MR SELDEN'S MAP OF CHINA

The Spice Trade, a Lost Chart and the South China Sea

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Preface

Rarely does an old map make front-page news, but the map of the world that Martin Waldseemüller produced in 1507 did just that when the Library of Congress acquired it in 2003. The Waldseemüller map has been called America's birth certificate, and it cost the nation $10 million. It is beautiful, certainly, printed from twelve woodblocks so finely carved that the Jesuit schoolteacher who rediscovered the map in 1901, Joseph Fischer, assumed it to be the handiwork of the great artist Albrecht Dürer. It wasn't, but it was worthy of the mistake. As many as a thousand copies of this enormous map of the world may have been printed from these woodblocks, yet the only copy to survive is the one now on display in the foyer of the Library of Congress.

The map fetched the price it did because of one tiny detail. This is the first map on which the name America appears. Martin Waldseemüller inscribed it on a blank space in South America, roughly where we would locate Paraguay. Quite how much of the wraith-like landform snaking its way up the left-hand side of the map from the Antarctic to the Arctic the term was meant to name is unclear, but the Congress of the United States agreed that it covered enough to satisfy them. So there it is: a new name for a new continent, and all because Waldseemüller was

a big fan of the explorer–geographer Amerigo Vespucci. Had he been an enthusiast of Christopher Columbus, he might have called the new continent Columbia. But no, for him Vespucci was the discoverer of the New World.

Nine years after the map was published, Waldseemüller abandoned his innovative model of the world for a very different design, thereby rendering the 1507 original redundant. It was now a map without a future. This one copy survived only because a free-spirited priest-turned-mathematician named Johannes Schöner bought and preserved it some time before he died in 1547. He put it in a leather-bound portfolio, which ended up in Wolfegg Castle in southern Germany. It came to light only because in 1901 the castle archivist, Hermann Hafner, heard that a schoolteacher just across the border in Austria was interested in historical documents and offered him the run of the castle library. That schoolteacher, Joseph Fischer, was a Viking enthusiast looking for sources on the early Norse voyages. Without all these serendipitous connections, the map might never have crossed the five centuries that separate us from Waldseemüller. Johannes Schöner, the actor in this history closest to its beginning, feared the indifference with which objects by which one can investigate the past – indeed anything – could be treated. 'You know the times', he complained in 1533. The arts and sciences 'are so silent and neglected, it may be feared that the idiots will wipe them out'.

The book you are about to read revolves around a different map, the Selden map, so called because an English lawyer by the name of John Selden bequeathed it to the Bodleian Library in Oxford in 1654. The most important Chinese map of the last seven centuries, it maps the slice of the world that Chinese at the time knew, from the Indian Ocean in the west to the Spice Islands in the east, and from Java in the south to Japan in the north. It exists today because it came into the hands of John Selden, who shared Johannes Schöner's passion to ensure the survival of knowledge, and not just English knowledge but all knowledge, even Chinese, although it was a language he couldn't read. It is fortunate that he did so, for unlike the thousand Waldseemüllers that were printed, the Selden map is a singleton, drawn and painted by hand, the only one of its kind.

It is a large map, measuring 160 cm (63 in.) in length and 96½ cm (38

in.) in width. That makes it only half the size of the Waldseemüller (16⅔ sq. ft compared to 34 sq. ft), but still it must count as the largest wall map of its time and place. As neither China nor Europe produced sheets of paper that large, making wall maps on this scale required ingenuity. The largest sheet of paper available to the man who drew the Selden map was 65 × 128 cm (25½ × 50½ in.). He solved the size problem by taking two sheets, cutting one lengthwise down the middle and gluing one of the halves down the side of the other sheet, then trimming the length of the remaining half and gluing it along the bottom. Waldseemüller worked with smaller sheets of paper (42 × 77 cm, 16½ × 30½ in.). Rather than glue them together, he divided his map into twelve sections, printed it on twelve sheets from twelve separate woodblocks and left it to the buyer to assemble them into a single map. Then map design changed, and all the buyers but one threw their dozen sheets away. Schöner's set survived only because it disappeared into a library, which is just what happened to the Selden map. Both have now re-emerged – Waldseemüller's a century ago, Selden's just a few years back – to great public interest.

Both maps are terrifically important, in different ways. Waldseemüller drew his map just at the moment when the New World was coming into view. Europe's novel encounter with the world forced him to bend the existing mapmaking template to breaking point, and then to abandon it nine years later in favour of a new geometry better capable of encompassing the entire globe. So too in its way the Selden map bore the impact of China's encounter with the same world, seen from the other side of the globe. The man who drew the map acknowledged long-established traditions of how to draw China, but he also stepped outside that tradition to picture the lands that lay beyond China in a fashion no other Chinese cartographer had ever done. Not unlike Waldseemüller, he re-designed the world in response to an avalanche of new data about how the lands and seas beyond his native place actually lay on the surface of the earth. He also created a thing of considerable if subtle beauty, wallpapering the land mass of eastern Asia with mountains, trees and flowering plants – and the occasional whimsical detail. The two errant butterflies fluttering about in the Gobi Desert are my favourites.

It took a century for the map that names America to find its new home in the Library of Congress, where it occupies what many regard as its

rightful place in the pantheon of foundational documents celebrating their nation. Will fate touch the Selden map in the same way? Painstakingly (and expensively) restored in 2011, it is now on display in the Bodleian Library. Will its story end there? Should some decide that this map has a foundational role to play in the celebration of China's national identity, its future could become complicated. But the Selden map is not China's birth certificate. Neither the Chinese name for China – Zhongguo – nor the name of the reigning dynasty – Ming – appears on it, but then China has been around for so long that neither would carry significant weight at this late moment in its history.

Not a birth certificate, then, but potentially an adoption certificate? China is currently in dispute with every maritime nation in East Asia over who may rightfully claim sovereignty over the thousands of islands that dot the East and South China Seas. The best-known, because most noisily contested, are the Diaoyu Islands north-east of Taiwan, and the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. As the Selden map is the only detailed and geographically specific Chinese depiction of these waters before the nineteenth century, some hope that this long-lost map may be the winning card in the diplomatic game China plays with its neighbours. Over the course of this book I will indicate my doubt in this regard and show that the Selden map has nothing to say about such topics. But patriotic sentiment and national interest are powerful forces against knowledge for its own sake, so who can say? The Selden map has been valued for insurance purposes at three-fifths the price of the Waldseemüller map. This is an arbitrary estimate for an object that has been off the market for almost four centuries. If it ever goes back on, the bidding will surely go much higher.

I have not devoted an entire book to a single map in order to deliver an *Antiques Roadshow* punchline. Rather, I take the map as an occasion to explore the age in which it was made. It was an age of remarkable creativity and change. New vistas were opening, old horizons faltering, accepted truths giving way to controversial new ideas. Ordinary people in their hundreds of thousands were on the move in search of work, survival and adventure. Ships in their tens of thousands were sailing from every port in Europe and Asia. Commodities produced on one continent were reshaping economies on another. Against this background William

Shakespeare was premiering *The Tempest*, Ben Jonson inventing the musical to amuse King James I, and John Donne being pressured by that same monarch to give up love poetry for sermon-writing, and excelling at both. John Selden was among this crowd, living life to the full in London and dutifully churning out poems while he was supposed to be studying law. The poems were decidedly second-rate: the younger man had yet to find his metier. His monumental achievements in Oriental scholarship and constitutional law lay ahead of him. But he too would change the fabric of English society just as surely as these more famous authors did. And as all this unfolded, the map that bears his name would come into his hands.

I do not begin the book with the map itself, for there are many other things to think about before we ever get to the Selden map. We have to dig first in other fields, in part because there exists basically no documentation that can tell us anything about the map. The map itself complicates its own story by having travelled half-way around the world and ending up among people who viewed it very differently from the man who made it, thereby doubling the stories that can be told about it. Far more than just a passive illustration of its age, it is a densely worked document that will reveal much about the times and places in which it was drawn, viewed and graffitied. Knowing both less and more than what the mapmaker knew, we will have to do much digging to find out how to read it.

Odd as this may seem, one book is not enough to open all the doors hidden in the details of the map, let alone travel all the corridors that lead from these doors, still less to enter all the rooms that open off the corridors. Those I have been able to enter have disclosed a mad variety of events and personalities that I never expected to encounter when I first looked at the map. They include the burning of Japanese erotica in London, the trade policies of Emperor Wanli, the design of the Chinese compass, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's intentional misspelling of Xanadu, the donation of human remains to the Bodleian Library, and the ancestral church of the Knights Templar, to mention but a few. The only topic among these that I could have predicted was the compass; everything else came as a surprise. But all of it must be taken into account if we hope to give the Selden map, about which nothing certain is known, the history it deserves.

In the end, this book is not really about a map. It is about the people whose stories intersected with it. The venture succeeds if I can demonstrate how rich, how complicated and how globally networked this era was. The map stands as a reminder – a warning, even – that our understanding of our own time will be enfeebled if we remain ignorant of the earlier practices of gaining wealth and power that have led us to our present impasse. Of course, no one back in the seventeenth century could have anticipated that the small-scale deals and conflicts going on around the South China Sea were early rumblings of the age of empire to follow, or of the age of state-corporate alliances in which we find ourselves. The traders and sailors travelling across the surface of the Selden map were simply in it for the money and thought no more about it. Curious that a desire so uninteresting could remake the world. But then why should we presume to think that our age is any different from theirs? As Johannes Schöner so bluntly put it, 'You know the times.'

1 What's Wrong with this Map?

In the summer of 1976 I left China through Friendship Pass. As the train crawled into northern Vietnam through the rounded hills south of the pass, we gazed down into steep gullies crisscrossing the landscape beneath us. In some of the deeper gullies narrow streams gurgling with spring water were left to follow their natural courses. In others, the streambeds had been widened into rice paddies, the heads of the rice plants still green and not ready to harvest. An overturned steam locomotive lay in one of those gullies, its charred carcass sprawled on its back like some ruined Jurassic beast. Signs of the Vietnam War, which had ended just a year before, still littered the landscape, occasionally dramatically – beneath every railway bridge lay the twisted

girders of all the other bridges it had replaced – more often inconspicuously. Already the war was being forgotten. The very landscape seemed ready to forget it. Looking down on the locomotive, I could imagine the subtropical vegetation of the gully simply growing up around the defeated machine and gently swallowing it from sight before the recovery crews could arrive.

Friendship Pass is the Orwellian name for the rail junction connecting big-brother China to little-brother Vietnam. Honoured as a site of friendship between the two countries, it has just as often been a barrier of animosity across which the two sides have eyed each other suspiciously, and occasionally launched a wasteful invasion. It would be China's turn to invade in 1979, but that piece of folly was still three years off that peaceful and beautiful summer when I came through the pass. I was leaving China at the end of a two-year stint as an exchange student, heading home via a long detour that would take me through Laos, Burma, India and Afghanistan.

We approached the pass from the north. The Chinese train shuddered to a halt, and everyone had to alight to go through border inspection inside the station before switching to the Vietnamese train, which ran on a narrower gauge. Those who weren't Chinese or Vietnamese – there were only two of us – were set aside for special treatment. When my turn came, the brusque customs officer asked me to open my backpack so that he could inspect the contents. He was looking for something, and in no time he found it.

A month before leaving Shanghai, I had gone to the customs office to arrange the shipping of my books and few possessions back to Canada prior to my departure by train through Vietnam. I had to unpack and present everything for the inspection of the customs official whose job it was to check what foreigners were sending out of China. The official, a man at mid-career wearing the uniform of the customs department, was pleasant enough; he was also thorough. After going through my books and papers closely, he set aside two things I could not send out of the country. Both were maps. One was a national atlas, the other a wall map of China. I had bought both at the Nanjing Road branch of New China Bookstore, the official – virtually the only – book retailer in the country, and still had the receipts to prove it. They were not marked 'for internal

circulation', the label printed inside the vast majority of books, which we, as foreigners, were forbidden from buying. We had access only to 'open circulation' publications. It was one of those amusing Möbius strips of Cultural Revolution reasoning: the dignity of the nation would not permit Chinese to know everything foreigners knew, but it would not permit foreigners inside China to know the portion of what we knew that Chinese knew.

When I pestered the customs official in Shanghai to know why I couldn't keep them, he blandly pointed out that of course I could keep them; I just couldn't send them out of the country. When I pushed a little harder, he closed the subject down by informing me that maps had a bearing on national security. In those days, and probably these days as well, national security was the ultimate trump card of Chinese officials seeking to restrict foreign students' access to Chinese society. What that bearing actually was, no one could say. The only maps I was permitted to keep were the approved tourist maps of those cities that were open to tourists. These representations deliberately distorted space, on the flawed understanding that, should an enemy air force seek to bomb the country, these maps would confuse the pilots and cause them to miss their targets. (I know this sounds ridiculous, but those were ridiculous times.) I took the atlas and map back to my dormitory room, pondering what to do with them. The atlas was a hardback too cumbersome to consider carrying in my backpack across the length of Asia, so I gave it to a Chinese friend, who was happy to have it.

The map was another matter. I didn't want to get rid of it. It was light and could be folded into a compact square. Why not just carry it out in my backpack? Besides, the customs inspection had piqued my interest. I unfolded the map and looked again. What would have bothered the customs official? What was wrong with this map?

Nothing, as far as I could tell at first glance. Gradually it dawned on me that the map's liability had to do less with anything inside China than with its edges, the places where China abutted its numerous neighbours. I knew that China had exchanged fire with both the Soviet Union and India over disputed borders; there may have been others as well. Was this map claiming more territory for China than it had the right to occupy? Then I glanced at the South China Sea. This large and relatively

shallow body of water south of China is bounded on its other three sides by Vietnam, Malaysian Borneo, Brunei and the Philippines. China has declared ownership of the whole thing, minus the standard 12 nautical miles (13.8 miles or 22.2 kilometres) that international law permits every coastal nation to claim. This is China's most egregious unilateral claim over a frontier. There it was on my map, marked out as a series of nine dashes dipping down from the main body of the country to enclose all of the South China Sea.

The Vietnamese know this same body of water as the East Sea. Their particular interest is in the scattering of some thirty-odd tiny islands known to Europeans as the Paracels. (The Portuguese brought the word from southern Brazil, where it was the native term for a protective offshore reef.) Vietnamese call them the Hoàng Sa Islands, the Yellow Shoals; to Chinese they are the Xisha, the Western Shoals, so named because there is another, wider scattering of islands 700 nautical miles to the south-east, off the north-west coast of Borneo. These they call the Nansha or Southern Shoals. The rest of us know them as the Spratly Islands (named after the English captain Richard Spratly, who sailed by them in 1843 and published an account of his voyage in London). The tiny islands clustered in these zones number in the thousands, depending on how many outcroppings that disappear at high tide deserve to be dignified with the name of island. Historically uninhabited, they are uninhabitable without sustained support from elsewhere.

China's claim has put it in a decades-long stand-off with all its South-East Asian neighbours. The first serious conflict blew up in January 1974, when China and South Vietnam fought the two-day Battle of the Paracel Islands. (Vietnam lost.) It was a useful propagandistic distraction for both sides. Unfortunately for us exchange students in China at the time, this little exercise in force majeure resulted in a lot of bombastic patriotic poetry, which our teachers forced us to read.

And there I was in the summer of 1976, heading for Vietnam with a restricted national map of China in my backpack. The stern-faced border guard saw me coming. He opened the backpack, looked through its contents and pulled out the map. Barely concealing his pleasure at being a cog in the machinery of state, he asked me why I was taking the map