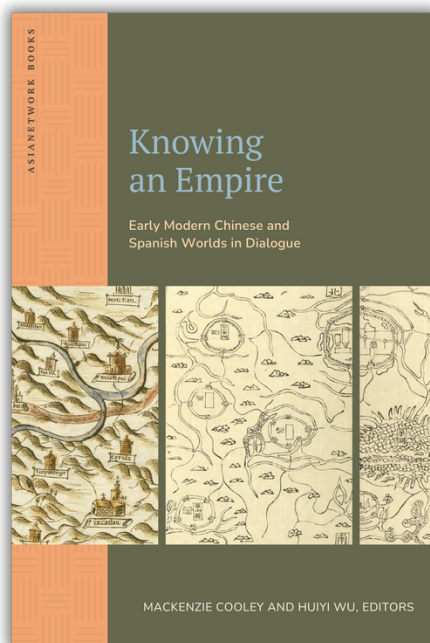




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KNOWING AN EMPIRE

Early Modern Chinese and Spanish Worlds in Dialogue

Edited by Mackenzie Cooley & Huiyi Wu

Knowing an Empire unveils how these two vast empires, separated by thousands of miles, developed comparable systems to gather, order, and wield knowledge about their local worlds in the process of empire-building. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, officials in both empires compiled large quantities of structured data on the climate, topography, natural products, languages, religions, and more of their locales, creating a vision of their empires as diverse yet unified. Through a new methodology of “juxtapositional comparison,” the book reads the *difangzhi* 地方志 (local gazetteers) of China and the *relaciones geográficas* of the Spanish world in parallel.

Knowing an Empire does not see the conveyance of information across an empire as a top-down process with an active center as a knowledge-maker. Instead, it amplifies a blend of voices that speak as much to imperial bureaucracy as to the rich local and Indigenous cultures, revealing these two early modern empires as diverse polities whose equilibria were constantly rebalanced among local powers. Comprised of 18 chapters, this edited collection reflects on the historical evolution and inner structures of the imperial epistemologies, as well as the many ways historians today read *difangzhi* and *relaciones geográficas* to understand the spatial, natural, and social order in both the Chinese and the Spanish empires. At once a comparative and a connected history, it places Chinese and Spanish imperial knowledge in the globalizing early modern world, highlighting the migration of people, goods, and ideas and revealing how these wide-ranging influences are reflected—or not—in the *difangzhi* and the *relaciones*. The book concludes by broadening our scope beyond China and Spain to reflect how other early modern empires, such as the Portuguese, failed to develop such systematized imperial genres.

With contributions from leading scholars across Latin American and Asian Studies, this book synthesizes political, environmental, and socio-economic history with historical anthropology to highlight parallel governance and knowledge structures. The contributors challenge conventional binaries of Western versus Eastern, and colonial versus non-colonial, presenting a nuanced perspective of early modern empires as dynamic, interconnected entities through the shared challenges of scale, diversity, and increasing globalization. Through these dialogues, *Knowing an Empire* illuminates the complex entanglement of ruling and understanding. This groundbreaking collection offers a highly innovative and dialogic approach to comparative studies of empires, with major implications for Asian, European, Latin American, transnational, and global history.



“The authors of this edited volume explore the intriguing parallels between two distinct imperial knowledge systems: the *relaciones geográficas* of Spain and the *difangzhi*, or local gazetteers, of China. This timely and indispensable comparative study examines how both empires aimed to systematize, centralize, and control information about their vast territories through independently developed standardized questionnaires and instructions for compiling local gazetteers.”

—Antonio Barrera-Osorio, Colgate University