LEXICAL LANDSCAPES AND TEXTUAL MOUNTAINS IN THE HIGH T'ANG

BY

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The sinological study of what has been called “mountains and the cultures of landscape” began in earnest nearly ninety years ago with Édouard Chavannes’ monumental monograph on T’ai Shan.1 During the years since then, while important scholarly studies of other discrete peaks have appeared,2 the related but broader issue of traditional China’s accommodation with the natural world—from literary and political, as well as religious angles—has inspired a proliferating number of books and articles.3 Several scholarly symposia have been convened to investi-

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1 Le T'ai chan: essai de monographie d'un culte chinois (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1910).

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gate various aspects of the topic and have added their measure to the expanding bibliography. The journal *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* devotes considerable space to the subject of sacred geography. It sometimes seems that one can scarcely pick up a sinological journal these days without finding at least one article focused on *some* Chinese mountain—a frequency of study beginning to rival the perennial topics of Wang Wei’s “nature poetry” or Liu Tsung-yüan’s “landscape essays.” I too have contributed items to this outcropping of mountain and landscape scholarship. But one begins to wonder where it is all leading.

Of course we should be, and are, grateful for each new fact, all new data, on any subject or place that helps us see more clearly into the culture of traditional China. When you’ve seen one Chinese mountain, you haven’t seen them all. But their outlines often seem to blur and fade into one another. Perhaps it is time to re-examine some of our assumptions about the literary values of Chinese landscapes. Now, a student of the T’ang has a particularly blurry lens to unfog, because it is such a well-studied and ever-attractive era. We must first, therefore, do our best to skirt the reductive categories and smooth clichés that have come to determine our responses, to prescribe our views.

Hence we shall not here admit the term “nature poetry”—an unreflecting tag of no critical value. To be sure, we may acknowledge the fact that Chinese poetry has since its beginnings—like virtually all traditional poetry anywhere—drawn deeply on the natural world as a primary fund of imagery; but that is an obvious and, in truth, unremarkable fact. Squeeze this idea and you will notice how little remains in your grasp. Nor shall we warrant, on any but the most vulgar level, a convincing distinction between “religious” and “literary” texts—as though the educated elite of the T’ang conceived of themselves and their writings in terms of the disciplinary boundaries of our university curricula. Instead we accept as given, from earliest times, the continual merging and

4 Including the one for which an earlier version of this paper was prepared, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in January 1993.