

Alternative Modes of Mapping

a response by Alex Schultz

Nathan Shui's essay on the 2013 Beijing Queer Film Festival considers a new geography for queer spatial tactics of interpolation. In 2013, the festival took place not in a public square or park, but in a train car. Organizers chose this extra-governmental mobile space for practical as well as perhaps ideological reasons: Xi Jinping's government has increased scrutiny of public LGBTQ+ events and advocacy in the last decade, including canceling Shanghai Pride for the first time – and until further notice – in August 2020.¹ This crackdown has forced the LGBTQ+ community to rethink outreach and events, including using word-of-mouth rather than email marketing to publicize events such as the Beijing Queer Film Festival.

A documentary still-frame included in the author's essay displays a collage of photographs, blue lines, and other symbols affixed to what seems to be a typical road map of Beijing and surrounding areas. These annotations serve to make queer space visible while simultaneously obscuring official or government-approved modes of interacting with the city. For me, this brings critical attention to *any* map's discursive obstruction. Maps are not neutral depictions of fact: like any representation they are selective and rhetorical.

Rail or road maps, like the foundational layer of this artwork, are cartographic. They are produced with trigonometric and satellite data, but also a robust sense of imagined authority. For example, in the nineteenth century, British colonial engineers

¹ Steven Jiang, "Shanghai Pride Shuts down amid Shrinking Space for China's LGBTQ Community," CNN, August 16, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/14/asia/shanghai-pride-shutdown-intl-hnk/index.html>.

deployed trigonometric cartography to map Egypt in order to claim administrative and legislative purview. In both places, measurement technology took the form of mathematics, precise instrumentation, and rigorously prescribed and documented processes. These were in turn visualized into the map, a representation of land and land ownership that was considered more modern and more objective than, for example, Ottoman tax registers. The latter relied on local practice and practitioners who recorded land information textually in ledgers. As Timothy Mitchell has shown, the British colonial survey of Egypt was not more accurate than previous practice, but rather reconfigured space to facilitate the colonial economy, including the consumption of squatter's land for profit.² Even today with the widespread adoption of GIS data in software such as Google Maps, maps remain incomplete, imprecise, and selective two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional space. Indeed, the priorities of a map reveal much more about the map-makers than the space itself.³

The official roadmap of Beijing did not make room for queer spaces, so the Queer Festival artists added them. These spaces are not mapped using traditional cartographic symbols, but the faces of real people. Such a precise obstruction questions the authority of maps, and thus the authority—and reach—of the state. Indeed, the map is transformed into something beyond a cartography. Rather, it declares the festival as a spatial practice.⁴ The new map makes space for the ephemeral and the experiential while simultaneously occluding state claims to all ways of moving and being in Beijing.

In a security state, governance is rooted in constant and pervasive fear.⁵ However, the fear runs both ways. Regimes and their agents practice systematic and often violent oppression because they fear the power of people, especially in the form of community action. Even ostensibly apolitical events such as the Beijing Queer Film Festival are considered a threat: as Shui notes, officers from three different police units questioned organizers, and eventually shut down the 2011 festival. Holding the festival in spite of repeated state intervention is an act of resistance. Doing so in a mode that

² Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Matthew Edney has explored similar issues of colonial governance and the process of map making in India. See: Matthew Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

³ Swati Chattopadhyay, "Cities and Peripheries," *Historical Research* 83, no. 222 (2010): 649–71.

⁴ The cartographic mode is only one among many ways of visually representing cognitive spatial mapping. For an interesting discussion of this issue, see: Matthew Edney, "This Is Not a Map," *Mapping as Process*, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.mappingasprocess.net/blog/2017/12/14/this-is-not-a-map>.

⁵ For some discussion of this and creative modes of subversion and resistance, see: Paul Amar, *The Security Archipelago: Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism* (Duke University Press, 2013); Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999/2015).

frustrates surveillance efforts and official cartographies is not only necessary, but critically, a disruption of the hegemony of state knowledge.⁶

⁶ Shui characterizes these as ambivalent processes. This event and its tactics also bring to mind classic examples of petty resistance, including humor, foot-dragging, and recalcitrance. See: James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013).

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