

Borders on Chinese Maps

Elke Papelitzky

The most eye-catching feature on the mid-16th century general map of China in Luo Hongxian's 羅洪先 (1504–1564) influential atlas *Guangyu tu* 廣輿圖 is a long black strip north of China labelled *shamo* 沙漠: the Gobi Desert (fig.1). Visually, the desert very clearly separates China from the 'northern barbarians', depicting a seemingly impenetrable border. For decades, Luo Hongxian's vision of the desert shaped the way Chinese mapmakers portrayed the Gobi Desert, emphasizing this natural border.

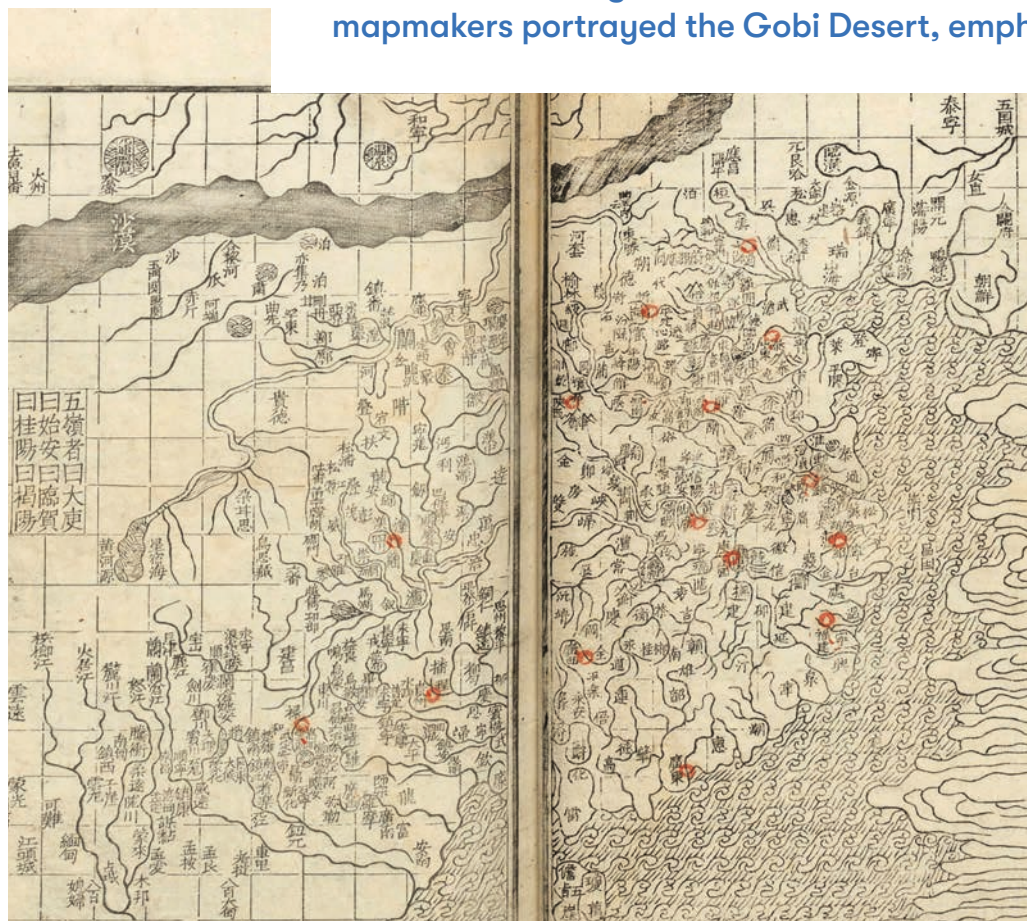


Fig. 1: Section of the general map of China from the 1566 edition of the *Guangyu tu*. Courtesy of the Harvard-Yenching Library.

Later adaptations of the map, however, while keeping the shape of the desert based on the *Guangyu tu*, changed the symbol used for the desert: some mapmakers used little dots as a symbol for the sandy desert, and others just left the strip white with black contours. Maps depicting the desert in such a way were made throughout the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912), well into the 19th century.

Not all borders on Chinese maps appear as prominent as the Gobi Desert. In this section, four scholars will introduce different aspects of mapping borders and borderlands in Ming and Qing China. Sometimes, borders are even curiously missing, as Mario Cams discusses in his contribution. Qin Ying describes how in late 19th and early 20th century Yunnan, changes in the political situation resulted in officials having to quickly adapt to new circumstances. Gu Songjie introduces a mapping project that aimed to deepen knowledge of the northeastern borderlands in the 18th century. And as the Gobi Desert is a natural and not a political border, Stephen Davies looks at the border between land and sea on Chinese maritime maps.

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At the borders of Qing imperial cartography

Mario Cams

Qing China's Kangxi (1661–1722), Yongzheng (1722–1735), and Qianlong (1735–1796) emperors each produced large atlases of the empire they ruled, entitled *Huangyu quan(lan) tu* 皇輿全(覽)圖 [Overview Maps of Imperial Territories]. Different editions were produced during each of these reigns, some in the form of atlases, some in the form of large multi-sheet maps.

Maps without borders?

The Kangxi atlas covers Qing controlled territories and adjacent tributary lands such as Korea and Tibet. To this, the Yongzheng map (see QingMaps.org) adds all of the Russian Empire up to Riga and Asia Minor, whereas the Qianlong map expands this scope even further to include the northern subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula. This raises the question of how the Qing depicted its borders on these "Overview Maps of Imperial Territories".

A quick look shows that no borders are depicted in the north, including in areas where the successive maps expanded their scope; there is no trace of a border between the Qing and Russian empires, for example, despite the existence of two border treaties, Nerchinsk (1689) and Kyakhta (1727). Another example is the apparent absence of the Qing–Korean border. In contrast, in the southwest of Qing territories, dotted lines trace the border that Yunnan province shared with what is now Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. Similarly, although only on the Kangxi and Yongzheng maps, dotted lines surround unmapped blank

pockets in Guizhou province that constituted tribal lands. Thus, it seems external borders in the southwest are clearly indicated, whereas legally confirmed borders in the north and northwest did not find their way onto these large multi-sheet maps. How can we explain this paradox?

Space versus territory

A closer look reveals that borders internal to the Qing are emphasized and exaggerated. One such border is the Willow Palisade, long since in disrepair by the time these atlases were produced, which separated Mongols from Manchus and runs from the Great Wall northeast of Beijing all the way around Mukden (Shenyang) and Kirin Hoton (Jilin), with one stretch branching off towards the (undepicted) border with Korea. On the other hand, there is the Great Wall itself, most of it built as a defensive structure during the late Ming precisely in order to keep the Manchu at bay. Like the Willow Palisade, this border is greatly exaggerated, giving the false impression that it formed one uninterrupted and uniform wall from east to west (fig.2). With this, Qing court maps stress one of the hallmarks of Qing rule: the separate administration, territorially defined, of Manchu, Mongols, and Han (later also including the Tibetans and the mostly Muslim population in the 'western regions' *xiyu* 西域).

The absence of legally defined external borders combined with a strong emphasis on internal borders can be understood by considering the difference between imperial

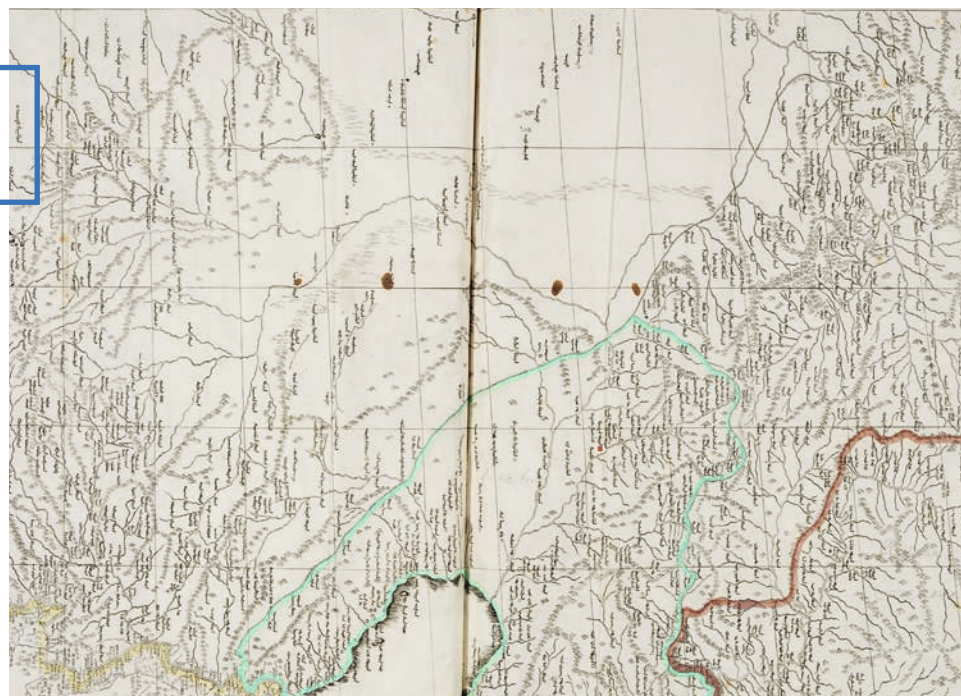


Fig. 2: 1719 copperplate version of the Kangxi-era multi-sheet map. Borders highlighted in print and in colour include the Willow Palisade (centre, in green); and the Great Wall (bottom left, in yellow). Although colour was also applied to highlight the border between Qing and Korean lands (bottom right, in brown), this border is not indicated on the print itself. About 40–64 cm. Royal Library of Belgium, LP VB 11.283 E (2), fol. 10. Reproduced with permission of the Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels.

territory and its prerequisite, imperial space. Taken as a whole, these maps communicate Qing space and therefore leave open the possibility of further expansion and conquest, particularly in the direction of the court's northwest-oriented gaze. On the other hand, it was imperative for this minority-ruled empire to distinguish between the Manchu, Mongol and Han territories it effectively controlled. Beyond this, Tibetan and Korean tributary lands were also covered under the imperial umbrella, but these lands are mostly separated by river systems so that no border needed to be drawn. In the southwest, where the dotted line delineates Yunnan, we are in fact also dealing with an internal border of sorts, separating the province from more

tributary lands (left blank in this case). The fact that provinces are also separated by a dotted line where no natural border is present confirms this thesis.

In short, whereas these court maps as a whole communicate a universal and therefore a theoretically borderless imperial space, they clearly distinguish among the imperial territories, including tributary states that made up and defined the Qing order. In other words, it is not at the edge but at the very center of these maps that we find ourselves at the borders of Qing cartography.

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