

# The Introduction of the Concept “ASIA” into China and the Chinese Responses\*

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*I cannot conceive why three names, and women's names especially, should ever have been given to a tract which is in reality one.*

—Herodotus

The three-continent system, including Europe, Asia and Africa, was devised by the ancient Greeks. In the Middle Ages, this system was conceived in the Roman Catholic theological context, which placed Jerusalem at the center of T and O world map, and construed the continents as domains of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. In the Great Navigation period, European navigators found new routes to India and the Far East, and “discovered” the New World. At the same time, the European notion that Asia was an isolated and alien continent was consolidated. But, as Herodotus wondered, why were three names applied to a tract which is in reality one? Perhaps it was because Europe needed an “other” for self-identification.

The Chinese had not known that their country constituted part of a vast continent named Asia until the Italian Jesuit Father Matteo Ricci drew his first world map (*Shanghai Yudi Tu* 《山海輿地圖》) in Zhaoqing in 1584. Through Matteo Ricci, Giulio Aleni, Francisco Furtado, Ferdinand Verbiest and other European Catholic missionaries, Western geographical knowledge, including the concept of Asia, was introduced into China during late Ming and early Qing dynasties.

Western-shaped geographical thinking deeply changed the traditional Chinese idea of *Tianxia* (天下), but the European concept of Asia was not to impact Chinese thought strongly until the late Qing period, when Xu Jiyu (徐繼畲), Wei Yuan(魏源), He Qiutao(何秋濤) and other scholars adopted it in their famous books. At that time, facing the strong powers from the West, China needed to rethink its idea of central empire, and construct an identity encompassing their territory and neighbors. The concept of Asia was useful in achieving this, and Europe, accordingly, was regarded as their “other.”

In the landmass labeled “Asia” there was a multiplicity of cultures, variety of religions,

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\* I want to thank Dr. Nicholas Jackson for his careful proofreading of this paper.

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and diversity of identifications. So this tract is in fact not very suitable to be conceived or perceived as a unit in any sense. Since its genesis the concept of Asia has been a result of odd construction and artificial convention. In our era of globalization, it is all the more timely and appropriate to ask: do we still need this concept of Asia?

## 1. Introduction

We were taught that there are seven continents on the earth: Asia, Europe, Africa, North America, South America, Australia, and Antarctica, but when we take a look at the globe, we find that the three continents, Asia, Europe, and Africa comprise a single continuous landmass and share a common continental shelf. Geographically, Europe is a northwestern peninsula of the Eurasian landmass. This division would appear to be based on culture, for Asia, Europe, and Africa have different cultures. Yet this is not consistent with the principles or realities of cultural geography. We know that, in contrast to Europe, Asia is the most culturally diverse continent, on which there are abundantly colorful and distinct cultures in different regions, whether Hinduism, Islamism, Buddhism, Confucianism in the South, West, Southeast and East Asia. If there is no close correspondence between the cultural borders of its various types of constituents, then why do we divide this Afro-Eurasia landmass into three continents?

It was this very question which vexed the Greek historian Herodotus more than 2400 years ago. He remarked, "I cannot conceive why three names, and women's names especially, should ever have been given to a tract which is in reality one."<sup>①</sup> Herodotus tried to trace the names to their provenance, but did not arrive at any satisfactory explanation. It is still unclear today. Nevertheless we are sure that the ancient Greeks had already used Asia and Libya to name the east and south climes, and looked at themselves as Europeans, during their colonial expansion and trade across the Mediterranean. This state of affairs might be compared to what obtained in ancient China, when the Chinese people looked at themselves as *Huaxia* (华夏), and called other tribes around them *Rong* (戎), *Di* (狄), *Man* (蠻), and *Yi* (夷). This is the way they perceived their outside world, and constructed their self-identification.

The threefold division of the Old World into Asia, Europe, and Africa is a European contrivance, which served to separate themselves from others, and delineate its borders and confines. The Mycenaean Greece of antiquity left scant record of some serving women from a locality called "Asia," but it referred to Anatolia, the later Asia Minor. At that period, Europe meant mainly Greece, while Libya was a small region to the west of Egypt. In the 6-5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the boundary between Asia and Europe was taken to be the Phasis River (the

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① *The History of Herodotus*, Book IV.

modern Rioni) in the Caucasus, and as geographic knowledge of the Greeks increased during the Hellenistic period, this archaic convention was revised and the boundary was considered to be the Tanais (the modern Don River). The Roman geographer Ptolemy acceded to the archaic Greek three-continent system, designated the Red Sea as the border between Libya and Asia, and defined the northern border between Asia and Europe as a meridian through the mouth of the Don River northward to "the unknown region." Ptolemy's Asia extended to the Far East, approximately identical to today's Asia.

Throughout the Middle Ages and into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional division of the landmass of Eurasia into two continents Europe and Asia followed Ptolemy, with the boundary following the Aegean Sea, the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, the Bosphorus, the Black Sea, the Kerch Strait, the Sea of Azov and the Don River. European geography fell into a stagnant period in which little development took place. Geography was overshadowed by Roman Catholic theology. One case in point is the appearance of a type of world map, the T and O map. The *T* represented the Mediterranean, the Nile, and the Don River dividing the three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa; and the *O* stood for the encircling ocean. Jerusalem was generally represented in the center of the map, and because the sun rose in the east, Paradise was generally depicted as being in Asia, which was situated at the top portion of the map. The three continents were regarded as domains of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, Japheth (or as they were spelled on the map: Sem, Cham, and Iafeth).

During the period of Great Navigation (or the Great Discoveries of Geography), Europeans made great strides in geography as well as in cartography. European navigators found new routes to India and the Far East, and "discovered" the New World. After two centuries of navigation and exploration, there remained only a few unreached lands. The world maps of the 16<sup>th</sup> century clearly showed most parts of the Earth. At the same time, Asia was regarded as the most important "other" of Europe, and the European concept that Asia was an isolated and different continent was consolidated. Although more and more European countries became nation-states, they still wished to maintain a European identity, especially when confronted with Africans, Indians, and peoples of the Far East. For example, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Empire manipulated the boundary between Asia and Europe, in order to preserve European identity in geography as well as in other aspects of cultural heritage. In 1730 the Swedish geographer Philip Johan von Strahlenberg published a new atlas proposing the Urals, instead of the Don River, as the border of Asia.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, there were three main conventions: one following the Don, the Volga-Don Canal and the Volga; another following the Kuma-Manych Depression to the Caspian and then the Ural River; and a third abandoning the Don altogether, following the

Greater Caucasus watershed to the Caspian. The question was still treated as a “controversy” in geographical literature of the 1860s, with Douglas Freshfield advocating the Caucasus crest boundary as the “best possible.” Most geographers in the Soviet Union also favored the boundary along the Caucasus crest, and it became the standard convention in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The modern construct of Europe delimits it from Asia at the Aegean Sea, the Dardanelles-Sea of Marmora-Bosporus, and the Black Sea, along the watershed of the Greater Caucasus, the northwestern portion of the Caspian Sea and along the Ural Mountains, as both mapped and listed in many atlases.<sup>①</sup>

From its inception to modern times, the concept of the threefold division of the Afro-Eurasian landmass, especially the concept of Asia, has been exclusively European. It was devised, explained, spread, discussed, and defined by Europeans. Different European geographers, philosophers, politicians, and theologians rendered different meanings and demarcations to it according to their own purposes. For example, Egypt is typically included in the Middle East, but not in Asia, even though the Middle East is a division of Asia. But in the whole process, almost all of the people who were living on the so-called landmass “Asia” were totally absent. In the pre-modern era neither Chinese, nor Japanese, nor Vietnamese, nor Korean nor any other nations of this construct ever knew that they were “Asian.” To their minds, they were vastly differentiated in civilization, contrary to ancient European notions. They did not call themselves Asian, but were referred to in that way by others. In fact, there has never been a group of people whose name was Asian.

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the European concept of a five-continent world, including Asia, was introduced into China. At the time of this introduction China had her own traditional world view, called the *Tianxia* view ( 天 下 觀 ). The following discussion examines the encounter of these two world views, particularly the Chinese responses to the European concept of Asia.

## 2. The introduction of the concept of Asia into China

Roman Catholic missionaries were the main instruments of the cultural intercourse between East and West during 16-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. They brought European knowledge to China, and sent back information about that land of the Far East. Practically the only agents of cultures between China and Europe, they had the priority to decide what kind of knowledge they would introduce to China, and what they would transfer to Europe. European impressions

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① For some parts of the paragraphs above, I consult comprehensively the entries of “Asia,” “Continents,” “Boundaries between continents,” and “T-O map” in Wikipedia (internet).



of China, as well as Chinese impressions of Europe, were shaped by these missionaries, but these impressions were not always very accurate.

European geography was one body of knowledge that the missionaries (mainly Jesuits) energetically transmitted to the Chinese. Two reasons account for their interest and effort in doing so. Firstly, Chinese literati and officials were intrigued to know something about the outside world, so introducing European geography became a convenient way to cultivating friendship with Chinese personages – the kind of friendship crucial for the success of evangelism in China. Secondly, they needed to show that they came from a place of sophisticated civilization, not from an uncouth place of barbaric character, which the Chinese had been accustomed to thinking, in order to predispose the Chinese to accept the Christian doctrine. The Chinese would refuse to learn anything from any people whom they could confidently regard as barbarians.

When the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci finally settled down in the capital city Zhaoqing, Guangdong Province of South China, he hung a world map with explanations in European language on the wall of his residence. According to recent research, this map could have been Abraham Ortelius' (1527-1598) or Gerardus Mercator's (1512-1594) production. His Chinese guests brimmed with curiosity and expressed the wish to have one accompanied by notes in their language. So Ricci drew a world map called *Shanghai Yudi Tu* (《山海輿地圖》) in Chinese to satisfy this desideratum. Ricci inserted some Christianizing content in this map in order to propagate the Catholic doctrine – doctrine previously unknown to the Chinese – and he placed China at the center to cater to the Chinese notions of the world. Although it was far from perfect, this world map was circulated among Chinese officials and literati, and elevated his reputation. Unfortunately this world map is no longer extant. But we can infer that through this map, Ricci introduced to China the European geographical concept of continents, as well as Asia.

Ricci subsequently drew several other world maps at the different places where he resided, such as Nanchang, Nanjing, and Beijing. Both *Yudi Shanhai Quantu* (《輿地山海全圖》, Nanchang, 1596) and *Shanghai Yudi Quantu* (《山海輿地全圖》, Nanjing, 1600) did not survive to be handed down to us. The most influential one still with us today is the *Kunyu Wanguo Quantu* (《坤輿萬國全圖》), drew in Beijing in 1602. On this map, we can view Ricci's introduction of the five continents, "In accordance with the topography, the terrene terrain can be divided into five continents, which are Europe, Libya (Africa), Asia, South and North America, and Magallanica (Antarctica)." <sup>①</sup>

① 利瑪竇：《坤輿萬國全圖》，載朱維鈞主編《利瑪竇中文著譯集》，上海：復旦大學出版社，2007年，第174~175頁。

Although Ricci's introduction was very brief, it was supplemented by fellow Jesuits, such as Giulio Aleni (1582-1591), Francisco Furtado (1589-1563), and Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688). In his *Zhifang Waiji* (《職方外紀》, 1623), Aleni offered a general description of Asia, as well as the other four continents. He wrote, "Asia is one of the biggest continents of *Tianxia* (under heaven, 天下), where ancestors of human beings were born, and it was the first motherland of Oracles." After defining its confines, Aleni observed, "There are more than one hundred countries in Asia, and China is the biggest one. ... China is located at the Southeast of Asia. From ancient time, her emperors and kings established their powers and might, and sages and oracles have been constantly teeming. Her reputation, culture, civilization, rites, music, and dress are beautiful. Her mountains, rivers, and soil are fertile, and her customs, properties, and people are rich. Thus all the countries, no matter how far or near, respect and imitate China."<sup>①</sup>

But here all "the countries," including all the Chinese tribal states, such as Tartar, Manchu, Korea, Liuqiu, Tibet, Vietnam, Thailand, and those more distant, such as Arabia, Persia, India, Turkey, belong to Asia. European countries, or *Da Xiyang Zhuguo* (大西洋諸國, Countries of Big West Ocean) as Jesuits called them, are not included. Europe is another continent regarded as a land with a civilization as refined as China's, which China had never known until the advent of the Jesuits. This perception not only affected but impacted the traditional Chinese scheme of *Tianxia*, according to which, China was the center of the whole world and that the farther the region was from the center, the less civilized it was. Jesuits acknowledged China as a civilized center, but they told Chinese that China was only the center of Asia. There was another center of civilization in *Taixi* (泰西, Big West), whence they came to China.

In further deviation from the Chinese view, there was, according to the Jesuits, one Asian country that was more important than China. That was Judea. It was the suzerain state of all other countries, because the primogenitor of human beings was made by God there, and the Judean history recorded all kinds of things about human beings. In *Zhifang Waiji*, as well as in other geographical books by Jesuits, the description of Judea was much more detailed than those of other Asian countries, because Christianity originated there. It was the Holy Land of Christianity, so it had to be the most important place in the world.<sup>②</sup>

It is not surprising that the Jesuits tried to put religious content in their geographical

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① 艾儒略：《職方外紀》卷一，謝方校釋，北京：中華書局，1996年，第32~33頁。

② 艾儒略：《職方外紀》卷一，第52頁。

presentation. Aleni's preface (1648) to his *Wanguo Quantu* was a typical case, in which he wrote, "All the terrains of *Tianxia* are divided into five continents. ... There are countless bigger or smaller countries in each continent, which could not be drawn on a small map. ... Although the five continents are huge, and there are thousands of countries on them, compared with the sky, they are only tiny spots. The country where we are living is only a dot on the five continents, and the place where we are standing is only a spot on a big country. What if I were compared to the sky? What if I were compared with the Lord? So I am just a speck in a dot, and could not be found anywhere. Although my body is puny compared with the sky and earth, I have a tiny soul which was given by the Creator, so my soul can contain the sky and earth, and understand the Creator of the sky and earth and all the things between them. Thus my body is called a small cosmos (所謂人身小天地也)." <sup>①</sup> The last sentence is evidence that the Jesuits used Confucian terms and perspectives to convey Catholic doctrine, or in another words, that they endowed Confucian ideology with tenets of Christianity.

In his *Huanyou Quan*, Furtado wrote, "All humans derive from Adam, who was in fact in Asia. Since Adam's descendants were scattered among thousands of countries of Asia, Libya, and Europe, who can say that they could not arrive in as far a land as America and Magallanica? Although the land route is hard, there are sea routes. Since our Lord of Heaven has created land for us, He would certainly order Angels to bring men to those far away places. While the Apostles still walked the earth, the Law of Jesus was spread all over Asia, Libya, and Europe. These three continents are highly esteemed, so although the Law of Jesus has not arrived at their distant corners, we still say that it covers the entire terrestrial sphere." <sup>②</sup> Thus, although China is located on the margin of Asia, she should still accept the Law of Jesus; that is why the missionaries came from Europe to China.

Long before the arrival of European geography, the Buddhist understanding of the world had been introduced into China. Buddhism divided the world into four continents (Dvīpa), Uttarakuru (北俱盧洲), Purvavideha (東勝神洲), Aparagodaniya (西牛賀洲), and Jambudvīpa (南瞻部洲). This geographical conception was denounced by the Jesuits. For example, Ricci asserted that it was difficult to count so many countries of the world, but approximately, each continent had at least one hundred countries; and the Buddhist idea that China was in Jambudvīpa was obviously an error. <sup>③</sup> Ricci told Chinese scholars that the

① 艾儒略:《萬國圖小引》, 佈雷頓斯國立圖書館藏品, 見黃時鑒《黃時鑒文集》第三冊《東海西海》, 彩圖 16, 上海: 中西書局, 2011 年。

② 傅汎際譯義、李之藻達辭《寶有詮》(1628)卷六, 法國國家圖書館 Chinois 3384, 第 52 頁。

③ 《坤輿萬國全圖》, 載朱維鈞主編《利瑪竇中文著譯集》, 第 175 頁。

Buddhist notion of four continents derived from European geography, because before the discovery of America, a European geographer had also only known four continents, and on the map *Dadi Yuanti Tu* (《大地圓體圖》), which was dedicated to Kublai Khan by Zamaldin (札馬魯丁), there were also only four continents.<sup>①</sup>

In the late-Ming and early-Qing period, through the introduction of European geography, and the concept of continents, the Catholic missionaries showed to Chinese people a new world view. They tried to construct a bipolar world, in which Europe and China were the two centers of civilization, and other regions and countries were ancillary. The traditional Chinese Tianxia view was influenced by this new world view, but it did not completely collapse, for although China was not the center of the whole world anymore, she was still the center of Asia. The traditional Chinese Tianxia perspective was now replaced by a new view of Asia, because all the regions, nations and countries that the Chinese had known formerly as her *Si Yi* (四裔、四夷) were located in Asia. Sages appeared in both Europe and Asia, but in the latter, they only appeared in Judea and China. Thus, China was not the only region of high civilization, but one of the main countries in Asia, and Europe was not one of China's *Si Yi*, but was a region whose civilization parallel to China's. Missionaries tried to remove Chinese psychological obstacles to accepting Christianity. In the interest of propagating Christianity in China, Christian content was inserted into the presentation of European geography, and the Buddhist geographical viewpoint was impugned. Faced with the new knowledge of European geography, including its concept of Asia, Chinese scholars responded in several ways.

### 3. Chinese responses to the European concept of Asia during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties

The European idea of five continents, especially as represented in Ricci's *Kunyu Wanguo Quantu* and Aleni's *Zhifang Waiji*, was cited frequently and appeared in many texts of the late-Ming and Qing period: *Ming Shi* (《明史》), *Siku Quanshu Zongmu Tiyao* (《四庫全書總目提要》), *Guangdong Tongzhi* (《廣東通志》), *Huangqing Wenxian Tongkao* (《皇清文獻通考》), and other important compilations. We can see that this European knowledge exercised much influence in the Chinese intellectual domain.

As to much other European knowledge, the Chinese responses to the European concept

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① 利瑪竇：《複連池大和尚〈竹窗天說〉四端》，載朱維錚主編《利瑪竇中文著譯集》，第666頁。

of Asia could be divided into three types: acceptance, rejection, and deferral of discussion of the proposition.

Not surprisingly, the European concept of continents and Asia was completely novel to Chinese. For until the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Western Europe and America had not been reached by any Chinese. As Chinese people had not known of these regions, they could not be easily convinced of the claims of the new geography. This is why disbelief and skepticism was the most common reaction to it.

Zhang Huang (章潢, 1527-1608), a famous geographer of the late-Ming period who came from Jiangxi, cited Ricci's *Diqiu Tushuo* (《地球圖說》) and copied Ricci's *Yudi Shanhai Quantu* (《輿地山海全圖》) in his works *Tushu Bian* (《圖書編》).<sup>①</sup> Although Zhang Huang's transcription of Ricci's world map was not an exact copy, he clearly wrote the names of the continents on it, and commented that as Ricci's map and knowledge of the world were based on his personal experience of travel, it could possess a certain amount of truth. But conventional Chinese and traditional Buddhist views of the world were also included in his *Tushu Bian*, so we may observe that Zhang Huang just gathered the new European geographical knowledge and put it into his book together with others, in order that other scholars could compare them and decide which one was more reasonable. Zhou Yuqi's (周于漆) *Sancai Shiyi* (《三才實義》, 1680), which also included a transcription of Ricci's world map (*Yudi Tu*, 《輿地圖》), may also be placed in the same category of response as Zhang Huang's *Tushu Bian*.<sup>②</sup>

In the early-Qing period, doubt and deferral of the question were still the prevalent attitudes towards the five-continent geographical scheme. Inspection of the official historical books demonstrates this point. In the *Mingshi* (《明史》), it was recorded that, "Ricci arrived at our Capital during the Wanli Reign from Italia, and drew *Wanguo Quantu*, in which he said that there were five continents under *Tianxia*, ... because what he said about the customs and products of other countries are exaggerated, and there are *Zhifang Waiji* and other books that could be consulted, here we don't narrate it in detail."<sup>③</sup> *Ming Huiyao* (《明會要》) impugned Ricci's *Wanguo Quantu* and the five-continent scheme, "it is absurd and cannot be testified."<sup>④</sup>

Apropos of the five-continent conception could be found in the *Zhifang Waiji*, the *Siku*

① 章潢：《圖書編》卷二十九，文淵閣四庫全書本，第44~46頁。

② 參見黃時鑒、龔纓晏《利瑪竇世界地圖研究》，上海古籍出版社，2004年，第18~19頁。

③ 張廷玉：《明史》卷三百二十六列傳第二百十四“意大裡亞傳”，武英殿刻本，第17~21頁。

④ 龍文彬：《明會要》卷七十九外蕃三，清光緒十三年永懷堂刻本，第11頁。

*Quanshu Zongmu* (《四庫全書總目》) commented that “many things that this book described are bizarre, and cannot be proved; they seem rather extravagant. But as the heaven and earth are huge, and anything could exist, so we note their theory in order that this strange idea could be more widely known.”<sup>①</sup>

Many scholars adopted the same attitude. Gu Jingxing (顧景星), a litterateur of this period, wrote that Ricci’s idea of five continents, and that Italian’s notion that China was one percent of Asia, could not be judged either true or false.<sup>②</sup>

Most of these authors rarely had any direct or close contact with missionaries, and had no way to discuss the novel scheme of continents, so it is understandable that they persisted in doubting it. Another possibility is that they hesitated to accept the existence of a powerful other (Europe, 歐羅巴) because its ramifications would jeopardize or disturb the Chinese *Tianxia*. For example, although the author synthesized Ricci’s maps, Liang Zhou’s (梁輅) world map *Qiankun Wanguo Quantu Gujin Renwu Shiji* (《乾坤萬國全圖古今人物事跡》),<sup>③</sup> is still a typical Chinese traditional *Guangyu Tu* (輿圖), showing the Chinese view of *Tianxia*, without mentioning or indicating the names of continents. Another instance is Cao Junyi’s (曹君義) world map *Tianxia Jiubian Fenye Renji Lucheng Quantu* (《天下九邊分野人跡路程全圖》, 1644),<sup>④</sup> in which China and her *Siyi* are at the center, occupying more than half of the map, and hence the other four continents are accordingly very small—with their names written on it, but the name of Asia not among them. It is a world map, assimilating some European knowledge but based on the Chinese world view of *Tianxia*. It seems that Cao Junyi accepted the existence of the other four continents, but preferred not to recognize the concept of Asia.

Many of the literati and officials, such as Wang Pan (王泮), Wang Yinglin (王應麟), Wu Zhongming (吳中明), Guo Zizhang (郭子章), Feng Yingjing (馮應京), Li Zhizao (李之藻), and Xu Guangqi (徐光啟), who promoted the drawing and publication of the world maps or prefaced these maps and other geographical books by the missionaries, can be regarded as converts to or tolerators of the European idea of the continents. Most of them looked favorably upon Christianity, or were even baptized into that faith. I turn now to some of these figures, who quoted and commented on the European concept of Asia.

One of Ricci’s world maps *Liangyi Xuanlan Tu* (《兩儀玄覽圖》, 1603) was

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① 《四庫全書總目》卷七十一史部二十七，武英殿刻本，第17~18頁。

② 顧景星：《白茅堂集》卷三十，康熙刻本，第43頁。

③ 曹婉如等編《中國古代地圖集》（明代），北京：文物出版社，1994年，圖145。

④ 曹婉如等編《中國古代地圖集》（明代），圖146。

published by one of the Chinese Literati Christians, Li Yingshi (李應試, Paulo, baptized in 1602). In his preface to this map, he admitted that Europe and much of the globe had been unknown to the Chinese until these Westerners traveled 80 thousands li by sea from Europe. These Europeans had made great contributions by their maps, which informed Chinese of the existence of more parts of the world. Although their languages were different from Chinese, they and Chinese scholars could understand each other, because both of them had the same mind towards to the same truth, and their learning were the same with Zhou Gong (周公) and Confucius.<sup>①</sup> "Both west sea and east sea have the same mind and the same truth" (東海西海, 心同理同) was one of the most important bases for those Chinese literati acceptance of Western learning, not least European geographical knowledge.

Feng Yingjing (1555–1606) was a high official who deeply admired Western learning, and was nearly baptized before his death. In his preface to the *Liangyi Xuanlan Tu*, he admitted that though the Great Ming had more than 100 dependent states, the Chinese *Tianxia* only occupied one fifth of the whole world on this map. It was held that there was no place that Chinese power didn't reach; but upon seeing this map, Feng strongly doubted this view. He recognized that Ricci's goal in drawing this map was to make all people believe in God, their Father, and to persuade them that though divided into many states, they were all brothers. But Feng did not consider Ricci's evangelical agenda an obstacle to accepting European geographical knowledge: for the latter was objectively true.<sup>②</sup>

Feng put a transcription of Ricci's *Shanhai Yudi Quantu* and Wu Zhongming's preface into his book *Yueling Guangyi* (《月令廣義》). This transcription was also copied by Wang Qi (王圻) into his *Sancai Tuhui* (《三才圖會》), and by You Yi (游藝), who inserted it in his *Tianjing Huowen* (《天經或問》). The name "Asia" was clearly written on these maps. Feng also published two small maps of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres given by Ricci. Although originals of both maps failed to survive, there are copies from of them preserved in Cheng Baier's (程百二) *Fangyu Shenglu* (《方輿勝略》, 1610) and Pan Guangzu's (潘光祖) *Yutu Beikao* (《輿圖備考》, first published in Chongzhen Reign). Cheng's book included a sheet, tabulating the longitude and latitude of each state of the continents, which might be formed by an anonymous Chinese scholar.<sup>③</sup>

Another Chinese Christian Qu Shigu (瞿式穀, received baptism from Matteo Ricci in 1607) not only accepted the five-continent theory, but also used it to confute the traditional idea

① 李應試：《刻兩儀玄覽圖》，引自黃時鑒、龔纓晏《利瑪竇世界地圖研究》，第171頁。

② 馮應京：《輿地圖敘》，引自黃時鑒、龔纓晏《利瑪竇世界地圖研究》，第171–172頁。

③ 參見黃時鑒、龔纓晏《利瑪竇世界地圖研究》，第37–41、53頁。

of *Tianxia* and *Siyi*. In the preface to Aleni's *Zhifang Waiji*, he wrote, "According to the map in this book, China occupies one-tenth of Asia, and Asia occupies one fifth of *Tianxia*, so besides China, there are another nine regions similar to China. Are we like a frog at the bottom of a well if we set ourselves up as the center of *Tianxia* and regard all others as barbarians?"<sup>①</sup>

The concept of "Western learning originates from China" (西學中源) was another important basis on which some Chinese scholars accepted European geography. It frequently happened that when new knowledge was introduced into China, Chinese scholars used to look for its roots in ancient China. Facing the European scheme of continents, scholars such as Li Zhizao, Guo Zizhang, Wang Yingming (王英明), Xiong Mingyu (熊明遇), Fang Kongzhao (方孔炤), Fang Yizhi (方以智, Kongzhao's son), and Jie Xuan (揭宣, Yizhi's student) supposed that it derived from Chinese ancient theory. Guo Zizhang, one of the publishers of Ricci's *Shanhai Yudi Quantu*, thought that the Italian's world map and theory were consistent with Chinese ancient books *He Tu* (《河圖·括地象》) and *Shanhai Jing* (《山海經》), especially with Zou Yan's (騶衍) and Yu's (禹) theories of *Jiu Zhou* (九州), both of which asserted that China was only one-ninth or one-eighty-first of the whole *Tianxia*. Accordingly, Ricci's map precisely corroborated Zou Yan's theory.<sup>②</sup>

Jie Xuan drew two maps: one was full figure of five continents of the Earth (《大地圓球五洲全圖》); the other was a map depicting Asia (《亞細亞一大州圖》). Both of these were based on Aleni's world map. Jie Xuan not only accepted Aleni's assumptions, but thought that Western geographical knowledge derived from Guo Shoujing's (郭守敬, 1231-1316, Astronomer in the Yuan dynasty) theory.<sup>③</sup>

Aleni had more influence in local academic circles around Fujian. In those poems dedicated to him, the five-continent framework was frequently mentioned.<sup>④</sup> Some other high officials and eminent scholars of the early and middle Qing period, such as Li Guangdi (李光地)<sup>⑤</sup> and Ruan Yuan (阮元),<sup>⑥</sup> also accepted the five-continent theory. Through these influential officials and scholars, the European concept of five continents spread wider and had more impact.

① 瞿式穀：《職方外紀小言》，見艾儒略《職方外紀》，謝方校釋本，第9~10頁。

② 郭子章：《山海輿地全圖序》，引自黃時鑒、龔纓晏《利瑪竇世界地圖研究》，第175頁。

③ 揭宣：《旋璣遺述》卷二，“地圓”，引自黃時鑒、龔纓晏《利瑪竇世界地圖研究》，第108頁。

④ 《熙朝崇正集》，吳相湘主編《天主教東傳文獻》，臺北：學生書局，1965年，第652-653、661-662、671、684-685頁。

⑤ 李光地：《榕村集》卷五，文淵閣四庫全書本，第13頁。

⑥ 阮元：《（道光）廣東通志》卷三百三十列傳六十三，道光二年刻本，第61~62頁。



There were, however, some scholars who rejected the European scheme of a five-continent world. They were extremely uncomfortable with a geographical system in which China would constitute a much smaller part. The authors of *Huangqing Wenxian Tongkao* (《皇清文獻通考》) did not approve of the five-continent theory of Aleni's *Zhifang Waiji*, as they thought it was irrational to classify Magallanica, a land only one thousand li, as a continent, when China, covering tens of thousands li, was classified as merely a part of a continent.<sup>①</sup> Zhang Yongjing (張雍敬), a scholar from Xiushui (秀水), Zhejiang Province, thought that the Europeans deceived Chinese people by teaching them an invalidated five-continent theory.<sup>②</sup> Another scholar, Se Dan (璉耽) pointed out that *Ya Xi Ya* (亞細亞, Asia) meant "small and subordinate," so that the missionaries were clearly reducing and disparaging China through by such a geographical model. He became angry when he read a book quoting *Ou Luo Ba* (歐邏巴, Europe) and *Ya Xi Ya*, and threw it down to the floor and stamped it, and would never read it again.<sup>③</sup> The illustrious scholar Huang Zongxi (黃宗羲) wrote a poem (《明司天湯若望日晷歌》) to denounce not only the five-continent theory, but also Christianity.<sup>④</sup>

European geography, with its five-continent scheme, widened the Chinese field of vision and seriously influenced the traditional Chinese world view of *Tianxia*. In order to supplant the *Tianxia* view, missionaries wanted to present a bipolar world, with Europe on one side, and Asia (more or less equal with Chinese traditional *Tianxia*, in which China was the center, with traditional tributary states around her). They did not wish to be regarded as barbarians, and tried to obtain respect from the Chinese by introducing sophisticated European learning and scholarship. This respect could eliminate Chinese scholars' psychological resistance of to accepting exotic, Roman Catholic religion. Most of the missionaries insisted that they came from *Ou Luo Ba*, or *Da Xiyang* (大西洋, Big West Ocean), instead of from merely just one state or country of Europe. They wanted Chinese people to get the impression that they were from a united territory, and wished the people of China to regard Europe as their "the other" *au pair*, just as they viewed China as their most important "other."

Chinese literati and scholars offered a variety of responses to this new knowledge during late Ming and early Qing periods. Confronting the new five-continent scheme, the prevailing attitude, exemplified by the authors of official historical works and some other scholars, was

① 《皇清文獻通考》卷二九八，四裔，文淵閣四庫全書本，第16~17頁。

② 張雍敬：《定曆玉衡》卷三，《續修四庫全書》景印復旦大學圖書館藏本，轉引自黃時鑒、龔纓晏《利瑪竇世界地圖研究》，第97頁。

③ 平步清：《霞外攬屑》卷二執香峪話“蓮鬢閣集”，民國六年刻香雪庵叢書本，第53~54頁。

④ 全祖望：《鮑塘亭詩集》卷二，四部叢刊景清抄本，第2~3頁。

skepticism and an inclination to defer this question to future consideration and evaluation. At the same time, they were quite apprehensive about the implication that China had lost (or would lose) its central status in the world. This helps to explain why some of them still drew world maps in the older, traditional Chinese way, despite the fact that they had already become acquainted with the new geographical knowledge from the West. Most of the literati and scholars who accepted the five-continent theory were either friendly to missionaries, or had become converts to the Christian faith. Through European geographical knowledge, they were persuaded that China was not the center of the world, but only the center of Asia; and that the world was much larger than the traditional Chinese *Tianxia* had indicated. For the first time they knew that there was a Europe, Magallanica, and an America; and that Europe constituted another center whose civilization could rival China's. Some of them, such as Qu Shigu, employed the European five-continent concept to excoriate the *Tianxia* view. Although some scholars strongly objected to that concept, they were not the mainstream and exerted little influence.

#### **4. Chinese responses during the middle and late Qing:**

##### **Wei Yuan's commentary on the five-continent theory**

The relationship between China and the West profoundly changed during the middle and late Qing period. There were more conflicts of trade, and the appearance of military powers from Europe aggravated tensions between East and West. China's *Tianxia* view and its tributary system crumbled and collapsed, and were replaced by the modern worldview and system of unequal treaties.

Roman Catholic missionaries were not the only instruments of cultural intercourse between the West and China. Protestant missionaries emerged to play a more and more important role. There was an increasing number of Chinese going abroad to personally experience the outside world. In the late Qing era, especially after the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, more modern Western knowledge flowed from Japan.

More Western geographical knowledge was introduced into China through different channels, and the five-continent (or seven-continent—dividing America into North and South, and adding Oceania) theory was accepted universally as incontrovertible fact. Because of a series of defeats in wars and subsequent unequal treaties with Western powers, China began to perceive that the West was possessed a different culture, with a higher level of science and technology than any region in the East. The traditional *Tianxia* view was not tenable or applicable any more, and China had to admit and accept the West as her powerful other.

The perpetual tensions between China and the West impelled Chinese scholars to study

Western geography. A great number of geographical works appeared as a result of the impact from the West. Such books as Lin Zexu's (林則徐, 1785-1850) *Sizhou Zhi* (《四洲志》, 1841), Wei Yuan's (魏源, 1794-1857) *Haiguo Tuzhi* (《海國圖志》, 1842-1852), Liang Tingnan's (梁廷柅, 1796-1861) *Haiguo Sishuo* (《海國四說》, 1846), Xu Jiyou's (徐繼畲, 1795-1873) *Yinghuan Zhilue* (《瀛環志略》, 1849), and He Qiutao's (何秋濤, 1824-1862) *Shuofang Beicheng* (《朔方備乘》, ca. 1858) appeared in this way. These works demonstrated that Chinese had opened their eyes to look at the whole world. They incorporated the Western worldview and theory of continents, and described the locations, cultures, military affairs, politics, products, people, trade, and other aspects of states, nations, and countries of all the five continents. The method of compiling these books was more or less the same as Aleni's in the *Zhifang Waiji*, but much more detail was added. There were plenty of other works, both official and unauthorized, treating the geography of the world; the theory of continents was mentioned frequently in them. Examples of such works as these were, He Changling (賀長齡) and Wei Yuan's *Qing Jingshi Wenbian* (《清經世文編》, 1826), and Qilu Zhuren's (杞廬主人) *Shiwu Tongkao* (《時務通考》, 1897). In the following section I will focus on Wei Yuan's treatment of the five-continent theory, because his was the most representative and influential.

Following Lin Zexu's suggestion, Wei Yuan compiled the *Haiguo Tuzhi*, first in 50 volumes, and later expanded into 100 volumes. This book is regarded as a landmark of Chinese geography because, compiled by Chinese scholar, it facilitated the Chinese people's detailed comprehension of the world. The sources consulted by Wei Yuan were very wide, including traditional Chinese works, Chinese books written by both Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries, and other miscellaneous types of information from foreigners. Wei's aim was to make his readers know and learn from the Western powers, in order to fortify China against their aggression. The five-continent system was followed by Wei in his compilation of this book, but he had his own comprehension and explanation of the European theory of continents. We can most clearly understand his views by reading his essay "Explanation of the Five Continents" (《釋五大洲》) presented in the *Haiguo Tuzhi* (volume 74).<sup>①</sup>

As mentioned above, Ricci criticized the Buddhist theory of Dvīpa, but Wei Yuan's adoption of the European five-continent scheme was made within the framework of Buddhism. He thought that continents should be divided and surrounded by oceans, not by seas, rivers, mountains or isthmuses, so the landmass of Afro-Eurasia should be regarded as one, instead of three continents. Nor, he thought, should America be separated into two continents by

① 魏源：《海國圖志》卷七十四，光緒二年魏光壽平慶涇固道署刻本，第1~10頁。

the Isthmus of Panama. In other words, the five continents in the European system should be taken as merely components of the two Dvipas of Buddhism: the whole of Asia, Europe, and Africa formed but one continent Jambudvīpa and the landmass of both North and South America was Aparagodaniya; the third continent called Uttarakuru was located in the Arctic Ocean, the ocean which the Europeans hadn't known or reached; and the fourth continent Purvavideha, which was Antarctica, which, though reached by Europeans, was not penetrated so far as to interact with its local people. (Wei did not know that Antarctic was an unpopulated landmass.)

According to Buddhist scriptures, there are four Lords in Jambudvīpa: Lord of Man dwells in the East, Lord of Elephant resides in the South, Lord of Horse inhabits the North, and Lord of Treasure occupies the West. Based on this theory, Wei thought that China was the Lord of Man in the East, because she possessed the largest population; India was the Lord of Elephant in the South; Mongolia and Kazakhstan were the Lord of Horse in the North; and Europe was the Lord of Treasure in the West. Furthermore, in Jambudvīpa, Asia was more hallowed than the other two parts (Europe and Libya), because all the men of God, that is, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha Sakyamuni, and Confucius, were born in Asia. Wei thought that Europe was harmful to China because England exported opium to China; but America was beneficial because China drew silver from there.

Wei Yuan's commentary on the five-continent theory was very influential in the late Qing period. Eminent scholars such as Wang Tao (王韜, 1828-1871)<sup>①</sup> and Yu Yue (俞樾, 1821-1907) followed his opinion.<sup>②</sup> But there was also scholars like Zhang Weiping (張維屏, 1780-1859) who impugned Wei's idea.<sup>③</sup>

In the twentieth century, the European scheme of continents was completely accepted as truth and common knowledge – in the same way that the heliocentric universe was accepted in place of the geocentric one. China and the West became antagonists, and in Chinese mind, the West has always served as pole of comparison and frame of reference. Henceforth, scarcely any Chinese scholars endeavored to re-consider, re-evaluate, or challenge the Western conception of Asia.

## 5. Final remarks

In the first section of this paper I traced the origin and the intellectual development of the

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① 王韜:《鸞閣余談》卷四。“論地球僅得兩大洲”,光緒元年申報館本,第10-11頁。

② 俞樾:《湖樓筆談》七,光緒二十五年刻春在堂全書本,第18頁。

③ 張維屏:《國朝詩人征略二編》卷四十七,道光二十二年刻本,第2-3頁。

concept of the continent "Asia" in the European mental universe. I then turned to a discussion of the introduction of the European five-continent theory into China, and Chinese responses to it during the late Ming and Qing periods. But all of the narrative and analysis I have provided is only the prelude to the more ambitious project I intend to pursue. This paper serves as the first step towards a thorough re-consideration and re-conceptualizing of the construct of "Asia" which we, in the twenty-first century, have inherited.

"Asia" functions as much more than a geographical reference. From the beginning till now, it is a result of construction and convention, with multiple meanings and intentions. It is a term of culture, religion, politics, race, and identity, but most of all, it is a European concept. It is derived from ancient Greece, and was evolved in Europe. For thousands of years, this expansive land has been called "Asia" by Europeans, while people living on the vast landmass never perceived or regarded themselves as Asian. They had peculiar views of world, whether based on the Chinese *Tianxia* view or the Buddhist *Dvīpa*. During 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the European five-continent scheme was brought into China, it widened the visual field of Chinese people, and caused the subversion and later collapse of the Chinese *Tianxia* view.

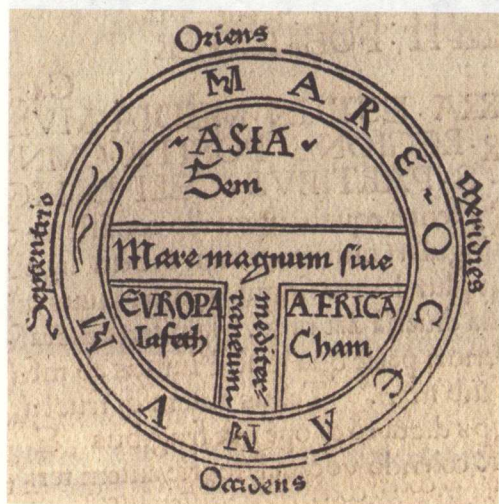
In the contemporary world, "Asia" is a term widely used in such various fields as sports, politics, media, economics; but it is not really a very helpful or convenient term. It is much too broad for precise reference. For example, both being classified as Asian by FIFA, the national football team of China must travel as far as Jordan to play that country's squad in a qualifying match for the World Cup. This example only demonstrates the problem of distance or space. In the landmass labeled "Asia" there has been a multitude and dizzying variety of cultures, religions, and identifications. So this enormous and diverse territory is not, in fact or in any sense very suitable to be conceived or regarded as a single, monolithic unit.

In recent years, scholars have been trying to write the history of Asia. Professor Rhoads Murphey's *A History of Asia* was the first and famous example (Note, in addition, that besides being called "Asian" by the West, the first history of the "Asians" themselves was written by a Western scholar). We have had histories of nations, of regions, local history, and global history, and now we also have history of a continent. But if the term "Asia" is a result of European conceptualization, what about the "History of Asia"? If historians have a role in deciding questions of identification and classification, then we must ask ourselves: does the "History of Asia" make good sense? If the "History of Asia" is the collective history of several distinct regions and their inner connections, why don't we write a history of Afro-Eurasia?





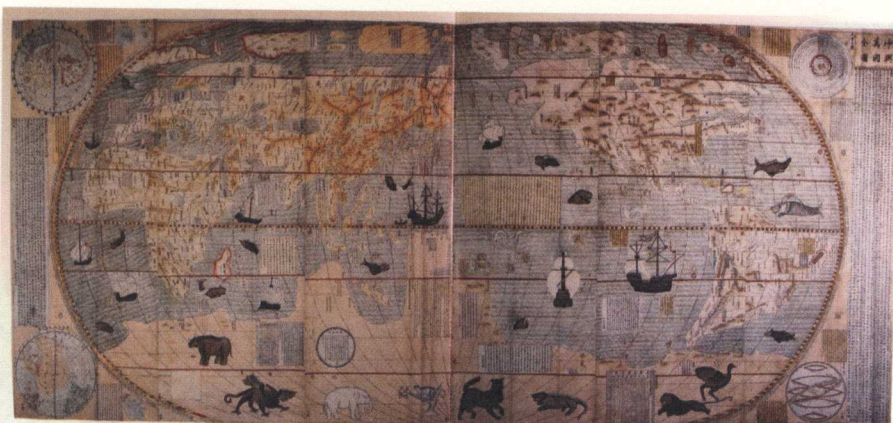
图版一 (Figure 1)



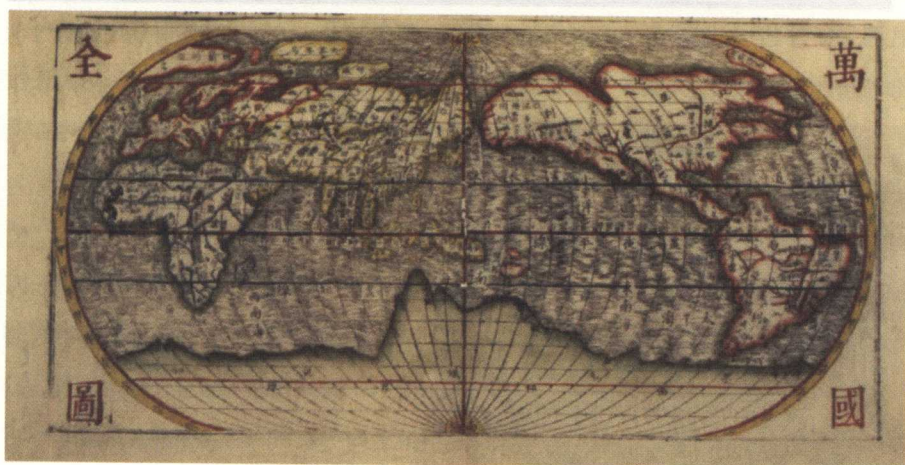
图版二 (Figure 2)

图版一：托勒密的世界地图

图版二：T-O 世界地图, Guntherus Ziner 1472



图版三 (Figure 3)

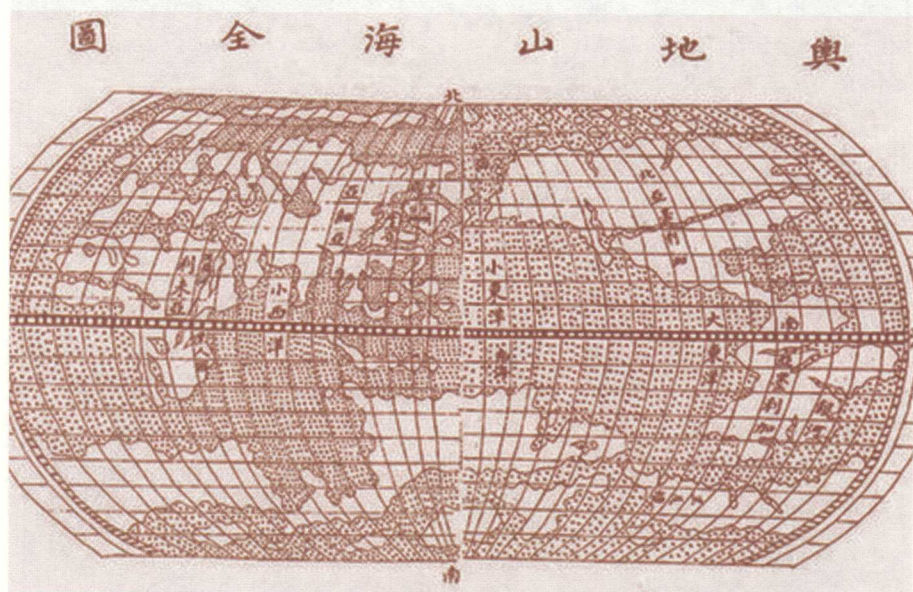


图版四 (Figure 4)

图版三：利玛窦在北京所绘《坤輿万国全图》（1602）

图版四：艾儒略《万国全图》

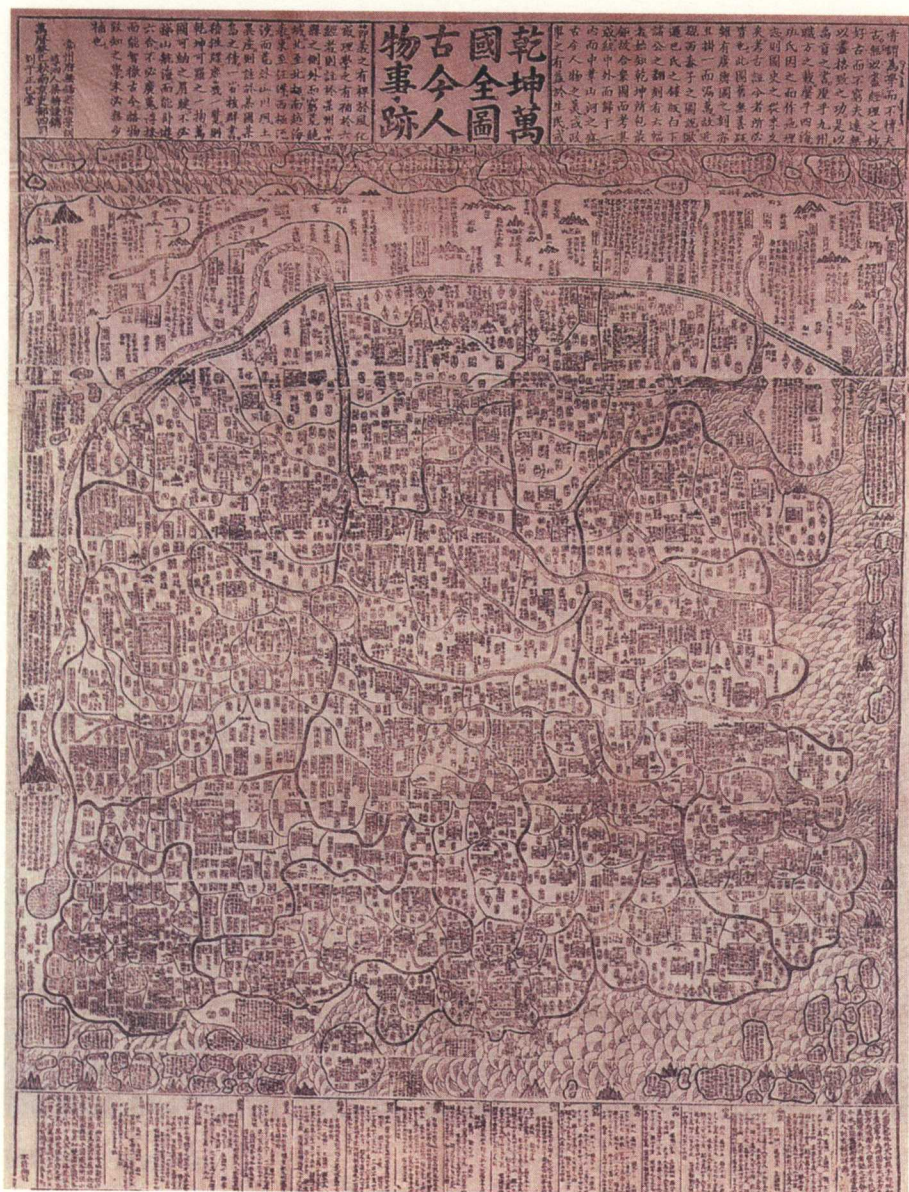




图版五 (Figure 5)

图版五：章潢《图书编》中的《與地山海全圖》（本图扫描自黄时鉴、龚缨晏《利玛窦世界地图研究》，第13页。）





图版六 (Figure 6)

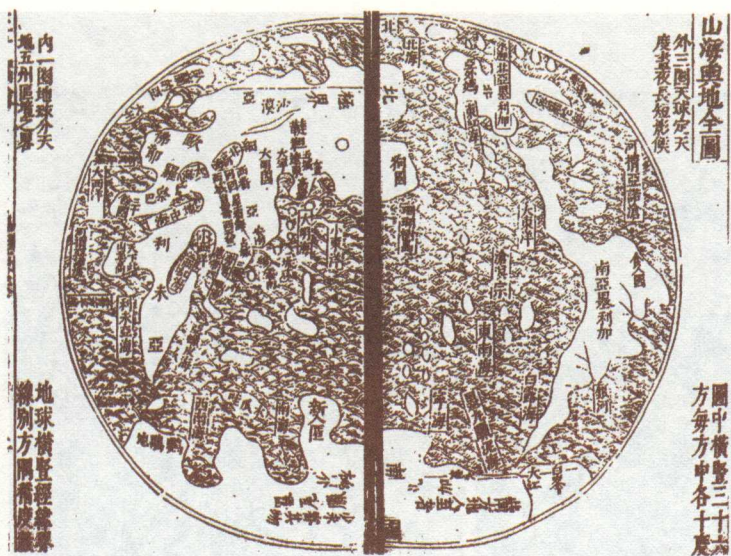
图版六：梁辑《乾坤万国全图古今人物事迹》



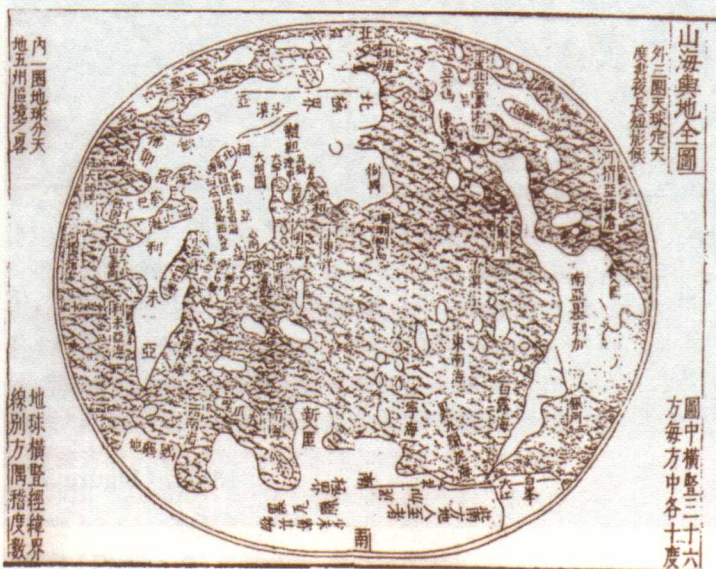


图版七 (Figure 7)





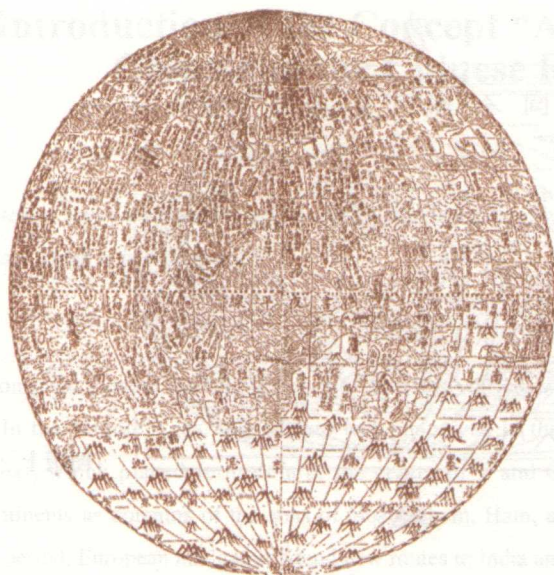
图版八 (Figure 8)



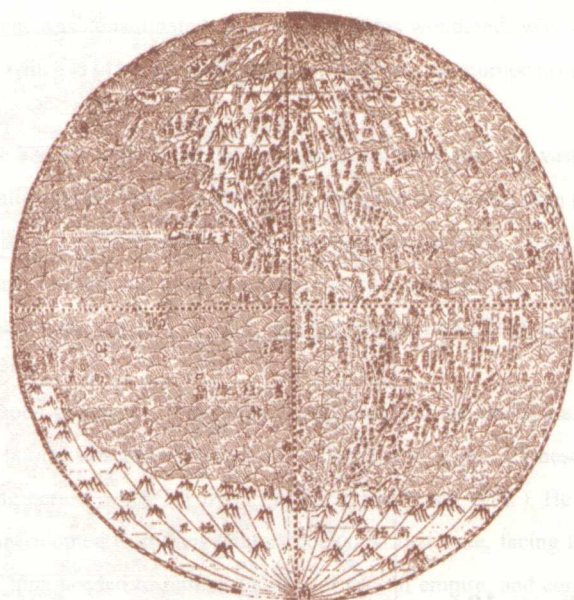
图版九 (Figure 9)

图版八: 冯应京《月令广义》中的《山海輿地全图》(扫描自黄时鉴、龚纓晏《利玛窦世界地图研究》,第23页。)

图版九: 王圻《三才图绘》中的《山海輿地全图》(扫描自黄时鉴、龚纓晏《利玛窦世界地图研究》,第23页。)



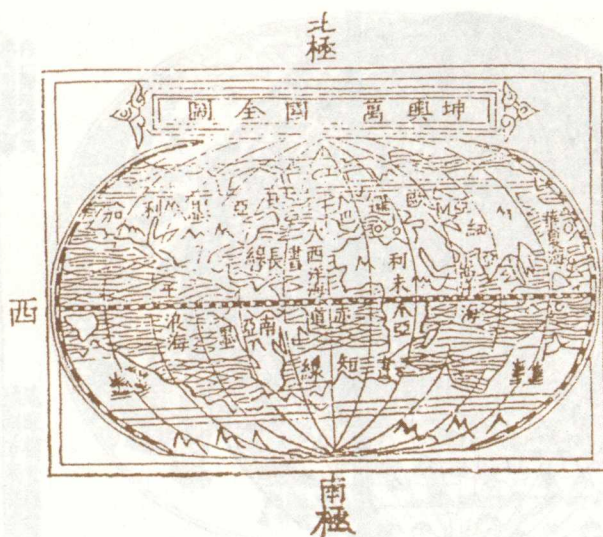
(西半球圖)



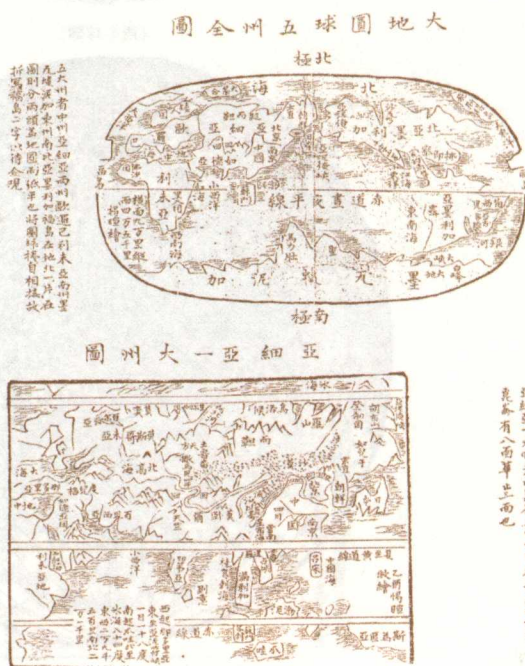
图版十 (Figure 10)

图版十：程百二《山海輿地图》（扫描自黄时鉴、龚纓晏《利玛窦世界地图研究》，第38页。）





图版十一 (Figure 11)



图版十二 (Figure 12)

图版十一: 熊明遇《坤輿萬國全圖》(扫描自黄时鉴、龚纓晏《利玛窦世界地图研究》, 第 51 页。)

图版十二: 揭宣《五洲全圖》《亚細亞大一洲圖》(扫描自黄时鉴、龚纓晏《利玛窦世界地图研究》, 第 108 页。)