Introduction

In 1497, Vasco da Gama set sail from Portugal, seeking an eastern route to Asia and its fabled lands of gold and spices. As he ventured south along Africa's western coast, da Gama traveled in waters previously unknown to Europeans – and little known to Muslim and Chinese geographers as well.[1] This was no longer the case, however, from the moment he rounded the Cape of Good Hope and passed into the Indian Ocean. Once there, the Portuguese explorer and his crew found themselves on the world's longest sea trade route in regular use to date – a series of passages that linked the peoples of East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, India, Southeast Asia, and ultimately, China.

Da Gama did find the route to India, but his success depended largely on the expertise of a Muslim navigator familiar with the sea routes that led to Calicut. What da Gama himself knew about his world does not concern us in this book, but rather the knowledge of his navigator. This book seeks to understand the extent of the geographic knowledge that existed between two of the principal actors that created this interconnected world of Asia, namely China and the Islamic world, as well as the processes by which they gained this knowledge over centuries of continuous contact. We will, in effect, try to see the world as it looked through the eyes of da Gama's navigator and those of the Asian geographers, mapmakers, and others whose accumulated wisdom would prove so vital to European explorers such as da Gama on their celebrated voyages.

This book challenges the prevalent Eurocentric approach to world history – which continues to see the year 1492 as the initial moment of interaction between distant cultures – by examining the eight centuries of contact and exchange prior to 1492 involving two of the world's major

cultures: China and the Islamic world.[2] From around 700 to 1500, each society enjoyed similarly high levels of economic and cultural development. Hubs of information ran parallel to their rich markets for goods. As the Chinese sought spices and fragrances from the Middle East, they also gained knowledge about advanced astronomy, mathematics, engineering, and medicine. As merchants from the Islamic world purchased silks and porcelains from China, they in turn adopted various technological inventions pioneered by the Chinese, such as the art of papermaking and the compass. This activity also naturally resulted in the increase of mutual geographic knowledge. Mapmakers and writers recorded this new geographic information, thanks to the rich literary traditions of both societies. By 1500, the Chinese learned significantly more about the Islamic world, and the Muslims of West Asia and North Africa knew a great deal more about China, than either society had known about each other in the eighth century. During these eight centuries preceding Vasco da Gama, a great metamorphosis occurred: Asia's most affluent and powerful societies, each located at the extreme end of the other's known world, transformed their understanding of each other, turning *terra incognita* into *terra cognita*.

In 750, maps of China did not exist in the Islamic world, nor did the Chinese possess maps of the Islamic world. Chinese geographers knew about *Dashi*, the Chinese term for the Arabs or Arabia (and later for the Muslims in general),[3] but had little idea about their region's geographic shape. Similarly, their counterparts in the Islamic world in the early years of Islam had only a vague notion of China, a country at the eastern end of the Silk Road from which merchants returned with silks and other goods, but whose precise location was not well-defined. In the ensuing centuries, merchants, diplomats, and travelers from both spheres acquired and disseminated a great deal of knowledge about the histories, customs, and religious practices of other societies. Scholars then recorded their accounts, and based on their data, cartographers drew increasingly more detailed maps of the two regions and the lands that linked them (see Figures 0.1 and 0.2).

Figure 0.1 shows the world map drawn by the Muslim geographer al-Idrīsī in the mid-twelfth century. Placing the Arabian Peninsula at the center, al-Idrīsī presents a very accurate depiction of the Mediterranean coastline to the west and the Indian Ocean and seas reaching China to the east. Figure 0.2 shows a map drawn in Korea in 1402 that, according to its Korean authors, was based on maps drawn in China during the fourteenth century. The 1402 map therefore reveals the level of Chinese

FIGURE 0.1. Al-Idrīsī's map of the world from his *Pleasure of He who Longs to Cross the Horizons* (*Nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq*, dated to 1154), copy of 1553. By permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (Ms. Pococke 375, fols. 3b–4a). The original map placed the south on top; the map is reversed here for clarity.

understanding about the world at the time, which included accurate knowledge of the contours of the Arabian Peninsula and Africa. This leap from no maps to fairly precise geographic depictions, as evidenced in these two maps, is the direct result of the lively exchange of geographic and cartographic knowledge between the Chinese and Islamic worlds.[4]

The state of European geographic knowledge during this period stands in clear contrast to the elaborate, systematic, and accurate descriptions of the world that Asian contemporaries produced thanks to continuous and open contact. Although the Europeans aspired to understand and engage the lands to the east from which exotic goods came, their knowledge

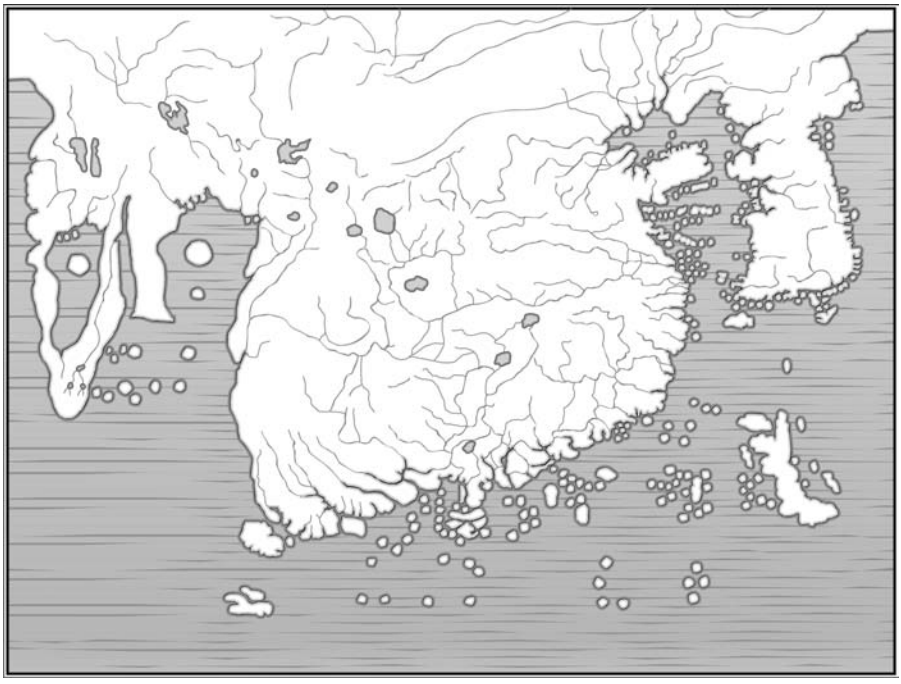

FIGURE 0.2. *The Map of Integrated Regions and Terrains and of Historical Countries and Capitals* (*Honil gangni yeokdae gukdo jido*, or shortly the *Kangnido*) – the world map drawn in Korea in 1402 based on maps drawn in China during the Mongol period. This copy of the Korean original is dated 1470 and held in Ryūkoku University, Kyoto, Japan. Redrawn after the original image.

remained largely circumscribed by a simplistic world view, represented by the "T-in-the-O" map: this image accounted for the Middle East but depicted distant places such as China as little more than fabled lands of monsters and the original Garden of Eden.[5] One of the first important sources of information was the travelogue of Marco Polo, who claimed to have journeyed to and from China between 1271 and 1295. Its contents constituted a sum of all geographic knowledge circulating throughout Asia in the fourteenth century. Da Gama's predecessors, Henry the Navigator and Christopher Columbus, were each said to have read the travelogue. In other words, the geographic knowledge of the world gradually accumulated in China and the Islamic world and communicated through Marco Polo (as well as other geographic and travel accounts) helped open the way to the age of European exploration and discovery in the sixteenth century.[6]

Although an enormous number of secondary sources about pre modern Sino-Islamic relations already exist in many languages,[7] this book is the first to treat both sides of the exchange equally, using a comparative analysis of major primary sources in Chinese, Arabic, and Persian. These sources taken together provide enough data to trace the cross-cultural exchange of geographic knowledge that took place between these two societies, which, as we have just seen, would have powerful implications for world history.

China and the Islamic World: Connected by Land and Sea

To define what we mean by "China" and "the Islamic world," this study uses geographic markers that reflect the two societies' perceptions of each other during the pivotal eight centuries. "China" refers to the river valleys of the Yellow, Yangzi, and Pearl Rivers, which, in our period of study, was sometimes under Han Chinese rule and sometimes not.[8] "The Islamic world" refers to the regions of modern-day Iraq and Iran as well as North and East Africa and Turkestan. For practical purposes, this study does not include other parts of the world where Muslim populations predominated, such as Southeast Asia. People living in these geographic regions of China and the Islamic world came to share similar cultures and traditions after a long process of intraregional political interactions.[9] As they did, writers within that region gradually defined their own societies and differentiated them from other societies.

The earliest people to call themselves Chinese established the first Chinese states on the North China Plain along the Yellow River sometime between 1500 and 200 BCE. They called their states the "Middle Kingdom" (*zhongguo*) to contrast them with their "barbarian" neighbors, according to their world view. Gradually the whole of China proper was unified, both politically and culturally, and the Chinese maintained and accentuated their cultural distinction over the centuries under successive ruling dynasties.[10] One of China's earliest contacts with peoples to the west was with the pre-Islamic Sassanid empire of Iran (226–651). The means of contact was the overland routes of the Silk Road, but because of the huge distances and many natural obstacles, the exchange typically took place via relays. Traders such as the famous Sogdian merchants, who made their home in what is now Uzbekistan, would travel back and forth in short circuits, passing commodities from one market to another. These goods would then move along another stretch of the overland route via another set of carriers.[11] We can assume that some basic knowledge

about the land and people of China was transmitted from one merchant to another along with the goods they traded, and eventually made its way to the Arabian Peninsula. It is important to note that this information was probably more substantial than that transmitted to the Roman empire, for Roman writers tell us only about a place called *Serica* [*Sērikē*], the country of silk. The Indo-Iranian term for China that circulated in Central and West Asia at this time was *Chīn*, probably derived from the name of the first Chinese empire, Qin (221–210 BCE). The Arabs subsequently borrowed this term to create their own word for China, *al-Ṣīn*.[12] They continued to use the name, even several centuries after the fall of the Qin dynasty.

In 622, a new force intervened in the established trading routes linking China and West Asia. A new religion, Islam, began to rise as a strong political power under the Arabs, who swiftly conquered West Asia and soon after asserted their political dominance over Central Asia, North Africa, and Southern Europe, creating the political and cultural unity known as *ummah* (the Community of the Muslim Believers). The Umayyad caliphate's expansion into Central Asia reached as far as Kashgar, the oasis city located at the western end of contemporary China. As the western side of Eurasia experienced political upheaval, a new, strong, and outward-looking dynasty – the Tang – came to power in China, establishing itself in the year 618.

A few extant sources reveal that contacts between the Tang dynasty (618–907) and the Islamic caliphates existed during this early period. Even if we exclude the legendary story about the visit of Muḥammad's close relative Saʿd b. Abī Waqqās to Guangzhou (Canton) in the seventh century, official Chinese histories mention thirty-three Arab diplomatic missions to keep peaceful relations with the Tang dynasty between 651 and 750. Unfortunately, Arabic sources corroborate very few of these accounts,[13] and we do not know how many of these missions were dispatched by the Islamic rulers. Merchants from western Asia, including Sogdians and Persians, continued to visit China in large numbers along the Silk Road as they had even before the rise of the Tang dynasty, and many undoubtedly provided the Chinese with information about their native lands as well as neighboring countries. At the same time, Chinese geographers learned about the rise of Islam from people traveling to West Asia such as Buddhist monks. The earliest surviving Chinese source that mentions Dashi (the Arabs) is an account by the Korean monk Hyecho [Chinese: Huichao] (704–787), who traveled from China to India and Central Asia. His narrative contains a brief sentence about the Arab

invasion of Iran (651), which indicates that the Chinese knew about the event.[14]

Around 750, the histories of the two societies entered a new, dramatic phase. After a successful rebellion in Central Asia (Khorasan/Transoxania), the ʿAbbāsids replaced the Umayyad caliphate (661–750). Continuing its eastward push, the ʿAbbāsid caliphate (750–1258) soon collided with the westward expanding Tang dynasty. This first full-scale contact between the Chinese and Islamic societies took the form of clashes over political and military supremacy in Central Asia. As we will see in Chapter 1, soon after contest, the conditions of overland routes gradually worsened and Silk Road trade dwindled. Their decline, however, stimulated the development of ocean routes. By the eighth century, sea travel in the Indian Ocean became the predominant mode of contact, both direct and indirect, between China and the Islamic world.

According to the first-century Greek text *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, it was the Greeks who pioneered the sailing route from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, which they called the Erythraean Sea, during the mid-first century CE.[15] The account details navigation itineraries and the kinds of goods traded in ports along the way, but provides only a vague description of a country beyond India called *Thīnai* (*Sinae*), from which silks came.[16] After the *Periplus*, western sources mostly fall silent about routes in the Indian Ocean. A few archaeological sources reveal activity by Persians who sailed through the Indian Ocean and into East Asia.[17] Chinese official histories before 750 (sources are few for the contemporary Islamic world) record a long-term development of Chinese maritime trade with Southeast and South Asian merchants.[18] Here lay an opportunity, it seems, for Chinese and West Asians to meet somewhere in the Indian Ocean's midst. However, middlemen from South and Southeast Asia primarily conducted trade on both ends, and therefore, the scale of the trade and contact was limited.

Sources, in both Chinese and Arabic, testify to a dramatic – and soon becoming steady – growth in scale of maritime contact between China and the Islamic world after 750. This study focuses primarily on maritime contacts in order to contrast it with the more familiar narratives about China's contact with the western regions through the famous overland Silk Routes. By the 1500s (when Europeans were initiating active contact with Asian markets), political fragmentation of the Islamic world – such as the establishment of the Shi'i Savavid empire that served as a block between the Sunni kingdoms (Uzbeks and Ottomans) – was disrupting overland trade. At the same time, maritime trade operated continuously

even in the face of strife. And so, Europeans in the 1500s traveled to Asia along the maritime routes, including those between Iraq and China that Arab-Persian Muslims and Chinese had pioneered in earlier times.

Despite our maritime emphasis here, it is crucial to also examine the important diplomatic channels conducted through overland routes. In fact, maritime and overland societies experienced political integration during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries under the Mongols, who conquered most of Eurasia and reopened overland routes that had been in decline for centuries. Even during this period, however, Sino-Islamic contacts grew most through maritime commercial channels. Only recently have scholars begun to pay attention to the significance of maritime trade during the Mongol period, which the nomadic Mongol rulers supported more vigorously than anyone had suspected.[19]

During the several centuries of continuous Sino-Islamic contact, scholars and geographers in both societies began to write about each other. Most of these accounts contain information about trade goods, local products and inventions, sailing routes, history, and customs – knowledge intended to facilitate trade relations. When this commercially-oriented information circulated between the two societies, other forms of knowledge such as science and technology (including cartographic techniques) traveled with it. Thus, Sino-Islamic exchange led to an overall growth in cross-cultural knowledge, which served to encourage further contact. How well we can calibrate this growth depends on our ability to interpret the geographical and cartographical evidence before us.

Source Materials

Specialists in comparative history realize that it is not easy to find equivalent sources from both sides of an encounter. Such is the case when studying Sino-Islamic contacts. Fortunately, China and the Islamic world, arguably the world's two most advanced societies between 750 and 1500, both produced abundant texts on a variety of subjects. By 750, the Chinese literary tradition was already over a thousand years old, and by the eleventh century, the Chinese were producing texts on a mass scale thanks to the innovation and spread of wood-block printing. As a result, more books from China survive in their complete forms than from any other culture of this period. Literature in the Islamic world, in contrast, did not blossom until the creation of the Qur'ān in the seventh century, which initiated the standardization of written Arabic, a necessary precursor to the evolution of Arabic literature.[20] From the eighth century onward, the

number of Arabic literary genres increased dramatically, but manuscripts would continue to be hand copied for a millennium, as printing would not be introduced until the nineteenth century. Despite the disparities in the quantity and quality of written sources, both Chinese and Islamic societies boast rich collections of texts and manuscripts. These provide modern historians enough source material with which to make a balanced comparison of each society's knowledge about the other, and about the world at large.[21] In this book we will examine geographic accounts, travel and diplomatic narratives, and maps, and supplement these principal sources with contextual information drawn from official histories, local gazetteers, and other kinds of literary works. Data from archaeological excavations will provide further contextual information and supplement the limitations of written sources.

Presenting a challenge to our study is the fact that few original manuscripts from this early period survive intact. In most cases, what we have to work with are copies made long after the original first appeared. As scholars well know, the original words could sometimes be distorted through successive generations of copies. The problem of copies and how to deal with them has provoked some fascinating debate, and urges us to consider the matter more seriously.[22] Here again, contextual sources will prove essential as points of cross-reference.

Geographic Accounts

This category of texts encompasses writings that convey information about another society's geography, history, customs, and trade goods, regardless of the author's purpose in writing the work. Most such accounts supply basic information about peoples and societies in an itemized fashion, organized country by country, although some authors present this information in more dynamic narrative form. The earliest of these works were written by men who had never traveled to the countries they wrote about; these writers depended instead on the secondhand reports and hearsay of others. Consequently, their accounts are full of vague and fantastic stories about *terra incognita*. As contacts increased, however, authors writing about other societies were able to include firsthand information in order to satisfy the interests of their respective governments and of the general public.

Sima Qian (circa 145–86 BCE), often considered "the Herodotus of China," was the first Chinese historian to write about western peoples. In the classic *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*), he based his descriptions of the countries of the Western Regions (*Xiyu*) on information

provided to him by Zhang Qian (died 113 BCE), the envoy who first pioneered the overland Silk Route through Central Asia. Here is the first part of Sima Qian's account of the Parthian empire (*Anxi*), which flourished between 247 BCE and 224 CE in what is now Iran and Iraq:[23]

> The Parthian Empire [Anxi] is situated several thousand *li* [1 *li* = approximately ½ kilometer] west of the region of the Great Yuezhi. The people are settled on the land, cultivating the fields and growing rice and wheat. They also make wine out of grapes. They have walled cities like the people of Dayuan, the region containing several hundred cities of various sizes. The kingdom, which borders the Gui [Oxus] river, is very large, measuring several thousand *li* square. Some of the inhabitants are merchants who travel by carts or boats to neighboring countries, sometimes journeying several thousand *li*. The coins of the country are made of silver and bear the face of the king. When the king dies, the currency is immediately changed and new coins issued with the face of his successor. The people keep records by writing horizontally on strips of leather….
>
> When the Han envoys first visited the kingdom of Parthia, the king of Parthia dispatched a party of twenty thousand horsemen to meet them on the eastern border of his kingdom. The capital of the kingdom is several thousand *li* from the eastern border, and as the envoys proceeded there they passed through twenty or thirty cities inhabited by great numbers of people. When the Han envoys set out again to return to China, the king of Parthia dispatched envoys of his own to accompany them, and after the latter had visited China and reported on its great breadth and might, the king sent some of the eggs of the great birds which live in the region, and skilled tricksters of Lixuan, to the Han court as gifts.[24]

Sima Qian's history represented a breakthrough in the Chinese understanding of the far west: No longer a fantasy land of mysterious creatures and immortal spirits, the territories of the west were now real, containing societies of normal mortals complete with farms, cities, markets, currencies, kings, and even systems of writing that could be described.[25] The description of Anxi is typical of most Chinese accounts of foreign countries, specifying their geographic location, natural environment, local products, types of cities, markets, merchants, monetary system, and political and diplomatic relations with neighboring countries as well as with China. The Chinese gradually accumulated factual information about other societies that differed distinctly from the material found in the "classics" of their times, such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing*), whose fantastic creatures defy empirical testing.[26] Sima Qian dismissed such texts as unreliable once actual reports about foreign places came to him from travelers like Zhang Qian.[27]