The Grand Canal as a Feature of the Cultural Atlas of China

Rita Merkle, University of Heidelberg, Germany

Summary

The project I am trying to develop is a cultural atlas of the Grand Canal of China as a part of the Electronic Cultural Atlas of China. Taking this water route as a spatial reference different aspects of the Chinese culture will be localized in time and space.

I would have liked to virtually guide you around China on the Grand Canal already. As yet, I haven't created any digitized material. The idea for the project arose from the fact that the Grand Canal played an important role in the imperial past of China. After a short introduction I want to do some brainstorming on the possibilities of the future database and finally present some ideas about two pilot projects.

The Grand Canal through the Chinese History

From 605 to 610 A.D., the Sui emperor Yangdi carried out a series of dazzling projects that launched the first Grand Canal network which expanded preexisting canals and waterways to form one unified, state-controlled system of canal communications. The canal building of the Sui and the following Tang period was a spectacular undertaking with consequences for the later imperial age. The ambitious program was closely linked to the establishment of an empire-wide granary system that connected the core agricultural regions in the east and south to important political-strategic centers in the north. The price and the availability of grain became issues that affected both internal stability and external security. But it not only laid the political and economic foundations for Tang power. The Grand Canal was more than a potent force for the unification in early imperial China. It, indeed, became a symbol of imperial rule during the remainder of the imperial age. And, as Jane Kate Leonard states in her detailed study *Controlling from Afar*. "By the Qing period, the strategic and historical significance of the Grand Canal was embedded in the rich cultural matrix of values, institutions, laws, and precedents that comprised the imperial state." (p. 36)

(Different maps of the Grand Canal through the history, compare Annex)
(As the Yellow River's meandering and flooding intensified throughout the 1840s, the river finally shifted its course between 1851 and 1855 and the series of aftershock floods disrupted the Grand Canal communications until the end of the century.)

Project Design and Application Areas

This short introduction to the Grand Canal already provides a first glimpse onto the importance of that water route to the overall development of the Chinese culture throughout the imperial age. It's, indeed, a spatial focus that can be linked to much broader issues and all different kind of datas could be combined - physical features, demographical features, historical features (e.g. the An Lushan Rebellion or the Taiping Rebellion), visual material, political features or aspects of the economic system - to only mention a few. You all know about the possibilities of such a combination of interlinked datas. Eventually the atlas should be a research tool for selecting, combining, sorting and viewing different kind of datas rather than a mere collection of ready-made maps. The datas should be accessible seamlessly across the Internet from a common front-end software and it would be nice to create some timemaps, i.e. maps of cultural features which change through time.

Realization

As a part of the eventual Grand Canal atlas, in the bid process I first want to start with two pilot projects which I want to call "The visual material and map index project" and the probably more ambitious "Virtual Beijing Project". Since a lot of material already exists of Beijing, the city will be the spatial starting point of the overall project.

1. "The visual material and map index project" will include:
   - hypertext links to online resources that offer maps of China (and the Grand Canal);
   - links to libraries and other institutions that have archival collections of historical maps, drawing s and other virtual material about the Grand Canal;
   - visual materials of the Grand Canal like photographs and drawings (Here the question of copyright might cause problems.)

2. "Virtual Beijing Project" will include a broader range of different aspects:
   - the growth of the city in population and in space (eventually this should become a timemap);
   - economic features (numeric/statistical information about the exchange between North and South China via the Grand Canal, changes in the agricultural system, the grain supply system, foreign trade, economic incentives of the state etc.);
   - political features (the administrative and bureaucratic system, state-society relations, political ideologies etc.);
   - any kind of visual material (photographs, maps, art etc.)
   - historical features (the history of the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, visual material of historical persons, Qing-Foreign relations, the Opium War, ideologies etc.)

In this paper I have attempted to briefly show the future possibilities of an electronic cultural atlas of the Grand Canal of China. My current work is focussing on the technical problems of the project and getting acquainted with the GIS program I am using (ArcView). As soon as I have managed these problems the next steps in the projects will be taken and I hope that I can present some digitized material at the next ECAI meeting.

Acknowledgments