The ISHMap VII Symposium took place July 10-15, 2023, at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (MPIWG) and the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (StaBi). The symposium's themes of materiality and cross-cultural exchange were well represented in both scholarship and format—it was a week of thought-provoking workshops, panels, and talks, and credit goes to the organizers, institutions, and attendees for having cultivated an environment marked by generosity and collegiality. The keynote also directly addressed this year's themes. Richard Pegg and Elke Papelitzky delivered their latest findings on the famed celestial and terrestrial Blue Maps of China, the colors of which owe their vibrancy to the pigment Berlin blue. With a close eye toward the processes of making and systems of representation contained within these maps, the talk set the stage for the rest of the week.

The conference brought together both emerging and senior scholars working on a wide range of geographies and disciplinary concerns. As someone trained primarily in art history and visual studies, several talks piqued my interest: Michelle H. Wang interwove the study of material processes with ornamental patterning in two Chinese terrestrial diagrams from the Han dynasty; Sayantani Mukherjee and Katherine Parker each presented a case study in decolonial epistemologies and the enduring notion of “accuracy” in the mapping of the Himalayas and Pacific Islands; Marissa Griffioen and Carme Montaner situated the question of reception and circulation in the Low Countries and Francoist Spain, respectively. Accompanying these and other panel talks was a poster session, a format that has pros and cons. On the one hand, it encourages one-on-one conversations. On the other, it runs the risk of reinscribing hierarchies between conference talks and poster presentations, with the latter being de-prioritized in more conservative systems of academic valuation. Anne-Sophie Pratte’s granular study of the Mongolian manuscript maps in the collection of the StaBi combined archival and GIS research, shedding light not only onto nineteenth-century imperial territoriality but also Qing studies. Nils Petter Hellström’s project, “Unmapping Africa,” took the form of an animation. It began with a question regarding the intersection of scientific knowledge and aesthetic representation: Why did maps of the African continent created by European cartographers in the Age of Enlightenment become increasingly empty? This question seemed particularly apt considering our location—the StaBi is within a stone’s throw of the site of
the Berlin Congress of 1884-5, during which major colonial powers met to establish the rules of conquest in Central Africa, overlaying new lines and geometries upon territories formerly under local control.

Berlin is a rich repository of cartographic material, and attendees were offered glimpses into the vast stores of the StaBi and the MPIWG. Markus Heinz, deputy director of the Map Collection at the StaBi, filled three rooms with highlights, including a 1944 map of France printed on a rayon-like fabric that was silent to use and water-resistant, leading to an interpretation that it functioned as an escape map; a lavish manuscript scroll map of the Chinese and Taiwanese coastline from the nineteenth century; and a large box of tactile topographic relief maps designed in the late nineteenth century for use by the visually impaired. Under the directorship of sinologist Dagmar Schäfer, a priority at the MPIWG in recent years has been the acquisition of exemplary East Asian maps, especially those that are not found in other German institutions. A visit to the MPIWG library offered a cross-sectional view into Chinese cartographic history from the seventeenth through the mid-twentieth century. The number of questions and the enthusiasm generated by attendees toward the diversity of practices represented in the room serve as a reminder that these materials deserve sustained scholarly attention. Attendees also had the opportunity to visit the famed Perthes Research Collection in Gotha, hosted by Petra Weigel and Iris Schröder. I was unable to join, but reports confirm that it was both fascinating and informative.

The highlight of the week was the two-day workshop designed for early career professionals, of which I was a participant. Four sessions on the topics of color and pigment, digitization and geospatiality, historiography and narrative, and mapping and artmaking touched upon important scientific and theoretical issues in the study of cartography. Diana Lange and Oliver Hahn, whose research has recently been published in the volume *Colours on East Asian Maps* (2023), offered valuable insight into the histories, processes, and meanings of chromatics in Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, and Korean maps. Digital humanities specialist Shih-Pei Chen shared practical knowledge on how to filter and leverage datasets for historical research. Matthew Edney presented us with the issue of the canon in cartographic history, one that—not unlike other disciplines—is marked by Eurocentric notions of civilization, modernity, and progress. The workshop concluded by challenging our ingrained notions of what a map is and can do. David Weimar brought stacks of old maps from the Newberry Library for us to rummage through, cut up, draw upon, and glue back together. Armed with massive scissors, glue sticks, markers, and pens, we created our own exhibition that challenged the ontological boundaries of the map.

Lastly, it should also be noted that the focus on East Asian maps at this year’s conference greatly benefited from the attendance of scholars working in institutes like the Academia Sinica in Taiwan, Zhejiang University in mainland China, and Seoul University. The ability for these and numerous other individuals from around the world to navigate border regimes in order to share knowledge in-person should not be underestimated. All in all, as a relative newcomer to the field, I left ISHMap reinvigorated and look forward to becoming a part of this global community of scholars.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-maps


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59681

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.