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CHINA IN THE SPOTLIGHT THE KANGNIDO MAP

If we turn now to what the Chinese were doing at the same time, it is also evident that by the end of the 14th century China was gathering information about the worlds that lay beyond the Indian Ocean. The most compelling evidence of the Chinese knowledge of the outside world is a map of the world commissioned by the Ming emperor Hongwu in 1392, the Daming Hunyi tu, or Amalgamated map of the Great Ming.

Its most famous rendition, although, is the Kangnido map, commissioned in 1402 by the new dynasty that had established the Choson dynasty in Korea a decade ago. The map shows an oversized Korea in astonishing detail, with its counties, naval bases, and provincial capitals. But it is China that stays in the center of the known world, with the great wall shown in a very distinctive way. All the east of East Asia appears very far away from its actual position, as is the case with Japan, or in an extremely reduced size as is the case of South East Asia, where only the Malaysian peninsula seems recognizable. Indonesia and Philippines are reduced to a series of small dots at the southern part of the map. The Indian east coast emerges from Malaysia, while its east coast is much better depicted, even if Sri Lanka ought to be much more at the south east of India.

The silhouette of the Arabian peninsula is quite recognizable, as is the Red Sea and the east and west coasts of Africa. The overall size of Africa is highly underestimated, but the mapmakers knew perfectly well that its southern tip could be rounded. It is important to **remember that the Kangnido map predates both the Zheng He expeditions and the Fra Mauro's map.** The Kangnido map shows clearly that the Chinese were utterly familiar with the navigation in the Indian Ocean more than a century before the arrival of the Portuguese to it.

As can be seen in this silhouette rendition of the Kangnido, above Africa appears a quite compressed Mediterranean and a handful of Mediterranean countries, like Morocco and Egypt in the south, and Spain, Italy and Greece in its northern shores. The European part of the map contains some hundred place names, but a thorough study of them has not yet been made. **The map's knowledge of the names and shapes of Africa and Europe came probably from the Arab geographers that had been quite active in the Chinese court in Mongol times.**

In fact the countries names have a classical latin flavor, like I-su-pan-ti-na, transcribing Hispania for Spain.

Chinese maps show some areas beyond their own borders, but the size of these countries - as was the case with the European ones - tends to be minimized according to their distance from the civilized center of the Chinese empire.

Furthermore, the trade lines went from China to Europe and not the other way round.

And so, the Chinese interest for Europe was nil. This attitude reappears also in the Cho'onhado Korean maps, that emerged in the 16th century.

In them, China occupies the center, identified by its name, Zhongyuan, the great wall and the Yellow river. To the East are Korea, Japan, and the Ryukiu islands. Most of the other names come from Buddhist and Chinese legends.

The lands in the West are labeled as barbaric wastelands, and one of them is the land of white people.

Europe, vaguely recognized, stands clearly off the limits.