I. Introduction

The earliest surviving examples of maps covering the extent of a Chinese empire date from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The extant maps appear either on large stone steles placed in public spaces or in printed books of various genres. These media allowed for the official, private, and commercial reproduction of maps. The publicity that maps of the empire received from the twelfth century on marks a transition in the history of Chinese cartography and is part of a larger development in imperial political culture. This essay examines the role of print in the formation of conventions of map reading. It is intended as a first attempt at reconstructing the invisible cultural logic of map reading that left visible traces in writing at that particular moment in the cultural history of map production when print technology made possible, for the first time, the possession, manipulation, and close reading of maps of the empire not only among a small circle of court elites but also by a larger readership.

The maps of the Chinese territories that were produced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries derived from earlier models of mapping.\(^1\) However, the demand for instructional materials of various kinds that resulted from the exponential increase in the potential book-buying readership of students preparing for the civil service examinations led to the reformatting of graphic and textual information and to the articulation of reading instructions that were consonant with pedagogical and editorial techniques used in other contemporary instructional texts such as prose anthologies and prose style manuals.

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\(^1\) I discuss earlier models and twelfth- and thirteenth-century understandings of them in “Maps and Memory.” For a wide-ranging discussion of the broader category of tu 畫 (variously translated as “map,” “chart,” “painting,” or “image”), see Bray et al., eds., Graphics and Text.
The first printed historical atlas, *Lidai dili zhizhang tu* 歷代地理指掌圖 (*Handy geographical maps throughout the ages*),\(^2\) is the focus of my inquiry. By examining how the editor(s) of this atlas instructed their readers to move about the map, direct the gaze, and interpret individual maps and sets of geographical data sequentially, this essay suggests that the commercial success and high profile of this atlas derived in part from its articulation of a set of rules that promised to render vast geographical and historical archives accessible to the reader. This set of rules, a cultural logic of map reading, was separable from the maps to which it had originally been attached. Its further dissemination in other genres of commercially produced and distributed printed texts, discussed in the final section, highlights the intersections between the first atlases and other types of archival and instructional genres and the role of both types of texts in the changing political culture of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Song China. The comparison with other documentary collections further elucidates the ‘historical’ in the first printed historical atlas and helps us question and revise modernist scholarship on the history of the genre.

II. Maps of the Empire in Print

*Maps Can Imbue Us with a Sense of Order*\(^3\)

During the twelfth century printed maps of the empire appeared in books in various subject categories. Maps featuring old and contemporary place names were included in works of classical exegesis and pedagogical tools providing instruction in the interpretation and memorization of the classics. Examples include *Liujing tu* 六經圖 (*Figures of the Six Classics*) and Tang Zhongyou’s 唐仲友 (1136–88) *Diwang jingshi tupu* 帝王經世圖譜 (*Catalog of figures illustrating the governance of rulers*). The former includes maps, charts, tables, and illustrations translating and synthesizing the classics in graphic formats. The first woodblock edition dates from 1165, but the earliest extant copy

\(^2\) My translation of the title strays somewhat from the literal meaning of *zhizhang*. This term means ‘demonstrable in the palm of the hand’ and thus easy to understand and clear. ‘Handy’ captures the original metaphor, means ‘convenient’ and ‘within reach’; its semantic field is stretched somewhat in my use of it here to include the meaning of ‘within easy intellectual reach.’

\(^3\) Harmon, *You Are Here*, 18.