

A history of a spatial relationship: Kunlun Mountain and the Yellow River source from Chinese cosmography through to Western cartography

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Abstract

Kunlun Mountain and the Yellow River belong to the general knowledge one has about Chinese cosmography and geography. Kunlun is a cosmic mountain typologically similar and sometimes identified with Mount Meru and at the same time, the name of a long mountain range in the Western part of China. The Yellow River that crosses its territory from the West to the East has long been the symbol of the Chinese state. I argue that Kunlun mountain range and the Yellow River source below it, as they appear in modern Western maps, are cartographic images imported from Chinese cosmography and cartography. In this paper I try to trace this long and complex process. Kunlun Mountain is characterised by an outstandingly broad range of identifications with real mountains. I suggest that this diversity originates from its shifting cosmological “positions” that varied between specific spatial conceptions or depended on political and ideological needs that differed both between written sources and historical periods. I propose to test this hypothesis by exploring the concept of Kunlun as a location of the Yellow River source. I shall examine the first occurrences of Kunlun as the Yellow River source in early Chinese texts and depictions of Kunlun Mountain and the Yellow River source in Chinese maps. Finally, I shall show how and which cartographic images of the Yellow River source and Kunlun Mountain were transferred to Western cartography.

Keywords

Concepts of space; Chinese cosmography; Chinese cartography; Western cartography.

* I am truly indebted to John Moffett (The Needham Research Institute) for corrections of my English. Any mistakes found in this paper are my own responsibility.

História de uma relação espacial: a Montanha Kunlun e a origem do Rio Amarelo da cosmografia chinesa à cartografia ocidental

Resumo

A montanha Kunlun e o rio Amarelo fazem parte dos conhecimentos gerais que se têm acerca da cosmografia e da geografia chinesas. Kunlun é uma montanha cósmica tipologicamente similar à montanha Meru e, ao mesmo tempo, o nome de uma longa cordilheira na parte ocidental da China. O rio Amarelo, que atravessa seu território do oeste para o leste, por muito tempo tem sido o símbolo do Estado chinês. Sustento que a cordilheira de Kunlun e a origem do rio Amarelo, tal como aparecem em mapas ocidentais modernos, são imagens cartográficas importadas da cosmografia e cartografia chinesas. No presente artigo, procuro descrever este longo e complexo processo. A montanha Kunlun é caracterizada por um escopo notavelmente largo de identificações com montanhas reais. Sugiro que essa diversidade se origina de suas “posições” cosmológicas mudáveis, que variaram dentro do contexto de concepções espaciais específicas ou em função de necessidades políticas e ideológicas que diferem nas diversas fontes escritas e períodos históricos. Proponho testar essa hipótese através de uma exploração do conceito de Kunlun como possível localização da origem do rio Amarelo. Para tanto, examino as primeiras menções a Kunlun como origem do rio Amarelo nos primeiros textos chineses, assim como as descrições de Kunlun e a origem do rio Amarelo em mapas chineses. Finalmente, mostro como e quais imagens cartográficas da origem do rio Amarelo e a montanha Kunlun foram transferidas à cartografia ocidental.

Palavras-chave

Conceitos sobre o espaço; Cosmografia chinesa; Cartografia chinesa; Cartografia ocidental

Cosmologically important landmarks: proposed research perspective

Kunlun 崑崙-- (昆侖) Mountain first appears in a cluster of early Chinese texts dating from the late Warring States Period (475-222 BC) through the Early Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 8). Its descriptions are found in the philosophical treatises *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Master Zhuang), the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Springs and Autumns of Mister Lü), the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Masters from the Huainan) and the *Liezi* 列子 (Master Lie), in the *Erya* 爾雅 explanatory dictionary, in a poetical anthology the *Chuci* 楚辭 (The Songs of Chu), in a comprehensive description of the terrestrial world the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Itineraries of Mountains and Seas) and a description the travels of King Mu 穆 (r. 956-918 BC) to the West the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳 (Narrative of the Son of Heaven, Mu).¹ According to these texts, it is a mountain with divine properties located in the Western part of the inhabited world. For instance, in some texts it is related to the Queen-Mother of the West (*Xi wang mu* 西王母), granting immortality, and, therefore, associated with the West as the turning point between life and death.²

Etymologically Kunlun is connected to *hundun* 混沌 (variants in early texts: 渾沌 [Zhuangzi], 渾敦 [Zuozhuan 左傳]), the primordial chaos, that also has a graphic variant 混淪 [Liezi] that differs from Kunlun only in the radical (“mountain” in case of Kunlun or no radical at all, “water” in case of *hundun*), and share the same phonetic element.³

There have been many attempts to identify Kunlun with real mountains. In modern physical maps it is a long mountain range in the North-western part of the Tibetan Plateau, but at least six other major identifications with different mountains of the Tibetan Plateau and adjoining areas have been proposed in traditional Chinese scholarship (shown in black in Map 1, in total seven, including the one that was eventually retained in the modern Western maps of China). Even more identifications, sometimes well beyond the Western regions of contemporary China, have been advanced in sinological literature.⁴

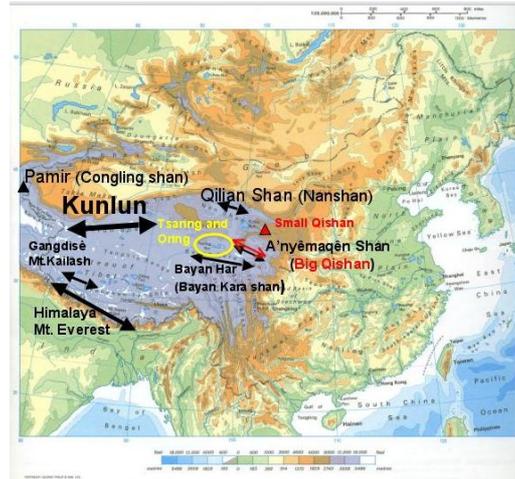
¹ For general information about these texts, see Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: Early China Special Monograph Series 2, 1993).

² For references to Xiwangmu in early Chinese texts, see Riccardo Fracasso, “Holy Mothers of Ancient China (A New Approach to the Hsi-wang-mu Problem)”, *T'oung Pao* 74 (1988): 1-46, and Manfred W. Frühauf, *Die Königliche Mutter des Westens: Xiwangmu in alten Dokumenten Chinas* (Bochum: Projekt-Verlag, 1999).

³ “Kunlun and *hundun* are the same closed center of the world”, see Isabell Robinet, “*Hundun* 混沌 Chaos; inchoate state,” in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, ed. Fabrizio Pregadio (London: Routledge, 2007), 525.

⁴ Manfred W. Frühauf, “Der Kunlun im alten China. Versuch einer Positionsbestimmung zwischen Geographie und Mythologie,” *minima sinica – Zeitschrift zum chinesischen Geist* 1 (2001): 41-67, on 43-7.

Map 1. Physical map of China. Black: Kunlun Mountain identifications (Mt. Kailash is the earthly identification of Meru, what allows one, in its turn, to identify Kunlun with Meru). Red: Jishi Mountain identifications. Yellow: Tsaring (Gyaring) and Oring (Ngoring) Lakes – Yellow River sources



Martin Frühauf, the author of a comprehensive survey of occurrences of Kunlun in early Chinese texts, its identifications with real landmarks and related studies, concludes that despite the great variety of these identifications through Chinese history, it always fulfilled the same function – of a marker of the Western border of the Chinese cultural space.⁵ Deborah Porter, while exploring the function of Kunlun in the “Narrative of the Son of Heaven, Mu”⁶ and related texts, argues that it is first and foremost a “mythic construct”. She is primarily concerned with the implications of the North-western cosmological and astronomical “position” of Kunlun with respect to the core territories of Chinese civilisation (encompassing the basins of the Yellow and the Yangzi rivers), as derived from this text.⁷ Marina Kravtsova demonstrates the key-role of Kunlun in the conception of space, characteristic of Chu culture, as presented in “The Songs of Chu”.⁸ She believes that according to this text, neither semi-cardinal directions nor the five-fold framework oriented to the four cardinal directions and the centre played a significant role in the Chu picture of the world, which, rather, was built around the West-East axis, and that Kunlun symbolized the sacred centre located far to the West.⁹

These studies share the same approach, considering Kunlun as a *cosmological referent* rather than as a *geographical one*. The main function of such place-names is that

⁵ He provides an account of descriptions of Kunlun Mountain in early Chinese texts, lists of its identifications, discussion of the possible meanings and origins of its name, perspectives of its interpretation and an extensive bibliography, *Ibid*, esp. 47.

⁶ *Mu Tianzi zhuan*, describing King Mu’s (r. 956-918 BC) travels to the West, was discovered in AD 279 in the tomb of King Xiang 襄 of the Wei 魏 kingdom, who died in 296 BC.

⁷ Deborah Porter, “The Literary Function of K’un-Lun Mountain in the *Mu T’ien-tzu Chuan*,” *Early China* 18 (1993): 73–106, esp. 76–85.

⁸ A poetic corpus mostly comprising poetical works by a nobleman Qu Yuan 屈原 from the Chu kingdom situated in southern China, in the basin of the Yangzi River, who lived in the late 4th century BC (also includes a small number of his followers and imitators up to the 2nd century AD).

⁹ Marina E. Kravtsova, *Poeziya Drevnego Kitaya: opyt kul’turologicheskogo analiza* [The poetical tradition of ancient China: An attempt at a culturological review] (St. Petersburg: Tsentr Peterburskoe Vostokovedenie, Orientalia: 1994), 168–83. She also makes interesting observations on some connections of Kunlun to the Southwestern direction in later sources, in 190–4.

of a marker of a cosmologically significant “position”. Identifications of Kunlun with real mountains, therefore, only make sense when regarded with respect to its cosmological place. Each of these studies aims to reveal the right cosmological “position” of Kunlun, but the results obtained vary. I suggest that these differences and the outstandingly broad range of identifications of Kunlun with real mountains may originate from its shifting cosmological “positions”, which varied between specific spatial conceptions or depended on political and ideological needs that differed both between written sources and historical periods.

I propose to test this hypothesis by positioning Kunlun in its relation to another special landmark in Chinese conceptions of terrestrial space – the Yellow River source, as Kunlun being the Yellow River source is one of its basic attributes in early texts. Taking two linked cosmologically and ideologically important landmarks is much more advantageous for understanding the place of each of them in conceptions of space than considering them separately. I shall examine relevant occurrences in early texts using as a visual aid depictions of Kunlun Mountain and the Yellow River source in Chinese maps, and eventually show how these landmarks found their place in Western cartography.

Chinese maps have not yet been taken into consideration in studies relevant to Kunlun. The reason for this is understandable – the earliest surviving maps showing Kunlun Mountain and the Yellow River date from the Song dynasty (960-1279) that is from about a dozen centuries later than the earliest descriptions.¹⁰

These maps represent the Chinese Empire. A prominently delineated course of the Yellow River is one of the core elements of these maps. The maps are amazingly diverse in their location of the Yellow River source, but the majority of them, in effect, locate the Yellow River source at Kunlun Mountain. Many explicitly rely on the early textual tradition and can be regarded as resuming the discussion of the “true” location of the Yellow River source first raised in early imperial historiography that I shall briefly discuss below.

The Song maps were, indeed, created in a substantially different historical setting, and they necessarily bear the stamp of later spatial conceptions and interests. Yet, these maps are the only visual aids related to the early descriptions available to us that *originate from the continuous Chinese tradition of conceiving of and representing terrestrial space*, and using them is much more justified and helpful than relying exclusively of topographically accurate Western maps (as is usually done), which may even be misleading. At the same time, these and later maps are valuable sources of their own that show the development and evolution of conceptions of space.

Although it may seem more logical to proceed from early descriptions to later maps, I shall do the opposite, as it seems much easier to grasp spatial conceptions moving from an image towards a description.

¹⁰ For instance, maps are not used by Porter, Kravtsova and Frühauf.

Place of Kunlun in the “wheel” maps

I begin my investigation with a rather peculiar case in East Asian traditional cartography, the “Maps of the Under-heaven” (天下圖 *Tianxia tu*, Korean *Ch'ônhado*, sometimes the “General map of the Underheaven” 天下總圖 *Tianxia zongtu*), or the so-called “wheel” maps. The maps, indeed, have a round frame somewhat resembling a wheel.¹¹

The “wheel” maps convey an overall view of the world to a considerable extent based on the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas”, the most comprehensive and systematised of the terrestrial descriptions to have survived from Ancient China, and one of the principal early texts describing Kunlun as the location of the Yellow River source. This text was compiled about the beginning of the 1st century BC, and the maps are almost two millennia older. The exact date of their production is difficult to determine, they seem to originate from about the 16th century, with most extant copies supposedly dated to the 18th - 19th century. Far removed in time from their textual source, the maps necessarily comprise later geographical information and also bear some indications of later influences, for instance, of Buddhist cartography. But despite their late provenance, the “wheel” maps are still strikingly faithful to the principles of traditional Chinese cosmography and cartography. Such traditional maps successfully co-existed in China with more topographically accurate maps made under the impact of Western cartography up to the end of the 19th century.

The “wheel” maps are also rare cases of cartographic representations of the whole world in the East Asian cartography.¹² I had a chance to examine the originals of two coloured “wheel” maps in the Musée Guimet (Paris, France) and three copies, one coloured and two monochrome in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (Munich, Germany). Let us take a look at the “wheel” map with helpfully contrasting colours from the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, an example (Map 2).

¹¹ Nakamura Hiroshi, “Old Chinese Maps Preserved by the Koreans,” *Imago Mundi* 4 (1947): 3-22; Gari Ledyard, “Cartography in Korea,” in *The History of Cartography, Vol.II.2: Cartography in the Traditional East and Southeast Asian Societies*, ed. John B. Harley, & David Woodward (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 256-67.

¹² Most of the Chinese general maps are limited to the territory of the Chinese Empire.

Map 2. "Wheel" Map, Korean Atlas, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich (mid-18th century?) Diagram in the lower left corner – schematic representation of the system of concentric zones alternating land (yellow) and sea (blue).



The top of the map is oriented to the north. It provides a view of the world as a nest of more or less round concentric zones. Four zones can be distinguished, alternating land and sea (their schematic representation is given in the lower left corner). The outside zone is the sea, devoid of any inhabitants, but contains markers of the "extreme East" and the "extreme West", the places where the sun rises and sets, respectively. In both cases the extreme points are represented by an island with a mountain and a cosmic tree growing out it, as described in the "Itineraries of Mountains and Seas".

The next zone is a strip of land with many countries and mountains, and also two rivers. Names of countries are formed into rectangles (in some copies in circles). The third zone from the outside is again the sea, with many countries depicted as rectangles with their names and islands with mountains. Finally, the central zone represents the "best known" part of the world where China and its closest neighbours are found - Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Japan is shown just as a name in a rectangle (such reduced representation of Japan is often found in Chinese maps). Korea, in contrast, is as an oversized peninsula, and Vietnam territory is also quite outstanding.

China is placed at the centre of the map, and its name – the "Central Empire" (中國 *Zhongguo*) in some maps the "Central Plain" (中原 *Zhongyuan*) – is accentuated by being circled and tinted in red (faded to orange), thus clearly standing out as the political Centre of the world. Since China is located in the Eastern part of the central zone, this zone is shifted to the left (= West) of the map.

The central zone is divided by five rivers, two of which form a confluence. The rivers are as follows – the Yellow River (Huanghe 黄河), the Yangzi (Jiangshui 江水) or Blue River, the Red River (Chishui 赤水 = Mekong?), the mythical Black River (Heishui 黑水) and the Yang River (Yangshui 洋水 = Gang?, its name varies among "wheel" maps). In this particular map only three rivers are named - the Yellow River, the Black

River and the Red River, which are tinted in the corresponding colours.¹³ It also contains a depiction of the Desert Area in the form of a raindrop shifted to 45° (Shamo – Gobi-Tarim) and the Western Region (roughly corresponds to Xinjiang) represented by its countries.

Now, the main subject of this paper, Kunlun Mountain is a prominent mountain located to the West of China and in the centre of the central zone. Kunlun is depicted here as the largest mountain of the world, thus providing a clear visual argument in favour of its interpretation as the *axis mundi*. Therefore, if China is the political centre of this map, Kunlun seems to be its sacred centre, the central axis of this picture of the world.

The surviving copies of the “wheel” maps are very numerous and several of them are published in colour. For instance, a “wheel” map strikingly similar to that just discussed found in the Musée Guimet is provided in the recent study of the Far Eastern cartography by Philippe Pelletier.¹⁴ Another similar, though, less colourful map at the National Central Library of Seoul (Korea), illustrates the Chicago *History of Cartography* series.¹⁵ A large photo of a “wheel” map from a private collection is published in *História da Cartografia*.¹⁶ Two very beautiful “wheel” maps are presented in the catalogue of Korean maps that were exhibited in 2009 at the Aizu Museum of Waseda University (Japan).¹⁷ A slightly different type of “wheel” maps is kept in the British Museum and in the Library of Congress. Its peculiarity is a very detailed list of countries for the Western part of the central zone and an additional island in the extreme South. Countries are framed in circles, and not rectangles. Korea is highlighted in red.¹⁸

In sum, the extant “wheel” maps are never completely identical. They have interesting differences between them in some details, such as the selection of peripheral countries, the choice of colours and forms of cartographic symbols (squares or circles). But their structural framework and the set of basic landmarks are the same. In particular, in all of them Kunlun Mountain is placed at the centre of the central zone, to the left of its political centre, China.

Although these maps have evident Chinese origins, they have survived in Korean copies and are usually first sheets in atlases, where they play the role of the

¹³ In this map, the Black and the Red Rivers are interchanged when compared to the majority of other extant copies of the “wheel” maps.

¹⁴ See Philippe Pelletier, *L'Extrême-Orient: L'invention d'une histoire et d'une géographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), colour plate 4. Another still unpublished “wheel” map in the possession of the Musée Guimet is distinguished by the aesthetic care in designing cartographic images.

¹⁵ John B. Harley, & David Woodward, ed., *The History of Cartography, Vol.II.2: Cartography in the Traditional East and Southeast Asian Societies* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), colour plate 16.

¹⁶ *História da Cartografia* (Rio de Janeiro: Editôra Codex Ltda., 1967), 182-3. Here Korea is highlighted in red, accentuating the Korean provenance of the map.

¹⁷ <http://www.waseda.jp/aizu/2009/whats2009.html>

¹⁸ These maps are available on the internet sites of these libraries.

“key” map of the world, the world reduced to the East, Central and South Asia. This is the case of the originals of the “wheel” maps that I examined in the Musée Guimet (two coloured atlases) and in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (one coloured and two monochrome atlases). This world map is usually followed by a map of China, then a map of Korea accompanied by maps of each of the eight Korean provinces (Korean *do*, Chinese *dao* 道), and, finally, a map of Japan and a map of the Ryûkyû kingdom.¹⁹

Kunlun as the Yellow River source in Song maps

Little detail in the “wheel” maps is given for the Chinese territory, just the main mountains (among them the Five Peaks, the markers of the five cardinal directions and the centre plus two additional mountains), the Yellow and Yangzi (Blue) rivers. But its general outline clearly resembles traditional maps of China, which usually follow the “wheel” map in the Korean atlases (Map 3).

Map 3. Map of China, Korean Atlas, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich (mid-18th century?)



For instance, in the map of China from the coloured atlas of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Kunlun Mountain is depicted as the largest of all mountains located in the West of the core Chinese territories (the basins of the Yellow and the Yangzi rivers) and is the source of the Yellow River. The Yellow River is crossed by the Great Wall prominently delineated in the North. A very similar map of China follows the “wheel” map in one of the atlases from the Musée Guimet, the “wheel” map being very similar to the “wheel” map from the Bayerische Bibliothek. These maps of China are amazingly faithful to the numerous prototypes that date from the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279).

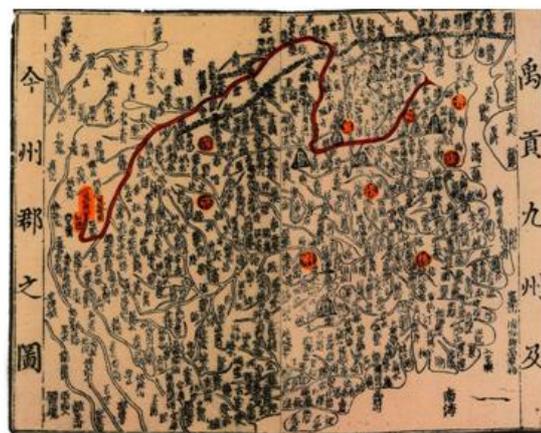
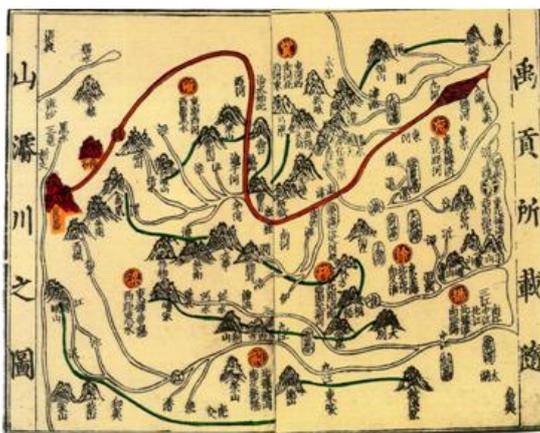
¹⁹ This order of maps is found in the two Musée Guimet atlases and in one of the monochrome atlases from the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. In another monochrome atlas, Japan and Ryûkyû are missing, and in the coloured atlas from this library the general map of Korea is missing, and Japan and Ryûkyû precede the maps of Korean provinces.

A very clear example of such map dating from the early 13th century is the “Map of moving along mountains and deepening rivers, as registered in ‘Yu’s [System of] Tribute”²⁰ (禹貢所載隨山濬川之圖 *Yugong suo zai suishan junchuan zhi tu*, in “Collected Commentaries on the Book of Documents” [書集傳 *Shujizhuan*] by Cai Shen 蔡沈/ Cai Jiufeng 蔡九峰 [1167-1230], completed in 1209). Kunlun Mountain is the largest of all the mountains, located in the West and the source of the Yellow River (Map 4).

The same configuration is conveyed by the “Map of the Nine Provinces of ‘Yu’s [System of] Tribute’ and contemporary provinces and commanderies” (禹貢九州及今州郡之圖 *Yugong jiuzhou ji jin zhoujun zhi tu*) from the same collection, with the difference that it provides much more topographical detail and does not contain depictions of mountains, just their names (Map 5).

Map 4. “Map of moving along mountains and deepening rivers, as registered in ‘Yu’s [System of] Tribute’” (*Yugong suo zai suishan junchuan zhi tu* 禹貢所載隨山濬川之圖). In “Collected Commentaries on the Book of Documents” (書集傳 *Shujizhuan* by Cai Shen 蔡沈/Cai Jiufeng 蔡九峰 [1167-1230], completed in 1209) [reproduced from Yan Ping 1998, p. 65]. The Yellow River, the names of the “Nine Provinces” described in “Yu’s [System] of Tribute”, Kunlun, the biggest mountain in the West, and Jishi mountain to the right of it are tinted in orange by the author of this article.

Map 5. “Map of the Nine Provinces of ‘Yu’s [System of] Tribute’ and contemporary provinces and commanderies” (*Yugong jiuzhou ji jin zhoujun zhi tu* 禹貢九州及今州郡之圖). In “Collected Commentaries on the Book of Documents” (書集傳 *Shujizhuan*) by Cai Shen 蔡沈/Cai Jiufeng 蔡九峰 [1167-1230], completed in 1209) [reproduced from Yan Ping 1998, p. 64]. The Yellow River, the names of the “Nine Provinces” described in “Yu’s [System] of Tribute)” and Kunlun with a note that it is the Yellow River source are tinted in orange by the author of this article.



²⁰ This text will be discussed in the following part of the article.

A representation of Kunlun as the Yellow River source is found in a very interesting Japanese manuscript map of China from the Genkô Manuscript (1333), the “Map of the [five main] peaks and [four main] rivers, seas and marches” (岳瀆海澤之圖 *Yue du hai ze zhi tu*), It is supposed to be a copy of a Chinese original of the 7th century, but one can see an apparent difference in the style of mapping. In this map, the Kunlun Mountain dominates the mapped territory and is the most eye-catching element of the map (Map 6).

Map 6. “Map of the [five main] peaks and [four main] rivers, seas and marches” (岳瀆海澤之圖 *Yue du hai ze zhi tu*), Genkô manuscript (Japan, 1333) [reproduced from Kalinowski 1991, colour plate I]. The Yellow River, the names of “provinces” and Kunlun with a note stating that it is a Yellow River source are tinted in orange by the author of this article.



Kunlun and the Yellow River source problem in late Warring States – Early Han texts

All these maps represent the China of remote antiquity. The location of the Yellow River source at Kunlun is reported in a group of texts thematically related to the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas” – in the “Narrative of the Son of Heaven, Mu”,²¹ the “Masters from the Huainan”,²² the *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 (Commentary on the ‘Itineraries of Rivers’) by Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (AD 469?–527)²³ and as a definition in the *Erya* explanatory dictionary.

According to this group of texts, the concept of the Yellow River source at Kunlun Mountain became current in the 3rd-2nd centuries BC, about the time of the foundation of the Chinese Empire.²⁴ However, the newly founded empire pointedly rejects this location, as one can see from the two first imperial histories, “The Grand Scribe’s Records” (*Shiji* 史記, compiled by Sima Qian 司馬遷, ca. 145–87 BC) and the “History of the [Former] Han [Dynasty]” (*Hanshu* 漢書, compiled by Ban Gu 班固, AD 32–92).

²¹ Interrelation between these two texts is extensively discussed by Porter.

²² A passage on Kunlun in this text is reproduced from the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas”.

²³ In addition to having a similar title, this text includes extensive citations from the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas.”

²⁴ The Chinese Empire was founded in 221 BC by the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty, Qin Shi Huangdi (r.221-210 BC).

The reason for the interest in the Yellow River and the preoccupation with the location of its source around this time is the special role the Yellow River played in the Chinese empire. The Yellow River became its main artery and the symbol of its unity, the source of which should be clearly determined and officially recognized.

Contesting the location of the Yellow River source at Kunlun Mountain is the central issue of the “Memoirs” (*[lie]zhuan* [列傳]) on the Western Region, the “Memoir on Dawan” (大宛列傳 *Dawan liezhuan*, ch. 123) of “The Grand Scribe’s Records”, and the “Memoir on Zhang Qian and Li Guangli” (張騫李廣利傳 *Zhang Qian, Li Guangli zhuan*, ch. 61) of the “History of the [Former] Han Dynasty”. These chapters deal with missions sent to Central Asia during the Former Han dynasty, their primary goal being to find the ‘true’ source of the Yellow river,²⁵ since two different locations are given for it in early Chinese texts.

The alternative location occurs in “Yu’s [System of] Tribute” (禹貢 *Yugong*, ca. 5th-3rd centuries BC) chapter of the “Book of Documents” (尚書/書經 *Shangshu/Shujing*), one of the Six Confucian Classics. This text delineates the Yellow River from a different and rarely mentioned landmark – Jishi 積石 Mountain (literally, “heaped stones”). Similarly to Kunlun, there are different identifications of Jishi with real mountains. Two mountains under this name are found in modern maps of China – Small Jishi and Big Jishi, both located along the upper part of the Yellow River course and one of these identifications, Big Jishi Mountain - Da Jishi (A’nyêmaqên Shan), coincides with one of Kunlun’s identifications (see Map 1).²⁶

In the early imperial histories “Yu’s [System of] Tribute”, was recognised as the main reference text for landmarks, and became a theoretical foundation of the imperial conception of “terrestrial organisation” (地理 *dili*).²⁷ For this reason, its authority outweighs

²⁵ For surveys of these missions supplied with maps, see Lu Liangzhi 盧良志, *Zhongguo dituxue shi* 中國地圖學史 [History of Chinese Cartography] (Beijing: Cehui, 1984), 22–6; Denis Twitchett, & Michael Loewe, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 1: The Ch’in and Han Empires (221 B.C. – A.D. 220)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 164–7; 407–9. For a study focused on the Western region according to the “The Grand Scribe’s Records” and the “History of the [Former] Han [dynasty]”, see Larisa A. Borovkova, *Tsarstva “zapadnogo kraya”: Vostochny Turkestan I Srednyaya Aziya po svedeniyam iz “Shi tszi” I “Khan’ shu”* [The kingdoms of the “Western Region”: Eastern Turkestan and Central Asia, according to the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*] (Moscow: Institut vostokovedeniya RAN – Kraft+, 2001).

²⁶ One Jishi Mountain (the so-called Small Jishi, Xiao Jishi) is situated on the Southern bank of the Yellow River in Gansu 甘肅 Province, not far from its border with Qinghai 青海 Province, about 25 km Northwest of Linxia 臨夏 city. This Jishi became a Buddhist “holy” mountain. Another Jishi Mountain (the so-called Big Jishi – Da Jishi, also called A’nyêmaqên 阿尼瑪卿 Mountain), more precisely a long mountain range, is found much farther up the Yellow River, in Qinghai province, in the deep nook of the river.

²⁷ The official conception of terrestrial space, understood as an orderly administrative territorial division established by the ruler and aimed at symbolizing world order.

the numerous occurrences of Kunlun as the Yellow River source in other texts. As a result, the conclusions (“appraisals”) to these two Memoirs on the Western Region report that the expeditions did not confirm that the Yellow River emanates from Kunlun. This information is declared as completely false, and texts transmitting it, specifically the “Yu’s Basic Records” (禹本紀 *Yu benji*, now lost) and the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas”, are condemned as unreliable. Such texts are clearly demarcated from “Yu’s [System of] Tribute” chapter of the “Book of Documents”. I have explored this question elsewhere.²⁸ What interests us here is that early imperial historiography claims that Kunlun is simply a non-existent landmark.

The “appraisal” in “The Grand Scribe’s Records” is as follows:

太史公曰：

禹本紀言：

「河出崑崙。崑崙其高二千五百餘里，日月所相避隱為光明也。其上有醴泉瑤池。」

今自張騫使大夏之後也，窮河源，惡睹本紀所謂崑崙者乎？

故言：

九州山川，尚書近之矣！至禹本紀山海經所有怪物，余不敢言之也。

“The Lord the Grand Scribe states:

‘Yu’s Basic Record’ says:

The [Yellow] River emanates from Kunlun Mountain. [As far as] Kunlun [is concerned,] its height is over 2500 *li*. [Kunlun is] the place where the sun and the moon avoid and hide away from each other in order to sparkle and shine [in turns]. On its summit are the Sweet Spring and the Jade Pool.

[However] now since Zhang Qian has been sent to Da Xia, [and] exhaustively explored the source of the [Yellow] River, did [he] witness [with his own eyes] the Kunlun referred to in ‘[Yu’s] Basic Records’?

Therefore [I] say:

[For] the Nine Provinces, the [itineraries by land marked by] mountains [and the] river [itineraries],²⁹ [it is] the ‘Book of Documents’ (= its ch. 6, ‘Yu’s [System of] Tribute’) [that] is close [to their correct locations]! As far as the amazing things and beings contained in ‘Yu’s Basic Records’ and the ‘Itineraries of Mountains and Seas’ [are concerned], I do not [even] dare to speak about them!”³⁰

²⁸ Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, “Where is the Yellow River Source? A Controversial Question in the Early Chinese Historiography,” *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005-2006): 68-90.

²⁹ The compound of these four characters is a compressed reference to the “Yu’s [System] of Tribute”.

³⁰ *Shiji* 123:3179. Cf. J. J. M. de Groot, trans., *Chinesische Urkunden zur Geschichte Asiens, zweiter Teil, Die Westlande Chinas in der vorchristlichen Zeit* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1926), 44-5, and Burton Watson,

Almost the same “appraisal” concludes the counterpart chapter of the “History of the [Former] Han Dynasty”.

The aim of this early historiography was to erase Kunlun from the Earth’s surface, although one of the ‘unreliable’ texts mentioned in the conclusions to the “Memoirs”, the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas”, proposes a good compromise to extend the Yellow River from Jishi up to Kunlun. This is a reasonable solution, as in “Yu’s [System] of Tribute” it is actually said that the [Yellow] River is delineated [beginning from] Jishi” (導河積石 *dao He Jishi*), but Jishi is never explicitly referred to as its source (河源 *Heyuan*).³¹ At first sight, the maps showing Kunlun as the Yellow River source that I mentioned above seem to illustrate this idea – the Yellow River emanates from Kunlun and Jishi is a station further along its course flowing in an easterly direction.

Actually, these maps completely or partially represent the topography of “Yu’s [System of] Tribute”, as one can see from their titles. In particular, they depict the Nine Provinces (九州 *Jiuzhou*) described in this text as an orderly territorial division established by the legendary emperor Yu the Great.³² In these maps the names of the “provinces” (literally “isle-lands”) are usually given in prominent circles. However, maps that depict Jishi Mountain as the source of the Yellow River are surprisingly rare (one of these rare cases is the famous “Map of Yu’s tracks” (禹跡圖 *Yujitu*, engraved on a stone stele in 1136, created about 1100?)³³ (Map 7).

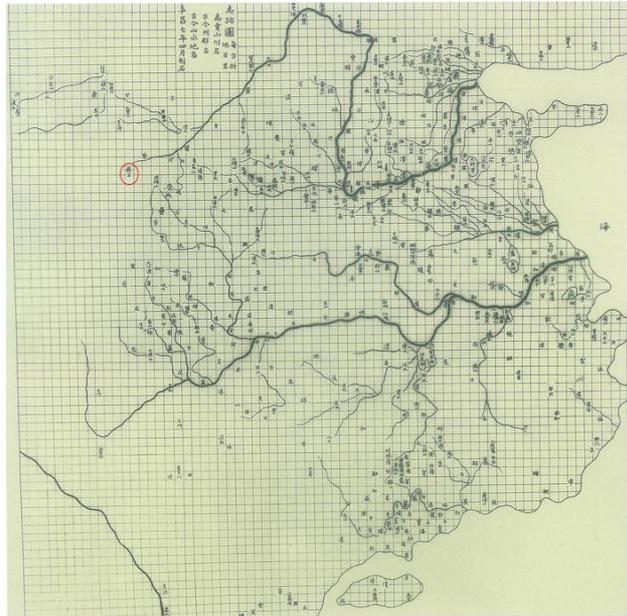
trans., *Records of the Historian; the Shih chi of Ssu-ma Ch’ien* (New York: Columbia University, 1969), 299. The translation provided here is my own and differs slightly from those by de Groot and Watson

³¹ However, in the “summary” of Yu’s regulations of the Nine Provinces and the system of itineraries found in “Yu’s [System of] Tribute” (*Shangshu* 6.16b, §30 according to Karlgren’s division of the text) there is a phrase concerning the sources of all the river itineraries delineated by Yu (“The nine river itineraries had their sources cleaned” 九川濼源 *jiuchuan diyuan*), which implies that the initial points of the described river itineraries are their sources.

³² For the system of the Nine Provinces, see Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, “Ritual Practices for Constructing Terrestrial Space (Warring States-Early Han),” in *HdO Early Chinese Religion. Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC – 220 AD)*, ed. John Lagerwey, & Marc Kalinowski (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 595-644.

³³ This is an example of topographical imprecision in this map, which was reputed for its outstanding topographical accuracy and for this reason inevitably cited in all the studies on the history of Chinese cartography. One of the best is still the article by Edouard Chavannes, “Les deux plus anciens spécimens de la cartographie Chinoise,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient* (Hanoi) 3 (1903): 214-47.

Map 7. “Map of Yu’s tracks” (禹跡圖 *Yujitu*, engraved on a stone stele in 1136, created about 1100?), drawing. Jishi 積石 at the Yellow River source is circled in red.



In the majority of cases, the Yellow River is delineated from Kunlun. One can suggest that eventually, the compromise proposed in the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas” rejected in early historiography was accepted in Song cartography.

Yet, a closer examination of the occurrence of Kunlun in the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas” shows a more complicated picture. The special interest of this text is that it provides *precise respective “positions”* of mountains. It represents the central part of the inhabited world through a cardinally oriented system of 26 itineraries³⁴ marked by 447 mountains,³⁵ and Kunlun and Jishi are listed among these marking mountains. No maps of these itineraries have survived or, most likely, never existed as the text was self-sufficient,³⁶ and for this reason it allows one to derive a reliable representation of the system of itineraries in the form of a map. This is a reconstruction by Wang Chengzu (1982) redrawn by Richard Strassberg (2002),³⁷ with my correction of the upper part of

³⁴ The North and the South are delineated by three itineraries each, the West and the East by four each, and the centre contains twelve itineraries.

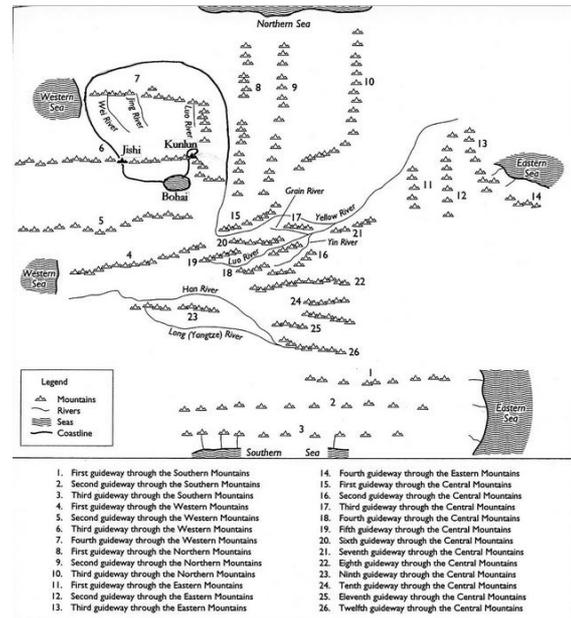
³⁵ I discuss this system in detail in Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, “Conception of Terrestrial Organization in the *Shan hai jing*”, *Bulletin de l’Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient* 82 (1995): 57-110; “Mapping a ‘Spiritual’ Landscape: Representing Terrestrial Space in the *Shan hai jing*,” in *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries, and Human Geographies in Chinese History*, ed. Nicola di Cosmo, & Don Wyatt (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 35-79; “Text as a Device for Mapping a Sacred Space: A Case of the *Wu zang shan jing* (“Five Treasuries: The Itineraries of Mountains”),” *Göttinger Beiträge zur Asienforschung* [special issue *Creating and Representing Sacred Spaces*, ed. Michael Dickhardt, & Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann] 2/3 (2003): 147-210.

³⁶ Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, “Mapless Mapping: Did the Maps of the *Shan hai jing* Ever Exist?” in *Graphics and Text in the Production of Technical Knowledge in China: The Warp and the Weft*, ed. Francesca Bray, Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, & Georges Métaillé (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 217-94.

³⁷ Wang Chengzu 王成組, *Zhongguo dilixueshi: Xian Qin zhi Ming dai* 中國地理學史，先秦至明代 [History of Chinese geography : from before Qin through Ming dynasty] (Peking: Shangwu, 1988 [revised 1982]), 19, map 2, redrawn by Richard E. Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 37, fig. 10, who supplies it with

the Yellow River course made on the basis of an exploration of the occurrences of Kunlun and Jishi Mountains in this text³⁸ (Map 8).

Map 8. Map of 26 itineraries marked by mountains of the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas” (山海經 *Shanhaijing*). Reconstruction by Wang Chengzu, redrawn and translated by Richard Strassberg, corrected by Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann [reproduced from Dorofeeva-Lichtmann 2005-2006, p. 82].



One can contest details of this reconstruction, but it still conveys the main characteristic of this system: each mountain has a definite “position” in its itinerary, one that excludes any other location within this system. The position is given by referring to the preceding mountain in the sequence – as the distance and the cardinally oriented direction to be taken from the preceding mountain. Kunlun and Jishi occupy closely related “positions” – they belong to the same itinerary and are both stations along the Yellow River course – Kunlun is the 8th mountain in the 3rd Western itinerary, which comprises altogether 22 mountains (in Map 8 designated by Strassberg as the “Third Guideway Through the Western Mountains”). Its general direction and, consequently, the order of enumeration of mountains go from the centre to the West.³⁹ Jishi Mountain is the 13th mountain, and is, therefore, located ... further to the west from Kunlun. The Yellow River emanates from Kunlun, makes a turn, passes through Jishi and then flows to the East.⁴⁰ In sum, here Kunlun is located much closer to the core Chinese territories,

translations of place-names and some additions and useful notes, for instance a numbered list of represented itineraries.

³⁸ Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, “Where is the Yellow River Source?” 76-81

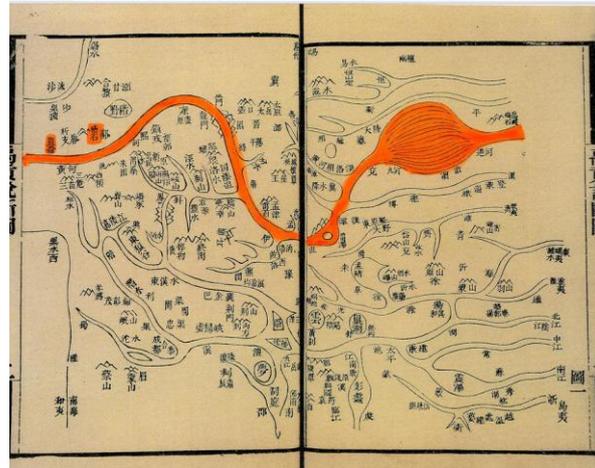
³⁹ One can see clearly that in the system of itineraries, Kunlun Mountain is located in the West and is slightly shifted to the North.

⁴⁰ Some parallels to such locations of Jishi and Kunlun are found in “Springs and Autumns of Wu and Yue [kingdoms]” (吳越春秋 *Wu Yue chunqiu*, attributed to Zhao Ye 趙曄, mid of 1st century AD, where in chapter 6, the deeds of Yu, the ancestor of the Yue kingdom are described. Here another rare occurrence of Jishi Mountain is found. It marks the *extreme Western point* of Yu’s round tour (周行 *zhouxing*) of the world “Inside the Seas” (海內 *hainei*), and is one in a group of landmarks that mark the Eastern, Western, Southern and Northern limits of Yu’s travels. Kunlun is mentioned immediately after, which allows one to suggest that it is located *inside* these limits, *Wu Yue chunqiu*, SBBY ed., 6.3a.

and Jishi, in contrast, is far away in the West. Their positions, are, therefore, reversed in comparison to their positions in later maps.

Kunlun also appears among the landmarks of “Yu’s [System of] Tribute”, but as the name of one group of the Western ‘barbarians’ and their territory, not as a mountain name. The Kunlun barbarians are mentioned in the description of North-western Yong 雍 “province” together with Jishi Mountain. “Yu’s [System of] Tribute” does not contain indications as to the arrangement of Kunlun and Jishi in Yong “province”, but the main issue is that, according to this text the place-name Kunlun is located *inside* the core territories of the Chinese empire, delimited by the Nine Provinces, and not in the Western periphery, as found in the Song and later maps. For instance, Map 1 from the collection of “Maps to elucidating fragments on ‘Yu’s [System of] Tribute” (禹貢說斷圖 *Yugong shuoduan tu* by Fu Yin? 傅寅 [1148-1215])⁴¹ locates Kunlun “barbarians” to the left from Jishi, that is, similarly to Kunlun Mountain in related maps (Map 9).

Map 9. “Maps to elucidating fragments on ‘Yu’s [System of] Tribute” (禹貢說斷圖 *Yugong shuoduan tu* by Fu Yin? 傅寅(1148-1215), map n° 1, original map lost, mid. 16th copy [reproduced from Yan Ping 1998, p. 73]. The Yellow River, Kunlun barbarians in the West and Jishi to the right of them are tinted in orange by the author of this article.



Failed attempt to erase Kunlun from the imperial picture of the world and a shift of its “position” from early descriptions to Song maps

The Song maps and their later copies illustrate the fact that Kunlun was too important for Chinese culture to be erased even by imperial will. The resumption of its place was facilitated by the collapse of the Chinese empire in the early 2nd century AD and the long period of political disunity that lasted through to the late 6th century.⁴² These events resulted in a temporary loss of imperial interest in the Yellow River.⁴³ Selection of the officially recognised texts on the Yellow River also became less strict.

⁴¹ The original map is lost, and survives as a Ming copy.

⁴² A new phase of unity starts with the Sui 隋 dynasty (581-618).

⁴³ This decline in particular imperial interest in the Yellow River can be seen from the fact that the “Treatises” on waterways disappear from the dynastic histories compiled after the Han dynasty. They are revived after a gap of about a thousand years under the title “Treatise on the [Yellow] River and [its Canals]” in the

In particular, the negative evaluation of the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas” in “The Grand Scribe’s Records” and the “History of the [Former] Han [dynasty]” changes completely in the next dynastic history, the “History of the Later Han [dynasty]” (後漢書 *Hou Hanshu*, LH AD 25–220) where it becomes one of the major reference texts on the Yellow River.⁴⁴ Similarly to the “The Grand Scribe’s Records” and the “History of the [Former] Han [dynasty]”, the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas” is mentioned in the “History of the Later Han [dynasty]” again in relation to the Yellow River, in the biography of the official responsible for repairing its dykes, Wang Jing.⁴⁵ The “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas”, the “Treatise on the [Yellow] River and [its canals]” (河渠書 *Hequshu*) and the “Maps of ‘Yu’s [System of] Tribute” (禹貢圖 *Yugongtu*),⁴⁶ no such maps dating from the Han dynasty have survived) are reported to have been given to Wang Jing by the emperor, serving as the major reference texts for repairing the dykes.⁴⁷ Here the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas” is even placed in the primary position among these sources. The royal recommendation to rely on it indicates the official recognition of its locations, especially the location of the Yellow River source at Kunlun Mountain.

However, the first imperial “attack” against Kunlun did not pass without serious consequences. First, in the officially recognised maps, such as the “Map of Yu’s tracks” (Map 7) or (Map 10) the “Map of Terrestrial Organisation” (墜理圖 *Dilitu*, drawn about 1190 by Huang Shang 黃裳, engraved by Wang Zhiyuan 王致遠 in 1247) - whose official status is signalled by its title referring to the conception of “terrestrial organisation” - the Yellow River is still delineated from Jishi Mountain. Second, in the maps that show Kunlun as the Yellow River source, Kunlun Mountain is pushed far away to the West, as far as possible from the core imperial territories.

dynastic histories of the Song and Jin Dynasties (金史 *Jinshi* and 宋史 *Songshi*, both compiled almost simultaneously under the Yuan Dynasty [AD 1271–1368]). In other words, the “Treatises” on waterways reappear in the dynastic histories describing the period of time and compiled during the period of time when the Yellow River basin again became of special political importance due to its invasion by “barbarians”. Treatises on waterways under the same name are found in all subsequent dynastic histories.

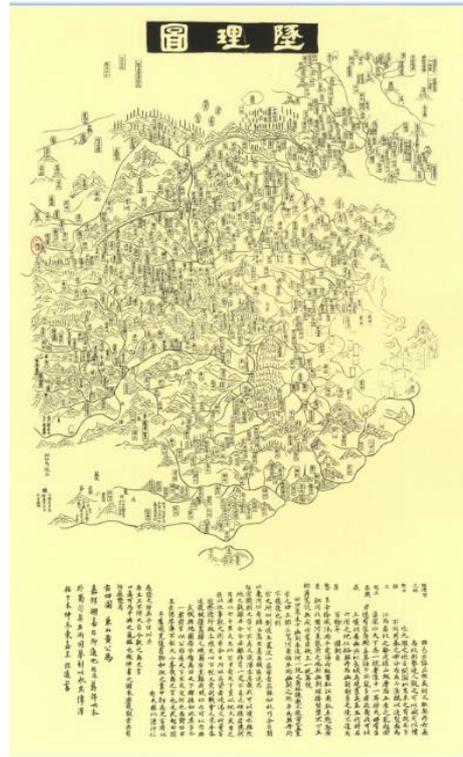
⁴⁴ Apart from the “Treatises” composed by Sima Biao 司馬彪 (ca. 240 – ca. 306), the “History of the Later Han [dynasty]” was compiled by Fan Ye 范曄 (398–446). The different parts of this dynastic history were then combined by Liu Zhao 劉昭 (fl. AD 502–520).

⁴⁵ *Houhan shu* 76.2465 (王景列傳 *Wang Jing liezhuan*).

⁴⁶ No maps related to “Yu’s [System of] Tribute” dating from the Han dynasty have survived.

⁴⁷ This occurred in AD 69.

Map 10. “Map of Terrestrial Organisation” (陸理圖 *Dilitu*, drawn about 1190 by Huang Shang 黃裳, engraved by Wang Zhiyuan 王致遠 in 1247), drawing. Jishi 積石 at the Yellow River source is circled in red.



Therefore, the analysis of Song maps vis-à-vis the early textual tradition to which these maps usually refer, allows one to detect the first cardinal shift in the “position” of Kunlun – from the Western part of the core territories of China to the far-away Western periphery. In other words, initially, according to the late Warring States and the early Han texts, Kunlun was not that far away from the centre, but it is the latter – shifted to the far West “position” of Kunlun – that became the commonly accepted one by later scholarship and sinological literature.

New attempt to erase Kunlun and new shift of its “position” with the discovery of the Yellow River source at Star Lodge Lake

Not even the “position” of Kunlun far to the West was absolutely secure, however, due to the considerable change in Chinese cartographical tradition that took place during the Mongolian Yuan dynasty (AD 1271–1368). In contrast to the authors of the early dynastic histories and Song cartographers, who were preoccupied with the question of where the Yellow River source *should be located*, the Mongols had a *realistic understanding* of the source of the Yellow River – that it starts from a double lake shaped like a gourd that in maps received the name “Star Lodge Lake” (星宿海 *Xingxiuhai*), possibly after one of the 28 lunar lodges called the ‘Star’ (the central lodge of the Southern heavenly sector).⁴⁸ In modern cartography it corresponds to two interlinked lakes – Gyaring

⁴⁸ Astronomical connotations of the name and design of this cartographical image in Chinese maps deserves a special study that is beyond the scope of this article. Here it suffices to note that in certain maps Star Lodge Lake is often filled out by chained circles, the same symbols that are used for

(Tsaring) and Ngoring (Oring) (see Map 1).⁴⁹ Yet, this realistic location still has a strong conceptual flavour – the name of the lake conveys the idea that the Yellow River emanates from the heavens, and its form evokes the idea of an unquenchable source. This new location of the Yellow River source prevails in late imperial maps.

In 1315, a special “Records on the Yellow River source” (河源記 *He yuan ji*, also entitled the “New Classic on Rivers” 今水經 *Jinshuijing*) was composed by Pan Angxiao 潘昂霄 (fl. 14th century) aimed at updating conceptions of the Yellow River source (Map 11a).

A map of the Yellow River source at Star Lodge Lake inspired by this treatise and drawn shortly after its composition is found in the “Notes taken by Nancun [Tao Zongyi] while at rest from plowing” (南村輟耕錄 *Nancun chuogeng lu*, 1366) by Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (1316-?). The new Yellow River source is placed to the Northeast of Kunlun, and it is Kunlun that occupies the central position in the map (Map 11b).

Map 11a. “The Yellow River source” (黃河源 *Huangheyuan*). In the “Notes taken by Nancun [Tao Zongyi] while at rest from plowing” (南村輟耕錄 *Nancun chuogeng lu*, 1366) by Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (1316-?) [reproduced from Cao Wanru 1999, map 168].



Map 11b. “Map of the Yellow River source” (河源之圖 *Heyuan zhi tu*). In “Cartographic outlines of managing the [Yellow] River” (治河圖略 *Zhihe tulüe*) compiled between 1341 and 1368 by Wang Qi 王喜 [reproduced from Cao Wanru 1999, map 205].



This disposition of Kunlun and Star Lodge Lake is even more accentuated in a slightly later map of the Yellow River source from an atlas of six maps of the Yellow River, “Cartographic outlines of managing the [Yellow] River” (治河圖略 *Zhihe tulüe*, compiled between 1341 and 1368 by Wang Qi 王喜).

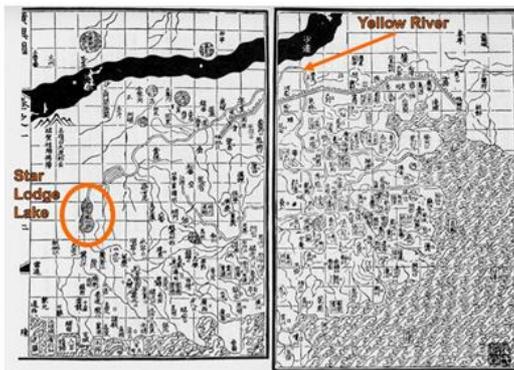
constellations. For the meaning of the term ‘logde’, see Christopher Cullen, “Translating 宿 **sukh/xiu* and 舍 **lhah/she* – ‘lunar lodges’, or just plain ‘lodges’?” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 33 (2011): 83-95.

⁴⁹ Gyaring (Tsaring) and Ngoring (Oring) are shallow lakes, each covering an area of about 1,000 square km (to be compared with Taihu’s surface of about 2,400 square km).

The first map of the Chinese Empire that places the source of the Yellow River at Star Lodge Lake is ascribed to Zhu Siben 朱思本 (1273-1337), and is entitled the “Earth-Vehicle Map” (輿圖 *Yutu*). It is supposed to have been composed simultaneously with the “Records on the Yellow River Source” (in 1315), but the original map has not survived. The earliest surviving map of this type is the “Enlarged Earth-Vehicle Map” (廣輿圖 *Guangyutu*) dating from 1555 and composed by Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504-1564)⁵⁰ (Map 12).

Another example dates from the same time, the “Map of [terrestrial] shapes and advantages of the past and present” (古今形勝之圖 *Gujin xingsheng zhi tu*, 1555, by Yu Shi 喻時 (1506-1571)?) (Map 13).

Map 12. “Enlarged Earth-Vehicle Map” (*Guangyutu* 廣輿圖 1555) by Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504-1564) based on the lost “Earth-Vehicle Map” (輿圖 *Yutu*) by Zhu Siben 朱思本 (1273-1337) [reproduced from Needham 1959, p. 553].



Map 13. “Map of [terrestrial] shapes and advantages of the past and present” (古今形勝之圖 *Gujin xingsheng zhi tu* 1555) by Yu Shi 喻時 (1506-1671)? [reproduced from Harley and Woodward, eds. 1994, colour plate 1].



Although the maps date from the same year, there is a slight difference in their shape, affecting the configuration of the Yellow River and the placement of its source. The map that originates from Zhu Siben has a rectangular shape and is stretched in the East-West direction. The Yellow River source is located in the extreme Western part of the map. The second map has a square shape, so that the Western periphery is compressed, the beginning of the Yellow River source shifted to the Southeast and placed much closer to core imperial territories. In both maps the Yellow River source is depicted as an oversized gourd-shaped lake, and a note points out “the Yellow River source” (黃河源 *Huanghe yuan*). In the second map, the lake and the Yellow River are

⁵⁰ For the atlas by Luo Hongxian and its editions, see the seminal work by Walter Fuchs, *The “Mongol Atlas” of China by Chu Ssü-pen and the Kuagn-yü-t’u, with 48 facsimile maps dating from about 1555* [Monumenta Serica, Monograph VIII] (Peiping: Fu Jen University, 1946).

tinted in yellow, making them the most eye-catching elements of the map. A curious late Vietnamese map of the Chinese Empire (it represents the Qing Empire) has the same characteristics as the “Map of [terrestrial] shapes and advantages of the past and present”, but over-exaggerated. Here the Yellow River source is pushed so far to the South-eastern corner and squeezed so close to the core imperial territories that the beginning of the Yellow River course is delineated almost parallel to the Western border of the map.

The Kunlun Mountain is nowhere in evidence in such maps. The omission of Kunlun from the “Enlarged Earth-Vehicle Map” and the “Map of [terrestrial] shapes and advantages of the past and present”, both with high official status, reflects a new imperial attempt to erase Kunlun from the Earth’s surface.

What follows next seems to be a repetition of earlier history: Kunlun persistently returns to Chinese maps as a prominent mountain located near Star Lodge Lake, having again found its proper place in the new picture of the Chinese Empire, a place that is again linked to the Yellow River source. One can see this in the examples of similarly configured maps that differ regarding the presence of Kunlun.

For instance (Map 14), the “Comprehensive map of 10000 states of Heaven and Earth, tracks of the deeds of human beings and beings and things of the past and present” (乾坤萬國全圖古今人物事跡 *Qiankun wanguo quanguo gujin renwu shiji*, 1593)⁵¹ drawn about 40 years later than the “Map of [terrestrial] shapes and advantages of the past and present” has many affinities with it in the depiction of China.⁵² In particular, the maps are very similar in the delineation of the Yellow River, although in the “Comprehensive map” Kunlun is inserted to the North of Star Lodge Lake, into a curve of the Yellow River course, and is the biggest mountain on this map.

⁵¹ According to a note provided at the upper left corner of the map, it was engraved by Liang Zhou 梁翰, an education official in Wuxi county of the Changzhou prefecture and printed at Nanjing. This is a typical Chinese world map that despite its ecumenical title is dominated by a representation of the Chinese Empire, whereas the other countries are compressed into a thin margin around it. This map is famed for relying, according to the annotation on top, on a lost world map (1584) by Matteo Ricci, see Benjamin A. Elman, “Ming-Qing Border Defence, the Inward Turn of Chinese Cartography, and Qing Expansion in Central Asia in the Eighteenth Century,” in *The Chinese State at the Borders*, ed. Diana Lary, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 35-6; John Day, “The Search for the Origins of the Chinese Manuscript Copies of Matteo Ricci’s Maps,” *Imago Mundi* 47 (1995): 94-117.

⁵² However, among the sources mentioned in the annotation to the “Comprehensive map” is the “Enlarged Earth-Vehicle Map”, not the “Map of [terrestrial] shapes and advantages of the past and present”.

Map 14. “Comprehensive map of 10000 states of Heaven and Earth, tracks of the deeds of human beings and beings and things of past and present” (乾坤萬國全圖古今人物事跡 *Qiankun wanguo quanguo gujin renwu shiji*, 1593) by Liang Zhou 梁濟 [reproduced from Yan Ping 1998, p. 131]. Red circle: Star Lodge Lake. Blue square: Kunlun.



The same happens with maps following the model of the “Enlarged Earth-Vehicle Map”. The advantage of this model is that it is distinguished by the uniformity of configuration of the Yellow River course, allowing one to see that Kunlun is always added in the same place – the second curve of the Yellow River after its source. Compare, for instance, two survey maps of China sharing the same pattern from the historical atlas “Earth-Vehicle Maps of the present and past” (今古廣輿圖 *Jingu yudi tu*, 1638) (Maps 15a and 15b).

Map 15a. “General survey map of districts and regions of China and barbarians of the present and past” (今古華夷區域總要圖 *Jingu huayi qiyu zongyaotu*) from the “Earth-Vehicle maps of the present and past” (*Jingu yudi tu* 今古廣輿圖, 1638 by Wu Guofu 吳國輔 and Shen Ding 沈定). [reproduced from Yan Ping 1998, p. 152]. In this two-coloured map, showing the present in black and the past in faded red, Kunlun is given among the actual landmarks, see red circle.

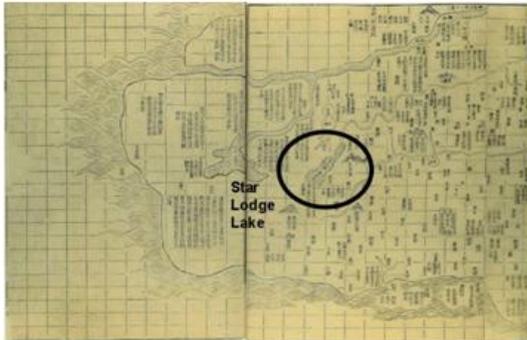


Map 15b. “Map of commanderies and principalities of the Western Han” (西漢郡國圖 *Xi Han jinguo tu*) from the “Earth-Vehicle maps of the present and past” (*Jingu yudi tu* 今古廣輿圖 1638 by Wu Guofu 吳國輔 and Shen Ding 沈定) [reproduced from Yan Ping 1998, p. 153]. In this two-coloured map, showing the present in black and the past in faded red, Kunlun is missing.

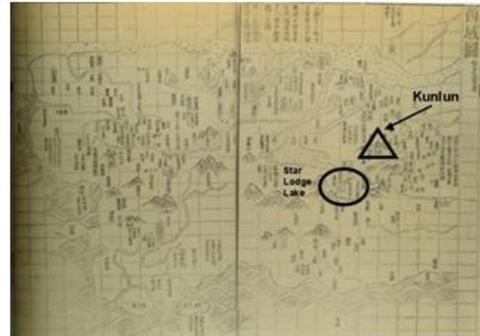


The “position” of Kunlun with respect to the Yellow River course can be seen more clearly from comparison of two more detailed maps of Western China, from the atlas of “Administrative maps of the Illustrious Ming [dynasty]” (皇明職方地圖 *Huang Ming zhifang ditu*, 1636) (Maps 16a and 16b). This means that the “position” of Kunlun, even if this mountain is missing in a map, was clearly defined and, therefore, always invisibly present in the picture of the Chinese empire – either as an empty or an occupied “position”.

Map 16a. “Map of the Illustrious Ming Great Unity” (皇明大一統地圖 *Huang Ming dayitong ditu*), WESTERN PART, map 1 of the atlas “Administrative maps of the Illustrious Ming [dynasty]” (皇明職方地圖 *Huang Ming zhifang ditu*, 1636) by Chen Zushou 陳祖綬 [reproduced from Yan Ping 1998, p. 148-149]. Kunlun is absent in this map.



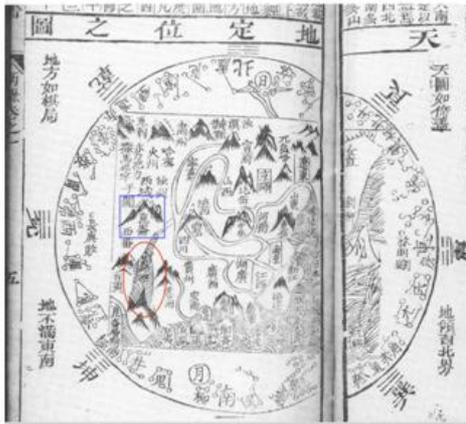
Map 16b. “Map of the Western Region” (西域圖 *Xiyutu*). In the atlas “Administrative maps of the Illustrious Ming [dynasty]” (皇明職方地圖 *Huang Ming zhifang ditu*, 1636) by Chen Zushou 陳祖綬 [reproduced from Yan Ping 1998, p. pp. 151].



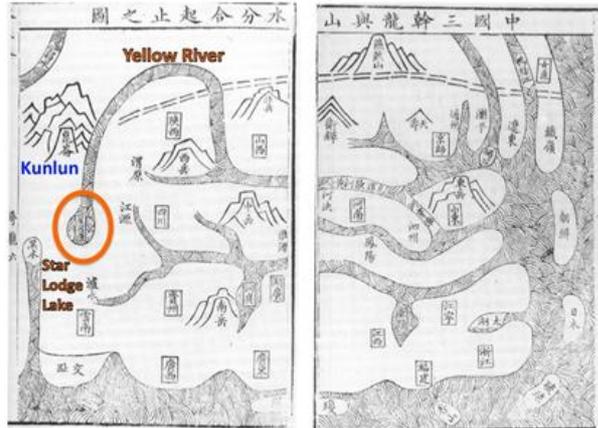
The respective disposition of Kunlun - above Star Lodge Lake – is accentuated in the so-called cosmograph map (1721), which outlines the general structure of the ancient Chinese conception of the universe where the square earth is inscribed into the round heavens (Map 17a).

In this map, however, no name for the lake is provided, it is simply referred to as the Yellow River source (黃河源 *Huangheyuan*). One can see this disposition – huge Kunlun above Star Lodge Lake – more clearly in a typologically similar map showing only the Earth’s surface, the map of the Three Dragons system (Map 17b).

Map 17a. “Map of definite positions in Heavens and Earth” (天地定位之圖 *Tiandi dingwei zhi tu*), the so-called cosmograph map. In the “Newly amplified almanac of auspicious images” (新增象吉備要通書 *Xinzeng xiangji beiyao tongshu*, 1721) [reproduced from Harley and Woodward., ed. 1994, p. 209] Blue square: Kunlun Red circle: Yellow River source (the name of the lake is not given in this map).



Map 17b. “Map of the three dragons of the Middle Kingdom and the divisions and conjoinings, beginnings and limits of mountains and rivers” (中國三幹龍與山水分合起止之圖 *Zhongguo sanganlong yu shanshui fenhe qizhi zhi guo*). In “A summation of songs on terrestrial organisation, chiselled jade, and pared hilltops” (地理琢玉斧鑿頭歌括 *Dili zhouyu fuluantou gekuo*, 1828) by Xu Zhimo 徐之鑱 [reproduced from Harley and Woodward 1994, p. 221].



The Yellow River source and Kunlun in early Western maps of China

The earliest Western maps of China rely either on the “Enlarged Earth-Vehicle Map” or the “Map of [terrestrial] shapes and advantages of the past and present”. This is pointed out in an extensive survey of 17th century European maps of China made more than a half-century ago by Boleslaw Szczesniak, published in *Imago Mundi*, and in a short summing up of the evolution of the Western mapping of China in a recent study by Laura Hostetler.⁵³ These and other authors⁵⁴ note the apparent Chinese influence, but their references to this influence are, as a rule, limited to general statements and impressions, while their primary interest is the development of the topographical accuracy of these maps and the sophistication of cartographical methods.⁵⁵ I propose to use the cases of the Yellow River source and Kunlun Mountain to take a closer look at Chinese influences on the early European maps of China. This

⁵³ Boleslaw Szczesniak, “The Seventeenth Century Maps of China. An Inquiry into the Compilation of European Cartographers,” *Imago Mundi* 13 (1956): 116-36; Laura Hostetler, *Qing colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 60-2.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., *Chine et Europe: évolution et particularités des rapports est-ouest du XVI^e au XX^e siècle: actes du IV^e Colloque international de sinologie de Chantilly, 8-11 septembre 1983, Numéro 73 de Variétés sinologiques, Nouvelle série* (Paris: Institut Ricci, 1991); Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe: Volume I, The Century of Discovery, Book 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994). For Martino Martini’s atlas referred below, see Henri Bernanrd S.J. “Les sources mongoles et chinoises de l’atlas Martini (1655),” *Monumenta Serica* 12 (1947): 127-44.

⁵⁵ This is the perspective of Hostetler’s summary and of Szczesniak’s survey. The articles by Szczesniak and Bernard are not cited by Hostetler, so their approach is independent.

allows one to reveal cartographic images and related spatial conceptions that were transferred to Western cartography.

The earliest more or less realistic Western map of China is found in the 1984 edition of Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, the first atlas of the world in Western cartography. Ortelius incorporated into his atlas a map of China drawn by a Portuguese cartographer who worked for Phillip II of Spain, Luis Jorge de Barbuda (Ludovicus Georgius), who seems to have been the first Western cartographer to rely on a Chinese original⁵⁶ (Map 18).

Map 18. CINAЕ olim Sinarum Regions, Nova Descriptio by Luis Jorge de Barbuda (Ludovico Georgio). In Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* 1602 (first print of the map in the edition of 1584). Blue frame: Lake (Lacus) corresponding to "Star Lodge Lake"



The map oriented to the West on top depicts a huge lake at the Western borders of the Chinese Empire. The map is supplied with an extensive note that distinguishes this even more clearly from other lakes, but does not contain any specific name, just "Lacus" (Lake). This lake is the main source of the Yellow River in the map (another branch pours into the Yellow River from the North). Its place roughly corresponds to that of Star Lodge Lake in Chinese maps, but its size is even bigger. It also has an oblong form, but without the curves of the gourde shape. I suppose that this originates from comments by the Chinese informants of Barbuda, who pointed out the importance of this lake. But this map still contains many symbols inherited from earlier European representations of the world and its Eastern areas (such as a mountain range around China).

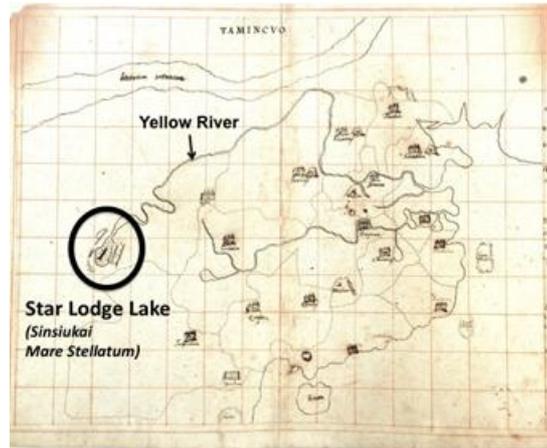
About the same time, Jesuit Michele Ruggieri (born in 1543, arrived at Macau in 1579, and died in 1607) composed an atlas of China that carefully follows the Chinese originals.⁵⁷ The manuscript by Ruggieri gives an insight into the technique of this work. For instance, there is a copy of a Chinese map of Liaodong province and a very similar "translation" by Ruggieri. His manuscript general map of the Chinese Empire follows

⁵⁶ See M.P.R. van den Broecke, *Ortelius Atlas Maps: An Illustrated Guide* (Goy-Houten : Netherlands, HES Publishers, 1996). For Barbuda, see Maria M. Portuondo, *Secret Science: Spanish Cosmography and the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 261-2, esp. footnote 14. I am grateful to Iris Kantor (University of São Paulo) for this reference.

⁵⁷ This manuscript map is published in Eugenio Lo Sardo, curator, *Atlante della China di Michele Ruggieri, S.I.* [Archivio di Stato di Roma] (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 1993).

the rectangular shape of the “Enlarged Earth-Vehicle map”, the square grid and the representation of the Yellow River source as Star Lodge Lake (here transcribed as *Sinsiukai* [=Xingxiuhai] and translated as *Mare Stellatu*). It even depicts points inside the lake that imitate the circles that fill out the lake in some Chinese maps (Map 19).

Map 19. Manuscript map of China of the Ming dynasty entitled “Ta min cuo (= Da Ming guo 大明國) by Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) [reproduced from Lo Sardo 1993, colour plate 1]. “Star Lodge Lake” is transcribed as *Sinsiukai* (= 新宿海 *Xingxiuhai*) and translated as *Mare stellatu*



The *Imperii Sinarum Nova Descriptio* maps, originating from Martino Martini’s map in his *Novus Atlas Sinensis* (1655) already shows the Yellow River source as two linked lakes, though still as a very prominent landmark of the map bearing the name of Star Lodge Lake (transcribed as *Singsieu L* [=Xingxiu Lake])⁵⁸ (Map 20). It is not accidental, then, that in his portrait, Martini holds a map and his finger points.... to the source of the Yellow River! (Figure) The square shape of Martini’s map is, however, closer to that of the “Map of [terrestrial] shapes and advantages of the past and present” where the Western periphery is compressed, and the Yellow River source is placed close to the core imperial territories.⁵⁹



⁵⁸ The version of the *Imperii Sinarum Nova Descriptio* map and of Sichuan province are reproduced from a facsimile of the early and richly coloured edition at the Library of Wolfenbüttel, see Joan Blaeu, *Novus Atlas Sinensis 1655*, Faksimiles nach der Prachtausgabe der Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, Einführung von Yorck Alexander Haase (Stuttgart: Verlag Müller und Schindler, 1974), colour plates 1 and 7, respectively

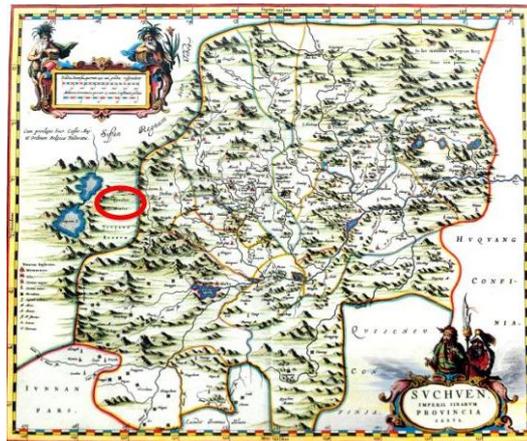
⁵⁹ A curious variation of the *Imperii Sinarum Nova Descriptio* maps by Johannes van Loon (end of the 17th century) contains both an Ortelius’s representation of Star Lodge Lake and Martini’s two lakes,

Map 20. *Imperii Sinarum Nova Descriptio* by Martino Martini's *Novus Atlas Sinensis* (1655) [reproduced from Blaeu 1974, colour plate 1] Red circle : the Yellow River source at "Star Lodge Lake" is transcribed as *Singsieu L* (=新宿 *Xingxiu Lake*).



None of these early Western maps of the Chinese Empire contains Kunlun Mountain. However, in the *Imperii Sinarum Nova Descriptio*, a group of mountains around the Yellow River source is depicted. The more detailed map of Sichuan (*Suchuen* in the map) province (the 6th of the 15 provinces maps that follow the general map) provides a close-up view of this area, and here the mountains to the East of the Yellow River source are called Kunlun (*Quenlun Montes* in the map)⁶⁰ (Map 21).

Map 21. Map of Sichuan (*Suchuen*) province by Martino Martini (1655) [reproduced from Blaeu, colour plate 7]. "Star Lodge Lake" is transcribed as *Singsieu L* (=新宿 *Xingxiu Lake*). Red circle: *Quenlun Montes* (= Kunlun Mountains)



The map also shows the Yellow River source as two oversized lakes enclosing the Western border of Sichuan province. The lakes are the most eye-catching cartographic elements of the map, whereas Kunlun here refers to a medium-sized mountain group.⁶¹ The occurrence of Kunlun in a provincial map and its absence from the map of the empire suggests that, in contrast to the Yellow River source, it was considered as an ordinary landmark of provincial level, not worth being featured in the general map of the Chinese Empire. Kunlun is also not in the depiction of the Chinese Empire in maps

⁶⁰ The position of Kunlun to the East of the Star Lodge Lake differs slightly from its place in Chinese maps – above the lake.

⁶¹ In this detailed map, the name *Singsieu L.* is inscribed in the first of the lakes, but since the second is not named, one may suggest that it refers to both lakes. The lakes are filled out by small points inspired by the circles in Chinese maps.

made by French geographers a century later, e.g. in the maps by Jacques-Nicolas Bellin (1748) (Map 22), Robert de Vaugondy (1751) (Map 23), and Rigobert Bonn  (1783) (Map 24).

Map 22. Map of the Chinese Empire by Jacques-Nicolas Bellin (1748), collection of the author of this article. Red circle: the Yellow River sources with a note "Sources du Hwang Ho" (no names of lakes are provided, the right lake is not tinted by mistake, here corrected).

Map 23. Map of the Chinese Empire by Robert de Vaugondy (1751), collection of the author of this article. Red circle: Tcharing and Oring lakes with a note "Sources du Hoang Ho" (= Tsaring/Gyaring and Oring/Ngoring, the Yellow River sources).

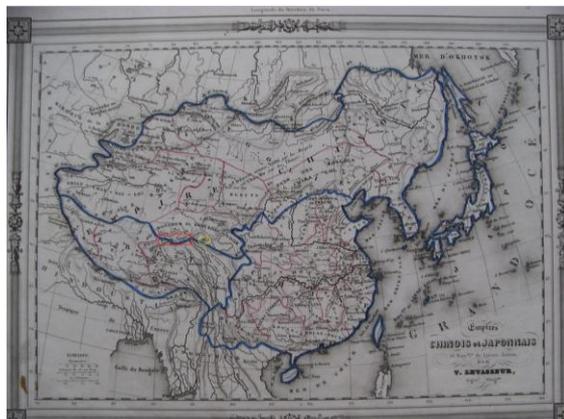
Map 24. Map of the Chinese Empire by Rigobert Bonn  (1783). Blue circle: the Yellow River sources.



At the same time, in all these maps the Yellow River source is shown very clearly, and, as in Martini's map, it is depicted as two oversized lakes. In those of Bellin and Vaugondy a note is added near the lakes stating that these are the Yellow River sources, thus further accentuating the importance of these landmarks, especially since the sources of other rivers are not pointed out. In the largest and the most detailed map by Vaugondy the lakes already have their modern names – Tcharing (Tsaring, Gyaring) and Oring (Ngoring). Bonn 's map is a simplified coloured version, and the lakes are not named here, but are still depicted in a very prominent way.

Kunlun Mountain, once having regained its place in Chinese cartography, also appears in the Western maps of China, initially as a landmark of provincial importance. By the middle of the 19th century, Kunlun finally rises up to the imperial level once again, as one can see in the map of China and Japan by Victor Levasseur (1852) (Map 25).

Map 25. Map of the Chinese and the Japanese Empires by Victor Levasseur (1852). Yellow circle: Yellow River source. Blue square: Kunlun.



In this map, Kunlun is still placed very close to the Yellow River source, as in Chinese maps. However, its location and configuration is close to the way it is represented in contemporary maps of China – a mountain range at the North-western border of the Tibetan Plateau, rather far away to the Northwest of the Yellow River source at the lakes Gyaring (Tsaring) and Ngoring (Oring) (see Map 1).

Nevertheless, the imperial level of Kunlun is still not stable. For instance, in a German version of a map of China and Japan that dates from the same time (1850), Kunlun is not named (Map 26).

Map 26. Map of China and Japan (1850).

Red circle: Yellow River source.



In sum, the situation repeats once again, and Kunlun is pushed from the Western border of the core Chinese territories in Martini's map of Sichuan province farther to the West, finally becoming associated with the mountain range at the North-western border of the Tibetan Plateau.

Conclusions

In sum, Kunlun Mountain is an example of a "mythic construct" or a marker of a cosmological "position" that successfully adapts to all changes in spatial conceptions and developments in geographical knowledge. Its location in Chinese maps may vary between the West/North-West in earlier maps to the West/South-West in post-Yuan maps, but in all periods it keeps its link to the Yellow River source, which is, therefore, its most important locating characteristic. At a certain period of time, the location of a "mythic construct" as simply "somewhere far away in the West" may be sufficient, then more precision is required to give substance to the evolving cosmological "position" and spatial conception it represents, and to ensure its adaptation to new geographical knowledge. Eventually, a "mythic construct" finds its definitive place on the Earth's surface and becomes a real landmark displayed in modern Western maps.

The Yellow River source at Star Lodge Lake is the opposite case. Here a real location that appeared as the result of expanding geographical knowledge provided the inspiration for a conceptual interpretation that was aimed at inscribing it onto the

Chinese representations of space. Its independent existence was rather short, and soon the new location became once again associated with Kunlun Mountain, although less directly than in earlier texts and Song maps, whereas the role of Kunlun became less important. From the most outstanding mountain in the West it simply becomes a big mountain range in the West.

The reason for the remarkable longevity of Kunlun can be clearly seen from the “wheel” maps with which I started my discussion: Kunlun symbolised a sacred centre in the West, a rather uncomfortable spatial concept for the Chinese Empire, which saw itself as having the role of the centre. The “wheel” maps with two centres – Kunlun and China – convey a visual image of this contradiction.

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