

CORAL (SHANHU) AND CORAL ISLANDS (SHANHUZHOU)
IN ANCIENT CHINESE TEXTS (HAN TO SONG PERIODS)

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Abstract: *Il presente articolo si occupa di analizzare le descrizioni del corallo (in cinese shanhu 珊瑚) estrapolate da numerose fonti antiche cinesi. Alcuni degli aspetti di maggiore rilievo sono il colore, la tassonomia e il simbolismo che questi invertebrati marini hanno assunto nel corso dei secoli. Un ulteriore punto degno di analisi è il termine shanhu_{zhou} 珊瑚洲, letteralmente "isola corallo". Le domande che l'autore si pone in questo contributo riguardano l'origine di tale parola e come essa sia collegata al cosiddetto Zhanghai 漲海 e al toponimo Da Qin 大秦. L'autore ha considerato anche il nome che appare nella famosa iscrizione nestoriana del periodo Tang e i legami con l'area geografica del Guangdong e le opere compilate dai Gesuiti.*

Basic Terms, Issues and Species

In both traditional and modern Chinese texts, the term for corals usually is *shanhu* 珊瑚. One of the earliest references to *shanhu* appears in a work attributed to Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (c. 179–117 BC), quoted in *Shi ji* 史記. Many scholars have cited this text, which is so famous indeed that we do not need to comment on it here. Early poems and prose texts, usually surviving in fragmentary form, especially in *leishu* 類書 of later periods, also mention *shanhu*. It would be a rewarding task to analyse these references in detail, one by one, because they raise diverse questions. One example showing where the problems are, is a recent study of the entries on *shanhu* in Ren Fang's 任昉 (460–508) *Shuyi ji* 述異記.¹

Besides textual references to *shanhu*, one can find various objects made of coral in Chinese collections and museums. However, nearly all of these objects date from very late periods. Apparently, archaeologists have not unearthed too many items produced in Zhou and Han times. Even objects datable to the Tang 唐 (618–907), Song 宋 (960–1279), Yuan 元 (1279–1368) and Ming 明 (1368–1644) periods seem to be rare. Regarding paintings and book illustrations,

again there is very little from the pre-Qing era. Chinese scholars were interested in beautiful flowers and trees, exotic birds and insects, fish and other marine creatures, precious stones, and jewels, but for unknown reasons, early scrolls and prints rarely show corals.²

Another issue is the terminology "surrounding" the binom *shanhu*. Besides this expression, traditional Chinese texts mention "coral islands", usually *shanhu_{zhou}* 珊瑚洲. Further terms standing for reefs and submerged "rocks" in areas known for their corals include such combinations as *lugu* 鹵股, *luogu* 羅股, *laogu* 老古 (硤古 etc.) and *gulao* 古老. Especially the last term may derive from Malay (*batu*) *karang* (etc.), meaning "reef" or "coral reef". Other terms one may wish to consider in such contexts are *cishi* 磁石 (literally "magnetic rocks") and *qitou* 崎頭. These are just some examples. Detailed research will be necessary to trace the history of these and similar expressions, what they really meant and when they first began to appear in traditional accounts, for example, in old navigational texts. A further and very important binom is *langgan* 琅玕. Among the many "received texts" of ancient times, the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 could be the earliest account to record that substance. Originally, *langgan* seems to denote a greenish stone; later on, particularly in *bencao* 本草 works, scholars also used it for corals.³

The fact that at some point in time both *langgan* and *shanhu* started to coexist as generic expressions for coral, raises an important question: When was it that Chinese sailors and / or scholars introduced different terms for specific types of corals? Colour attributes are important as well. In all likelihood early references to *shanhu* are to the red variety and especially to corals imported via the landroute from the "Far West", i.e., the Mediterranean world and / or West Asia. In these regions the production of corals has a long and well-documented history. Howev-

er, Chinese texts do not only mention *bong shanbu* 紅珊瑚 (red corals), they also associate the attributes *bi* 碧, *qing* 青 (both blue / green), *hei* 黑 (black) and *bai* 白 (white) with the binom *shanbu*. What exactly do such combinations stand for?

Here one is tempted to look at the modern taxonomy and the natural distribution of corals across the Asian seas. Zoologists have identified a huge number of species. The classification of these creatures is undergoing constant changes and upgrades. Currently, the general term *shanbu* mostly refers to the class of *Anthozoa*, divided into subclasses, among which one finds the so-called *Bafang* (or *she*) *shanbu* 八放(射)珊瑚 (*Octocorallia*) and *Linfang* (*she*) *shanbu* 六放(射)珊瑚 (usually *Hexacorallia*). These organisms are polyps, generally with a six-fold or eight-fold symmetry, hence their scientific names. Furthermore, several corals are reef-building creatures, or *zaojiao shanbu* 造礁珊瑚. This includes, for example, the so-called *Shi shanbu* 石珊瑚 (*Scleractinia*; stony corals; earlier also *Madreporaria*).

Almost as a rule, classification on the level of families and species is more complex. In many cases, one finds colour attributes in modern Chinese terms. Here are some names: *Lan shanbu* 藍珊瑚 (*Cang shanbu* 蒼珊瑚), literally “blue corals”, often stands for the *Helioporacea* and a species called *H. coerulea*. *Hei shanbu* 黑珊瑚 (also *Jiao shanbu* 角珊瑚 or *Heijiao shanbu* 黑角珊瑚) designates the *Antipatharia*, black coral. The name *Hong shanbu* appears on several levels. For instance, it can be the family *Coralliidae* (under the *Octocorallia*), the genus *Corallium rubrum* (with over thirty species), and the species *C. rubrum* (Sardinia coral, etc.).

It seems that corals with a bluish colour are quite common in the Maldives, near the Ryukyu Islands and Taiwan, but not so much in the South China Sea, or Nanhai 南海. Regarding the reddish and pink varieties, we find several of them in Asian and Pacific waters. This includes, for example: *Shou-*

chang bong shanbu 瘦長紅珊瑚 (*Taobong shanbu* 桃紅珊瑚; *C. elatius*, pink coral), *Riben bong shanbu* 日本紅珊瑚 (*Chibong shanbu* 赤紅珊瑚, *Shenhong shanbu* 深紅珊瑚; *C. japonicum*, oxblood coral, aka coral) and *Qiaobong shanbu* 巧紅珊瑚 (*Fenbong shanbu* 粉紅珊瑚; *C. secundum*, Midway coral or Rosato coral). One may add, modern accounts often list *C. rubrum*, other red corals and even some species with different colours as *gui shanbu* 貴珊瑚 (*corallium nobile*, or precious corals) or *baoshi shanbu* 寶石珊瑚 (precious stone corals). These are non-zoological categories of a general nature. They derive from the fact that artisans in various parts of the world have been using the relevant raw materials for producing costly objects and medicinal substances.

What then does the above tell us with regard to traditional Chinese texts? The use of such terms as *shanbu*, *bong shanbu* and *hei shanbu* rarely allows us to determine a particular genus or species. Certainly, in many cases references to Chinese imports of red coral via the landroute through Iran and Central Asia should be references to *C. rubrum* from the Mediterranean or even Atlantic regions, but one may also think of corals originating from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Other references to *bong shanbu*, mentioned in different contexts, may represent coral coming from Japan or collected in the South China Sea. Below we shall return to these geographical aspects.

Coral and Coral Islands in the Context of Da Qin 大秦 and the Zhanghai 漲海

There is one other terminological problem that we should briefly consider here: According to the *Shuo wen jie zi* 說文解字 of the Han period, the expression *shanbu* points to both a plant and corals: “*Shanbu* is red in colour, it grows in the sea or it grows on the mountains” (珊瑚色赤, 生於海中, 或生於山中). Most scholars think the *shanbu* plant is *Viburnum odoratissimum* (sweet

viburnum), a shrub or small tree also called *zhaoshushu* 早禾樹.⁴ Its white flowers spread a strong fragrance, hence the Latin name. The berries of that plant are red. Clearly, the colour could explain the popular name *shanbushu* 珊瑚樹. When aging to black they look less attractive and decay. Today, *V. odoratissimum* grows in parts of South China and the Philippines. Modern botanical works assign it to the *Wufubua* family 五福花科 (*Adoxaceae*; Moschatel family).

The fact that *shanbu* may stand for a plant, and not just for coral, makes it difficult at times to determine the correct meaning of that term in a particular context. The *Shuyi ji* mentioned above is a case in point. The relevant textual fragment and other fragments from further sources now lost appear in various *leishu* collections. Examples are found in the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 of the early Song period. Already in the 1860s August Pfizmaier provided a German translation of the entries on *shanbu*.⁵

However, perhaps we should leave aside these problems and look at those sources, which clearly refer to coral, and not to a plant. Some of these texts combine references to *shanbu* with references to Da Qin and a sea called Zhanghai. Da Qin, we all know, is the Roman Empire or, especially in later periods, the Roman Orient and / or Byzantium. This means that we are looking at a polity or region with easy access to three coral producing seas: the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The name Zhanghai is less easy to understand. It refers to the South China Sea or parts of it, but the surviving texts do not allow us to define its outer limits. In other cases, the name appears in the context of Da Qin. Moreover, some later works substitute it by another toponym, namely Xihai 西海, which raises further problems.⁶

Research on the many extant descriptions of and references to Da Qin abounds and there are many excellent translations of the relevant texts. Nevertheless, schol-

ars hold different views regarding the name Zhanghai. In fact, some specialists thought that Zhanghai may not be a name but just a term meaning something like “swollen sea”. Sources tell us that General Ma Yuan 馬援 (14 BC to 49 AD), when trying to pacify the southern regions, ordered the construction of a major wall to ward off dangerous waves, and perhaps also foreign intruders. This image is linked to the combination *bai zhang* 海漲, literally “the sea swells”, discussed by many modern authors, and one can also connect it to the later names / terms Wanli shitang 萬里石塘 and Qianli changsha 千里長沙 (and similar forms), which stand for the many coral islands in the South China Sea. The ocean wall would then be a southern pendant to the northern Great Wall, or Wanli changcheng 萬里長城, and the name / sequence “Zhanghai” would be an inversion of the combination *bai zhang*. It is in this Zhanghai, adjacent to the ancient polity called Funan 扶南 (roughly the Khmer area), that one finds *shanbu* (coral) or *shanbu-zhou* (coral islands) in the sea. At least that is what one learns from early texts.

Another aspect concerns the combination Zhanghai itself. There seems to be a phonetical relation between that form and the non-Chinese name Čankhay (various spellings / transcriptions), which appears in Arabic sources of the medieval period (already analysed by Gerini, Tibbetts and further scholars), but not everyone will accept such a proposal. Taking into account these and other considerations, scholars have made different suggestions in regard to the entity called Zhanghai: One view is that the Zhanghai / Čankhay extended from the South China Sea, via the Indian Ocean to the ‘Far West’, i.e., to the seas (or one sea) adjacent to Da Qin. Others believe the name Zhanghai / Čankhay first referred to only one of Da Qin’s seas, especially the Red Sea, and later came to be used for the South China Sea. A further possibility is this: If the combination *zhanghai* simply means ‘swollen

sea', then it may of course appear in several geographical contexts.

Recently, in my own research, I have tried to introduce a further option. The extant textual fragments referring to Da Qin and / or the Zhanghai and its coral (islands), when organised in a rough chronological order, may suggest the following: In an early stage *zhanghai* / Zhanghai stood for the South China Sea with its many reefs and atolls. Soon thereafter, scholars transferred the name Zhanghai to Da Qin. Probably the version *Cankhay* already existed in the first period, alternatively, it emerged later and derived from its Chinese "equivalent".

Essentially these assumptions rely on several descriptions found in extant fragments from such texts as *Funan zhuàn* 扶南傳, *Waiguo zazhuan* 外國雜傳, *Nanzhou yiwu zhi* 南州異物志, etc. (3rd to 4th centuries). Their editorial history is not clear, but it seems likely that the relevant fragments go back to one or two sources. The *Funan zhuàn*, possibly the earliest record, reports this: "In the Zhanghai / 'swollen sea' there are large rocks; corals grow on their surface" (漲海中有盤石, 珊瑚生其上). The *Waiguo zazhuan* gives a more detailed account, adding the name Da Qin:

"In the Zhanghai, to the southwest of Da Qin, at a distance of seven or eight hundred *li* [from that country], one reaches a coral island (or: [several] coral islands). On the sea floor, there are large rocks; corals grow on their surface. People take iron nets to collect them" (大秦西南漲海中, 可七八百里, 到珊瑚洲。洲底大盤石, 珊瑚生其上。人以鐵網取之。).

The version in *Nanzhou yiwu zhi* is even longer. The first part repeats the information found in *Waiguo zazhuan*, the second part tells us how people harvested corals:

"When they (= the corals) first grow, they are white and soft like fungus. The men

of the country board great ships carrying iron nets, [which] they first submerge beneath the water. [After] one year, the coral grows through the interstices of the net; its colour is still yellow, with its branches and twigs interlocking to a height of three or four *chi* (c. 1 to 1.4 m). [The trunks of] the larger ones are a *chi* or more in circumference. [After] three years, [when] the colour is carnation, then by means of the iron meshes they wrench free their roots and draw the iron net into a ship, lifting the net back up [with] a windlass. They [then] cut and carve [the coral] into any shape they wish. [But] if too much time passes before it is carved, then it becomes brittle [due to] parasites [and shatters into tiny pieces]. The large ones are transported to the king's treasury, the small ones are sold" (初生白, 軟弱似菌。國人乘大船、載鐵網先沒在水下。一年便生網目中; 其色尚黃, 枝柯交錯, 高三四尺。大者圍尺餘。三年色赤, 便以鐵鈔發其根, 繫鐵網於船, 絞車舉網, 還。裁鑿恣意所作。若過時不鑿, 便枯索蟲蠱。其大者輸之王府, 細者賣之。)⁷

Other texts of later periods repeat some of the above data in condensed form, usually without providing fresh details. While these works are not so important, we should consider a further fragment from the third century, which is very special: the *Wei lie* 魏略 by Yu Huan 魚豢. This fragment has survived in the annals of the Sanguo era; it is among the best-studied sources dealing with Da Qin. Among other things it refers to several regions near Da Qin, including Qielan 且蘭 and Sifu 氾復. Scholars have proposed different identifications for these toponyms. Nevertheless, the general impression is that both stand for locations in modern Syria, Palestine or Jordan. Furthermore, "going due south from Qielan and Sifu, there are 'accumulated stones'. To the south of [these] stones is the great sea, [which] produces corals and true pearls" (且蘭、氾復直南, 乃有積石, 積石南乃有大海,

出珊瑚、真珠).⁸

The *jishi* zone seems to be the famous site called Petra or, more broadly, the rocky portion of Arabica Petraea. The “great sea” producing corals and pearls could be the Red Sea, “to the south” of the rocky area. The distance of 700 or 800 *li* mentioned above, which corresponds to circa 300 to 400 kilometers, would then point to Leukos or Koseir (Quseir) along the Egyptian coast. Corals and pearls were among the products exchanged in these regions. That might explain the term *shanbuzhou*. Moreover, the character *zhou* may evoke a complex reef or archipelago; therefore, one may also think of the area near Hurghada or the Dahlak Islands near the Eritrean coast much farther to the south.

The geographical setting described above may remind readers of the setting associated with Ma Yuan’s activities. In both cases, when going south, one reaches a zone full of rocks: the area of “accumulated stones” and Ma Yuan’s wall. Farther to the south are the coral-growing regions: some reefs in the Red Sea and the many atolls in the Nanhai. Was this parallelism intended? – It has been suggested that Chinese descriptions of Da Qin provide a very positive image of that polity. If we accept that, then the coral part could be a kind of decorative element among many other and certainly more important constituents all of which suggest that both entities had certain things in common.

There could be a second parallelism of a different kind. According to the quotation from the *Nanzhou yiyu zhi* corals have a fungus-like *white* colour; after some years the “colour is *carnation*”; if one does not pay attention, they *decay*. Sweet viburnum offers a similar “pattern”. The flowers are *white*; there are *red* berries; these turn *black* and *decay*. Hence, is it plausible to assume that local Chinese fishermen and / or scholars transferred botanical observations to the imagined growth of corals in the sea? Was

it the other way around? Did the botanical name derive from a maritime phenomenon?

Here we may briefly return to the short quotation from *Shuo wen jie ci*. This entry pre-dates all the other sources mentioned above. Although it seems to describe red coral, it does not mention Da Qin or another coral-producing location in the “Far West”. This could mean that we are looking at red coral from the Asian seas, perhaps at *C. elatius* and / or *C. japonicum* growing near Japan and in some sections of the South China Sea. Put differently, early Chinese authors did not necessarily reserve the term *shanbu* for coral from the Mediterranean. Furthermore, most likely the concept of “coral islands” (*shanbuzhou*) emerged in a domestic context first, before people began transferring it to the context of Da Qin and the Red Sea (or other maritime spaces adjacent to Da Qin). Finally, repeated references to coral islands and corals growing in the South China Sea suggest that Chinese sailors knew these areas very well. Most definitely, works in other Asian languages offer nothing comparable in that regard.⁹

The above leaves open two points. What was the relation between the term / name Zhanghai and the name Čankhay? Is it really true that the term *shanbu* derives from a phonetically similar expression of Iranian origin, as suggested in earlier research?¹⁰ We can no longer tell how and when individual terms and concepts travelled from one Asian region to the next, along the land corridor and / or the maritime routes. Notwithstanding, as was said, there are good reasons for the assumption that Chinese scholars associated corals, their production and the phenomenon of coral islands with the Nanhai first before also transferring these concepts and the relevant terms to the “Far West”.

Chinese Imports and Uses of Coral

As we move on in time, towards the Sui, Tang and Song dynasties, it becomes

evident that foreign merchants and tribute delegations continued to bring coral to China quite regularly. Sources of these periods do not allow us to draw a clear picture of the prices and quantities involved in that trade, but it is beyond doubt that coral pieces and small objects made of coral were among the more precious import items. Chinese monarchs and the well-to-do also admired unbroken “coral trees”, or *shanbushu*. These were exotic treasures, and it is very likely that some specimen existed in private collections. The *Sancai tubui* 三才圖會, a popular “encyclopedia” of the early seventeenth century, and an earlier work, the *Yiyu tuzhi* 異域圖志 of the mid-fourteenth century, provide illustrations of rare “coral trees” in association with brief descriptions of Da Qin and Mojiala 默伽臘 (second character also *qie*).¹¹ Presumably similar illustrations existed in earlier sources, but they are now lost. Be that as it may, quite evidently many influential persons considered coral as a beautiful and highly decorative substance. This contributed to continued demand for *shanbu*.

We still need to discuss the toponym Mojiala. Several versions of that name have survived in ancient texts. Here I only mention two or three cases: The *Lingwai da da* 嶺外代答 (1178) has Mojia 默伽, the *Zhufan zhi* 諸蕃志 (1225) gives *Mojialie* 默伽獵. The *Shilin guangji* 事林廣記 (late Song / early Yuan) has Mojiala (as in *Yiyu tuzhi* and *Sancai tubui*).¹² All these names seem to stand for the Maghreb region, or just for Morocco. We may add, the distant “West” was not totally unknown in Song times. Merchants active during this period operated complex networks, which connected China via the coastal regions of India to major destinations around the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. From Syria and Egypt some of these networks extended to the central and western sections of the Mediterranean world, many of which were under Islamic control. It was through foreign and Chinese traders regularly coming to or based in Guangzhou, Quanzhou

and other Chinese port cities that stories about distant regions and exotic products began spreading across China. Such stories, collected by local officials, started to enter written accounts.

These sources refer to corals, as we saw, but often they only repeat earlier data, or they mix new and old elements. The *Zhufan zhi* is a case in point. It associates coral with Srivijaya, the Cholas in India, the Near East and the Philippines. This seems new, in part at least, but there is dissent regarding some of the toponyms mentioned in the text. Dashi Pinuoye 大食毗喏耶 (fourth character also *ruo* 若) is one example. The first two characters point to a location in or along the Persian Gulf, or, in a broader sense, to an area under “Arab” influence and control and not just to the Gulf. However, whether Pinuoye was a “Dashi region” in modern Tunisia, as suggested by Hirth and Rockhill, is an open issue. The mode of fishing, also described in the *Zhufan zhi*, reminds of earlier accounts. Evidently, people used iron hooks, nets and windlasses to collect “coral trees” or “branches” from the bottom of the sea; yet, there are minor variations in the descriptions of fishing methods and these variations deserve further research. Currently it seems difficult to assign specific technical elements to specific regions.¹³

By far the most remarkable element in *Zhufan zhi* concerns a very different observation: coral was also available in the Philippines. The place in question bears the name Pulilu 蒲哩嚕, which could be Polillo Island near the Pacific coast of Luzon, Manila Bay or even Bolinao (modern Bolinao Municipality), the latter two on the west side of Luzon. The fact that the *Zhufan zhi* mentions coral in the greater context of that island suggests that some coral had arrived from these areas via the so-called eastern trade route to Fujian; this route passed the southern tip of Taiwan and the Penghu Islands 澎湖群島 (Pescadores).

The precise location of Pulilu may not

matter very much. The more important thing is that the above seems to confirm our earlier assumption, namely that *shanbu* stood for different kinds of coral and that it did not only represent imported material from the “Far West”. Indeed, as already mentioned, Ming and Qing sources, not discussed in the present note, make it abundantly clear that *shanbu* became a widely applied term. Besides that, the Pulilu section in the *Zhufan zhi* mentions green *langgan* along with *shanbu*; this suggests that the author considered *langgan* as yet another type of coral.¹⁴

Here we may return to the question of coral “consumption”. There is no way of estimating the precise value which Tang and Song collectors assigned to individual *shanbushu* or beautiful objects made of coral. However, the two characters for *shanbu* carry the jade radical and this suggests that people classified coral as a kind of gem. Indeed, in Buddhism red coral was one of several precious “stones” used to decorate costly figures. Jewels are rare and expensive; therefore, it is very likely that the trade in coral from both the “Far West” and the South China Sea was a profitable business.

One can identify further uses of *shanbu* in China. Here are just some examples. *Bencao* works offer several prescriptions, which list *shanbu* as one ingredient. Powder made from red coral served for the preparation of ink paste needed for stamping with seals. Coral was an adornment and a symbol of status. Red accessories made of *shanbu* decorated official robes, caps and hats. Artisans carved beautiful snuff-boxes, beads and other small objects from coral. Finally, early sources refer to so-called *shanbugou* 珊瑚鈎. The term is difficult to explain, but probably it simply stood for red amulets. This reminds of similar traditions in Europe, where coral acquired various symbolic functions from very early times onward, especially in religious contexts.

Symbolism in China involves the issue of colours. In Chinese thought, things that

are red often represent the southern direction and they mark auspicious events. Early texts link distinct colours to individual dynasties and periods. Red is the colour often assigned to the Han dynasty and especially to the long reign of Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 140–87 BC), one of China’s most successful rulers. This may explain why several later accounts refer to *shanbu* in such contexts, usually retrospectively. Apparently, coral became quite popular in these early times. Scholars even began associating it with the beautiful residence of Xiwangmu 西王母 on the Kunlun Mountain 崑崙山. In short, already in the Medieval Period red *shanbu* gradually started to move from the real to the imaginative sphere.¹⁵

The “purely” literary world includes several poems and short prose works, which refer to coral. In fact, the history of *shanbu* as a literary element seems to begin with Sima Xiangru whom we had briefly mentioned in the introductory part of the present article. Since then, *shanbu* became a standard item in a growing repertory of *mirabilia*. Some of its semantic dimensions gradually changed or broadened in the course of time. So far, modern scholarship has paid little attention to all that. The same applies to *langgan* also referred to above; detailed studies will be needed to disentangle the precise literary qualities of such terms.

Final Remarks: Returning to the Question of Geography

This is not the place to discuss Chinese imports of *shanbu* during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. There are just some geographical aspects, one may add to the panorama described above. The *Taiping huanyu ji* 太平寰宇記 (late 10th century) and *Yudi jisheng* 輿地紀勝 (usually dated 1221), both comprehensive geographies of the Song Empire, refer to one (or several?) *shanbuzhou* beyond the southern shores of Dongguan County 東莞縣 in Central

Guangdong. Whether this implies a location in the area of modern Hong Kong or whether the name / term stands for the Dongsha Islands 東沙群島, which are at a greater distance from the mainland, remains an open issue. Notwithstanding, many later works and maps record a place of that “name” near the littoral of Central Guangdong.¹⁶

A further issue is the famous Nestorian inscription of Tang times. There are many translations and studies of this text. One recent work is a book by Max Deeg, *The Nestorian text gives the name / term Shanhu zhi hai 珊瑚之海*, literally “Coral Sea”, which could be a poetical name for the Red Sea. This may evoke a connection between certain European / West Asian toponyms – for example “Mare Rubrum” and “Erythrá Thálassa” (Ἐρυθρὰ Θάλασσα) – and the red colour of corals. If so, it is also possible that the authors of the inscription made use of the name *Shanbu zhi hai* to distinguish the Red Sea from the Zhanghai. Here one may note: During the Tang period scholars still referred to the Zhanghai and the Nestorians had certainly found the latter name in earlier records.¹⁷

In lieu of discussing further names and terminological problems, I shall conclude my glosses by drawing attention to another remarkable issue, which puts us much beyond the time horizon of the present paper. Jesuit written sources and maps record a cluster of coral islands in the Pacific Ocean; they call these islands Shanhu(shu)dao 珊瑚(樹)島. Chinese cartographic works influenced by Jesuit geographical concepts also show such islands, but they are not always correctly placed on the maps.¹⁸ Be that as it may, the Pacific case reveals another, more interesting dimension. As mentioned above, the element *shanbu* can stand for various kinds of coral. Moreover, the islands in question, visible on several European drawings which the Jesuits must have studied before preparing their own maps, are not really known for red coral; rather, they mostly offer different varieties. Thus, both the European fathers and their Chinese friends,

when talking about corals / *shanbu*, had no problems in applying these appellations to a number of oceanic sites and species, including reef-building corals. This in turn suggests that Ming scholars, just as their predecessors in earlier times, were familiar with the nature of the atolls in the South China Sea. Therefore, the story of *shanbu* and *shanbuzhou* bears a political dimension. It is one of several mosaic stones that indirectly give proof of a continued Chinese presence in the island world of the Nanhai.

Selected Collections with Fragments Drawn from Lost Chinese Texts

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Notes

¹ Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shi ji* 史記, 10 vols. (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1975), j. 117, p. 3026. For the *Shuyi ji*. Roderich Ptak, “Shanhu 珊瑚 im Shuyi ji 述異記”, in Roderich Ptak (ed.), *Aus geteilten Zeiten. Geburtstagsgabe für Shing Müller* 宋馨. *Studien zur Nanbeichao-Periode* (Gossensberg, Ostasien Verlag, 2020), pp. 187-212.

² For coral objects, mostly in Europe, see for example, Giovanni Tescione, *Il corallo nella storia e nell’arte* (Naples, Montanino, 1965), and J. Malcolm Shick, *Where Corals Lie. A Natural and Cultural History* (London, Reaktion Books, 2018). For China: Pippa Lacey, “The Coral Network: The Trade of Red Coral to the Qing Imperial Court in the Eighteenth Century”, in Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (eds.), *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World* (Abingdon etc., Routledge, 2016), pp. 81-102; Tiziana Iannello, “Itinerari e fonti del *Corallium rubrum*. I commerci tra Mediterraneo, India, Cina e Giappone dall’antichità alla prima età moderna”, *Annali di Ca’ Foscari. Serie occidentale* 51 (September 2017), pp. 109-128; Anna Grasskamp, “Branches and Bones:

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³ On these and other terms, see, for example, Chen Guodong 陈国栋, “Haiyang shijie de guannian jiaohuan: yi ji ge Hanyu jieci wei li” 海洋世界的观念交换: 以几个汉语借词为例, in Li Qingxin 李庆新 et al. (eds.), *Xue bai yang fan yijiazhi. Guangdong sheng shehui kexueyuan lishi yu Sun Zhongshan yanjiusuo (Haiyang shi yanjiu zhongxin) chengli liushi nian jinian wenji* 学海扬帆一甲子——广东省社会科学院历史与孙中山研究所 (海洋史研究中心) 成立六十年纪念文集 (Beijing, Kexue chubanshe, 2019), pp. 727-740. Also see Zhao Liyun 赵丽云, “Da Qin shanhu, langgan kaoxi” 大秦珊瑚、琅玕考析, *Xi’nan keji daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 西南科技大学学报 (哲学社会科学版), vol. 37, no. 4 (2020), pp. 33-39. Illustrations of *langgan* and *shanhu* in *bencao* works are, for example, in Tang Shenwei 唐慎微 et al., *Chongxiu Zhenglei jingshi Zhenglei beiyong bencao* 重修正和經史證類備用本草 (short form *Zhenglei bencao*) (Taipei, Nantian shuju youxian gongsi, 1976), j. 4, p. 116; Li Shizhen 李时珍, *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (Beijing, Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 1990), vol. I, illustrations 3.

⁴ Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuo wen jie zi shu* 說文解字注, commented by Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (Shanghai, Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981),

1st *pian* (*shang*), 36b-37a (pp. 18-19). Also quoted, for example, in *Taiping yulan*, vol. IV, j. 807, 3b, p. 3586. Here, I exclude from the discussion such terms as *shanhubua* 珊瑚花, *shanbucai* 珊瑚菜, etc.

⁵ See, for example, Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand. A Study of Tang Exotics* (Berkeley etc., University of California Press, 1963), especially pp. 246-247; Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird. Tang Images of the South* (Berkeley etc., University of California Press, 1967), p. 159; August Pfizmaier, “Beiträge zur Geschichte der Edelsteine und des Goldes” (Wien: Aus der K. K. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei in Commission bei Karl Gerold’s Sohn..., 1868; originally in *Sitzungsberichte der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien, Philosophisch-historische Klasse* 58, 1867).

⁶ For the Zhanghai, see, for example, Nanmingzi 南溟子 (=Chen Jiarong 陳佳榮), “Zhanghai kao” 漲海考 (n.d.), 281-290, <http://www.world10k.com/blog/pdf/281-290.pdf> (accessed 04.06.2020). Also see Roderich Ptak, “Zhanghai: Raum und Konzept. Von den Anfängen bis zur Tang-Zeit”, in Shing Müller, Thomas O. Höllmann, Putao Gui (eds.), *Guangdong: Archaeology and Early Texts / Archäologie und frühe Texte (Zhou-Tang)* (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004), pp. 241-253. Also see the entries in the old work by Gerini, *Researches on Ptolemy’s Geography of Eastern India: Further India and Indo-Malay Archipelago* (New Delhi, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1974; originally London 1909).

⁷ For details and references to the sources in which these quotations appear, see Chen Jiarong 陳佳榮, *Sui qian Nanhai jiaotong shiliao yanjiu* 隋前南海交通史料研究 (Hong Kong, Xianggang daxue Yazhou yanjiu zhongxin, 2003), and Roderich Ptak, with the assistance of Wang Yang, “Around and About the Term / Name *Shanbuzhou* 珊瑚洲 in Traditional Chinese Sources”, *Journal of Asian History* 55.1 (2021), pp. 31-66, especially part IV. Also see the many modern collections containing old textual fragments. For example: *Han Tang fangzhi jiyi* and *Waiguo zhuàn*.

⁸ See Chen Shou 陳壽, *Sanguo zhi* 三

國志, 5 vols. (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1973; originally 1959), vol. III (*Wei shu* 魏書), j. 30, pp. 858-863 (note). For English translations and various comments, see, for example, Friedrich Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient. Researches into their Ancient and Medieval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (Rpt. Chicago, Ares Publ. Inc., 1975; originally 1885), pp. 67 et seq., 76, 110 et seq., 193-195; Donald D. Leslie, and K. H. J. Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources* (Rome, Bardi Editore, 1996), p. 5, pp. 65-78, 194-196; John E. Hill (trans.), *The Peoples of the West from the Weilue 魏略 by Yu Huan 魚豢: A Third Century Chinese Account Composed between 239 and 265, Quoted in zhuàn 30 of the Sanguozhi, Published in 429 AD*. N.p. 2004, <http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/weilue/weilue.html> (accessed 06.06.2020), sections / notes 17 (especially 17.1), 19 (especially 19.1); Yu Taishan 余太山, “China and the Ancient Mediterranean World: A Survey of Ancient Chinese Sources”, in *Sino-Platonic Papers*, vol. 242 (2013), pp. 32, 37, 38, 80 et seq., 107-109.

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¹⁰ Janusz Chmielewski, “Two Early Loan-words in Chinese”, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1961), pp. 65-86. A “classic” on Sino-Iranian cultural contacts is Berthold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica. Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran, With Special References to the History of Cultivated Plants and Products* (Chicago, Field Museum of Natural History, 1919).

¹¹ *Sancai tubui* 三才圖會, ed. by Wang Qi 王圻 and Wang Siyi 王思義, 3 vols. (Shanghai, Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), vol. I, section “renwu”, 18a, 21a, pp. 862, 863; *Yiyu tuzhi* 異域圖志, anonymous, in the Wade Collection (Cambridge): <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-FC-00246-00005/112> (accessed 28-02-2021), p. 53b. – Regarding the illustrations in *Sancai tubui*, one may note that they depict coral trees quite differently. However, they resist clear interpretations.

¹² For these toponyms, see, for example

Friedrich Hirth and W. W. Rockhill, *Chau Ju-kuo: His Work on the Chinese and Arab Trade in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, Entitled Chu-fan-chi* (Rpt. Taipei, Ch'eng-Wen Publishing Company, 1970; originally 1911), p. 154; Victoria Almonte, *The Historical Value of the Work Lingwai daida by Zhou Qufei* (Canterano, Aracne editrice, 2020), pp. 183-184. Also see Chen Jiarong 陈佳荣, Xie Fang 谢方 and Lu Junling 陆峻岭, *Gudai Nanhai diming huishi 古代南海地名汇释* (Beijing, Zhong-hua shu-ju, 1986), p. 861; Yang Wuquan 杨武泉 (ed.), *Lingwai dai da jiaozhu 岭外代答校注* (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1999), pp. 127, 128 n. 11; Su Jiqing 苏继颀 (ed.), *Daoyi zhibilie jiaoshi 岛夷誌略校释* (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1981), p. 350 n. 1; Chen Yuanjing 陈元靓, *Shilin guangji 事林广记*, modern preface by Hu Daojing 胡道静, 6 vols. with one addendum called *Fanguo lei 方国类* (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1963), *Fanguo lei*, p. 4b.

¹³ Hirth and Rockhill, *Chau Ju-kuo*, pp. 61, 96, 103, 140, 226.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162; also *Zhufan zhi zhubu 诸蕃志注补*, by Zhao Rukuo (last character different transcriptions) 赵汝适, ed. by Han Zhenhua 韩振华 (with a Chinese translation of the English comments by F. Hirth and W. W. Rockhill), in Han Zhenhua zhuzuo zhengli xiaozu 韩振华著作整理小组 (Xie Fang 谢方, Qian Jiang 钱江, Chen Jiarong 陈佳荣 et al., eds.), *Han Zhenhua xuanji 韩振华选集*, vol. 2 (Hongkong, Centre of Asian Studies, 2000), pp. 279-280 n. 4.

¹⁵ For the above and more details, see Ptak, “Shanhu”, pp. 200-203 and especially n. 36 there.

¹⁶ Yue Shi 乐史, *Taiping huanyu ji 太平寰宇记*, ed. by Wang Wenchu 王文楚 et al., 9 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), vol. VII, j. 157, p. 3030 n. 49; Wang Xiangzhi 王象之, *Yudi jisheng 舆地纪胜*, 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), vol. III, j. 89, 13b, p. 2844. Also Ptak, “Around and About the Term / Name *Shanhu*”. – Note: The illustration in *Chongxiu Zhenghe jingshi*

Zhenglei beiyong bencao, j. 4, p. 116, bears the title “Guangdong shanhu”, i.e., “Coral from Guangdong”. It also quotes earlier sources, which tell us that coral came from the Nanhai region, Sri Lanka and other places.

¹⁷ Max Deeg, *Die Strahlende Lebre. Die Stele von Xi'an* (Wien, Lit Verlag, 2018). See also, for example, Leslie and Gardiner, *The Roman Empire*, pp. 115-116, 270, 278. A recent Chinese discussion: Zhao Liyun 赵丽云, “Han Tang shi ren dui Da Qin de renshi ji qi yuwai guannian – yi ‘Da Qin jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei’ suo ji ‘Da Qin’ wei zhongxin” 汉唐时人对大秦的认知及其域外观念——以《大秦景教流行中国碑》所记“大秦”为中心, *Shibezi daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban) 石河子大学学报(哲学社会科学版)*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2014), p. 121.

¹⁸ See, for example, Pasquale M. D’Elia, *Il mappamondo cinese del P. Matteo Ricci S. J. (Terza edizione, Pechino 1602) conservato presso la Biblioteca Vaticana* (Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1938), Tavola XI-XII (segment Ah), XV-XVI (segment Fg); Huang Shijian 黄时鉴 and Gong Yingyan 龚纓晏, *Li Madou shijie ditu yanjiu 利马竇世界地图研究* (Shanghai, Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004), p. 197, also plates 26 (segment A1) and 29 (segment G1-2); Ai Rulüe 艾儒略 (Giulio Aleni), commented by Xie Fang 谢方, *Zhifang waiji jiaoshi 职方外纪校释* (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1996), pp. 139-140, 154; Aleni (De Troia’s translation), *Geografia dei paesi stranieri alla Cina*, *Zhifang waiji 职方外纪* (Brescia, Fondazione Civiltà Bresciana, Centro Giulio Aleni, 2009), pp. 172, 191-192. Later on, Ferdinand Verbiest repeats some of these details. For a Chinese map influenced by European cartography, see Roderich Ptak, “The Sino-European Map (*Shanhai yudi quantu*) in the Encyclopaedia *Sancai tubu*”, in Angela Schottenhammer and Roderich Ptak (eds.), *The Perception of Maritime Space in Traditional Chinese Sources* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), pp. 191-207.