

BOOK REVIEW

*East Asian Cartographic Print Culture: The Late Ming Publishing Boom and its Trans-Regional Connections*

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Alexander Akin's monograph on "cartographic print culture" in the late Ming brings the study of maps into dialogue with broader fields of research such as the study of textuality and book history. It directs our attention away from some of the most famous maps of the period and toward a broader cartographic culture, fostered, as Akin argues, by the late Ming publishing boom, which facilitated new modes of textual production and circulation.

To provide a brief overview of the contents of the book, Chapter 1 introduces the reader to a range of Ming maps, from court publications to "popular" encyclopedias. Here Akin examines the relationship between earlier mapping traditions and late Ming cartographic culture, which inherited and adapted previous maps in ways facilitated by the expansion of printing. Chapter 2 provides a valuable discussion of historical cartography and its relationship to classical scholarship. Akin effectively describes why mapping the Classics was useful both for civil service examination students and for addressing contemporaneous administrative concerns. Chapter 3 provides a new context for understanding the circulation of Jesuit knowledge in Ming China by adopting a book historical approach to the study of cartographic printing practices. This reframing fruitfully centers Jesuit interaction within existing modes of Ming knowledge production. The final two chapters examine the place of Ming maps within the cartographic cultures of Chosŏn Korea and Tokugawa Japan. Particularly notable here is mention of a Korean map circulating in Ming China, which Akin uses to illustrate the "bidirectional" nature of cartographic influence (196).

Akin's research makes several contributions, within both the history of cartography and the history of East Asian books. Avoiding a pitfall of comparative scholarship that sees Chinese maps as lacking in innovation compared to their European counterparts, Akin argues that although Ming maps did not evince the dramatic changes in format characteristic of contemporaneous European maps, they were "deployed, contrasted, and combined" (12) in significantly different ways from the past. These differences, such as the juxtaposition of Jesuit knowledge, Confucian texts, Buddhist maps, and military memorials within a single compilation, represent a profound shift in textual

culture, reflective of a late Ming trend toward syncretism (66–67). This line of interpretation leads Akin toward observations concerning textual reuse as a locus of innovation, allowing him to persuasively argue that “late Ming saw old techniques applied to new purposes” (87).

While Akin’s research centers on the Ming, his monograph is not bound by national borders. Instead, Akin highlights the multidirectionality of cartographic knowledge across East Asia, as Ming maps traveled to Chosŏn Korea and Tokugawa Japan, and to a more limited extent in the opposite direction. This significant point is in line with recent research challenging representations of China as the sole center of culture spreading civilization outward.<sup>1</sup> There are still relatively few documented examples of literary and scholarly texts from Korea and Japan reaching an audience in Ming–Qing China, and the cases Akin provides are therefore a valuable contribution to this area of study.<sup>2</sup>

Akin has further addressed types of maps that are sometimes left out of the specialist scholarship for not conforming with present-day ideas of what maps ought to do, such as those produced through historical cartography, focused on the mapping of geography described in the Classics, and Buddhist cartography, which aimed to chart the geography of scripture. Related to this point, Akin emphasizes the significant role of “scholasticism and textual analysis” (14) underlying the production of maps, which have largely been ignored because of modern Western assumptions concerning particular functional purposes of maps. By broadening the scope of his analysis according to contemporaneous conceptions of cartography during the Ming, Akin provides a model for avoiding the sorts of anachronism that plague research on specialized fields of learning. Alongside this effort toward a capacious understanding of cartography, Akin attempts to bypass the evaluative concerns with accuracy by which present-day researchers have anachronistically tended to judge historical maps. Akin is largely successful in this regard, although I would note the tendency to employ charged words, such as “crude” (46 et passim), “haphazard” (54), and “deficient” (172), which casts an empiricist shade over an otherwise concerted attempt to understand these maps on their own terms.

Finally, Akin aims to decenter the state in narratives of cartographic innovation. While state concerns with mapping for military and political reasons are well documented, Akin suggests that the more interesting developments in Ming mapmaking occurred outside of the court’s direct oversight. This de-emphasis of the state as the primary locus of knowledge making is an important corrective within histories of Chinese intellectual culture, and particularly for the history of cartography.

At times, the various chapters of this monograph feel like independent essays. As interesting as the observations in any given chapter are, the book does not follow a clear narrative progression between the chapters, nor does it build toward an overarching conclusion. The throughline appears to be the significance of a late Ming “publishing boom,” which facilitated the circulation, modification, and development of maps during this period, a point to which Akin returns in each chapter. Print as a driving force in the construction and circulation of knowledge is central to Akin’s narrative. He argues, for instance, that the “increasing availability of maps through mass printing”

<sup>1</sup>Sixiang Wang, *Boundless Winds of Empire: Rhetoric and Ritual in Early Chosŏn Diplomacy with Ming China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

<sup>2</sup>For a rare exception, see Benjamin A. Elman, “One Classic and Two Classical Traditions: The Recovery and Transmission of a Lost Edition of the *Analecs*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 64.1 (2009), 53–82.

enabled Ming authors to “balance fundamentally different worldviews” (42). There are aspects of this book-historical argument that might benefit from greater interaction with recent scholarship. In particular, book historical scholarship has tended to call into question narratives of a stark dichotomy between manuscript and print cultures.<sup>3</sup> Scholars of book history would generally agree that printing and a developed commercial publishing industry can facilitate the circulation of knowledge. Yet, as the work of Adrian Johns, Suyoung Son, and Yuming He, among others, has taught us, print and commercial publishing were hardly transparent processes.<sup>4</sup> In certain regards, printing could exacerbate concerns with secrecy, credit, and textual reproduction and manipulation. While Akin’s claims about the effect of publishing are undoubtedly valid to a degree, they become somewhat repetitive across each chapter, and are not in keeping with developments in the field that have sought to complicate our understandings of print as an agent of intellectual and political change. Instead, the book largely reinforces commonplace understandings of printing in the Ming, here transplanted onto the lesser-known context of cartography.

While the role of publishing is undoubtedly significant in cartographic developments, more could be said about the focus on late Ming. As Akin readily acknowledges, maps had been printed and widely circulated for centuries before the Ming (86, 106). It is just that, in the Ming, it happened on an even larger scale. That is true of almost all categories of text in the Ming. Might there be other factors, beyond the expansion of a printing market, contributing to changes in cartographic practices? In other words, was it publishing that generated the syncretic attitude toward cartography that Akin documents? Or did the changes in format and textual eclecticism visible in printed books of this period serve to meet the expectations of an audience that increasingly valued syncretic knowledge? The printing and circulation of textual material in the late Ming must have played a role in the ability of thinkers to connect the dots across various fields of cartographic knowledge, but I suspect that shifting relationships between, for instance, Buddhist and Confucian scholarship, as well as changes in the standards for assessing valid knowledge also played an important part.

As a non-specialist on maps, I found much of use in this book, but caught myself having to do some of the heavy lifting. A case in point is the section of the Introduction entitled “Why maps matter” (19–21), which poses the question of why we should care about Ming maps, but does not answer it, instead focusing on defining what a map is. Akin has emphasized that attention to paratextual material is a necessary supplement to earlier cartographic scholarship, which has largely based its conclusions on reading just the maps themselves. This incorporation of the textual material surrounding the maps is most welcome, but an even fuller picture of the role of mapmaking and compilation within the broader intellectual milieu would seem feasible and enriching. Each chapter is devoted primarily to a description of the maps and their immediate paratextual apparatus, which at times has the effect of effacing the role of mapmakers and compilers.

<sup>3</sup>David McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup>Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Suyoung Son, *Writing for Print: Publishing and the Making of Textual Authority in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018); Yuming He, *Home and the World: Editing the “Glorious Ming” in Woodblock-Printed Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

For instance, Akin devotes considerable attention in Chapter 1 to a cartographic compilation by Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504–1564), tracing the origins of the maps contained therein (48–55). In addition to his cartographic ambitions, Luo was a major mid-Ming thinker, who contributed substantially to the contemporary discourse on Wang Yangming learning, as well as music and mathematics, among other fields. Attempting to understand how this polymathic thinker fit all these endeavors together (or maintained them as separate spheres), and in general greater attention to the intellectual-cultural importance of maps to a Ming audience, would go a long way toward solving the question of how and why things changed in Ming maps by underscoring the motivations and agency of those involved in the process of producing them. It might also broaden the significance of this book for readers who are not intrinsically invested in maps. In the case of Luo Hongxian, I find it surprising that a scholar of Wang Yangming learning, with its well-known disavowal of book learning, would be interested in a technical field like cartography. Some clues regarding the connection might come from the work of Zhang Huang 章潢 (1527–1608), whose maps are discussed at length in the same chapter (65–80). Zhang's deep investment in Neo-Confucian (albeit tending toward Cheng-Zhu) interpretations of the *Yijing* is immediately apparent in the opening volume of his cartographic magnum opus *Tushu bian* 圖書編, which explicitly links these fields of learning through the cosmological significance of various kinds of image. One need only turn to Zhang's dedicated study of the *Yijing*, *Zhouyi xiangyi* 周易象義, to see in even greater depth the theoretical significance of these connections across forms of image for his broader intellectual program. As a historian with expertise in cartography, Akin is positioned better than most to contextualize the significance of mapping within the complex, and little studied, intellectual culture of the mid-late Ming. In Chapter 2, Akin's discussions of historical and Buddhist cartographies suggest some consideration of broader intellectual-cultural issues, such as the role of the civil service exams and popular literacy. Further contextualization along these lines might ultimately provide a richer answer to the question Akin poses of why maps mattered in the Ming, and why they are of historical consequence. It would also, I believe, provide necessary evidence for any argument about the shift in cartographic practice in this period.

Overall, Akin's monograph is a notable achievement, bridging a specialized technical area with broader concerns of textuality in early modern East Asia. It brings to light little-known texts and images, uncovering the logic of their arguments and the meanings they had for contemporary audiences. The writing is lucid and the book should attract an audience well beyond East Asian studies, particularly among those interested in the study of comparative historical cartography and print cultures.