that the concept of diasporic Chinese, who were settled or sojourning in Vietnamese territory, can assume any objective reality, despite the waves of northern migration attested in the historical record for earlier times.

