

# Chinese Surveyed and Drew the First World Map Before Columbus

By Siu-Leung Lee, PhD

A seven-centimeter diameter plain brass medallion with the inscription “Authorized and awarded by Xuande of Great Ming” was unearthed four inches under the soil, several hundred miles inland from the American east coast. Is it evidence for pre-Columbian contact of Chinese with America? Since I obtained the medallion in 2006, it has totally changed my life, and I hope it will change history as it is taught today.

Zheng He, an admiral who served the Ming Emperors Yongle and Xuande, assisted them to establish diplomatic and trade relations with all the nations they could find in the world. In seven voyages (1405–1433), each with 28,000 well-equipped crewmembers on hundreds of huge ships, traveled via different routes for two to three years. The capacity of this 28-year endeavor is at least 1,000-fold of all explorations combined in the Great Discovery Age. The whole purpose of the last voyage commissioned by Emperor Xuande in 1430 was to announce himself and his new era. After Xuande died, China isolated herself from the rest of the world for more than 400 years. Most of Zheng He’s records were lost.

The brass medallion by itself is not proof of Ming Chinese in America before Columbus. To solve this mystery, I approach the problem like a forensic detective solving a 600-year-old cold case. There is no living witness to tell the story, but cultural relics speak their own language and are amply available to keen eyes. Hundreds of Chinese cultural relics in America cannot be mere incidental or accidental independent developments. Cultural relics are better in telling the truth as less error is introduced by personal bias.

The medallion was unearthed in a very scantily populated area near Asheville, North Carolina, where major battles were fought between the earliest European immigrants and the native Cherokee. The Cherokee had a Big Dipper flag, a symbol that represented the Chinese emperor for 2,000 years. This is well documented in 1,000 years of official history as part of the imperial procession, from the Song to the Qing dynasties. The Big Dipper was also a guiding constellation for Zheng He’s navigation. Other than China and the Cherokee, no nation in the world had a Big Dipper flag before the 20th century.

The Floridian natives had star-crescent flags, an easily recognized Muslim symbol. Zheng He was a Muslim, his ancestral name Mohammad. The Spanish colonists certainly would not have displayed a star-crescent flag as Columbus set sail in the same year the Spanish drove the Muslims out of Spain.

The Catawba tribe neighboring the Cherokee is famous for their pottery. Their traditional tripod earthenware, although much less sophisticated, almost replicates the distinct Chinese brass or porcelain censer made during the Xuande era. These censers, patterned on the ceremonial vessel “*ding*” used by Chinese emperors and kings, were part of the gifts brought by Zheng He and were also used in ceremonies to pray for maritime safety.

Up until the mid 18th century, Europe could not figure out the mysterious formula to make porcelain, until the English got porcelain clay from the Catawba Indians. The special white porcelain clay is called *I-to* 聖土 in Catawba tongue, *unaker* 壘泥 in Cherokee, and *un-na-ke* in the dialect of Jingdezhen, the Chinese porcelain capital of the world for the last 1,000 years. Even South Carolinians are surprised that their porcelain technology so uniquely resembles the traditional Jingdezhen technology—in processing of clay, glaze, and the style of pots. There are plenty of details left for discussion in my upcoming book.

The most important and irrefutable clue comes from the 1602 map allegedly drawn by Matteo Ricci as a gift to the Chinese emperor Wanli. Matteo Ricci, an Italian Jesuit who

came to China in 1584, stayed until his death in Beijing in 1610.

Matteo Ricci’s 1602 map is completely written in Chinese. In Ricci’s own words on the map, he had consulted Chinese sources to add hundreds of names and to correct the geography. Almost 50 percent of the 1,114 names, including those on the American continents, do not have equivalents in European maps. And, Ricci’s map is far more accurate than any other contemporaneous world map.

The absence of Papal State and important Renaissance names on Ricci’s 1602 map is obviously inconsistent with Ricci’s status as a Jesuit commissioned to evangelize China. An Italian map without the Papal State and Florence in the 16th century is equivalent to an American map today without Washington DC and New York City. The first major American cities established in the 16th century by Spanish and Portuguese settlers, such as Santa Cruz, Acapulco, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires, are notably absent.

The shape of Hudson Bay and the California peninsula are far more accurate on Ricci’s map than the contemporaneous European world maps. Hudson Bay was not “discovered” until the year Ricci died. Area west of the Mississippi, explored by Lewis and Clark 200 years later, is shown with many names. Names and features that should be on the map are not there, while those shouldn’t be are found. That is why Ricci’s 1602 map has been characterized as “impossible.”

Ricci’s map is consistent with the naming of major oceans with cardinal directions using China as the center of reference, while European maps were inconsistent and confused even 200 years later. This mistake is seen on a globe commissioned by the Pope and a map by Ricci’s successor Giulio Aleni. This shows the Chinese had prior knowledge of the three largest oceans.

The most important dating clue is a note on the map above Spain clearly stating that the map was drawn “70 some years” after the first official contact of China and Europe. This refers to Pope Benedict XII sending a legation of 50 clergymen to Beijing (1342–47). Seventy some years later would date the map to 1410s–1420s

when Zheng He was active in his voyages, 160 years before Ricci and 70 years before Columbus. On the other hand, 70 some years prior to Ricci's visit or the European world maps, China had a maritime ban with no contact with the west. The significance of this statement was left unnoticed by all including Ricci himself, until I deciphered the meaning.

The 1602 map was completed one year after Ricci was allowed to roam in the Forbidden City. This provides a timing witness of where and when he likely had access to information in the imperial archive.

Unless more primary information can be found to support European discovery and survey of these places on Ricci's map before the map was drawn, the conclusion should be revised to say that Ricci's 1602 map is truly one based on Chinese survey, while the other world maps are copies of an original source done by the Ming Chinese. For Ming Chinese to have drawn this map, they must have circumnavigated and returned safely. It is thus beyond reasonable doubt that Ricci actually uncovered and redrew a Chinese world map around Zheng He's time (1405–1433), proving that Chinese were indeed the first to start the Great Discovery Age.

Ricci's map is not the only one that contradicts the "history" we have been taught. A 1507 map by Waldseemueller shows the vast Pacific Ocean and the Panama Isthmus before Balboa crossed the isthmus, seeing the Pacific Ocean for the first time in 1513, six years after the dated Waldseemueller map. Out of the thousands of miles of coastline, how did Balboa spot the isthmus so soon after Columbus's trips? How did Magellan in 1519 prepare for the long journey across the unknown Pacific and make it successfully in one shot, with no prior information? There used to be 1,000 copies of the Waldseemueller map, which obviously served as the guide for Balboa and Magellan. Who else had the ability to survey the American continent in such detail before Columbus?

The only surviving copy of the Waldseemueller map was acquired by the Library of Congress in 2007. The Ricci 1602 map was purchased by University of Minnesota in 2010. Both are permanently on display as

witness to my statements.

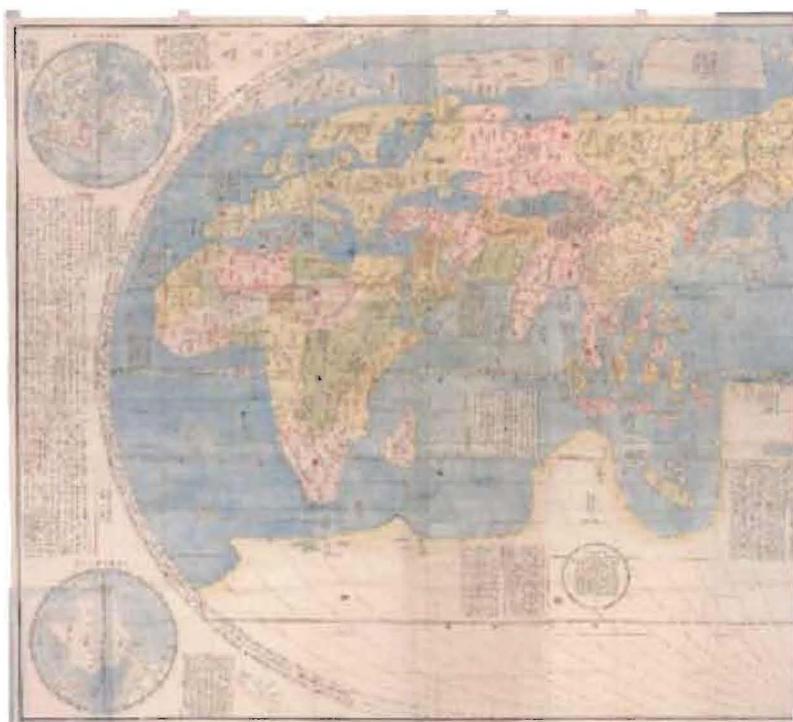
The above is only a brief glimpse of the available evidence that Ming Chinese surveyed the world and drew the first world maps that led the Great Discovery Age. The purpose of this article is not to negate European contributions in developing the new continent. However, it is necessary to give proper credit to the deserved and to have history reflect the truth. Without the Ming Chinese maritime explorations, the new continents would still have been discovered, but at a much later date. It is well recognized that the first settlers of America came from Asia 14,000 years ago. So the friendly relationship between

peoples of the two continents happened long before China and America were nations by name.

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*This article summarizes presentations at the Hong Kong branch of the Royal Geographic Society in 2006, and at the Zheng He Conference in Melaka, 2010. Dr. Siu-Leung Lee is a biochemist turned historian, internationally known for his Chinese calligraphy, and author of all translation and calligraphy of Nickelodeon's animated series "Avatar." In 2010, a renowned Chinese newspaper in Hong Kong featured Dr. Lee's Zheng He research in a full front-page article. SLLee@asiawind.com; website asiawind.com.*

*The famous Matteo Ricci map, made in the year 1602.*



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