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Storia Militare Moderna

a cura di
VIRGILIO ILARI



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Testiera (Shaffron) per cavallo, Brescia (?) 1560-70
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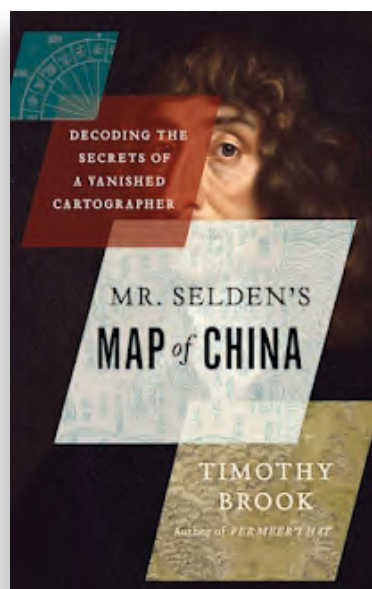
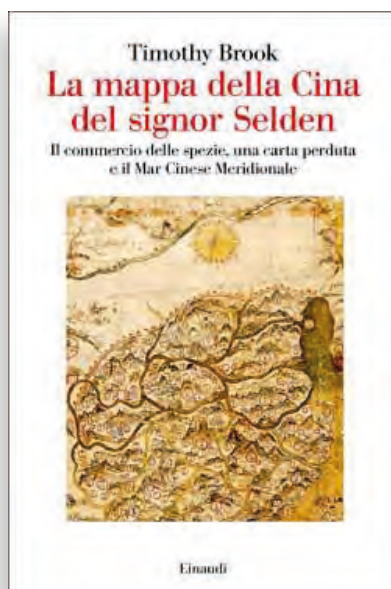
TIMOTHY BROOK

*Mr. Selden's Map of China.
Decoding the Secrets of a Vanished Cartographer*

New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2013, pp. 240

Trad. it. *La mappa della Cina del Signor Selden. Il commercio delle spezie, una carta perduta, e il mar Cinese Meridionale,*

Torino, Einaudi, 2016



In *Mr. Selden's Map of China. Decoding the Secrets of a Vanished Cartographer*, author Timothy Brooks brings the readers on a journey between early modern England and South East Asia. He does so by investigating the secrets and stories hidden behind one of the most fascinating early modern maps of South East Asia, known as the *Selden Map of China*. Although it was never lost sight of, its significance remained unexplored until January 2008, when it was inspected by the American historian Robert Batchelor. It was one of the first Chinese maps to reach Europe and it was likely manufactured around the year

1600¹. It is impressive in both appearance, level of detail and size (160 cm x 96,5 cm), being elaborately decorated with landscapes and vegetation and curiously including a European-style compass rose.

Considering its size, the Selden Map was probably meant to be hung in a wealthy merchant's house rather than for use at sea. Unfortunately, it remains anonymous and it is not known exactly when and where it was drawn. Recent studies suggest that it was produced in the early seventeenth century by a Chinese cartographer since Chinese sources are used for the place names on the map. He was likely based in Southeast Asia, as the map's depiction of that area was extraordinarily accurate for its times. The Bodleian Library in Oxford received the artefact in 1659 from the estate of the English jurist, legal historian and orientalist John Selden (1584-1654), one of the leading scholars of his age. The latter had acquired it from an English East India Company trader, who in his turn had obtained the map in East Asia, perhaps by force. Since the 1590s, English and Dutch adventurers had indeed started to aggressively compete with the Portuguese to gain access to Asian waters via the route circumnavigating Africa.

The Selden Map is a unique object, being markedly different from other Chinese maps drawn during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644)². Firstly, it is not primarily a map of China, but of East and Southeast Asia as a whole. Earlier Chinese maps represented China not only as the centre of the known world but as occupying almost their entire area. In the Selden Map, China instead occupies less than one half of the area depicted. The map is surprisingly centred on the South China Sea and the lands surrounding it. Thus, the primary purpose of the map is not the depiction of the Ming Empire itself but of its broader geographical context and its maritime links with Southeast Asia. Indeed, the anonymous mapmaker incorporated many sailing routes determined with compass bearings radiating from the Chinese port of Quanzhou to all the regions covered by the map. Thus, he charted

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- 1 The author considers it "the most important Chinese map of the last seven centuries", Timothy BROOK *Mr. Selden's Map of China. Decoding the Secrets of a Vanished Cartographer*, New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2013, p. 9.
 - 2 Robert K. BATCHELOR, *London: The Selden Map of China and the making of a Global City, 1549-1689*, Chicago: University Press, 2014; Annie N. HONGPING, *The Selden Map of China: A New Understanding of the Ming Dynasty*, Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2019; Chen TSUNG-JEN, *A Collage of Many Things: Rethinking the Making of the Selden Map*, in *Mapping Asia: Cartographic Encounters Between East and West*, New York, Springer, 2017, pp. 59-72.

the regional commercial network as no map, whether European or Chinese, had done before.

The Selden Map constitutes the earliest known example of Chinese merchant cartography, and it shows the real extent of China's intercourse with the rest of the world at a time when the country was generally supposed to have been inaccessible under the strict Ming imperial policies concerning seaborne trade. During thorough conservation work on the map, once its old backing was removed, the main sea routes, identically drawn, were found on the reverse, revealing that the map had been drawn by the use of voyage data obtained from a magnetic compass and systematic geometric techniques, some of them having no western parallel.

Interestingly, the map came into possession of John Selden, the author of the treatise *Mare clausum* (1635), who defended the right of coastal states to acquire exclusive rights over pelagic spaces³. Selden's arguments were instrumental to the new policies of the Stuart kings James VI-I and Charles I who desired to control the seas surrounding Great Britain, notably in order to tax the highly productive herring fisheries operated by the Dutch⁴. Selden was replying to the famous Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius who had instead advocated the opposite principle of the freedom of the sea in *Mare liberum* (1609)⁵. In the process, the law of the sea was starting to emerge as a separate branch of international law.

The author of *Mr. Selden's Map of China*, Timothy Brook, is a professor of Chinese history at the University of British Columbia. His research focuses on the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) but encompasses the period from the Mongol oc-

3 John Selden, *Mare clausum seu de dominio maris libri duo*, London, excudebat Will. Stanesbeius, pro Ricardo Meighen, 1635. An English translation by Marchamont Nedham appeared in 1652: John Selden, *Of the Dominion, or Ownership of the Sea. Two Books*, London, William du Gard, 1652. See also Helen THORNTON, 'John Selden's Response to Hugo Grotius: The Argument for Closed Seas', in *International Journal of Maritime History*, vol. 18, iss. 2, 2006, pp. 105-127.

4 BROOK, *Mr. Selden's Map of China*, cit., pp. 45-47.

5 The most recent edition and translation of *Mare liberum* is: Robert FEENSTRA (Ed.), *Hugo Grotius Mare Liberum, 1609-2009: Original Latin Text and English Translation*, Leiden, Brill, 2009. See also Martine J. VAN ITTERSUM, *Profit and Principle: Hugo Grotius, Natural Rights Theories and the Rise of Dutch Power in the East Indies 1595-1615*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2006; Peter BORSCHBERG, 'The Seizure of the Sta. Catarina Revisited: The Portuguese Empire in Asia, VOC Politics and the Origins of the Dutch-Johor Alliance (1602-1616)', in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2002; idem, *Hugo Grotius, the Portuguese and Free Trade in the East Indies*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2011.

cupation of China in the thirteenth century to the Japanese occupation of China in the twentieth. In the preface of the book, he clearly states his objectives: “I have not devoted an entire book to a single map [...]. Rather, I take the map as an occasion to explore the age in which it was made”⁶, and “in the end, this book is not really about a map. It is about the people whose stories intersected with it”⁷. The age in question, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries represented an epoch of rapid changes in international relations and growing commercial interactions between Europe and maritime Asia⁸. Cartographic and geographical knowledge was simultaneously booming, and successive generations of cartographers faced the colossal task of merging extensive oral and written sources into single images capturing an expanding world⁹.

The author’s ambition is to provide insights on some of the persons and places involved in these developments, employing as a point of departure the Selden Map. After introducing the significance of the map (chapter 1), the author divides his investigation into three different but connected “forays”: firstly, he brings the reader to England during the Stuart dynasty (1603-1713), the period that saw John Selden writing *Mare Clausum* and acquiring the map and then the librarian Thomas Hyde (1636-1703) annotating it with the help of one of the first Chinese to visit England, Michael Shen Fuzong (chapters 2-3). Secondly, he carries the reader on the seas of South East Asia, where Asian and European sailors were establishing a system of sea routes that formed a coherent trade network, and where Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English traders were actively disputing among themselves the role of intermediaries between Asia and Europe (chapters 4-5). Thirdly, the author adventures in the history of cartography and geographical knowledge around the time when the map was created, focusing on China (e.g. Luo Hongxian’s famous atlas *Guang yutu*, first published in 1555) and the reception of that knowledge in England by men such as the successful map publisher John Speed (chapters 6-7). Through these three interconnected “forays” the author intends to answer some of the mysteries behind the Selden Map, while

6 BROOK, *Mr. Selden’s Map of China*, cit., p. 12.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

8 See Charles H. PARKER, *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age*, Cambridge: University Press, 2010; Lauren BENTON, *A Search for Sovereignty, Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900*, Cambridge: University Press, 2012.

9 Leo BAGROW, *History of Cartography*, Chicago, Precedent Publishing, 2009, p. 105.

better understanding the historical conjecture in which this special object came to life (chapter 8)¹⁰.

Notwithstanding the quality of the general narration some imprecisions can be identified, for instance when the author considers (p. 27) that the Treaty of Tordesillas signed in 1494 between Portugal and Spain was sponsored by a “papal legate”. It is well established that on that occasion the Portuguese government sought direct negotiation with its Spanish counterpart exactly to avoid the cumbersome intervention of Pope Alexander VI¹¹. On page 48, the author refers to James VI-I’s brother in law as the King of Denmark. However, it would be better to refer to him as Christian IV of Denmark-Norway, since the two Nordic kingdoms had been united since the end of the fourteenth century under a personal union. Norway, not Denmark, constituted the main stakeholder on the seas north of the British Islands¹².

When the Selden Map was drafted, the South China Sea was already crossed by trafficked seaways connecting the East and the West. However, the Ming empire never showed interest in claiming solitary control over the sea beyond its immediate coastal waters. Indeed, a long-lasting tradition in favour of the freedom of the sea had evolved across the region¹³. Europeans still constituted a minor presence in the area and could not project their sea power effectively¹⁴. Historically, experienced seafarers who sailed through the South China Sea steered clear of the thousands of inlets, low tide elevations and coral reefs known as the Para-

10 BROOK, *Mr. Selden's Map of China*, cit., pp. 173-200.

11 See Thomas DUVE, *Treaty of Tordesillas*, in *Max Planck Encyclopaedia of Public International Law*. Online edition [www.mpepil.com], Oxford: University Press, 2013.

12 Stefano CATTELAN, «Claims of Dominion and the Freedom of the Sea: Diplomatic Tensions between England and Denmark-Norway in the late Tudor Period», *Journal on European History of Law*, 2, 2021, pp. 29-42.

13 BROOK, *Mr. Selden's Map of China*, cit., p. 195. See also Charles H. ALEXANDROWICZ, *An Introduction to the History of the Law of Nations in the East Indies (16th, 17th and 18th Centuries)*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1967; Ram P. ANAND, *Origin and Development of the Law of the Sea, History of International Law Revisited*, The Hague-Boston-London, M. Nijhoff, 1983, pp. 31-35; idem, *Maritime Practice in South-East Asia until 1600 A. D. and the Modern Law of the Sea*, in *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1981, pp. 445-446.

14 For an interesting analysis, see Tonio ANDRADE, *The Gunpowder Age: China, Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West in World History*, Princeton: University Press, 2016, pp. 135-210.

cel and Spratly Islands because of the danger they posed to navigation. However, if John Selden had already defended the possibility of ownership over the sea, nowadays China claims the vast majority of the South China Sea as its own, based on historical rights and prior discovery. This ambition directly encroaches on what neighbouring states view as their maritime rights under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III), especially regarding their 200 nautical miles Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)¹⁵.

The Chinese have been assertively extending their *de facto* control on several reefs, islands, and low-tide elevations from which they uphold maritime claims based on the so-called “nine-dash line”. US Navy vessels continue to sail within 12 nautical miles of Chinese claims, challenging what they view as excessive maritime claims and an infringement on the freedom of the high seas. The US government maintains that such operations are carried out throughout the world, including areas claimed by its allies. It argues that they are directed at upholding access to watery highways under international law. China and the US accuse each other of escalating the situation. In this context, the Philippines brought to court a case against China concerning the South China Sea. In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration based in The Hague issued a landmark ruling. It stated that Beijing’s expansive maritime claims had no legal basis¹⁶. However, the Chinese government rejected the decision¹⁷. The interest in the South China Sea is easily explained. It contains rich, though depleted, fisheries, as well as massive oil and gas fields. In our interconnected globe, it constitutes a vital artery of world trade, with an estimated one-third of global shipping transiting through its waters. Some of the world’s largest economies, and notably China, rely on the commer-

15 Taiwan, Brunei, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines hold competing claims.

16 PCA Case n. 2013-19, *In the Matter of the South China Sea Arbitration*, before an Arbitral Tribunal Constituted under Annex VII to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, between the Republic of the Philippines and the People’s Republic of China. See also Christopher Rossi, “Treaty of Tordesillas Syndrome: Sovereignty ad Absurdum and the South China Sea Arbitration”, in *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 50, 2017, pp. 231-283.

17 See, for instance, the arguments elaborated by the Chinese Society of International Law (CSIL), “The South China Sea Arbitration Awards: A Critical Study”, in *Chinese Journal of International Law*, Vol. 17, Iss. 2, June 2018, pp. 207-748. For a western perspective, see Eleanor FREUND, *Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea: A Practical Guide*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, Special Report, June 2017.

cial routes crossing this relatively narrow body of water, something that raises concerns about its vulnerability as a strategic chokepoint.

In conclusion, Brook's volume offers a captivating introduction to early modern exchanges between Europe and Asia, providing fruitful insights on the region centred on the South China Sea. It also provides some starting points of reflection on what is today one of the most geopolitically and economically pivotal pelagic spaces, where the great powers of our time, the US and China, are openly facing each other. What ultimately emerges from the reading of *Mr. Selden's Map of China* is the complexity and diversity of seventeenth-century maritime interactions. No European or Asian political entity could dictate alone the rules pertaining to the use of the sea, and the South China Sea represented a true "commercial common ground"¹⁸.

STEFANO CATTELAN¹⁹

18 BROOK, *Mr. Selden's Map of China*, cit., p. 9.

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The Selden's Map of China - Bodleian Library, MS.Selden supra 105

Mappa Regni Sinensis Lingua Sinensi scripta

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Armatura equestre realizzata nel 1548 a Norimberga dall'armaiolo Kunz Lochner (1510-1567)
per Giovanni Ernesto Duca di Sassonia-Coburgo (1521-1553).
Rogers Fund (1932), Metropolitan Museum, CC0. Public domain

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