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**“ENVIRONMENTS” WORLDLY AND OTHER-WORLDLY: WUTAISHAN AND THE
QUESTION OF WHAT MAKES A BUDDHIST MOUNTAIN “SACRED”**

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“Environments” Worldly and Other-Worldly:
Wutaishan and the Question of What Makes a Buddhist Mountain “Sacred”

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Abstract

Using the Chinese Buddhist pilgrimage site of Wutaishan 五台山 as an example, this paper will examine the question of whether or not there are “ecological” implications in the Buddhist tradition’s designation of landscape as “sacred.”

The ample literature on Wutaishan as a sacred Buddhist mountain, covering its long history from the 4th century CE to modern times, abounds in celebrations of the five-terraced mountains as a location made holy chiefly by the presence of the great bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (Wenshu pusa 文殊菩薩). Wutai is held to be his terrestrial abode; it is the prospect of seeing him or otherwise sensing his presence that has drawn pilgrims there in incalculable numbers over the centuries; and it is he who is believed to precipitate the miracles and uncanny events that have always abounded there. One might therefore say (indeed, Buddhists have said) that Mañjuśrī’s presence has altered the very ontology of Wutai, making it a locus of transcendence, a mountain somehow “out of this world” (*lokottara*, *chushijian* 出世間).

However, woven inextricably together with the discourse on Wutai’s otherworldliness is a vigorous strain, perhaps several strains, of ardently expressed appreciation of the “natural” (*lokiya*, *shijian* 世間) wonders of the place — the sheer beauty of its vistas, its bracing climate, its wonderful array of flora and fauna, the purity of its springs and streams, especially the plenteous variety of healing plants and minerals that adorn its slopes, etc. And the pious pilgrims who have flocked to Wutai in hope of encountering Mañjuśrī have also (like pilgrims the world over) always found it possible to combine their explicitly religious activities (prayer, chant, bowing, fasting, meditation, etc.) with the delights of what we might today call an “outdoor holiday” (invigorating exercise, camaraderie, picnicking, escape from routine worldly cares, communing with nature, etc.).

Drawing especially upon a set of texts that might be called the classical Wutai “trilogy” — i.e., the late seventh century “Accounts of the Clear and Cool Mountains” (*Qingliang zhuan* 清涼傳), and the late eleventh century “Expanded Accounts of the Clear and Cool Mountains” (*Guang qingliang zhuan* 廣清涼傳) and “Continued Accounts of the Clear and Cool Mountains” (*Xu qingliang zhuan* 續清涼傳) — as well as on the several Wutai gazetteers (*Qingliang zhi* 清涼志) that were compiled from the 16th through the 20th centuries, this paper will suggest that there are deep affinities — some tacitly acknowledged some explicitly expounded — between traditional reverence for Wutai as the lodgment of a transcendent deity and awe at the place for its natural beauty and for its role as a location in which the vital forces of the cosmos are available in special concentrations. The contemporary concern, on the part of both Buddhist institutions and government agencies, for the reforestation of Wutai and for judicious control of its growing “tourist industry” will be offered as only one of the more recent manifestations of the convergence at Wutai of religious and ecological value.

Ecological or environmentalist consciousness is apparently a part of Buddhism's present (as the sponsorship of this conference by a Buddhist university indicates), and one suspects that it will also be — increasingly — a part of Buddhism's future. I think, however, that it is not a significant part of Buddhism's past.

Although I would be happy to be corrected on this point, I must confess at the outset of my remarks that I can find in pre-modern Buddhism very little of the sort of explicitly reasoned and ardently expounded concern for the natural environment, very little of the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature, very little of the sort of urgent anxiety over perceived threats to the natural environment that the words “ecological” or “environmentalist” conjure up in modern ethical/political discourse. To be sure, there is much in Buddhism's ethical vision, even in its metaphysics, that could be used as a foundation upon which to construct a Buddhist environmentalism, but it has only been relatively recently that such potential has been recognized and exploited. We might want to find, in Buddhism's doctrines of non-violence (*ahiṃsā* , 不害 *buhai*) and right-livelihood (*samyak-ājīva*, 正命 *zhengming*), and in its elaborate strictures against craving (愛 *tṛṣṇā*), the seeds of an ecological compassion or an environmentalist conscience. We might feel justified to find today in the

Buddhist doctrines of *pratītyasamutpāda* (緣起 *yuanqi* = “dependent origination”) or *shishi wu'ai* (事事無礙 = “the coinherence of all phenomena”), i.e., in what some call Buddhist “holism,” the implication that the sheer interdependence of all things and beings that Buddhists so fundamentally acknowledge actually entails or compels an environmentalist ethic. We might even want to argue that Buddhist practices like vegetarianism or “release of life” (放生 *fangsheng*) — despite the fact that they have never been universally endorsed by the whole of the Buddhist tradition — are actually practical expressions of a kind of tacit but irrepressible ecological impulse. Nevertheless, Buddhists have not until lately drawn such inferences from their own beliefs and practices. Far more typical of traditional Buddhism’s normative views of nature (of the sentient, the insentient but animate, and the inanimate worlds) is the conviction that they are all snares, or arenas of necessary (i.e., deserved) karmic retribution and that they are, in any case, quite devoid of inherent (*en soi, pour soi*) value. It is helpful, in this connection, frequently to remind ourselves that, for example, Chinese Buddhists who have traditionally refrained from eating chickens have done so, not so much because they believed that chickens have an inherent right not to be eaten, nor so much because they cared for the well-being and natural sanctity of the biosphere or eco-system, of which they see chickens to be an integral part but rather, most commonly, because they believed that the chicken one might eat could well be one’s own unhappily reborn mother! That is to say, even in a matter like this, in which conventional Buddhist practice would seem

to exemplify fidelity to some of the more lofty principles of environmentalism (vegetarianism), the order of human social and human ethical (especially familial) relationships has taken precedence over any relationships one might have with the non-human natural world, and values in the economy of salvation have taken precedence over the values of ecology.

But none of this means that there are not to be found in Buddhism expressions of deep reverence for what we think of as the natural world. Such reverence is amply to be found in traditional Buddhism. I would suggest, however, that is usually of a kind other than that advocated in modern environmentalism. Especially in Mahāyāna (which is the kind of Buddhism I shall be concerned with here), there are in fact numerous Buddhist beliefs and practices that imply, and some that explicitly assert, the view that elements of the natural world are “sacred” and thus deserving of both awe and devout care not so much by virtue of their own intrinsic worth as by virtue of the sacramental presence within them of the transcendent — by virtue, that is to say, of their being seen to embody, or at least to represent, the immanence of Buddhahood. These more traditional forms of Buddhist piety toward nature might still usefully be called forms of “eco-piety,” I think, but it must be understood that the values they find in the natural world are not so much inherent as conferred or infused. In any case, the old Buddhist view that the natural world is sacred and to be cherished chiefly because

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas dwell therein ought not to be overlooked in any discussion of possible Buddhist anticipations of or alternatives to modern and “secular” environmentalisms.

If, rather than strain to find proleptic “environmentalism” in earlier Buddhism, one were to choose (as I think the historian must) to search first for traditional Buddhist valuations of the natural world, formulated in traditional Buddhist terms, then many avenues of exploration would appear to be available. One might, for example, pursue the implications of occult Buddhist teachings (Mijiao 密教) about the material world’s (*catvāri mahābhūtāni*, 四大 *sida*) being the very “body” of the Buddha, this serving as the foundation of Japanese Buddhist notions of sacred geography. One might also explore the ramifications of the Tiantai and Chan Buddhist notions of the Buddha-nature of insentient things of. (These notions serve very specific and somewhat technical doctrinal agendas in the Tiantai and Chan traditions, but they are not without broader implications bearing on the general question of Buddhism’s attitudes toward nature.) However, these matters have already been taken up by other scholars like Alan Grapard and Robert Sharf.¹ I propose here a different route.

Let me begin by suggesting that we consider, for example, the implications of the motif or theme of “*alaṃkāra*” (莊嚴 *zhuangyan*). This term, which is often (and, I think, somewhat lamely) translated as “adornment” or “ornament,” is better rendered as “splendor,” “glory,” or “grandeur.” Of course, it is most commonly used to intimate the magnificence of Buddhist

paradises and the hieratic beauty of the transfigured body (*sambhogakāya*, 報身 *baoshen* / 應身 *yingshen*) of the Buddha, or to characterize the sumptuous decor of Buddhist monasteries. Also, it normally has strong connotations of opulence and artifice. It suggests something intentionally created rather than naturally evolved and it exemplifies a “heavenly” rather than an “earthly” aesthetic not unlike that displayed in Byzantine icons. Think of the visionary worlds conceived in the Mahāyāna Buddhist religious imagination and depicted in Buddhist art: lakes of liquid crystal rather than water, trees made of jewels rather than flora, birds and other fauna that “never wert,” surfaces always gilded to a high and opaque sheen, skin only of golden tone, scenes without shadows lit by uncanny radiances, “fearful symmetry” of structure, all things in stasis rather than motion, and so forth. These are what the word “*zhunagyan*” most commonly brings to mind.

It is significant, however, that sometimes, in Chinese Buddhist discourse about certain precincts of nature that they consider to be both sacred and beautiful (although seldom, if ever, about the whole of the natural world), the term “*zhuangyan*” is used in juxtaposition with other terms like “*guangjing*” (光景 = “surroundings,” “environs,” “scenery,” “vista,” “prospect”) and “*shengsuo*” or “*shengdi*” (勝所 / 勝地, literally: “superior place,” more conventionally: “scenic location,” even “vacation spot”). Such juxtapositions suggest a conflation of the hieratic and the mundane, a collapse of the distinction between the other-

worldly (*lokôttara*, 出世間 *chushijian*) and the worldly (*lokiya*, 世間 *shijian*), in which the beauties of the natural world are seen also as manifestations or resonances of the supernatural order — indeed, as the Buddhist equivalent of “theophanies.” One particular place where such convergence is celebrated, in the collocation of phrases like *zhuangyan* and *shengsuo* and in other ways, is the sacred Buddhist site known as Wutai shan 五台山 (The Mountains of the Five Terraces) in northern Shanxi province.² For centuries Buddhists in China and throughout the Buddhist world have treasured this remote and starkly beautiful mountainous region — located at what was long the very frontier of northern China and very nearby the northernmost of the five sacred peaks (五嶽 *wuyue* = “Five Marchmounts”) of ancient pre-Buddhist China³ (namely Mt. Heng 恆山) — because it was held to be the terrestrial residence of Mañjuśrī (Wenshushili 文殊師利). That this foremost of all Bodhisattvas — actually a primordial Buddha said to be only masquerading as a bodhisattva and to have been in fact the original progenitor of all the buddhas⁴ — that he was believed to reside in China (rather than, say, in India) was a point of deep gratification and inspiration for Chinese Buddhists. It served for them as a confirmation to their oft-asserted claim that China, despite its distance from the homeland of Śākyamuni, was the Buddhist country par excellence. It also served for countless Buddhists from all other Buddhist lands as well as for Chinese Buddhist as sufficient motivation for arduous pilgrimage to the Five Terraces. The lore of Wutai abounds particularly in accounts of the miracles that occurred there, miracles that were of course

understood to have been precipitated by Mañjuśrī's presence, but it is noteworthy, apropos of our common subject today, that these miracle tales are almost always occasions also for expressions of admiration for, or of awe at, the stark and overwhelming beauty of the place. The exhilaration that Buddhist visitors to Wutai felt was expressed as though it were somehow a reaction both to the proximity there of Manjuśrī and the sheer natural wonder of its landscape, and even its often daunting weather. As but one of many examples of the convergence of these two kinds of reaction let me note that Chinese Buddhist have gone even so far as to say that the five terraces of Wutai are actually the five lobes of the colossal Mañjuśrī's crown, or the five tresses of his hair, protruding up from beneath the surface of the earth where he resides. They have also found in their belief in Mañjuśrī's presence justification for their belief that the waters of the springs and streams that irrigate Wutai are curative, and that the medicinal herbs and minerals that are to be found on its slopes possess especially potent healing powers.

Time constraints do not allow today a full display or truly adequate discussion of the many indications that Wutai has traditionally been seen, and is today still seen, as a sacred environment in both a "natural" and a "religious" sense, but let me offer one document from the archives of Wutai that may serve as a useful example.

In the twelfth century, i.e., during the Jin (Jurchen) dynasty there lived at Wutai a certain Chinese scholar-official by the name of Yao Xiaoxi 姚孝錫.⁵ His cognomen was Zhongdun 仲純 and he hailed originally from the South, from Fengxian 豐懸 in Jiangsu. After passing his civil-service examinations in 1114, he was posted to the military command in Daizhou 代州, the center of administration for the Wutai region. When Jurchen forces came through Wild Goose Pass (Yanmen 雁門) and attacked Daizhou,⁶ demanding the submission of the city and putting most of the local officials in fear for their lives, Yao is said to have remained quite unconcerned. During the siege he simply “went to bed,” Yuan says, “and snored loudly, giving the matter not the slightest thought.” The victorious Jurchens then appointed Yao to the office of Registrar of Wutai (Zhu Wutai Pu 注五台簿), but he soon resigned this modest position, pleading ill health, and stayed on at Wutai as a private resident, passing his time in cultivated leisurely pursuits, in travel and sight-seeing, and in playing host to a steady stream of guests. Once, when the region was suffering famine, he is said to have donated ten-thousand piculs of grain from his own private stores to feed the hungry, thereby saving many lives. Such generosity earned him the admiration of the local people. In his later years he turned his household over to the care of his sons, adopted the literary name “Merry Drunkard” (Cuixuan 醉軒), and devoted himself entirely to enjoyment of the mountain scenery and to the pleasures of poetry and wine. Noted for his impassable equanimity, which included the ability to maintain serene indifference to the changing fortunes of his life, he is

said “never to have allowed his demeanor to betray either delight or distress.” His biographer tells us that he died at the age of eighty-four, some twenty-nine years after resigning all his official duties. He left behind a substantial collection of poetry that included some regulated and old-style formal verse but that consisted mostly of more informal lyrics (詞 *ci*).

One of Yao’s poems was inscribed at Foguang si, a famous old monastery located just south of Wutai. It combines a subtle sense of place with reflections on the difficulty of balancing the active and the contemplative life while living in a distraught world. It may also be read in Buddhist terms as alluding to the difficulty of practicing both the discipline of serenity and that of insight.

題佛光寺

Inscribe at the Temple of the Buddha’s
Radiance⁷

臧穀雖殊竟兩亡

The slave-boy and the slave-girl,
different though they were, both lost
their sheep.⁸

倚欄終日念行藏

Leaning on the balustrade at day’s end,
I ponder the question of engagement
and withdrawal.⁹

已忻境寂洗塵慮

The quietude of serenity washes away
worldly thoughts.

更學心清聞妙香

The clarity of the illumined mind
senses the fragrance of the

	numinous. ¹⁰
孤島帶煙來遠樹	A solitary crow flies to a distant tree, trailing mists.
斷雲收雨下斜陽	Under broken clouds laden with rain, the sun's rays slant.
人間未卜蝸牛舍	A man can never predict his niche in this world. ¹¹
遠目橫秋益自傷	I gaze far off at the autumnal sky and grieve all the more.

We are told that Yao died at the age was eighty-four, but we are not told exactly when he died. Nevertheless, we know that he was still living at Wutai in 1164, for in that year he wrote the following preface to new printing of the *Records of Qingliang* (“Qingliang” being an alternative name for Wutai).¹²

重雕《清涼傳》序

白馬東來，象教流行於中土、玄風始暢。或示禪寂以探宗，或專神化而素法。亦猶水行地中，枝分別派雖異，至於濟世利物之功，其歸未始不同。故唐劉夢得已為佛法在九州間，隨其方而化，因名山以為莊嚴國界、凡言神道示現者，必宗清涼焉。按經言：文殊師利宅東北清涼山，與其眷屬住持古佛之法，降大慈悲以接引羣生。或現真容以來歸依，或發祥光以竦觀仰。千變萬化，隨感而應，有不可形容擬議者。何其異哉！

昔有沙門慧祥與延一者，皆緇林助化之人。洎丞相張公天覺、皇華朱公少章。皆大臣護法

之士。異世相望，同心贊翼，慮聖跡在遠未彰，芳塵經久或熄，及廣搜見聞與目所親睹，編次成帙。慧祥始為《清涼傳》二卷，延一復為《廣傳》三卷，張相國朱奉使又為《續傳》，記以附於後。其他超俗談玄之流，與夫高人達士，作為詩頌贊偈附名傳末。星聯珠貫，粲然具錦之文，流行於世。凡九州四海之內，雖未躬詣靈巖，目瞻聖跡，但覽卷披文，自然回思易慮，益堅向善之心。其外護之益，未易可述。

偶回祿之構災，致龍文之俱燼。不有興者，聖功神化，歲久弗傳。東安趙統，以酒官視局臺山，慨然有感於心，既白主僧，願捐橐金以助緣。僧正明淨語其屬曰『茲事念之日久，屬化宮之災。用力有先後，今因其請，盡出粟帛，以成其事。』僦工鏤板，告成有日。趙因造門。屬余為序以冠其首。明淨與前提點僧善誼，相繼以書為請。僕嘗謂：道不在衣，傳衣可以授道；法不在文，披文因以悟法。僕既嘉趙候用意之善，而二高僧皆於清涼有大因緣者，知非販佛以眩眾，故為之書。

大定四年九月十七日古豐姚孝錫

Preface to a New Printing of the Records of Qingliang

It was when the white horse came east¹³ and the symbolic doctrine¹⁴ flowed into China, that the wind of profundity first swelled. Some have held the quiescence of meditation to be its deep purport; others have singled out thaumaturgy as the essential Dharma.¹⁵ But, like the waters that flow on the earth, though it divided into different branches, it has always had the

same ultimate goal, the salvation of the world and the benefit of creatures. Liu Mengde of the Tang¹⁶ observed that as Buddhism spread throughout the whole of China, working its transformations locally according to the particular genius of each region, it took China's famous mountains to be the splendid embellishments of the nation and, as everyone says, Qingliang is foremost among all sacred mountains for those who hold mystic manifestation to be the essence of Buddhism. There is a scripture that says the Mañjuśrī has made his home on the Qingliang mountains in the northeast. Here, together with his retinue, he maintains the ways of the ancient Buddhas and dispenses compassion for the edification of the all beings, sometimes attracting devotion by manifesting his true visage, at other times inciting reverence by displaying auspicious radiances. He performs miracles by the thousands and wonders by the tens of thousands, all condign and quite beyond description -- how wonderful!

Once there were two stalwarts of the Saṃgha, Śramaṇas Huixiang and Yanyi, and two great ministers and protectors of the Dharma, Premier Zhang Tianjue [i.e., Zhang Shangying] and the Imperial Ambassador Zhu Gongshao [i.e., Zhu Bian]. Though separated by generations, they complemented each other in being of like mind. Concerned that the deeds of the sage might not be known in distant parts or that after a time they might be obliterated like so much scented powder,¹⁷ they compiled books about Wutai, combining lore they had gathered far and wide with things they had experienced themselves. Huixiang was first with his Records of

Qingliang in two fascicles; next was Yanyi with his Expanded Records in three fascicles; then Premier Zhang and Ambassador Zhu compiled their Further Records as a sequel. From this came a flow of other transcendental discourses as eminent and perspicacious men wrote poems, hymns, encomia, and psalms that were appended to the famous Records. As this splendid tapestry of words, arrayed like a constellation of stars or a string of jewels, circulated throughout the world persons all over China who could not themselves visit the mystic peaks and witness in person the traces of the sage could yet open these volumes, scan their words, and thus be naturally moved to self-reflection and conversion, their minds all the more firmly fixed on goodness. The resulting increase in lay piety¹⁸ defied description!

However, a disastrous fire reduced these wondrous texts to ashes, and were they not to be restored then the miraculous deeds of the sage (i.e., Mañjuśrī) would go untold for years. Commissioner Chao of Dong'an, the Director of the Wine Bureau at Wutai,¹⁹ was deeply moved by this and approached Abbot Bo²⁰ with a pledge of personal funds to be used as a subvention. The Prefect of Clerics, Mingjing,²¹ spoke to his congregation, saying, "Long will we remember this deed. It is a great boon to our monasteries in their misfortune. I urge that we commit our full resources to the completion of this task."²² Artisans were then hired to carve the printing blocks and on the day when the work was to be dedicated Mr. Chao came to my gate soliciting a preface to be placed at the head of the text. Mingqing and the Former Monk-Bursar,²³ Shanyi,

also sent letters of invitation. I have always said that although the Dao does not reside in the robe yet by the transmission of the robe one can pass on the Dao, and although the Dharma does not reside in words yet the perusal of the written word may be an occasion for insight into the Dharma.”²⁴ Having great respect for Lord Chao’s probity and knowing that these two monks, both deeply attached to Wutai, are not intent on simony.²⁵ I have therefore inscribed this preface.

The seventeenth day of the ninth month of the fourth year of Dading (October 5, 1164) — by Yao Xiaoxi of Gufeng.

Yao Xiaoxi’s poem and his Preface to the Three *Chronicles of Wutai*, despite their brevity, are rich sources of information on Wutai shan, and on Chinese attitudes thereto, during the late medieval or early modern period of China’s Buddhist history. They tell us, for example, much about the political, even the military history of the place, and about the textual history of the most important sources of its early history. For our immediate purposes, however, they are especially valuable for the impressions they convey of a place, an environment if you will, that was appreciated, by laymen and clerics alike — by men of letters and by monks — as a beautiful and remote location to which one might repair as he searched

for serenity and sought a venue for the contemplative life, as a refuge from worldly tribulations, as a place deserving to be rescued from human depredation, as a magical place especially suited by virtue of its *genius loci* to practitioners of the more occult forms of the religious life, as a place worthy of generous donation, as a bastion of ecclesiastical religion, as an abode of deities, as a locale graced by the attention and solicitude of great men of the past ...

One could go on, but suffice to say here that we see in Yao's brief, pious, and artful observations an example of a kind of reverence for a place-in-nature that, while it may not precisely reflect to the sort of ecological piety and ethic we seem most valued in our modern world, must nevertheless be appreciated and understood as Buddhism develops, as it does seem to be developing, from a religion that once held nature to be either a slough of suffering of an environment sanctified only by the presence of supernatural agents, into a religion that may hold nature in reverent regard for its own sake.

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