Paper

Taoist Mountain Temples: Complementary, Conflicting, and Congruent Aspects of Sacred Mountains

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Abstract
This paper presents the cultural-religious beliefs and sacred geographies that distinguish Taoist mountain temples. It challenges western-centric scholarship on sacred mountains, which typically present unified conceptualizations regarding their symbolism and significance. Instead, predominant characterizations and distinctions in western historiography will be contrasted with the unique aspects of Taoist mountain temples, and their contradictions and congruencies illustrated by select western and eastern sacred, scholarly, and literary sources. The case study of Mount Wudang (Wudangshan), in Hubei Province, illustrates the paper's primary arguments. The conclusion suggests that Taoist sites such as Mount Wudang evidence unique aspects of sacred places and architecture.

Background

You ask why I choose to live among the green hills;
I smile without answering, my heart at peace.
Peach Blossoms float away with the stream;
There are heavens and earths beyond the world of men.[1] Li Bai (701-762)

Mountains as portentous settings for transcendence have figured prominently in western European and Chinese religious, philosophical, and literary texts. In the West, mountains and mountainous geographies were often believed to be the home of the gods, as in Mount Olympus, or the place where the divine might be encountered, as at Mount Sinai. They could also be settings for sacred events, such as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and Muhammad's sanctuary on Mount Hino. At times, strategic promontories became sacred settings, as found at the Acropolis and Masada. There is also the much-referenced attribution of sacred architecture as a recreation of sacred mountains, such as the Sumerian ziggurat at Ur and the dynastic pyramids of Egypt. There are also traditions of locating monasteries in remote mountainous areas including sites such as Mount Athos and Saint Catharine's monasteries.

These, and other examples, have often led scholars of sacred architecture to conclude that mountains where uniformly believed to be sacred places. However, it is pertinent to consider that the veneration of mountains is far from a unified history. For example, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans generally considered mountains to be, at least, valueless for human production and advancement, at most, dangerous and threatening. According to Robert Macfarlane, "Mountains, nature's toughest productions, were not only agriculturally intractable, they were also aesthetically repellent; it was felt that their irregular and gargantuan outlines upset the natural spirit-level of the mind."[2] However, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the value of climbing mountains, and the creation of traditions of mountaineering, first appeared. Edmund Burke's short essay on the energizing and ennobling effects of places of grandeur and danger contributed to the fascination with mountains,[3] as did Romantic writers who presented the experience of the beauty of wild landscapes as spiritually productive. However, perhaps more dominant was the positioning of mountain expeditions as scientific explorations that promised new knowledge on the geologic history and composition of the earth. Later, adventurous

expeditions to the highest peaks, and the personal value of wilderness experiences, resulted in the positive position mountains occupy in contemporary culture.

In China one finds a different history regarding cultural and religious attributions, beliefs, and writings on mountains and, in particular, their sacred qualities. According to James Robson, "Throughout Chinese history, the religious, cultural, and political landscapes have accorded mountains – both real and imagined – a major role."[4] However, as Robson also observes, Chinese culture at one time considered mountains to be fearful places with wild, threatening landscapes inhabited by dangerous animals and demons. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, Chinese literature often depicted mountains as "landscapes of fear."[5] However, beginning in the third century CE, mountains were more often depicted as religiously propitious settings, and the abodes of sages and immortals. Traditionally mountains were conceived as beneficent places where rivers emerged to nourish the fields of villages below, which often had temples to the mountain gods. Wei-Cheng Lin argues, "In ancient China, mountains were places of power, full of potencies and occult potentialities, and throughout China's history, it was a fundamental belief that mountains were breathing and moving, possessing animated and living forces according to none but the spiritual."[6] Poets and emperors came to extoll the virtues of mountains, and as early as the T'ang dynasty, scholar-officials retreated to the mountains for philosophical and spiritual motivations.[7] Perhaps equally significant, Chinese art during particular periods was distinguished by its preoccupations with mountainous landscapes.[8]

Taoism

However, it was Taoism and, in particular, venerated Taoist masters, that substantively established the cultural, political, and religious importance of mountains. Taoism, mostly known in the West through the enigmatic *Tao Te Ching* purportedly written by Lao Tse, is a belief and ritual system indigenous to China. Its earliest history is distinguished by eremitic traditions of ascetics who retired to mountain hermitages for spiritual edification and exploration, and sacred mountains and sacred personages were often closely associated. Originally mountains were places where alchemistic practices using native plants were developed in pursuit of eternal life. Later, the incorporation of the writings of Lao Tse, the adoption of spiritual beings, and the development of metaphysical systems, produced the mature Taoism known today.[9] In Taoism, mountains were the dwellings of the gods but also where humans seeking divinity could spiritually productively dwell.

Taoism may be distinguished by its literary and artistic output, and its prejudicing of individual practices and pursuits of spiritual enlightenment, but it also produced significant monastic architecture. During periods when it enjoyed political and cultural influence and support, monasteries and monastic communities were established throughout China. Subsequently, some locations and monasteries were designated as particularly important. Specifically, the "Five Sacred Peaks" achieved notable, and lasting, significance as Taoist centers: Taishan, in the eastern Shangdong Province, Hengshan, in the northern Shanxi Province, Huashan, in the western Shaanxi Province, Hengshan, in the southern Hunan Province, and Songshan, in the central Henan Province. They are not singular peaks or monasteries, but mountainous geographies organized by a system of sacred mountains and architectural settings. In addition to traditional hermitages, they typically included arduous trails and approach paths, interconnected courtyards entered by prominent gateways, and a variety of shrines dedicated to Taoist deities associated with the site and its settings.

Wudangshan, Hubei Province

Wudang Mountain, in western-central Hubei Province may not be one of the Five Sacred Peaks, but it has long been identified as one of the more important, principally as the place where the monastic martial art of Taichi was invented. Its numerous, and often cloud-sheathed, peaks has a

long history as a sacred setting rich in medicinal plants. Numerous monasteries were built on the slopes and summits of its peaks, each dedicated to particular deities. The ultimate destination is the Golden Summit where the Golden Hall is perched on its 1612m peak, and reached by a steep, winding, and vertiginous path that passes many lesser temples along the way. On some steep slopes temples were perilously constructed. Other important temples were located on lower slopes, such as the Ming Dynasty Fuzhen Palace.

Wudangshan is a sacred geography that defies the conventional characterizations of sacred mountains, and the predominant bifurcation of the sacred and the profane. An etymological root of the Chinese word for mountain, *chan*, is "diffusion," revealing cultural and religious conceptions and beliefs regarding intrinsic qualities of sacred places.[10] These, and other aspects of Wudangshan, suggest unique aspects of sacred places and architecture, and the value of challenging predominant presumptions and incorporating distinctions and differences in culturally and religiously complicated subjects.

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[1] *Poetry and Prose of the Tang and Song*, translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Panda Books, 1984), p. 31.

[2] Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta Books, 2003), pp. 14-15.

[3] William Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas Regarding the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757.

[4] James Robson, *Power of Place: The Religious Landscape of the Southern Sacred Peak* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 17.

[5] Yi-Fu Tuan, Landscapes of Fear (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), p. 73. See also Robson, p. 18.

[6] Wei-Cheng Lin, *Building a Sacred Mountain: The Buddhist Architecture of China's Mount Wutai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), p. 51,

[7] Robson, p. 19.

[8] See Kiyohiko Munakata, *Sacred Mountains in Chinese Art* (Urbana-Champaign, IL: The University of Illinois, 1991).

[9] Qiao Yun, *Taoist Buildings, Ancient Chinese Architecture* (New York: Springer/Wein, 2001) Foreword.

[10] Wei-Cheng Lin, op cit., p. 51.