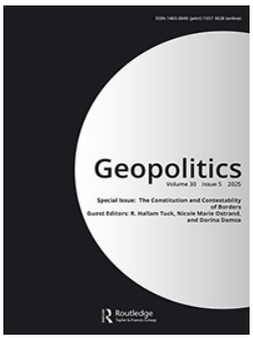

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The Imperial Gaze: Affective Governance, Hybrid Cartography, and China's U-Shaped Line

William A. Callahan

School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, Singapore

ABSTRACT

This article develops 'the imperial gaze' concept to explore how maps not only represent the world, but also do things in geopolitics, even provoking mass demonstrations. It examines China's early-modern and contemporary maps to highlight how they create an imperial gaze that guides Chinese understandings of world order. If your cartographic 'view of the world' produces your ideological 'worldview', then it is important to see how China's early-modern maps inform the PRC's twenty-first-century claims in the South China Sea. The article argues that Chinese cartography does things in geopolitics by mobilising the affective governance of an assemblage of hybrid combinations of tradition and modernity, East and West, and Sinocentric and Westphalian conceptions of space. In this way, it examines how historical maps of China and contemporary maps of the U-Shaped Line in the South China Sea work with each other to provoke the imperial gaze that celebrates China's territorial expansion, laments its lost territories, and fights to recover them. It concludes that the imperial gaze is not peculiar to the PRC, thus further comparative research will help to see how it works in other polities as well.

What can Chinese maps mean and what can they do in geopolitics, especially when their imperial gaze's affective governance makes people do things, even provoking mass demonstrations? In other words, how do Chinese maps 'get away with' their outlandish claims? (Wood and Fels 2008, xv)

This article explores these questions by asking how did the South China Sea 'come onto the map' (*ru bantu*-入版圖 [see Millward 1999]) in China? Empirically, this question is easy to answer: the South China Sea came onto China's map in 1947 through the now infamous U-Shaped Line (U-形線, also known as the 9-dash line, 10-dash line, 11-dash line) (Nanhai zhudao weizhi tu 1947). However, this article aims to treat the issue more conceptually, switching from the 'when' question to the 'how' question: How does the Chinese map's cartography get away with it? It argues that while critical

CONTACT William A. Callahan WACallahan@SMU.edu.sg School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, 10 Canning Rise, 179873, Singapore

cartography generally works to deconstruct maps as artefacts of modern nation-building – and as artefacts of modernist ideology spread around the world by Euro-American imperialism – China's U-Shaped Line's mapping of the South China Sea works in a different way. Modern Chinese maps actually show the persistence of pre-modern Sinocentric cartography concepts that keep reinventing themselves in new contexts to (re)create and (re)distribute the imperial gaze up to the present day. Rather than see reinscriptions of maps in new contexts as an anachronistic problem, the article explores what happens when cartographies collide to produce new maps that emotionally move people, even provoking public action.

China's U-shaped Line map gets away with it not just by using cartography to promote (nationalist) ideology, but also by appealing to affective governance in order to emotionally move people by attracting some, while at the same time repelling others (for more on ideology/affect see Massumi 2002). Hence, European scientific imperial power doesn't simply work to ideologically overwhelm the rest of the globe; nor does an essential Chinese civilisation heroically resist this hegemonic force. Here, the imperial gaze is not just Euro-American, but also Chinese. The article thus explores how the imperial gaze of Chinese cartography is interesting and powerful—i.e., how it gets away with it – because it appeals to the affective governance of an assemblage of hybrid combinations of tradition and modernity, East and West, and Sinocentric and Westphalian conceptions of space. In this way, it examines how historical maps of China and contemporary maps of the South China Sea work with each other to provoke the imperial gaze that celebrates China's territorial expansion, laments its lost territories, and fights to recover them.

This article focuses on Chinese maps and cartography in order to take advantage of the author's China studies training. However, the argument is not limited to China, or even to Asia. Rather, it speaks to the theoretical openings provoked by the current crisis of the Liberal International Order, which is exacerbated not just by the challenge of non-Western powers like China, India and Russia, but also by the Trump 2.0 administration's rapid dismantling of the current world order's ideology and institutions. In other words, the article's analysis of *tianxia* (All-under-Heaven) maps from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is not just of historical interest. In the past two decades, *tianxia* (and other Chinese concepts) have re-emerged to inspire alternative world order possibilities that are popular among international diplomats, scholars and public intellectuals – and even in China's official ideology of 'Xi Jinping Thought' (Buzan and Acharya 2022; Tsang and Cheung 2024, 168–93; Zhao 2005, 2018, 2021).

To see how the U-Shaped Line came onto the map in China through the imperial gaze's affective governance, it is necessary to critically examine conceptual debates in cartography, visual studies, and Chinese history. Rather than present a linear argument, the article's sections each develop concepts

and examples that are mobilised in the Conclusion to analyse China's U-Shaped Line map. Section 1 uses the People's Republic of China's (PRC) 2012 passport map to lay out the issues involved in the South China Sea disputes. Section 2 engages with critical cartography scholarship to develop the concept of map-fare to show how maps don't just mean things, but can actively do things in geopolitics. It also engages with critical scholarship on the South China Sea disputes to explain how attention to China's early-modern maps can help us explore the affective governance of non-European empires, in this case China's enduring imperial gaze. Section 3 seeks to unsettle analysis of non-Western cartography that is based on the modernist narrative of an evolutionary development from tradition to modernity. It argues that to understand the current impact of Chinese maps we need to appreciate its cartography as a hybrid combination of tradition and modernity, art and science, China and the West, and Sinocentric and Westphalian concepts of space. Section 4 looks to debates in visual studies to argue for a similar hybrid combination of word and image on Chinese maps, and explores how this shaped Ming-Qing maps that had an active, possessive and anxious imperial gaze. Section 5 analyses *tianxia* maps to show how Sinocentric and Westphalian spatial concepts combined in the twentieth century to reclaim lost territories on national humiliation maps. The Conclusion brings together the five Sections' arguments to explore how the U-Shaped Line emerged from this hybrid assemblage of ideology and affect, tradition and modernity, East and West, and Sinocentric and Westphalian conceptions of space. It thus uses early-modern and post-1900 Chinese maps to develop the concept of the 'imperial gaze', which in turn helps us to explain the appearance (and reappearance) of the U-Shaped Line. The argument is that if your cartographic 'view of the world' produces your ideological 'worldview', it is important to see how China's early-modern maps can help us to explain the PRC's twenty-first century claims to the South China Sea.

In addition to these empirical claims, the article has theoretical contributions: it explores the hierarchical, unidirectional and possessive 'imperial gaze' where the world performs as a totalising and universalising empire, not just in China, but in geopolitics more generally. As this 'view of the world/worldview' dynamic is not peculiar to China, the article concludes that we can use it to explore the imperial gaze in Southeast Asia, as well as in other places: e.g., with this reassessment of the enduring influence of Chinese cartography in mind, what can Vietnam's early-modern maps tell us?

Section 1. China's Passport Map and the South China Sea Disputes

These complex claims need to be further explained, and defended. To lay out the issues, it's helpful to start with an example that shows the double-coded hybrid expression of China's imperial gaze. In 2012, the South China Sea came

Figure 1. Visa page of PRC passport, Author's collection.

onto the map in the PRC's e-Passports, which include both links to the citizen's biometric profile and a sketch map of China that includes the U-Shaped Line (Author's photograph collection; see Figure 1). On the one hand, this map is part of a scientific project that employs mathematical cartography, and, for the first time, sophisticated biometric technology. The U-Shaped Line is also legal-rational in the sense that since 1992, all maps of the PRC are legally required to include it (Law on Territorial Waters 1992). In the past decade, the U-Shaped Line has spread around the world on maps and globes manufactured in China that are exported for sale abroad.

Indeed, when China deposited a map with the U-Shaped Line at the United Nations in 2009, it caused a diplomatic firestorm, provoking heated claims and counter-claims from Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Official debates over this map thus 'mark[ed] a significant turning point in the South China Sea disputes' (Kassim 2017b, xxix). This U-Shaped Line map is also one of the key reasons that in 2013 the Philippines challenged China's South China Sea claims and its U-Shaped Line at the UNCLOS Permanent

Court of Arbitration in The Hague (Hsiao 2016, 7–9). Importantly, Manila presented its own ancient maps as evidence at The Hague to counter the PRC's maps (Beatty 2021, 438). After the Tribunal declared in 2016 that the U-Shaped Line had no legal basis, China's reaction went beyond contesting the result: Beijing accused the entire legal process of unfair bias, and used 'lawfare' to discredit the proceedings in the global court of public opinion (see Hsiao 2016, 24–32; Swaine 2016).

In addition to being scientific and legal, the U-Shaped Line is an example of the affective governance of China's 'imperial gaze'. Rather than pointing to mathematically accurate geographical markings, China has never clarified the actual location of the dashes in the 9-Dash Line. Nor has it ever defined the extent of the area enclosed by the U-Shaped Line. Indeed, to guard against copying this official document, China's passport map is designed to shimmer, making this iridescent irridentist image difficult to read clearly. (The image in Figure 1 is heavily photoshopped to produce a measure of clarity.) Hence, Beijing's legal claims can be seen as an aesthetic creation of spatial identity that, as we saw above, provokes deeply personal and emotional experiences. The passport map doesn't just excite Chinese pride. It also provokes anger in Southeast Asia, with a Vietnamese border official declaring, 'I think it's one very poisonous step by Beijing among their thousands of malevolent actions. When Chinese people visit Vietnam we have to accept it and place a stamp on their passports' (quoted in Anderlini and Bland 2017). What irks the Vietnamese official here is that they have to performatively endorse the U-Shaped Line every time they stamp a Chinese visitor's passport. The U-shaped line, which hugs the coasts of Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, thus is seen by many people in Southeast Asia as a 'Chinese tongue licking up the South China Sea', or as the 'tongue of the dragon' (Stenseth 1999, 13). As evidence of this anxiety, in 2023 Vietnam banned the blockbuster *Barbie* movie because its map of the 'Real World' included a dashed-line that suggests China's U-Shaped line (Graves 2023). With this cartographic appeal to popular feelings, the map shifts from ideological governance to what could be called 'affective governance' (see Callahan 2020, 32–45; Hutchison 2016; Massumi 2002).

The South China Sea disputes have generated much scholarly analysis, including macro-level analysis that frames it as an issue of diplomacy, power politics, trade, natural resources, and China-Southeast Asia relations (see Ataka 2016; Hsiao 2016; Kassim 2017a). Importantly, it also has provoked critical analysis that probes the disputes in terms of how they reflect identity politics and national-building, showing that contemporary claims to the South China Sea characteristically are made in response to Euro-American and Japanese imperialism's territorial and conceptual challenges from the early twentieth century (Ataka 2016; Beatty 2021; Chao 2024; Hayton 2019; Sasges 2016). As Hayton (2019, 140) concludes, Beijing's South China Sea claims

show 'the long process of adjusting the official Chinese attitude towards marine territory from one of *tianxia* (all under heaven) to Westphalia'.

This article builds on such critical analysis of the role of identity, cartography and popular feelings in current maritime sovereignty claims. But it seeks to unsettle the argument that the South China Sea claims are (just) clear evidence of an imperialist diffusion to Asia of European modernity in the form of the Westphalian concepts of sovereignty, territoriality, and international law. Rather, it takes seriously early-modern and modern Chinese maps. While supporters of Chinese territorial claims take them seriously as 'factual evidence' of Beijing's sovereignty over the South China Sea, this article pursues a different approach to treat maps and cartography as sources of concepts, including *tianxia*, that can help us understand how elite and popular actors in the PRC experience global politics and world order. Instead of framing Chinese, Vietnamese and Philippine protests just as 'responses' to the 'challenge' of Western empire (see Cohen 2010), it looks at how Chinese cartography and maps have active agency in creating their own world(s).

Section 2. Map-Fare and Critical Cartography

To understand the imperial gaze embodied in the U-Shaped Line, it's necessary to develop the concept of 'map-fare' in the sense of maps 'doing things' for geopolitical, and even cosmological, objectives. This neologism takes advantage of the suffix '–fare' (to go to, to journey) that turns a noun into a more active practice: e.g., the Middle English word 'warfare', as well as the twentieth-century term 'lawfare' that describes an active use of law for geopolitical objectives (Dunlap 2017; Hsiao 2016). Indeed, as we'll see, the U-Shaped line 'comes onto the map' through warfare, lawfare, and map-fare.

While securitisation theorists have developed J. L. Austin's (1962) ideas to examine how people 'do things with words' in international politics (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 21–35), here I switch to consider how people 'do things with images', and even how maps 'do things' to political leaders, public intellectuals, and the general public (see Bleiker 2018; Hansen 2011). Indeed, Dylan Michael Beatty (2021, 438, 448–49) explains how the public exhibition of maps in the Philippines not only cultivated patriotic feelings in support of Filipino South China Sea claims, but also provoked popular demonstrations against Chinese claims (also see Sasges 2016). Hence, like with Austin's 'performative utterances', maps are not only symbolic objects that describe things, but are themselves performances that 'do' legal and material things in geopolitics: the Republic of China's first official map in 1912 was 'issued for enforcement' (Zhonghua minguo ditu 1912), which is also the function of maps according to the PRC's 1992 'Law on Territorial Waters'.

As suggested above, China's U-Shaped Line map works on many levels, in scientific, legal, political, and cultural spaces to provoke reactions among

supporters and critics alike. Here a map is 'not merely space or territory'. As Thongchai (1994, 17) explains, a map is a living and breathing 'geobody' that is both ideological and affective: it is 'a component of the life of a nation. It is a source of pride, loyalty, love, . . . hatred, reason, unreason'. As we will see with China's imperial cartography, maps are living, breathing things that expand and contract: places marked as 'lost territories' on post-1900 maps often are marked as 'gained territories' on pre-1900 maps (Waley-Cohen 2003, 333). As mass-produced visual artefacts, maps thus are more than mathematical representations of 'reality'. Here the national/imperial map becomes a logomap – the national map as an icon that is separated from the context of neighbouring territories (Anderson 2006, 175) – that works as a visual icon to mobilise the masses (and the elite). In this way, maps not only tell us about the geopolitics of international borders; when they inscribe space as a geobody, maps are visualisations that can emotionally move and connect people in affective communities (see Callahan 2020, 32–45; Hutchison 2016).

Much critical cartographic research concentrates on criticising empiricism's quest to accurately reflect the 'reality' of the Earth's surface. It does this in order to create space for 'constructivist' interpretation that seeks to unveil the ideology behind the map's meaning (see Anderson 2006; Beatty 2021; Harley 1989; Mignolo 1995; Sasges 2016; Ó Tuathail 1996, 1–20; Wood and Fels 2008; Yee 1994b). Importantly, scholars increasingly use critical cartography and the geobody concept to deconstruct ancient maps used in the South China Sea claims by China, Vietnam and the Philippines. In many ways, they present a straightforward answer the question of *when* the U-shaped line officially 'came onto the map' in China. As Bill Hayton explains (2019), it came onto China's official map in 1947 as a response to claims made by the French and Japanese empires that had provoked domestic political struggles in China. While the Chinese officials, journalists and patriots aimed to use ancient maps and other documents to prove their claim, Hayton (2019, 146) shows that the evidence is spotty at best, and is actually based on misunderstandings: e.g., in 1933 Chinese officials and journalists mistook French claims to the Spratly Islands as claims to the Paracel Islands. Hayton thus uses Thongchai's geobody concept to deconstruct such maps, and argue that their power is more emotional than legal-rational, and thus less legitimate. Gerard Sasges (2016) and Beatty (2021) likewise employ the geobody concept to deconstruct Vietnamese and Philippine claims in the South China Sea that rely on 'historical facts' and 'old maps'; they each conclude that such claims are neither logical nor legal, but contingent and even historically flawed. Like with Chinese claims, they demonstrate that contemporary Vietnamese and Philippine claims are messily entangled with Euro-American empire. Beatty (2021, 438) thus concludes that even though Philippine claims appeal to patriotic nationalism, the maps used as evidence are 'coated with the residue of colonialism', and thus are politically problematic (also see Sasges 2016, 174). This use of maps and cartography for

South China Sea claims thus is seen as the characteristically modern phenomenon of nation-building, and is evidence of these postcolonial Asian countries' uneasy engagement with the (European imperial) practice of international law and the (modern European) concept of territorial sovereignty. In other words, South China Sea claims are put in the context of the modernity that was imposed by imperialism.

These arguments are well documented and persuasive. This article, however, seeks to unsettle the focus on European modernity by putting China's South China Sea claims in a longer historical context. Conceptually, it also looks to map-fare to push beyond both empiricist and hermeneutic searches for meaning to see what maps can 'do' visually and affectively (Kaul and Thornton 2025; Shapiro 2013, 3–4). Indeed, both Sasges (2016, 160, 171–72) and Beatty (2021, 438, 448–49) highlight how maps are not just legal documents, because they also are prominently deployed in public exhibitions designed to emotionally move the general public. A map thus is more than a reflection of the contemporary world, that is either 'true' or coated with ideology. As Cordell D. K. Yee explains (1994c, 228), a map also can 'serve as an instrument of political persuasion, give form to emotional states, or even afford access to transcendent beings'.

While narrative theory pushes beyond empiricism's view of texts accurately reflecting reality to argue that we need to interpret the meaning of texts in relation to other texts—i.e. intertextuality – map-fare examines how maps don't simply illustrate texts (or reality), but also resonate with other maps in a process of 'intervisuality' where an 'image never stands alone. It belongs to a system of visibility' (Rancière 2009, 99). As Lene Hansen explains (2011, 53), the pictures of emaciated people in concentration camps in the Bosnian war in the 1990s were compelling, in part, because they intervisually evoked iconic photos of people liberated from Nazi death camps in World War II. Maps thus aren't just images that engage in ideological governance: as the Chinese passport map shows, they also do the attractive affective governance work of bringing some people together (e.g. Chinese patriots) – while at the same time repelling other groups into their own affective communities (e.g. Vietnamese and Filipino critics and patriots). As mentioned above, Beatty (2021, 438, 448–49) describes the intervisuality of the South China Sea dispute, where maps speak to maps: Chinese maps based on such expansionist cartography provoked a Supreme Court Justice in the Philippines to organise a map-based public exhibition of his country's claims, which in turn brought together its own affective community by 'prompting public action' including mass demonstrations (also see Hayton 2019, 130–32; Sasges 2016, 158).

These affective communities thus are more than the result of top-down state propaganda. They involve maps produced, distributed and exhibited by local government, scientific institutes, commercial presses, and civic groups that often are made by and for popular audiences (see Beatty 2021; Callahan 2010,

91–126; Hayton 2019; Sasges 2016, 159). Map-fare thus evokes a decentred notion of governance that allows for non-elites to perform pastoral roles. Much as W. J. T. Mitchell (2005, 9–11) argues that pictures themselves can have the agency to desire, and Craig Clunas (1997, 100) argues that Ming dynasty sculptures were involved in 'doing things' beyond visual spectacle, here maps can mean and do things separate from human intentions. Certainly, people make maps and leaders employ them as part of ideological governance projects; indeed, below we will see how maps enable the Chinese emperor's 'imperial gaze'. But map-fare allows for the importance of non-elite and even nonhuman action to shape people's ideological and affective views of themselves and the world.

Section 3. Science/Art and West/China

To explain how China's imperial gaze emerges in the hybrid cartography seen in early-modern and post-1900 maps, it's necessary to question popular and critical understandings of the history of cartography that see a clear, inevitable, (and often lamentable) transition from art to science and from China to the West through the imperialist diffusion of modern knowledge practices. Indeed, one of the great debates about Chinese cartography concerns the relations between science and art, and between mathematics and landscape painting – which ultimately is about the power and influence of 'Western' or 'Chinese' cartographic concepts and techniques. It was common in both China and pre-Enlightenment Europe to see pictorial maps as aesthetic and religious works of art that were guided more by symbolic concerns than by geographical accuracy. The hegemonic view is that with its scientific revolution, Europe developed more mathematical maps both to conquer the world and to create the world map that worked to carve up the globe into sovereign territories divided by exclusive line boundaries (Mignolo 1995, 218). In this narrative, mathematical cartography gradually diffused from Europe to the rest of the world as the hegemonic technique – and the hegemonic mode of ideological governance. Science thus triumphs over civilisation, and pictorial maps are reduced to artefacts of interest primarily to art historians and art collectors (see Branch 2014).

The influence of European Jesuits in Ming-Qing China provides evidence for this narrative of the progressive mathematisation of space in China. Matteo Ricci published the first mathematical map of the world in China in 1584, and 1000 copies of his 1602 world map were published in China. Ricci's and other Jesuit maps of China and the world thus circulated widely in seventeenth-century China (Brook 2020; Hostetler 2001, 53). The influence of Jesuits reached its apex when the Kangxi emperor commissioned them to survey and map his empire. The result is the *Kangxi Atlas* (1717), which actually set the global standard for detailed maps of imperial domain. At the same time, France and

Russia likewise employed cartography for state-building and empire-building (Branch 2014, 72; Hostetler 2001; Perdue 1998; Seegel 2012). In this coeval clash of empires, imperial map-making in Qing China (1717) actually preceded that in Bourbon France (1744) and Tsarist Russia (1745). The Qing thus were not 'backward' or 'behind' Europe, but were developing cartographic techniques as part of a grand imperial project that was responding to the 'same geopolitical imperatives' as the French and Russian imperial projects (Hostetler 2001, 3).

Hence, while Hayton (2019), Sasges (2016), and Beatty (2021) each explain how Chinese, Vietnamese and Philippine claims in the South China Sea involve state-building and nation-building exercises in response to twentieth-century Euro-American and Japanese imperialism, a long durée view shows that China (along with France and Russia) used maps for state-building and empire-building starting in the eighteenth century. In this narrative, it is not East vs. West, but a global shift from tradition to modernity, where Chinese and European 'culture' are both transformed into modern science through processes of imposition, assimilation, and/or parallel development (Hostetler 2001, 15–16; Perdue 1998).

This narrative is useful because it helps us to unsettle the Orientalist logic of Chinese exceptionalism, and the argument that European 'challenges' provoked Asian 'responses' (see Cohen 2010). Even so, there are still problems with this narrative: although the Jesuits helped the Qing court to produce the first mathematical survey-based comprehensive map of the empire in the early eighteenth century, this map and its technique did not exclusively shape either general cartographic trends or worldviews in China. The *Kangxi Atlas* was actually top-secret, and such accurate maps didn't get published for the general public in China until the 1930s. Indeed, one of the primary functions for world maps – including Jesuit maps – in the Ming dynasty was for public display on screens, which were enjoyed by the emperor as a 'pleasant decoration' (Clunas 1997, 80).

Hence other scholars, particularly Timothy Brook, Cordell D. K. Yee, Richard Smith and Craig Clunas, argue that it is important to understand Chinese maps in their context, which is certainly strategic and political, but is also historical, cultural, and aesthetic. This article's argument is that mathematical maps did not replace pictorial maps. Rather, mathematical and pictorial maps co-existed as two parallel cartographic traditions in early-modern China, where map-making and landscape painting shared theories, techniques, materials, and personnel. Map-makers were artists and artists were map-makers, not just for grand ideological maps of the Chinese worldview, but also for detailed practical military maps: for example, coastal defence maps often were made by top artists (Clunas 1997, 81).

The most interesting development in Ming-Qing maps is how they often combined mathematical and artistic techniques in a hybrid cartography. Yee highlights this hybrid practice: 'To achieve literacy in traditional Chinese

cartography, one needs grounding in the history of science and technology, art, literature, government, economics, religion and philosophy' (Yee 1994c, 228). Chinese space–including in the South China Sea–thus is aesthetic and cosmological as well as mathematical and rational.

Brook's (2020) analysis of Ming-Qing world maps stresses how they are hybrids of Chinese and European techniques, and how this hybrid worked first to bring the world map to China, and then to get China onto European world maps. My argument builds on this to examine how Chinese maps of the world are also hybrids of science and art, word and image, and of the spatial concepts of (Sinocentric) centre/periphery and (European) inside/outside. While Brook (2020) focuses on world maps as 'complete maps' (*quantu*-全圖), this article explores the map-fare of the cartographic genres of 'Comprehensive Maps of All-under-Heaven天下全圖' and 'All-under-Heaven Maps-天下圖'.

Cao Junyi's 'A Comprehensive Map of 10,000 Countries, Human Vestiges, and Routes through the Nine Frontiers of All-under-Heaven -天下九邊萬國人跡路程全圖' (Cao 1663; see Figure 2) is an important example of such hybrid maps that comes from the popular Ming-Qing genre of 'Comprehensive Maps of All-under-Heaven-天下全圖' (see Smith 2012, 70–83). Cao's 'Comprehensive Map of All-under-Heaven', the first version of which was published in 1644 (see Brook 2020, 17–21), is fascinating because it combines features of Jesuit world maps and Sinocentric 'All-under-Heaven Maps'. Like Ricci's map, it is oval and marks latitude and longitude. It provides reasonably accurate (for the time) representations of Europe and Africa, and hints of the Americas. But it is, at the same time, a Sinocentric map because the Ming dynasty dominates the world map. It is not only placed in the centre (which is common on most countries' maps), but is also very large: China takes up over three-quarters of the land-space on the map. It resonates with the All-under-Heaven Map genre (天下圖, see Figure 3) where concentric circles place China at the centre of the world, and other countries at the periphery. On Cao's map, these countries are described in cartouches, as well as being listed in a column on the left edge of the map. Importantly, other countries are described not as equal nation-states, but as tributaries and barbarians, and include fantastic peoples from the *Shanhai jing* such as the 'Country of 3-Faced People-三首國' (see Smith 2012, 86–87; Strassberg 2018). Hence, at the same time, this 'Comprehensive Map of All-under-Heaven' hails other countries to come onto China's map (*ru bantu*-入版圖) through mathematical methods, and calls China to come onto the world map through the Sinocentric aesthetic. In this way, we go beyond analysis that argues that in early-modern China science and art developed in parallel. This and other maps show how early-modern Ming-Qing maps combine different concepts and techniques for a hybrid

Figure 2. Cao Junyi, 'A Comprehensive map of 10,000 countries, human vestiges, and routes through the nine frontiers of all-under-Heaven-天下九邊萬國人跡路程全圖' (1663), Harvard map collection, Harvard library.

cartography of China in the world. Indeed, Cao literally collaged together parts of Ricci's world map with parts of Luo Hongxian's *Guang yutu-Enlarged Terrestrial Atlas* (1555) into a hybrid map (Brook 2020, 43–55; Cao et al. 1994, 36, plate 146; see Luo in; Cao et al. 1994, plates 147–56).

It's common, even among scholars who promote China's aesthetic cartography, to argue that Chinese cartographers ceased to make pictorial or hybrid maps by the end of the nineteenth century due to the crisis of the first Sino-Japanese war (1894–1895). My argument is that such maps do not just tell us about how early-modern Chinese elites saw the world. Rather, the concepts and techniques of these hybrid maps persist in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially in China's 'maps of lost territories' and 'maps of national

Figure 3. *Cheonhado*. [Map of All-under-Heaven-天下圖], (c.1800), Library of Congress.

humiliation' that likewise mix mathematical and aesthetic cartographies. In this way, the geopolitics of twenty-first century map-fare is entangled with the Ming-Qing imperial gaze.

Section 4. Word/Image: Grasp the World in One Comprehensive Gaze

Another of the great debates that impacts our understanding of the imperial gaze is visual culture's discussion of the relation between word and image (see Mitchell 2005). While the verbal generally takes precedence in Enlightenment thought, in Chinese aesthetics the verbal and the visual often work together

through a non-hierarchical co-presence. For example, it is common for a scroll painting to have both an image and a poem, where '[t]he picture is not an illustration of the poem, nor is the poem a commentary on the picture' (Clunas 2009, 101, 99).

We can see this co-presence in the concrete example of the Chinese character for map, *tu*-圖, which speaks to a double-coded understanding that refers to both words and images, and both meaning and doing. As a noun, *tu* means a picture, a diagram, a chart, a table, and a map, while as a verb it means to anticipate, to hope, to scheme, to plan, to plot against, and even to covet (Yee 1994a, 72, note 9; Hostetler 2001, 3; also see Ó Tuathail 1996, 2; Clunas 1997, 107–08). As the U-Shaped Line map in Chinese passports shows, cartographs certainly provide the ideological governance of information and meaning, but as examples of map-fare they also can – at the same time – engage in affective governance that provokes emotions and desires that covet and scheme in ways that move and connect people in affective communities.

Although mainstream and critical histories of cartography trace the gradual disappearance of text from mathematical maps (Branch 2014, 55), Chinese cartography is interesting because it foregrounds the complementary relation between word and image. Much like with science and art, here words and images work together on Chinese maps: as we saw in Cao's 'Comprehensive Map of All-under-Heaven' (1663), the Sinocentric world order is expressed through a combination of concentric circle-inspired images, and texts that assert the Son of Heaven's rule over tributary states and barbarians. As Yee concludes, for map-makers like Cao, word and image were not in a binary opposition because 'a map is a fusion of image and text, of the denotative and the expressive, of the useful and the beautiful' (quoted in Woodward 1994, xxiv).

The imperial gaze graphically emerged as a significant experience for people during the Ming dynasty, which 'was full of pictures' on walls, paper, silk, books, doorways, ceramics, clothes, and so on (Clunas 1997, 17). Visual images were common in the Ming era for economic, technical, and artistic reasons. The technology of mass printing, including of images, rapidly developed in the Ming, and it was voraciously consumed by China's prosperous elite and common people alike (Clunas 1997, 22, 84; He 2013). Clunas (1997, 111–33) argues that this outburst of interest in visual images provoked new 'ways of looking' in the male gaze, the elite gaze, and in, I would argue, China's 'imperial gaze'.

To be clear: the 'male gaze' refers to the unequal power relation in visual art and film, where '*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (Berger 1972, 47; Mulvey 2008, 19). In a similar way, the 'colonial gaze' works to make non-Europeans visible in specific hierarchal ways (Alloula 1986; Fanon 2008, 82–82, 84; Mirzoeff 2011;

Said 2004). E. Ann Kaplan (1997, 15, 78) sees the 'imperial gaze' at the 'intersection of male and colonial gaze', and develops this new concept to explore how white men and women look at the non-Western Other in ways that assert and reaffirm their power and privilege. Kaplan (1997, xvii-xviii) argues that the imperial gaze is not merely triumphant, but is also evidence of anxiety among white men and women when they encounter the non-Western Other. Importantly, other scholars have used the imperial gaze concept to examine ideological and affective governance beyond Euro-American imperialism (Gunko 2022; Ozavci 2023; Rana Bhat 2024; also see Kaul and Thornton 2025). Here, the article considers how the ideological and affective governance of Chinese maps, including maps of the South China Sea, employs the imperial gaze to actively possess and dominate in a hierarchical view of the world. This totalising and universalising gaze, which is seen in the *tianxia* concept and on *tianxia* maps, makes peoples and places perform to assert and reaffirm China's power and privilege. As we will see, like with Kaplan's analysis, China's imperial gaze is both triumphant and a nagging expression of what Billé (2017) calls 'cartographic anxieties'.

This active, possessive, and anxious imperial gaze thus is not just a modern concept invented by Euro-American theory; it also can be seen in the different historical and conceptual context of early modern China. To make sense of this, Clunas helpfully explores not just what is looked at (i.e., the meaning of the images), but how images take on meaning depending on who gets to look, where they look, and when. He provides an analysis of how common Chinese words – *kan*-to see, *guan*-to look, and *du*-to read – took on deeper meaning in the context of Ming literati collectively appreciating images, where, for example, '*kan hua*-looking at a painting' was a learned skill, and *guan* refers to 'the gaze' as an active, creative contemplation (Clunas 1997, 111–33).

As evidence of the emergence of this new imperial gaze, people during the Ming dynasty developed a keen interest in foreign people and places, which can be seen in both maps and illustrated publications. These images in popular, even 'hucksterish' books 'shaped the ways in which Ming Chinese viewed themselves and their world, as well as the ways in which readers in other regions of the world viewed Ming China' (He 2013, 5). Chinese admiral Zheng He's early-fifteenth-century sea voyages to Asia and Africa not only added more information to the Chinese state's understandings of the world (Wade 2005; Yang 2014). They also sparked a greater interest among Chinese people in the outside world (Smith 2012, 59), which suggests that the imperial gaze's map-fare is a popular affective experience, rather than just an elite ideology.

In the Ming dynasty, Chinese peoples' gazes thus concerned not just what to view, but *how* to view the world through new ways of looking. Like with landscape painting, where images allowed people 'to travel to the Five Peaks from my couch' (Clunas 1997, 83), Cao Junyi explains on 'Comprehensive

Map of All-under-Heaven' (1663) that '[i]f you want to know in detail what lies in the four directions under Heaven [i.e. the world] without leaving your courtyard, then here everything ancient and modern is laid out right before your eyes' (quoted in Brook 2020, 47). Maps thus developed the concept of *lan*-覽-gaze to see the world from China's centres of power and influence: 'Gazing at Distant Places from the Palm of Your Hand-遐覽指掌' (1647) is an atlas that goes from near to far, starting in the centre with maps of Nanjing and Beijing, and ending on the periphery with maps of 'barbarian countries' on China's Northwest and Southeast frontiers (Xia lan zhi zhang 1647). The *lan*-gaze also inspired more practical maps for coastal defence such as 'Gazing at Guangdong Coastal Defense-廣東海防彙覽' (Lu et al. 1832), and Ma Huan's description of places and people encountered on Zheng He's last voyage in *A Comprehensive Gaze of the Ocean's Shores*-瀛涯勝覽 (1433) (Lu et al. 1832; Ma [1433] 1997). Jesuits leveraged the concept of the imperial gaze in their maps made for the Ming and Qing imperial courts. Matteo Ricci's 1602 map of the world is actually called the 'Map of Gazing at All the Universe with a Quiet and Meditative Mind-兩儀玄覽圖' (see Cao et al. 1994, 135, plates 57–59). The totalising, universalising and possessive imperial gaze is best seen in the Chinese name for the *Kangxi Atlas* that set the global standard for imperial state-building in the eighteenth century: 'Atlas for the Comprehensive Gaze of the Imperial Realm-皇與全覽圖' (Huang yu quan lan tu 1717–21). The Kangxi emperor thus desired 'a precise map which would unite all the parts of his empire in one gaze' (Hostetler 2001, 4).[1]

As the next section will show, the totalising and universalising imperial gaze is key for understanding how map-fare works to include old territories and new conquests, including the U-Shaped Line in the South China Sea. While Hostetler and others point to *guan* and *lan* to highlight the 'direct observational' empirical methods used to create these maps (Hostetler 2001, 1), it is also important to see *lan*-gaze in terms of a power relation similar to the male gaze, where maps provoke the possessive performative hierarchy of the imperial gaze.

Kangxi's 'Atlas for the Comprehensive Gaze of the Imperial Realm' actually shows how Chinese/Qing territory was not fixed or eternal, but is a living, breathing geobody, where new conquests required new maps. A common preface to such maps declared that 'The land ruled by the present dynasty is unprecedented in its extent' (quoted in Smith 2012, 74). Indeed, as noted above, many of the places marked as 'lost territories' on post-1900 maps are celebrated as 'gained territories' on Comprehensive Maps of All-under-Heaven (Waley-Cohen 2003, 333). Later expansion, where vast territories came onto China's map, was duly recorded in the Qianlong emperor's revised version of the *Kangxi Atlas*, published in 1759. Much like women performing for men in the male gaze, such atlases make the territories and peoples perform for the emperor through the imperial

gaze. In other words, the atlas did not just enable the Kangxi emperor to visualise territories in terms of material issues to be rationally administered; the atlas also provoked an affective gaze of the ideology and cosmology of universal empire.

This map-fare of the imperial gaze is peculiar to the context of early modern Chinese images, concepts and experiences. But it is also part of a global trend. Earlier, we examined how the *Kangxi Atlas* led a global technological development of cartographic state-building and empire-building in France, Russia, and other places. I suggest that Kangxi's 'Atlas for the Comprehensive Gaze of the Imperial Realm' also was part of the global development of a totalising, universalising, and possessive imperial gaze. Indeed, the expanding Chinese, French, and Russian polities also worked to perform the imperial gaze, not just through imperial maps, but also through imperial gardens and landscape art that affectively brought the world into the emperor's gaze (Callahan 2020; 239–270; Mukerji 1997; Forêt 2000; Seegel 2012). The imperial gaze thus is not merely material and technical. It can also be ideological and affective. As the U-Shaped Line on the PRC's passport map shows, the imperial gaze still works affectively in the twenty-first century to emotionally attract people in China and emotionally repel people in Vietnam and the Philippines.

Section 5. Inside/Outside and Centre/Periphery on Civilisation and Barbarism Maps, Tianxia Maps and Maps of China's Lost Territories and National Humiliation

How does the imperial gaze work to make the U-Shaped Line come onto China's map? I argue that it combines two concepts that inform map-fare in both early-modern and contemporary China: inside/outside and centre/periphery. The argument is that if your cartographic 'view of the world' produces your ideological 'worldview', it is important to see how China's early-modern maps engage in map-fare in ways that explain the PRC's twenty-first century claims in the South China Sea. Rather than search for causal links between maps and 'reality' in order to find evidence for the PRC's current sovereign territorial claims (Gao and Jia 2013; Hsiao 2016, 3; Shen 2002), it is important to see how these early-modern maps and post-1900 maps all work with each other, and intervisually resonate with each other to provoke the imperial gaze that celebrates China's territorial expansion, laments its lost territories, and fights to recover them. Rather than logical causation, an appreciation of intervisuality allows us to see (and feel) the affective resonance of correlation between these maps.

We have already seen the centre/periphery logic in the 'Comprehensive Map of All-under-Heaven-天下全圖' (Figure 2) and the 'All-under-Heaven Map-天下圖' (Figure 3) discussed above. These maps are not one-offs, as both are examples of popular early-modern cartographic genres. They represent the

imperial gaze of the hierarchical Sinocentric world order where China is at the centre, and other countries are on the periphery, first with closer polities as tributary states, and then with farther away peoples as 'barbarians'.

This concentric circles model of cultural order, political order, and world order comes from the historical example of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, as described in the *Discourses of States-Guoyu*'s *wufu* system. This Sinocentric world order is a series of five concentric squares, starting at the centre with the 'king's domain', and ranging out to the Lord's domain, the Pacified zone, the Controlled zone, and finally to the outermost Wild zone, where 'barbarians' run amok. Figure 3's 'Cheonhado', a Korean map of All-under-Heaven, is also called a 'wheel map' because it charts the world in terms of concentric land and sea rings (see Ledyard 1994, 256–267). The centre/periphery logic of power radiating out from the imperial capital is an enduring way of conceptualising space and order, which calls into question the clear inside-outside boundaries seen on the mathematical maps that define the Westphalian world order of equal sovereign states (see Branch 2014).

The second cartographic concept is inside/outside, which can be seen on China's 'Civilisation and Barbarism Maps-華夷圖' and 'Maps of Lost Territories-喪失地圖'. The Cheonhado's visualisation of the proper normative order is not exceptional; it has interesting resonances with Chinese cartography during the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). Among the dozens of empire-maps/world maps produced in the Song, the most famous is the 'Map of Civilisation and Barbarians-華夷圖' (Huayi tu 1136). As Figure 4 shows, it gives a broad idealised visualisation of the Chinese realm. Much like with the 'Comprehensive Maps of All-under-Heaven' and 'All-under-Heaven/Cheonhado Maps' that came five centuries later, it employs the cartographic convention of centre/periphery, rather than the clear line boundaries of inside-outside.

The 'Map of Civilisation and Barbarians' provides an imperial gaze of China, ranging from the Great Wall in the North to Hainan island in the South. This 900-year-old-map's marking of Chinese borders is actually mobilised in current intervisual debates about the U-Shaped Line: a supreme court justice from the Philippines offers this and other ancient maps as empirical evidence that China's southernmost border is Hainan Island (see Beatty 2021; Carpio 2014). However, this article treats the 'Map of Civilisation and Barbarians' more conceptually. A close examination shows that it presents neither the actual territory of the reigning Song dynasty, nor that of its powerful neighbours. The map was produced during a violent transformation, where the Song dynasty lost significant territory. After decades of struggle, in 1141 the Song signed a peace treaty to formally recognise Jin dynasty control over territory North of the Yangtze and Huai rivers (i.e., the top half of the map). None of the many empire maps of the Southern Song period, however, plotted the territory of both the Song and

Figure 4. 'Map of civilisation and barbarians-華夷圖' (1136), Library of Congress.

Jin dynasties (de Weerdt 2009, 164). Rather, as seen on the 'Map of Civilisation and Barbarians', they show the Song ruling over all of China, and over all of the world. That the map in Figure 4 is carved on a stone stele underlines its map-fare function as a didactic monument of ideological governance. But rather than instructing people in the actual borders of the Song empire, the purpose is affective governance: i.e., to provoke an affective community that was more anxious than triumphant (see Kaplan 1997, xvii-xviii). Indeed, such Song dynasty maps inspired anxious poetry among the literati that not only lamented lost territory, but also was quite pragmatic about recovering it:

> I carefully examined a map of the empire,
> I'd rather see it once more implemented on the ground.

(quoted in de Weerdt 2009, 159)

'Civilisation and Barbarism Maps' were very popular not only in the Song dynasty, but also in the Ming dynasty. One other thing that the Song and the Ming have in common is a very strong sense of what we now call Han-Chinese identity, defined as civilisation against the barbarism of non-Han neighbours. While it's popular among critical scholars to see this self/Other relation as fluid and cultural rather than as fixed and 'racial', these maps and poems suggest that the Song and the Ming were visualising a strong inside/outside sense not just of identity, but of empire because both engaged an anxious imperial gaze of territories to be (re)conquered and defended.

Not surprisingly, 'Civilisation and Barbarism Maps' were not as popular in the Qing dynasty. Because the Qing was a non-Han conquest dynasty, self/Other relations and cartography worked differently. As seen above, there is a cartographic stress on 'All-under-Heaven Maps-天下圖' and 'Comprehensive Maps of All-under-Heaven-天下全圖'. This follows from Brook's argument that starting with the Yuan dynasty, non-Han dynasties had to ideologically present themselves as expanding empires that provided (universal) 'unification', rather than (Chinese) 'civilisation' (Brook, van Walt van Praag, and Boltjes 2018, 49–56; also see Brook 2019, 6). This can be seen in the prevalence of 'unity-一統' and 'great unity-大一統' in many Qing dynasty map titles. For example the 'Comprehensive All-under-Heaven Map of the Unified Great Qing for 10,000 Years-大清萬年一統天下全圖 (1811) contains all the terms: All-under-Heaven, comprehensive map, and unity, with 'for 10,000 years' added in for good measure (DaQing Wannian yitong tianxia quantu 1811). Such titles do not just celebrate the strength of universal empires, but also give clues to affective anxieties. To put it another way, countries that have 'united' in their names are characteristically fragile, because their unity is a contingent achievement that is always in question: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Union of Myanmar, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America, and so on. The 'Unified Great Qing' dynasty likewise always worried about falling apart, which it did in 1911. Again, like most geobodies, the Qing dynasty was a living, breathing thing that expanded and contracted; navigating its inside/outside distinctions was always a concern of its imperial gaze that was both triumphant and anxious.

After fall of Qing dynasty in 1911, the size and shape of 'China' was not clear. The 'Map of the Republic of China' (1912) was the first official map of post-Qing China, and it speaks to these inside/outside anxieties. Like the Song dynasty 'Map of Civilisation and Barbarism', it is a map of lost territories: most of the countries surrounding China are labelled 'originally in our country, now in Japan' (or France, Britain, or the US) (Zhonghua minguo ditu 1912). The existential crisis evoked by this original Republic of China (ROC) map set the

tone for the new genres of 'national humiliation maps' and 'maps of lost territories' that were popular from 1916 to 1940. Importantly they reappeared with China's patriotic education campaign that started in 1991 as a response to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) double existential crisis: the domestic crisis of mass uprisings and violent suppression in 1989, and the international crisis of the dismemberment of the Soviet Union in 1991 (see *Jindai Zhongguo bainian guochi ditu* [1997] 2005; Callahan 2010, 98). This article's argument is that many 'national humiliation maps' and 'maps of lost territories' intervisually resonate with the cartographic concepts of centre/periphery and inside/outside seen in the imperial gaze of early-modern Chinese maps. Indeed, in terms of timing, they are all entangled at the turn of the twentieth century.

Xie Bin's 'Map of China's Lost Land and Maritime Territories-中國喪失領土領海圖' (Xie 1927; see Figure 5) was very popular in the early twentieth century, and was republished in 2014 in the PRC (Xie [1925] 2014, 1927). This map presents the imperial gaze of the territory controlled by the Qing dynasty,

Figure 5. Xie Bin, 'Map of China's lost land and maritime territories-中國喪失領土領海圖' (1927), Author's collection.

and works to claim for the new Chinese nation-state the vast territories that are now independent nation-states in Northeast, Southeast, and Central Asia: Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and so on. While it's reasonable to conclude that in the early twentieth century Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino publics were fighting the imperial gaze and imperial practices of Euro-American and Japanese empires, this and other similar maps should give us pause. China is not just seeking to reclaim its own territory lost to Euro-American empire; it is also invoking a Chinese imperial gaze to claim the territory of most of its neighbours as well.

Like All-under-Heaven Maps, this 'lost territories map' employs two sets of rings to conceptualise space in terms of concentric circles, with the outer ring marked as the 'boundary of maritime territory during the Qianlong era' (1735–1796), which also includes vast land territories. What these land territories have in common is a history of presenting tribute to the Chinese court. Although not explicitly declared, such maps of lost territories are organised according to the logic of China's expansive imperial gaze as seen on early-modern 'Comprehensive Maps of All-under-Heaven' that enlisted other countries not as equal nation-states, but as tributary states and barbarians in a hierarchal world order. This is not just a rational-mathematical concern; 'maps of national humiliation' make the same claims through intervisual affective governance, first in the early twentieth century (for example see Hayton 2019, 143–44; Zhongguo guochi ditu 1927), and then again at the turn of the twenty first century as part of the PRC's patriotic education campaign (Callahan 2010, 81–125). For example, in 1997 and then again in 2005, China's official cartographic press published a special atlas: *Maps of Modern China's Century of National Humiliation*-近代中國百年國恥地圖 (*Jindai Zhongguo bainian guochi ditu* [1997] 2005).

Like in the Song dynasty, such maps don't chart the actual borders of the ROC or the PRC. Rather they promote affective governance by provoking an affective community that is more anxious than triumphant: the purpose of such modern maps is the 'righteous restoration' of lost territories. The textual prefaces attached in the margins of many of these early-twentieth-century maps explain that their purpose is to 'mark the glorious borders of the reign of the Qianlong emperor, and the timing and extent of territories that were later lost' (Zhonghua guochi jianming yutu 1928). The didactic ideological governance message of the cartography of expansive rings of lost territories is clear: it an eerie echo of the Song dynasty patriotic poet's cartographic lament, a twentieth-century activist declares that since China has 'lost more than half its territory', it is necessary to 'compile a geographical record of the rise and fall of our country in order to craft a government policy to save it' (Jia 1930, 1). Likewise, in the 1990s, a key anxiety of China's hypernationalist youth-憤青was of a 'western conspiracy' that schemed to divide up the PRC, which they saw as a replay of Western and Japanese national humiliations

from the early twentieth century (see Wang et al. 1999). Commenting on the return of Hong Kong in 1997, an influential Chinese scholar-official wrote that the lesson of this particular returned 'lost territory' is irredentist: while 'welcoming the return of Hong Kong and Macau to the fatherland, we also look forward to the perfect resolution of other historical legacies' (Lu 1997, 63).

These early-modern maps and post-1900 maps intervisually resonate with each other, and respond to each other in affective governance. The centre/periphery logic of concentric circles of the 'All-under-Heaven Map' plus the yearning for lost territories of the Song dynasty 'Map of Civilisation and Barbarism' combine to form twentieth- (and twenty-first-) century hybrid maps that use concentric circles to (re)claim lost territories. They use the inside/outside logic to show anxieties about Chinese 'disunity', which enables the imperial gaze to reclaim a Chinese 'unity' that is territorial, ideological, cosmological, and affective.

The patriotic education campaign, which is now in its fifth decade, is usually seen as strong evidence of China's ideological transition from 'socialism' to 'nationalism' at the end of the Cold War (see Zhao 2004). This largely successful campaign has grown from being top-down ideological propaganda taught in classrooms, to now use multimedia edu-tainment to affectively govern generations of Chinese people. Hence, the patriotic education campaign's appeal to national humiliation maps fosters the (re)emergence of the imperial gaze on social media platforms as well as in official documents.

Conclusion: The U-Shaped Line Coming onto China's Map

The U-Shaped Line has a history that runs in parallel with the history of national humiliation maps and lost territories maps. The Line first became an issue in the 1930s when the cartography of national humiliation was very influential in China's nation-building project, and then reappeared in 1992 on official maps governed by the PRC's 'Law on Territorial Waters' just after national humiliation maps re-emerged through the PRC's patriotic education campaign in 1991. The first official map with the U-Shaped Line, the 'South Seas Islands Location Map-南海諸島位置圖', was published in 1947 (Nanhai zhudao weizhi tu 1947; see Figure 6). Here, the U-Shaped Line intervisually resonates with the Sinocentric rings of the lost territories maps. Indeed, in the 1930s and 1940s some of the same people were involved in charting lost territories on national humiliation maps and in creating the U-Shaped Line (Bai 1930; Zheng 1947; also see Hayton 2019, 158–60).

China's twenty-first-century official maps that include the U-Shaped Line thus use the hybrid aesthetic technique of concentric circles (centre/periphery) to claim lost territories (inside/outside). Like the Song dynasty 'Civilisation and Barbarism Map', these maps don't reflect the PRC's actual control over the South China Sea. Rather than serve as evidence of territorial sovereignty (Gao

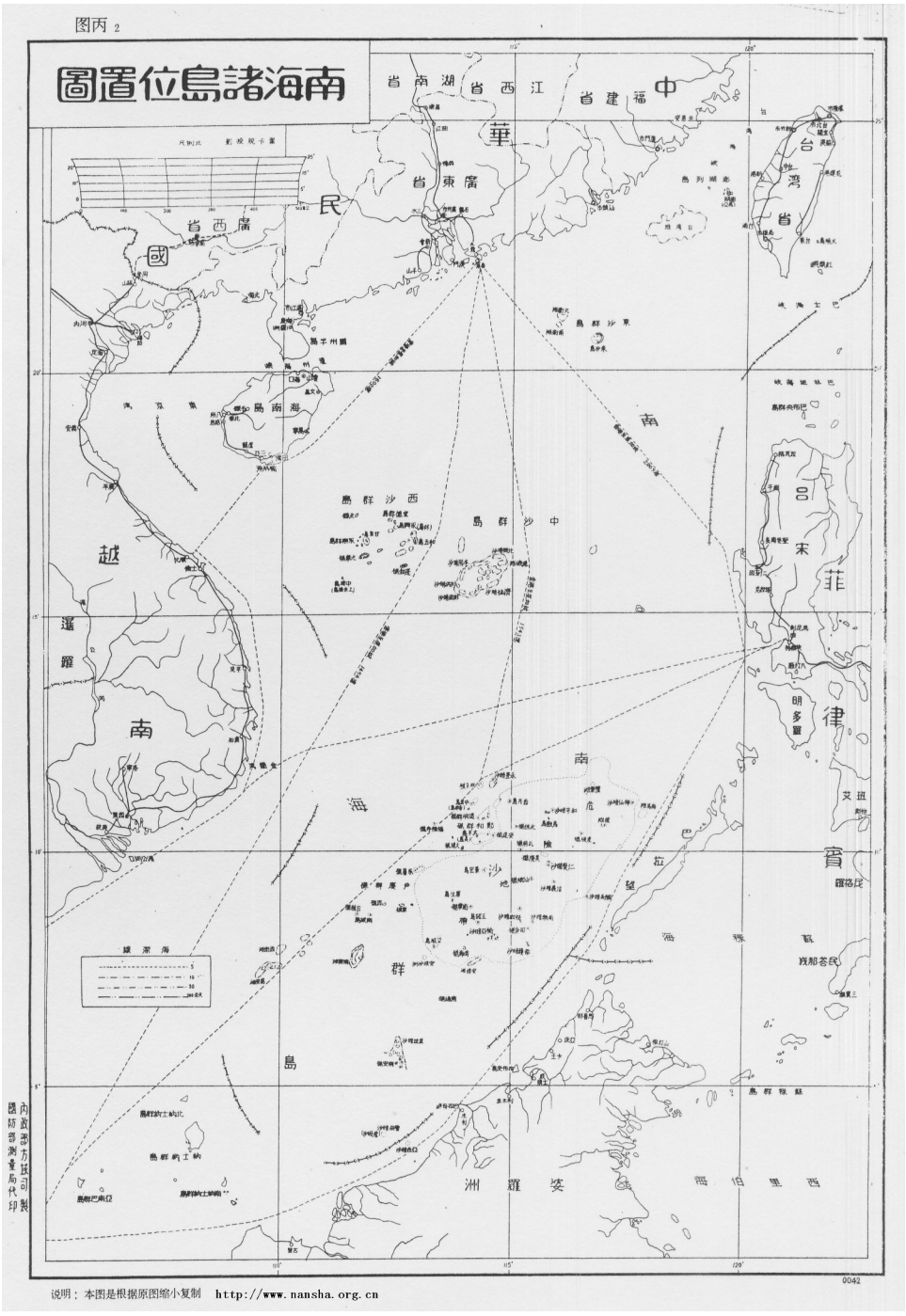

Figure 6. 'South Seas islands location map-南海諸島位置圖' (1947), Wikimedia.

and Jia 2013; Kassim 2017a; Shen 2002), these historical maps of China and contemporary maps of the South China Sea work with each other, and inter-visually resonate with each other to provoke the imperial gaze that celebrates China's territorial expansion, laments its lost territories, and fights to recover them.

Figure 7's map graphically invokes the imperial gaze's infectious passion to hail patriots to reclaim lost territories: 'China: Not One Inch Less-中國一點都不能少' (Zhongguo yidian bu neng shao 2016). This map was first published in social media by the CCP's official newspaper, the *People's Daily*, as a response to the UN Law of the Sea Tribunal's 2016 decision that legally nullified the U-Shaped Line.

Once again, this and other maps don't just describe the situation as 'a picture, a diagram, a chart, a table, and a map'. Rather, as an exercise of affective map-fare, such maps also actively 'hope, scheme, plan, plot against, and covet' to recirculate the imperial gaze that affectively evokes pride among many in the PRC, while provoking anger among many others in Southeast Asia.

This article builds on critical cartography's rich analysis of the role of the maps and cartography in constructing the South China Sea claims made by China, Vietnam, and the Philippines. This persuasive analysis shows that

Figure 7. 'China: not one inch less-中國一點都不能少', *Renmin ribao* (2016).

appeals to ancient maps for modern claims are problematic because they are often conceptually anachronistic, as well as because they characteristically rely on colonial and imperial knowledge practices. These articles thus deconstruct and denaturalise such claims through a careful reading of the biographies of the Chinese, Vietnamese and Philippine maps (Beatty 2021; Hayton 2019; Sasges 2016).

This article, however, goes in a different direction. It seeks to explore early-modern and post-1900 maps to see how the imperial gaze is not just Euro-American, but also Chinese. Rather than determine whether maps are being used anachronistically in modern nation-state identity politics, this article examines how Chinese maps are an assemblage of hybrid combinations of ideology and affect, tradition and modernity, East and West, and Sinocentric and Westphalian conceptions of space. Instead of seeing (re) inscriptions of maps in new contexts as an anachronistic problem, it explores what happens when cartographies intervisually collide to produce new maps that emotionally move people into affective communities. China's U-Shaped Line maps thus 'get away with' their outlandish territorial desires through their appeal to affective communities that emotionally move and attract Chinese patriots, while at the same time repelling Vietnamese, Filipino, and other critics. Indeed, as Figure 7 suggests, Chinese map-fare turned the legal 'loss' at the 2016 UNCLOS tribunal into a political 'win': the louder the (foreign) criticism, the stronger the affective community of Chinese supporters.

Such hybrid cartography that provokes affective communities is not limited to China, and it would be interesting to see if and how it works in other countries as well. For example, Sasges (2016, 161) discounts the affective power of the 'Complete map of *Dai Nam-Dai Nam toan do*' (1839) because it does not employ the cartographic conventions of modern maps: i.e., it puts West at the top, rather than North. But what happens when we explore how such early modern conventions might yield different and interesting meanings for the map, and even provoke important feelings among Vietnamese audiences? Do they suggest a Vietnamese imperial gaze? Or something else?

With map-fare, such maps are world-making in the sense that their cartographic 'view of the world' shapes their ideological 'worldview', including the Chinese imperial gaze explored in this article. At a broader level, *tianxia* and Sinocentric maps are important because they resonate with the twenty-first century's re-emergence of the concept of 'All-under-Heaven' among intellectuals, diplomats, and even Xi Jinping himself (Buzan and Acharya 2022; Tsang and Cheung 2024, 168–93; Zhao 2021). As the Trump 2.0 administration works to dismantle the Liberal International Order, Chinese concepts are gaining in currency not just in China, but also beyond the PRC (see Buzan and Acharya 2022). For example, in an op-ed for the *Washington Post* at the height of Trump

1.0, Zhao (2018) asked, 'Can China's "tianxia" philosophy save us from growing global chaos?' More to the point, the English translation of Zhao's (2005, 2021) landmark book *The Tianxia System* has a *tianxia* map (see Figure 3) on its cover.

Although the PRC's current imperial gaze appeals to a Chinese exceptionalist view of essential and unique civilisation, this map-fare is best understood as the imperial gaze's latest hybrid cartography. It actually has much in common with what Brook calls 'downstream imperial polities': e.g., China, India, Russia, Brazil, Turkey, and the US, which are expansive empires that now present themselves as multinational nation-states, if not civilisation-states (Brook 2016, 966–67, 2019, 378–90; also see Coker 2019; Gunko 2022; Ozavci 2023; Rana Bhat 2024; Kaul and Thornton 2025). In particular, China's imperial gaze of concentric circles, national humiliations, and lost territories yearning to be reunified has much in common with Vladimir Putin's neo-Eurasianism that likewise sees Russia as the territorial, civilisational, and cosmological centre (Clowes 2011, 43–67; Dugin 2014; Gunko 2022). Indeed, the Russian invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 are justified by Putin (2021) in terms of the 'imagined geography' of national humiliations, lost territories, and rejuvenated empire.

As the imperial gaze is not peculiar to the PRC, further comparative research within Southeast Asia, as well as with countries outside the region, would help to sort out what is uniquely Chinese, and what is shared in the map-fare of the imperial gaze seen in other places. Theoretically, the imperial gaze shows how hybrid cartography can effectively cultivate affective communities not just among elites but with popular groups as well, including Chinese netizens, Filipino youth groups, and Vietnamese factory workers.

Importantly, this imperial gaze is not merely a triumphant expansion of the male gaze and the colonial gaze that enlists peoples and places to perform in ways that assert and reaffirm a polity's hierarchical power and privilege. Alongside this totalising and universalising possession, the imperial gaze is evidence of nagging anxieties about unstable geobodies that are continually expanding – and contracting.

Note

1. In line with this article's theorical arguments, I have changed Hostetler's translation of *lan* from 'glance' to 'gaze'.

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