

**Title:** *Ancient Chinese world view, from the Chhin-Ting Shu Ching T'u Shuo*

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**Author:** *unknown*

**Description:** Before the Roman Empire had emerged from its Mediterranean heartlands an even greater empire had taken shape in the East. By 210 A.D. the Ch'in had expanded from their homeland beyond the great bend of the Yellow River to establish supremacy over the whole of China. The Han dynasty, notably during the reign of Emperor Han Wudi, pushed the boundaries even further, until the empire and its protectorates stretched from Korea to Kyrgyzstan and south to Vietnam. However, expansion to the west was constantly frustrated by the Xiongnu, a nomadic people that had migrated from the north and formed a powerful empire that threatened China's northern borders, displacing an indigenous people, the Yuezhi, deep into Central Asia. In 138, eighteen-year-old Han Wudi resolved to dispatch an emissary to the Yuezhi in the hope of eliciting their support for a two-pronged assault on the Xiongnu. The mission, placed in the hands of the courtier Zhang Qian, left the capital *Chang'an* [modern Xi'an], with 100 followers and a Xiongnu guide.

Far to the west, Zhang Qian's route took him through the territory of the Xiongnu, detained him and gave him a wife to keep him happy. But Zhang Qian never relinquished his imperial credentials, and after ten years, when the Xiongnu finally lowered their guard he escaped to proceed on his mission to the Yuezhi, crossing the mountains and after several weeks reaching the kingdom of Dayuan, the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan. Provided with guides and interpreters, he continued west into Kangju, where Samarkand now lies, then turned south to seek the Yuezhi kingdom around the Amu Dar'ya. Here he found the Yuezhi quite content with their new-found pastures, and in no mood for another war against the Xiongnu. After a year in the region, Zhang Qian set out empty-handed for home, arriving back in Chang'an after an absence of thirteen years, his Xiongnu wife and guide in tow. His report, which richly portrays the lands visited, as well as others more distant, survives as one of the earliest narratives of a true explorer. Zhang Qian opened the eyes of the Chinese for the first time to a civilized world beyond their borders, and he provided the geographic background and stimulus for trade that would result in the opening of the Silk Road, along which the first exchanges would take place between East and West.

In ancient China, "space" was not perceived as a uniform quantum continuum, as has been taken for granted in the West at least since the Renaissance. Rather, it was understood as a confederation of five directions: north, south, east, west, and middle. Each direction had its own distinction and quality. The Chinese universe was sometimes diagrammed as a grid of nested rectangles with the center occupied by China, whose name means "Middle Kingdom." The diagram below shows such a symbolic, ideological diagram from about the fifth century B.C. The center of this "map" represents the imperial palace. Reading outward, the next rectangle represents the imperial domains; then the lands of the tributary nobles; then the zone of pacification where border peoples are adjusting to Chinese customs; then the land of friendly barbarians; and finally, the outermost rectangle separates Chinese civilization from the lands of savages who have no culture at all.

In this Chinese example we observe an interesting combination of aesthetics and political iconography. The contemporary Chinese viewer not only would appreciate the decorative composition of his "map" with its nested rectangular borders and extraordinary emphasis on a "positional enhancing" center, but was thereby lulled by

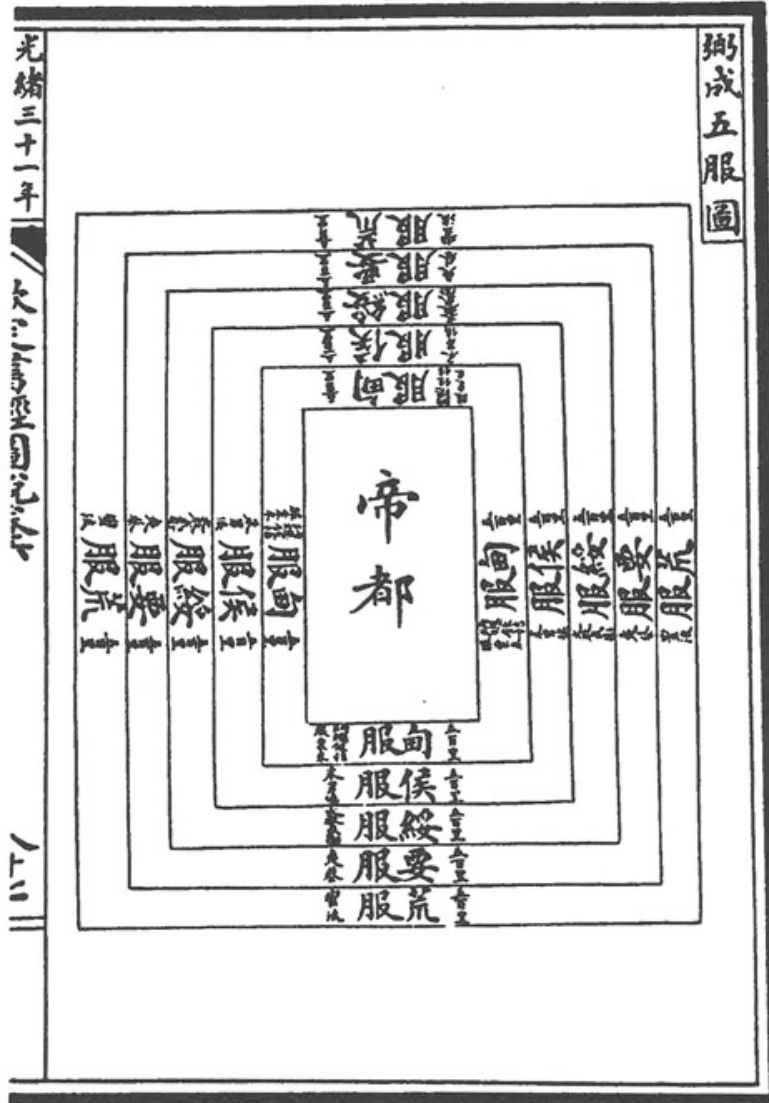
those very aesthetic qualities into feeling complacent about his national security. Much later, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Jesuit missionary Father Matteo Ricci gained some insight into this peculiar Chinese map mentality (#441). While attempting to convert the gentry of the Ming dynasty, he had published a number of world maps in the Chinese language and artistic style yet still showing the world according to the prevalent European Ortelian cartographic system, with meridians curving toward the north and south poles.

From ancient times maps have served a variety of purposes in China. Many were designed as practical educational tools for scholar-officials, to guide, instruct and edify in times of both peace and war. They were also employed as a concrete means of asserting the emperor's territorial claims, whether local, empire-wide, or world-wide. Maps became symbolic tokens of exchange in China's domestic and foreign relations, and were even used to depict a perceived link between the realms of heaven and earth. Significantly, they also provided a means by which viewers could take "spiritual" journeys to distant lands - the cartographic equivalent of "travelling [through a landscape painting] while remaining at rest [*woyou*]".

Traditional Chinese maps tend not to be drawn to scale, include a great deal of text and are sometimes pictorial. This generalization is accurate in so far as one acknowledges that a number of kinds of mapping practices, reflecting various epistemologies, did coexist. Distinct technologies and map styles were suited to different audiences and purposes.

The following cartographic image displays the world as perceived by the ancient Chinese. The four innermost squares, radiating at consecutive distances of 500 *li* [roughly 250km/150 miles] from the imperial palace, indicate the regions occupied by the various social classes subservient to the emperor. The fifth and outermost square, *Huang Fu*, was the rest of the world, the "barbarian" realm beyond the emperor's control.

This cartographic diagram represents the traditional conception of the radiation of ancient Chinese culture from its imperial center. Proceeding outward from the metropolitan area (center), there is, in concentric rectangles: (a) the royal domains; (b) the lands of the tributary feudal princes and lords; (c) the 'zone of pacification', i.e., the marches, where Chinese civilization was in course of adoption; (d) the zone of allied barbarians; and (e) the zone of cultureless savagery. The systematization can never have been more than schematic but Egypt and Rome might have used a similar image, all unconscious of the equally civilized empire at the eastern end of the Old World.



Ancient Chinese world view, 138 B.C.

From the Chhin-Ting Shu Ching T'u Shuo

[imperial illustrated edition of the *Historical Classic* chapter 6, Yü Kung]

The traditional conception of the radiation of ancient Chinese culture from its imperial center. Proceeding outwards from the metropolitan area we have, in concentric rectangles, (a) the royal domains; (b) the lands of the tributary feudal princes and lords; (c) the 'zone of pacification', i.e. the marches where Chinese civilization was in course of adoption, (d) the zone of allied barbarians; (e) the zone of cultureless savagery.

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**References:**

\*Howgego, R., *The Book of Exploration*, pp. 20-21.

\*Needham, Joseph & Wang Ling, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Volume 3, p. 502, Figure 204.

\*Smith, Richard J., *Chinese Maps, Images of 'all under Heaven'*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 24.

\*illustrated