Where was the southern Chinese frontier during the fifth and sixth centuries BCE? The influence of Vietnamese national history has tempted scholars of the twentieth century to project the Sino-Vietnamese border of the present back in time, and to view the expansion and retraction of Chinese imperial power in the south as early indicators of the future appearance of a Vietnamese state. An example of this is the treatment of the foundation of Yuezhou, a new province founded in the late fifth century under the Liu-Song Empire by splitting off Hepu Commandery from the province of Jiaozhou. On modern historical maps this province is shown to have a controlled territory to the north of the Leizhou Peninsula covering an area that corresponds to the southernmost third of Guangxi and the southwestern third of Guangdong today. From this time onwards Hepu was no longer subordinate to the Hà Nội area and had a regional inspector of its own appointed from the Liu-Song capital Jiankang (modern Nanjing). Taylor described the foundation of Yuezhou as a matter of recognizing “those portions of Giao that were still under imperial authority, the most important being the prefecture of Hepu, which became the headquarters of the new province,” and went on to say that “Yuezhou in effect, became the new frontier of the empire.”¹ There are a few assumptions being made here: that the Yuezhou area was more integrated into the imperial system of government than Jiaozhou; that a frontier was slowly beginning to emerge that foreshadowed future political arrangements along Chinese and Vietnamese lines; and that the foundation of Yuezhou was the result of a

¹ “In 471 Yüeh Province was organized from portions of Kuang and Chiao. The immediate reason for this was to recognize those portions of Chiao that were still under imperial authority, most important being the prefecture of Ho-p’u, which became the headquarters of the new province. Yüeh Province in effect became the new frontier of the empire.” Taylor, Keith W. The Birth of Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 122.
northward retraction of Chinese power out of the south. The early history of Yuezhou and its inhabitants I outline below not only presents a challenge to the “Sino-Vietnamese” view of the southern frontier, it also shows that Chinese imperial expansion in the south was not exclusively in a north-to-south direction.

When one compares political developments in Jiaozhou to those in provinces closer to the center of Chinese imperial power, it seems quite reasonable to view Jiaozhou as an uncontrollable country beyond the frontier. This view seems especially fitting for the fifth and sixth centuries when de facto political power over the province no longer lay in the hands of administrators appointed from the capital but was inherited within localized great families or openly usurped by rebellious individuals like Lý Bón, Emperor of Yue. Nevertheless, the exceptional nature of Jiaozhou fades into insignificance when compared with Yuezhou. Despite being physically closer to the imperial capitals of the Southern Dynasties than the Red River Plain, the inhabitants beyond this frontier were culturally and politically more distant from the imperial world than those who dwelt in the plain. In the fifth and sixth centuries many of the inhabitants of the Yuezhou region had yet to be incorporated into the imperial administrative system and were living under the rule of bronze drum-owning chiefs in small polities more typical of upland Southeast Asia than the centralized and Sinified society of the Red River plain. Examination of the societies within the country that went to make up Yuezhou and the circumstances surrounding the foundation of the province show the location of a southern Chinese frontier in an unexpected place. Upland Yuezhou was an internal frontier country surrounded on all sides by Chinese counties and commanderies, and the Chinese conquest of it was no simple north-to-south movement, but rather an uphill and upriver encroachment.

Yuezhou before the Chinese Conquest

Chinese historical atlases usually depict provinces as neatly bounded areas containing subordinate counties and commanderies.2 Looking at a map of Southern China leads one to assume that all the territory in modern Guang-

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