Matteo Ricci’s World Maps in Late Joseon Dynasty*

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In the period of the Ming (明) Empire, there was a man from Gura[-pa] country named Li Madu. He proudly said, “Having traveled far and wide throughout all under heaven, I realized that there were five worlds other than and comparable to the Central Kingdom (中國).” …… The envoys of our Eastern country dispatched to Beijing brought his teaching [to our country]: Yi Gan 李柬 (1677-1727)

Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), or “Li Madu (利瑪竇)” as known to Korean literati, was one of a few “Western barbarians,” who enjoyed exceptional popularity among intellectuals in the late Joseon (朝鮮, 1392-1910) period. No Korean seems to have ever met him in person, but by the early eighteenth century, Ricci’s name and his role as the initiator of Western learning in late Ming (明, 1368-1644) China were well appreciated by Korean literati. They even considered “Li Madu” representing Europe (Gurapa, 歐羅巴) and its culture as a whole, giving him a multifarious identity as a Christian priest, an astronomer, a geographer, and even a clockmaker, which covered the whole range of Jesuit’s cultural accomplishments in China. Of these multiple roles assigned to Ricci, this essay focuses on Ricci as a geographer and mapmaker.

As shown in Yi Gan’s remark, Ricci was known foremost as an extraordinary traveler, who, based upon his journey “throughout all under heaven,” suggested a grand geographical scheme of the plural worlds, a scheme presented in a series of his world maps published in China. Indeed, “Li Madu’s maps,” introduced from China and then reproduced and circulated widely among literati intellectuals, were one of the main sources of Li Madu’s popularity in late Joseon society. World maps

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1 Yi Gan, “Cheonji byeon huseol” (Discourse on Heaven and Earth, and an Epilogue), Oeam yugo, gweon 12, in Hanguk munjip chonggan (Seoul: Minjok munhwa chujinhoe, 1997), Vol. 190, p. 447 [李柬,『巍巖遺稿』巻12,“天地辨後說”,韓國文集叢刊].
of other Jesuits, those of Giulio Aleni (1582-1649) and Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-
1688), were also circulated, occasionally misidentified as “Li Madu’s maps.” In a
sense, “Li Madu’s maps” became a generic term for Western style world maps in
the late Joseon period.2

This paper examines the circulation of “Li Madu’s” or “Western” world maps in
late Joseon society with particular emphasis on how Korean mapmakers and gener-
al intellectuals read and reproduced the maps of foreign origin. However, this is not
an attempt to measure the “influence” of the Jesuit cartography upon indigenous
map culture, as has been done in much of the previous research about the cartogra-
phy of early modern East Asia.3 The Jesuit maps were circulated in Joseon society,
this paper argues, not as ready-made entities, the meaning and the usages of which
had been predetermined by the Jesuit authors. On the contrary, this paper examines
the circulation and consumption of the Jesuit maps in late Joseon society as a
process in which the Korean audience created a new entity called “Li Madu’s
maps”: a cultural hybrid that the Koreans made out of features from both the East
Asian and the European cartographic traditions.

Circulation of Matteo Ricci’s Maps in Late Joseon Period

Since the Jesuit missionary did not establish a foothold in Korea during the late
Joseon period, the world maps and the geographical ideas of the China Jesuits
came into Korea mainly through the efforts of Korean visitors to China. Matteo
Ricci’s world maps were transmitted to Korea from as early as the beginning of the
seventeenth century, when Ricci had settled in Beijing and launched an ambitious
project to proselytize China with the help of European secular learning.

Yi Sugwang (李睟光, 1563-1628), a famous courtier of this period, recorded one
of the earliest Korean encounters with Ricci’s world map. In 1603, he saw a map
presented to the court by the returning envoys from Beijing. He simply called it a
“terrestrial map of Europe” (歐羅巴國輿地圖) drawn by a certain “European envoy”
named Feng Baobao (馮寶寶). Yet, there is little doubt that this “six-scroll” map is
a copy of the famous “Kunyu wanguo quantu” (坤輿萬國全圖, the Complete Map
of Ten Thousand Countries of the Earth), which had been drawn by Ricci and Li

2 Recent research, for example, shows that an early nineteenth-century copy of a Jesuit world
map, titled “the Map of Ten Thousand Countries by a Western Jesuit, Li Madu,” was actually a
copy of Aleni’s world map. See, Yang Bogyeong, “Ha Baikwon’s Map of Ten Thousand
Countries and Map of the Eastern Kingdom,” Jeonnam sahak 24 (2005), 73-109 [양보경, “圭南
河百源의 <萬國全圖>와 <東國地圖>”, 『全南史學』].

3 For a review of previous research on the introduction of European cartography into late
Imperial China, see Cordell Yee, “Traditional Chinese Cartography and the Myth of
2, Book 2, Cartography in the Traditional East and South East Asian Societies (Chicago: