
It is surprising to discover that the literature of pilgrimage is quite thin, whether for Christianity, Islam or any other religion. Yet, for centuries pilgrimage has been a major form of religious practice in East and West; it takes many forms and it has had important consequences for religious art and architecture and for the formation of religious centres. It is significant, too, when one tries to account for the spread of a religious cult, for its cohesiveness or its persistence.

Pilgrimage may be to a place which is naturally special by reason of its scenery, its remoteness or some other geographical factor; or it may be to a place which has been sanctified through association with a revered figure, human or divine, and has been developed as a cult centre. Sometimes nature and people have combined to form a particular site for veneration. Pilgrimage as religious ritual or spiritual quest should be distinguished from mere tourism, but in practice it may be difficult to draw the line, since even tourism has its little rituals, and the most devout pilgrim cannot be immune to surroundings of natural beauty or awesomeness. It is remarkable that pilgrimage, in sundry manifestations, continues to flourish across the world today; and to understand it, in any given case, one needs to examine the recorded history of a cult at a personal, psychological level as well as from social, institutional, doctrinal, and literary points of view.

Until recently traditions of pilgrimage in East Asia, whether Buddhist, Taoist, Shinto, or Hindu, had not been described in much detail for the Western reader. This situation is rapidly changing. The topic of pilgrimage in Japan particularly has become something of a growth industry, absorbing the energies of both Japanese and foreign scholars. The present volume contains nine substantial papers by scholars working in the United States for the most part, as well as an introductory essay by the editors themselves. It is a landmark
for the study of pilgrimage in China. The editors emphasize that pilgrimage "did not occupy the same central position in Chinese culture that it did in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, or monastic Buddhism" (9); that "Chinese cities, unlike Jerusalem or Rome, did not usually attract pilgrims" (8); and that "reports of travels to sacred places were written by monks much more rarely in China than in Europe and the Middle East" (7). Despite such caveats, however, it is perfectly in order to apply the label "pilgrimage" to certain aspects of Chinese religion, and there is plenty to say: individual contributions to this book span periods ranging from the T'ang dynasty to the present day, and communicate a mass of detailed information.

The concept of pilgrimage may be applied above all to journeys to sanctified mountain sites. Even if they were foreign to the everyday experience of most Chinese, mountains have had a profound symbolic value in Chinese culture for at least 2500 years. From early medieval times literati, whether Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian, encapsulated visions of them in poetry or paintings, while popular fancy peopled them with immortals, tigers, dragons, and other magical creatures. Most of the contributors to this volume pick a specific mountain and describe and analyze the cult connected with it, the historical sources of information about it, and the interpretation to be placed on it.

Primary sources on Chinese pilgrimage include fictional narratives, of which the best-known is the great sixteenth-century novel Hsi-yu chi ['Record of a journey to the west'], based on the life-story of the seventh-century pilgrim Hsüan-tsang. Glen Dudbridge's contribution to the present book consists of two translated chapters from another novel, which dates from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, and describes, with abundant period detail and a strong vein of irony, even sarcasm, a visit by a women's pilgrimage group to Mount T'ai, holiest of all Chinese mountains. The mocking tone of the narrative arises partly from the plot of the novel as a whole, but also from the author's keen observation of human character and human weakness. It brings alive a religious atmosphere that must have existed in China for centuries earlier than the time of the novel's composition; and that surely survives to some extent today.

Wu Pei-yi, in a companion essay about a seventeenth-century pilgrim to Mount T'ai, maintains that holy mountains outside China "seldom attract crowds of pilgrims to their lofty peaks" (65). He points out that "[i]n the Old World, especially, all great centers of religious pilgrimage – notably, Canterbury, Compostella, Jerusalem, and Mecca – are more or less on level ground" (65). Further, "in China the idea of sacred mountains goes back to the dawn of history, long before the introduction of Buddhism and the emergence of religious Taoism, perhaps even antedating the beginning of pilgrimage" (65). The implication of these statements seems to be that the