

# Where is the Yellow River Source? A Controversial Question in Early Chinese Historiography\*

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## 0 Introduction

Early Han historiography, as represented by the two first imperial histories, the *Shiji* 史記<sup>1</sup> and the *Hanshu* 漢書,<sup>2</sup> paid special attention to the Yellow River. The “Treatises” on waterways of the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* – the “Hequ shu” 河渠書 (“Treatise on the [Yellow] River and [its] Canals”, ch. 29) and the “Gouxu zhi” 溝洫志 (“Treatise on Irrigation Ditches and Trenches”, ch. 29) – focus on the configuration of its course and canals. The location of its source is the central issue of the “Memoirs” (*liezhuan* 列傳) on the western regions of the Chinese Empire, the “Dawan liezhuan” 大宛列傳 (“Memoir on Dawan,” ch. 123) of the *Shiji*, the “Zhang Qian, Li Guangli zhuan” 張騫李廣利傳 (“Memoir on Zhang Qian and Li Guangli,” ch. 61), and the “Xiyu zhuan” 西域傳 (“Memoir on the Western Region,” ch. 96) of the *Hanshu*. No other river or any other landmark received such close attention in the official histories.

The reason for the singling out of the Yellow River and the preoccupation with the “true” location of its source seems evident – the Yellow River was the main artery of the unified Empire, serving as its symbol. The necessity to manage the Yellow River for agricultural production and avoiding floods was one of the factors that under-pinned political unification.

This paper explores the representations of the Yellow River source discussed in early Han historiography. The aim is to determine which conceptions of the Yellow River source are distinguished in the two first official histories, how these conceptions are evaluated and which eventually became officially recognised.

## 1 “Appraisals” of the “Dawan liezhuan” of the *Shiji* and the “Zhang Qian Li Guangli zhuan” of the *Hanshu* on the location of the Yellow River source

The question of where the Yellow River source is located is raised in the “appraisal” concluding the “Dawan liezhuan”. This chapter deals with missions sent to the Central Asia during the Former Han dynasty.<sup>3</sup> Since the “appraisal” is focussed on the Yellow River source problem, one can see clearly that the quest for its location was the primary goal of these missions.

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\* I am indebted to John Moffett for corrections of my English. I am also truly thankful to Dorothee Schaab-Hanke and Martin Hanke for their valuable remarks and suggestions. Any mistakes found in this paper are my own responsibility.

1 Comp. by Sima Qian 司馬遷, ca 145–87 BC (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1972).

2 Comp. by Ban Gu 班固, AD32–92 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975).

3 For surveys of these missions supplied with maps, see Lu Liangzhi 盧良志, *Zhongguo dituxue shi* 中國地圖學史 (Beijing: Cehui, 1984), 22–26; Michael Loewe, “The Former Han Dynasty,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 1: The Ch'in and Han Empires (221 B.C. – A.D. 220)*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, (Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University, 1986), 164–167; Yü Ying-Shih, “Han foreign relations,” in idem, 407–409. See also a recent study of the Western Region, according to the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*, by Larisa A. Borovkova, *Tsarstva “zapadnogo kraja”*: *Vostochny Turkestan I Srednyaya*

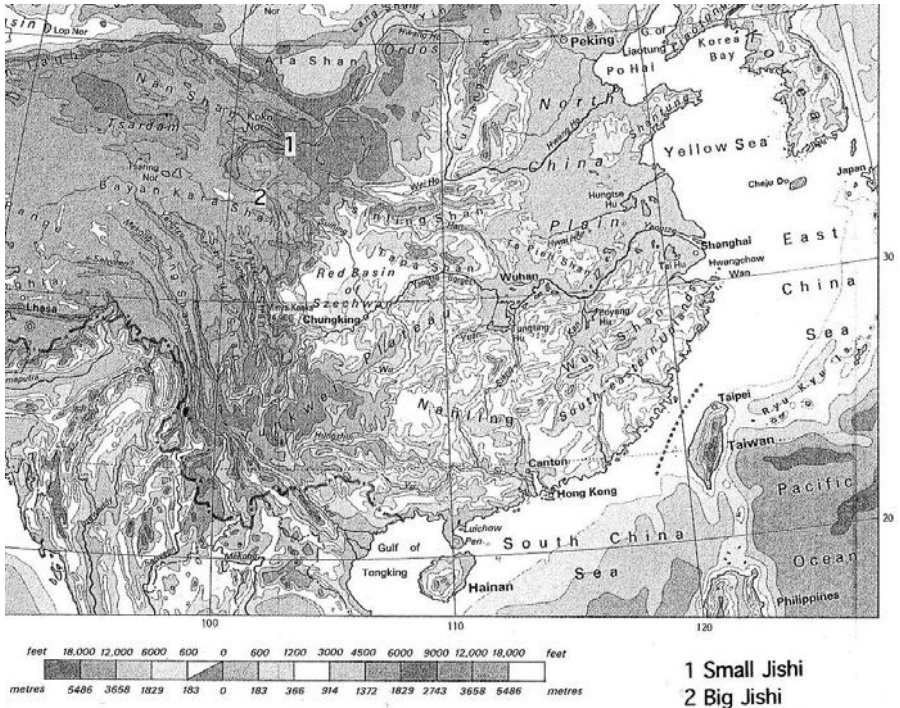
The need to determine the Yellow River source originates from the different locations given for it in early Chinese texts. Three texts are mentioned in the “appraisal” of the “Dawan liezhuan” in relation to this issue – the now lost text *Yu benji* (禹本紀 “Yu’s Basic Records”), the *Shangshu* 尚書, (meaning specifically the “Yugong” 禹貢 “Yu’s [System of] Tribute” chapter of the *Shangshu/ Shujing* 書經, “The Book of Documents”)<sup>4</sup>, and, finally, the *Shanhai jing* 山海經, compiled about the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BC.<sup>5</sup> The “appraisal” begins with a citation from the *Yu benji*, which is the only passage from this text that had survived.<sup>6</sup> According to this fragment, and as reported in the *Shanhai jing*, the Yellow River emanates from a cosmic mountain – Kunlun 崑崙 (昆侖)<sup>7</sup> – related to the Queen-mother of the West (Xi Wangmu 西王母) grant-

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*Asiya 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).

- 4 The “Yugong” (ca. 5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BC) is chapter 6 of the *guwen* edition of the *Shangshu* (*Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義, SBBY ed.), 6.1a-19b. Cf. *The Chinese Classics, Vol. 3, Part 1: Shoo King*, trans. James Legge (Hongkong and London: London Missionary Society’s Printing Office, 1865), 52–67; *Chou King*, trans. Séraphin Couvreur (Ho Kien Fou: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1897, repr. 1971), 61–89; “The Book of Documents,” trans. Bernhard Karlgren, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 22 (1950), 12–18, “Glosses on the Book of Documents,” idem, 20 (1948): glosses 1352–1396. For the dating of the “Yugong,” see Qu Wanli 屈萬里, “Lun Yugong zhucheng de shidai” 論禹貢著成的時代, *Zhongyuan yanjiuyuan lishi yanyan yanjiusuo jikan* 35 (1964), 53–86. For a survey of the textual history of the *Shangshu/ Shujing* and its scholarship, see Kai Vogelsang, “Inscriptions and Proclamations: On the Authenticity of the ‘gao’ Chapters in the *Book of Documents*,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 74 (2002), 138–148.
- 5 I share the interpretation of the character *jing* 經 (literally “warp”) in the title of the *Shanhai jing* advanced by Yuan Ke 袁珂, *Shanhai jing jiaoyi* 山海經校譯 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1980), 180–184, who argues that *jing* here is not used in the sense of *jingdian* 經典 (“classic, canon, book”), as in the majority of text titles comprising this character, but rather means *jingli* 經歷 (“to go through, to pass, to undergo, to stretch over”). This point of view is apparently supported by Richard E. Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas* (Berkeley, etc.: University of California, 2002), who, unfortunately, does not provide much elucidation on his innovative translation of the title *Shanhai jing*. I prefer a more neutral translation of *jing* as “itinerary/itineraries”. For the system of itineraries derived from the *Shanhai jing*, see my article (2003a), “Mapping a ‘Spiritual’ Landscape: Representing Space in the *Shanhai jing*” in *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries, and Human Geographies in Chinese History*, ed. Nicola di Cosmo and Don Wyatt (London: Curzon, 2003), 35–79; idem [2003b], “Text as a Device for Mapping a Sacred Space: A Case of the *Wuzang shanjing* (Five Treasuries: The Itineraries of Mountains),” in Dickhardt, Michael and Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann (eds.), *Creating and Representing Sacred Spaces*, Göttinger Beiträge zur Asienforschung 2–3 (special issue) (Göttingen: Peust & Gutschmidt, 2003), 147–210.
- 6 The “appraisal” apparently singles out this lost text. The *Yu benji* is cited once and then mentioned two more times in the “appraisal”. It is not referred to elsewhere in early Chinese texts. One may suggest that the text disappeared shortly after the *Shiji* was composed.
- 7 For a comprehensive 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 extensive bibliography, see Manfred W. Frühauf, “Der Kunlun im alten China. Versuch einer Positionsbestimmung zwischen Geographie und Mythologie,” *minima sinica – Zeitschrift zum chinesischen Geist*, 1 (2000), 41–67; 2 (2000), 55–94. For a recent essay on Kunlun Mountain from a large historical and cultural perspective, see Augustin Berque, “Kunlun, la montagne cosmique,” *L’Alpe* 32, printemps (2006), 78–82.

ing immortality.<sup>8</sup> The same location of the Yellow River source is found in a series of other texts – the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳 (“Narrative of the Son of Heaven, Mu”, discovered in AD 279 in the tomb of King Xiang 襄 of the Wei 魏 kingdom, who had died in 296 BC), the *Erya* 爾雅 dictionary (ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. BC), and the *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 (“Commentary on the Itineraries of Rivers”) by Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (AD 469?–527).<sup>9</sup>



Map 1<sup>10</sup>

In modern physical maps Kunlun is represented as a mountain range in the north-western part of the Tibetan Plateau (see Map 1), but at least seven major identifications of Kunlun with different mountains in the western regions of contemporary China are proposed in traditional Chinese scholarship, and even more identifications, sometimes well beyond the western regions, are advanced in sinological literature.<sup>11</sup> The *Shangshu*, specifically the

8 For studies of references to Xiwangmu in ancient Chinese texts and her relation to Kunlun, cf. Riccardo Fracasso, “Holy Mothers of Ancient China (A New Approach to the Hsi-wang-mu Problem),” *T’oung Pao* 74 (1988), 1–46; Manfred W. Frühauf, *Die Königliche Mutter des Westens: Xiwangmu in alten Dokumenten Chinas* (Bochum: Projekt-Verlag, 1999); Michael Loewe, *Ways to Paradise. The Chinese Quest for Immortality* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), 86–126; Suzanne E. Cahill, *Transcendence and Divine Passion – The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1993).

9 It seems noteworthy that this text was composed in the Northern Wei (AD 420–534) that occupied the basin of the Yellow River, see the discussion of the treatises of waterways focussed on the Yellow River below.

10 Reproduced from Harold Fullard (ed.), *China in Maps* (London: George Philip and Son, 1968), 9.

11 See Frühauf 1 (2000), 43–47.

“Yugong” chapter, delineates the Yellow River using a different and rarely mentioned landmark – Jishi 積石 Mountain. This location of the Yellow River source, according to my knowledge, is not given in any other early Chinese text – apart from in citations of the “Yugong”, for instance, in the early dynastic histories. Jishi occurs, in particular, in the *Shan-hai jing*,<sup>12</sup> which is not surprising, as this text is the most comprehensive account of landmarks, especially mountains, surviving from ancient China.<sup>13</sup> But this is a rare case. The identification of Jishi is, however, no less complicated than that of Kunlun. It is sufficient to note here that *two* mountains under the name of Jishi are found in modern maps of China. 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 north-west of Linxia 臨夏 city (see no. 1 added to Map 1).<sup>14</sup>

The part of the Yellow River to the west of the Small Jishi is called the Jishi Gorge 積石峽. 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 (see no. 2 added to Map 1). The latter Jishi is apparently shown as the Jishi of the “Yugong” in the historical maps of China edited by Tan Qixiang.<sup>15</sup>

Further attempts to determine which of the possible identifications of Kunlun and Jishi are the right ones, and where precisely they are found on the earth’s surface, does not seem to be a fruitful approach to these landmarks in the context of the “true” location of the Yellow River source, since this question, as will be demonstrated below, is really of an ideological rather than a geographical nature. For this reason, in this study Kunlun and Jishi are regarded as *cosmological referents* rather than *geographical ones*. This characteristic of Kunlun Mountain has been pointed out by Deborah Porter, who argues that it is first and foremost a “mythic construct”.<sup>16</sup> Since Jishi, as a location of the Yellow River source, plays a role similar to that of Kunlun, it should also be considered from a cosmological perspective. The main function of such toponyms is that of a marker of a cosmologically significant “position”. Identification of such toponyms with real landmarks or their location on the earth’s surface necessarily depends on specific spatial conceptions or political and ideological needs that differ both between written sources and historical periods. The results are bound to be controversial, as in the cases of Kunlun and Jishi. The only sensible way forward is to explore the locations of these landmarks as given in the ancient texts, so as to determine their cosmological “positions”, and, eventually, their cosmological and ideological functions.

12 But not as the location of the Yellow River source. This occurrence will be discussed below.

13 The first part of the *Shanhai jing*, the *Shanjing* 山經 (“Itineraries of Mountains”), comprises descriptions of 447 mountains.

14 This Jishi became a Buddhist “holy” mountain.

15 Tan Qixiang 譚其驤 (ed.), *Zhongguo lishi ditu ji* 中國歷史地圖集 *The Historical Atlas of China. Vol. 1: Yuanshi shehui, Xia, Shang, Xizhou, Chunqiu, Zhanguo shiqi* 原始社會、夏、商、西周、春秋、戰國時期. *The Primitive Society, Xia, Shang, Western Zhou, the Spring and Autumn, Warring States Period* (Beijing: Ditu, 1982), map on 43–44; idem, *Vol. 2: Qin, Western Han, Eastern Han* 秦、西漢、東漢時期 *Qin Dynasty Period, Western Han and Eastern Han Dynasties Period* (idem, 1983), maps on 3–4, 13–14 and 40–41.

16 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.

This approach is pursued by Porter (1993), who is primarily concerned with the implications of the north-western cosmological and astronomical “position” of Kunlun, derived from the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* and related texts. To compare with, Marina Kravtsova argues that, according to the *Chuci* 楚辭 (“The Songs of Chu”) poetic corpus, Kunlun is associated with the West, and that neither semi-cardinal directions nor the five-fold framework played a considerable role in the Chu picture of the world, which was built around the West-East axis instead. She demonstrates the key role of Kunlun in the conception of space, characteristic of Chu culture, that of the sacred centre located far in the West.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the cosmological “position” of Kunlun may vary in different sources. I shall focus on the “position” of Kunlun according to the surviving texts cited in the “appraisal” – the “Yugong” and the *Shanbai jing*.

Now let us take a closer look at the “appraisal” in the *Shiji*. It reports that the expeditions to the West did not confirm that the Yellow River emanates from Kunlun. As the result, this information is declared as completely false, and texts transmitting it, specifically the *Yu benji* and the *Shanbai jing*, are condemned as unreliable. The “appraisal” clearly demarcates such texts from the “Yugong” chapter of the *Shangshu*. The “appraisal” is as follows:<sup>18</sup>

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:

The *Yu benji* 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 the [*Yu benji*]?  
 Therefore [I] say:

[For] the “Nine Provinces”, the [itineraries by land marked by] mountains [and the] river [itineraries],<sup>19</sup> [it is] the *Shangshu* (= its ch. 6, the “Yugong”) [that] is close [to their correct locations]! As far as the amazing things and beings contained in the *Yu benji* and the *Shanbai jing* [are concerned], I do not [even] dare to speak about them!<sup>20</sup>

17 Marina E. Kravtsova, *Poeziya Drevnego Kitaya: opyt kul'turologicheskogo analiza* [Poetical tradition of ancient China: Attempt of culturological review] (St. Petersburg: Tsentr Peterburskoe Vostokovedenie, Orientalia, 1994), 168–183. Besides, she makes interesting observations on some relations of Kunlun to the south-western direction in later sources (idem, 190–194).

18 *Shiji* 123.3179.

19 The compound of these four characters is a compressed reference to the “Yugong”.

20 Cf. J. J. M. de Groot (trans.), *Chinesische Urkunden zur Geschichte Asiens, zweiter Teil, Die Westlande Chinas in der vorchristlichen Zeit* (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1926), 44–45, and Burton Watson (trans.), *Records of the Historian; the Shih chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (New York and London: Columbia University, 1969), 299. The provided translation is my own and differs slightly from those by de Groot and Watson.

Almost the same “appraisal” concludes the biography of the generals who led the expeditions to Central Asia, Zhang Qian and Li Guangli, in the *Hanshu*.<sup>21</sup>

贊曰：

禹本紀言：

「河出崑崙，崑崙高二千五百里餘，日月所相避隱為光明也。」

自張騫使大夏之後，窮河源，惡睹所謂崑崙者乎？

故言：

九州山川，尚書近之矣！至禹本紀山經所有，放哉！

The “appraisal” states:

The *Yu benji* 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].

[However] 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?

Therefore [I] say:

[For] the “Nine Provinces”, the [itineraries by land marked by] mountains [and the] river [itineraries], [it is] the *Shangshu* (= its ch. 6, the “Yugong”) [that] is close [to their correct locations]! As far as what is contained in the *Yu benji* and the *Shanjing* [is concerned], [this, on the contrary,] gets away from the point!<sup>22</sup>

One can see that the very similar “appraisals” have minor yet interesting differences. One of them is that Ban Gu mentions only the first (core) part of the *Shanbai jing*, the *Shanjing* (“Itineraries of Mountains”). One could suppose that this is due to a copying error, were it not for the fact that the same “error” can be found in the citation of the “appraisal” from the *Shiji* in the *Lunheng*,<sup>23</sup> a philosophical treatise contemporary to the *Hanshu*, too. In other words, Wang Chong, the author of the *Lunheng*, reproduces the “appraisal” from the *Shiji* with the difference being that he mentions the *Shanjing* instead of the *Shanbai jing*. This means either that the *Shanjing* circulated during this time as a separate text, which seems probable because of its difference in many respects from the second part, the *Haijing* 海經 (“Itineraries of Seas”), or that due to its core role the *Shanjing* could stand for the entire text.

Another noteworthy difference between the “appraisals” is that Ban Gu omitted the reference to the *guainu* 怪物 (amazing beings and things).<sup>24</sup> The omission results from Ban Gu’s

21 *Hanshu* 61.2705.

22 Cf. A. F. P. Hulsewé (trans.), with an introduction by Michael Loewe, *China in Central Asia (the early stage: 125 B.C. – A.D. 23). An Annotated Translation of Chapters 61 and 96 of the History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 237–238.

23 *Lunheng* 論衡, by Wang Chong 王充, AD 27–97 (SBBY ed.), section 31: “Tan tian” 談天, 11.3b; see the translation by Alfred Forke, *Lun-hêng. Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch’ung. Part I.* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1907), 254. The “appraisal” of the “Dawan liezhuan” is cited in the *Lunheng* with some minor differences that are pointed out in Forke’s translation. For a comparison of the parallel versions in *Shiji*, *Lunheng* and *Hanshu*, see the table in the appendix.

24 For “amazing being and things” in Chinese culture, see Robert Ford Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomalous Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: Suny, 1996) who refers to them as “anomalies”.

intention to completely separate his conception of “terrestrial organisation” (*dili* 地理)<sup>25</sup> from any allusions to spirits implied by the *guaimu*.<sup>26</sup>

In any case, though slightly different, the “appraisals” of the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* share completely the evaluation of the *Yu benji* and the *Shanbai jing* as unreliable sources of locations, in marked contrast to the “Yugong”, which is considered as the main reference text for “true locations”. The location of the Yellow River source serves here, therefore, as a criterion for evaluating the reliability of terrestrial descriptions.<sup>27</sup>

In order to fully understand the spatial conception underlying the “appraisals”, it is necessary to thoroughly explore the references to the Yellow River source in the two surviving texts mentioned here – the “Yugong” and the *Shanbai jing* – especially since, in contrast to the *Yu benji*, they are not cited in the “appraisals”. The primary goal of this exploration is to determine “positions” of Kunlun and Jishi Mountains, according to these two texts.

## 2 The Yellow River Source and locations of Kunlun and Jishi in the “Yugong” and the *Shanbai jing*

### 2.1 Jishi and Kunlun in the “Yugong”

The description of the Yellow River in the “Yugong” corresponds to the third river itinerary. Some remarks on the system of itineraries of the “Yugong” are necessary. Two sets of itineraries are featured in this text – *nine itineraries by land* marked by mountains and *nine river itineraries*. The itineraries are described immediately after the “Nine Provinces”, whose description constitutes the major part of the “Yugong”. The “Nine Provinces” cover the basins of the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers and serve as a general framework for representing the “civilised world” in Chinese culture. Apart from being structurally consistent with the “Nine Provinces”, the itineraries are marked off by many landmarks mentioned in the descriptions of the “provinces”, and are delineated across them. The itineraries, therefore,

25 This conception is formulated in the “Dili zhi” 地理志 (“Treatise on Terrestrial Organisation”) chapter of the *Hanshu*, which does not have a counterpart in the *Shiji*. Ban Gu’s conception of *dili* builds on the “Yugong” as its theoretical foundation and can be defined as “an orderly administrative territorial division of the Empire established by the ruler and aimed to symbolize world order,” see Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, “I testi geografici ufficiali dalla dinastia Han alla dinastia Tang,” in “La scienza in Cina,” ed. Karine Chemla et al., in *Enciclopedia Italiana, Storia della Scienza*, Vol. II, ed. Sandro Petruccioli. (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2001), 190–197; idem, “Geographical Treatises in Chinese Dynastic Histories: ‘No Man’s Land’ Between Sinology and History of Science,” in *Science and Cultural Diversity, Proceedings of the XXIst International Congress of History of Science, Mexico City, 8–14 July 2001*, ed. Juan José Saldaña (México City: Sociedad Mexicana de Historia de la Ciencia y de la Tecnología-Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2005), 2262–2279.

26 I discuss this question in the paper “Ritual Practices for Constructing Terrestrial Space (Warring States-Early Han)” presented at the International Conference *Rituals, Pantheons and Techniques: A History of Chinese Religion before the Tang* (14–21 December 2006, Paris), organised in the framework of the project on the history of Chinese religions by John Lagerwey). Contributions to the project will be published by Brill.

27 Bruce Brooks in his contribution of March 26, 1999, to the WSW discussion list labelled “SJ 123” questions Hulsewé’s suggestion that the “Dawan liezhuan” is based on its *Hanshu* counterpart. The differences between the “appraisals”, he argues, show clearly that the “appraisal” of the *Hanshu* is deduced from that of the *Shiji* and not *vice versa*, which provides an additional argument against this suggestion.

complement the general nonary framework serving as ways of communication between the “provinces”.<sup>28</sup>

Some river itineraries encompass several rivers, some just one. The latter is the case for the third itinerary, which comprises only the Yellow River. The delineation of the Yellow River begins from a place called Jishi 積石:<sup>29</sup>

導河積石，至于龍門，...

[Yu] delineated<sup>30</sup> the [Yellow] River [beginning from] Jishi [Mountain], [then] reached Longmen (Dragon’s Gate) [Gorge] ...

This is the second occurrence of Jishi in the “Yugong”. The first appears several passages earlier, in the description of the western “province” Yong 雍. This province is located in the basin of the Wei 渭 River and is the last in the sequence of the “Nine Provinces” in the “Yugong”. Here Jishi is the starting point of tribute transportation from Yong province:<sup>31</sup>

浮于積石，至于龍門西河，會于渭汭。

[The tribute was] floated (at =) from Jishi [Mountain] towards the Longmen (Dragon’s Gate) [Gorge and] the Western [part of] the [Yellow] River, [and then was] gathered at (or joined with) the nook of the Wei [River].

Transportation of tribute concludes descriptions of each “province” in the “Yugong”. Since the tribute is mostly sent by river, the context is consistent with the description of the Yellow River as the third river itinerary. The beginning of this passage is, indeed, very similar to the beginning of the third river itinerary.

Although Kunlun is not recognised in the “appraisals” of the “Dawan liezhuan” and the “Zhang Qian Li Guangli zhuan”, as the source of the Yellow River, it appears among the

28 In contrast to the “Nine Provinces”, the systems of itineraries are given much less consideration in sinological literature. I have briefly discussed the system of nine itineraries by land in relation to the itineraries of the *Shanbai jing*. See my article “Conception of Terrestrial Organization in the *Shanbai jing*” *Bulletin de l’Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient* 82 (1995), 77–78, Fig. 10 on 100, which shows a schematic representation of the itineraries. See also Dorofeeva-Lichtmann (2003b), 153–154. Brashier explored it recently in the context of interaction with mountain spirits. See Ken E. Brashier, “The Spirit Lord of Baishi Mountain: Feeding the Deities or Heeding the Yinhang?,” *Early China* 26–37 (2001–2002), 177–178. Having drawn a similar conclusion – that the sets of mountains represent itineraries – we propose slightly differing schematic representations of these itineraries. The system of river itineraries has become of special interest in relation to the recently discovered description of the “Nine Provinces” in the *Rongcheng shi* 容成氏 manuscript (Shanghai Museum Bamboo Manuscripts series, late 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC), since this description is focussed on the river networks. The manuscript is published in Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, *Shanghai bowuguan zang Zhanguo Chu zhusu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書, Vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2002), 91–146, photographs of the slips; 247–293, annotated transcription by Li Ling 李零. I discussed the *Rongcheng shi* version of the “Nine Provinces” at the 17<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Warring States Project (17–18.09.2003, Leiden). I elaborate on some issues of this discussion and refer to other studies of the *Rongcheng shi* version of the “Nine Provinces” in my forthcoming article “The *Rong Cheng shi* version of the ‘Nine Provinces’: Some Parallels with Transmitted Texts,” in *Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on China (The 8<sup>th</sup> China Cultural Week)*, 17–22.01.2005, Lisbon (Portugal), ed. Ana Maria Amaro and Dora Martins.

29 *Shangshu* 6.14b. §23 in Karlgren’s division of the “Yugong”.

30 *Dao* 導 (to delineate) marks the beginning of description of each river route in the “Yugong”.

31 *Shangshu* 6.14b. §19 in Karlgren’s division of the “Yugong”.



landmarks of the “Yugong”. It is also found in the description of Yong “province”, immediately after the delineation of tribute transportation routes. Kunlun occurs in the next and the last passage of Yong’s description. Yet, here it does not refer to a mountain, but is the name of one group of the Western “barbarians” (and their territory) that are given here:<sup>32</sup>

織皮崑崙、析支、渠搜、西戎即敘。

Karlgren translates this not entirely clear passage as follows:

The felt[-wearing people of] Kunlun, Xizhi, Qusou, [these] Western Rong were made orderly.

Whatever interpretation of this passage is preferred, it is evident that, according to the “Yugong”, Kunlun refers to the same Western section of the described territories as Jishi, but the text is too imprecise to allow one to determine how these landmarks are located with respect to each other. It is only clear that they are located not too far-away from each other.

## 2.2 Kunlun and Jishi in the *Shanbai jing*

In the *Shanbai jing* Kunlun Mountain occurs several times,<sup>33</sup> three times as the source of the Yellow river. It is mentioned twice in its first and core part, the *Shanjing* 山經 (“Itineraries of Mountains”) or the *Wuzang shanjing* 五藏山經 (“Five Treasures: The Itineraries of Mountains”), and once in the later layer of this text. The first occurrence is found in the “Xici sanjing” 西次三經 (“The Third Itinerary of Western [Mountains]”) sub-chapter:<sup>34</sup>

西南四百里，曰昆侖之丘。... 河水出焉，而南流東注于無達。

400 *li* to the south-west there is Kunlun Peak. ... The [Yellow] River emanates from it and flows south, in the east pours into the Wuda.

References to rivers in the *Shanjing* in the majority of cases are done in a uniform and formulaic way – they comprise the initial point of the described river – the mountain it “emanates” (*chu* 出) from, the cardinally-oriented direction of the beginning of its course (e.g., “flows south” *nanliu* 南流), and its cardinally oriented final point – usually a river or a sea the river “pours into” (*zhu yu* 注于). The final direction of the Yellow River course (east) does not raise any questions, as the east is its dominant direction. But the landmark marking its final point is rather unclear. Literally Wuda means “Unreachable”, and formally it should be a river, a sea or a lake, as the Yellow River “pours into” it, yet Guo Pu 郭璞 (AD 276–324), the author of the earliest surviving commentary on the *Shanbai jing*, considers it to be a mountain name. But whatever it is, the Yellow River arrives to the east.

The occurrence of Kunlun in the “Xici sanjing” is of special help and importance for our study, as it allows one to derive a rather *precise cosmological location* for Kunlun Mountain. Indeed, the *Shanjing* represents the central part of the inhabited world through a system of twenty-six itineraries marked by mountains. The itineraries are arranged according to the four cardinal directions and the centre. The north and the south are delineated by three itineraries each, the west and the east by four each, and the centre contains twelve. For an attempt at a reconstruction of this system, see a representation of the itineraries of the *Shan-*

32 *Shangshu* 6.12b. §19 in Karlgren’s division of the “Yugong”.

33 For a detailed discussion of these occurrences, see Frühauf, 2 (2000), 58–67.

34 *Shanbai jing* (*Shanbai jing jianshu* 山海經箋疏, edited by Hao Yixing 郝懿行, SBBY ed.), 2.17a–18b.

*jing* by Wang Chengzu, redrawn by Richard Strassberg who supplied it with translations of toponyms and some additions and useful notes, for instance a numbered list of represented itineraries (Map 2).<sup>35</sup> I have discussed this system in detail elsewhere.<sup>36</sup>

Wang represents itineraries as mountain ranges, which is not entirely accurate, as the text features single mountains that serve as *itinerary markers* and are placed at considerable distances from each other, but his reconstruction gives a good idea of this system.<sup>37</sup> Each mountain has a precise position in its itinerary. 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 Mountain is the eighth mountain in the third western itinerary, which comprises altogether twenty-two mountains (the “Third Guideway Through the Western Mountains” in Map 2). Its general direction and, consequently, the order of enumeration of mountains is from the centre to the west. I indicated approximate position of Kunlun on Wang’s reconstruction. One can see clearly that in the system of itineraries Kunlun Mountain is located in the west and is slightly shifted to the north.

The next occurrence of Kunlun as the source of the Yellow River is found in the first itinerary of the “Beishan *jing*” 北山經 (“Itineraries of Northern Mountains”), the most western among the northern itineraries, so that here Kunlun is also related to the north-west. Kunlun is mentioned in the description of Dunhong 敦薨 Mountain (mountain No. 17 in the itinerary comprised of twenty-five mountains).<sup>38</sup>

又北三百二十里，曰敦薨之山，... 出于昆侖之東北隅，實惟河原。

Then 320 *li* farther to the north there is Dunhong Mountain... [As far as] the emanating from Kunlun Mountain’s north-eastern corner [is concerned], this is, in effect, the source of the [Yellow] River.

Finally, the north-western position of Kunlun is pointed out in another chapter of the text, the *Hainei xijing* 海內西經 (“Western Itineraries of Inside the Seas”):<sup>39</sup>

海內昆侖之虛，在西北，帝之下都。... 河水出東北隅，以行其北西南，又入渤海，又出海外，即西而北，入禹所導積石山。

Inside the Seas there is the great peak of Kunlun Mountain, located in the north-west, is the lower capital-city of the (Supreme) Deity. ... The [Yellow] River emanates from its north-eastern corner. [Passing] through its northern, western and southern [sides] (= turning around Kunlun from the north, west and south), then pours into the Bohai (Bohai Lake, not to be confused with the Bohai in the north-east of China), then emerges from the [Bo]hai, immediately turns to the west, and then in the north enters into Jishi Mountain, [as] paved by Yu.

35 Wang Chengzu 王成組, *Zhongguo dilixueshi: Xian Qin zhi Ming dai* 中國地理學史, 先秦至明代 (Peiking: Shangwu, 1988 [revised edition; first edition: 1982]), 19, map 2, redrawn in Strassberg (2002), 37, fig. 10. Strassberg, however, mistakenly considers it to be a “modern map of mountains” described in the *Shanbing*. I, in contrast, point out the schematic character of Wang’s map and its affinity with Chinese cartographic tradition, see Dorofeeva-Lichtmann (2003a), 38, 43.

36 Dorofeeva-Lichtmann (2003a, 2003b).

37 I discuss Wang’s reconstruction in Dorofeeva-Lichtmann (2003a), 38, and in my article “Mapless Mapping: Did the Maps of the *Shanbing jing* Ever Exist?,” in *The Warp and the Weft: Graphics and Text in the Production of Technical Knowledge in China*, ed. Francesca Bray, Georges Métailié and Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

38 *Shanbing jing* 3.5b.

39 *Shanbing jing* 11.2b.

As mentioned above, the north-western cosmological and astronomical position of Kunlun is much emphasised by Deborah Porter in her study of the *Mu Tianzi zhuàn*, building all her argumentation on it.<sup>40</sup> The north-western position of Kunlun with respect to the “Nine Provinces” is also derived by John Major from the “Treatise on Topography” (“Dixing xun” 墜形訓) of the philosophical compilation *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (finished not later than 139 BC), and he also provides helpful cosmological schemes.<sup>41</sup> The consistency of this data is a bit spoiled by the location of Kunlun “to the south of the western sea” (*xihai zhi nan* 西海之南) in one of late chapters of the *Shanhai jing*, the “Dahuang xijing” 大荒西經 (“Western Itinerary of the Great Wilderness”), which implies a south-western position, but landmarks mentioned here in relation to Kunlun (e.g. the Chi 赤 and the Hei 黑 Rivers, literally Red and Black, respectively) are the same as in the passages where a north-western position is given.<sup>42</sup> One can suggest that the western sea, according to the *Shanhai jing*, may be shifted to the north, and, indeed, on Wang’s map a part of the western sea is shown in the north-west, placing the location of Kunlun below it and, at the same time, in the north-west. In any case, the north-west is the dominant cosmological position of Kunlun, according to the *Shanhai jing*.

The passage from the “Hainei xijing”, originating from the later layer of the *Shanhai jing* (*Haijing* part, *Hainei* 海內 “Inside the Seas” group of chapters) is apparently an attempt to make a coherent fusion of the information on the Yellow River course from earlier sources, in particular from the two passages from the *Shanijing* discussed above. According to the former passage (“Xici sanjing”), the Yellow River first heads *to the south* from Kunlun, and according to the latter (“Beishan jing”), the Yellow River *emanates from its north-eastern corner*. In the “Hainei xijing” the Yellow River emanates from the north-eastern corner of Kunlun and arrives to the south of it, having encircled it from the north, west and south. In other words, here a link between the north-eastern corner of Kunlun, as the place where the Yellow River comes out of the earth, and the initial southern direction of its flow is established.

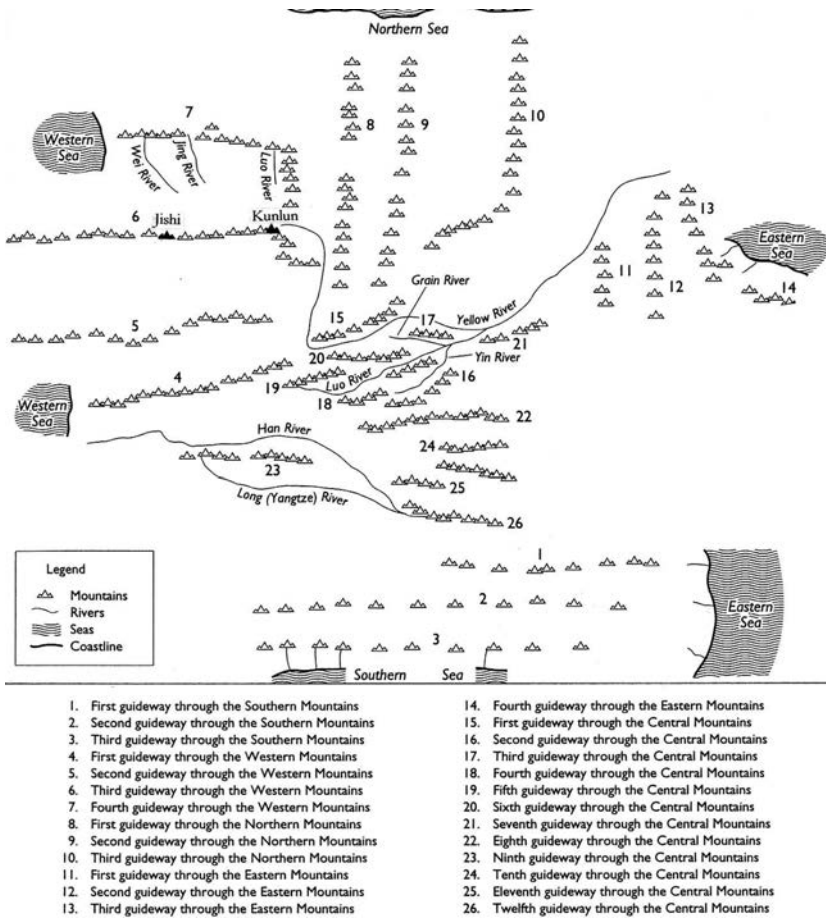
Then a compromise between the *Shanhai jing* and the “Yugong” versions of the Yellow River source is proposed, and their “reconciliation” is achieved in a very straight-forward way, through paraphrasing the delineation of the Yellow River from Jishi in the “Yugong”. The Yellow River emanating from Kunlun becomes an extension of its delineation in the “Yugong”, and, therefore, is no longer an alternative conception. The proposed extension of the Yellow River, in effect, matches rather well its delineation in the “Yugong”, where it is actually said that Yu “*delineated* the [Yellow] River [beginning from] Jishi” (*dao He Jishi* 導河積石), but Jishi is never explicitly referred to as its source (*Heyuan* 河源).<sup>43</sup>

40 Porter (1993), esp. 80 ff.

41 John S. Major, “The Five Phases, Magic Squares and Schematic Cosmography,” in *Explorations in Early Chinese Cosmology*, ed. Henry Rosemont (Chico: Scholar, 1984), 133–137.

42 E.g. Chi and Hei are mentioned in the discussed occurrence of Kunlun in the “Xici sanjing”, and Chi in the “Hainei xijing”.

43 However, in the “summary” of Yu’s regulations of the “Nine Provinces” and the system of itineraries found in the “Yugong” (*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 (*jiuchuan diyuan* 九川滌源 “The nine river itineraries had their sources cleaned”), which implies that the initial points of the described river itineraries are their sources.



Map 2

Let us take a closer look at the Kunlun → Jishi extension of the Yellow River. According to the “Hainei xijing”, the Yellow River, having emanated from Kunlun and arrived to the south of it, then flows to the *west* where it reached Jishi. This implies that Jishi is located farther to the west than Kunlun. The relative locations of Kunlun and Jishi derived from the “Hainei xijing” are consistent with those given in the *Shanijing*. The advantage of the system of locations in the *Shanijing*, especially within a single itinerary, is their high level of precision, which makes them absolutely incontestable and independent of any interpretation of the content of the text. Specifically, Jishi Mountain belongs to the same itinerary as Kunlun – the third itinerary of western mountains whose general direction and order of enumeration of mountains is from the centre to the west. Jishi is the thirteenth mountain in this itinerary, whereas Kunlun is the eighth, and, therefore, Jishi is located considerably farther to the west than Kunlun (see its approximate location in Map 2). According to the description here, Jishi is an important point on the Yellow River.<sup>44</sup>

44 *Shanhai jing* 2.20b.

又西三百里，曰積石之山，其下有石門，河水冒以西流。

Then 320 *li* farther to the north there is Jishi Mountain. There is a stone gate under it (at its southern slope). The (Yellow) River bursts through it (= through the gate) and flows (via the gate) to the west.

The reference to the “stone gate” (opening) at the southern slope of Jishi is coherent with the phrase from the passage from the “Hainei xijing” that the Yellow River “in the north enters into Jishi Mountain”. Since the Yellow River, according to this passage, having emerged from Kunlun heads south and then west, it necessarily reaches Jishi in the north. The next phrase in the Jishi description is much more difficult to understand and the proposed translation is tentative, but the western direction of the Yellow River course is mentioned very clearly.<sup>45</sup>

The Yellow River is mentioned in descriptions of two other mountains of the third itinerary of western mountains: the first Chongwu 崇吾 and the third Buzhou 不周. Congwu Mountain “is located to the south of the [Yellow] River” (在河之南), and this is the first among the indications of its location provided in the text. This means that the starting point of the third itinerary of western mountains is to the south of the Yellow River. The Yellow River in the description of the famous Buzhou Mountain butted by Gonggong 共工<sup>46</sup> is less useful as a location reference, as it is said that it flows under the Youze 洳澤 Marsh that is found relatively far to the east of Buzhou:<sup>47</sup>

...東望洳澤，河水所潛也，...

...To the east of it (= of Buzhou) one observes from distance (special form of ritual) the Youze Marsh, this is the place where the He River hides as an undercurrent...

Although an underground river can hardly be located, this reference is coherent with the location of Chongwu to the south of the Yellow River, as Chongwu is found to the east of Buzhou.

All these indications allow one to derive the following configuration of the beginning of the Yellow River course: it emanates from the north-eastern corner of Kunlun, flowing around it to the north, west and south, then heads further south and pours into the Bohai Lake. Emerging from here, it turns to the west and to the north in order to arrive at Jishi. Its course after Jishi is less clear, but in any case, Jishi is *the most western point of the Yellow River* course mentioned in the *Shanbai jing*. Kunlun, in its turn, according to this text is located not far to the north-west of the “Nine Provinces”,<sup>48</sup> somewhere to the south of the Wei River corresponding to the location of the Kunlun “barbarians” inside Yong “province” of the “Yugong”.<sup>49</sup>

45 Wang Niansun 王念孫 and Hao Yixing suggest that the character “west” is a mistake for “south”, but this suggestion is based on cartographic representations of Jishi I shall discuss later and contradicts the Yellow River course derived from the *Shanbai jing*. See Yuan Ke (1980), 51.

46 For Gong Gong, see William G. Boltz, “Kung Kung and the Flood: Reverse Euhemerism in the Yao Tien” *T’oung Pao* 67, 3–5 (1981), 141–153; Anne Birrell, “The Four Flood Myth Traditions of Classical China,” *T’oung Pao* 83, 1–3 (1997), 229–235; Marc Edward Lewis, *The Flood Myths of Early China* (New York: SUNY, 2006), 55–60.

47 *Shanbai jing* 2.13b.

48 Such a location is shown, for instance, in schematic representations of Kunlun and the “Nine Provinces” by Major (1984), 133–137.

49 Some parallels to such locations of Jishi and Kunlun are found in *Wu Yue chunqiu*, 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) of the world “Inside the Seas” (*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

Another helpful indication of the Yellow River course is the references to rivers emanating from mountains in itineraries located in its neighbourhood. Rivers emanating from the third through the ninth mountains of the fourth itinerary of western mountains located to the north of the third itinerary, roughly parallel to it, *flow east and pour into the Yellow River*. This is coherent with the location of the first mountain of the third itinerary of western mountains to the *south* of the Yellow River. And now if one looks at the rivers emanating from the fourth through the seventh, and the ninth mountains of the first itinerary of northern mountains which goes from the centre to the north and is located to the east of the fourth itinerary of western mountains, these rivers *flow west and pour into the Yellow River*. This allows us to delineate this part of the Yellow River course from north to south, and to the north from the beginning of the third itinerary of the western mountains. This implies that the Yellow River arrives to this part of the Yellow River from the north, having encompassed the source of the Wei 渭 River, the western tribute of the Yellow River, and the northern tributes of Wei – the Jing 涇 and the Luo 洛 Rivers.<sup>50</sup>

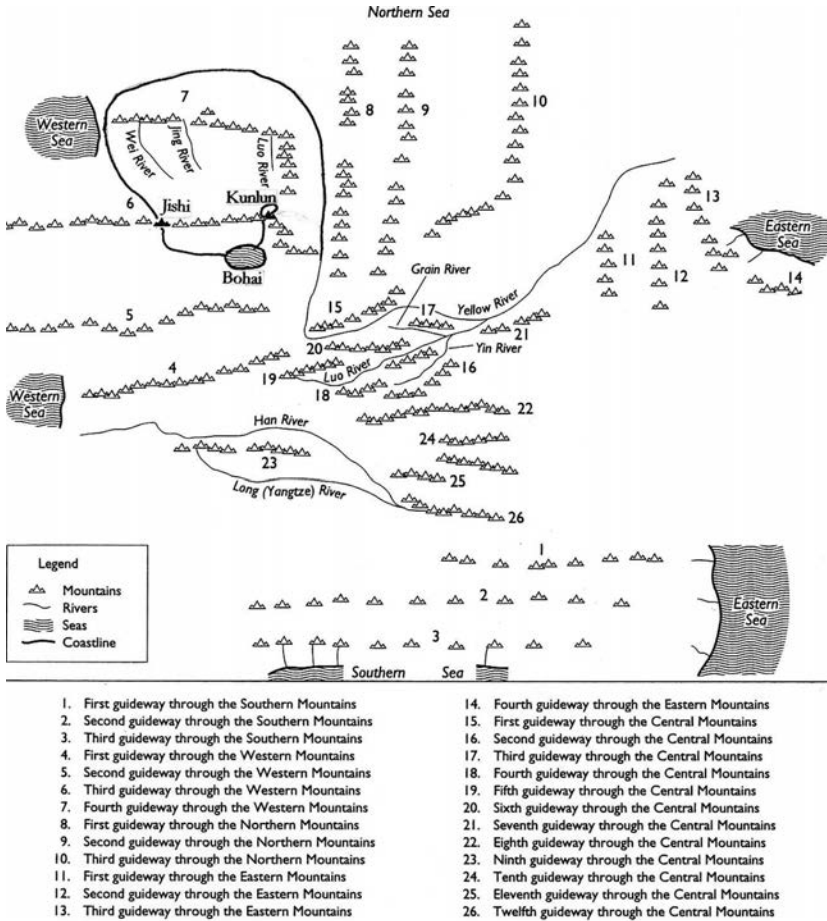
The beginning of the Yellow River course derived here is not that evident, and it certainly created some difficulties to Wang Chengzu. For instance, he does not mention the turn to the west from Kunlun in his delineation. A good indication of the fact that his reconstruction has some inconsistencies is his delineations of the Wei, the Jing and the Luo Rivers (upper left corner of Map 2). It seems that for some reason Wang could not find a proper place for these rivers. The proposed delineations are unrelated to the Yellow River, contradicting references to these rivers in the text. The corrected beginning of the Yellow River course incorporated into Wang's map is shown in Map 3.

In sum, the references to Jishi and Kunlun in the “Yugong” allow us to locate these two landmarks somewhere not far from the western border of the western “province” Yong, but there are no indications in the “Yugong” as to how Jishi and Kunlun are located with respect to each other. In addition, Kunlun is not a mountain name here, but rather the name of “barbarians”. The elaborate system of locations applied in the *Shanhai jing*, in contrast, enables one to derive fairly precise respective “positions” of Jishi and Kunlun mountains. According to the *Shanhai jing*, Jishi is located considerably farther to the west than Kunlun and is the most western “station” of the Yellow River course. In this respect the *Shanhai jing* does not contradict the “Yugong” – here Jishi is also the most western point of the Yellow River course. The difference between these two texts is, therefore, the role of Kunlun – in the “Yugong”, Kunlun is a secondary landmark (most likely the name of “barbarians”) unrelated to the Yellow River; in the *Shanhai jing* Kunlun is one of the core mountains and the Yellow River source, while Jishi is secondary to it.

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one to suggest that it is located *inside* these limits, in *Wu Yue chunqiu* 吳越春秋, attributed to Zhao Ye 趙曄, mid of 1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD (SBBY ed.), 6.3a.

50 This relation between the Yellow River, the Wei, the Jing and the Luo Rivers can be derived from references to them in the fourth itinerary of the western mountains.



Map 3

### 3 The Yellow River source in the “Treatises” on waterways of the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*

The “appraisals” of the “Dawan liezhuan” and the “Zhang Qian Li Guangli zhuan” first question Kunlun Mountain as the source of the Yellow River and the reliability of sources that locate it there, making a clear choice in favour of the “Yugong” as the true account of locations.

The same choice is made in the other two chapters of the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* that describe the entire course of the Yellow River – the “Hequ shu”<sup>51</sup> of the *Shiji*, and the “Gouxu zhi”<sup>52</sup> of the *Hanshu*. But, in contrast to the “appraisals” of the “Dawan liezhuan” and the “Zhang Qian Li Guangli zhuan”, the treatises on waterways do not even mention Kunlun and texts referring to it, exclusively relying on the “Yugong”.

The “Hequ shu” is mostly concerned with the Yellow River and related canals. The treatise describes the construction of various canals as means of irrigation and transportation, changes in the course of the Yellow River and breaches of its dikes. The description is done in a chronological sequence and is preceded by an introduction that evokes overcoming the Flood by the mythical emperor Yu and his regulations of terrestrial space. The introduction begins with a citation that formally refers to the “Xiashu” 夏書 (“The Book of Xia”),<sup>53</sup> the part of the *Shangshu* devoted to the Xia dynasty and comprising the “Yugong” as its first entry. In effect, though, it is a selected citation of the preface to the complete reproduction of the “Yugong” in the “Xia ben ji” 夏本紀 (“Main Records of the Xia Dynasty”) chapter of the *Shiji*.<sup>54</sup> The preface relies on the “Yugong”, specifically on its beginning and the “summary” of Yu’s regulations of the “Nine Provinces” and the system of itineraries,<sup>55</sup> yet also mentions many details of Yu’s actions that are nowhere in evidence in the *Shangshu*. The reference to the “Xiashu” reproduces with some differences certain passages of the preface, including the passages that paraphrase the “Yugong”.<sup>56</sup>

Simā Qian then stresses the great threat of the Yellow River to the Central Empire (*Zhongguo* 中國) as a problem of central importance to be solved and, therefore, the reason for Yu’s regulation of its course. This is followed by a citation of the delineation of the Yellow River course according to the “Yugong”, though with some minor differences, one of which highlights Jishi as the initial point, done by adding the preposition 自 “from” in front of Jishi.<sup>57</sup>

故道河自積石歷龍門，...

For this reason [Yu] made a way for the [Yellow] River from Jishi [Mountain] all through the Longmen [Gorge] ...<sup>58</sup>

51 *Shiji* 29.1405–1415; cf. *Les Mémoires Historiques de Se-ma Ts’ien, Vol. 3, 2ème partie*, trans. Édouard Chavannes (Paris: Leroux, 1899), 520–537; *Records of the Grand Historian of China translated from the Shih chi of Ssu-ma Ch’ien*, trans. Burton Watson, *Vol. II* (New York and London: Columbia University, 1961), 70–71; trans. Watson (1969), 230–238; *Syma Tsyen’ – Istoricheskie Zapiski (“Shi tsz’i”)* [Simā Qian – Historical Records (*Shiji*)], trans. Rudolf V. Vyatkin, *Vol. 4* (Moscow: Nauka, 1986), 194–200.

52 *Hanshu* 29.1675–1699.

53 The first characters of the introduction are “*Xiashu yue* 夏書曰” (The Book of Xia says):

54 The “Yugong” is reproduced here with minor differences. For the preface, see *Shiji* 2.51; cf. *Les Mémoires Historiques de Se-ma Ts’ien, Vol. 1*, trans. Edouard Chavannes (Paris: Leroux, 1895), 101, *Syma Tsyen’ – Istoricheskie Zapiski (“Shi tsz’i”)* [Simā Qian – Historical Records (*Shiji*)], *Vol. 1*, trans. Rudolf V. Vyatkin and Vsevolod S. Taskin (Moscow: Nauka, 1972), 152; *The Grand Scribe’s Records, Vol. I. The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China by Ssu-ma Ch’ien*, ed. William H. Nienhauser (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1994), 22–24.

55 *Shangshu* 6.1b and 6.16b, respectively. §§ 1 and 30 in Karlgren’s division of the “Yugong”.

56 Phrases from one through twelve following the *Xiashu yue*.

57 *Shiji* 29.1405.

58 The character 歷 “to go through, to pass, to undergo, to stretch over, to get to” used here accentuates the considerable distance between Jishi Mountain, whichever identification of it is accepted,



The citation is cut into two parts by explanatory notes by Sima Qian on the special difficulties of managing the Yellow River. In conclusion, Sima Qian points out the utmost importance of its regulation. This ensured orderly functioning of the entire system of waterways – the “nine rivers” (*jiuchuan* 九川) and the “nine marshes” (*jiuzhai* 九澤) – eventually bringing harmony to the “civilised world” (“All the Xia” *zhuxia* 諸夏) to the benefit of the three dynasties.

The title of the “Gouxu zhi” does not contain the name of the Yellow or any other river, and instead refers to systems of irrigation in general. There is, however, little difference in the content of the two treatises. The “Gouxu zhi” first reproduces with minor variations the “Hequ shu”<sup>59</sup>, and then adds to it data on irrigation canals constructed after the compilation of the *Shiji* until the reign of Wang Mang (AD 9–23).

In sum, the “Treatises” on waterways of the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* proceed from the delineation of the Yellow River, as described in the “Yugong” and beginning from Jishi. The “Yugong” plays here the role of the absolute and unquestionable authority on the subject, and its delineation of the Yellow River serves as the “theoretical foundation” of the “Treatises”.

#### 4 The imperial conception of the Yellow River source, according to the “Xiyu zhuan” of the *Hanshu*

The “appraisals” together with the “Treatises” on waterways give the impression that the imperial conception of the Yellow River source is Jishi, but things are not as simple as they may seem at first glance.

The introductions of the “Treatises” obediently reproduce the delineation of the Yellow River from Jishi in the “Yugong”, but *do not say* that Jishi is the source of the Yellow River. The “appraisals” consider the references to Kunlun as the source of the Yellow River as completely false for the reason that it was not confirmed by the expedition of Zhang Qian, who “exhaustively explored the source of the [Yellow] River” (*qiong Heyuan* 窮河源). But having stressed this thorough exploration of the Yellow River source, the “appraisals” rather surprisingly are not precise about where the true source is located. Instead, a general statement about the reliability of the “Yugong” is provided. Such vagueness is not accidental. The reason is that the expeditions to the West, as twice reported in the main text of the of the “Dawan liezhuan”, discovered, in effect, a source of the Yellow River, but one differing both from Kunlun and Jishi:<sup>60</sup>

于寔之西，則水皆西流，注西海；其東水東流，注鹽澤。鹽澤潛行地下，其南則河源出焉。多玉石，河注中國。

[As far as the territories] to the west of Yutian [are concerned], all [their] rivers flow west, pour into the Western Sea. Rivers to the east of it (= of Yutian) flow east, pour into the Salty Marsh (= Lake Lobnor). The Salty Marsh [further] clandestinely goes under the earth. [And as far as the territories] to the south of it (= of Yutian) [are concerned], the [Yellow] River source emanates from here. [There is] much jade, the [Yellow] River [then] enters (literally pours into) the Central State.<sup>61</sup>

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and Longmen Gorge. Longmen Gorge is situated on the part of the Yellow River where, having made a large loop around the Ordos in the north, it descends from the north to the south above the place where the Fen 汾 River, its north-eastern tribute, pours into it (Shenxi province, Hancheng county).

59 *Hanshu* 29.1675–1684.

60 *Shiji* 123.3160.

61 *Shiji* 123.3173.

...而漢使窮河源，河源出于真，其山多玉石，采來，天子案古圖書，名河所出山曰崑崙云。  
 ...And the Han ambassador exhaustively explored the source of the [Yellow] River,<sup>62</sup> [according to the results of his exploration,] the [Yellow] River emanates from Yutian, its mountains have a lot of jade, [that the Han ambassador collected] and sent back [to the Han court] (translation of these two characters, according to commentary). The Son of Heaven relied on the old “graphic representations” and books [that say] that the mountain the famous [Yellow] River emanates from is called Kunlun.

The first passage is completely missing in the “Zhang Qian Li Guangli zhuan”, the second is reproduced, but the reference to Yutian is omitted – the entire phrase “*Heyuan chu Yutian* 河源出于真” (The [Yellow] River emanates from Yutian) is just erased.<sup>63</sup> Having dropped these references from the biography of Zhang Qian and Li Guangli, Ban Gu provides a much more elaborate and slightly different version of the discovered Yellow River source in another chapter on the Western Region, the “Xiyu zhuan”, one that does not have a counterpart in the *Shiji*. This chapter begins with a detailed description of the Yellow River course from its sources to Jishi.

According to Ban Gu, the Yellow River has two sources – Congling 蔥嶺 Mountain (literally, “Onion Mountain”, usually identified with the Pamirs)<sup>64</sup> and Yutian 于闐. According to Yan Shigu’s 顏師古 (AD 581–645) commentary, *tian* 闐 is the same as *tian* 寘 in the passages just discussed of the *Dawan liezhuan*.<sup>65</sup> Yutian is the ancient name of Hotan or Khotan.<sup>66</sup> Yutian is located by (below) the Nanshan 南山 Mountains (the “Southern Mountains”).<sup>67</sup> The Yutian branch of the Yellow River flows north and pours into the Congling branch. After the two branches unite, they pour into Lake Puchanghai 蒲昌海 (literally the “Lake of Cane that flourishes wildly”) or Yanze Marsh (literally the “Salty Marsh”, Lake Lobnor). Then the Yellow River flows under the earth, and reappears to the south of Jishi Mountain, where it becomes the [Yellow] River of the Central State (*zhong guo*), that is the core territory of the Empire:<sup>68</sup>

其河有兩源：一出蔥嶺山，一出于闐。于闐在南山下，其河北流，與蔥嶺河合，東注蒲昌海。蒲昌海，一名鹽澤者也，去玉門，陽關三百餘里，廣袤三百里。其水亭居，冬夏不增減，皆以為潛行地下，南出於積石，為中國河云。

The [Yellow] River has two sources, one emanates from Congling Mountain, one emanates from Yutian. Yutian is situated below Nanshan Mountain, its [branch of the Yellow] River flows north, and unites with the Congling [branch of the Yellow] River, [then] pours east into Lake Puchanghai. Lake Puchanghai, another name is Yanze Marsh, is situated more than 300 *li* away from Yumen and Yang-

62 This phrase is repeated in the “appraisals”.

63 *Hanshu* 61.2696. This is an additional argument in favour of the conclusion that the “Zhang Qian Li Guangli zhuan” relies on the “Dawan liezhuan” and not *vice versa*.

64 The Pamirs are located to the west and east of the border between Tajikistan and Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region.

65 *Hanshu* 96A.3872, n. 5.

66 Hotan or Khotan, modern Chinese name Hetian 和田, is located in the south-west of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Formerly Hotan oasis was one of the important “stations” on the Silk Road.

67 It is clear that the Nanshan Mountains mentioned here cannot be the Nanshan Mountains found in modern maps of China (the latter are located too far to the east of Hotan). The mountains that would fit a location near Yutian are, actually, the modern Kunlun chain. If we locate the Nanshan in the place of modern Kunlun, that is, along the southern boundary of the Tarim basin, they would make a proper counterpart to the Tianshan Mountains that frame the Tarim in the north and whose other name is Beishan Mountains, literally the “Northern Mountains”, see Map 1.

68 *Hanshu* 96A.3871.

guan, [its] width and length (from north to south) are [both] 300 *li*. Its water stops and stays without moving [here], in winter and summer does not increase or decrease, [instead] all [the water] clandestinely go under the earth, and in the south reappears from Jishi, becoming the [Yellow] River of the Central State.

For a rare cartographic representation of this idea of the sources of the Yellow River helping to visualize it, see Map 4.<sup>69</sup>

In sum, the new geographical information accumulated during the expeditions to the West required a revision of *both* the ancient textual traditions locating the Yellow River source. The reliability of the “Yugong”, however, was not to be even partially questioned, as this would have contradicted the high ideological status appointed to this text in the early Han historiography.

Sima Qian apparently did not manage to find a coherent solution to the Jishi problem – the discrepancy between the delineation of the Yellow River from Jishi in the “Yugong”, and the discovered source (Yutian 于寘). As a result, he twice mentions the discovered source in the main text of the “Dawan liezhuan”, but masks it in the “appraisal” of this chapter.

The situation for Ban Gu was even more complex and delicate. On the one hand, he formulated the conception of “terrestrial organisation” based on the “Yugong”, and thus recognised this text as the highest authority among terrestrial descriptions. On the other, more information on the Western Region had become available by his time. In addition, he could not openly revise Sima Qian, even though his position on the Yellow River source was contradictory. Nevertheless, Ban Gu found an elegant compromise between the new geographical information available on the Western Region and the authority of the “Yugong”, and still formally respected Sima Qian’s position. He reproduced the main points of Sima Qian’s chapter on the expeditions to the West expressed in the “appraisal”, having first eliminated references to the discovered source inconsistent with it, and then elaborated on this issue in a new complementary chapter on the Western Region. Here Ban Gu did not invent much especially new with respect to Sima Qian. All the main constituent elements of his conception of the Yellow River sources were expressed by Sima Qian in the “Dawan liezhuan” – the Yellow River starts in the West and first pours into Lake Lobnor (Yanze), then its waters flow underground and reappear in the core territory of the Empire.<sup>70</sup> But Ban Gu transformed this vague passage placed somewhere in the middle of the “Dawan liezhuan” into a detailed and clear description that opens a new special chapter on the Western Region.

Let us take a look at this conception with respect to the real topography of the Western Region (Map 1). The expeditions to the West discovered Lake Lobnor and the rivers that flow towards it from the west and the south-west. Ban Gu proposed that these rivers should be considered as the two sources of the Yellow River that – together with the lake – form a unit separated from the main body of the Yellow River by an underground part. This conception perfectly corresponded to the needs of the imperial ideology – it clearly distinguished between

69 *Han xiyu zhuguo tu* 漢西域諸國圖 (“Map of all the countries of the Han Western Region”, AD 1260–1264) reproduced from Yan Ping et al., *China in Ancient and Modern Maps* (London: Philip Wilson, 1998), 79. For convenience, I have added to the map *pinyin* transcriptions of toponyms mentioned in the “Xiyu zhuan”.

70 See especially the passage in *Shiji* 123.3160 cited above.

the “inside” and the “outside” sections of the Yellow River, that is, the sections located in the core territory of the Empire (*Zhongguo*) and in the Western Region.



Map 4

The division of the Yellow River into “inside” and “outside” sections is carefully mirrored in the textual structure of the *Hanshu*. These two sections are described not only in different chapters of the *Hanshu*, but in hierarchically unequal parts of the history. The “inside” section of the Yellow River is described in the “Treatise” on waterways (“Gouxu zhi”), that is, in the “Treatises” (志) part of the dynastic history, which deals with selected items of imperial ideology that were considered of special importance.<sup>71</sup> The “outside” section of the Yellow River is described in the “Memoirs” (傳) part, which is comprised of biographies of distinguished persons and descriptions of peripheral (“barbarian”) lands, the subjects of qualitatively lesser significance for the Empire.

This separate representation of the Yellow River allowed Ban Gu to find a proper “conceptual” place for Jishi – as the Yellow River source in the “inside” part,<sup>72</sup> and, at the same time, to incorporate into the description of the Yellow River the new geographical information about the Western Region. The “position” of Jishi as a quasi-source of the Yellow River is an

71 A “Treatise” in a dynastic history is a systematic description of a certain subject of imperial importance, see B.J. Mansvelt Beck, *The Treatises of Later Han: Their Author, Sources, Contents and Place in Chinese Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 36–55; Balazs distinguishes four categories of these subjects – I. Rites and Customs; II. “Sciences”; III. Government (State) Institutions; and IV. Bibliography, see Étienne Balazs, *La bureaucratie céleste: Recherches sur l'économie et la société de la Chine traditionnelle* (Paris: Galilard, 1968), 57; cited (in English translation) by Mansvelt Beck (1990), 54–55. The book Mansvelt Beck referred to focuses on the “Treatises” compiled by Sima Biao 司馬彪, ca. 240 – ca. 306, later added to the *Houhan shu* 後漢書, edited by Fan Ye 范曄, 398–446 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1973).

72 For instance, in Map 4 it is noted that Jishi is the Yellow River source, apparently of the core territories of the Empire.

innovation of Ban Gu's, as compared to Sima Qian, who, apart from citing the "Yugong", avoids any reference to this landmark.

## 5 Conclusions

The following conceptions of the Yellow River source are discussed in early Han historiography:

- Jishi is the source of the Yellow River (the "Yugong");
- Kunlun Mountain is the source of the Yellow River (the *Shanhai jing*), and Jishi Mountain is the most western point of the Yellow River course; in the "Hainei xijing" chapter a compromise is proposed – the Kunlun → Jishi extension of the Yellow River is presented as complementing its delineation in the "Yugong";
- The conception of two sources in the Western Region pouring into Lake Puchanghai or Yanze Marsh (Lobnor) and separated from the main Yellow River course reappearing at Jishi by an underground part (the "Xiyu zhuang" chapter of the *Hanshu*), developing on a vague outline of this idea in the "Dawan liezhuan".

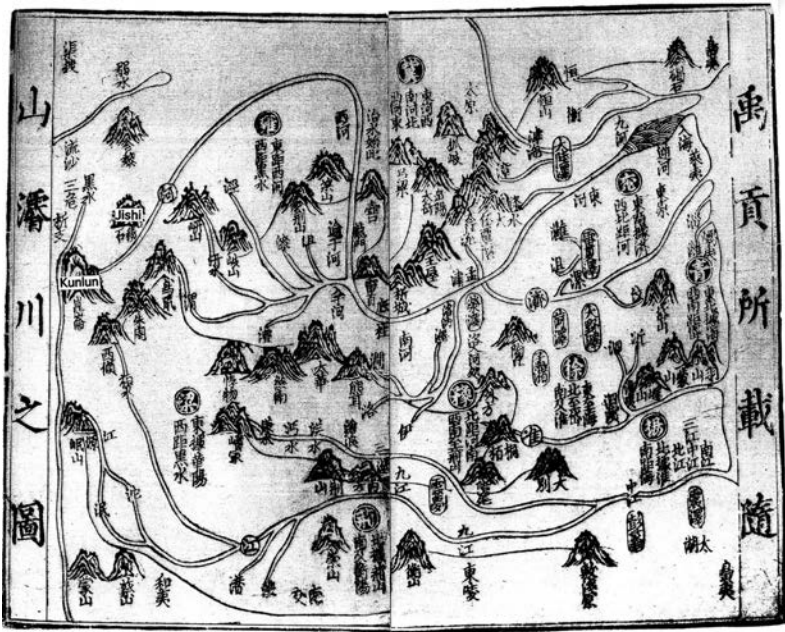
The conception of the Yellow River source(s) in the Western Region somewhat resembles the Kunlun → Jishi extension of the Yellow River described in the "Hainei xijing". Here also the Yellow River first falls into a lake (Bohai 渤海) and then emerges from the lake and arrives at Jishi, and since there is no underground part, the Kunlun → Jishi extension seems even more consistent. The reappearance of the Yellow River from underground at Jishi somewhat resembles its "bursting" (*mao* 冒) through the "stone gate" (*shimen* 石門) of Jishi described in the "Xici sanjing".

Yet, there are some principal differences between the two conceptions that make them absolutely incompatible. Firstly, according to the *Shanhai jing*, Jishi is the most western point of the Yellow River course, located far-away in the west, considerably farther than Kunlun. According to the "Xiyu zhuang" chapter of the *Hanshu*, Jishi is the demarcation point between the main territories of the Empire, corresponding to the "Nine Provinces", and the western "barbarous" periphery,<sup>73</sup> and, therefore, is located just at the boundary of the "civilised world".

Secondly, both Sima Qian and Ban Gu strived to erase any connection between Kunlun Mountain and the Yellow River because, for reasons that require a special study, this did not match the imperial conception of terrestrial space. This imperial conception faded, however, with the beginning of the period of political disunion after the collapse of the Han Empire in AD 220. 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.<sup>74</sup>

73 I am thankful to Christian Lamouroux for having called my attention to this role of Jishi.

74 They are revived after a gap of about a thousand years under the title "Hequ zhi" in the dynastic histories of the Song and Jin Dynasties, *Jinshi* 金史 and *Songshi* 宋史, 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". Since then treatises on waterways under the same name are found in all subsequent dynastic histories.



Map 5

The insistence on the orthodoxy of the officially recognised sources on the Yellow River also became less strict after the time of the Han Empire. In particular, the negative evaluation of the *Shanhai jing* in the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* is completely reversed in the *Houban shu*, which described the Later Han dynasty (AD 25–220). Apart from the “Treatises” composed by Sima Biao, the *Houban shu* was compiled by Fan Ye.<sup>75</sup> Similarly to the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*, the *Shanhai jing* is mentioned in the *Houban shu* again in relation to the Yellow River, in the biography of the official responsible for repairing its dykes, Wang Jing.<sup>76</sup> The *Shanhai jing*, the “Hequ shu” and the *Yugong tu* 禹貢圖 (“Maps of the ‘Yugong’”, 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.<sup>77</sup> Here the *Shanhai jing* is even placed in the primary position among these sources. The royal recommendation to rely on it first indicates the official recognition of its locations, especially the location of the Yellow River source at Kunlun Mountain.

75 The different parts of the *Houban shu* were then combined by Liu Zhao 劉昭 (fl. AD 502–520).

76 *Houban shu* 76.2465 (“Wang Jing liezhuan” 王景列傳).

77 This occurred in AD 69.

A good illustration of this recognition is found in representations of China and the surrounding world in traditional Chinese cartography, the earliest surviving “world” maps dating from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279 AD).<sup>78</sup> The most current type of these maps delineate the Yellow River as coming from Kunlun Mountain, and show Jishi a little bit farther to the east along the Yellow River course (see for instance Map 5).<sup>79</sup> Kunlun and Jishi are found in the upper left part of the map.<sup>80</sup> Yet, these maps provide a location of Jishi cardinally different from that derived from the examination of the *Shanbai jing*, where Jishi is located to the west of Kunlun. Having placed Jishi to the east of Kunlun, these maps, in effect, also adopt Ban Gu’s idea of Jishi as a demarcation point between the Western Region and the core territory of the Empire.<sup>81</sup>

## 6 Appendix<sup>82</sup>

<i>Shiji</i> 123	太史公曰禹本紀言河出崑崙崑崙其高二千五百餘里
<i>Lunbeng</i> 31	太史公曰禹本紀言河山崑崙其高三千五百餘里
<i>Hanshu</i> 61	贊曰禹本紀言河出崑崙崑崙高二千五百里餘
<i>Shiji</i> 123	日月所相避隱為光明也其上有醴泉瑤池
<i>Lunbeng</i> 31	日月所於辟隱為光明也其上有玉泉華池
<i>Hanshu</i> 61	日月所相避隱為光明也
<i>Shiji</i> 123	今自張騫使大夏之後也窮河源惡睹本紀所謂崑崙者乎
<i>Lunbeng</i> 31	今自張騫使大夏之後窮河源惡睹本紀所謂崑崙者乎
<i>Hanshu</i> 61	自張騫使大夏之後窮河源惡睹所謂崑崙者乎
<i>Shiji</i> 123	故言九州山川尚書近之矣
<i>Lunbeng</i> 31	故言九州山川尚書近之矣
<i>Hanshu</i> 61	故言九州山川尚書近之矣

78 For examples of such maps, see Cao Wanru 曹婉如 et al. (eds.), *Zhongguo gudai dituji* 中國古代地圖集 *An Atlas of Ancient Maps in China*, 3 vol. (Beijing: Wenwu, 1990, 1994, 1997), a good collection is also provided in Yan Ping et al. (1998). For discussion of the representations of the Yellow River source in Chinese cartography, see Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, “Contradicting Representations of the Yellow River Source in Song Cartography,” *Vestnik MGU, Vostokovedenie*, Seriya 13 [Journal of the Moscow State University, Oriental Studies, Series 13] (2006), 49–56.

79 禹貢所載隨山濬川之圖 *Yugong suo zai suishan junchuan zhi tu* (“Map of [Yu’s] moving along the mountains [as orientation marks in order to blaze paths through highlands (shown in the map by lines)] and deepening rivers, as registered in the ‘Yugong’”, shortly before AD 1209) reproduced from Yan Ping et al. (1998), 65. This map, though like many others formally referring to the “Yugong”, in effect, incorporates data from other texts, in particular, the delineation of the Yellow River source from Kunlun.

80 For convenience I added *pinyin* transcriptions of Kunlun and Jishi in the map.

81 Wang Chengzu in his reconstructed map of the *Shanbing* (see Map 2) seems to copy the configuration of the Yellow River course from these maps rather than trying to reconstruct it from the *Shanbai jing* (cf. Map 3).

82 I am indebted to Martin Hanke who provided this table for me.