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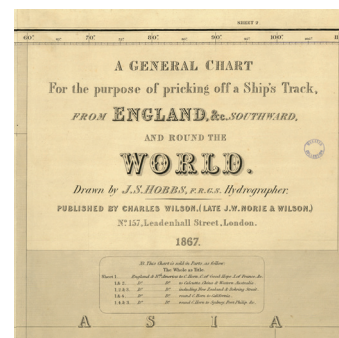
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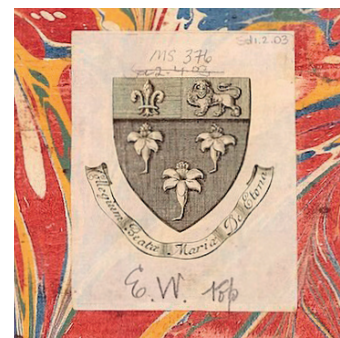
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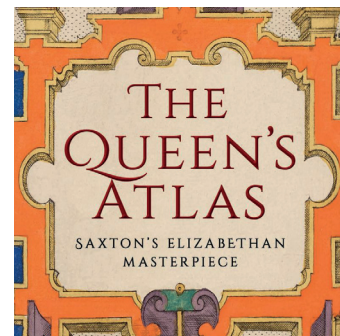
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Front cover Detail of 'Beijing Map' in the *Tianxia Shanhai Tu*. Reproduced by permission of the Provost and Fellows of Eton College.

BY THE PRICKING OF THEIR RHUMBS¹

Tracking the Sea Routes to East Asia 1778–1914

Peter Geldart

The Honourable East India Company (EIC) was founded in 1600 and dissolved in 1874. During its heyday from 1708 to 1834, each year twenty to thirty, or more of its merchant ships, known as East Indiamen, would leave England in the spring for India and China via the Cape of Good Hope, and usually return in the summer of the following year. But not all East Indiamen came home – some stayed in India; others were the victims of enemy action in times of war; and all too often they were lost at sea because of typhoons, or as a result of foundering on an uncharted rock or reef.

By the eighteenth century British and French charts of the sea routes to East Asia were available, but these were not always accurate or up-to-date. The bigger challenge for the ships' captains and masters was to determine their position when out of sight of land. Latitude could be ascertained quite easily from astronomical observations, and the use of accurate chronometers – notably those made by John Harrison – had greatly improved the measurement of longitude, but sailing ships were always at the mercy of the prevailing winds and currents. Accurate sea charts were thus of the utmost importance, and Alexander Dalrymple (who had joined the EIC in Madras in 1753 and would work for the Company until his death in 1808) saw the need to collect and publish as many charts as he could obtain.

Having resigned his formal position with the EIC, Dalrymple returned to England after his third and last voyage to China and the Philippines in July 1765. He continued to promote his proposed trading settlement in the Sulu Sea, expounded the theory of the Great Southern Continent, and encouraged the exploration of the Pacific Ocean. By 1769 Dalrymple had established his position in London; for the next six years his main activity was the publication of charts, plans, memoirs and pamphlets.²

In 1775 he departed for India as a passenger in the East Indiaman *Grenville*, and a letter he wrote from the Cape of Good Hope illustrates the difficulties of the Atlantic passage on the outward journey.³ As explained by Andrew S. Cook, the foremost authority on Dalrymple and his works:⁴

Back in London in April 1777 Dalrymple soon developed a scheme to assemble data from the deposited journals of oceanic voyages by East India Company ships, to predict the safest and quickest courses to follow, and to explain the effects of the currents, particularly in the Atlantic. [In an untitled pamphlet, he wrote]: 'A comparison of the several tracks of the Company's ships would, in a few years, determine with great precision what is, at every season, the most eligible course to pursue out and home.'⁵

He issued special journal forms to allow parallel recording, in detail, of positions by account, and by chronometer or lunar observation, and distributed with them blank charts calibrated at 5 degrees to 1 inch for marking tracks. The East India Company subscribed for 100 sets, for the ships of the new season.

Although not formally given the title of Hydrographer, on 1 April 1779 the EIC appointed Dalrymple to a new responsibility 'for examining the Ships Journals ... and for publishing from time to time such Charts and Nautical Directions as a comparison of the various Journals and other Materials may enable him to do'.⁶ That year Dalrymple added a blank equatorial chart specifically for the Atlantic, 'on a Scale of half an inch to 1°, from the Cape de Verde Islands to 21° S'.⁷ An example of this chart, held in the Admiralty Library in Portsmouth, 'has been completed retrospectively by Dalrymple himself with coastal outlines and tracks both "by account" and by a combination of latitude observations and chronometer, including the track of his own voyage in *Grenville* in 1775'.⁸

The engraved charts that Dalrymple printed and distributed in 1778 measure approximately 22 x 37 in and consist of a plain border with dots surrounding a graticule with the meridians (longitude) marked from 45° West to 135° East, and the parallels (latitude) marked from 50° North to 40° South. No coastlines or other topographical features are shown but only

the names of capes, peaks, islands and ports that captains could expect to see and use to guide their journey. These toponyms are (*sic*): Cape Clear, Lizard, Cape Finisterre, Flores, Fayal, Madeira, Peak of Tenerif, Ferro, Port Praya, Ferdinand Noronha, Reciff, Ascension, S^t. Helena, Rio Janeiro, Cape of Good-hope, S^t. Augustin, Mauritius, Bombay, Goa, Fort S^t. George, F^t. Will^m. Calcutta, Bencoolen, Batavia, Temontangis, Banguay Peak, Goat I^d., Gr^d. Ladron and Canton.

Two of these charts have survived. One, held in the British Library (IOR:X/14000/2021/DAL), shows three tracks from the Lizard to Calcutta (or the reverse), but the ships are not named and the chart is undated (**Fig. 1**). A number of additional toponyms have been added in ink, including Sal and Bonavista (in Cape Verde), Bourbon, and Johan and Mayotta (in the Comoros), together with a note that in Calcutta ‘Came on board a Pilot’.

The other surviving Dalrymple pricking chart, now in the author’s collection, carries more information. A manuscript inscription reads: ‘Track

of the Gen^l. Elliot [*sic*] to Bombay and China / 4th Voyage / N.B. The Lines to the East and West of the different Courses is the Ships Longitude by the Observations of the Sun, Moon and Stars. The Courses are prickt off every Third day except where we made the Land. / 1789 & 1790 / David Milne 2 Mate’ (**Fig. 2**). The tracks of both the outward and return journeys are shown, the latter quite faint. Again, additional features and toponyms are drawn in ink. On the outward journey Sal, Trinidada, Tristam de Counna (*sic*), Johanna, Socatra, Golden Mountain, P^o. Buton, Pedro Branco and Meclesfield Shoal (*sic*) have been added, with a note ‘saw the Land’ at S^t. Augustin. For the return voyage the additions are Timoan, Monopin Hill, Java Head, Sharp Mountain, Cape Lagullas, Ascension and Scilly Islands.

On the fourth of her voyages to China, the East Indiaman *General Elliott* (Captain Robert Drummond) sailed from the Downs— the roadstead and anchorage off the east coast of Kent – on 19 December 1788 and returned on 22 June 1790, with David Milne as

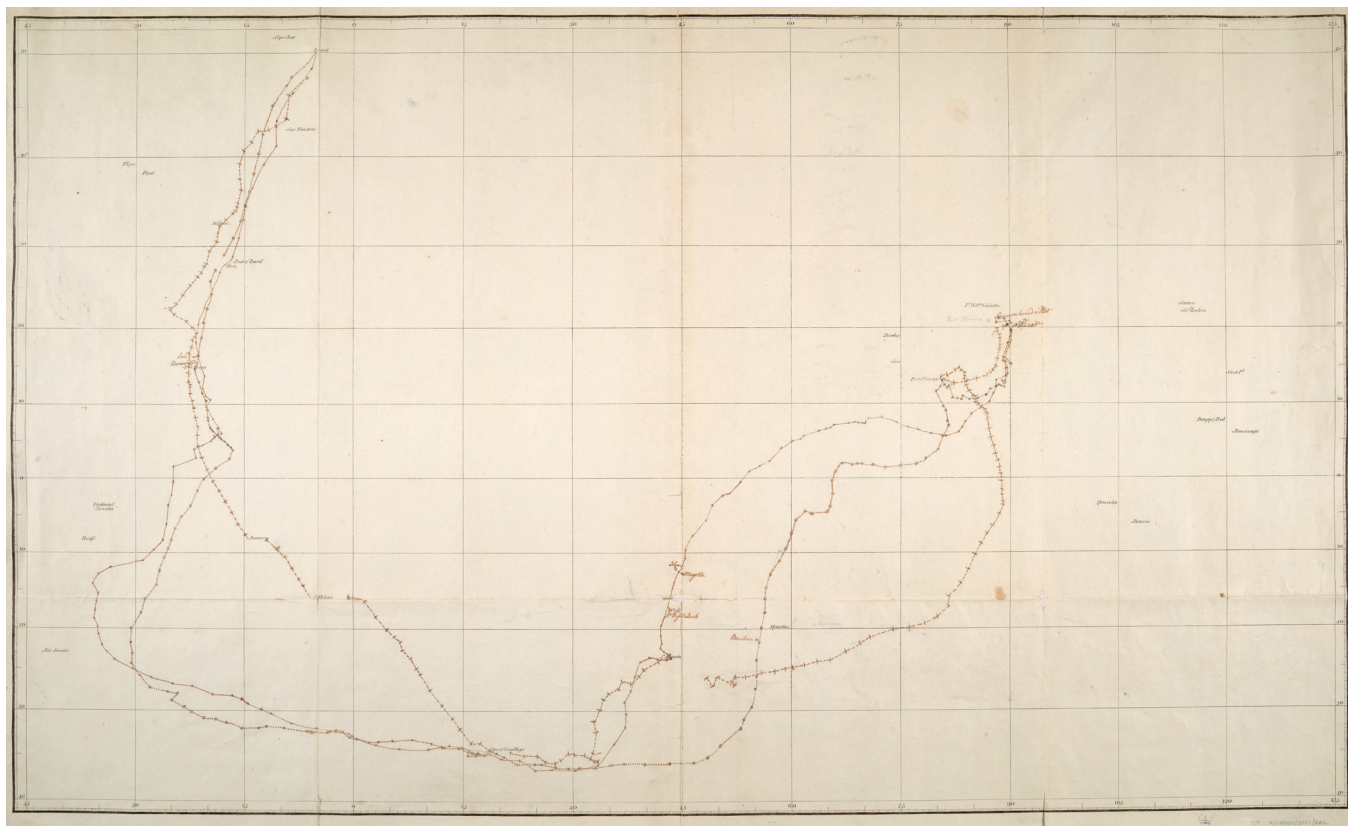


Fig. 1 Alexander Dalrymple, untitled pricking chart c.1778, 22 x 37 in (56 x 94 cm). ©British Library Board (IOR:X/14000/2021/DAL).

TRACING A LATE-IMPERIAL CHINESE ATLAS IN ETON COLLEGE

The Tianxia Shanhai Tu as an early modern knowledge artifact

Man Zheng

In 1736 Eton College Library absorbed a substantial bequest from the English collector Richard Topham, who had died in 1730. Topham's gift was famous above all for its classical and antiquarian riches: he left Eton not only his library but also a collection of about 3,000 drawings and prints recording Roman sculptures and paintings, and he did so on the explicit condition that 'all learned persons at convenient seasons may have recourse to and reasonable use of said books, prints and drawings'.¹ Yet, folded into this overwhelmingly Greco-Roman universe was an object that seems, at first glance, wholly out of place: a Chinese manuscript atlas, later summarised in library notes under the title *Tianxia Shanhai Tu* 天下山海圖 [Map of Mountains and Seas All under Heaven].

A belated modern record

The atlas enters the modern record only belatedly. The earliest notice that can presently be traced dates from 1921, when Chu Chi-ch'ien described the volume in a letter to Provost of Eton College, Montague Rhodes James, written before May of that year. Later institutional attention appears mainly in the form of brief curatorial summaries rather than sustained study: a note associated with Howard G. H. Nelson at the British Library, dated 1965, explicitly treats Chu's letter as 'a most accurate summary', and it was revisited again in November 2011 in connection with British Library staff. These later references may point to moments of cataloguing or curatorial review, but, in substantive terms, Chu's 1921 letter remains the fullest – and in effect the only – extended account of the atlas to date. The circumstances of its production therefore matter: who, then, was Chu Chi-ch'ien (more commonly rendered today as Zhu Qiqian), and how did he come to examine a Chinese atlas preserved in an English school library at a moment when China itself was in political turmoil?

Zhu Qiqian 朱啟鈐 (1872–1964) was not a specialist in the history of cartography, but a prominent early-Republic statesman and an influential antiquarian with sustained interests in rare books and

material culture. In 1921 he travelled to Europe as a special envoy of President Xu Shichang 徐世昌 and, alongside his official duties, undertook a deliberate survey of old books and collections.² In the absence of a securely documented itinerary for his movements in Britain, it is not yet possible to state with certainty whether he examined the atlas in person at Eton or worked from materials supplied through the Provost, M. R. James. What can be said is that the surviving correspondence establishes a line of contact between Zhu and James, and that the atlas entered the record through this encounter – whether as one incidental 'find' in Zhu's broader programme of overseas book-hunting, or as part of James' efforts to solicit informed assistance in making sense of a Chinese volume that had been in Eton's possession for nearly two centuries.

Zhu's suitability for such a role lay in the combination of his elite scholarly formation and his long-standing engagement with documentary work. He came from a family of Jiangxi ancestry, long resident in Guizhou, and was raised within a milieu shaped by scholar-official culture. In the late Qing he moved within reformist circles and, by 1902, held an appointment connected to the Translation School (譯學館) of the Imperial University in Beijing (京師大學堂) – an environment in which foreign-language mediation and the management of texts were quotidian concerns.³ In short, even if he was not a map specialist, he was well placed to recognise the genres of late-imperial compilations, to identify and gloss difficult phrases, and to provide the kind of historically informed reading that an English curator could not easily supply.

In Zhu's portrayal, the work is 'a late Ming dynasty manuscript atlas of military installations in China', framed as 'a scheme of defence against pirates and bandits' and accompanied by narrative remarks on disturbances and their suppression. He provides a folio-by-folio overview of the atlas' 64-page contents, identifying a prefatory section of classical geography, maps of the empire as a whole, province-by-province coverage, and an extensive series on coastal defences

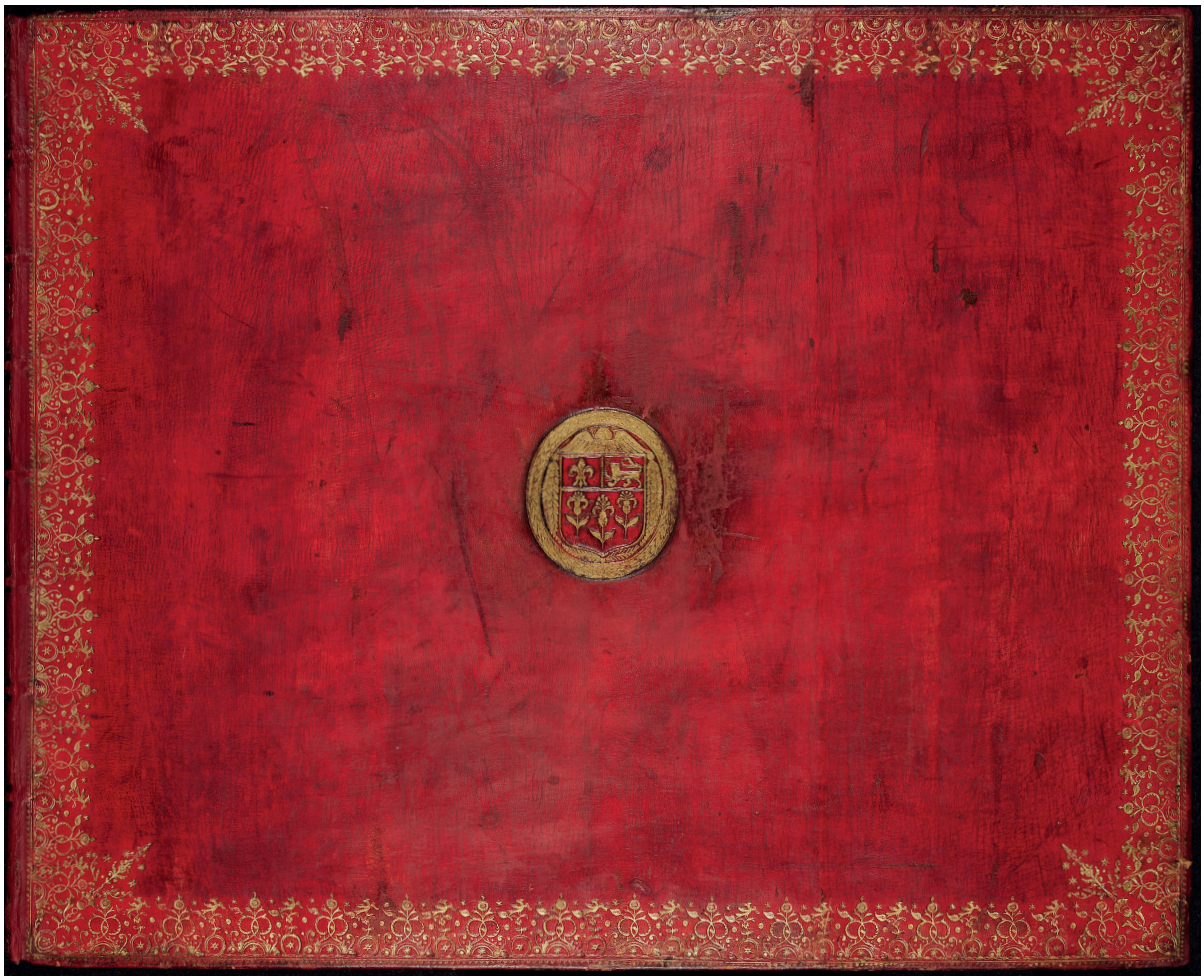


Fig. 1 The front cover of the present Western binding of the *Tianxia Shanhai Tu* housed in Eton College. Reproduced by permission of the Provost and Fellows of Eton College.

against Japanese raiders, whose captions range from strategic prescriptions to historically specific references. On the basis of internal details as he read them, Zhu proposes a late dating for the compilation, arguing for a terminus between 1630 and 1644 because the latest events mentioned fall in the early 1630s and no Qing references are noted in the letter. He also reads the recurring seal at the centre of each double page spread as ‘邊疆夷國長城’, translating it as ‘Borderlands, Barbarian Countries, and the Great Wall’. Beyond transcription and translation, he occasionally adds brief interpretative glosses grounded in his own historical and geographical knowledge – limited in scope, but significant simply because, to date, no fuller study has replaced them.

Valuable as Zhu Qiqian’s notes are, they are necessarily partial. Composed in the first instance to make the atlas legible to an English curator, they concentrate on what can be read directly from the

maps and their accompanying headings. They do not attempt – nor could they, within the genre of a descriptive letter – to reconstruct the atlas’ production context, its intended users, or its modes of circulation and reuse. Yet these are precisely the questions that make the volume historically consequential. Late Ming China produced a wide range of defence-oriented atlases and ‘atlas-like’ compilations. This *Tianxia Shanhai Tu* manuscript cannot be understood simply by listing what it contains. Does it belong to a recognisable lineage of late Ming military or administrative mapping, with demonstrable practices of copying and inheritance? Or does it represent a more idiosyncratic compilation assembled for a local purpose? How should its structure, its selection of regions covered, and its internal rhetoric be situated within the broader history of Chinese mapmaking and, more specifically, within the fraught Ming–Qing transition, when military knowledge, territorial