CHAPTER 2

The Invention of Wutaishan

In the southeast of Tai-chou 岱州, there is the Five Terrace Mountain. Anciently, it was said to be the dwelling of divine transcendants. This mountain encompasses three hundred li 平方, and its terrain is exceedingly precipitous and lofty.

There are five tall terraces. Grasses and trees do not grow on its summits. A dense forest of conifers is overgrown on the valley floor. This mountain is extremely cold. Those to the south call it Mount Clear-and-Cool (Yanyi, Guang Qingliang zhuan, 1060, transl. Birnbaum 1986: 120).

As pointed out by Robert Gimello, Turner’s notion of liminality in pilgrimages can apply not only to the state of mind of the pilgrims but also to the place itself. Wutaishan appears as a liminal yet relatively accessible site: it is at the same time a pure land, a ‘buddha land’ (buddhakṣetra, Mo. burkhan-u oron [‘abode of buddhas/deities’], Ch. fotu 佛土)—and ‘part of the ordinary world.’

In this kind of ‘middle realm,’ ordinary men and women have the possibility to come in contact with the bodhisattva. Tang-dynasty Chan monk-pilgrim Daoyi 道義 had a vision of himself visiting a ‘transformation monastery’ along with an old man, who was none other than Mañjuśrī:

When I arrived to travel at the mountain I only saw hillocks, grass, and trees. Now I see here (in the temple) gold and jade towers. For this reason, I am uncertain as to whether Wutai is a pure 淨 (land) or a part of the ordinary 煞 (defiled world). I cannot resolve whether the holy and ordinary are distinguished (here).

3 Qingding Qingliangshan zhi, translated by Andrews 2011: 148. This would be the origin of Jingesi that was eventually constructed according to Daoyi’s vision (Gimello 1992).
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This second chapter sketches an overview of the mountain’s natural, human and divine geography, followed by its history before the Qing dynasty, in order to highlight the intrinsic characteristics of Wutaishan that explain why it was chosen as a mountain of ‘spiritual significance,’ first by the Chinese, then by Buddhists from all over Asia and eventually by Mongols. It will help measure Wutaishan’s ‘spiritual magnetism’ according to three of Preston’s four components: apparitions of supernatural beings; geography sacralized by history and by the presence of deities and spirits; and difficulty of access.4

Earthly Wutaishan

Wutaishan literally means ‘Five-Terraced Mountain(s),’ referring to its five summits with flat tops, one at each cardinal point and the fifth in the middle. Its more canonical name in ancient Chinese sources is ‘Clear and Cool Mountains’ (Qingliangshan 清涼山).5 Wutaishan is the most ancient and most prominent pan-Asiatic Buddhist sacred site in China. It is home to many of China’s most important monasteries and temples and has preserved the oldest extant wooden buildings in China.6

Wutaishan is located relatively far from urban centers and was considered a Buddhist retreat, “a kind of spiritual rampart of the empire”7 isolated from urban social life. From the Shunzhi period of the Qing dynasty until well into the Republican period, the holy mountain was a Tibeto-Mongol enclave on the edge of Chinese territory with a status of extraterritoriality, ruled by the representative of the Dalai Lama. However, its remote location has not hindered its institutional and economic development. Being at the crossroads between Tibet, Inner Asia and China, Wutaishan has served as a religious, economic and political meeting point for the populations from those three areas and was

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5 Translated in Mongolian as Serüün Tunggalag Uula (‘Cool and Clear Mountains’) and transcribed as Tsing Liyang Shan Uula.
6 The Buddha halls of Nanchansi 南禪寺 and Foguangsi 佛光寺 have survived since the Tang dynasty (618-907) (Rhie 1977). Not far from Wutaishan are found a great number of ancient historical sites, such as the Yungang Grottoes, Huayan 華嚴寺 and Shanhua Monasteries 善化寺 of Datong, Mount Hengshan 恒山 (one of the ‘Five Great Peaks’ of China) and nearby Hanging Monastery (Xuankongsi 懸空寺). On Wutaishan architecture: Wang Jinping 2005; Lin 2014.
7 Gimello 1992: 99.