

The Map of Matteo Ricci: Some Preliminary Observations

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The James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota has recently put on display a copy of the 1602 map of the world made by Matteo Ricci and his Chinese collaborators. The Ricci map is owned by the James Ford Bell Trust; it has been loaned to the University of Minnesota for the benefit of the James Ford Bell Library. (A copy of the map is available at <http://www.lib.umn.edu/bell/riccimap>. I urge you to visit the website; you can zoom in and see the map in great detail.) It was with great pleasure that I gave a talk on the map at the Macau Ricci Institute in November of 2011. What follows are excerpts from that talk.

The 1602 Map of Matteo Ricci is a record of how Ricci and his Chinese collaborators chose to represent the world as they knew it at that time. They had ample sources of information: both European and Chinese maps and travel accounts. The map is printed on paper using the same woodblock printing techniques that had already been used in China for both words and images for almost 800 years. The map of the Italian missionary was, therefore, a woodblock print, or rather, a series of prints. We know from Ricci's diaries that the map was intended to be hung on a large folding screen. There were, according to Ricci's diaries, thousands of copies of the map made, only about six of which remain.

When Ricci entered China 1583, he came prepared to spend the rest of his life there, as required by imperial regulations. He brought with him a library, including a selection of maps. Ricci hung one of the maps of the world on the walls of the mission house. His diary tells us:

The more learned among the Chinese admired it very much and when they were told that it was a view and a description of the whole world, they became greatly interested in seeing the same thing done in Chinese.¹

The year was 1584, and Ricci set to work to make a map of the world, using Chinese characters for the legend and annotations. His willingness to do so was not just because he was being accommodating. Nicolas Triagault, who edited Ricci's diaries, tells us:

In answer to the Governor's request, he [Ricci] went to work immediately at this task, which was not at all out of keeping with his ideas of preaching the Gospel. According to the disposition of Divine Providence, various ways have been

¹ Louis Gallagher. *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583–1610*. (New York: Random House, 1953) pp. 165–66.

employed at different times and with different races, to interest people in Christianity. In fact this very attraction was to draw many of the Chinese into the net of Peter. The new chart was made on a larger scale than the original, so as to give more room for the Chinese written characters which are somewhat larger than our own. New annotations were also added, more in keeping with the Chinese genius and more appropriate also to the author's intentions. When there was a question of describing the various religious rites of the different nations, he took occasion to insert a mention of the sacred mysteries of the Christian faith, hitherto unknown to the Chinese. In this way he hoped to spread the name and fame of Christianity through the whole of China in a brief space of time.²

The 1584 map is no longer extant; the 1602 map which we do have does not in fact discuss the religious rites of the different nations in very much detail. But the passage is important because it articulates the connection between cartography and Ricci's Christian mission.

In a colophon written in Chinese to a 1603 edition of the map, Ricci explains:

When I came from the west to China, I read Chinese texts and documents. When they spoke of foreign countries, they were cursory and without detail...I wanted to imitate European gazetteers. I collected large maps as sources of information...

He continues:

I made a good number of revisions, for example when my observations contradicted things which I had heard. I did not dare to write recklessly and without evidence, deceiving the world through a desire of saying something new. As for the strange tales told in the past and recorded on maps showing foreign countries—that there were people with three heads, with a single arm, people without thighs or without bellies, with eyes in the rear, with bodies joined together, people who do not die, etc.—I have never heard or seen anything the like. Europeans too, who are busy travelling everywhere by sea and by land, never have reported such things. How could I dare to add such exaggerations, which would be insults to the creator?³

We know from Ricci's diary that an unauthorized edition was made simultaneously with the official edition. He writes, "When the plates were being cut for these maps, the printers made a duplicate copy of them, unknown to the [Jesuit] Fathers, and in this way two editions of the work were published at once."⁴ And in a letter written after 1607 he writes that the printers made separate blocks, to sell, "which they did selling very many at a high price. But that was the year of the great rain at Peking

² Gallagher, p. 166

³ A preface on the fourth edition, dated 1603. I consulted the translation of Pascale d'Elia's "Recent Discoveries and New Studies (1938-1960) on the World Map in Chinese of Father Matteo Ricci, S.J.", *Monumenta Serica* 20 (1961) "Recent Discoveries and New Studies" pp156-58 but made some changes. The Chinese original is in Huang Shijian 黃時鑒 and Gong Yingyan 龔纓晏. 2004. Li Madou Shijie ditu yanjiu 利瑪竇世界地圖研究 (Research on the World Map of Matteo Ricci). Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004)

⁴ Gallagher, p.398.

[1607] and the old house in which they were collapsed one night, killing two printers and breaking the plates.⁵ Presumably Ricci and his colleagues did not object to the sale of the map—commercial publishing is one way of disseminating ideas, after all.

The “first” edition of the 1602 map—the authorized one—probably was not sold, but rather was given to important personages. We know, again from Ricci’s diaries, that people brought their own paper on which to print the map—a kind of publish on demand operation. Map owners participated in the aesthetic production of the map in making decisions about what paper it would be printed on.

The map is filled with words. The words tell us the names of places—continents, rivers, mountains, countries, the occasional city. In addition, large blocks of text explain to the viewer longitude and latitude and the means of calculating eclipses. Other blocks of text are colophons by Ricci and by Chinese literati which are appreciations of the map, appreciations of Ricci, and attempts to insert the map and its cosmology into Chinese traditions of mapmaking and cosmological thinking more generally. Small bits of texts scattered throughout the map inform us of customs of the various peoples of the world, presenting an odd panoply of forms of knowledge. Earlier scholars, both Chinese and Italian have tracked down the sources of many of the notations—it is clear that they come from both Chinese and European stories.⁶

Some of the knowledge embedded in the map is commercial knowledge. For example, in an area near the general location of the Potosí silver mines in Peru,⁷ the map presents a terse five word commentary “This mountain has many silver mines,” a not surprising observation considering how important the silver trade was to the Jesuits.

Some of the annotations are what we would categorize as ethnographic, again which could easily have come from Jesuit knowledge of the new world. For example, we are told “The products of the Mexica include bird feathers of every color. People use them to render landscapes.” The Jesuits had first-hand knowledge of New Spain by 1602—the missions were connected by the fact that one of the routes to get to China was to cross the Atlantic, disembark at Veracruz, go overland to Acapulco on a road called the “China Road” and then board one of the large Spanish trading ships known as “Manila Galleons”, to go to the Philippines. Thus it is not surprising that Mexico is the most accurately rendered part of North America.

One bit of information on Egypt comes from the fourteenth-century Englishman Sir John Mandeville. Egyptians are said to be skilled at astronomy; the map connects this attention to the skies to the lack of rain.

Insular Southeast Asia is of particular interest on the map—the islands are large and awkwardly drawn. There is an annotation which notes “In this place there are many

⁵ d’Elia, “Recent Discoveries,” p. 114.

⁶ Primary among these are Pasquale D’Elia, . *Il mappamondo cinese del p. Matteo Ricci*, S. I. conservato presso la Biblioteca Vaticana (The Chinese Map of the World by Matteo Ricci, SJ, held at the Vatican Library). Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca apostolica Vaticana 1938 and the work by Huang Shijian and Gong Yingyan cited above.

⁷ Ed.s’ Nte: Potosí is in modern day Bolivia, was part of the Spanish Viceroyalty of Peru at the time of Ricci.

islands; boats have a hard time navigating.” Then the annotation goes on to list a variety of kinds of incense that are produced. For Malacca (Maloke) the map records, “This land does not have the five grains. They only have sago palms, whose bark can be ground for powder or used for clothing.” In regard to Brazil the map tells us:

The inhabitants of this country do not build houses but dig holes in the earth to make caves to live in. They like to eat human flesh, but they only eat men, not women. They make clothes with the feathers of birds.

The discussion of China on the map is rather taciturn (and on the Bell exemplar is fairly badly damaged) but it can be read on other exemplars. The text gives China’s longitude and latitude and suggests that people who are interested in finding out more about the details of Chinese geography consult local gazetteers. The longitude and latitude are not insignificant innovations; these numbers locate China in Ricci’s cosmos. Ricci does not give the longitude and latitude coordinates for any other countries; this fact demonstrates that it was important for Ricci that he locate China in his cosmos, a Christian cosmos.

The discussions of Europe are no less interesting than those of China. Europe is oddly shaped. The general discussion of Europe is as follows:

The continent of Europe comprises more than 30 countries, all of which are monarchies that follow the systems of the previous kings. No one here indulges in heterodoxy; everyone adheres only to the Holy Religion of the Lord of Heaven, the Supreme Deity. Their officials are divided into three classes: the highest are occupied with matters of religion, then those deciding secular affairs, and finally those who are concerned exclusively with the military. The region produces five grains, five metals and 100 species of fruit. They make wine from the juice of grapes. All craftsmen are wonderfully clever. They completely understand the principles of astronomy. Their customs are simple and straightforward; they value the five relationships. Production is very abundant. The princes and their subjects are strong and rich. In every season relations are maintained with foreign countries. Travelling merchants go to every country in the world. It is 80,000 [*li* from China] In antiquity there was no contact with China. It is only in the past 70 or so years that there has been contact.

The stress on uniformity and heterodoxy in Europe in 1602 cannot be cast as anything but wishful thinking. The stress on the ethical nature of Europeans is not particularly strange (the Jesuits might be expected to give a generous accounting of their countrymen.) What is of note is the statement that Europeans followed the five relationships—the *wulun* 五論, which are quite specific to the Chinese ethical world—the five relationships (ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, brother-brother, and friend-friend) are the basic ethical building blocks of Chinese society. The invocation of this specific Chinese ethical system both assures the Chinese viewers of the map of the universality of the *wulun*—they are valued in Europe—and the civilized nature of Europeans—they practice the *wulun*. The distance from Europe is stressed; 80,000 *li* is certainly farther than the distance between China and Europe as crow flies, but by the

route the Jesuits took may not be so much of an exaggeration. Several earlier commentators have suggested that one of the functions of the map (its visual representations as well as the words on it), was to assure the Chinese that Europe was very small and far away and hence not a serious threat. Another interesting aspect of this short (about 125 word) note is the way it historicizes contact—it says that originally there had been no contact between China and Europe, but seventy years earlier, contact had been established. Thus the map both represents time and space. The explicit mention of contact perhaps indicates the dawn of a new era, when contact will take place with increasing frequency and intensity.

Some parts of the world have customs and inhabitants that are portrayed as just plain odd. One of the oddest, which is similar to the Dutch cartographer Petrus Plancius' description of dwarves in Greenland in his 1592 atlas, reads :

Country of Dwarves. The men and women of this kingdom are only a little more than one foot tall. At the age of five they already have children, and at eight, they are already old. Constantly devoured by cranes and hawks, they live in caves for safety. Here they wait until the third month of summer, when they come out and destroy the eggs of their enemies, riding on goats.⁸

How do we reconcile pygmies riding goats hunting crane eggs with Ricci's statements about the care with to avoid exaggerations and the sensational in the the annotations for his map?

Feng Yingjing, a contemporary and admirer of Ricci, provides some help in thinking about the seeming contradiction in a colophon on a 1603 version of the map.⁹ He outlines the range of customs we see noted on the map.

Then if we examine the customs of the different countries [we see] that there are still those who live in caves, others who eat no rice, or who do not use food cooked by fire, some who dress in the skins of reptiles or the scales of fishes, who make knots in cords or cut notches in wood or leaves (as a way of writing), some who eat other men or eat their own children, who are devoured by cranes or hawks, who hang their dead in trees or give them burial in their own belly.

He goes on to talk about the Westerners and Chinese, each of whom participates in a world of civilization, albeit on different terms:

Just as Western countries have certainly never heard the teaching of the sages of China, so we have never heard of the books of their ancient sages. But now both enlighten each other, both benefit one another. In this way, the whole world has become a single family and minds have interpenetrated so there is no longer a difference between those spreading to the east and those extending to the west.¹⁰

⁸ Note at Minneapolis Institute of Arts by Rachel McGarry, <http://www.artsmia.org/exhibitions/ricci-map/artworks/dwarves.html>.

¹⁰ D'Elia, "Recent Discoveries," pp. 134-35.

The point that I want to underscore is not the cheerful statements of east and west interpenetrating as one family, but the clear implication that Feng Yingjing is making that the Chinese and the Jesuits are both civilized—they do not live in caves, they do eat cooked food, they do not eat their children or their parents, they are not (in general) subject to being eaten by hawks and cranes, and they do not bury their parents in their bellies—all of which (save one) are practices that are engaged in by the people portrayed on Ricci's world map. The map is then, in Feng's eyes, a marker of civilization—to be sure the civilization which the Jesuits and the Chinese literati share is not identical, but it marks them as different from the rest of the world.

The idea that Jesuits and Chinese literati had much in common is not a new one. But what I want to suggest is that in this collaborative map—which takes from Planius, Sir John Mandeville and Ma Duanlin as well as other sources both Chinese and European—we see a common celebration of civilization. “We” are civilized and “they” are not, and the “we” here includes both Jesuits and Chinese literati. It is a fragile alliance of the civilized—it will ultimately break down. But the map is a visual record of a moment of collaboration, of mutual curiosity and conversation. There is not much evidence that the map had substantial impact on the ways in which later Chinese conceptualized the world—some place names remain the ones he used, but many are changed. A very crude world map, which some say is derived from the Ricci map, is published in the *Sancai tuihui* in 1607. Craig Clunas is useful in his evaluation of the significance of the Ricci map. He writes:

What the majority of European writers (with the signal exception of Paul Pelliot back in 1921) have failed to take into account is the “culture of curiosity” in the China of the late Ming period, a widespread interest in the novel, the curious, and above all the foreign and the imported, which provided Ming consumers with a conceptual framework in which new forms of representation and new forms of script could be comfortably accommodated without serious epistemological disturbance.¹¹

I would like to suggest that the map can be placed in another framework; the framework of Jesuit cartography. But that would be another talk for another time.

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¹¹ Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) p. 173.