GEOGRAPHY
The dust jacket of the 1972 reprint of Erik Zürcher’s seminal *The Buddhist conquest of China* includes an image of a robed Buddhist figure perched on the top of a peak within an unidentifiable mountain range. This image is not explicitly referred to in the body of the text, but it is an image that resonates well with traditional accounts of the arrival and spread of Buddhism on the Chinese landscape, and with Zürcher’s own thesis about the importance of mountains in those processes during the pre-Tang period. Early Buddhists not only established an institutional presence in the urban centers of early China, but also alighted on mountains scattered throughout the imperium. Eventually, according to the traditional narrative, the powerful presence of buddhas and bodhisattvas became firmly rooted in the Chinese landscape—principally at four sacred mountains that were much later classified as the “four famous Buddhist mountains” (*sida mingshan* 四大名山): Wutai (Mañjūsri) in Shanxi, Putuo (Avalokitesvara) in Zhejiang, Jiuhua (Ksitigarbha) in Anhui, and Emei (Samantabhadra) in Sichuan. Yet the story of this transposition of Indian Buddhist figures to Chinese mountains and the formation of Chinese Buddhist sacred geography during the pre-Tang period is not as straightforward as the historian might desire.

In general accounts (as well as in more specialized studies) of Chinese Buddhist sacred geography the four famous Buddhist mountains tend to be the standard starting point. Some scholars, such as Zheng

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1. I would like to thank John Lagerwey for his perceptive editorial suggestions and for challenging me to push this essay in new directions. I also appreciate Stephen Teiser’s critical comments and suggestions which forced me to hone the argument and make some of the claims more explicit.
3. See, for example, references to the four mountains in Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London, 1989) and Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, diplomacy and trade: the realignment of Sino-Indian relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu, 2003), p. 76. The only work I am aware of that covers all four mountains is Kamata Shigeo, *Chūgoku shidai reizan no tabi* (Tokyo, 1987), but he does not provide a study of the formation of the *sida mingshan* set. Reginald Johnston, *Buddhist China* (London, 1913) discusses the four mountains