

Islands as Mountains Standing out from the Sea: The Case of Kunlun Islands in Chinese Cartography

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Kunlun Mountain 崑崙山 appears as a cosmic mountain typologically similar and sometimes, indeed, identified with Mount Meru. Eventually it became a name of a long mountain range delimiting the Tibetan Plateau from the Tarim Basin. Kunlun is characterised by a broad range of identifications with real mountains through the long span of the Chinese history.

In the proposed paper I shall focus on the *maritime Kunlun*, now known under the name of Pulo Condor, a small archipelago to the south from the Mekong River Delta. It enjoyed much less attention than the numerous identifications with outstanding mountains on the continent. Pulo Condor is a Malayan version (pulo = corrupt *pulau* – ‘island’) of the Vietnamese Côn Dao, an abbreviated reading of the Chinese *Kun[lun]dao* 崑[崙]島 – Kunlun Island(s).

I shall first call attention to the two Kunluns in some Chinese maps – Kunlun Mountain(s) at the western borders of the Chinese Empire, and Kunlun Island(s) in sea to the south of it (e.g. the Selden Map [ca. 1619] *Jingban tianwen quantu* 京板天文全圖 usually translated as the “Universal Map of the Qing Empire” [1797–1800]), and to maps focused on Kunlun Island(s), where the maritime Kunlun is depicted as a station on a sea route. Then I shall reveal the origins of the southern Kunlun in the “Itineraries of Mountains and Seas” (*Shanhaijing* 山海經, a comprehensive terrestrial description compiled about the 1st century BC), where it is part of the concept of “Inside the Seas” (*Hainei* 海內), the densely inhabited sea zone, as it is depicted in maps derived from this text.

I argue that the two complementary cosmological “positions” – a great Kunlun Mountain standing on firm land in the West and a small Kunlun Mountain rising from the sea in the South – made their way from the early Chinese texts through to maps.

In conclusion, I shall analyse the very idea of perceiving sea-islands, as mountains standing out from the sea, which similarly to mountains on land, served as markers of itineraries.

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