CHAPTER 5

Translating the Four Seas across Space and Time

The introduction and recontextualization of the notion of the terraqueous globe in the late Ming and early Qing coincided with two sets of discourses that both had to do with explicating the meaning of the term “Four Seas.” One was led by the Jesuits, who were in the process of developing a Chinese nomenclature to translate the European names for the seas and oceans established in Renaissance world geography. Pursuant to their general approach of accommodation, the Jesuits did this by partially reworking the preexisting Chinese system of naming the maritime spaces, including the names of the Four Seas employed in the mainstream geographical literature. The other set of discourses arose from Chinese scholars in the field of Yugong studies. Over the course of the seventeenth century, this area of classical scholarship gradually emerged from the geopolitical discourses of the “All under Heaven” tradition and became a field of evidential scholarship in historical geography. A telltale sign of this transformation was that the new Yugong scholars began to comment on the two passages in the “Tribute of Yu” (Yugong) in which the term Sihai (Four Seas) appears with an eye to ascertaining what the term must have meant to the legendary sage-ruler Yu and his people within the realm of historical possibility. Explicitly or implicitly, participants in both discourses were thus rejecting the notion that there are four and only four seas surrounding China, or the earth—in other words, the notion that underlay the literal usage of the term Four Seas.

Very few paper trails link these new discourses on the “Tribute of Yu” to the writings of the Jesuits. Indeed, the earliest work documented here that contributed to their rise was written by Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) before the arrival of the first Jesuits. As detailed below, Li’s attack on the literal interpretation of the term Four Seas in the “Tribute of Yu” was derived in part from personal knowledge about the global maritime trade acquired during childhood, when he lived near the southeastern coast in Fujian, and also during his years of official appointment near the Ming empire’s southwestern frontier in Yunnan in the early Wanli reign (1573–1620). Furthermore, despite their apparent elision of the fact in their writings, the major evidential scholars of the early Qing, such as Zhu Heling 朱鶴齡 (1606–1683), Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682), and Hu Wei 胡渭 (1633–1714), were linked to the Jesuit discourses through an intricate web of words and social relations. Their consistent rejection of the literal reading of the Four Seas in this classical text, in contrast to the stance of
earlier Yugong scholars such as Cheng Dachang, stemmed from the same
global context and the same ideological impulse that had led Xiong Mingyu,
Mei Wending, and others to “discover” the idea of the globe and a perfect
calendrical science in ancient Chinese texts (as discussed in Chapter 4).

A distinct thematic continuity runs through the works of the major partici-
pants of these discourses, whose lives were otherwise shaped by vastly differ-
ent socio-historical circumstances in the early Wanli era, during the cataclysmic
Ming-Qing transition, and in the early years of the Kangxi reign. This indispu-
table continuity calls into question some of the long-established characteriza-
tions of the Ming-Qing divide in Chinese intellectual history. It compels us to
take seriously the early Chinese encounters with Jesuit science and the broader
maritime context within which they occurred—namely, the arrival of a new
phase of global exchange in the Age of Discovery that stretched across the
Ming-Qing divide—as yet another major historical setting for the develop-
ment of Chinese thought in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth century.

Defining the Four Seas in Jesuit Hydrographic Nomenclature

The major participants in the Jesuit discourses on the Four Seas were Matteo
Ricci, Giulio Aleni, and Ferdinand Verbiest. Ricci was the pioneer among them,
and his major works in this area, his Chinese world maps, were tremendously
popular among Chinese scholars during his lifetime. But it was Aleni whose
writings on this topic, particularly his *Records of Lands outside the Jurisdiction
of the Imperial Geographer* (Zhifang waiji, 1623), reached the widest Chinese
readership across several generations, well into the early and mid-Qing. Aleni’s
influence on his Chinese readers was mirrored by his influence on his Jesuit
successors: the major Jesuit work in world geography published after his life-
time, Verbiest’s *Illustrated Account of the Geography of the World* (Kunyu
tushuo, 1674), reproduced many sections in their entirety from Aleni’s text,
including those pertaining to maritime place names. For these reasons, the
following discussion focuses on Ricci and Aleni.

As noted in Chapter 2, Ricci was the first Jesuit to craft a basic Chinese
vocabulary for Renaissance world geographical concepts such as those of the
terrestrial sphere (*diqiu* 地球) and the five continents (*wudazhou* 五大州), as
well as for names of the continents, countries, major landmarks, and various
seas and oceans. Most of the maritime place names he supplied on his
“Complete Geographical Map of Ten Thousand Countries” (Kunyu wanguo
quantu, 1602) were translations or transliterations of their European counter-
parts, but some were adapted or created anew to suit Chinese conventions