

THE SAN ON MAP OF MGR. VOLONTERI*

On the Centenary of the Copy in the R.G.S. Collection

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In 1860 a young Italian priest arrived in the British Colony of Hong Kong to join the Mission of the Propaganda in the Roman Catholic Diocese there. Interrupted frequently by ill health, he stayed only a few years in the Colony and in the adjoining Chinese District of San On (Hsin-An Hsien, now known as Bau-An Hsien) in the Province of Kwangtung, in preparation for a later distinguished career in northern China. Compared with those long years of successful missionary work in the capacity of Bishop of Honan, Fr. Simeone Volonteri's early efforts were little remembered and his biographer devoted only a small section in an introductory chapter to the description of his labours in Hong Kong and its vicinity.

Padre Ho, a name derived from the transliteration in the local dialect of the first syllable of his surname, was a well-liked priest among the Hakka rice farmers in the District. He was a man of tremendous zeal and was reputed to have converted an entire community on an island off the coast and nine other villages to the Catholic faith. His youthful keenness and his love of the country and the people led him, together with his interpreter and colleague, over land and water to almost every settlement in the District. A most remarkable fruit of his four years' professional labour was undoubtedly the San On District Map 'drawn from actual observations', a frequently consulted historical and geographical document for those interested in the area, especially of the period before the New Territories were leased to Britain in 1898. However, his modesty dissuaded him from acknowledging directly on the map his due share of the credit in bringing to the public this 'first and only map hitherto published'. Within two years of

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its appearance, two copies of this significant contribution to the geographical world were presented to the Society by J. L. Southey in 1868, but for a century the authorship and the identity of this 'Italian missionary of the Propaganda' remained unknown.

Considering the difficulties presented by the rugged terrain and the unsettled times under which the observations were made, the map has a remarkable degree of accuracy and contains a wealth of information. Although it cannot be ascertained whether Mgr. Volonteri had received any cartographic training, either before or after he entered the priesthood, the map displays no sign of amateurism and, indeed, it won several enviable awards in various European exhibitions, including the Milan Cartographic Exhibition of 1894, in the years immediately following its appearance. Other things apart, the fact that it is probably the first ever bilingual map of its kind must place it in a class of its own.

There are several features of the map that merit close attention. The longitudes shown are reasonably accurate, but the latitudes are some 2 minutes north of their true positions. Apparently Mgr. Volonteri did not make the actual measurements himself, but had copied the grid from a previously existing source. It would be an impossible task to determine which particular version he adopted but it is fairly certain that it had not originated from British sources, for an official map of Hong Kong Island published twenty years earlier by the Government had the longitudes and latitudes in their correct positions. Naval charts might well have been consulted in the process of plotting the coastline because of the inclusion on the map of the depths of water — information which would obviously be of little relevance to the priest who must have compiled the map for some utilitarian purposes. The quality of the coastline has a great variation in accuracy. In spite of the highly irregular coast due to submergence, Mirs Bay, Tolo Harbour, Tide Cove, Hebe Haven and the eastern approaches of Victoria Harbour are not only packed with sounding records but are also depicted accurately down to the uninhabited islets. On the other hand, for the remainder of the map, the accuracy of the coastline is most disappointing. There could be two possible explanations for this. It was either that coastal charting was still in progress and had not yet covered the western parts or that Fr. Volonteri might have improved on an outline from an earlier smaller-scale map for the areas with which he

was most familiar. In view of the fact that the water bodies were referred to by their English names and unaccompanied by their equivalent in Chinese, the former explanation seems more probable. There is however, no ready means of establishing how much existing information was available to him at the time, and the answer must await further research into the progress of the charting, the circumstances under which Volonteri worked and the amount of cooperation rendered him by the authorities.

Fr. Volonteri attempted to portray the relief of the area in order to bring out the relative location of the settlements. It has been written by his biographer, Lozza, that 'he reconnoitred on foot, villages, small towns, plains and mountains in order to get to know in exactitude the true distances between one place and another, and to give maximum precision to the map'. His apparent ineptitude in relief representation by contours was a far cry from the close match between the elevations he recorded and the actual surveyed heights. The 'contours' shown on the map are certainly not lines linking up points of equal height nor are they spaced out at regular intervals. Far from being concentric rings, as contour lines should be, they are often merely broken arcs or even continuous spirals. In areas with no prominent heights, groups of these lines exhibit a scalar pattern and wherever a major river valley occurs, there is a conspicuous lack of any elevation representation.

Perhaps one should not be too critical of the map on cartographic and technical grounds, for the greatest contribution of Fr. Volonteri's effort lies in making available a wide range of information on the settlement pattern in San On. In no way had the Catholic priest allowed his religious belief to influence the features he selected for recording on the map. Apart from the obvious inclusion of the Roman Catholic Chapels, of which there were only five in the multitude of settlements, he also truthfully recorded the locations of 'pagodas (temples) of some consideration'. Amongst the settlements he noted, he made a clear distinction between their sizes and importance, ranging from Mandarin Residences, large and small market towns of his day to villages, some of which could not have contained more than ten families in the 1860's. He also indicated all the important tracks and mountain passes, vital for communication between the major towns and village groups.

Considering that the mapping was done during his brief sojourn in the District, in the little time which he could devote to perform this immense task of recording over 900 settlements spreading over an area of some 750 square miles under personal and environmental conditions which were far from congenial, Fr. Volonteri deserves the admiration of all those who have recourse to the document. It is worth noting that the number of 368 villages and market towns shown in that part of San On which became British 30 years later is fairly consistent with the official figure of 416 for 1898. The information on the settlement pattern was certainly derived from his personal knowledge and the Chinese script was probably provided by his local collaborator, Don Andrea Maria Liang, who accompanied him on practically all his journeys in San On. Herein lie also the sources of weakness of the map: the vital time element and the joint authorship.

The most immediately evident aspect of the discrepancies is the number of villages on both sides of the San On border which had their locations clearly marked but remained unnamed in either language. These settlements have in common that they are situated in the remote interior or on the off-shore islands. It may well be that Fr. Volonteri would have liked more time in the District to complete the work he had so meticulously undertaken, but his health deteriorated and, furthermore, he was under the impression that he would soon be assigned to a new post under the existing circumstances of shortage of personnel in other mission stations in China. He was understandably anxious to see the map engraved in Leipzig prior to his departure from the area. The appearance on the map of these unidentified villages may lead one to suspect legitimately that there could well be many more sites which are not even marked with a symbol. This is almost certainly the case with Lantau Island. Travelling in San On in his day was an arduous and time-consuming business, as Stewart Lockhart's description of the conditions thirty years hence was to reveal. There is no doubt that the work was finished in haste for on several occasions errors made in the Chinese characters were not properly erased but were merely printed over. Fr. Volonteri, with his knowledge of the Chinese written language, must have noticed these incongruities and, except for shortage of time, he would not have sent the manuscript to the engraver with such a lack of polish.

The pattern of settlement presented by the map must be treated with some caution, for there is a distinct difference in the degree of complexity between the two portions divided roughly by an imaginary line running from the middle of the top margin south-westwards to the bottom edge. To the east of this divide practically all the villages known to have been in existence at that time were accurately located and named, but on the other side of the line, the settlements were under-represented and the locations of those actually cited were rather inaccurately plotted. Furthermore, some six to eight miles of the north-western boundary with Tung Kun District is conspicuously missing, but it does not seem that any part of San On lies beyond the margins of the map. The distortion of the coastline and the lack of relief contrasts on which Volonteri must have based his observations, were part of the reason for the imprecision, but the full explanation for the omission of many village sites in western San On must be sought elsewhere.

Although there was a larger number of small villages in the eastern peninsula, the concentration of population was definitely in the more prosperous and long established western plains. The broad valleys of the rivers emptying into Deep Bay were settled by the Cantonese Tang clan as early as the tenth century, while the hilly tracts of the east had to wait a couple of centuries for the arrival of the Hakkas. Several farming communities on the large island of Nam Tao (Lantau) have a history dating back to the Ming and even to the Sung Dynasty, but none of these were recorded on the map. There are two possible explanations which may account for this unfortunate lack of information in western San On. The first must be that Volonteri, like his successors, found that the Hakkas were, on the whole, more receptive to Christianity than were the more wealthy and tradition-bound Cantonese and hence a concentration of missionary efforts on these communities in the early days. In view of the Tai Ping Rebellion (1850-64), with its religious and ethnic implications, the timing of Volonteri's arrival and survey work was certainly not the most opportune. He would therefore have spent more time with the Hakkas and have become more familiar with the areas around the five strategically located Roman Catholic churches in the eastern section. The result was that his knowledge of the remainder of the district did not seem to have extended far beyond

the immediate vicinity of the well recognized market towns. The other important factor is probably related to the state of law and order in some of the outlying areas during this period of China's internal upheaval. The complacent mandarin in San On Un would most likely have left Lantau and its adjacent islands to the unlawful elements and concentrated instead on the places with overland contact. In view of the notorious history of piracy on these islands, which were ideally situated in relation to the trade routes focusing on and weaving between the flourishing ports of Portuguese Macau, British Victoria and Chinese Canton, the officials in Nam-tau-shing, the administrative seat of San On district, would have been unable to render the priest much protection had he ventured to these parts. Volonteri, however, was not wanting in courage and in spirit of adventure, but the pirates of the Pearl River estuary were very different men from those he encountered in Swabue, on whom he had written, 'the pirates seem to fear the humble priest and not the priest the pirates; they make some rare appearances but the presence of the padre impels them to retreat at once'. How far this can account for the comparatively poor outline and incorrect location of the off-shore islands as well as for the lack of information on the settlements there must await fresh materials on Volonteri's work in San On, but the villagers on Lantau vouchsafed to me that in the time of their forefathers, piracy, preying on ships and peasants alike, was a greater hazard to the population than the vagrant weather conditions.

Finally, the bilingual feature of the map must be noted. It is apparent that the document was intended primarily for English-speaking users. As there are several current systems of transliteration, in the present case the one based on Williams' Dictionary, the inclusion of the original Chinese names adds to the work that rare, but highly desirable, quality of precision and refinement. In a way, the document is simultaneously a map and a gazetteer of the District. The degree of cooperation between Volonteri and Liang was remarkable and out of the hundreds of villages cited bilingually there was not a single occasion where the name in one language did not correspond to the other. This is probably due to Fr. Volonteri's ability to read, perhaps not so much as to write presentably, the Chinese script which enabled him to check every detail. Credit should also go to his colleague for juxtaposing

the characters in such a way that ambiguity or overcrowding was successfully avoided. However, Liang's commendable standard of calligraphy was not matched by his ability to translate and hence the references to the lead mine, Canton River and 'As far to Canton' were expressed only in English. Was it the intention of Volonteri that these should remain so, or had he overlooked these particular items? This is but a trival point compared with the fact that in at least three cases the local place-names recorded in English were neglected by the Chinese scribe who, in turn, independently inserted more than twenty references to villages, islands and mountains, unaccompanied by their transliterations. It is of interest to note that practically all these incongruities, like the others mentioned earlier, occurred in western San On, the area which must have been less familiar to both partners.

It is not the intention of this introduction to the Map of the San On District to belittle in any way the splendid effort and significant contribution of Mgr. Volonteri, but it is hoped that by pointing out some of the limitations in the information, the value of this magnificent piece of work as a fundamental document in the study of the history and geography of San On could be enhanced.

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