CHAPTER 2

Memories of Foreign Lands in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, *Illustrations of Tributaries*, and Travel Accounts: Chinese Sources of Knowledge Regarding Foreign Lands before and after Matteo Ricci

1 The Contrast between Imagination and Knowledge: The Imagination of Foreign Lands

In 1699, the missionary Louis le Comte (1655–1728) criticized 16th century Western travelers and merchants in his work *Das Heutige Sina* saying, “in their accounts [about China], there were plenty of hearsay and mediocre stories.”

This comment, while perhaps not entirely unreasonable, exhibits the typical conceit of later generations towards those who came before. When Le Comte wrote these words, interactions between China and the West had increased through missionary work, trade and diplomacy, and knowledge regarding foreign regions was increasing. In the hundred or so preceding years, interactions between the worlds of the West and the East were not so common, and most of the knowledge about foreign regions was accumulated bit by bit with great difficulty. Inevitably, historical memory was clouded with the imaginary and conjecture; just as inevitably, the writings were permeated with fabrication and conjecture.

If this is how people from foreign lands saw China, the way the Chinese saw foreign countries was no different. In the 15th and 16th centuries, before Matteo Ricci came to China, Chinese people were possessed of the wildest fantasy about foreign lands, especially regions not easily accessible by boat or carriage. We now know that the contents of the Chinese imagination were not entirely without basis, because the ancient Han people may well have learned about certain remote cultures earlier than we had at first thought.

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To begin with, consider: not only was Tang dynasty Chang’an home to a large population of foreigners such as merchants from Persia and the Arab world, but several new kinds of archival evidence shows how an understanding of the neighbouring peoples pre-dates even the western journeys of Zhang Qian (164–114 BCE). Professor I-tien Hsing has provided us with a detailed and outstanding study of this in his article.106 And, two figurines carved on oyster shells with Caucasian characteristics,107 discovered at Zhouyuan and dating from around the 8th century BCE, have prompted Victor H. Mair to publish an article advancing a series of bold conjectures, such as the possible connection between the ancient pronunciation of the character *wu*巫 and the Old Persian word ‘Magus’ (from which comes the word ‘Magician’).108 If such ideas are confirmed, then Chinese knowledge of foreign cultural forms must have been acquired very early indeed.

There is a difference, however, between imagination of foreign peoples, which is a feature of the history of ideas, and actual knowledge of foreign peoples, which is a feature of the history of life and living. Regardless of the early knowledge thought to have been possessed by the Han people, certain features of how foreign lands were imagined within the world of ideas displayed a persistent attachment to historical memory. This historical memory prevailed as conventional wisdom till as late as the mid-Ming dynasty in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The fantasy came mostly from classical literary texts, which, besides the expected written record of historical events, include: *Bunian tu* (Illustrations of Emperor Taizong receiving the Tibetan envoy; *Zhigong tu* (Illustrations of tributaries); *Wanghui tu* (Illustrations of meetings with kings); and, various images of foreign peoples on display in Buddhist cave paintings. There are records of life beyond the seas in travel accounts like *Foguo ji* (A record of Buddhistic kingdoms) and *Jingxing ji* (Notes on places passed through), but of even more importance are half-mythical, half-encyclopedic texts like *Shanhai jing* (The classic of mountains and seas), *Shenyi jing* (The book of divine miracles), and *Mutianzi zhuan* (The journey of King Mu of the Zhou Dynasty). Over time, the imaginary and the factual mingled, yielding impressions of foreign lands in

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107 For the image, see *Wenwu* 1(1986): 46–47.