

The Selden Map of China: A New Understanding of the Ming Dynasty

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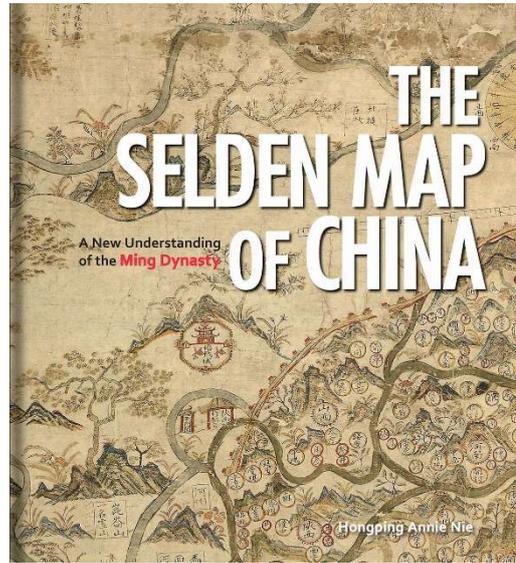
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My interest in the Selden Map of China stems from having previously reviewed Brotton and Millea's book *Talking Maps*. Being an accompaniment to the Bodleian Library *Talking Maps* exhibition, I was eager to find out more about the collection and uncover more detail about pieces within the exhibition. Hence, I was introduced to Nie's book. Initially, I was a little apprehensive as I have no background knowledge of the Ming Dynasty and a very superficial understanding of Chinese cultures, history and traditions. I do however, have a passion and curiosity for all things cartographic and am thankful that I did not let these doubts sway my interest.



The book provides a detailed, descriptive account of a key historical artefact that dates back to the seventeenth century. What differs about this ancient map and makes its rediscovery so significant is that it does not centralise China in the centre of the document but instead focuses on the surrounding oceans and islands. Instead, it depicts the trade routes that were used during the Ming Dynasty. In addition, the map contains specific cartographic properties and features that, as part of Chinese cartography, have underpinned a number of methods and techniques that we observe today. The focus of the book is to describe the historical background of the eras associated to the Selden map and provide an understanding of the relationship between China, maritime trade, and the wider western world. Based on the social, cultural and economic impacts stemming from this particular era, the map encompasses these factors through various forms of representation and symbology. It provides evidence that readdresses misconceptions of Ming China as isolated and suggests a more globally connected, modernised country.

Composed of five very detailed and informative chapters, the book provides plenty of analysis and description that demonstrates the significance and historical importance of the map. It begins with an overview that outlines the function and purpose of the map, before enlightening readers with the story of its rediscovery, using this event to frame the remainder of the narrative. The second and third chapters provide a comprehensive account of the map and discuss various elements of Chinese cartography and its artistic qualities. These chapters provide several insights into the contested creation of the map and the various theories regarding who the original cartographer/designer/publisher was, and finally how the Bodleian came to have it in their collection. Here, I was pleasantly surprised that the author offered such a detailed account of the conservation of the map, as this reaffirmed the importance of the document itself. This is accompanied by high-quality photos of the conservation process, which consequently allow readers to grapple with and visualise the sheer size and scale of the project. In doing so, the book communicates not only the significance of the item and the historical development of cartographic techniques, but also reinforces that artefacts like this command a level of care and respect.

The fourth chapter looks more specifically at the Ming Dynasty and maritime trade, specifically the wider social, economic and cultural factors that impacted greatly on this dynasty and subsequent

eras. As a geographer, it was interesting to see how the Selden map has embodied the qualities, values and beliefs of Ming China and how it has acted as a vehicle to disseminate this knowledge and therefore provide a more accurate understanding of the history of China. It presents evidence using cartographic representation and relevant symbols and icons that today's experts can together decipher to acquire a fuller, more detailed insight of the past. Finally, the concluding chapter ties all this information together and reaffirms the book's narrative and focus; the Selden map. Ultimately, this map has played a vital role across various cultures and societies, and today represents the map-making skills and techniques developed to underpin many of the tools and mapping features that we readily use in the present, such as compass bearings, scale and ratios.

One of the key factors I like about this book is that it offers an insight into wider contexts and fields that cartography can contribute to. I have often argued that maps are compiled of layers of detail and information for the observer to interpret, whereby they are more than just a useful tool for getting from 'A' to 'B'. Maps are a vessel of representation and can encompass more than just their visual form and function. The book supports this argument by delving into the wider social and cultural contexts and associated histories that are not often associated to mapping; especially in today's more digitally-focused world. However, I do feel that at times the book risks the clarity of its narrative by proceeding too far along a tangent and providing overly detailed accounts of various topics, such as the various dynasties, trade, shipping, and cartography. On the other hand, rather than see this as a problem, these various pockets of discussion serve more as a reminder of the importance of Batchelor's find and the vital clues that the map contain, contributing key evidence towards a more detailed and accurate understanding of China.

In ending, whilst its purpose may be to explore the rediscovery of a historical document and misconceptions of China, this book offers a friendly and approachable insight to the Ming Dynasty. The book is written in such a way that the narrative flows rather like a story and does not require its readers to depend on pre-existing knowledge. There is a start to the tale whereby the author sets the scene by introducing the rediscovery, progressing on to the chunky middle section exploring the historical era of the Ming Dynasty, and the conclusion then revisits the importance of the rediscovery and reinforces the cartographic, historical and cultural significance of the Selden Map. Using the map as the key piece of evidence, Nie has exceeded in demonstrating the representational qualities of cartographies specifically through historical maps, and that they can encompass both tangible characteristics like scale bars and a compass and intangible qualities relating to social, economic and cultural values and beliefs.

Lastly, I feel that having read this book I have received further insight regarding the capabilities of cartographic representation, and how mapping is not so different from the original paper and ink techniques used hundreds of years ago. Nie has opened the door to a plethora of conversations regarding the preservation and conservation of artefacts and documents, so that today's society can also reflect on centuries of development and contribute towards more accurate understandings of history.

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