Japanese World Maps between East and West

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Lieux de mémoire are often vested in items of material culture, and material culture can often reveal fascinating hybrids of inter-reacting and competing cultures. Maps are exemplary carriers of internationally mobile science and technology: Ptolemy’s maps revolutionized cartography when they re-entered the West European mainstream in the fifteenth century. And besides being vehicles for spreading technical knowledge, maps of the world can also represent world-views. As they travel across cultures, maps can reveal a record of that intercultural exchange between different parts and views of the world.

Western interest in Japanese cartography has tended to focus on the European impact from the sixteenth century onwards, which did indeed produce some interesting (and very beautiful) hybrid world maps. Certain of them like the famous Nanban or ‘Southern Barbarian’ world maps (discussed below) might indeed be said to be a kind of lieu de mémoire of interactions between Europe and the rest of the world. Those intercontinental connections have inevitably been coloured in Western eyes and ears by the dashing and theatrical exploits of Commodore Matthew Perry, forcibly opening Japan to Western trade with his gunboat’s firepower in 1853, and Lieutenant B.J. Pinkerton’s romantic hit-and-run love encounter in Puccini’s Madama Butterfly of 1904. Like the maps of Matteo Ricci entering via China, or Japanese interest in Dutch medicine and geography (Rangaku), these milestones of cultural interchange have become symbols of the interaction between the closed Japanese archipelago and the Western word, with the emphasis very much on the effects of European penetration.

This essay explores a colourful if Eurocentric story of the evolution of Japanese traditional maps of the world, but it also probes the material to ask really how deep the Western influence ran, how important the old traditions remained despite the invasion of Western ideas, and the extent to which there was geographical influence in the other direction too, from East to West. Finally, some Japanese cartoon maps from the early twentieth century will be taken as examples of Japanese agency in this story of exchange and mart amongst the mapmakers.

As was the case in several Asian cultures, the Japanese had a vibrant and long-lived cartographic tradition long before Europeans came anywhere near them. The Buddhist mapping tradition came originally from India, and represented a view of the world centred on that subcontinent and its
four great rivers; most of the maps were India-centred. They were not particularly concerned with geographical accuracy, but rather proximity and relative position. Four or five concentric continents were usually shown, ringed around Mount Sumeru (the centre of the world in both Buddhist and Hindu ancient cosmologies). This Buddhist view of the world was current in Japan by the seventh century, and a surviving copy of such a Japanese map (of Chinese origins) dates from as early as 1320; these Buddhist maps were in circulation until the nineteenth century. The influence of Chinese traditional cartography was also great in Japan, and it remained important until the middle of the nineteenth century. This imagined world in Japan was Sino-centric, and generally showed three geographical circles: in the centre was China, nearby were Korea and Japan, and in the outer circle was all the rest, varying in composition, but sometimes including Europe at the north-west periphery. These maps are best preserved in their Korean Chonha-do (‘under heaven’, or terrestrial) versions, which were produced and printed throughout the time of the Yi dynasty from the fourteenth right up to the twentieth century. So Japanese cartography, including widespread printing of world maps, was very much alive from the medieval period onwards, and continued to thrive during and after the advent of Western influences, well into the nineteenth century at least.

Japan was of course, somewhat intriguingly, almost hermetically closed to outside influence for the whole of the Edo period from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century: the seclusion policy or Sakoku forbade Japanese travel abroad, and banned all foreigners except a very limited number of Dutch traders on the island of Deshima in the port of Nagasaki. In the nineteenth century the blockade was more porous, with Russian interest from the West, and American from the East; nonetheless, Japanese understanding of the West seems to have been very limited during the seclusion centuries. However in the decades before the 1640s there was considerable exposure of Japanese mapping to European Renaissance cartography, delivered by the same agents who were active in China, centred round the work of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci. Ricci imported the innovative cartography of Europeans like Ortelius to China, introducing visual manifestations of a spherical world and the vast number of other countries in it: Ricci’s greatest achievement in cartographic China was the huge Kunyo Wanguo Quantu of 1602, or map of 10.000 countries of the earth. These techniques entered Japan in turn through missionaries in the early seventeenth century, but there had been other Jesuit routes into Japan, with their maps and globes, since the visit in 1549-51 by the Basque missionary Francis Xavier SJ. This technical information generated the Nanban or Southern Barbarian world maps, of which about 30 still exist, many of them painted onto folding screens or room dividers, which were used by wealthy merchants as status symbols and as aids in the performance of their role in
Japanese culture and society. Some of them were on the Mercator projection and some Japan-centred. European maps of the world by Peter Plancius in the 1590s, and a map of 1609 by Pieter van den Keere (both eminent figures in Dutch Renaissance cartography) can be unequivocally seen directly to have influenced Japanese maps of that period. There was also a significant presence of marine chart and surveying technology in the early seventeenth century, introduced by Portuguese traders.

These early European influences helped to generate another genre of Japanese mapmaking which continued into the seclusion period: the Bankoku-Sozu, or maps of all the countries. These were printed by woodblock (books had been printed in Japan since the eleventh century, and sheet maps from the seventeenth). A well-known version is shown in figure 1: it dates from 1645 in Nagasaki, and was accompanied by illustrations of the different peoples of the world. It was printed with East at the top, perhaps to fit the page, which put Europe in the obscure bottom left. It is on an oval projection, and is split in the Atlantic, putting Japan near the centre of the map, emphasized by the chequered cross hairs of the equator and a meridian drawn through the Eastern Pacific. Europe and Africa are well articulated, and there is a huge, vague southern continent. Ricci had introduced the Pacific-centred European-style world map in China, but it did not prove popular there; in Japan it did, perhaps because of its tendency to highlight the island position and centrality of Japan, as opposed to the traditional Chinese or Indian dominance. It is worth pointing out that these Western influences were not exclusively Western-perpetrated: there was for example a Japanese expedition of three Christian Kyushu noblemen who travelled to Europe in 1585 and collected maps and writings by Ortelius and Georg Braun, together with charts, globes and astrolabes, which they brought back to Japan on their return.
The final principal influence of European on Japanese mapmaking before the end of seclusion came through Rangaku, or Dutch Studies, from the eighteenth century onwards. Certain groups of scholars began to take note of Western learning through the Dutch presence in Nagasaki; in Yedo their interest was primarily in Western (‘red-hair’) medicine, whereas in Nagasaki it was in cartography. There the work of the Blaeu dynasty of Amsterdam in maps, atlases and globes was absorbed (as was Russian cartographic influence), which stimulated the Japanese to make their own, Western-influenced maps of the world and of foreign countries in the nineteenth century, mass-printed and widely circulated; by then the impact of Rangaku could ‘hardly be overestimated’.

Figure 2 shows an example of this genre, if a rather idiosyncratic one. The year is uncertain, but the presence of a complete and reasonably believable Australia suggests a date in the nineteenth century, when these Westernized maps were really beginning to dominate the Japanese market. It is on the Mercator projection, or something very like it (Greenland is tellingly larger than South America, and although the bottom third of the map has not simply been cut off, it is covered in writing, thus pushing the latitudinal centre up well above the Tropic of Cancer, and making the northern hemisphere look more important). The map is broken in the Atlantic in such a way that puts Japan precisely in the longitudinal middle; the continents (rather than countries) are prominently labelled and shaded in different colours.
The story so far is reasonably familiar: a rather Eurocentric and even Orientalist narrative, which foregrounds a secretive, far-off Asian island society which chooses to close itself off from the rest of the world for two centuries and more, and then has to be prised open by force in order to escape from the Middle Ages and come to terms with the modern world. The agency is all Western, first Jesuit and then Dutch, in small doses, leaking in small amounts of Western technology and modernity, enough to interest a small part of the elite. Eventually in the nineteenth century the floodgates are blasted open, and Japan rapidly becomes a modern country: all of this is reflected in cartography.

But this narrative is of course not entirely satisfying, and indeed it has been periodically challenged, for it tends to rob the Japanese mapping world of any real agency in the matter. It is appropriate, therefore, in this examination of a lieu de mémoire of interaction between West and East, to explore the extent of Japanese empowerment and agency in the exchange, to check just how deep these European influences actually were, and, at the end of the period, to try to extract from the cartographic sources just what the Japanese chose to express in their maps of their own view of the world, rather than just being influenced by the West.14

Looking at cartography as a whole, Japanese maps were primarily about Japan. It was an independent and self-sufficient society, and ‘there was little impetus to map the world beyond its own shores’; even before the 1640s ‘we should not overestimate the contribution of Europeans’.15 Persistent traditions of presenting imaginary aliens, not unlike the strange peoples on Western medieval maps derived from the writings of Pliny the Elder and Solinus, actually represented a Chinese (not European) influence, and long remained a way of visualizing the rest of the world in the early modern period.16 There was ‘no wholesale transition’ until the second half of the nineteenth century.17 Those Kyutu nobles of the early 1580s were actively seeking new knowledge in the West, rather than just passively receiving what the Portuguese merchants and the Jesuits chose to bring them, and ‘Dutch Studies’ was very much a movement of Japanese intellectuals who wanted to use or exploit the knowledge present in Nagasaki harbour to advance their own systems of geography, cartography and medicine. In the Nanban tradition of the great hand-painted world maps on folding screens, the general picture came from European Renaissance mapping to be sure, but the Japanese artists adapted and deployed this knowledge to their own and their patrons’ ends. The screens were used in the performance of socio-cultural rituals which had little to do with the West, and the artists added extensive detail to the Western models in terms of information about Japan and surrounds: there was agency aplenty in those screens.18 In the early nineteenth century, the German physician Philipp von Siebold (1796-1866) was in the service of the great Dutch Trading Company (Nederlandsche
Handel-Maatschappij), and was posted to Deshima as medical man for the tiny colony. He established a medical school in Nagasaki, and was rewarded with many objects of Japanese material culture during his stay there in 1823-29. He collected many maps, including some that the Japanese authorities thought were politically sensitive; he was charged with treason and expelled, but managed to get most of his botanical collections, books and maps back to Leiden in the Netherlands, where he settled, and indeed founded a small museum which still exists today as the SieboldHuis. His collections, including the cartographic material, were considered important for Western knowledge of East Asia, so the traffic in at least some instances was two-way. Indeed there are elements of reverse Orientalism in the exchanges. The prolific trade in printed world maps in Japan, like the Bankoku, was carried out in the form of illustrations in books not just for scholars, but for a wide general public: they were not there for purposes of precise geographical accuracy, but rather for a commercialized exoticism, or Occidentalism. 

It is not necessary to exaggerate this element of Japanese agency in the cartographic interaction over several centuries: recognizing the reality of the ‘two-way street’ is sufficient. It is perhaps illuminating to look at some cartoon versions of world maps from around the turn of the twentieth century, to establish the point more firmly. Europe began to be aware of Japan as a rising threat to European power in the East from the 1890s onwards. There is a splendid cartoon (figure 3) in the German satirical magazine Kladderadatsch in 1895 showing an anthropomorphic map of Eurasia; old

Figure 3: ‘Die ostasiatische Frage’, in Kladderadatsch, Berlin, 5 May 1895.
Europe at the top is having her extremities in Asia – her feet in the form of Formosa and Korea – sawn off by the upstart Japan.

But Japan had its own view of the world. Figure 4 shows a map in style of the cartoons made famous by Frederick W. Rose, using personifications of countries to make geopolitical comment in a humorous way: they were immensely popular in several countries from the late 1860s up to the First World War, mainly in Europe. But this one is Japanese, signed by Kisaburo Ohanara in 1904 at the beginning of the Russo-Japanese war. Mostly in Japanese, there is enough English commentary in the cartouche to make entirely clear what is going on. Russia is ‘the Black Octopus’, who is advancing on several other territories in Asia, like Tibet, Persia and Korea. The text and the drawings make clear that Japan is about to put a stop to this aggression, having already annihilated Russia’s Pacific fleet and being about to complete the humiliation by military victory on land. This is perhaps a sign of the globalizing world of cartoons around 1900, but here we see the Japanese artist taking a Western form and turning it largely on its imperial head in the name of Japanese assertiveness and the (impending) defeat of a major European imperial power.

One final map from this ironic genre pointing up Japanese agency comes from a decade later, on the eve of the First World War, in figure 5. It is signed by Ryozo Tanaka, and appeared in a journal right at the beginning of the

Figure 4: Kisaburo Ohanara, ‘A Humorous Diplomatic Atlas of Europe and Asia’, Japan, 1904.
war. It portrays a Japanese world-view at a time when Japan saw itself as an important and successful rival to Russia, while the United States was an unpredictable force.20 Africa is shown as a patchwork quilt, the European and Asian countries are portrayed as animals and fish, the US is shown in an Uncle Sam outfit, and only Japan has any nobility, as a Samurai. There is some implicit sympathy for Germany, who is pin-cushioned with hostile foreign arrows; the portrayal of China as a short-sighted pig indicates some sort of prey for Japan, Russia is still an enemy but a blundering one, and the European empires are indulging their petty grievances in a full-scale war. Only Japan (and perhaps the US) are in control of themselves. This is Japan in assertive mode.

What can we take away from this canter through the interaction in terms of cartography over five centuries between Europe and Japan? First we can point again to the often exquisite hybrid forms of mapmaking which resulted from the encounter: the Bankoku-Sozu map shown in Figure 1 is but one example. Secondly, the East Asian traditions which underpinned Japanese cartography – the Chinese, the Indian and to some extent the Korean – together with indigenous Japanese elements, supported a rich and very long-lived cartographic narrative, which lasted certainly until the mid-nineteenth century. It was only then that the neo-Confucian Chinese and the Buddhist India-centric traditions were ‘overcome by the surging inflow of
modern European information on world geography in the mid-nineteenth century. 21 The import of Portuguese surveying techniques and European Renaissance world maps in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was, like most translational traffic, always accompanied by an appropriation process through which the Japanese cartographers made the incoming information their own, by adding details, emphasizing certain features and by using the resulting maps for their own cultural purposes. Furthermore, the information flow was two-way, also informing the West about the East. Even the voluminous spread of Westernized printed world maps was modulated in the appropriation. The earliest was the Yochi zenzu (map of the earth), a copperplate engraving published in 1792, by Shiba Kokan: it was taken from a 1730 map from the house of Covens and Mortier in Amsterdam, but had considerable added detail on Japan and surrounding areas. 22 And the lens of the Japanese cartoon maps – substantially appropriated in the transition from the European model – amply displays the agency retained and gained by the Japanese around 1900, only half a century after they had allegedly been engulfed by Western forms and content. If we can leave our Eurocentric leanings at the threshold, then these maps can show us a wide and enriching range of cultural encounter over many centuries, a lieu de mémoire of more than one dimension.

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8. Ibid., 405-10.
13. I discussed this map and the Bankoku one in figure 1 briefly in: M.J. Wintle, ed., Imagining Europe: Europe and European civilisation as seen from its margins and by the rest of the world (Brussels, 2008), 36-7.
14. The obvious should go on the record here: I rely on the maps partly because I cannot read the written Japanese texts. Fortunately the secondary sources in English concerning the principal cartographic events, as cited here in the notes, are quite extensive and reliable.