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Mapping Borderlands: New Insights on Cartographic Practices in Late Imperial China (1880s-1890s)

During the late nineteenth century, the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) engaged in negotiations with European empires to demarcate linear boundaries in Southwest China. Drawing a line that neatly separated the borderlands between Qing China and European colonial possessions posed a unique set of challenges due to competing cartographic practices and distinct understandings of territorial sovereignty held by the negotiators on both sides. This paper draws on recently declassified Chinese maps from the 1880s and 1890s to examine the role of cartographic practices and spatial discourses in defining borders between the Qing and European colonial regimes.

To advance their territorial claims, the Qing formulated new spatial discourses of the disputed border regions by employing a vast array of sources that included European maps, Chinese imperial gazetteers, and second-hand geographical knowledge gleaned from border inhabitants. Through the use of such diverse sources, the Qing produced new maps of their borderlands that at first glance resembled the ones of their European counterparts. This paper argues, however, that these maps should not be viewed as an enthusiastic embrace of Western cartographic practices by the Qing officials. Aware that maps were the political medium through which Western powers constructed and negotiated space, the Qing produced their own versions of European maps to convey their concepts of territorial sovereignty to their counterparts and aggressively legitimize their border claims. By analyzing this process, this paper sheds new light on the way that the Qing mapped and reconceptualized their borders with European colonial empires in Asia.



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