Chapter 3

The Hundred Schools of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Period, II (ca. 6th to 3rd Century BCE)

1. Warring States Hundred Schools Contend, I: Cosmic Space and Time

The Book of Master Shi (Shizi) text says that “Heaven and Earth and the four squares are called yu (宇); from ancient time to today is called zhou (宙).” The ancient Chinese concept of the “cosmos” (yuzhou, from yu + zhou) includes both time and space. We can certainly believe that the thinkers of the Warring States period intensely pondered the following questions: What is the nature of Heaven (or “the sky”) above our heads? What is the shape of the Earth we walk on? Where is the origin of time? How were Heaven, Earth and the Human formed in that distant beginning?

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In the Warring States period, it was a view of the cosmos similar to the later “vault of Heaven” (gaitian shuo) theory that was most likely absolutely dominant. The ancient Chinese noticed the visible movement of celestial bodies very early on. Living in the northern hemisphere, they could very easily see from the rotation of the earth that the dome of the sky (tianqiong) moved from east to west. Owing to the earth’s rotation around the central axes of the north and south poles, exact north seemed to be a motionless place like an axle on a wheel. All of the stars and the sun and moon appeared to rotate around this stationary point, the north pole. When the Analects (“Wei Zheng” 2.1) says that “the Pole Star remains in its place while all the myriad stars do homage around it,” this is what it means. In the minds of the ancient Chinese, Heaven was round like a conical bamboo hat covering the earth below. Because the north pole never moved, its spatial position occupied the axis between Heaven and Earth and had no point of symmetry, and it also transcended the temporal position that was marked by sunrise and sunset; for this reason, it was viewed as the center of Heaven and it occupied the highest position as the “One.” Furthermore, the handle of the Big Dipper (beidou) rotated following the seasons and was believed to announce the “Will of Heaven” that controlled the

1 Shizi, j. xia, esez, 373.
changes of seasons and organized time in the human world. During a single year, the handle of the Big Dipper pointed in the four directions of east, south, west and north, and each of them had their own sacred symbolic spirit—the Azure Dragon (East), Vermilion Bird (South), White Tiger (West) and Black Tortoise (or Warrior, North)—their symbolic colors of azure, vermilion, white, black and later yellow, to accord with the Five Phases, and their corresponding seasons of spring, summer, autumn and winter. The ancient Chinese used the regular movements of the celestial bodies and the stellar or planetary orbits to divide the years, season, months, solar periods (jieqi 齊氣), days and hours, and this transformed spatial movements into temporal changes.

Through continuous association, migration and warfare, the ancient Chinese gradually understood the earth they lived on. They imagined it to be formed in the shape of a large character jing 井 for “well.” This very early on probably led them to the idea that there were “nine continents” (jiuzhou 九州) since the character for “well” has nine spaces. Although this division into nine continents was derived from creative imagination, it nevertheless reflected the ancient Chinese understanding of “all under Heaven.” The clockwise north-east-south-west rotation of earth particularly corresponded to the apparent leftward rotation of the heavenly path (tiandao zuoxuan, 天道左旋), and this further demonstrated the ancient Chinese understanding of “all under Heaven.” The ancient Chinese understanding of Heaven and observations of Heaven. In both, they sought mutual correspondence. Although the various contemporary Regional States might have had slightly different understandings of all under Heaven, they all had the same understanding and conception of the Earth. They all took Earth and Heaven to be mutually corresponding, and imagined an outwardly expanding space with a precise order and both a center and borders. The “five zones” (wufu 五服) and the “nine zones” (jiufu 九服) mentioned in the “Tribute of Yu” (Yu Gong) chapter in the Book of Documents, the “Discourses of Zhou, I” (Zhouyu shang) chapter of the Discourses of the States and the “Summer Officials: Map and Tribute Official” (Xiaguan, Zhifang shi) in the Rites of Zhou, are all basically representations of the picture of the world held in the minds of the people of that age. These assumptions about all under Heaven led the people of the Warring States period to continue the general Shang and Zhou dynasty traditional idea of the Earth—that it had a center and four or eight directions in the shape of the character hui 回 for “return.” The great square of the earth was composed of four or eight directions, and these four or eight directions each had its own associated symbolic spirit, season and color. In this way, Earth and Heaven had identical structures, interconnected symbols and relationships of correspondence.