



World Map in Book 5 — Dr Hendon M Harris, Jr Collection, from *The Asiatic Fathers of America*.

Maps, money and DNA

Q: Why are the ideas in your book so controversial?

A: It's not easy to rewrite history. I'm not a PhD, and if I were to pursue a PhD, I'd need university and academic mentors who supported the research. Most experts on the discovery of America have invested their lives and careers documenting a different view, a Eurocentric view.

It wasn't always that way, though. I have seen copies of US history textbooks from around 1905, which say that the Chinese have been in America for at least 1,000 years. So this isn't a new idea. But by around 1910 there were new academic pressures, and then came the Columbus Day national holiday. After that, school kids in the US stopped hearing about Chinese coming to America.

Q: It seems that a lot of Chinese scholars are as reluctant to embrace the idea as US scholars are. Why?

A: There is immense interest here. But it can't be proved, especially with Chinese documents, because, soon after the voyages of Zheng He, there was a tremendous reaction against these outside adventures and the strain such shipbuilding put on the country's economy. Ships, maps, records were all destroyed and China became an inward-looking society for centuries. That's why it's easier to find ancient maps that tell the story in Korea, where they were not destroyed by government order, than it is in China.

Q: The US Library of Congress recently exhibited a famous map made by Matteo Ricci, the Italian Jesuit, which the Library said was the first known map of the Americas with Chinese inscriptions. You challenged that publicly.

A: It was a surprising thing for the Library of Congress to say. Many people doing research in this area have seen older maps of the Americas with Chinese writing. One of them is in the Library of Congress' own collection, though they have yet to validate or disprove its age.

Q: Is this about ethnic bias?

A: Well, it's true that many Western scholars are invested in the history of the European discovery of America. But it may be a matter of money, too. In May 2003, the Library of Congress completed their purchase of the Waldseemuller Map of the world for \$10 million. Five million came from Congress and the other \$5 million from donors. According to their 2003 press release that map was the "first image of the outline of the continents of the world as we know them today — Martin Waldseemuller's monumental 1507 map". That indeed is a beautiful map. However, if the Library of Congress now, only seven years later, admits that any other map that shows the American continents predates the Waldseemuller, then perhaps Congress and the donors who helped purchase the Waldseemuller will complain their money was misspent.

Many scholars contend that since the Waldseemuller and other European maps showed the Pacific Coast of the Americas before Europeans had been there, that they had to be copied from earlier maps.

Q: People who read your book, your father's book and Gavin Menzies' book can easily be overwhelmed by all of the evidence you cite. But critics contend most of it is circumstantial. Of everything you've seen and learned about, what has been the most convincing evidence for you?

A: DNA evidence, which is quite recent. We've known for a long time that the "Chinese blue spot", which appears on the buttocks of babies and then disappears, is also seen at birth in many Native American communities. Now we know that five distinct genetic markers match ancient Chinese with modern Native Americans. That's evidence that you can take to court and win.

Nailing their colors to the mast

The treasure trove of seafaring knowledge amassed by the Chinese over the centuries is at the heart of a debate over the extent of their ancient voyages, **Mike Peters** reports

A bright-eyed, middle-aged woman from the state of Virginia, United States, sits waiting for her next interview in a Lido-area hotel lobby. She's a retired social worker, a no-nonsense lady who speaks quietly and deliberately. But she is in town to help answer the question: Did medieval Chinese navigators reach the Americas years before Christopher Columbus? Just a few years ago, Charlotte Harris Rees started thinking that her late father might have held the key to one of history's great mysteries.

"Few people expect ever to own documents that could change world history," Harris writes in her 2008 book, *Secret Maps of the Ancient World*, "and neither did we. Yet for decades, under my brother's bed, lay ancient Asian maps that we, our father's seven children, inherited from him. Some believe that they may contain a secret of the ancient world."

That possibility brought Rees to Asia this month for two weeks of conferences and speeches. Her first stop focused on Zheng He (1371-1435), the 15th-century Chinese admiral who was dispatched by Emperor Zhu Di to "proceed all the way to the end of the Earth".

An international conference this week in Malaka, Malaysia — a seafarer's crossroads for centuries that was an important base for Zheng He — explored questions about Africa. Zheng certainly got there, but exactly where and the extent of his fleet's settlements and activities have engaged curious scholars for centuries.

The question that excites Rees, however, is whether Zheng He — and perhaps his Chinese predecessors — sailed to America as well.

Academics have batted around that idea for centuries, but it wasn't until Gavin Menzies published his bestselling book, *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*, eight years ago that the debate became an international firestorm. One of the sparks landed on Rees, who read *1421* with amazement and realized that the author was trying to connect the same dots her father had followed in his research.

"When I was a social worker straight out of college, many of my clients in Oklahoma were American Indians who looked very Asian to me," she says

today. "But the idea of Chinese coming to America 4,200 years ago in boats sounded pretty far-fetched then."

But her father, Hendon M Harris Jr, a child of Christian missionaries who worked in several regions of China, was fascinated by the possibility. He picked up references to ancient Chinese navigators from several sources, including the ancient classic *Shan Hai Jing* (Collection of the Mountains and Seas), said to have been written in 2,200 BC and quoted in Chinese history and literature ever since.

The *Shan Hai Jing* tells of Chinese travel to the four corners of the earth, says Rees, "including a beautiful land to the east of China named Fu Sang."

Then one day in 1972, Harris was browsing in an antique shop in Shouth Korea, looking for gifts to take home to his family in the United States. He was examining the wares on display when the shopkeeper said, "I have a map in the back. Would you like to see that?"

"Father wasn't really into collecting maps — not then! — but he said, 'Yes,'" the daughter says. And when the map was spread out, as he recounted to his children years later, "he had to sit down because he felt himself shaking all over."

What Harris saw was a world map block-printed in an ancient Shang (16th century to 11th century BC) Chinese style, with China at the center and a circular continent looping around the edges of the page. He immediately related this to the Fu Sang of the *Shan Hai Jing*. In subsequent years Harris found copies of similar maps in the collections of museums and universities.

However, opinion is divided over the identity of Fu Sang, many believe it refers to somewhere in America;



Dr Hendon M Harris, Jr.

IF YOU GO

Charlotte Harris Rees will speak about her research at two public forums in Beijing:

- Today, July 9, 9-11 am, National Library of China
- Monday, July 19, Tsinghua University, 9-11 am; Rees will repeat the presentation she made at the International Zheng He conference in Malaysia. Two other presenters from that conference will also speak.

while others claim it is more likely to be Japan.

A year later, Harris wrote *The Asiatic Fathers of America: Chinese Discovery and Colonization of Ancient America*. It got some notice in academic circles, but it was never the pop-culture phenomenon of *1421*, though its premise was much more controversial.

For while Menzies' book credits the voyages of Zheng He and the admirals

under him with the discovery of the world beyond China, Harris argues that Zheng He set sail with maps made from information acquired hundreds, even thousands of years earlier.

Charlotte Harris Rees finds that argument persuasive. Her speech in Malaka this week was titled *Zheng He's Inheritance*, and she told her audience that "starting a study of Chinese sea travel with Zheng He is like beginning a study of space travel with a trip to Mars."

Chinese seafaring was refined over centuries, she believes. "Zheng He could not have been as successful as he was, without the treasure trove of knowledge and invention amassed by the Chinese over many years of sea travel."

An illustration from the July 2005 issue of *National Geographic* compares Zheng He's largest ships to European vessels of the same era. The article contends that the Chinese admiral's fleet contained up to 62 *baochuan*, or treasure ships, that measured 122 m by 52 m.

"You could fit all of Columbus' ships and all of Vasco da Gama's on a single deck of a ship that size," Rees says in awe. Rees talks about her father's research today with the passion of a religious convert. She talks of ancient Chinese shipwrecks off the US Pacific coast. Of maps Columbus and Magellan are said to have used on their voyages. Of DNA testing on Native Americans, with undisputed links to ancient Chinese.

So is she convinced that Chinese adventurers, not Columbus, "discovered America"?

"I don't pretend to know the answers," she says, smiling. "But as we find more and more evidence, I think we have to keep trying to put it together until we do know."



Charlotte Harris Rees in Beijing.

MIKE PETERS / CHINA DAILY