AESTHETIC AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CARTOGRAPHY
OF CHINESE AND EUROPEAN LANDSCAPES

Fivos Papadimitriou

Centre for Environmental Education, University of Athens, Athens, Greece

Abstract

European semi-natural, cultural and artificial landscapes are significantly different than those of China and so are the cartographies of these landscapes. Feng-Shui for instance (an ancient Chinese method for assessing and mapping strong-favourable and weak-unfavourable aspects of landscapes and places) is still thought to be practiced by a large share of the Chinese, today. However strange the Asian methods may seem to the European mind, they constitute an essential part of traditional Chinese architecture, garden arrangement, and moreover landscape design. The relationship between humans and landscapes is very complex and the relevance of attitudes formulated by the Chinese in the past to the attitudes of today may have far-reaching consequences for the man-landscape relationships today. Equally interesting is the south-east Asian and Chinese cartography of parks and forests from the cultural point of view, particularly in relation to its relevance with the ancient Asian cosmologies. The comparative examination of European and Chinese cartographies may lead to a considerable re-evaluation of the perception of the role of humans in the landscape.

Landscape iconography and cartography

The cartographic representation of landscapes dates back to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. However two distinct mainstreams in cartography, have left their trace throughout the ages: European and Chinese. The first due to its lucidity and accuracy, the second due to its profound symbolism. The visual representation of landscapes, however, is intricately related to culture attitudes, trends, ideologies as well as historical stages and developments, as studied by many cultural geographers. The extent to which the representation of the landscape reveals its perception by humans, is manifested in cartography. Cartography is thus intricately related to the iconography of the landscape (Cosgrove, 1997) as well as to various approaches to the landscape (Muir, 1999). In this sense, cartographic representations of the geographical space find their place in long-term evaluations of the cultural geography of European landscapes, such as the one...
produced by Schama (1995). Yet, to claim that only European landscape iconography and cartography are important would be a colossal mistake, for Europe has not been the only region of the world where cartography has advanced. At the antipodes of Europe, cartography and iconography of the landscape have had their own spikes in post-medieval Imperial China. A world apart, secluded Imperial China has produced some of the most stunningly beautiful iconographies of landscapes, as well as one of the most peculiar theories of landscape interpretation and evaluation: Feng-Shui.

**Chinese versus European representations of Landscapes**

There is a very wide range of climates within the territory of the P.R. of China: tropical in the south, temperate and oceanic in the centre, arid in the west, mountainous in the southwest, etc. These climates support equivalently diverse vegetation growth and land use, of which maps can be found in O.U.P. (1997). The majority of the Chinese people belong to the Han Chinese. The cultural output through the ages, from earlier than the period of the Warring States up to the fall of the empire (in 1911) and the rise of the Maoist regime to the present date, has always been rich in schools and periods of calligraphy and painting (to which landscape iconography relates). How do these relate to the European perspective on the landscape? To answer this question, we should first consider certain distinct features of the European landscape iconography and cartography.

The production of Italian maps (mainly Venetian and Genovese) in the early centuries of the second millennium marks the onset of European cartography. Subsequent discoveries of new lands and continents overseas resulted in an unprecedented expansion of cartography, whilst developments in geodesical, toographic and astronomical techniques contributed to significant increase in map accuracy. The increasing intimacy with Europe’s densely inhabited (and hence, tamed” landscapes), along with the emerging perception of the world as a whole (in its planetary dimensions) gave a strong impulse to both the scientific and artistic studies of landscapes at local scale. Extremely benefited from these developments, painters and cartographers have produced some remarkably faithful representations of nature during the later centuries (17th to 19th), with Constable most significant in this respect among the artists and Mercator outstanding among cartographers.

**Comparing landscape features and ideals**

Although it is hard to generalise, thatched cottages within green villages constitute the „ideal” landscape for the English (Taylor, 1991), whilst the French equivalent is that of „la douce France”, manifested in a balanced combination of orchards, rivers, fields and woods (Schama, 1995). Timelessness and stability are some of the ideal characteristics of the English landscape (Muir, 1999). No doubt, such landscape qualities would be perceived as ideal for other European nations as well. No doubt, a large share of the Chinese population would find these landscapes pleasant and appealing as well. But the ideal landscape is by far more powerful a concept than
just that of a universally appealing landscape, because its very character lies in the core of the relationship between humans and land. As Yi-Fu Tuan (1979) rightly notes, "Landscape...is not to be defined by itemising its parts. The parts are subsidiary clues to an integrated image. Landscape is such an image, a construct of the mind and a feeling", and Meinig (1979) points that, "Any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but lies within our heads".

The Chinese traditionally place much emphasis on the moral and aesthetic uplift experienced by the viewer of a landscape. This is particularly apparent in Chinese painting and may be due to the long-inherited Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist traditions (Lai, 1992), all of which favour, in one way or another, the profound experience of nature with a view of self-transformation and transcendence. The "five pure elements" (plum blossom, bamboo, moon and water, pine, peach) play a key role in Chinese landscape painting, as much as contrast between light and darkness, comprehensiveness and detail, horizontality and verticality. The painted landscape usually has a dynamic character: it leading the spectator from a point close to him to another further remote and poorly defined; the nature of the world around us is vaguely understood and so its representation should be. Equivalently, the nature of the landscape is known in detail only in close proximity to us, but the landscape itself becomes largely unknown further away, with the only exception of certain landmarks (houses, trees, humans). Such landmarks serve to guide us through the maize of infinity and point towards it: since the landscape is infinite, so its icon should be.

In the domain of cartography, "Feng-Shui" (air-and-water) is an ancient Chinese technique of landscape evaluation for development, contemplation and dwelling. Feng-Shui method lies on a set of basic tenets, along with a set of mechanisms for implementing these tenets in landscape evaluation. The Chinese systems of astrological signs, forms of matter etc., all fit well in feng-shui. The aim of implementation of feng-shui evaluation is first to locate and then to map the favourable and unfavourable characters of the landscape, in order to manage the landscape better, or decide on the location of a house, tree, or any other object or activity. Favourable directions on the landscape are plotted against unfavourable ones whilst favourable sites are identified according to their shapes, colours or material composition. Consequently, maps of favourable and unfavourable sites can be created for restricted (e.g. in-house), large (e.g. landscape) or very large (e.g. province) areas. These are then useful for planning future farming, town and site planning, ecistics and finance. Although there is virtually no science in it, feng-shui has been established as one of the most widespread methods of landscape assessment among the Chinese, even today.

Conclusion

The following table sums up the main differences between the aesthetic and cultural aspects of cartography of European and Chinese landscapes and their cartographies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>European</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Landscapes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Bioclimate type | Tropical, Temperate, Arid | Temperate
2. Rural structures | Socialist | Capitalist (Latifundia)
3. Major threats | Desertification | Pollution
4. Major interventions | Watershed management | Land reclamation
5. Development | Rapid | Established

B. Culture and cartography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>European</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ideal iconography</td>
<td>Eternal</td>
<td>Picturesque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Imagined ideal landscapes</td>
<td>Amitaas paradise</td>
<td>Arcadia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ideal real landscape</td>
<td>Spiritually arising</td>
<td>Balanced, planned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Cartography aims at depicting</td>
<td>Landscape qualities</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Traditional cartography</td>
<td>Feng-Shui</td>
<td>Maps of explorators</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Certainly, all humans appreciate beautiful landscapes, but whatever their cultural disposition or race may be. It is however interesting to note that all nations are not equally interested in the same landscape features. Cartography then depicts these graded preferences, as their visual expression.

References


