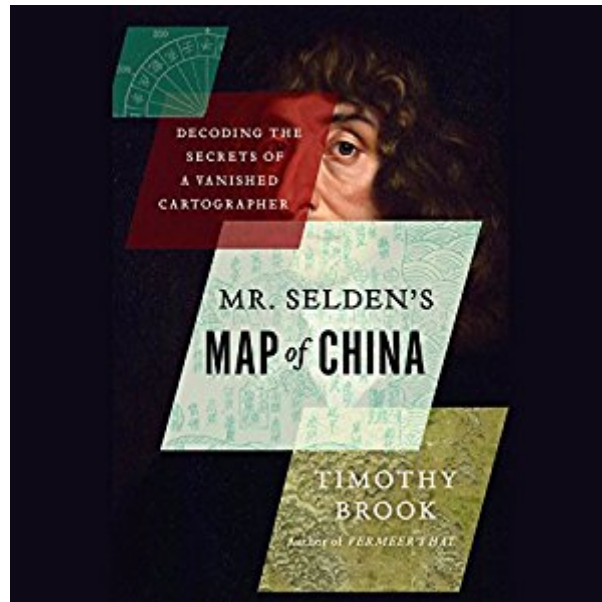


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Mr. Selden's Map Of China: Decoding The Secrets Of A Vanished Cartographer



Synopsis

From the author of the award-winning *Vermeer's Hat*, a historical detective story decoding a long-forgotten link between 17th-century Europe and China. Timothy Brook's award-winning *Vermeer's Hat* unfolded the early history of globalization, using Vermeer's paintings to show how objects like beaver hats and porcelain bowls began to circulate around the world. Now he plumbs the mystery of a single artifact that offers new insights into global connections centuries old. In 2009, an extraordinary map of China was discovered in Oxford's Bodleian Library - where it had first been deposited 350 years before, then stowed and forgotten for nearly a century. Neither historians of China nor cartography experts had ever seen anything like it. It was so odd that experts would have declared it a fake - yet records confirmed it had been delivered to Oxford in 1659. The "Selden Map", as it is known, was a puzzle that needed solving. Brook, a historian of China, set out to explore the riddle. His investigation will lead listeners around this elegant, enigmatic work of art, and from the heart of China, via the Southern Ocean, to the court of King James II. In the story of Selden's map, he reveals for us the surprising links between an English scholar and merchants half a world away, and offers novel insights into the power and meaning that a single map can hold. Brook delivers the same anecdote-rich narrative, intriguing characters, and unexpected historical connections that made *Vermeer's Hat* an instant classic.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An easy narrative about the discovery of a map probably drawn in China or by a Chinese cartographer around 1608 that falls into the hands of an English academic at some point before he

wills it to the Bodleian Library in 1654. The tale is well told of its previous owners, its possible origins, its secrets, and the impact it might have had on the west's understanding of Asia and cartography had it been made available to the public during Selden's lifetime, which it was not. There are fascinating sections on a number of related topics making the actual map a vehicle to discuss Chinese history, the story of the Spice Trade, early cartography, dry versus wet compasses, tattooed slaves, and maritime law in a friendly and convivial manner. Brook, in short, is a great story-teller, as those who have also read his most popular book, *Vermeer's Hat*, can attest to. Two or three evenings' reading, at most, and probably more enjoyable to those who have some knowledge of these subjects to begin with because then the various tidbits fall into place amongst the larger fabric of Asian history--the tale of the capture of the *Santa Catarina* at the south end of the Malay Peninsula in 1603, for example, or Zheng He's great maritime adventures.

Some books are stark intellectual endeavor -- the author's mentor, Joseph NEEDHAM, wrote 26 volumes or so on China's technology. A few books, however, reflect the author's unalloyed joy in chance discovery, the pure pleasure of ferreting out the infinite of the reality in which we are wrapped. This book belongs to the second category. The author, a premier historian of China's culture and the Ming period, gives his best (and more). The author chances across a XVIIth century map of the South China Sea. With great skill he plumbs not only the secrets of the map, but also the context in which it was acquired. The result is a comparative portrait of culture and mindsets in Europe and China -- in all directions. This research in itself would be enough to justify reading the book. Along with earlier works by the author, this work helps dispel the view of the Ming period as static and self-regarding. It was China's tragedy that, the author concludes, having refused trade, it invited imperialism. This is not all: in my view, there is much more in the book. For every mystery uncovered, the author plants new ones -- subtle metaphors about the historian's skills and limitations. Here an example: map-drawing is akin to history writing, where the curvature of the past (the divide of experience cannot be undone) makes it impossible for any historian fully to reconstruct the past. The skill is in minimizing the fudging. Odd as this may seem, one book is not enough to open all doors hidden behind the details of the map, let alone travel the corridors that lead from other doors, still less to enter all the rooms that open off the corridors. (pg.

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