

Kunlun and Kunlun Slaves as Buddhists in the Eyes of the Tang Chinese

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Abstract. As the entries on Kunluns and Kunlunnus increased in the historical records of Tang, art pieces depicting them also increased. The people of Tang wrote mystical tales about the Kunlunnu, who possessed supernatural powers. Kunlun was not a word that indicated a specific country in Southeast Asia. Kunluns are represented in the historical records as having "wavy hair and dark skin". Even if Hinduism was more prevalent than Buddhism in Southeast Asia from the third century to the seventh century, Kunluns were often presented as followers of the Buddhist faith in Chinese art, which likely resulted from the fact that the Southeast Asians brought in Buddhist goods as items with which to pay tribute to China. This is why the Chinese presumed that the Southeast Asians were fervent Buddhists. Within the tributary system, the Kunlunnus from a certain region in Southeast Asia were strangers to the Chinese, but they became regarded as Buddhists with magical powers, which departed from their real existence.

Keywords and phrases: Kunlun, Kunlunnu, Tang China, Southeast Asia, Buddhism

Introduction

The Southeast Asian historian, O. W. Wolters (1967, 153) wrote that the Chinese called the Southeast Asian maritime people and region "the Kunlun" 崑崙 from the beginning of their acquaintance with them. Kunlun was also written as Kunlun 昆侖 and Juelun 掘倫 in Chinese records. The Southeast Asian people who engaged in maritime commerce with China during the fifth and sixth centuries CE were known as Kunlun, but from the seventh century onward, the term was limited to the people of Indonesia. Wolters claims that the Chinese referred to all of the people who were involved in maritime commerce with themselves as Kunlun.

However, in the historical records from the period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, such as the *Book of Jin* (*Jinshu* 晉書), the *Book of Southern Qi* (*Nanqishu* 南齊書), the *Book of Liang* (*Liangshu* 梁書) and the *History of Southern Dynasties* (*Nanshi* 南史), the word Kunlun does not appear as a name that refers to the region or people of Southeast Asia in its entirety. Rather, Kunlun was used vaguely to indicate a region south of China. It was a new word used in a

completely different context from the Kunlunshan 崑崙山 (Mount Kunlun) being the residence of the *Xiwangmu* 西王母 (Queen Mother of the West and the Goddess of Death), as had been recorded in *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Classic of the Mountains and Seas). During the Southern and Northern Dynasties of China, the differences between the numerous states in Southeast Asia were recognised, and the Chinese people distinguished them as individual countries. Records relevant to Southeast Asia were greatly increasing in number and continued to do so into the era of the Tang Dynasty, when the Southeast Asian states repeatedly separated and reorganised themselves, and maritime commerce between these states and China expanded considerably. From the seventh century onwards, along with the rise of Srivijaya, the word Kunlun was used to indicate an island kingdom situated near the equator. In *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (Nanhai Guiji Neifadian* 南海寄歸內法傳) by I-Tsing (*Yijing* 義淨), Kunlun meant Indonesia, precisely Srivijaya, where I-Tsing stayed for a while. When Kunlun appeared in the Chinese records, it was initially used to indicate parts of Southeast Asia, excluding the Champa region, but its meaning later shifted so that it referred to Indonesia and parts of Southeast Asia. The Kunlun region used in Chinese records did not mark a specific country, but rather, its extent was continuously modified as a result of events in Southeast Asian history.

Kunlun, the dwelling place of the *Xiwangmu*, is a fictitious mountain that exists only in the imagination. However, the Kunlun that appears in the historical records after the period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties seems to have been a real and definite location, although it is difficult to be precise about where exactly this location was. Further complicating the matter is that in the eyes of the Tang Chinese, the term Kunlun referred to some of the Southern Barbarians (*Nanman* 南蠻). The Southern Barbarians were the people living in a vast area covering the entirety of Southeast Asia and the region south of the River Yangtze in present-day southern China, all the way down to Yunnan 雲南 Province. Furthermore, many Korean and foreign academics have held the view that a specific region in Southeast Asia was called Kunlun by the Chinese and that the *Kunlunnu* 崑崙奴 were slaves from that region.

This paper reviews these past outlooks on previously existing artistic and literary materials about Kunlun alongside evidence of newly found artefacts and historic records from China to enrich our understanding of the ancient culture of Southeast Asia. In particular, it focuses on the region known as Kunlun and on reconstituting the dual image of the Kunlun people as Chinese society perceived them in the Tang dynasty. The Chinese maintained a guarded yet interested view of the Kunlun, who served as a source of literary imagination and artistic expression. Focusing on the Tang dynasty, the research investigates the concept and image of *Kunlunnu*. The concrete representation of *Kunlunnu*, including the

newly excavated figurines, and the texts, needless to say, came out from Tang dynasty, indicating that the Tang Chinese began to imagine some of the Southeast Asian people as Kunlunnu. This paper will aid in reconstructing the ancient times of Southeast Asia, for which artefacts and documentation are not sufficient.

Kunlun, Kunlun Ships and Kunlun Slaves

If Kunlun and the Kunlun people as terms are completely unrelated to the legendary Mount Kunlun, where the Xiwangmu lives, then where is Kunlun, and who are the Kunlun people? In this section, we will look into the Kunlun, *Kunlun Bo* 崑崙舶 (Kunlun Ship) and Kunlunnu as they appear in written documentation, especially in official historic records. Whichever place and group of people it was used to indicate, Kunlun was a term and description that was used in China. Therefore, attempting an explanation of who is included under the term Kunlun, wherever they may be, requires viewing them and understanding them as strangers and "others" from the perspective of the Chinese. Where is Kunlun? It is possible to infer the answer to this question from the occasional entries found in Chinese records. The following section offers a concise description of these entries.

First, the "Records of Foreign Countries" (*Waiguo chuan* 外國傳) in the history books of China chose the method of defining the many Southeast Asian states by enumerating their specific names. For example, the book mentions the name of a country, such as Pan-pan 盤盤 or Tan-tan 丹丹, and proceeds to explain that "(this country) can be reached by sailing for this number of days in this direction", indicating its direction and distance from China. The size and characteristics, the culture of the country, and whether the country had paid tribute to the Chinese imperial court will be further examined. However, neither the *Old Book of Tang* (*Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書) nor the *New Book of Tang* (*Xin Tangshu* 新唐書) mentions Kunlun as a specific country. The following two entries found in the *Documents on Tang State Matters* (*Tanghuiyao* 唐會要) need further attention.

"On *dingmao* day in October, 665 (second year of Linde), the Emperor was starting from the capital of the eastern trying to Dongyue... many camps lined up in the yard. They are chiefs from Tujue, Yutian, Persia, Tianzhu guo, Jibin, Wuchang, *Kunlun*, Woguo, and Silla, Baekje, Koryo".¹

"Four kinds of barbarians from everywhere and Qianghu came to offer their valuables of nation, (they were) Jielifa from Tujue, king of Xiqidan. Dashi visited to appreciate. The envoys from major tribes in the world, *Kunlun*, Riben, Silla, Meihe came to visit (with offerings)".²

In this example, Kunlun is included in the list of country names. It appears that Kunlun was recognised as an individual country, just like that of the Turks (*Tujue* 突厥), Yutian 于闐, Wuhuan 烏桓 and Baekje 百濟. However, this is the only example of where it is identified as an actual country. The term Kunlun was not generally used to represent a country or a community with a certain level of political structure. It has been noted that the country known as Chitu 赤土 could well be the place that is indicated by the term Kunlun, but this is uncertain (Wang 1968, 63–64). In 636 CE, Emperor Taizong 太宗 of Tang received an envoy from a country called Gantangguo 甘棠國 (country of Gantang), the location of which has not been specified. The *New Book of Tang* only offers that Gantangguo was located south of the sea 海南, and it can be conjectured to be situated on the border of Vietnam. However, the record states that Gantangguo was also "one of the Kunlun" (Wolters 1967, 234). Another similar example can be found in the descriptions of Pan-pan and Lankasuka (*Langyaxiu* 狼牙脣) in the "Records of the Southern Barbarians" (*Nanman chuan* 南蠻傳) in the *New Book of Tang*. All of these are conjectured to have been located in the central regions of the Malay Peninsula. The "Records of the Southern Barbarians" in the *New Book of Tang* states that the king of Pan-pan was called Yangsushi 楊粟翬, or Kunlun, and "amongst those terms that indicate the king's subjects, there are names such as 'Kunlundi' 崑崙帝 and 'Kunlunbohe' 崑崙勃和". This reveals the possibility that Kunlun was a transliteration of a word used in this region. These cases hint that the word Kunlun was a modifier rather than a proper noun in and of itself.

Where is Kunlun as a place? Did the term indicate a specific location or refer to the entire Southeast Asian region? In I-Tsing's *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago*, the Kunlun people are described as having "wavy hair and dark skin" (*Toujuan tihei* 頭捲體黑). However, it is difficult to assume that the physical characteristics of having wavy hair and dark skin specify a certain group of people from a specific country. One research paper estimates that Kunlun was in present day Gorong in Indonesia.³ Gorong is a small island in the southern part of the sea in between the Watubela Archipelago and Ceram. The pronunciation of Gorong and Kunlun are indeed quite similar. However, because Gorong is only a group of small islands, it seems that Gorong lacked not only enough people or ships to do large-scale trade but also enough fame for Tang Chinese to notice it.

As another opinion of where Kunlun is, in the introduction inside the English-translated publication of I-Tsing's *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago*, Takakusu Junjiro 高楠順次朗 (1982, xxxix–xl) speculated that Poulo Condore Island, in the south of Vietnam, could be Kunlun. This is because the island that is currently called Con Dao is translated as Kunlundao 崑崙島 (island of Kunlun) in Chinese characters. This concurs with

the records from the *Old Book of Tang*, which indicates that Kunlun was located south of Hanoi, but it is unlikely that the record intended to specify just one island. Preceding Takakusu, E. Chavannes suggested that the origin of the word Kunlun came from the Chinese word *Gulong* 古龍, a Chinese transliteration for Kou-long. Judging from the fact that people of Funan were dark-skinned and naked, the royal family was named Kou-long, and the king of Pan-pan was called Koulongdi, Chavannes was convinced that the Kunlun referred to by I-Tsing was actually present-day Thailand and Malacca (Takakusu 1982, 11). However, the basis of this assumption is also rather frail. Chavannes claimed that this finding was the result of comparing the entries of the *Old Book of Tang* and the *New Book of Tang*, but there is no record in either book of a king named Gulong.

It is difficult to confirm the exact location of Kunlun because the references found in the Chinese documents are not consistent. The French academic Gabriel Ferrand, who focused on Kunlun, described the following possible locations (quoted from Shi Dongchu 釋東初 et al. 1985, 452–454):

1. East of the Ganges River and the numerous archipelagos on the Malay Peninsula;
2. Mount Kunlun in Pulaw Kundur (Pulo Condore);
3. Culao Cham (*Zhan Bi Luo* 占筆羅 or *Zhan Bu Lao* 占不牢) southeast from Tourane;
4. Champa, Zhenla, Myanmar, Malay Peninsula (Tunson [*Dun Xun* 頓遜] and Pan-pan);
5. Kunlunguo near Nan Zhao 南詔;
6. Kunlun Pass (*Kunlun Guan* 崑崙關) of Guangxi 廣西;
7. Eastern mountains of Fiji (*Feizhou Donglun* 斐洲東崙) and Madagascar.

Ferrand claims that beginning in approximately 1,000 BCE, people moved to wherever Kunlun was from the highlands of Asia, travelling along the Irawadi River, the Salouen River, the Menam River and the Mekong River. As these people moved into the Malay Peninsula and the archipelago, the native people disappeared and later, the Indian culture was diffused. Ferrand's opinion is based on seeing the Kunlun as a single ethnic entity. Although there are many places that are identified as Kunlun in Chinese records, it is questionable whether it is realistic to regard the present-day regional names as the same as the names used during the Tang Dynasty.

A very descriptive explanation of Pyu (*Biao* 驃) appears in the *New Book of Tang*, apparently not in the *Old Book of Tang*. This appearance possibly reflects the circumstances at the time when the *New Book of Tang* was compiled: The

compilers were likely affected by the powerful rise of the Pyu tribe, which prospered after the 800s. Kunlun appears in a passage that describes the vassal states and villages of the Pyu Country (*Biaoguo* 驃國, Myanmar).

"In between Michen 彌臣 and Kunlang 坤郎, a village called Xiaokunlun 小崑崙 (Lesser Kunlun) is located. The name of the King is Mangxiyue 茫悉越 and the customs are the same as in Michen. In between Kunlang and Luyu 祿羽, the Dakunlun 大崑崙 (Greater Kunlun) Kingdom can be found, and the King's name is Siliponanduoshan 思利泊婆難多珊. About a half-day journey away from the place where the Xiaokunlun King lives, one can reach Modeboshan 磨地勃柵... There is a river in Fudaiguo 佛代國 with 360 tributaries... This land produces many unusual spices. A market sits to the north where commerce ships from many countries gather. Across the sea is Dupo".

The Michen and Kunlang in this text are all names of regions, but because they are transliterations, it is difficult to know their exact locations. Xiaokunlun that appears in this text is presumed to be Datong 達通 or Bago of present-day Myanmar. Dakunlun could either be Bago, downstream on the Irawadi River, or Tenasserim (Northeast Asian History Foundation 2011, 1021). Myanmar is a long way from the Gorong Archipelago of the Moluccas, and they have nothing in common. Because there is a great geographical distance between them, the vegetation and specialty products in these two places are also very different. It is unlikely that both the Gorong Archipelago and Bago Bay were called Kunlun. However, there was undoubtedly a certain principle during the Tang era under which it was presumed that many areas and regions could be referred to as Kunlun.

Moving into the Tang era, the area called "Kunlun" became limited primarily to Indonesia near the equator.⁴ This is because with the advent of the Tang era, the meaning of Kunlun expanded to include the subcategories of Kunlunnu (Kunlun slaves) and Kunlun Bo (Kunlun ships). Srivijaya was known as a country rich and politically stable enough to produce and own Kunlun ships. Few examples of Kunlun Ships are mentioned in the written records of China. The story of the Kunlun Bo is featured in the biographical section of the *Book of Southern Qi*, the *Book of Northern Qi* and the *New Book of Tang*.⁵

In the *Book of Southern Qi*, Jiang Jingxuan 江景玄 (479–502) mentions that large Kunlun ships are called *Kunlun Bo* 崑崙船. He writes that foreigners call their ships "Bo" 船 and that these ships were much larger than those of China (Book of Southern Qi, Vol. 31). According to Wang Gungwu (1968, 60–62), in *Nanchouiwuchih* 南州異物志, written by Wan Zhen 万震 at Wu 吳 China, it is mentioned that the foreigners called their own ships "Bo" in approximately the

third century CE. Since "*Bo*" refers to foreign vessels that are suitable for sailing long distances, it implies that China's shipbuilding skills were less developed than those of the Kunlun at the time. From the Eastern Jin (*Dong Jin* 東晉) period onward, China imported Kunlun slaves from the Southeast Asian region, and *Kunlun Bo* could have multiple meanings, including "ships from Kunlun", "ships carrying Kunlun slaves" and "ships made in Kunlun". Whatever the term actually meant, it is clear that the ships were from the southern maritime countries. The name *Kunlun Bo* could have been given because the ships transported the Kunlun slaves or because the ships were operated by the Kunlun slaves. The ships could also have been described as *Kunlun Bo* because they were made, owned and sailed by the Kunlun people or because they transported the Kunlun merchants. The name was probably a general name that referred to all of these situations.

It is difficult to verify the exact country from which the *Kunlun Bo* came. There are records that say that trading ships that came to China across the South Sea of China were first from Linyi, Funan and Persia, and then India. However, to travel to China from India or Sri Lanka, a ship would have to come through numerous seas and bays, including the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, so it would be difficult to identify the original point of departure. It is not easy to differentiate the ships that could have originated from India and travelled to China via Southeast Asia from those that travelled straight to China from Southeast Asia. Therefore, it is hard to identify the country to which the fleet of commerce ships belonged. It is important to note that Tun-son (*Dun Xun* 頓遜) in the Malay Peninsula played an essential role in this East-West commerce. Because Tun-son was involved in trading with Jiazhou, India and Persia, it was written that "the East and West meet in the markets of Tun-son and there are more than 10,000 people" (Wang 1968, 48–50). This statement indicates that well developed harbour cities in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Malay Peninsula, functioned as stopover points in maritime commerce and operated as transit points in re-exporting and re-importing goods traded between China and India. It is highly unlikely that Kunlun Bo referred to ships that came from India, Sri Lanka or Persia. Because a single long-distance journey was not possible, they would have had to change ships at transit points such as Tun-son. Kunlun slaves who were made captive and sold from Southeast Asia were likely confined to the ships to work as sailors, so even if the owner of the ship was Indian or Persian, it seems unlikely that the Kunlun Bo were made in those countries. The skills to build a ship that could endure long-distance travel were most likely found in Southeast Asia.

Written records on Kunlun ships from the Tang period are more numerous. From the studies of Wang and Tansen (2003), it is possible to see which Southeast Asian countries traded with China. Before the Tang period, trade routes between Indochina, Malay Peninsula and the Southern Dynasties were more important

than those with Java-Sumatra. This was closely related to the existence of a central political power, which had the skills and ability to overlook and manage the building of vessels that were capable of long-distance voyages. After the beginning of the Tang period, the changes in maritime traffic, the development of ship-building skills that enabled long-distance voyages, and developments in navigation resulted in changes in the centre of trade. As ships began to undergo longer voyages, the utilisation of the maritime routes by Chinese people boarding on these ships also increased. I-Tsing stayed in Srivijaya, and the esoteric Buddhist monk Amoghajiva also went to Horing (*Heling* 訶陵) on board a Kunlun Bo from the South Sea (*Songgaosen-zhuan* 宋高僧傳 1987, 7; Iketaka 1999, 78–80). The places that these two people visited reveal the rise of Indonesia. Horing is conjectured to be present-day Java, and the Horing Kingdom that Amoghajiva (*Bu Kong* 不空), an Indian Buddhist monk of the eighth century, visited is possibly the ancient kingdom of the Sailendra Dynasty in central Java or the ancient kingdom of Mataram. It is certain that a kingdom that was powerful enough to construct an enormous monument such as the Borobudur would have played an important role in maritime commerce with Tang China. Amoghajiva would have travelled aboard their Kunlun Bo.

Finally, let us turn to the use of Kunlun as a term during the Tang to designate a people. It has been noted that Kunlun refers to people with dark skin. Wilensky (2002, 1–9) believes that Kunlun of the Tang era were slaves from Africa. However, "dark skin" was not the only characteristic that identified a Kunlun person. One description following the word Kunlun was "wavy hair and dark skin" (*Quanfa Heishen* 鬋髮黑身), which makes it clear that wavy hair was also a strong characteristic of Kunlun people. All of those with "wavy hair and dark skin" could be called Kunlun regardless of their origin, whether it was Southeast Asia or Africa. In the entry for Zhenla 真臘 found in the "Records of Foreign Countries" in the *Old Book of Tang*, Zhenla is described as "a vassal state of Funan 扶南".⁶ The record immediately states that "it belongs to the group of Kunlun (*Kunlun zhi lei* 崑崙之類)".⁷

This record implies that the term of Kunlun by the Tang era was a method of identifying an ethnic or racial group. Therefore, Kunlun appears to be an ethnic distinction based on people's appearance. However, in the *New Book of Tang*, written approximately 100 years later than the *Old Book of Tang*, which was compiled during 940–945 CE, the name Kunlun is not specified in relation to this group, and only the characteristics of dark skin and wavy hair are recorded. For example, Zhenla was not identified as part of the Kunlun group in the *New Book of Tang*. It seems that a considerable change in identifying "Kunlun" occurred during the 100-year interval in between the *Old Book of Tang* and the *New Book of Tang*. Both Chitu 赤土 and Zhenla were described as Kunlun in the

Old Book of Tang, so what does this show us? It indicates that Kunlun was not a word used to identify a certain region in Southeast Asia but a name of an ethnic and racial group. The Kunlun characteristics of "wavy hair and dark skin" might have been generalised to include all those with the same characteristics. Therefore, it was a name not used to indicate a specific place but to refer to all people with wavy hair and dark skin. However, it is also difficult to perceive Kunlun as a general noun that indicates the entire Southeast Asian region.

Therefore, it is difficult to consider the Kunlun as a single ethnic entity or a racial category. It cannot be confirmed whether the Han Chinese actually differentiated the ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, and it is even more doubtful that they needed to do so. It is more logical to see Kunlun as a general name that referred to people from particular regions. Within the history records, it is presented that countries that were considered "the same as Kunlun" included the Southeast Asian region except Jiaozhou 交州 (Viet Nam), Linyi 林邑 (Champa), Pan-pan, parts of Zhenla 真臘 and a few areas in the Malay Peninsula.

Kunlunnu, "Others" in the Eyes of Tang

Nevertheless, who were "the Kunluns", the Kunlun people, and how did the people of the Tang come to connect them with Buddhism? A type of Glossary of Buddhism, Pronunciation and Meaning in the Tripitaka (*Yiqiejingyinyi* 一切經音義) describes the Kunluns as barbarians with mystical powers.⁸ They are described as foreigners with dark-skinned bodies from islands of the South Sea who were capable of staying under water for a long time. How did the image of "Kunlun with mystical powers" come into being?

Until the Southern and Northern Dynasties, Kunlun referred to people from the south of China who brought in rare and precious goods through maritime commerce. However, moving into the Tang period, although the increase in maritime commerce resulted in the accumulation of great wealth, the power of the central government to control that wealth had become increasingly weak. In harbour cities such as Guangdong 廣東, the local administrative officials abused their authority, and riots broke out against them (Wang 1968). The most representative riot case is the revolt that took place in 684 CE, which is described in Book 89 of the *Old Book of Tang*. Particularly after the outbreak of the An Shi 安史 rebellion in 755, the central government's grasp of the local regions became weaker. Regions such as Guangdong, which became affluent due to the development of commerce, saw the erection of regional governments that sought a share in wealth become immensely corrupt and unaffected by the control of the central government. Rebellions posed problems not only to the Chinese but also to the Kunluns who worked on the commerce ships. As a collateral result of maritime commerce, some of the Kunluns had settled in Guangdong, but when

the Chinese officials became coercive, they counterattacked fiercely and ran away to the ships. The damage caused during this confusion was detrimental to both the Kunluns and the Chinese. It appears that the novel *Kunlunnu* 崑崙奴 was written on the basis of these historical backgrounds.

The short fiction "Kunlunnu", which is included in the Extensive Records of the Taiping Era (*Taipingguangji* 太平廣記) compiled in 977, features a Kunlun slave named Mo Le 摩勒.⁹ In this narrative, based around the years of Dali (大曆: 766–779), a Kunlun slave called Mo Le, who was extremely intelligent, had extraordinary super powers and was capable of magic, lived in the residence of Cui Sheng 崔生. He was initially loyal to his master, but when his master betrayed him, he immediately ran away to a ship. The plot of fiction such as this has its basis in the rebellions that took place in Guangdong during the eighth century. The mystical super powers of Mo Le were undoubtedly added to make the story more appealing, but Mo Le's being described as strong and running away to sea on a ship reflects the Tang Chinese thoughts on Kunlun slaves. The actual cases of Kunlun bravery, which were spread by word of mouth, resulted in the appearance of such mystical stories of Kunlun slaves in classic Chinese supernatural fiction writing in the Tang era.¹⁰

This indicates that the people's perception of the Kunluns had expanded over time. The increased importing of people and commodities from the South Sea naturally raised awareness about the people of Southeast Asia with "wavy hair and dark skin". The Kunluns who had been captured and sold as slaves from early times, and those who worked on the Kunlun Bo, were also Kunlun people, making it possible to come up with fictitious characters featured in the novels found in the Extensive Records of the Taiping Era. The dramatically increasing interest in Kunlun can be found in the form of "the Kunluns" 崑崙人, *Kunlun Bo* 崑崙船, and *Kunlunnu* 崑崙奴, which appear in many types of novels.

It is not appropriate to describe the dark-skinned clay figures or pictures recently found in China as simply "clay figures of black people" (*Heiren taoyong* 黑人陶俑) from Africa. Wyatt (2009) asserts that African blacks likely came into China in earlier periods. However, entries on such envoys from Africa or tributes paid by African countries are very rare in the Chinese official historical records in general and absent from those of the Tang, which makes it difficult to believe that these figures do indeed represent African people. The physical appearance of the Southeast Asian people from countries such as Linyi and Funan, found in pictures such as the "Exotic Tributes of Envoys in Liang" (*Liangzhigong-tu* 梁職貢圖) and "Foreign Envoys Arriving with Tributes" (*Fankeruchao-tu* 蕃客入朝圖), is similar to the appearance of many Tang-era clay figures. The features are characterised by their naked bodies, wavy hair with large curls and dark skin, and they are labelled in ink as representing people from "Linyi" 林邑 (Linyi, Champa) or

"Langyaxiu" 狼牙脩 (Lankasuka; Figure 9). Therefore, the dark-skinned people who appear in the paintings and sculptures produced during the Southern and Northern Dynasties and the Tang Dynasty can be seen as the Kunluns who came from Southeast Asia. The description of people from Lankasuka, written in the "Exotic Tributes of Envoys in Liang", also refers to people who are "dark-skinned with wavy hair." The description written here regarding their physical appearance and attire concurs with the records found in the history records of China and the descriptions found in works of fiction. Therefore, it is certain that the dark skin, wavy hair with large curls, and naked body depiction in the paintings and sculptures were intended to portray the image of Kunluns.

Kunluns performed various other duties apart from being sailors on ships or slaves of affluent households. In the "Report of Southern Barbarians" in the *New Book of Tang* (1024–1036), there is a passage that describes the music and dance of Nan Zhao 南詔 and Pyuguo 驃國 (Myanmar).

"During the Zhenyuan 貞元 years (785–804 CE) of the reign of Emperor Dezong 德宗, Nanzhao King Yi Mou Xun 異牟尋 send Yang Jiaming 楊嘉明 with song and dance troupe of more than 200 people to Changan 長安 to offer the 'Nan Zhao music' to the Tang Emperor (Fengsheng yue 奉聖樂). Wei Gao 韋皋 (746–806 CE), the Jiedushi 節度使 of Jiannan 檢南 Xichuan, processed the temperament of the music and compiled *Nan Zhao fengsheng yue* 南詔奉聖樂 (*Nan Zhao Music to the Emperor*). The symbolic signs in *Nan Zhao fengsheng yue* manifest the Nan Zhao's loyalty to the Tang".¹¹

Around the same period, the king of Pyu, Yong Qiang 雍羌 sent his brother Shu Nantuo 舒難陀 to present his country's music to the Tang Emperor. This music is also recorded as a manuscript in *Nan zhao fengsheng yue* by Wei Gao and named "*Biaoguo yue*" 驃國樂 (Pyu Music to the Emperor). The most notable part of this is the description of the instruments. A "dragon head mandolin" (*Longshou pipa* 龍首琵琶) with two dragons facing each other is described. *Hanbo* 捍撥, the end decoration of the mandolin, is described as being shaped like a dancing Kunlun painted in beautiful colours. Information on the 12 songs continues afterwards. The musicians playing the instruments were all dark-skinned Kunluns wearing dark red cotton clothes with *zhaoxiabu* 朝霞布 cloth called *geman* 緘襴 draped over their knees, going around their shoulders and tied under their armpits.¹² This passage appears to be describing the Kunlun mode of dressing. The Kunlun musicians decorated themselves with rings and bracelets made of gold and gems and wore golden crowns and earrings. They had wide flat straps fixed to their heads in the shape of a flower bouquet adjusted with two hairpins. These musicians danced while they played songs and followed directions given by their leader. Dances were conducted in groups of even numbers, such as 2, 4, 6, 8 and

10, and they all wore hats made of beads while they bowed on the floor and danced. In response, Emperor Dezong offered Shu Nantuo 舒難陀 the post of Taipuqing 太僕卿, and Tang Ci 唐次, who was given the post of Kaizhou cishi 開州刺史, composed the song "*Biaoguo xianle song*" 驃國獻樂頌 (Pyu Music to the Emperor) and presented it to the emperor.¹³

This entry shows that a specific region in Myanmar was known as Kunlun around the end of the eighth century and that they brought an unusual type of music to Tang China, which aroused the interest of the Tang imperial court and regional officials.

The method of describing the "Kunlun of Pyu" makes it possible to infer that Kunlun may be a region. It is regrettable that so far, there is no artistic evidence that can be connected to the shape of the Kunlunnu who was decorating the musical instrument. However, if the figure of the people from Xiyu 西域 (the Western Regions) portrayed in the mandolin housed at the Shosoin 正倉院, Japan could be slightly modified into having wavy hair and dark skin, it would be similar. The reason that portrayals of Kunlun people are harder to find than those of people from Xiyu is due to the difference in the sheer number of people. There were essentially fewer Kunluns than Xiyus in Tang China, and the Xiyus had entered Tang China much earlier in history. After the mission of Zhang Qian 張騫 to Xiyu, the Silk Roads were explored, and people from Xiyu came into Tang. They were more prominent as mercenaries or dancers than the Kunluns, who were primarily contained within the Jiangnan region, and it was therefore more convenient to portray the Xiyu people.

The Kunluns were described of having "wavy hair and dark skin". Thus, even if they were neither named nor inscribed as such, those figures with wavy hair and dark skin could be seen as Kunluns. It is not so easy to find a figure with dark skin and wavy hair in Chinese art. People from Xiyu with "deep eyes and a high nose" (*Shenmugaobi* 深目高鼻) are more common, but dark-skinned and wavy-haired figures only appear from the Tang Dynasty onwards. The Kunlun clay figures excavated from tombs can be examined first. The boy clay figure found from the tomb of Zheng Rentai 鄭仁泰, estimated to be from 664 CE, is an early example of a Kunlunnu represented in art. This *Tangsanci* 唐三彩 (Tang Dynasty tri-coloured glazed pottery) clay figure, currently housed in the Shaanxi History Museum (*Shanxilishibowuguan* 陝西歷史博物館), is not dark-skinned but is certainly a Kunlunnu (Figure 1). The wavy hair with large curls shows the efforts of the artist to express "wavy hair". However, the exaggerated curls show that this trait is not easy to portray. The reason that this boy is considered a Kunlun is because of his unique dress. The upper body is kept naked, but the lower body is wrapped in an unusual type of trousers made from rolling up a piece of cloth.

This method of wearing a lower garment is reminiscent of that mentioned in the *Book of Southern Qi* as the unique attire of Southeast Asia, utilising a single piece of fabric. In the present day, the people of Indonesia and Malaysia wear long skirts called sarongs, but in continental areas, a long rectangular fabric is wrapped around the waist. The ends meet in the middle and are rolled up together to be pulled behind in between the legs and tucked into the waist line (Figure 2). The women in Cambodia still wear clothes in this way. Therefore, the form of the lower garment with the fabric gathered up in the middle and sent behind indicates that this boy figure is a Kunlunnu originating from Zhenla.¹⁴ The boy is not simply standing up straight. His back is slightly leaning backwards, and his body expresses a rhythm. His hands are placed vertically in the air without meeting, suggesting that he might have been holding something.



Figure 1. Tangsancai clay figure from Tang Dynasty, 664 CE found at Zheng Rentai's tomb, currently housed in the Shaanxi History Museum

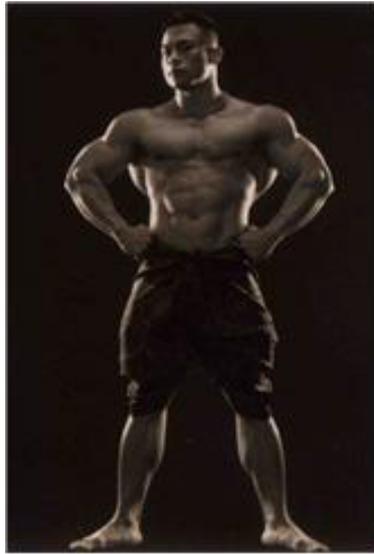


Figure 2. Man dressed in traditional way in Cambodia (Bunker and Latchford 2004)

A similar example can be found in the Shaanxi History Museum (Figure 3). A clay figure of unknown provenance is smaller and darker than the figure from Zheng Rentai's tomb. It cannot be called a finely made Tongsanci, but it looks more like a coloured clay figure. It is also dark-skinned with wavy hair, and the disproportionate arms and legs, along with the awkward expression of the human body, implying that it was not intended to be buried in a tomb of high status. The bulging eyes and tightly closed lips suggest an unusual strength. It is interesting to note the arms, which are placed vertically holding a long wooden pole. This artwork is probably portraying a rowing scene, and the clay figure from Zheng Rentai's tomb could also have been rowing like this. Kunlunns were often captured as slaves in Southeast Asia even before they were sold to China, and this is connected to the fact that they were used as man power to row the ships on long-distance journeys. These clay figures would have been made because the Kunlunns were the essential resource in all sorts of maritime operations. This reminds us of the written records that describe the Kunlunns as having the mystical power of being able to "hold their breath for a long time under water".

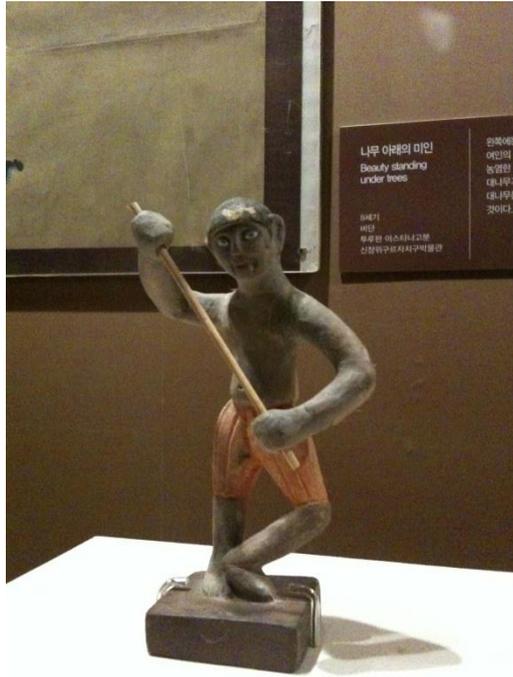


Figure 3. A clay figure from Tang Dynasty in the Shaanxi History Museum

The clay figure in the Shaanxi History Museum is dark-skinned with wavy hair (Figure 4). However, the clothes are different, being in the toga style, falling down from the top. The irregular U-shaped folds of the brick coloured clothes contrast unusually with the dark skin. This coloured clay figure was excavated from Dizhangwan 底張灣 in Shenyang 咸陽. The left arm is by the waist, and although the right arm is severed, it would have been held up. Clay Kunlun figures were also made as burial goods, much like other clay figures, and therefore, they have primarily been found in tombs (Figure 5). Compared to other burial goods, the Kunlun clay figures are considered very unusual.

Other clay figures found previously were mostly portrayals of Chinese or people from Xiyu. Whether their nationalities were Sogdian or Scythian, these people had a larger build and a lighter skin colour than the average Chinese person, and they were normally described as having "deep eyes and a high nose". The deep-eyed, high-nosed barbarian referred to white Caucasians who came from Xiyu or the Semites from Arabia with distinct facial features. However, as maritime commerce increased during the Tang Dynasty, the unfamiliar foreigners who caught the eyes of the craftsmen were the dark-skinned Kunlunus from Southeast Asia. As they were featured in the mystical tales compiled in the Extensive Records of the Taiping Era (*Taiping guangji* 太平廣記), the Kunlunnu

became the object of newly found curiosity as humans gifted with mystical power (Choi 2007, 373–383). Kunluns were perceived as being capable of performing magic and having insight, and they were thus represented by the Chinese artists in Changan. However, Kunlunnus were not often found, and just like Mo Le from the Extensive Records of the Taiping Era, they could "just vanish" if it became necessary. Historically, some Kunluns settled in the southern harbour cities of China, such as Guangdong, for commercial purposes, and some were sold as slaves. Therefore, Kunluns would have often been seen in the southern regions of China but not in Changan, in the far inland areas. The period during which these southern regions were under the control of the central government in Changan was fairly short during the overall history of Tang (Wang 1986, 75–77). Therefore, it would have been unusual to encounter Kunlunnus in the central regions of China, a long way from the southern ports; this likely would have added to their mysterious image among the Chinese people.



Figure 4. A clay figure from Tang Dynasty, excavated from Dizhangwan, housed in the Shaanxi History Museum



Figure 5. A clay figure from Tang Dynasty currently housed in the Shaanxi History Museum

The image that Tang China held of the Kunlun country can be seen in a "six-paneled silver case with the names of the seven countries of the Protectorate General" (Douguanqigeguo mingliubanyinhe 都管七箇國銘六瓣銀盒) (Figure 6). This silver case with inscription is one of three silver cases excavated from the north side of the Shanghai Jiatong University 上海交通大学 site in 1979.¹⁵ On each of the six petals on the outside, the names of the countries such as Gaoli 高麗 (Goryō), Poluomenguo 婆羅門國, Tufan 土蕃, Shulei 疎勒, Baituoguo 白拓國, Wumanguo 烏蠻國 are inscribed. All of these countries were areas where Tang established the Office of the Protectorate General (*Douhufu* 都護府) whilst they unified China and kept expanding their territory. This appears to be describing the "world" centring on Tang by including countries that corresponded to the Tang outlook of the world. However, the detail that draws attention is the figure engraved in the centre. A Kunlunnu figure carrying the *śarīra* (*sheli* 舍利, small crystals sometimes found among cremated remains of monks, and regarded as sacred relics) stands in front of a figure riding an elephant. The words *Kunlun wangguo* 崑崙王國 (Kunlun Kingdom) and *Jianglai* 將來 (bringing in from) are also engraved. This silver case appears to have been made to honour the event of bringing in the *śarīra* from a region called Kunlun (Tanaka 1993, 25–30). The reason that it consists of six petals and seven scenes is to indicate that the other

six countries shared the *śarīra* brought in from the Kunlun Kingdom, which is placed in the centre. It is plausible that this is a distinctly Chinese version of sharing the *śarīra*, following the Buddhist motif of dividing the *śarīra* of the Buddha into eight parts (Tanaka 1993, 25–30; Roh 2003, 38–41).



Figure 6. Six-panelled silver case with the names of the seven countries of the Protectorate General (part) from Tang Dynasty (Xian Wenwuyanlinju)

It is difficult to identify where Kunlun was located within Southeast Asia. It is clear that the event of bringing in the *śarīra* from Kunlun was considered important to Tang, but it is not clear where the *śarīra* was being taken. The important thing to note is that the *śarīra* of Śakyamuni Buddha was sent to China from a "Kunlun Kingdom" rather than from India. It is therefore possible to surmise that Tang China considered Kunlun to be an important Buddhist country. In the *History of the Southern Dynasties, Book of Liang and Records of Renowned Monks* (*Gaoseng chuan* 高僧傳), there are numerous entries that testify that the *śarīra* of the Buddha's tooth and the Buddha's skull was sent from Southeast Asia to China. It is not clear how or from where the Buddha's tooth or skull *śarīra* arrived in Southeast Asia in the first place. The Chinese were not interested in whether these *śarīra* were the real body *śarīras* of the Buddha from India. They were content with their being a "*śarīra*". Although the *Old Book of Tang* describes Zhenla as "worshipping the teachings of Buddha and the gods of

heaven, with the gods of heaven worshipped more widely and Buddhism coming in second", the Tang Chinese arbitrarily considered Zhenla to be an important Buddhist country.¹⁶ The status of the envoys from Southeast Asia gained more importance and prominence, like those from Xiyu and other countries in Northeast Asia, as the material value and importance of the goods they brought with them increased. The "Kunlun Kingdom" that is engraved in the silver case could well refer to Srivijaya. In the *Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago*, I-Tsing strongly voiced his opinion that it was necessary to study Buddhist doctrines and Sanskrit whilst staying in Srivijaya.¹⁷

The visual representations of Kunlun can be divided into two forms. One is a Kunlun in a crowd, as seen in the illustration of the Vimalakirti Sutra, and the other is in the form of a Kunlunnu pulling the vehicle of the Bodhisattvas Manjuśri and Samantabhadra. The illustration of the Vimalakirti Sutra was a popular motif from the Southern and Northern Dynasties period to the Tang Dynasty period. It depicts a scene from *The Consolation of the Invalid*, where Vimalakirti and Manjusri converse with each other (Figure 7). Here, a dark-skinned Kunlun is featured at the front, attracting attention. The figure at the front of the crowd, holding onto holy relics of Buddhism, is no doubt a very important person. The people lined up behind the Kunlun are known to be princes from other countries who came to Tang to pay tribute on behalf of their countries. If this is the case, the Kunlun standing at the very front and depicted on the same size scale can also be presumed to be a person of high status from the Kingdom of Kunlun.

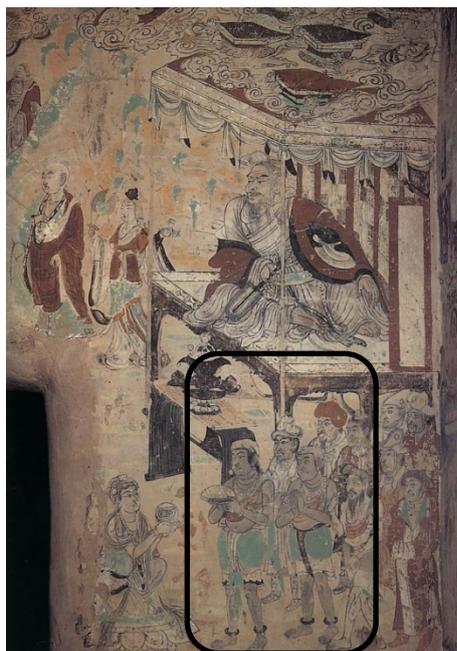


Figure 7. Illustration of Vimalakirti Sutra, found at the eastern wall of Mogaoku Cave 103, from the 8th century (王軼猛 1988, 『敦煌藝術寶庫』, 敦煌文物研究所, 155).

On the contrary, the Kunlunnu featured as the coach driver of the Bodhisattvas Manjuśri and Samantabhadra is depicted as considerably smaller in size, showing his status as a slave (Figure 8). This reminds us of the slave Mo Le from the Extensive Records of the Taiping Era, who has the supernatural ability to communicate with animals. The illustration of the Vimalakirti Sutra became less popular after the Tang Dynasty, but the portrayal of a Kunlunnu as the helper of the Bodhisattvas Manjuśri and Samantabhadra increased dramatically after the eighth century. Although they are not still extant, it would at one time have been easy to find wall paintings and sculptures of Kunlunnus in the Buddhist temples of large cities such as Xi'an and Luoyang 洛陽. It is important to note that unlike the Kunlunnu clay figures, these pictorial depictions were all included within a Buddhist motif and context. Despite recognising the worship of the gods of heavens, the Kunlun motif was always interpreted and expressed in a Buddhist context in China. To the Chinese, Kunlun was perceived to be a Buddhist nation, and Kunlunnus were followers of Buddhism who could perform magical powers for the safeguarding of the Buddhist doctrines.



Figure 8. Buddhist Triad with Manjusri and Samantabhadra from 8th century of Tang Dynasty, found at Songkwangsa, Korea

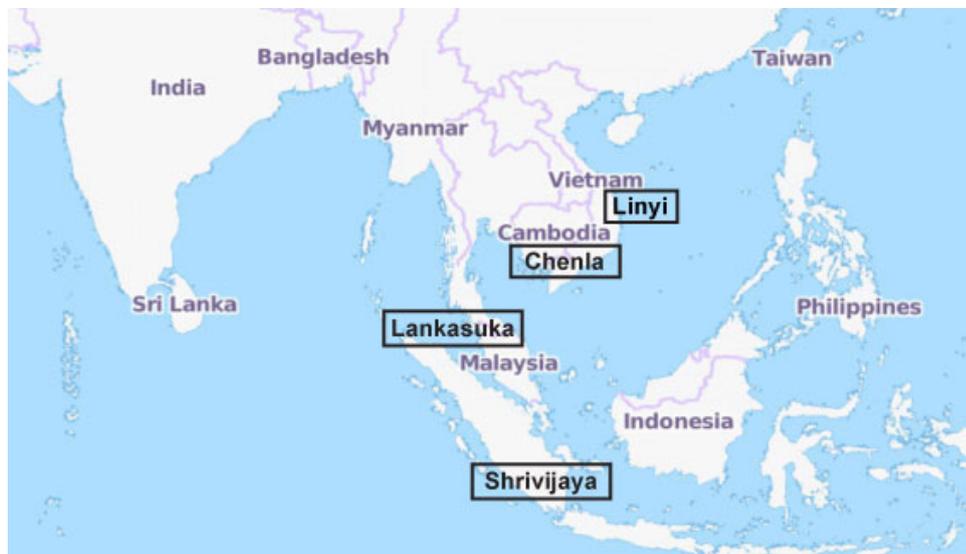


Figure 9. Location of the ancient kingdoms in South East Asia

Conclusion

As the entries on Kunluns and Kunlunnus increased in the historical records of Tang, art pieces depicting them also increased in number. However, the name "Kunlun" alone does not provide information about where Kunlun was and who the Kunlunnus were. The people of Tang wrote mystical novels about the Kunlunnu because they thought that the Kunlunnu possessed supernatural powers. From the records that are still extant, it is possible to conjecture the following.

First, Kunlun is not a term that indicates a specific country or the territorial borders of a country. Second, Kunlun is not a specific region and did not have a literary culture that the Chinese could respect. This can be seen in the varying ways that the Chinese wrote about different foreign tribes or ethnic groups. As seen in the examples of Kangju 康居 or India, the Chinese records recognised the different ethnic groups according to their origin or by labelling them with surnames in relation to their origin, which does not apply to the records of Kunlun. Third, although Kunlun and Kunlunnu were names related to the place of origin, the Chinese did not have accurate knowledge of them because they believed that the Kunluns had mystical powers. Fourth, the Kunluns did not form communities or live in groups that could be classified as separate ethnic groups or countries.

The artistic depictions of the Kunluns truthfully portray the historical records that describe them as having "wavy hair and dark skin", almost always appearing in the Buddhist context. Because the Kunlunnu was described as having "wavy hair and dark skin", the figures with dark skin and wavy hair in Chinese art should be various types of Kunlunnus. Chinese people traditionally used specific words for the designation of foreign people. Any people portrayed in art as having deep eyes and a high nose can be classified as Xiyu people because they described the people from Xiyu "deep eyes and a high nose". Thus, we can also conclude that the figures with dark skin and wavy hair might have been created as Kunlunnus in Tang.

In Buddhist art, Kunluns are presented as adherents to the Buddhist faith, carrying an incense burner or *śarīra*. This shows a certain gap between the artistic representations and the reality of Southeast Asia, where Hinduism was more prevalent than Buddhism from the fifth century to the seventh century. Those representations of Kunlun are related to the fact that the Southeast Asians brought in Buddhist goods as items with which to pay tribute to China and show their respect for the Chinese Buddhist faith. Not only did they bring in stupas, Buddhist statues, and *śarīra*, but they also brought in important items such as Chinaberry trees needed for Buddhist rituals, spices and sugar. It was as a result

of these gifts that the Chinese presumed that the Southeast Asians were fervent and devout Buddhists. One image that reflects this Chinese presumption is the Kunlunnu pulling forward the elephant and lion, on which the Manjuśri and Samantabhadra are riding. Although the Chinese were afraid of the Kunluns, because they were portrayed as powerful barbaric beings in the novels, they also tried to calm this fear by artistically depicting them as devout believers in the Buddhist faith.

These literary works and artworks show the duality of how the Tang Chinese perceived the Kunluns. Within the power structure of the tributary system, the Kunlunus from a certain region in Southeast Asia were strangers to the Chinese, but in Tang culture, they became thoroughly imaginary Buddhists and separated from their real existence.

Notes

1. "麟德二年十月丁卯 帝發東都 赴東嶽 從駕文武兵士 及儀仗法物 相繼數百里 列營置幕 彌互郊原 突厥 於闐 波斯 天竺國 罽賓 烏菴 崑崙 倭國 及新羅 百濟 高麗等諸蕃酋長" *Cefu Yuanguai* 冊府元龜 (Prime Tortoise of the Record Bureau).
2. "戎狄夷蠻羌胡朝獻之國 突厥 詰利發 奚契丹等王 大食謝 五天十姓 崑崙 日本 新羅 靺鞨之侍子 及使內臣之蕃" - *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, "Liyizhi" 禮儀志.
3. This is because I-Tsing mentions that "cloves of two colours are produced from the country of Kunlun". Cloves are widely produced in the present-day Moluccas Archipelago. Li, D. 2007. "Funan minzu zushu tantao" 扶南民族族屬探討. *Dongnanya yanjiu* 東南亞研究 5: 72-77.
4. However, presentations of a community called the Kunlun in Myanmar are exceptionally rare. Traditionally in China, Kunlun was considered the mystical mountain where the Xiwangmu lives, and there actually was a mountain called the Kunlunsan. This fact might be connected to the fact that Myanmar is located fairly close to the Everest Mountains.
5. "景真於南澗寺捨身齋，有元徽紫皮袴褶，餘物稱是。於樂遊設會，伎人皆著御衣。又度絲錦與崑崙舶營貨" (*Book of Southern Qi*, Vol. 31); "既而趙郡。公。增年獲免，收知而過之，事發除名。其年又以託附陳使封孝琰，牒令其門客與行，遇崑崙舶至，得奇貨猥然袴表、美玉盈尺等數十件" (*Book of Northern Qi*, Vol. 37). The same entry can be found in the History of the Northern Dynasties. "又以託附陳使封孝琰，牒令其門客與行，遇崑崙舶至，得奇貨：猥然袴表、美玉盈尺等數十件" "Liezhuan" 列傳 History of the Northern Dynasties 北史 88 Juan 卷. "就卒其業。武后時，遷累廣州都督。南海歲有崑崙舶市外區琛琲，前都督路元觀冒取其貨，舶酋不" (*New Book of Tang*, Vol. 150).
6. Zhenla is present-day Cambodia and matches the records of being designated as Kunlun, as found in the Old Book of Tang.
7. A similar passage can be found in the *Documents on Tang State Matters*. "殊柰 崑崙人也 在林邑南 去交趾海行三月餘日 習俗文字與婆羅門同 絕遠未嘗朝中國 貞觀二年十月 使至朝貢". However, the name of the country does not appear in the *Old Book of Tang* or the *New Book of Tang*.
8. "崑崙語：上音昆下音論時俗語便亦曰骨論南海洲島中夷人也 甚黑裸形能馴伏猛獸犀象等種類數般即有僧祇突彌骨堂閻蔑等皆鄙賤人也國無禮義

抄劫為活愛啖食人如羅刹惡鬼之類也言語不正異於諸蕃善人水 竟曰不死" (*Yiqiejing yinyi* 一切經音義 T2128, 54: 0835c18).

9. There are more stories that feature Kunluns in the Extensive Records of the Taiping Era such as Yan Jingli 閻敬立 and Lu Xu 盧頊. However, they do not constitute a significant proportion of the overall volume of the records, reaching almost 500 books in total.
10. Pei Xing 裴鏞 *Chōngi* 傳奇, trans. Choe, J., 2006. Pei Xing's original Chinese book *Chuanqi* 傳奇 is a compilation of the more famous stories that appear in the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* and can be consulted for the various biographical fictions of the Tang era, including the Kunlunnu stories.
11. "Report of the Foreign Countries" in the *New Book of Tang*, 1038–1039.
12. "Report of the Foreign Countries" in the *New Book of Tang*, 1038–1039. *Zhaoxia wei bixi* 朝霞為蔽膝 refers to a cloth made of *zhaoxiabu*, which is cut out widely, like an apron, to be draped over the knees.
13. Not long thereafter, in 832 CE, during the reign of Emperor Wenzong 文宗, Nanzhao attacked Pyu and moved 3,000 people from Pyu to Zhedong (柘東, present day Kunming). "Report of the Foreign Countries" in the *New Book of Tang*, 1038–1040.
14. Zhenla, the ancient kingdom of Cambodia, was often designated as Kunlun in the Old Book of Tang.
15. This silver case is shaped like a six-petal lotus flower on the exterior with a parrot-design silver case and tortoise shell-design silver case placed inside the outer case. Zhang and Wang. 1984. "*Xianshi wenguankuai shoucang de jijian zhengui wenwu*" 西安市文管會收藏的幾件珍貴文物. *Kaogu yu wenwu* 考古與文物 4: 22–24; Kazumi Tanaka. 1993. "*Miyakokan nanahokoku huta no juzou to sono yoto*" 都管七箇國盒の圖像とその用途. *Bukkyō bijutsu* 佛教美術 210: 15–30.
16. Hindu god statues are predominant motifs amongst the artefacts that have been found or excavated from the Southeast Asian region and date from the seventh to the eighth centuries; therefore, this passage seems to reflect reality.
17. I-Tsing, translated by Takakusu Junjiro, *ibid.*, 14–18.

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Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sūtra (*Yumahl sosŏlgyŏng* 維摩詰所說經) 14: 537.

Xin Tangshu 新唐書 (*New book of Tang*).

Yiqiejing yinyi 一切經音義 (*Pronunciation and meaning in the Tripitaka*).