

The Challenges of Mapping India: Cartography and Qing Imperial Expansion

Matthew W. Mosca
(University of Washington)

This paper will discuss several outstanding questions in the history of cartography in the Qing Empire, and consider what insights can be gained by studying Qing mapping of India. In both the West and China, the study of Qing-era map-making has largely concentrated on two interrelated sets of questions, both concerning the introduction and reception of maps and mapping techniques developed in Europe. Beginning with Matteo Ricci in the late Ming, a series of European missionaries presented Chinese-language world maps and globes distinctive in their technical underpinnings and empirical content. Over two centuries later a group of French Jesuits introduced the Kangxi emperor to mathematical surveying techniques, contributing to his later decision to have the entire realm mapped by teams of missionaries and Qing officials. In both cases, historians have sought to determine the long-term consequences of these episodes for Chinese (and Manchu) cartography. Did either European world maps or the Kangxi survey map displace indigenous maps and mapping techniques, or demote them to a subordinate position, thereby opening a new era in Chinese cartography? Did the two traditions coexist, each understood to dominate in a particular sphere? Or did European mapping fail to gain a permanent foothold and fall into decline by the later eighteenth century, surviving as an exotic curiosity that was only restored to predominance by the shock of the Opium War in 1840? In other words, the study of Chinese cartography was approached for most of the 20th century as a subset of the encounter between China and “Western science.” More recently, historians of the Qing Empire have developed a different approach to this topic. Building on the growing awareness that cartography functioned as a crucial tool of empire-building in the early modern period, scholars have attempted to compare Qing official cartography with that practiced by other contemporary empires elsewhere in Eurasia in order to determine whether Qing practice reveals parallels with other expanding states.

Considering how Qing ministers and scholars mapped India between 1700 and 1800 offers insight into these long-standing questions and raises new ones. One neglected issue is the gradual expansion of the original Kangxi-era survey: What began in the 1710s as a map almost entirely limited to territories actually surveyed became by the 1760s a map of much of Eurasia, from Arabia and the Baltic in the west to Siberia and Taiwan in the east. If the original surveys reflected Kangxi’s empiricism and included only what his own officials could directly verify (pointedly excluding content from European world maps), did the expansion of the official survey map indicate that later emperors were more open to trusting the unverifiable geographic data brought to China by Jesuits? The representation of India on the Qianlong survey map provides rich evidence on this topic, because it was constituted by a blend of survey data from the Kangxi era, maps imported from Europe, and *ad hoc* maps made during military campaigns using indigenous techniques. Sorting out how official map-makers accorded priority among these three types of evidence and thereby blended them together offers a glimpse into the methods by which Qing rulers hoped to obtain accurate and trustworthy maps of Eurasia.

The Qing mapping of India also invites a related set of questions about how best to place officially-sponsored cartography in its larger intellectual context. Both at the Qing court and among Chinese scholars at large, verbal descriptions in written texts remained the primary mode of conveying and debating geographic knowledge well into the nineteenth century. What role did maps play in this totality of Qing-era geographic research? One major problem confronted by Qing geographers was an abundance of sources which, due to their varied cultural and linguistic origins, were not easy to commensurate with each other. In the case of India, this manifested itself most obviously in the field of geographic nomenclature. It was often difficult to reconcile names from Chinese historical sources, Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim

geographies, and various contemporary reports. Whereas textual geographers had room to juxtapose different reports and reserve judgment on their mutual relationship, map-makers had no choice but to give one depiction of space with (usually) only one set of place names. This made India particularly difficult to map: not only was it mentioned in a particularly broad range of sources, but even within Qing official correspondence certain parts of India were given one name when described from one vantage point within the Qing Empire, and another name when observed from another frontier. Which among these many names should be used? Did using one set of terms while ignoring others make the map less useful for strategic planning? Further complicating the issue, geographic nomenclature could have political overtones. The Qianlong Emperor, for instance, advanced several geographic theories about India, which court editors were obliged to take into account. Moreover, many Qing geographers, including influential scholars working on official projects, were openly critical of Jesuit claims to superior knowledge of global geography. Adopting the names found solely on Jesuit maps could therefore be read as a political statement, an official endorsement that European world maps were correct. Yet how could these names be avoided when mapping territory whose shape had to be gleaned from European maps?

In sum, this paper argues that the particular complexities involved in mapping India are useful for illustrating how Qing-era cartographers sought to reconcile sources of diverse origin.