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# The Polity of Yelang (夜郎) and the Origins of the Name 'China'

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## 1. Introduction

One of the very common idioms known to almost all modern Chinese persons is *Yelang zi da* (夜郎自大),[1] which roughly translates as "the undeserved self-importance of Yelang." "Yelang," the Chinese histories inform us, was a polity lying to the south of the great Western Han empire (206 BCE–23 CE). And this Han empire, the European-language histories tell us, was one of the successive empires of "China." Is this, then, the sole relationship between "Yelang" and "China"? I submit that it is not and was not, and aim in this essay to demonstrate that the names "Yelang" and "China" in fact derive from the same source — the indigenous name of a large Lolo/Yi[2] polity extending in time from at least several centuries BCE to the first centuries of the Common Era. This will be done by first examining what we know of Yelang from Chinese sources, then by investigating the successive theories as to the origin of the name "China" and finally, through incorporating indigenous Lolo/Yi historiography, illustrating how it was that the indigenous name of a non-Chinese polity came to be used as an exonym in reference to the successive Sinitic polities of East Asia.

[1] A *chengyu*, or four-character axiom, often with historical allusion.

[2] A linguistic grouping under the Tibeto-Burman language family. The traditional linguistic category is Lolo, but the speakers of related languages in China today are classed as part of the Yi (彝) ethnic group.

## 2. 'Yelang' as seen in Chinese texts

The references in Chinese texts to Yelang are intimately tied with those relating to the polity of Zangke (牂牁), which is mentioned in texts dating to the Warring States period, suggesting its existence by the seventh century BCE. Later works[3] detail an attack by Zhuang Qiao, a general of the state of Chu,[4] against Yelang/Zangke at either the end of the fourth century or the early third century BCE. During the first century BCE, the Chinese texts tell us, Yelang fought with neighboring polities to expand its power and territory. Another, likely indigenous, tradition is recorded in the early Chinese texts. It refers to a "bamboo king" of Yelang who was born from a stalk of bamboo and who ruled in the region of the Dun River (遯水).[5]

What can be affirmed is that the Chinese textual references to Yelang are fragmentary and obviously derived from diverse sources. The most detailed references to the polity and its neighbors appear in Sima Qian's first-century BCE work *Shiji* 《史记》. The relevant sections of the work as translated by Burton Watson are provided in the Appendix to this paper, and for the purposes of this paper a brief synopsis of the contents is sufficient.

From these accounts we can glean some idea as to how the Chinese perceived the polity and some of the political events affecting it. Chapter 116 of the *Shiji*, on the Southwestern Barbarians,[6] tells us in its first sentence that the ruler of Yelang was the major political leader

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[3] The *Huayangguo zhi* (華陽國志· 南中志) and the *Hou Han shu* (後漢書· 西南夷· 夜郎傳), both works of the fourth century CE.

[4] A large empire located to the south of the more Sinitic polities subject to the Zhou during the eighth–third centuries BCE. Its territory included the lower Yangtze and extended over what are today the provinces of Hubei, Hunan, Henan and Jiangsu.

[5] Recorded in both *Huayangguo zhi* (華陽國志· 南中志) and *Hou Han shu* (後漢書· 西南夷· 夜郎傳). This is associated by some with the modern Beipan River (北盤江) in Guizhou, but others claim it to have been located in the Zunyi region of Guizhou. There is insufficient evidence at present to assign any firm modern identification to the river.

[6] A reference to peoples south of the more Sinicized cultures of Ba and Shu in what is today Sichuan province. It thus included areas which are today Yunnan, Guizhou, northern Burma and northern Thailand.

among these people, which suggests something of the power and influence of Yelang in that region in the last centuries before the Common Era. However, there existed a large number of other political leaders, suggesting a system of fiefdoms or hierarchies of power. To its west lived the chiefs of the Mimo 靡莫, the most important of whom was the ruler of Dian 滇,[7] and to its north resided various other small-scale political leaders, the most powerful of whom was the ruler of Qiongdu 邛都. These were all sedentary, agricultural societies. Farther to the west lived the nomadic herding tribes known by names such as Sui and Kunming.

During Han attacks on the Eastern Yue in the 130s BCE, it became known to the Chinese that the river along which the Southern Yue capital was situated — that which is today known as the West River, on which Guangzhou is sited — was connected with the Zangke (牂牁) River[8] along which the Yelang polity lay. The king of Southern Yue was said to have been using this waterway connection to try to gain control over the Yelang polity. In its subsequent efforts to destroy the power of Southern Yue, the Han court planned to use Yelang forces to proceed down river against the Southern Yue ruler. It is not clear whether such an attack ever eventuated, though negotiations between the Han envoy Tang Meng and the Yelang ruler Duotong (多同) did apparently take place, and, according to the Han records, the province of Jianwei was established in the region, and a road connecting Yelang with the Sinitic polities farther north was begun but never completed. With renewed attention to the Han's northern border, this project of southern expansion was shelved.

What is clear is that, during this period, Yelang controlled a large population, given its

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[7] A major bronze-using culture, which extended from approximately 1000 BCE to 100 CE, located to the south of the Dian Lake in modern Yunnan. The culture and polity have been detailed in Michèle Pirazzoli t'Serstevens, *La Civilisation du Royaume de Dian a l'Époque Han, d'après le matérial exhume à Shizhai shan (Yunnan)* (Paris: École Française d'Éxtrême-Orient, 1974). Connections between this culture and the Dongson culture that evolved in the Red River valley are discussed in William Watson, "Dongson and the Kingdom of Tien" in William Watson, *Studies in Chinese Archaeology and Art* (London: The Pindar Press, 1997). Both textual and archaeological evidence suggests quite some interaction between the Yelang and Dian cultures.

[8] Possibly the modern Beipan River (北盘江) in Guizhou.

reported capability of fielding 100,000 crack troops. It is also obvious that there was a great desire on the part of the Han court to bring Yelang under its control, either by driving a road through to the polity from Shu or by taking the Southern Yue and proceeding upstream.[9] This was undoubtedly at least partly due to the knowledge that Yelang was a key hub in trade between the Sinitic economies and those of India. The account of Shu cloth and Qiong bamboo given in the *Shiji* account affirms this. It was during the discussions between the envoys of the Han court and the rulers of Dian and Yelang over identifying the route to India that the discussions and questions which gave rise to the *Yelang zi da* idiom mentioned above took place. These events date to the 120s BCE. Other indications of trade and people flowing across this route include musicians and entertainers from the western Roman empire arriving in the Han capital in 120 CE.[10]

The relationship between Yelang and the polities of Julan (且蘭)[11] and Toulan (頭蘭), also mentioned in the *Shiji*, is not clear from the text. The latter, which were apparently located within or near the province of Jianwei, were attacked and brought to some sort of submission following the Han attack on the Southern Yue. They were then (in the equivalent of 111 BCE. the Chinese accounts tell us) made constituent parts of a new province of Zangke, named after the river mentioned above. It is thus likely that they had been either parts of or subject to the earlier Yelang polity. The "marquis of Yelang" also reportedly traveled to the Han capital of Chang'an to receive a seal. This suggests the emasculation of the power of this ruler and the increased incorporation or integration of his lands into Sinitic polities. This integration would have increased after 86 BCE, following the suppression of a "rebellion" by 24 areas in Zangke, including Tanzhi and Tongbing, comprising 30,000 people. The Han court ordered Shu and

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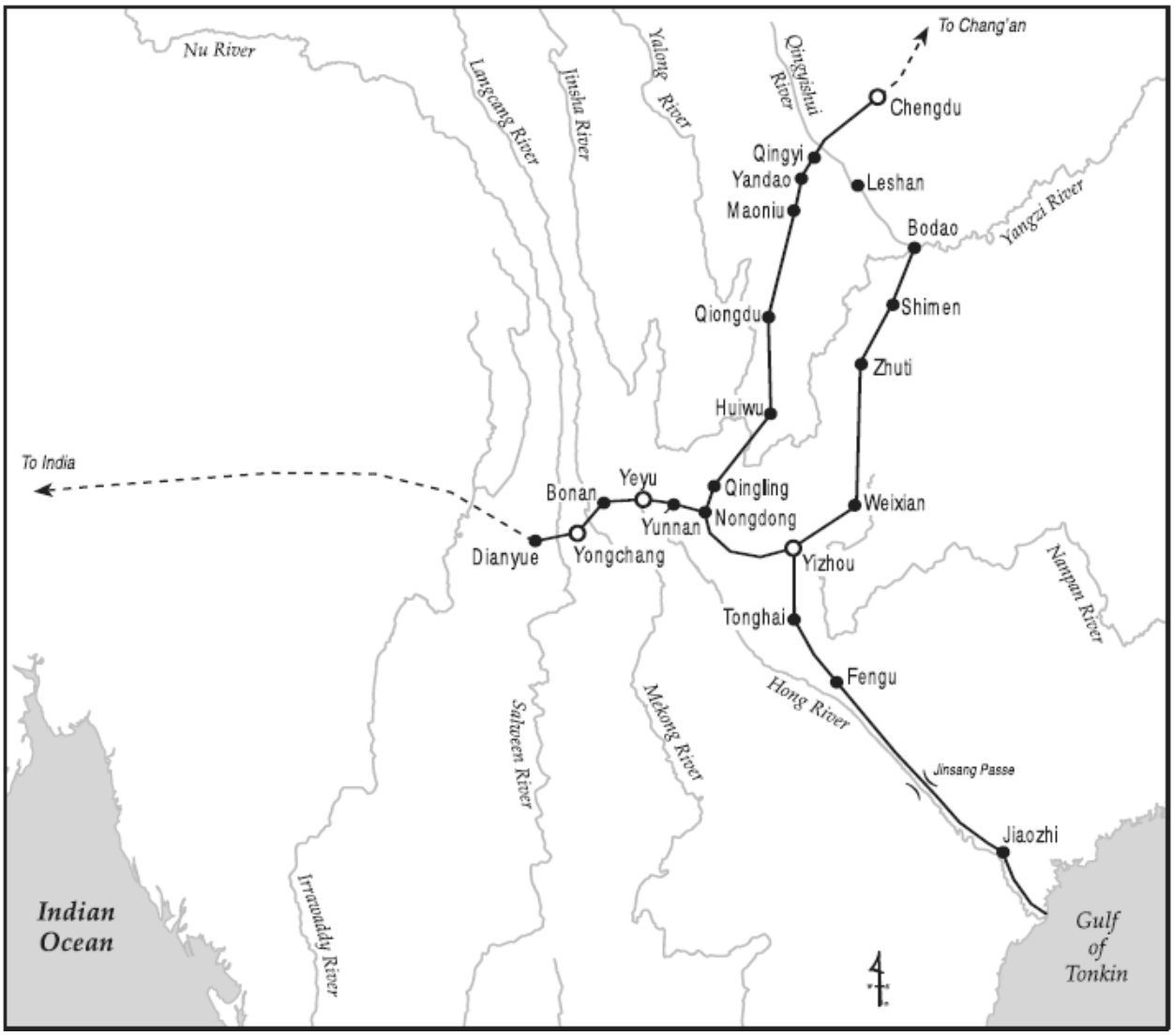
[9] The general expansionist policies pursued by the successive Han rulers are detailed in Yü Ying-shih, *Trade and Expansion in Han China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967).

[10] This is recorded in the *Hou Han shu*, or the "History of the Latter Han." See Charles Backus, *The Nan-chao kingdom and T'ang China's southwestern frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 18.

[11] The seat of which was located near the modern Fuquan, some 70 kilometres to the east of the Guizhou capital Guiyang.

Jianwei to send 10,000 troops against them, resulting in their complete defeat. A similar uprising in 27 BCE by a king of Yelang named Xing saw him dying at the hands of forces loyal to the Han court. Similar events continued into the first few centuries of the Common Era.




Map 1. Likely routes of East Asia – South Asia in the third century BCE. Source: Bin Yang: *Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective*.

If we synthesize the statements made in the various Chinese texts about Yelang, we can suggest that in terms of its temporal limits, the polity of Yelang and its precursor Zangke extend, as a major polity, back to the third century BCE, or perhaps even earlier. As far as the

geographical limits are concerned, the *Hou Han shu* (History of the Latter Han)[12] noted that Yelang extended east to Jiaozhi (what is today northern Vietnam), west to the state of Dian (centered on Dian Lake in Yunnan), and north to the state of Qiongdu (in today's southern Sichuan). It was thus a very extensive and powerful polity, which was based on an agricultural economy and possessed advanced bronze-working technologies. Opinions vary on the political center of the Yelang polity, with some scholars opining that Julan was the capital of Zangke Commandery and also of Yelang. It seems more commonly accepted, however, that the Yelang capital was located somewhere in the western part of today's Guizhou Province.

## 3. The Origins of the Name 'China'

Now let us detour to the second issue at hand — the origin of the name "China." No imperial Chinese polity or society ever used the name "China," or any variant of such, as an autonym. They usually employed the dynastic name (Han, Song, Ming) [13] or the generic "Zhongguo" (中國)[14] to refer to their polity. That is to say, "China" is a non-Chinese term, applied today by various non-Chinese languages[15] to the successive polities that governed

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[12] A history of the Latter Han dynasty (25–220 CE), written in the fourth century.

[13] Sometimes prefixed by a *Da* (大 = Great) or *Huang* (皇 = Imperial).

[14] Commonly rendered in English since the seventeenth century as "The Middle Kingdom." This term seems to have first found its way into European languages during the reign of Dom Manuel I of Portugal (1495–1521), when it was rendered as: "O Império do Meio." This is also the origin of many East Asian societies' name for China: Chūgoku (Japanese); Jungguk (Korean); Trung Quốc (Vietnamese), all of which derive from readings of the graphs 中國. For some further background on the term, see Wolfgang Behr, '"To translate' is 'to change' — linguistic diversity and the terms for translation in Ancient China," http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/gpc/behr/RTF/translate.rtf p. 4.

[15] Some of the variants include China (English, German, Portuguese, Dutch and Spanish); Chine (French); Chin چین (Persian); Çin (Turkish); Kina (Swedish and Norwegian); Chiny (Polish); Čína (Czech), Kiina (Finnish); Cheen (Hindi) and Kína (Hungarian). All scholars accept that these terms share a common origin. Later foreign names for China, including Cathay, derive from variants of the name Khitan/Qidan, and are linguistically unrelated to the terms being discussed here.

"Chinese" societies. But from where did the term originate? And how did it evolve? This has been a vexing question for Western Sinologists for several generations and one on which no true consensus has ever been reached.

Scholars in the Western tradition long held that the earliest reference to a place or polity with a name related to the English toponym "China" was *Thinai* (θίναι), noted in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*.[16] The place was located in the extreme north of the Indian Ocean, beyond Chrysê. Ptolemy, in his second-century CE *Geographia* mentioned the same place under the orthography *Sinai* (Σίναι). Three centuries later, Kosmas Indikopleustes in his *Topographia Christiana*[17] records the name *Tzinitza*, which Laufer considers to have reflected Persian *Čīnistān* or the Sanskrit *Cīnasthāna*.[18]

At about the same time, in the Buddhist texts translated into Chinese, there was infrequent reference to a term which appears to have been "China/Cīna," rendered as *zhina* through a range of graphs — 脂那, 支那, or 至那. By the Tang period (618–907 CE) another term, Mahā Cīna (摩訶支那 or 摩訶至那 = Great Cīna), appeared in Chinese Buddhist texts. A text from the Tang period, Hui Yuan's 慧苑 *Huayanjing yinyi*《華嚴經音義》, notes: "Cīna (支那) can be translated as 'thought'. The name derives from the fact that many of the people of the country are engaged in thought, and many in action."[19] The Southern Song monk Fa Yun 法雲[20] in his *Fanyi mingyi ji*《翻譯名義集》explained the name thus："Cīna (支那) is used to name a country of cultural accomplishments."[21]

Western discussion of the origins of the name "China" appears to have begun in the

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[16] "The Voyage around the Erythraean Sea." Originally compiled between 80 and 89 CE, it is available in annotated English translation in Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text with Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[17] For which, see http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/k/Kosmas_i.shtml

[18] Berthold Laufer, "The name China," *T'oung Pao*, Vol. XVIII (1912), pp. 719–26.

[19] "支那，翻为思維。經其國人多所思慮，多所制作，故以爲名."

[20] Fa Yun (1088–1158).

[21] "支那，此名文物國."

seventeenth century, when in his *Novus Atlas Sinensis* (Vienna, 1655) the Jesuit priest Martin Martini associated the name with the Chinese state of Qin (秦).[22] Berthold Laufer suggests that the etymology which Martini proposed was not his own invention but was derived from Chinese Buddhist circles. He cites a section of a Tibetan text *Grub-mt'a šel-kyi me-long* ("Crystal Mirror of the Siddhānta") of 1740 as being a manifestation of this:[23]

> The name of China in its own language is Sen-teu (Chin. *shên t'u* 神土, the land of the spirits). It is identified by some authors with the Dvīpa Pūrvavideha. The people of India call it Mahā Tsīna, *mahā* meaning great and *Tsīna* being a corruption of Ts'in. Among the sovereigns of China, Shi-huang, king of the country of Ts'in, became very powerful. He conquered the neighbouring peoples and made his power felt in most countries, so that his name as king of Ts'in became known in remote regions of the world. In course of time, by continual phonetic alteration, the name Ts'in passed into Tsin and then into Tsina or Tsīna, whence the Sanskrit designation Mahā Tsīna (Great China)."

Laufer considered that even this was not the likely origin of the thesis and suggested, without evidence, that the Tibetan author possibly "encountered this view in a Chinese author," but at the same time agreed that "a Chinese tradition could certainly not be adduced as pure evidence for the correctness of the etymology."[24] Suffice it here to repeat, as Laufer asserted, that the theory of correlation between the name of the polity of Qin and the name "China" was not exclusively Western. But, this correlation between Qin and China was the main explanatory thesis for the name "China" in the early part of the nineteenth century.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Baron F. von Richthofen proposed that the

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[22] The Qin empire is usually assigned dates of 221–206 BCE and its ruler Qin Shihuangdi is credited in modern Chinese historiography with ending the Warring States period and creating the first "unified" Chinese polity. However, a Qin state had existed from possibly the ninth century BCE.

[23] Laufer, "The name China," pp. 720–21.

[24] Laufer, "The name China," pp. 722.

name "China" derived from the Han dynasty commandery named Rinan (日南), in the area which became Tonkin in present-day Vietnam. He proposed this on the basis of supposed phonetic similarity and that this was the only trade port open to foreign trade at the beginning of the Common Era.[25] Terrien de la Couperie objected to this claim on the basis that Rinan was not located at the port of Tonkin and that the ancient pronunciation of the graphs was not likely to produce anything resembling "China." He proposed instead that we should look at the state of Dian, an early polity of Yunnan, whereby the Middle Chinese pronunciation of Dian (tɛn) was supposed to have provided sufficient phonetic similarity to have been able to evolve into "China." Herbert Giles dismissed both opinions as guesses and, as those before, opted for the name of the Qin state as the origin of the name "China."[26]

A new element in the debate was then introduced by the Sanskrit scholar Hermann Jacobi in an article he published in 1911.[27] In this, he describes a reference to *Cīna* in the classic Indian statecraft work *Arthaśāstra* by Kautilīya, a minister of the Mauryan King Chandragupta, which can be dated to about 300 BCE. The reference is to the silk and woven cloth that were produced in the country of *Cīna*,[28] which certainly suggests a cultural realm within East Asia. It also demonstrated use of the term *Cīna* well before the Qin polity had assumed dominance in the Sinitic world. Both Berthold Laufer[29] and Paul Pelliot[30] took this new discovery into consideration in their respective overviews of the issue in the following year, with Laufer

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[25] Ferdinand P.W. von Richthofen, *China: Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien* (Berlin, 1877), Vol. 1, pp. 504–10.

[26] Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive* (London: John Murray, 1903), pp.196–98.

[27] H. Jacobi, "Kultur-, Sprach- und Literarhistorisches aus dem Kautilīya," *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich-*
*Preussischen Akademie*, XLIV (1911), pp. 954–73. See especially p. 961.

[28] "kauceyam cīnapattācca cīnabhūmijāh." See Chapter 11, p. 81.

[29] Laufer, "The name China," pp. 719, 724.

[30] Paul Pelliot, "L'Origine du nom de 'Chine.'" *T'oung Pao*, Vol. XVIII (1912), pp. 727–42.

concluding that "it may not be impossible that *Cīna* has been the ancient (perhaps Malayan) name adhering to the coast of Kuang-tung Province and the coast-line farther to the south, in times anterior to the settlement of the Chinese in those regions."[31] Pelliot, partly based on his doubts about the dating of the *Arthaśāstra* and partly on the basis of the use of the term *Qin ren* (秦人), or "hommes des Ts'in" in classical Chinese texts, remained steadfast in his belief in the correlation between Qin and China.[32] Also in the early twentieth century, the Chinese scholar Xia Zengyou 夏曾佑 [33] saw the name as deriving from an unspecified Indic term, with the meaning of border.[34]

In 1919, in his seminal study *Sino-Iranica,* Laufer pronounced again on the likely origins of the name China.[35] He noted that the Persian names for China included Čīn, Čīnistān and Čīnastān, and that the Middle Persian names included Čēn and Čēnastān. The Armenian names for China also included Čen-k' and Čenastan. An early Sogdian name recorded was Čynstn (Čīnastān). He further noted the Sanskrit Cīna and Greek variants of Čīnai (Σίναι and θίναι), allowing the conclusion that it was likely that "the Indian, Iranian and Greek designations for China have issued from a common source and that this prototype may be sought for in China itself." He concluded that "I am now inclined to think that there is some degree of probability in the old theory that the name 'China' should be traceable to that of the dynasty Ts'in." [36]

He went on to suggest that, while Pelliot had failed to provide a convincing phonetic argument for the possibility that Qin/Ts'in was the origin of the name "China," the ancient phonetic value of Qin/Ts'in (秦) was **din, **dzin, **džin* or **dž'in*, with initial dental or palatal sonant, and this was possibly represented in Iranian by the palatal surd Č. He concluded "It is

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[31] Laufer, "The name China," p. 726.

[32] Pelliot, "L'Origine du nom de 'Chine,'" pp. 736–40.

[33] Xia Zengyou (1863-1924).

[34] 夏曾佑, 《中國歷史教科書》. Later reprinted as 《中國古代史》上海，商務印書館， 1933.

[35] Berthold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica: Chinese Contributions to the History of Ancient Civilization in Ancient Iran*, Chicago, Field Museum of History, 1919. See pp. 568–70.

[36] Laufer, *Sino-Iranica*, p. 569.

this phonetic agreement on the one hand and the coincidence of the Sanskrit, Iranian and Greek names for China on the other which induce me to admit the Ts'in etymology as a possible theory." [37] This thesis was also supported by the Japanese scholar Takakuwa Komakichi 高桑駒吉[38] in his study *Chūgoku bunkashi* 《中国文化史》.

Subsequently, in a work on Marco Polo, which he was not able to complete before he died, Pelliot again overviewed the studies and theories relating to the question of the origin of the name China and again asserted the correctness of the Qin thesis, bringing to bear all the evidence on this he had gathered during his lifetime.[39] He gleefully noted the endorsement of Laufer, Otto Franke and Albert Hermann.[40]

Chinese scholars have recently weighed in with a variety of proposed explanations of the name "China." Ge Fangwen has suggested that *Cīna* was a Sanskrit term for "the East" and that it became a generic name for India's eastern border, and then for the cultural complex known today as China.[41] This is essentially a continuation of Xia Zengyou's thesis of the early twentieth century. Su Zhongxiang has pursued a different direction, claiming that we need to look for the origin of the name China in the ancient state name of Jing 荊.[42] Jao Tsung-I (饒宗頤) has also examined the relevant Indian texts more deeply and identified further references to *Cīna* in the *Arthaśāstra*, in the work of Kālidāsa of the fourth century CE (where the term *Cīnamśuka,* or

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[37] Laufer, *Sino-Iranica*, p. 570.

[38] Takakuwa Komakichi (1869–1927).

[39] Paul Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo*, 3 vols., Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1963–1973. The discussion on the origins of the term "China" can be found under the entry "Cin" in Vol. 1, pp. 264–78.

[40] Paul Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo*, Vol. I, p. 268.

[41] Ge Fangwen 葛方文, "Zhongguo mingcheng kao"《中国名称考》[A Study of the Names of China], in *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao*《华东师范大学学报》1981 年第 6 期.

[42] Su Zhongxiang 苏仲湘, "Lun 'Zhina' yici de qiyuan yu Jing de lishi he wenhua" "论"支那"一词的起源与荆的历史和文化" [On the origin of the term China and the history and culture of Jing], in *Lishi Yanjiu*《历史研究》, 1979 年第 4 期, pp. 34–48.

"Cīna silk clothing" is used), and even in the Mahābharata.[43] He appears to accept that the earliest representation of the term *Cīna* is in the *Arthaśāstra*, and agrees that the toponym was derived from the name of the state of Qin.[44] Haraprasad Ray has detailed many of the references to *Cīna* appearing in the various Indian classical texts,[45] and supports the thesis that the state of Jing rather than the state of Qin was a more likely source of the name China.

That is essentially where our understanding of the origins of the name "China" stands today.[46] The earlier Western Sinologists reached what might almost be called a consensus that the term derives from the polity name of the Qin empire, some Chinese and Indian scholars feel that the state name Jing is a more likely candidate, while at least one Chinese history specialist has opined that these are unlikely origins.[47] It is perhaps worth pointing out here that none of the

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[43] Jao Tsung-I (Rao Zongyi) 繞宗頤, "Shu bu yu Cinapatta: lun zaoqi Zhong, Yin, Mian zhi jiaotong" 《蜀布與 Cinapatta—論早期中印緬之交通》, [The Cloth of Shu and Cinapatta — On Early Links between China, India and Burma], *Fanxue ji* 梵學集[Collected Sanskrit Studies] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 上海, 上海古籍出版社，1993), pp. 223–60. This is a selection of Professor Jao's studies. This article was originally published in Taiwan in 1974. See especially pp. 230–235.

[44] Jao, "Shu bu yu Cinapatta", p. 235.

[45] Haraprasad Ray, "The Southern Silk Route from China to India — An Approach from India" in *China Report*, Vol. 31 (1995), pp. 177–95. An interesting reference he cites from the *Sabhaparva* chapter of the *Mahabharata* has the ruler of *Pragjyotish* (Assam) employing in his army troops from *Cina*, who "lived beyond the mountain." See p. 179.

[46] A Chinese overview of these theories is contained in: Han Zhenhua, "Zhina mingcheng qiyuan kaoshi" in Chen Jia-rong and Qian Jiang, *Han Zhenhua xuanji zhiyi: Zhongwai guanxi lishi yanjiu* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1999), pp. 1–12. 韓振華，"支那名稱起源考釋"，陳佳榮，錢 江 編 《韓振華選集之一：中外關係歷史研究》， 香港，香港大學亞洲研究中心，1999年，1–12 頁. Professor Han, however, concluded that the name "China" derived from reference to *Seres* — China as "the country of silk."

[47] Endymion Wilkinson has offered an alternative origin, that "[the name China] is therefore more likely to have come from *cīna*, the Sanskrit for 'thoughtful' or 'cultivated.'" However, this idea, which accords with Hui Yuan's suggestion during the Tang dynasty, has not attracted much endorsement. See Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), p. 753, n. 7.

investigators of this question has considered it worthy of particular note that, while Qin and Jing are monosyllabic, the earliest representations of *Cīna* and its descendants are bisyllabic. This issue will be addressed further below.

## 4. 'Yelang' as 'China'

Where does this leave us on the question we are investigating? In one aspect, we have evidence of a large polity that the Chinese termed Yelang and which lay to the south of the polity of Shu (modern Sichuan). It was apparently the route through which products of Sinic societies reached India during at least the last few centuries before the Common Era. On the other issue, we have the term "China," which appears to derive in all its modern forms either directly from the Sanskrit *Cīna*, or at least from a common origin with it. The most prominent explanation for this name remains a correlation between *Cīna* and the third-century BCE Chinese polity of Qin. Let us explore these two issues further.

"Yelang" is the modern Mandarin pronunciation of the graphs 夜郎. One does not need to be a historical linguist to understand that the pronunciations of Chinese graphs have differed over time and still differ over space. Through studies based on rhyme books, poetry rhymes and other evidence, scholars have reconstructed likely phonologies of these graphs in earlier periods. Much seminal early work in this area was done by Bernard Karlgren,[48] while Edwin Pulleyblank has brought much of the relevant data together in a recent handy publication.[49] His Early Middle Chinese (perhaps sixth century CE) reconstruction of these two graphs is: *jia$^{h}$ lang*.[50]

In this instance, the graphs were employed for their phonetic rather than semantic values and were obviously used by the Chinese to represent an indigenous polity name. The people who live today in the area formerly known to the Chinese as Yelang/Jia$^{h}$-lang, and who trace their

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[48] Bernard Karlgren, *Grammata serica : script and phonetics in Chinese and Sino-Japanese***,** Reprinted from the Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern antiquities. No.12, 1940 (Taipei: Chengwen, 1966).

[49] Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese and Early Mandarin* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1991).

[50] Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation*, pp. 364, 183.

historical origins to that region are of the Lolo/Yi linguistic group. Recent years have seen the publication of a number of traditional histories of the Lolo/Yi, and these are of use in reconstructing topographical, ethnographic and polity names. Most of these histories have long genealogies, but have been committed to writing only recently.[51] These generally relate to the ancestors of people who reside in the Wumeng, Liangshan and Ailao areas along the border between the modern provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan.

One of the most relevant of such texts for the present investigation is that which has been published under the Chinese title *Yelang shi zhuan*.[52] This is a collection of epic poems that describe the genealogy of the Z̨ina (Yelang) clan, extending back to perhaps 500 BCE, and the evolution of the polity of that name. It includes details of the Z̨ina (Yelang 夜郎) clan within the Wubo branch of the Lolo/Yi. The work describes their ancestry, and the establishment of a polity and a system of rulership in what is likely the northeast area of today's Yunnan. Judging from the generational spread, this may have been as early as 500 BCE. The clan resided on the southern bank of the *T'i-zi* (Chinese: Taiye—太液), a river which some opine was the Dun River (遯水) mentioned in Han dynasty Chinese texts as being the place from which Yelang's "bamboo king" derived.

[51] Wu Gu, "Reconstructing Yi History from Yi records" in Stevan Harrell (ed.), *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 21–34.

[52] Wang Ziyao and Liu Jincai (eds.), *Yelang shi zhuan*, Chengdu, Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 1998. 王子尧, 劉金才 主編，《夜郎史傳》, 成都 四川民族出版社，1998.

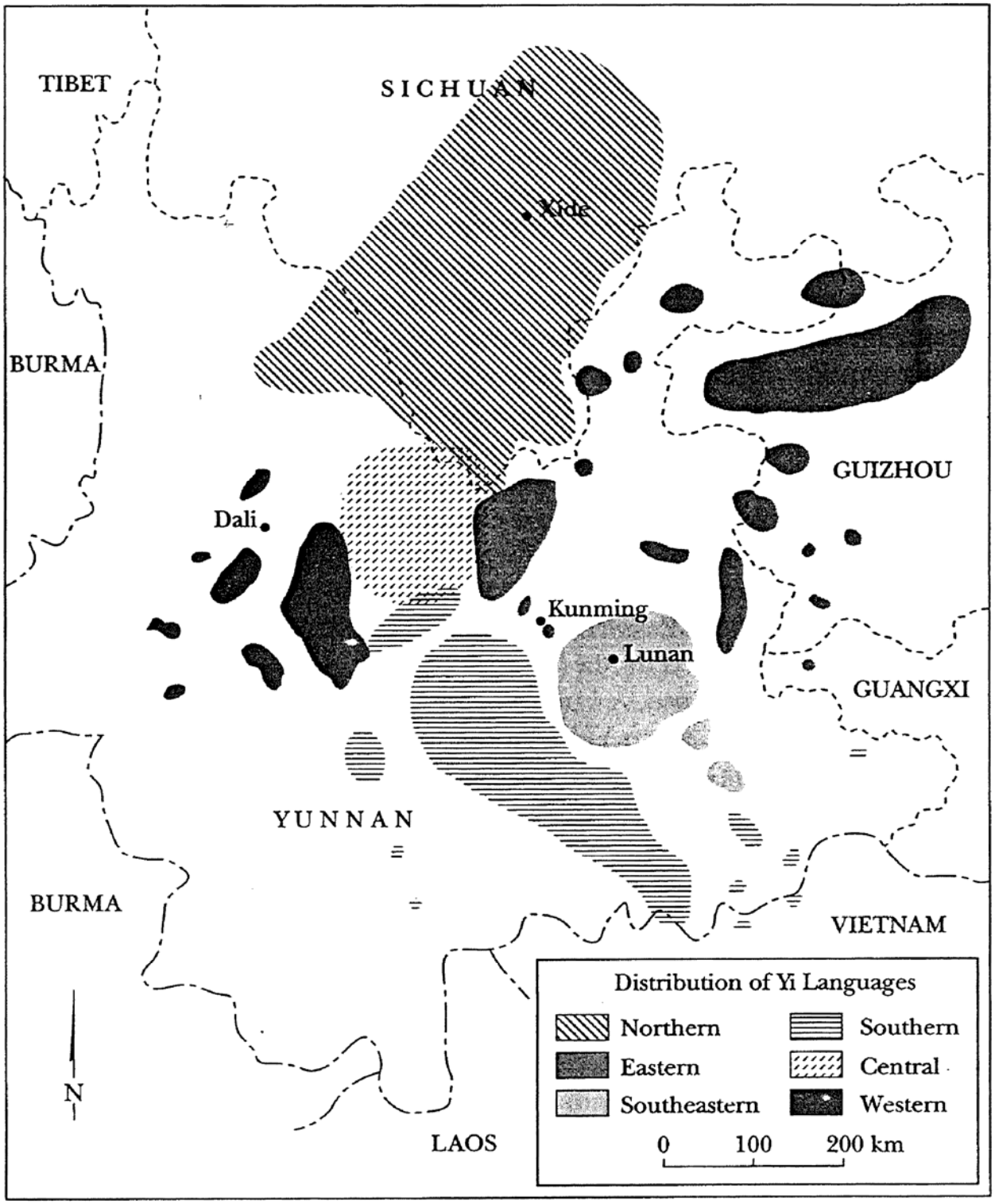

Illustration 1. A page from "The History of Ẓi-na" (History of Ye-lang), Sichuan Nationalities Publishing House, 1998.

By bringing together two of the lines of the six legendary ancestors of the Lolo/Yi, Ngo-lu-me (Chinese: Elumo 鄂魯默), the fourteenth generation descendant of their founder Bu-ʔa-mo, pursued expansion of the polity in all directions, taking the capital city K'u-lo (Chinese: Kele 可樂)[53] from the Western Pu and establishing his capital in that place. The polity was later to see expansion to the west, with the main political center moving to what is today Qujing in Yunnan. There is virtually no basis for comparable chronology in the work, excluding perhaps the mention of a ruler named To-t'o, who has been identified as the Yelang ruler Duotong of the Chinese texts.[54]

The polity described in this work appears larger than the "Yelang" described in Chinese texts, which suggests that various of the other polities mentioned in the Chinese text (such as Julan, Toulan, and the Pu 濮 polities) were part of a larger "Yelang" as perceived by the Lolo/Yi. The modern distribution of Lolo/Yi speakers as illustrated on Map 2 gives some idea of the geographical range of these people and possibly their earlier polities/cultural clusters.

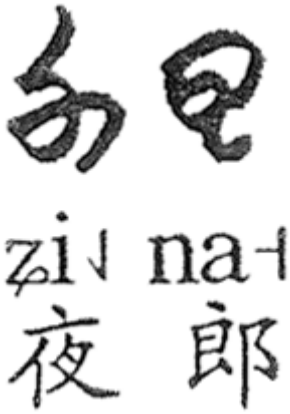
[53] Located in what is today Hezhang (赫章) County in Guizhou Province, PRC.

[54] Wang and Liu, *Yelang shi zhuan*, p. 5.




Map 2. Regional distribution of Lolo/Yi speakers in Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan. Source: Steven Harrell (ed.), *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, p. 203.

But our aim here is not to study the development of this polity, or compare the Chinese and Yi/Lolo accounts of it. Rather, what is of utmost importance for the topic at hand is the indigenous name of the polity rendered as "Yelang" by Chinese culture. The term employed throughout this text for the clan and the polity around which the epic is centered is:




The first syllable of the indigenous name comprises an initial voiced alveopalatal fricative and a short final vowel "i," while the second syllable comprises the alveolar nasal "n" with a final short "a." The Chinese of more than two millennia ago, in creating "Yelang" to represent this indigenous name, used *jia*$^{h}$ (夜) to represent the first syllable and *lang* (郎) to represent the second syllable. The /l/ and /n/ alternation is a recognised phenomenon in southern Chinese dialects, which removes one of the major objections to this thesis. The phonetics of the Chinese representation need to be further discussed by specialists, but there can be little doubt that the indigenous name was pronounced two millennia ago much as it is today, as its representation in Sanskrit was an almost perfect phonetic match — *Cīna*.

## 5. Conclusions

Can we then conclude that ʐina, the Lolo/Yi autonym for the people and polity known in Chinese as Yelang, was in fact the original "China"? I believe that we can. The evidence adduced includes:

1. The phonetic similarity is far closer than any suggested previously. The bisyllabic nature of the polity name and "China" is also congruent.
2. Geographically, the polity of Ʒina/Yelang fits perfectly with all of the early evidence for "Cina"/"China." *Thinai* (θίναι), noted in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei,* was, for example, located in the extreme north of the Indian Ocean, beyond Chrysê.
3. This thesis also helps explain the existence of *Cīna* in the Indic *Laws of Manu* and the *Mahabharata*, likely dating well before Qin Shihuangdi. Pelliot rejected these references and also specifically rejected the possibility that *Cīna* might have been "originally the designation of a Himalayan tribe" with the name being "extended to China only when the name of the 'men of Ch'in' reached India."[55] Pelliot recognized that Sanskrit texts "used '*Cīna*' in a loose manner for people to the north and north-west of India," but tries to explain it away by noting that "we must not forget that China, at the end of the second century BCE, had sent expeditions across Chinese Turkestan, and in the following century and again in the first and second centuries A.D. became the dominant power there. Although there was a direct road from early days from China to the Ganges *via* Yün-nan and Burma, it was mainly by the passes of the North-West that India was brought into contact with the Chinese, either as the result of trade or diplomacy. Provisionally, I feel inclined rather to suppose that the *Cīna* of Sanskrit texts represents the Chinese in principle and from the beginning."[56] While it is likely that at least by the time of references to *Cīna* and *Mahācīna* during the Tang dynasty that they referred to parts of the Tang empire,[57] we certainly cannot assume, as Pelliot did, that this was true from the earliest use of the term, perhaps

[55] Pelliot*, Notes on Marco Polo,* Vol. 1, p. 269.

[56] Pelliot*, Notes on Marco Polo,* Vol. 1, p. 269.

[57] See, for example, the account from 730 CE, reprinted in the *Song gaoseng chuan* which notes "The kingdom of Yindu (India) commonly call Guang-fu (Canton) 'Zhina' (*Cīna*) and refer to the imperial capital as 'Mohe zhina' (*Mahācīna*). See Pelliot*, Notes on Marco Polo,* Vol. 1, p. 272. A similar claim is seen in the *Da Tang qiufa gaoseng chuan* (大唐求法高僧傳).

more than 1,000 years earlier. On the basis of his study of the various references to *Cīna* in Indian texts, Jao Tsung-I opined that "The *Cīna* referred to in the Indian epics was located to the East of India in the Tibeto-Burman borderlands."[58]

4. The *Cina* of the Indian sources was obviously an influential polity. The polity of Ẓina/Yelang was also obviously powerful and a key hub in the links between the subcontinent and East Asia. This was a people/polity that controlled the lowlands at the end of the Himalayas, an area that was connected northwards to the Sinitic cultures, southwards to the Yue cultures and westwards to the cultures of the subcontinent. It was thus that it was frequently mentioned in the Indic texts.

The evidence outlined above suggests very strongly that the name "China" derived initially from Ẓina, the indigenous name of the Lolo/Yi polity recorded in Chinese texts with the graphs 夜郎 (Early Middle Chinese *jia$^{h}$ lang* or modern *Yelang*). This was the same polity referred to as *Cina* in the Indic texts.

Thus (and here we return to the idiom with which this paper began), rather than Yelang having had an undeserved sense of self-importance, we can now see it as having been once one of the powerful polities of East Asia, controlling the lands at the eastern end of the Himalayas, and playing a bridging role between the economies of East Asia and South Asia. It was through this fairly long-term importance and its gradual cultural and political subordination to its northern neighbors that the name of Ẓina/Cina was eventually to become the exonym for the great cultures which we today refer to as "China."

[58] Jao, "Shu bu yu Cinapatta", p. 231.

# Appendix: *Shiji* ( 史記) references to Yelang

**1. Under the account of the Southwestern Barbarians in the *Shiji*,[59] we read:**

There are dozens of chiefs ruling among the southwestern barbarians, but the most important is the ruler of Yelang. To the west of Yelang live the chiefs of the Mimo, of which the most important is the ruler of Dian. North of Dian live numerous other chiefs, the most important being the ruler of Qiongdu. All the tribes ruled by these chiefs wear their hair in the mallet-shaped fashion, work the fields and live in settlements….

In the sixth year of the era *jianyuan* (135 BCE), the grand messenger Wang Hui was sent to attack Zou Ying, the king of Eastern Yue, who was in revolt. Shortly afterwards the men of Eastern Yue murdered Zou Ying and reported their willingness to submit to Han rule. Wang Hui, relying upon his military might to bring the region under control, dispatched Tang Meng, the magistrate of Poyang, to visit the king of Southern Yue and persuade him to remain loyal to the Han. While Tang Meng was at the court of Southern Yue, he was given some *ju* berry sauce to eat. When he enquired where it came from, he was told, "It is brought down the Zangge River from the northwest. The Zangge is several *li* wide and flows past Panyu, the capital of Southern Yue." When Tang Meng returned to Chang'an he questioned a merchant of Shu on the matter and the merchant replied, "Shu is the only place that makes *ju* berry sauce. Large quantities of it are exported in secret to the markets of Yelang, which is situated on the Zangge. The Zangge at that point is over 100 paces across, wide enough to allow boats to move up and down. The king of Southern Yue sends money and goods in an effort to gain control of Yelang, extending his efforts as far west as Tongshi, but so far he has not succeeded in getting Yelang to acknowledge his sovereignty."

[59] *Shiji*, juan 116.

Tang Meng then sent a letter to the throne, saying, "The king of Southern Yue rides about in a yellow-canopied carriage with plumes on the left side, like the Son of Heaven, ruling a region that measures over 1,000 *li* from east to west. He is referred to as a 'foreign vassal' of the Han, but in fact he is the lord of a whole vast territory. If troops were sent from Changsha and Yuzhang to attack him, they would find most of the rivers impassable and would have great difficulty in advancing. I have received information, however, that over 100,000 first-rate soldiers could be recruited from the region of Yelang. If these were transported down the Zangge River and deployed against the king of Southern Yue while he was still unprepared, it would be an excellent way to bring his territory under control. With the strength of the Han forces and the wealth of Ba and Shu to support the undertaking, it would be an easy task to open up communications with Yelang and establish officials in the region."

The Emperor approved of this plan and, appointing Tang Meng as a general of palace attendants, put him in command of a force of 1,000 soldiers and over 10,000 porters. With these he marched out through the Zuo Pass in Ba and visited Duotong, the marquis of Yelang.

Tang Meng presented Duotong with generous gifts and, describing the might and virtue of the Han dynasty, urged him to permit Han officials to be sent to the area, promising that Duotong's son would be appointed as a governor. The small towns in the neighbourhood of Yelang were all anxious to obtain silk from the Han, and Duotong, considering that the road between his territory and China was too steep and perilous to be kept open for long, agreed for the time being to listen to Tang Meng's demands. Tang Meng then returned to the capital to report on his mission. As a result, the province of Jianwei was established in the area and troops from Ba and Shu were sent out to work on the road, extending it through Po in the direction of the Zangge River…. By this time, the emperor was busy building fortifications in Shuofang in an attempt to drive the Xiongnu out of the region south of the Yellow River. Gongsun Hong repeatedly emphasized the

dangers involved in attempting to open up communication with the southwestern barbarians and urged the emperor to abandon the project and concentrate his strength on combating the Xiongnu. The emperor accordingly gave up the idea, keeping only the two districts of Nanyi and Yelang, with one chief commandant, and leaving the province of Jianwei more or less to take care of itself.

In the first year of the *yuanshou* (122 BCE), Zhang Qian, the Bowang marquis returned from his mission to the land of Daxia (Bactria) and reported that while he was there he had seen cloth produced in Shu and bamboo canes from Qiong. On enquiring how they had arrived in Daxia, he was told, "They come from the land of Shendu (India), which lies some several thousand *li* to west of here. We buy them in the shops of the Shu merchants there." He was also told that Shendu was situated some 2,000 *li* west of Qiong. "Daxia, which is situated southwest of our country," Zhang Qian reported to the emperor with enthusiasm, "is eager to open relations with China and is much distressed that the Xiongnu are blocking the road in between. If we could find a new route from Shu via the land of Shendu, however, we would have a short and convenient way to reach Daxia which would avoid the danger of the northern route!"

The emperor therefore ordered Wang Ranyu, Bo Shichang, Lü Yueren, and others to go on a secret expedition through the region of the southwestern barbarians and on to the west to search for the land of Shendu. When they got as far as Dian, Changqiang, the king of Dian, detained them and sent a party of ten or twelve men to the west to find out the way to Shendu for them. The Chinese party waited over a year, but all the roads to the west had been closed off by the inhabitants of Kunming, so that none of the men who had been sent ahead were able to reach Shendu.

In the course of his talks with the Han envoys, the king of Dian asked, "Which is larger, my domain or that of the Han ruler?" and the marquis of Yelang asked the same question. Because there were no roads open between their lands and China, each considered himself the supreme ruler of a vast territory and had

no idea of the breadth and greatness of the Han empire.

Some years later, when the kingdom of Southern Yue rebelled, the emperor ordered the Marquis Who Hastens to Duty to raise an army among the south-western barbarians in the province of Jianwei and aid in the attack on southern Yue. The chief of one of the barbarian states in the region, Julan, was afraid, however, that if he and his men went on such a distant expedition the inhabitants of neighbouring states would invade his territory and seize the old men and boys who had been left behind. He and his people therefore revolted and killed the Han envoys and the governor of Jianwei. The emperor had ordered a force of released criminals from Ba and Shu to join in the attack on Southern Yue, and he now detached eight commanders from his force and sent them to put down the revolt in Julan. In the meantime, the resistance in Southern Yue was brought to an end, and the eight commanders, instead of proceeding downriver to the coast, turned back north and on their way executed the chief of Toulan. Toulan was another small state in the region that had constantly been hindering communication with Dian. Thus, Toulan and the other tribes of the southwestern barbarians were brought under control and the region made into the province of Zangge.

The marquis of Yelang had originally sided with the king of Southern Yue, but when Southern Yue was wiped out, he proceeded to execute all those who had advised him to revolt against the Han. Eventually, he journeyed to Chang'an to pay his respects to the emperor, who bestowed on him the title of king of Yelang…. Thus, of the hundreds of native rulers among the southwestern barbarians, only those of Yelang and Dian were granted the seals of kings. Dian, although a relatively small fief, still enjoys the highest favour with the emperor.

**2. Under the account of Sima Xiangru (179–117 BCE) in the *Shiji*,[60] it is recorded:**

There are dozens of chiefs ruling among the southwestern barbarians, but the most important is the ruler of Yelang. To the west of Yelang live the chiefs of the Mimo, of which the most important is the ruler of Dian. North of Dian live numerous other chiefs, the most important being the ruler of Qiongdu. All of these tribes ruled by these chiefs wear their hair in the mallet-shaped fashion, work the fields and live in settlements. Beyond them to the west, in the region from Tongshi east to Yeyu, are the tribes called Sui and Kunming, whose people all braid their hair and move from place to place with their herds of domestic animals, having no fixed homes and no chieftains….

After Sima Xiangru had been a palace attendant for several years, it happened that Tang Meng was dispatched to invade the regions of Yelang and Western Po to the west of China and open up relations with them. To accomplish this, he recruited 1,000 officers and men from the provinces of Ba and Shu. In addition, these provinces took it upon themselves to send along a force of 10,000 or more men to transport provisions. When he encountered any difficulties in carrying out his plans, Tang Meng took advantage of the military supply law to execute the ringleaders of the opposition, a step that threw the people of Ba and Shu into extreme panic. When the emperor got wind of the affair, he dispatched Sima Xiangru to reprimand Tang Meng and to explain to the inhabitants of Ba and Shu that it had not been his intention to inflict any penalties upon them….

By the time Sima Xiangru had completed his mission and returned to report to the emperor, Tang Meng had invaded and opened up communications with the region of Yelang. It was decided to use this opportunity to make contact with the roads in the territory of the barbarians of the southwest. More soldiers were called out from Ba, Shu and Guanghan, and a labour force of 20,000 or 30,000 men put to work building a road. At the end of two years, however, the

[60] *Shiji*, juan 117.

road had still not been completed. A number of men died in the course of construction and the expense reached staggering proportions, so that many of the people of Shu as well as the Han officials connected with the project began to complain that it was impractical. At the same time the local chieftains of the regions of Qiong and Zuo, hearing that the other southern barbarians had entered into relations with the Han empire and were receiving many fine gifts, asked to become subjects of the emperor and requested the officials to grant them the same treatment as the southern barbarians....[61]

[61] Burton Watson (trans.) *Records of the Grand Historian by Sima Qian* (Revised edition) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 284–89.

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