CHAPTER 4

The Introduction and Refashioning of the Terraqueous Globe

The Jesuit missionaries’ introduction of the notion of the terraqueous globe during the late sixteenth and the seventeenth century sparked a series of new and sustained cosmological discourses among Chinese intellectuals of the late Ming and early Qing. These discourses focused on the earth’s shape, its relation to the sea, its place in the cosmos, and the dynamics that sustain it in that place. The idea of a flat and square earth, to which Chinese geopolitical and cosmological discourses had for the most part implicitly or explicitly subscribed, came to be intensely reexamined in light of this new notion.

Like the original European proponents and defenders of the notion of the terraqueous globe in the early sixteenth century, the Jesuits who now joined Matteo Ricci in promoting this notion to their Chinese audience not only resorted to mathematical and philosophical reasoning but called on European explorers’ and travelers’ reports of their overseas experiences, as well as on their own personal observations made during their maritime voyages to China. In these Jesuit narratives, cosmological and maritime discourses on the earth converged and reinforced each other. For the Chinese intellectuals who took a positive interest in this Jesuit literature, this consistency was compelling. It seemed to them that the time had arrived to explore alternatives to the theory of a spherical heaven and a square earth.

Like their Renaissance counterparts of the preceding decades who were confronted by various anomalies borne of the New World discoveries, these Chinese scholars first turned to their own ancient texts. The theory of a spherical heaven and square earth had abundant textual basis in classical literature, some of which, such as the Confucian classic Book of Changes and the “Tribute of Yu” (Yugong) chapter in the Book of Documents, claimed great antiquity. But just how ancient was this theory? When Ricci and other Jesuits insinuated their notion of the terraqueous globe into the existing Chinese textual traditions by borrowing certain ancient Chinese terms and metaphors and reinterpreting others, another horizon of meaning in these ancient texts was suddenly opened up. The apparent textual edifice on which the model of a flat and square earth was built began to show cracks. A new, “global” image of the earth began to reveal itself. To interested Chinese scholars, it became evident that
such an image had already been there in these same ancient texts, awaiting their discovery.

Jesuit Introduction of the Notion of the Terraqueous Globe

The first Jesuits to arrive in China, Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci, had begun to introduce the notion of the globe as early as 1584. In that year, Ricci created his first Chinese world maps representing the earth as a sphere. Ruggieri, meanwhile, published the first Chinese catechism, *The Veritable Record of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shengjiao shilu* 天主聖教實錄, 1584). In this book, he gives the following exposition of Genesis, about the creation of earth and water:

On the first day, four things were created. The first is the earth. The earth is very large, with a circumference of 90,000 里. Located in the core of the earth is Hell. The earth’s substance is heavier than water; therefore it lies underneath water, and water floats above the earth. The second thing created is water on earth. Water surrounds the earth much like the egg-white enwraps the yolk. And the earth resides under the water like the yolk of an egg. …On the third day, the Lord of Heaven created land for humans and animals to live on. At the time, earth and water were in a chaos. He raised part of the earth higher up to become mountains, so that people besieged by water would have a place to dwell on. He deepened part of the earth to make rivers and seas, so that the chaotic waters could be conducted away from the ground.1 (emphasis added)

Here Ruggieri uses the egg-yolk metaphor to describe the relationship between water and earth according to the original Aristotelian cosmic model, namely, as two elemental spheres stacked on each other. It is not clear, however, whether or not he was intentionally borrowing this metaphor from a Chinese

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1 Michele Ruggieri, *Tianzhu shengjiao shilu* (天主聖教實錄 The Veritable Record of the Lord of Heaven), in *tdwxxb*, vol. 2: 782–785. The passage cited above comes from the edition revised by Manuel Dias, Jr. (Yang Manuo 陽瑪諾, 1574–1659), Gaspar Ferreira (Fei Qigui 費奇規, 1571–1649), and João Monteiro (Meng Ruwang 孟儒望, 1602–1648) with the approval of Francisco Furtado (Fu Fanji 傅汎際, 1589–1653), during the years when Furtado served as Vice-Provincial of the mission to China (1635–1641 and 1646–1647). The earliest edition of this text that I consulted, held at ARSI, states that the earth’s circumference is more than 72,000 里 (see Jap Sin 1 189, 12b). The smaller figure was also adopted by Ricci until 1600. See Chapter 2 above, note 45.