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LEAF OUT OF THEIR BOOK
The residents of Okinawa live very long lives, and some say the diet is responsible **FOOD & DRINK C8**



The Huang-Ming Vitong Da Tu on display at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum. Photo: Anthony Dickson, James Wendlings

Charts of the matter

An exhibition of 80 historical maps shows not just the evolution of Chinese cartography, but also how our understanding of the past informs political questions in the present

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Towering at a height of four metres, the Huang-Ming Vitong Da Tu, a magnificent old map of China, was hand-copied from an original produced by Japanese monks in Nagasaki in 1771.

The map, whose title translates as the United Atlas of the August Ming, is one of 80 historic maps and nautical charts on display at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum as part of an exhibition called "The World on Paper: From Square to Spheroid".

"Maps both reflect history and are a record of history," says collector Tam Kwong-jim, who helped curate the exhibition.

Running until February 24, the exhibition not only follows the evolution of Chinese navigation and cartography, but reveals how China saw itself in the world and how the rest of the world perceived China.

Tam bought his first old map of China in a second-hand bookshop in Tokyo while working in the 1970s. He has since been an avid collector and is now recognised as an authority on antique maps and charts, which, he points out, still influence modern geopolitical and territorial disputes. He points to a 1951 Japanese

chart showing the South China Sea that is clearly marked in red ink as "China". Another Japanese chart, produced in 1943 and including the Philippines, shows a thick boundary line drawn around the hotly disputed Spratly Islands, excluding them from control of the Philippines, which was occupied by the Japanese at the time.

Museum director Richard Wesley says the old maps help shed light on how the modern Chinese state goes about its business. "China is now recognised as a global economic superpower, but to better understand the Chinese approach to international trade and diplomacy, it can be helpful to examine how they saw the world and how they mapped it," he says.

Although China had been producing maps since the Han dynasty (206BC-AD220), there was no attempt to accurately chart its national boundaries or undertake scientific surveys of its territory, Tam says, it didn't need to.

Traditional Chinese thinking was greatly influenced by the concept of a "canopy heaven" represented by a spherical heaven and flat Earth. Everything inside China was ruled over by the emperor. Everything outside that empire was the world of barbarians and hardly worth bothering about.



The maps were drawn like Chinese paintings, depicting rivers and mountains

TAM KWONG-JIM, COLLECTOR AND CURATOR

Even as trade routes to the Arabian Peninsula developed in the Song dynasty (960-1279), this view of China at the centre of the universe remained firmly in place. Early maps of China had more of a municipal function, showing settlements, roads and geographical features, often with great artistic flourish.

"The maps were drawn like Chinese paintings, depicting rivers and mountains – what was important was the distribution of cities and centres of population density, because they had more of an administrative purpose than a navigational purpose," Tam says.

The exception was maritime charts, which were needed to guide junks safely between ports. One exhibition highlight is a beautiful nautical chart thought to represent the sixth voyage of the fleet of imperial treasure junks, commanded by Zheng He. The admiral led seven diplomatic expeditions from Nanjing to East Africa between 1405 and 1433. Though the chart depicts islands, harbours, navigational hazards and sailing routes, it was actually compiled some 200 years after Zheng's famous voyages.

The expeditions described in the chart represented a high point in terms of official Chinese engagement with the barbarian

world, though Tam notes that Zheng was not the first to sail between China and the Persian Gulf and East Africa. Numerous sailors and merchants had been doing this since the eighth century – possibly earlier.

While junk captains traditionally hugged the coast, their Arab counterparts held the key to essential navigation – using the stars and planets to determine position and heading. It is likely that Zheng employed experienced Arab mariners as pilots and that much of the information on the chart was derived from Arab sources.

The arrival of Western technology and knowledge introduced by European missionaries persuaded the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) to undertake large-scale, detailed surveys of its recently expanded territory.

In 1708, the 47th year of the Kangxi reign, a team of Jesuit missionaries and scholars were recruited to undertake a comprehensive and highly ambitious cartographic survey of China and the region. The map, which is called Huang Yu Quan Lan Tu (Kangxi Imperial Atlas of China), took more than 10 years to complete.

According to Professor Mario Cams at the University of Maastricht, at the time this map was produced the Qing empire was almost at the height of its territorial reach. It had conquered much of the vast Mongolian steppes and parts of Taiwan. Qing China was sending armies into Tibet and towards the deserts in the far west – today's Xinjiang region – and laying the

foundations for the territory of the modern People's Republic of China.

The 41 sheets of the atlas together constitute one large map of continental East Asia, from Lake Baikal (north) to Sakhalin (north-east) and Taiwan (east), and from Hainan Island (south) to Kashgar (west). It has sometimes been called the "Jesuit map of China", but Cams says that title underestimates the contribution of Chinese officials and scholars.

This enormous atlas of Qing China, printed in several versions, resulted in the largest mapping project of the early modern world and is unique in a number of ways, Cams says. First, it was largely based on field surveys conducted by mixed teams of Qing officials and European missionaries. Second, it is probably the most important example of early modern state-sponsored cartography. Third, it is a product of the creative integration of two different cartographic practices, European and East Asian.

It was not until 1899 that China produced its first modern map without Western help and reference to latitude and longitude with a conical projection, according to Tam, but the central meridian remained in Beijing. Called the Daqing Huangyu Quan Tu (Imperial Atlas of China), the map is remarkable because the external land boundaries are deliberately left ambiguous, Tam says.

"So many Western powers wanted a slice of China [by this time] that they could not define

their own boundaries because, diplomatically, China could not afford to upset any third-party power," Tam says, standing by the 1908 edition of the map on display at the exhibition, which still has the purchase price of 1.20 Chinese dollars displayed in the bottom corner.

It can be helpful to examine how [China] saw the world and how they mapped it

RICHARD WESLEY, MARITIME MUSEUM DIRECTOR

In less than a century, China had regressed from an empire under heaven, so self-confident that it did not feel the need to define its boundaries, to a nation that could not afford to define them for fear of upsetting aggressive foreign powers. Tam says this was part of the process of the "100 years of humiliation" that still informs policy in Beijing.

"I think it must influence modern Chinese diplomacy," Tam says, adding that it may be one reason Beijing is still so sensitive about issues of sovereignty.

The first Chinese map with a complete border was not made until 1905, as part of the self-strengthening movement to modernise and industrialise China to compete with the West. Tam describes it as China's "joining point with modernity".

It is also apparent that while China used Western and Islamic technology to inform its view of the world, the Western view of China was distorted and inaccurate until relatively recently.

China is featured in Abraham Ortelius' *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, published in 1570 and thought to be the first true modern atlas. Many places in China are marked on this map, but the land is shown as a rectangle and some coastlines are wrong.

Meanwhile, a map of Asia by English historian and cartographer John Speed published in 1576 includes depictions of people from major countries in the region. A tall, white-bearded man wearing a red tunic and a wide-brimmed cowboy hat is described as a "Chinese" and reveals the paucity of information about China in the late 17th century.

