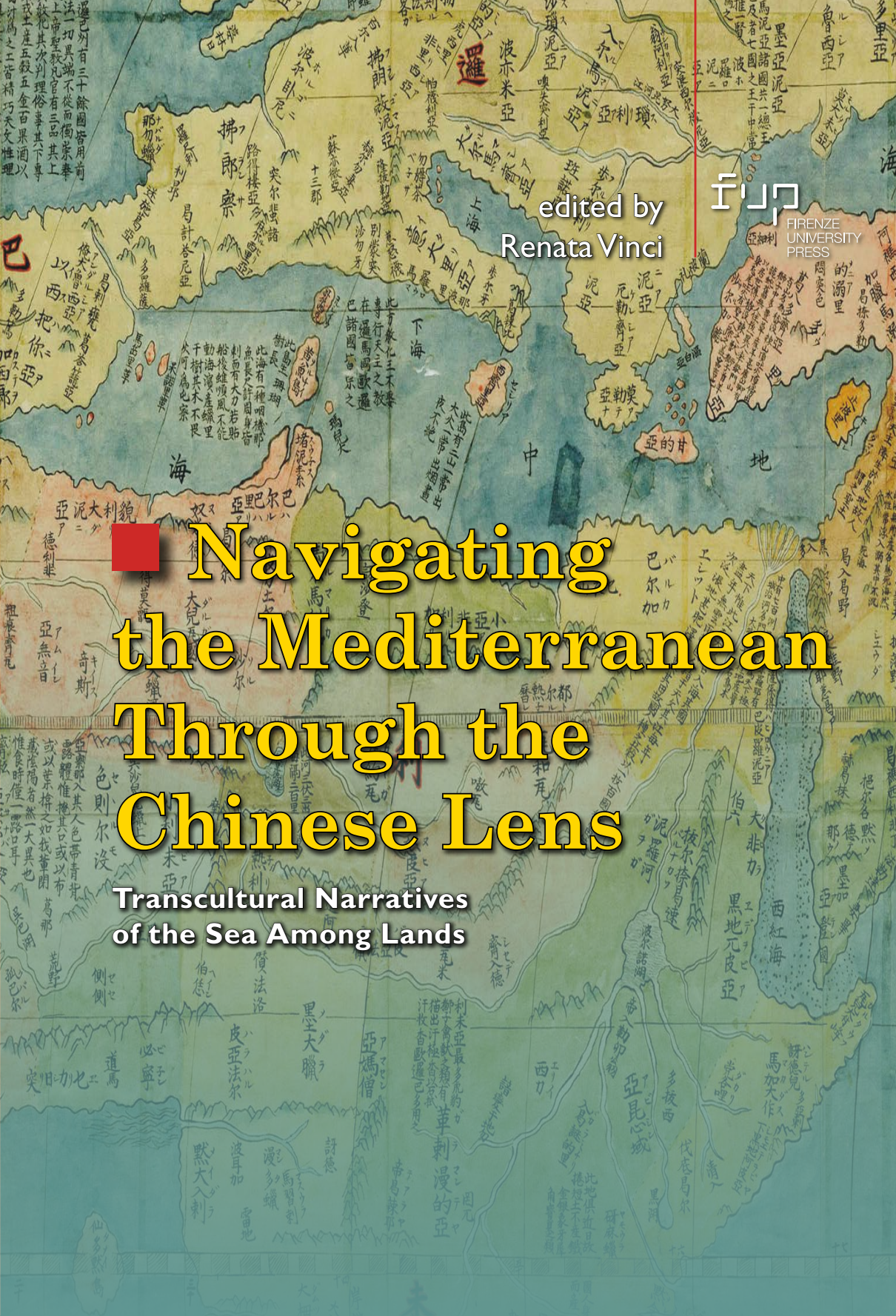




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# Navigating the Mediterranean Through the Chinese Lens

Transcultural Narratives  
of the Sea Among Lands

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# Navigating the Mediterranean Through the Chinese Lens

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# Following a Mediterranean Clue. A Reconsideration of the Sources About the Country of Haixi 海西國 (2nd–3rd Cent. CE)

Maurizio Paolillo

**Abstract:** Beginning with Zhang Qian's mission during the reign of Emperor Wu, the Han expansion westwards brought new geographical knowledge. Gan Ying's arrival on the shores of the Persian Gulf in 97 CE established a new and extreme boundary for knowledge of the West: the purpose of his mission was direct contact with the political entity known as Da Qin. Within the historiographical sources where references to Da Qin and the West appear, the toponym Haixi 海西 recurs in *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, *Hou Hanji* 後漢紀, and *Weilüe* 魏略. This chapter lists the historical sources on Haixi to discuss some related issues and proposes some hypotheses for identifying the place names in these texts, potentially aiding in locating Haixi geographically. Finally, a concluding paragraph addresses a previously neglected source, which appears to support the hypothesis identifying Haixi with Egyptian territory, thereby associating it with a region within the Mediterranean area.

**Keywords:** China and the West; Haixi; Egypt; Ancient Eurasian Sea Routes; Phoenix and *Fenghuang*

## 1. Chinese View of the West from the Zhou to the Han: A Complex Interaction

In the early Zhou 周 period (c. 1046–256 BCE), it is challenging to identify a clear distinction between a “Chinese” world (often referred to as Xia 夏 or Huaxia 華夏; Chen 2004) and a “barbarian” world: in the clash between the Zhou and other external political entities, there is hardly trace of any manifesto of cultural or moral superiority. On the contrary, practical necessities often favoured alliances between the lineages of the Central Territories (*zhongguo* 中國) and “barbarian” peoples (Di Cosmo 2002, 93–8; see also Goldin 2015).

This recurrent interaction between the Zhou (as well as the principalities of the Central Plains) and other peoples was perhaps one of the causes (together with the consolidation of a bureaucratic state structure) that starting from the period of the Springs and Autumns (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 BCE) led to a redefinition of the identity of the political and social group, that we can include under the definition of Huaxia. This new self-perception had as its *raison d'être* an exclusive view of the “barbarians” (Li 2006, 279–96).

With the Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國 453–221 BCE), the differentiation from the “barbarians” appears to be increasingly founded on a kind of culturally

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based paradigm, reinforced by the further consolidation of a hierarchical social structure based on ritual normativism (von Falkenhausen 1999). The view of foreign peoples does not seem to be based on ethnic markers, but on the observation of an environmental distinctiveness, which takes on not only cultural, but also political and economic aspects (for a later example of this point, related to the southern peoples known as Man 蠻, see Lycas 2019). The very definitions of an ethnically distinguished “Han people” and a *Hanzu* 漢族 seem to be *a posteriori* constructions, “linguistic products of ‘translingual practices’” (Chin 2012), resulting from a long literary and historiographical tradition that reaches up to modernity.

The blurred boundary between the Zhou and the “others” finds in some cases an echo in the not always conflictual relationship with foreign peoples entertained by single principalities. A clear example is the interaction between the western Principate of Qin 秦 and the group known as Rong 戎 (a pseudo-ethnonym, indicating “bellicosity”: Li 2006, 286; Goldin 2011, 235), in the period between 8th and 4th century BCE (Lewis 2007; Li 2013; but also Pines 2005–06).

Within this framework, the West very soon became a territory characterised by the interweaving of actual geographical data and fantastic details in texts such as the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Fracasso 1993; Fracasso 1996; Dorofeeva-Lichtmann 2003) and the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳 (Mathieu 1993; Shaughnessy 2023; Frühauf 2024).

The era of the Western Han (Xi Han 西漢, 206 BCE–9 CE) saw the appearance of another type of source, which we could define as anchored to more practical aspects: the travel reports composed by imperial emissaries sent westwards, beyond the areas that from 60 BCE by were under the control of the Protectorate General (*Duhufu* 都護府). The increase in knowledge would have led to the introduction, as early as the *Hanshu* 漢書, of a geographical section within dynastic histories and, more generally, to the inclusion of a certain amount of toponyms and ethnonyms that appear to be phonetic transcriptions from external idioms: for the Han period, a large portion of them refer to western territories (Schuessler 2014).

The costly strategy of control of the routes to the western territories was not, however, embraced by the entire court. A well-known passage from the *Yantielun* 鹽鐵論 recounts a dispute that took place in the Han court in 81 BCE, in which two factions faced each other: one defending the traditional “centralist” view, and the other more inclined to extend Chinese influence beyond the borders (Lewis 2006). The second intended to continue Emperor Wu’s (Han Wudi 漢武帝, r. 141–87 BCE) monopolistic policy of economic engagement: in the *Yantielun* it appears inspired by the cosmographic vision of Zou Yan 鄒衍 (c. 305–240 BCE), according to whom China was only one of the 81 parts of the world (Sima 1982, 2344).

Zou Yan’s theory also appears in Daoist Han texts, such as the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Liu 1989, 39b). Daoist currents may have played some role in the dissemination of this *tianxia* 天下 theory during the Han era: one may in this regard recall the widespread narration (found in the *Shiji* biography of Laozi) of Laozi’s final journey to the West (possibly to India or to Da Qin 大秦); the traditions (including iconographic ones) that associated the immortality of the *xian* 仙 not only with the islands of the Eastern Ocean, but also with the far West; or, finally,

one can cite a passage in the *Qiushui* 秋水 chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, in which the Central Territories within the Four Seas are compared to “a small grain in a large granary” (計中國之在海內, 不似稊米之在大倉乎: *Zhuangzi* 1989, 87a).

The conflicts inherent in the interaction between Han China and the world beyond its western borders are particularly evident in the contrast between Chinese expansion and the Xiongnu 匈奴. However, this should not overshadow the many inclusive aspects of the relationship between these two political entities, as reflected in the “historiography of the barbarians” itself (Di Cosmo 2010). Even the historian Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE), who in the *Hanshu* often depicted the barbarians as irredeemable “different” and resistant to the Chinese civilisation (Pines 2005), had partial Xiongnu or *hu* 胡 ancestry (Chen 2011), dating back to the Xiutu Prince (Xiutu *wang* 休屠王, ?–121 BCE). His brother Ban Chao 班超 (32–102 CE) gave impetus to the deepening of knowledge about the Far West, through his decision to send Gan Ying 甘英 in 97 CE to hitherto unreachable territories in order to make contact with the political entity called Da Qin 大秦.

## 2. Haixi: The Sources

Within the context of historiographical sources which references to Da Qin and the West, the toponym Haixi 海西 recurs in the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, the *Hou Hanji* 後漢紀 (for this source see Eicher 2018) and the *Weilue* 魏略. Haixi has mainly been identified with the Italic peninsula or Rome itself (Leslie, Gardiner 1996, 263–4; Yu 2013, 40, n. 68), and with Egypt (“Country of the Red Sea” in Hirth 1885, 163–4, 180–5; Egypt in Hill 2004; Hill 2015). I will review these passages, and then elaborate on a few points:

### *Hou Hanshu* (juan 86)

永寧元年, 擲國王雍由調復遣使者詣闕朝賀, 獻樂及幻人, 能變化吐火, 自支解, 易牛馬頭。又善跳丸, 數乃至千。自言我海西人。海西即大秦也。擲國西南通大秦。

In the first year of the Yongning era [121 CE], the ruler of the Kingdom of Shan, Yong Youtiao, sent again an ambassador, who, in the presence of His Majesty, offered musicians and illusionists, capable of performing transformations and breathing fire, of freeing their limbs, and of exchanging the heads of oxen and horses. They were also skilled at throwing up to a thousand balls into the air. Of themselves they said: “We are men of Haixi”. Haixi is none other than Da Qin; the region south-west of the Kingdom of Shan communicates with Da Qin (Fan 1973, 2851).

### *Hou Hanji* (juan 15):

及安帝元初中, 日南塞外檀國獻幻人, 能變化吐火, 自支解, 又善跳丸, 能跳十丸。其人曰: 「我海西人。」則是大秦也。自交州塞外檀國諸蠻夷相通也, 又有一道與益州塞外通。

During the Yuanchu reign of Emperor An [114–120 CE], the kingdom of Shan, outside the borders of Rinan [central Vietnam], offered illusionists, who were able to perform transformations and breathe fire, free their limbs, and were also skilled at throwing ten balls into the air. They claimed: “We are from Haixi”. It is therefore Da Qin. In the region outside Jiaozhou [North Vietnam], the Shan kingdom and the Man and Yi peoples are in communication; there is also a route connecting to the region outside the border with Yizhou [Sichuan] (Yuan 1780, 15.6ab).

*Hou Hanshu* (juan 88)

九年，都護班超遣甘英使大秦，抵條支。臨大海欲度，而安息西界船人謂英曰：「海水廣大，往來者逢善風三月乃得度，若遇遲風，亦有二歲者，故入海人皆齎三歲糧。海中善使人思土戀慕，數有死亡者。」英聞之乃止[...]. 自安息西行三千四百里至阿蠻國。從阿蠻西行三千六百里至斯賓國。從斯賓南行度河，又西南至於羅國九百六十里，安息西界極矣。自此南乘海，乃通大秦。其土多海西珍奇異物焉。大秦國一名犁鞬，以在海西，亦云海西國[...]. 或云其國西有弱水、流沙，近西王母所居處，幾於日所入也。漢書云「從條支西行二百餘日，近日所入」，則與今書異矣。前世漢使皆自烏弋以還，莫有至條支者也。又云「從安息陸道繞海北行出海西至大秦，人庶連屬。十里一亭，三十里一置，終無盜賊寇警。而道多猛虎、師子，遮害行旅，不百餘人，齎兵器，輒為所食」。[...].

In the ninth year [of the Yongyuan era of Emperor He: 97 CE], Governor Ban Chao sent Gan Ying as ambassador to Da Qin. He arrived at Tiaozhi; being on the coast of the Great Sea, he wished to cross it. But the sailors on the western border of Anxi addressed him, saying: “The waters of the Sea are vast. If those who cross it encounter favourable winds, it can be crossed in three months. If they encounter unfavourable winds it can also take two years. For this reason, those who face the Sea always carry provisions for three years. In the sea, something makes men long for land, feeling love at a distance; many are those who have died”. Hearing this, Ying stopped [...]. From Anxi, proceeding west for 3,400 *li* you reach the kingdom of Aman. From Aman, proceeding west for 3,600 *li* you reach the kingdom of Sibin; from Sibin going south you cross a river, and then going southwest you come after 960 *li* to the kingdom of Yuluo, which is the extreme western border of Anxi. From here you proceed by sea southwards, and communicate with Da Qin. In this territory there are many precious, extraordinary and rare objects from Haixi. The country of Da Qin is also called Lijian. Since it is located to the west of the sea, it is also called the country of Haixi [...]. It is also said that to the west of this country are the Weak Waters and Flowing Sands, close to the place where the Queen Mother of the West resides, near the point where the sun sets. The *Hanshu* states that “if you go west from Tiaozhi for more than two hundred days, you get close to the place where the sun sets”: therefore there is a difference with the present documents. The Han envoys of previous generations all returned from Wuyi, there were none who

reached Tiaozhi. It is also said that leaving Anxi (Parthia) by the land route, you follow a curved route through Haibei (“North of the Sea”); you go out from Haixi and reach Da Qin. The population is well connected: every ten *li* there is a rest stop, and every thirty *li* there is a post station. So there are no alarms due to the attack of marauders, but on the way there are many tigers and ferocious lions that block and harm the travellers: if [the expedition] does not include a hundred or more armed people, they invariably end up being devoured [...] (Fan 1973).

*Weilüe* (in *Sanguozhi*, *juan* 30):

大秦國一號犁靬。在安息條支西。大海之西。從安息界安穀城乘船。直截海西。遇風利二月到。風遲或一歲。無風或三歲。其國在海西。故俗謂之海西。有河出其國。西又有大海。海西有遲散城。從國下直北至烏丹城[...]。凡有大都三。卻從安穀城陸道直北行之海北。復直西行之海西。復直南行經之烏遲散城[...]。

The kingdom of Da Qin is also called Lijian. It lies to the west of Anxi and Tiaozhi, and of the Great Sea. From the city of Angu on the border of Anxi, if you take a boat, you go directly to Haixi. With favourable winds it can be reached in two months, with unfavourable winds it can take up to a year, and if there are no winds, three years. This kingdom is located west of the sea: for this reason, it is popularly called Haixi. There is a river that flows out of this kingdom. To the west [of Haixi] there is another great sea. In Haixi lies the city of Chisan. If you go straight north from the end of the kingdom, you come to the city of Wudan [...]. In all there are three great cities: from the city of Angu, proceeding straight north you reach Haibei; proceeding west again you reach Haixi; and proceeding south again you reach the city of Wuchisan [...] (Chen 1975).

### 3. Some Considerations on the Sources

In the passage in *juan* 86 of the *Hou Hanshu* there is an early mention of Da Qin, a place-name about which countless interpretations have been made, most of which tend to identify it with the Roman Empire or its eastern territories (Egypt and the Near East). Da Qin seems to have been very popular at the end of the first century CE: it is mentioned as a symbol of the extreme west in *Dongjingfu* 東京賦 by Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139 CE), composed in the Yongyuan 永元 era (89–105 CE) of the reign of Emperor He 和帝 (Knechtges 1982).

The jugglers-illusionists sent to the Chinese court by the ruler of the kingdom of Shan 檀國 (located probably in northern Burma) in 121 CE (or shortly before, if one follows the *Hou Hanji*) are defined as coming from Haixi, while in *juan* 88 their place of origin is Lijian 犁靬; in earlier sources the reference is to Tiaozhi 條枝 (a country where “people are skilled in the arts of illusionism”, *guo shan xuan* 國善眩: Sima 1982, 3163) or Lixuan 黎軒 (Sima 1982, 3173; the toponym corresponds to Ligan 犁靬 in the *Hanshu* and *Weilüe* 魏略).

The identification of Lixuan has been the subject of a considerable interpretative debate, also due to the choice of a different punctuation of a passage in *juan*

123 of the *Shiji*: this led to different conclusions and geographical collocations of this place-name (see e.g. Leslie, Gardiner 1996; Pulleyblank 1999). Tiaozhi, on the other hand, appears to correspond with the territory of Characene/Mesene in southern Mesopotamia or its political centre Charax Spasinou (Fariello 2025). Charax was located at the western end of the Iraqi coast of the Persian Gulf: it was a centre of great importance both in the maritime trade route connecting the Indian coast to the Red Sea emporiums, and in the land connections with centres such as Palmyra. The site of Charax has been the subject of recent archaeological exploration (Campbell 2019). In the past, it retained a certain *de facto* autonomy under both the Seleucids and the Parthian empire, maintaining great economic prosperity until the early 3rd century CE, when Parthian rule was replaced by the more centralised Sasanian empire.

The kingdom of Shan seems to have been located near the communication route that according to *juan* 123 of the *Shiji* (1982, 3166) would have connected Bactria (Da Xia 大夏) to the territory of Shendu 身毒 (identified with the Ganges river valley), passing through Sichuan and Yunnan. The Chinese attempt to control this route under the reign of Han Wudi would not succeed.

The passage in *juan* 86 of the *Hou Hanshu* identifies Haixi with Da Qin (however we do not know whether in whole or in part). Da Qin is also mentioned in *juan* 88, in the famous account of Gan Ying's mission, sent in 97 CE by the *duhu* 都護 Ban Chao. According to this passage, Da Qin's name was therefore already known, and was the trigger that prompted Ban Chao to dispatch the mission (as already pointed out in Pulleyblank 1999, 78). Here we find a route from Anxi 安息, i.e. the Parthia (or, more likely, from its capital), to Sibi 斯賓 and finally to Yuluo 於羅, identified by J. Hill respectively with Susa and Charax itself, which is "the extreme western border of Anxi" (Hill 2015; but see also Zanous, Yang 2018; Fariello 2025 for considerations on the toponym Yuluo as a probable phonetic transcription of Charax). A sea route departed from Yuluo, making it possible to reach Da Qin in two months if the winds were favourable (three months in a similar passage in the *juan* 15 of *Hou Hanji*). The passage notes that in the territory of Yuluo "there are many precious, extraordinary and rare objects from Haixi", a place-name that can be explained in geographical terms: it is so called because it lies west of the sea. However, here we also find the statement that Haixi is an alternative name for Da Qin (and also for Lijian).

The passage shows the evident presence of different documentary sources on the territories of the Far West. The *Hou Hanshu* fits into a particularly rich historical phase of the Chinese historiographical tradition (Durrant 2019): its compilation, directed by Fan Ye 范曄 (398–446 CE) in the years 432–445 CE in Jiankang, capital of the Liu Song dynasty, was based on various sources from the 2nd–4th centuries CE, such as the *Dongguan Hanji* 東觀漢記 and the *Hou Hanji* 後漢紀. For the section on the Western Territories, the privileged source seems to have been the *Xiyu fengtu ji* 西域風土記, the report written in 125 CE by General Ban Yong, son of Ban Chao, and delivered to Emperor An 安帝.

The compilation work was likely not without difficulties, as evidenced by various aspects of the text: for instance, in the passage from *juan* 88 quoted

above, in Yuan Hong's 袁宏 (330–378 CE) *Hou Hanji*, Gan Ying's mission and the reference to the “illusionists of Haixi/Da Qin” are more logically placed in the section on Da Qin. However, similar examples of a weak systematisation of sources should not automatically lead to discredit the value of the geographical information in the *Hou Hanshu* (see for a different position Thierry 2005).

In the passage from the *Hou Hanshu*, the location of traditional Western *topoi* (the Weak Waters *Ruoshui* 弱水, the Flowing Sands *Liusha* 流沙 and *Xiwangmu* 西王母, the Queen Mother of the West) west of Da Qin does not replicate the *Hanshu*, where such places are located west of Tiaozi (Characene) (Ban 1975: 3876–7). It is also recalled that, in the generations before Gan Ying's mission, Han envoys who were sent on a western mission returned to China from Wuyi 烏弋, a term that appears to be a shortened version of the toponym Wuyishanli 烏弋山離.

Wuyishanli, described in the *Hanshu* as a warm, lowland country, is generally identified with Alexandria in Arachosia, founded in 329 BCE by Alexander the Great and corresponding to present-day Kandahar in Afghanistan (Pulleyblank 1999; Pulleyblank 1962, 116, 128; Zanos, Yang 2018, 127–8 associate the toponym with the Indo-Parthian kingdom in the 1st century CE). Wang Tao (2007) instead identifies Wuyishanli with Alexandria Prophthasia (Farāh), south of Herat. In any case, the phonetic reconstruction of the toponym Wuyishanli seems to corroborate its correspondence to an Ἀλεξάνδρεια (Schuessler 2014, 267; Baxter, Sagart 2014, 66, 96, 116, 137).

Arachosia and its capital city were characterised by Hellenistic culture (Bernard 2005): in the Parthian Stations (Σταθμοί Παρθικοί) of Isidore of Charax (late 1st century BCE–early 1st century CE), this territory is the easternmost stopover of the overland route that connected Antioch to the East via a series of trade centres located in the territory of the Parthian empire (Fariello 2025). It therefore seems perfectly logical that, prior to Gan Ying's journey, the Chinese envoys who undertook the voyage along the southern route from Yumenguan, some 90 km west of Dunhuang, or Yangguan (43 km south-west of Dunhuang), would pass through Loulan and Yarkand, cross the Congling Mountains (Pamir) to the south, and reach the Kushana-controlled territories and Anxi/Parthia, with Arachosia as their final stop. This location was also the easternmost starting point of the other trade route, ending on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

Gan Ying's voyage, which probably took place along this geographical guideline, was clearly in accordance with Ban Chao's desire to learn more about this international trade network. However, the Chinese envoy made a diversion along the way (likely from the Susa area), – which in my opinion was planned from the beginning –, taking him south to Tiaozi/Characene coastal area. From here, the sea route to the Mediterranean begun, following the coast of the Arabian Peninsula south by sea, then went up the Red Sea and reached one of the trading emporiums of the Egyptian coast, controlled by the Romans from the end of the 1st century BCE, such as Myos Hormos or the more southern Berenice Troglodytica/Baranis: the relevance of this centre is underscored by the recent discovery by archaeologists of a 2nd century CE statue of Buddha at the

entrance to a temple area dedicated to Isis (Sidebotham 2023; for trade routes between Rome and the East, McLaughlin 2010; Cobb 2018).

The last part of the passage I quoted from *Hou Hanshu*, however, seems to indicate at least a geographical distinction between Haixi and Da Qin: “It is also said that, leaving Anxi (Parthia) by the land route, you follow a curved route through Haibei (“North of the Sea”); you go out from Haixi and reach Da Qin”. The difficulty in interpreting the sentence lies mainly in the rendering of *rao* 繞, usually understood as the verb “surround, encircle, move or circle around”. For some, *rao* takes *hai* 海 as its object, suggesting a land route that from Anxi would “encircle the sea” moving north to Haixi and eventually to Da Qin (see e.g. Zanous, Yang 2018). I personally agree with the view expressed by F. Hirth (1885; reprised broadly in Hill 2015) that *rao* here takes the binomial *haibei* 海北 as its object.

*Haibei* would denote a territory encompassing Mesopotamia and the area to the west, extending to present-day Jordan and the territory of the Nabataeans (under Roman control from the end of the 1st century CE and fully absorbed into the empire in 106 CE), which included the Gulf of Aqaba and the Sinai peninsula. The final stages were Haixi and Da Qin: it is not far-fetched to identify the first toponym as the Egyptian territory (under Roman control from 30 BCE), from which one could reach Da Qin (perhaps here the Italic territory of Rome).

The last passage I quoted belongs to the *Weilüe*, composed between 239 and 265 by Yu Huan 魚豢 (fl. 3rd century CE), an official of the Cao Wei kingdom (220–265 CE). Only the section of the work on western peoples and regions survived as a long quotation in *juan* 30 of the *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (late 3rd century CE). The information in the surviving section dates to the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE (Hill 2004; Leslie, Gardiner 1996). Here we find again the equation Da Qin = Lijian. The *Weilüe* also seems to indicate that Haixi is a part of Da Qin; in the text, the port “at the border of Anxi” from which one can embark for Da Qin is no longer Yuluo but Angu 安穀, a site of difficult identification (Orchoë in Hirth 1885, 187; Gerrha in Hill 2004; Antioch in Leslie, Gardiner 1996, 67). For the Later Han period, Angu is rendered as \*ʔan - \*kok (Schuessler 2007). Perhaps the toponym Ἀντιόχεια may be closer to the Chinese phonetic reading: in this case, the reference could be to Antioch, the name given to Charax in 166–5 BCE by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV, who rebuilt the city destroyed by river flooding. One would have to assume in this regard that this name survived over time: a plausible possibility in a region where Hellenistic culture continued to flourish throughout the Parthian period.

The identification of Haixi here can be clarified by other elements. Rather than the reference to the “river that flows out of this kingdom” (the Nile?) and the “great sea” that would still lie to its west (the Mediterranean?), it is the city of Chisan 遲散, also called here Wuchisan 烏遲散, that appears to provide more solid elements. The identification with Alexandria, already proposed by Hirth (1885) and rejected by Leslie and Gardiner (1996, 185), was in fact defended on solid linguistic grounds by E. Pulleyblank (1999, 76).

As for the toponym Wudan 烏丹, the identification appears uncertain. Hirth (1885, 181) proposed it as the important trading emporium of Myos Hormos on the Egyptian Red Sea coast; regarding the construct *cong guoxia* 從國下, he stated that it could mean “before one arrives in the country”. The phonetic reconstruction for Wudan, particularly for the Eastern Han period, is ʔa-tân (Schuessler 2007, 204, 507); Old Chinese \*ʔa- \*tʰan according to Baxter and Sagart (2014). If the meaning of *guoxia* is “the end of the kingdom (or country)”, this may indicate the southern part of the Egyptian territory, known as Upper Egypt. The phrase *cong guoxia zhibei zhi Wudancheng* 從國下直北至烏丹城 might also be translated as “if you go down straight to the north you reach the city of Wudan”, imagining the text as elucidation of a map where the north was represented at the bottom, as was traditional.

Additionally, based on Wudan’s possible location, it might be associated with Aten, an ancient city located near Luxor, founded in the 14th century BCE. This archaeological site, excavated only in 2020, has already been identified as the most important administrative centre of this region under Amenhotep III (r. 1386–1353 BCE) (Hawass 2021). However, identifying Wudan from the Chinese text with Aten would imply the toponym survived through the Ptolemies and beyond: a hypothesis that, despite the existence of settlement layers on the site dating to the Coptic era (3rd–7th century CE), remains unconfirmed.

#### 4. A New Source for a Mediterranean Clue?

The possibility that Haixi corresponds to the Egyptian territory may be further supported by another element that, to my knowledge, has so far escaped research. The phoenix, a mythical bird of Western tradition, appears in a well-known passage by Herodotus (5th century BCE: *Histories*, II, 73), which refers to its longevity and describes its journey from Arabia to Egypt, to the temple of Heliopolis, where it buries its deceased father preserved in a myrrh egg. The longevity of the phoenix is also noted in an earlier passage attributed to the poet Hesiod, cited in Plutarch’s *De defectu oraculorum* (11, 415c) (van den Broek 1972; Lecocq 2022).

The symbolism of the phoenix has also been linked linguistically to the sacred bird of ancient Egypt called *benu*, associated with the supreme solar deity Atum and Re, the sun god. The phoenix has often been compared to the traditional Chinese bird known as *feng* 鳳 or *fenghuang* 鳳凰, defined as a “numinous bird” (*shen niao* 神鳥) in the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (1st century CE) (Xu 1991, 79a). In a more detailed study, I have noted that the functional elements shared by the phoenix and the *feng* (both auspicious animal, linked to essence, sincerity, loyalty, sacred royalty, crimson colour, Sun, fire, cyclicity, oneness, centrality, axiality) are more numerous than previously emphasised (Paolillo 2025).

In this regard, it is useful to cite a source that has so far escaped the notice of previous studies. It is a poem by Fu Xuan 傅玄 (217–278 CE), entitled *Hongyan sheng saibei xing* 鴻雁生塞北行 (Ballad of the Swan Goose Born North of the Wall). Here is my translation attempt:

鳳凰遠生海西。及時昆山岡。  
 五德存羽儀。和鳴定宮商。  
 百鳥並侍左右。鼓翼騰華光。  
 上熙遊雲日間。千歲時來翔。  
 孰若彼龍與龜。曳尾泥中藏。  
 非雲雨則不升。冬伏春乃驤。  
 退哀此秋蘭草。根絕隨化揚。  
 靈氣一何憂美。萬里馳芬芳。  
 常恐物微易歇。一朝見棄忘。

The *fenghuang* bird was born far away in Haixi and has come timely to the crest of Kunshan (i.e. Mount Kunlun).

The Five Virtues are present as a model on its wings; with its harmonious call, it establishes the *gong* and *shang* notes.

The hundred species of birds surround him; he beats his wings, spreading the light. He wanders on high, shining between the sun and the clouds. After a time of a thousand years, he comes in flight.

How could the dragon and the turtle be like it, dragging their tails and concealing them in the mud!

Without clouds and rain, they would not ascend; in winter they conceal themselves, to soar in summer.

Orchids and autumn grasses here retreat in sadness; broken roots rise following change.

One is the holy *qi*: why be concerned with beauty? Fragrance spreads for ten thousand *li*.

Constant, the fear of the minuteness of things and their easy coming to an end; seen for a moment, they are put aside and forgotten (Zhao and Wang 2014, 438).

There are interesting elements in the poem, such as the reference to the Five Virtues (*wu de* 五德) on the body of the *feng*, which is also mentioned in the *Shuowen jiezi*, and the cyclical temporal nature associated with the bird. However, what stands out most is the opening line, with its mention of Haixi in relation to the *fenghuang*. Haixi is described here as the bird's place of origin: if one considers the possibility of Greek-Hellenistic ideas on the relation between the phoenix and Egypt, this provides a strong clue supporting the identification of Haixi with Egypt.

It is also noteworthy that Fu Xuan (biography in Fang and Chu 1973), the author of the poem, was selected in 245 CE (when he held the position of Editorial Director *zhuzuolang* 著作郎 of the Palace Library) as one of the main figures responsible for compiling the *Weishu* 魏書, the historical chronicles of the Cao Wei kingdom, which were later lost. This work appears to have been the source Yu Huan used for composing the *Weilüe* (completed before 265 CE), with its account of Da Qin and the Western territories.

In a recent study, Fu Xuan has been included among the court literati of the Cao Wei and Jin periods whose writings often focused on the exotic lands, revealing "the 'shared codes' among Chinese, Central Asians, and Indians through

religious and commercial exchanges” (Kong 2022, 16). It is thus plausible Fu Xuan was aware of information about the distant lands where the sun sets, and perhaps – through a form of cultural assimilation – drew this unique (and quite rare in Chinese sources) association between the *fenghuang* and a place that we may – tentatively – identify with Egypt.

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