A PILGRIMAGE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FICTION: T'AI-SHAN AND THE HSING-SHIH
YIN-YÜAN CHUAN*

BY
GLEN DUDBRIDGE

The T'ai-shan pilgrimage

Each year in the third and fourth months men and women from all parts climb in hundreds of thousands to offer sacrifice to [Pi-hsia] Yüan-chên 碧霞元君. If you look up the mountain by night the lanterns are like ten thousand bushels of glow-worms—milling up and down like ants, seething like a cauldron, resounding like thunder. There is barely room for feet to climb. I came after the due time and missed seeing the main spectacle of prayer and ritual. But I asked a temple officer about it, and he said that before the year ch'i-ssu 己巳 of Ch'ung-chen 崇禎 [1629] the annual number of pilgrims would come to as many as 800,000, and never fewer than 600,000. Today the figure is less than 400,000. The metropolitan and Shantung regions, down to Honan and north of the Yangtze, have suffered depredation and banditry. Half the population are put to the sword, half have fled to the wilds: they scarcely have leisure to offer prayers at a famous mountain. Who knows what it will be like in a few years' time? This was alarming to listen to.1

Thus Shen Ch'ing-feng 沈晴峯, a mid-seventeenth-century visitor to T'ai-shan 泰山. Like other literati of his time he found the sheer scale of humanity moving about the mountain impressive in itself, and the sight of numberless lanterns travelling the slopes at night became one of its unexpected man-made wonders.2 Even the

---

* This paper was originally presented at a conference on “Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China” sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies and held at Bodega Bay, California in January 1989.

1 Han-yeh lu 寒夜錄 B.19b (Hsiieh-hai lei-pien 學海類編 ). The book’s author Ch’en Hung-hsiu 陳宏锡 spanned the late Ming and early Ch’ing in his official and literary career; see Su-k’u ch’ien-shu tsung-mu 四庫全書總目 70.19b and 181.13b (Chekiang edn. of 1795, repr. Taipei 1964). He here quotes from an essay by Shen Ch’ing-feng沈晴峯 entitled “Teng Tai chi” 登岱記.

2 Compare remarks by Yü Chin 余信 (chin-shih 1652) in Teng Tai chi 10a (Hsiao-fang-hu chài yü-ti ts'ung-ch’ao 小方稡異地叢鈔, fourth collection); and by Chang Tai 張岱 (1597–1684?) in Lang-huan wen chi 廉嗚文集 2.69 (ed. Yün Kao 坠, Ch’ang-sha 1985). The spectacle of pilgrims’ lights in the late Ming is
stricken years after 1629 generated an annual clientele approaching half a million. In local terms the pilgrimage industry's economic dimension commanded respect too:

The Pilgrims' Tax (hsiang-shui 香稅) at T'ai-shan represents donations by the public which are used by the provincial administration to meet fixed outgoings over and above normal tax revenues. So, since the proceeds go to the government, I wonder why people still come wearing paper gods and calling upon the holy name, caring nothing about distance, bowing every ten steps or every five? And not only the government draws benefit. During spring and summer these multitudes numbering hundreds of thousands swarm to and fro like ants: traders and innkeepers make a living from their food, drink and ritual goods.3

These remarks by Huang Ch'un-yao 黃淳耀 (1605–1645) oversimplify a little. It is clear that ritual donation of money and precious objects at the holy mountain had long been part of the mass pilgrimage cult. Chinese scholars conventionally traced the practice back to Han Wu-ti and his officials at the time of the Feng and Shan sacrifices of AD 54.4 But a truer anticipation of the late imperial cult appears only in the Northern Sung, in the wake of the emperor Chen-tsung's 真宗 Feng 封 sacrifice on T'ai-shan in 1008. He had the Jade Maiden Pool (Yü-nü ch'īh 玉女池) near the summit cleaned out, and from it emerged a stone figure, which he acknowledged with visit and sacrifice, replacing it with a figure in jade.5 A century later a local officer at the site remarked: "By the 8th day of the fourth month each year there is a falling-off of visitors from all parts, so we divert the water and collect the objects thrown into the pool, make a register of them and deliver them to the temple... This year we have got 200 chu 銖 of gold, several times that amount in silver, and hundreds of fine silk garments."6 A vernacular inscription of 1327 at the Temple of the Mount reserved such pro-

---

3 Shan-tso pt'-tan 山左筆談, by Huang Ch'un-yao 黃淳耀; 2a (Hsiüeh-hai lei-pien).  
4 Han kuan i 漢官儀, by Ying Shao 隆韶, quoted in commentary to Hou Han shu 後漢書, Chih 志 7.3168, note 1 (ed. Chung-hua shu-chü, Peking 1965); Lang-huan wen chi 2.71; and references below, in n. 12.  
5 Hsu tzu-chih t'ung-chien ch'ang-pien 禮官治通鑑長編, by Li Tao 李藻 (1115–1184), 70.1561 (ed. Chung-hua shu-chü, Peking 1979–).  