

Design

The future of maps: Cartography in the 21st century

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For millennia, maps have held talismanic powers, helping to form spatial concepts and advance exploration. They have shaped geopolitical ideas, triggered international disputes and created pictures of the world both large and detailed.

Today, satellites and digital mapping tools have turned modern cartography -- the science and art of map-making -- into a technology-driven field. With accuracy all but guaranteed, new ways of visualizing space have emerged in the process. They mix art, experience and topography, approaching the physical world through the lens of time, perspective and storytelling.

Qiu Zhijie: China's master mapmaker

"We've entered a new era for cartography," Zhou Qiming, a professor and director of the Centre for Geo-Computation Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University, said in a phone interview. "Previously, map-making focused solely on projecting the Earth and its sphericity on a flat plane. That's taking a less crucial role now.

"We're approaching geographical environments from different directions, and (finding) ways of presenting geospatial locations that aren't maps in the traditional sense, but rather map-like visualizations. It's no longer just about a spatial display, although that remains the main reference point for any cartographer. Maps are getting smarter, and showing us the world under different parameters."

From Babylon to GPS

The earliest known maps were, given the limited knowledge of their creators, produced as artistic expressions rather than accurate representations. The "Babylonian Map of the World," a clay tablet created in Mesopotamia around 700 to 500 B.C., depicts Babylon as the center of the known world ringed by a circular waterway labelled "Salt-Sea" and surrounded by eight triangular regions.



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