Outside the southern and northern city walls of Old Beijing, just slightly to the east of the central axis of the city, stand the Temple of Heaven and the Temple of Earth. The Temple of Heaven, located on the southern or the yang side, centers on the Altar of the Circular Mount (huanqiu tan 圜丘壇). The altar consists of three levels, each circular in shape, and the top level is a platform with a single circular piece of stone in the middle, symbolizing the “heart of Heaven.” The Temple of Earth, located on the northern or the yin side, centers on the Altar of the Square Pond (fangze tan 方澤壇), so named because it is a square platform surrounded by a moat that was flooded with water when sacrificial rituals were performed in the temple.

Built in 1420 and 1530, respectively, the Temples of Heaven and Earth were the surviving examples of many such structures that had served as the sites for two of the most important state ritual sacrifices personally performed by the emperor in imperial China. Every year on the winter solstice, the moment marking the rise of the yang cosmic force, the Son of Heaven ritually bathed, fasted, and stepped onto the Altar of the Circular Mount to make thanksgiving offerings and renew his solemn vows to Heaven. On the summer solstice, the moment marking the ascent of the yin cosmic force, he prostrated at the Altar of the Square Pond, expressing his gratitude and veneration to Earth and praying for its continual blessing. An elaborate symbolism guided the choice of the time for the sacrifices, the colors and shapes of ritual implements to be used, the ritual music to be played in the background, and above all, the design of the two altars where these rituals were to take place. Such symbolism encapsulated the Confucian vision of the sovereign being at the apex of the human community and the center of the universe. Year after year, through these rituals, he reconnected humanity with Heaven and Earth and reestablished the balance between the yin and yang forces in nature.¹

¹ These rituals are described in much detail in Richard J. Smith, China's Cultural Heritage: The Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912 (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview 1983/1994), 157–160. For an in-depth examination of this subject, see Angela Zito, Of Body and Brush: Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance in Eighteenth-Century China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), especially Chap. 5. I wish to thank Prof. Dr. Sung Yong Kang, Editor of the Horizons: Seoul Journal of Humanities, for kindly granting me his permission to incorporate into the present chapter some of the arguments and material from my article “Matteo Ricci’s World Maps in Late Ming Discourse of Exotica,” Horizons 1, no. 2 (December 2010): 215–250.
These two altars captured an understanding of what the heavens and the earth looked like in premodern China: the heavens were circular in shape, and the earth was a square space bounded by the Four Seas (Sihai 四海). According to a long-held tradition among modern scholars, this vision of the cosmos had an archaic origin in Chinese history going back to time immemorial. However, in his recent three-volume work, *In and Outside the Square*, John C. Didier has challenged this monolithic view of ancient Chinese cosmology. He argues that the earliest identifiable Chinese cosmography, that of the Shang (ca. seventeenth–eleventh centuries BCE) and the Zhou (ca. eleventh century–256 BCE), held both the heavens and the earth to be circular. It was not until the period from 200 to 700 CE that the so-called Round-Heaven-and-Square-Earth (tianyuan defang 天圓地方) model began to crystallize and eventually gain dominance in Chinese thought. Didier identifies the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE), an era of intensive empire-building, as a crucial period for the germination of this new notion of a square earth. Among the several factors that he suggests were responsible for this new idea is the Han imperial scholars’ effort to develop an “emperor-/empire-centered philosophy of legitimacy.” In other words, the theory of a square earth was, to a great extent, invented as part of an imperial ideology that exalted one human center above all others.

Although some of the details of Didier’s proposal for a paradigmatic shift in premodern Chinese cosmological vision of the earth may be open to debate,

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5 I adopt a significantly earlier date—the end of the Spring and Autumn (771–476 BCE) and the early Warring States (475–221 BCE) period—for the emergence of the Round-Heaven-and-Square-Earth cosmology. See the third and fourth sections of Chapter 3 below and the beginning of Chapter 4.