The Hand-Drawn Beijing-Shanghai High-Speed Railway Map with Sights

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Translation of Chinese text on the map by Xu Wang-Angsüsser

This Chinese strip-format travel map is devoted to the high-speed railway connecting the capital Beijing with the metropolis Shanghai. The line was opened to the public in June 2011 and is more than 1300 km long. The entire map was hand-drawn by the artist DONG Zheng, save for the lettering and the north arrow. Due to its roughly eastern orientation, Beijing is found on the left hand side and Shanghai on the right.

The main purpose of the map is to promote this railway line. As a consequence, it was designed not to help users to find each train station as quickly as possible, but rather to trigger a positive attitude towards rail transport and the high-speed railway in particular. To achieve this emotional response, the artist applied several aesthetic codes on different levels. Some of these codes are clearly culturally bound.

In China, the traditional writing direction is from top to bottom in columns arranged from right to left. Often, bamboo slips bound together were used as material for the columns, resulting in an overall shape of a sometimes very long, horizontal rectangle. This probably influenced the decision for an eastward oriented map in a horizontal rectangular shape (Figure 1). The short text on the right-hand side of the map, describing the main features of this region, is also written according to the traditional writing direction.

The map is drawn from a bird's eye point of view. While the railway line and its touristically interesting surroundings are shown in detail, the background is partly blurred and partly hidden by clouds and fog. Although the Yellow Sea is very

Figure 1: Overall view of the map, shown at about 41% of the original size.

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near, it is difficult to find it on the map (Figures 2 and 3). Horizontally, the map is structured into several regions. Right of the central folding line runs the Huai River, generally seen as the border between North and South China. This line is additionally emphasized by two cranes flying above it in the sky - a traditional Chinese symbol for longevity (Williams 2006).

Figure 2: The northern end of the railway line with the cities Beijing (except for the train station, only historic buildings are shown) and Tianjin (depicted as the modern counterpart to Shanghai at the southern end). Shown at about 68% of the original size.

The two most important rivers of China are depicted in an outstanding brownish hue and a wave-like line structure: the Yellow River in the northern part of the map and the Yangtze River in the southern part. Where the railway line crosses these waterways, the big cities Jinan and Nanjing, both provincial capitals, are identified. South-east of Jinan lies a mountainous region; the sacred mountain Tai (Tai Shan) is prominently featured. The presentation style of both the mountains and the two big rivers follows that of traditional landscape paintings and maps (Figure 3).

The highly distortive application of different object scales (e.g., compare track gauge, train stations, buildings, and mountains) is a fascinating aesthetic feature of this map. A flexible

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use of scale results in an underestimation of distances along the railway line and an overestimation of easily reachable areas surrounding it. In some respects, this railway depiction adopts the aesthetics of model railways (e.g., only one track, tunnel shapes; Figure 3). Further, there are local variations in perspective (e.g., compare the first three train stations on the northern end; Figure 2).

Corresponding to its topical theme, many touristic spots are shown on the map: on the one hand historic sites (historic centers, temples, pagodas, tombs, bridges) and on the other hand modern sites (besides the railway line with its stations, cities with high-rises, and bridges) are shown. Completely missing, however, are roads (although most of the bridges are road bridges), other railway lines, and many other features not supporting the idea of perfect harmony between nature and culture, and between the glorious Chinese past and modernity.

The heavy usage of traditional codes and symbology to promote a high-tech achievement makes this map a very good example of the cultural dependence of aesthetics (Kent 2005), as well as the related aesthetics of identity (Lotman 1970 cited by Nöth 1990). An aesthetics of identity is established through the use of identical or nearly identical codes by producers and recipients. The artist invokes deeply rooted cultural conventions well-known to the intended audience. Aesthetic codes, such as emphasizing a central axis (Huai River), obscuring parts of the area with clouds and fog, and the presentation style of mountains, are examples found in this map.

Users with a different cultural background are often not familiar with some of these conventions and might therefore miss their symbolic dimension. As a possible consequence, users might overlook their aesthetic value. For these users, clouds and fog may not have aesthetic value at all, or clouds and fog might even be seen as disturbing and aesthetically harmful. Besides these uninitiated users unaware of the related aesthetic code, there are other users who can decode it, but in a different way than the map producer. For them, clouds and fog could have an aesthetic value merely because of the exotic oddity of clouds and fog rather than an awareness of the cultural code of clouds and fog as referenced by the artist. In such cases, Lotman introduced the term aesthetics of opposition (ibid.).

As this discussion shows, aesthetics in mapping partly depends on the actors involved and their individual and cultural peculiarities. Some aesthetic codes are at the same time cultural codes.

Figure 3: The sacred mountain Tai (Tai Shan), the Yellow River fading into the fog, and the city Jinan in between. Shown at original size.

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