



stairway to heaven

A JOURNEY TO THE SUMMIT OF MOUNT EMEI

JAMES M. HARGETT

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JAMES M. HARGETT

峨眉山

State University of New York Press

Cover image: "Buddha's Glory" on Mount Emei. Photograph by Liu Yong 劉勇.

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To Professor Irving Yucheng Lo (1922–2005),
My Teacher

師恩難忘, 惠澤終生

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Acknowledgments



This is a study about a famous mountain in southwest China called “Emei” (pronounced “Uh-may”; sometimes spelled “Omei”). Although few people in America and Europe have ever heard of Mount Emei, its reputation in East Asia is legendary. The landscape on Emei is spectacular and breathtaking, which is one reason that human activity on and around the mountain has been continuous for about the past three thousand years.

The Republican era scholar Zhao Xunbo 趙循伯, writing in his 1935 preface to the *Illustrated Talks on Mount Emei (Eshan tushuo)*, remarks: “It is surely insufficient to portray in words the loveliness of Emei’s scenery; unless one beholds it personally, he will not believe it.” From the outset, a question related to Zhao Xunbo’s observation has occupied my thoughts: how does one *write* about a natural phenomenon (in this case, a mountain) whose most apparent and striking quality is *visual*? At least a preliminary answer to this question is suggested by seventeenth-century scholar Luo Sen 羅森, who notes in his 1672 preface to the *Mount Emei Gazetteer*: “The beauty of landscape is enhanced and manifested by man; without travel there would be no way to discover its perfection; without writings there would be no way to reveal its wonders.” In writing about the history and importance of Mount Emei in Chinese cultural history, I have sought above all else to explain how and why Emei earned and maintained the epithet “famous mountain.” As we will see on the pages to follow, however, much of the mountain’s fame is indeed related directly to its physical environment. If I can “reveal” some of the mountain’s “wonders” and thereby help readers to discover at least some of its “perfection,” then I shall feel gratified indeed.

During the research and writing of this book I received help and encouragement from many individuals. First and foremost, I acknowledge indebtedness to my mentor, Professor Irving Yucheng Lo (Luo Yuzheng

羅郁正; 1922–2005), to whom this book is dedicated. Whatever merit my study may have is due in large part to the training and encouragement I have received from Professor Lo. I also wish to express thanks to my colleagues in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University at Albany, State University of New York, especially Mark Blum, Anthony DeBlasi, Susanna Fessler, and Charles Hartman, who read through numerous draft versions of chapters and always had useful suggestions for improvement.

There are few scholars in the world who command detailed knowledge about Mount Emei and its long, complicated history. I am fortunate in that two of these experts, Justin O'Jack and Xiong Feng 熊鋒, played supportive and influential roles in the research and writing of this book. Justin often shared his vast knowledge of Emei with me and meticulously read through and commented on all of my chapters. Mr. Xiong Feng, Chief Historian at the Mount Emei Museum, always found time to accompany me on my climbs to the summit, and on numerous occasions helped to clarify problems or inconsistencies in the sources. I also thank Justin and Xiong Feng for preparing the two maps that appear in this book.

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Much of chapter 2 appeared in an article titled "Li Bo (701–762) and Mount Emei," published in *Cahiers d'Extrême Asie* 8 (1995): 67–85. I am grateful to the editor of that journal, Dr. Hubert Durt, for allowing me to use material from the article in the present work. Some portions of chapter 2 were also presented at the conference "Mountains and Cultures of Landscape in China: Tang Dynasty, Five Dynasties Period, Song Dynasty,"

held at University of California, Santa Barbara, January 14–16, 1993. My special thanks go to conference participants Terry F. Kleeman and Allan G. Grapard, who read and commented on my paper “Literary Visions of Mount Emei during the Tang and Song.”

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Of course, any errors that remain in this book are my responsibility alone.

James M. Hargett
Guilderland, New York
4 December 2004

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Conventions



Buddhist/Sanskrit terms: Familiar Sanskrit words in English, such as *sūtra*, *stūpa*, and *saṃgha*, are not italicized. *Sūtra* titles and specialized Buddhist terms are usually given in Hanyu Pinyin; on first occurrence the Sanskrit version of the title or name, including diacritics, is also provided. With just a few exceptions, the names of Indian and Chinese Buddhist monks are given in Hanyu Pinyin.

Chinese characters: Chinese characters appear in the text and notes only when a special or technical term begs further clarification, or when an author/title is cited in the note that is not included in the selected bibliography. Chinese characters for all remaining names, official titles, places, terms, and so on, appear in the glossary-index.

Date Conversion: All original Chinese lunar calendar dates have been converted to Western dates based on the tables in *Liangqian nian Zhong-Xi li duizhao biao* 兩千年中西曆對照表 (*A Sino-Western Calendar for Two Thousand Years* (1940; rpt., Taipei: Guomin chubanshe, 1958).

Linear, Area, and Weight Measures: Song dynasty linear measures mentioned in this book are listed below. My main source for metric equivalents is Wenren Jun and James M. Hargett, “The Measures *Li* and *Mou* during the Song, Liao, and Jin Dynasties,” *Bulletin of Sung-Yuan Studies* 21 (1989): 8–30.

LINEAR MEASURES

chi 尺: 1 *chi* (“foot”) = 31.6 cm = 12.6 in

bu 步: 1 *bu* (“double-pace”) = 5 *chi* = 158 cm = 6.3 ft

li 里: 1 *li* (“mile”) = 360 *bu* = 568.9 m = 1,877.6 ft

ren 仞: 1 *ren* = 8 *chi* = 252.8 cm = 101.1 in = 8.4 ft

zhang 丈: 1 *zhang* = 10 *chi* = 316.1 cm = 126.4 in = 12.0 ft

Note: the last two measures on this list, *ren* and *zhang*, are often used with large numbers for hyperbolic effect, as in the line “A jade-white peak suddenly rises to a height of three thousand *zhang*!”

AREA MEASURES

mou 亩: 1 *mou* = 240 sq *bu* = 453.4 sq m = 1,373.9 sq ft

jian 間 (“room” or “bay”): *Jian* is a measure used for floor space in Chinese architecture, similar to the Japanese *tsubo* 坪. Oblong in shape, it varies in length and width.

WEIGHT AND CAPACITY MEASURES

dan 石 (“picul”): 1 *dan* = approx. 50 kg = 110 lbs

bu 斛 (“bushel”): 1 *bu* = 32.2 liters = 0.94 U.S. bushels

“**Mount Emei**”: The Chinese characters for Mount Emei are usually written as 峨眉山 (Emei shan), though some authors prefer to write the name as 峨嵋山. I will use the first of these forms. Although in the past the name of the mountain was often spelled “Omei” in English, the more accepted spelling now is the Hanyu Pinyin version, which is “Emei.”

Office and government agency titles: English translations for office and government agency titles generally follow those given in Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*.

Orthography: Full-form or traditional Chinese characters (*fanti zi* 繁體字) will be used throughout this study.

Place names: The modern equivalents for Song dynasty place names are identified on first occurrence.

Romanization: This work follows the Hanyu Pinyin system of phonetic transliteration for Chinese names.

Song dynasty government administrative units: Song dynasty government administrative units are translated as follows:

lu 路: circuit

fu 府: municipality

zhou 州: county

xian 縣: town

jun 軍: command

zhen 鎮: market town

xiang 鄉: village

In order to distinguish the Song dynasty terms listed above from *modern* administrative names, such as *xian* 縣 and *shi* 市 (“city”), the latter will be written in italics (Emei *shi*, Baoxing *xian*, and so on).

Translations from the Chinese: With just one or two noted exceptions, all translations from the Chinese are mine.

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CHAPTER 1



Introduction

I've come to understand that there's an interaction between people and environments that changes us, and I suppose it also changes the environment. Which is the actor and which is the reactor is not always clear.¹

—Peter H. Hackett, M.D.

TEXT AND CONTEXT

Since first conceiving the idea to write a book about Mount Emei, I have been concerned about the context in which to present such a study. There are certainly enough primary and secondary sources available to produce a general history of the mountain organized along chronological or dynastic lines. I also considered adopting a framework that would present topically arranged chapters on key subjects critical in the development of the mountain's identity and role in Chinese culture. Examples might include individual essays on Mount Emei's rich Daoist immortal (*xian*) tradition, the later arrival and development of Buddhism on the mountain, and literary works written by famous visitors through the dynasties. While there is no denying that religious activity, especially Buddhism, is central to Mount Emei's growth as a cultural phenomenon in China, it is limiting to view Emei shan simply as a "famous Buddhist mountain." This is because religion represents just one part of the mountain's history and identity. I am more interested in looking at Emei in its greater complexity. But this approach presents a formidable challenge, for the full complexity I seek to define is an intricate and diverse picture and there are many factors that determine why and how Mount Emei functions as a "famous mountain." In other words, there are numerous ways in which Emei shan is understood.

Now, mindful of avoiding a plunge into what James Robson calls "the abyss of loose syncretism,"² I propose a methodological approach that

includes scrutiny of, and yet at the same time is not limited to, religious traditions. Essentially, I view all of China's "famous mountains" as multifaceted phenomena of *human experience*. My main interest lies in examining Mount Emei's various properties of *place*, in particular, the special features of the mountain's remote location and the distinct physical, botanical, and meteorological characteristics that make it unique; *space*, that is, the relationships among various sites on Emei, both natural and man-made; and what I call *interaction*. This last category refers to the different ways in which humans have either reacted to and/or modified Mount Emei's place and space. Examples might include writing a poem, carving an inscription into a cliff-side wall, taking up residence in one of Emei shan's caves, building a monastery, or even hurling oneself off the summit in order to reach the arms of Buddha and achieve "instant nirvana." Without a doubt, Emei's remote location and unique environment have played decisive roles in what has happened there since humans first arrived thousands of years ago.

Of course, there are many reasons why particular persons might react to a given place and attempt to modify it to serve their own purposes. For instance, people of different occupations, religious interests, and educational backgrounds often brought their own understanding to Emei and thus responded to it differently. As we will see in later chapters, those persons who came to Emei tend to fall into certain groups with common interests and they reacted to and sometimes modified the mountain's place and space in ways that can be isolated and studied. Once this examination is complete, some assessment can be made of Mount Emei's role concerning sense of place in traditional China. The most practical way to undertake such an examination is to articulate and examine the various "imprints" of human activity that have been made there throughout the dynastic period. Although these phenomena appear in many forms, based on my readings and visits to the mountain I identify five that seem to be the most important and influential: (1) myths about the mountain's religious origins; (2) legends of Daoist immortals who are associated with Emei; (3) the arrival and development of Buddhism on the mountain; (4) the numerous poems, prose works, and inscriptions written about Emei through the dynasties; and (5) recent developments in the tourism industry there. These key imprints are all "present" on the mountain and affect its residents and visitors in one way or another. For instance, one cannot properly understand Buddhist activities on Emei shan without knowledge of its earlier Daoist immortal tradition; one cannot comprehend the miraculous "Precious Light" (Baoguang) on the summit without some knowledge of the mountain's physical geography; and one cannot visit Mount Emei

today without being affected by the profound physical changes (roads, a cable car, ski slope, hotels, a museum, and so on) made by the government-run tourism industry now in operation there. These imprints will be examined on the pages that follow. My task is to elucidate how and why each of these imprints resulted from human interaction with Emei's place and space. I will also attempt to determine how and why they relate to each other. Ultimately, my goal is to define Mount Emei as a complex amalgam of distinct physical environment and diverse human experience.

Given my interest in presenting the “big picture” and in following a more “get-the-reader-involved” approach to examining Mount Emei, I propose that we take a journey to the mountain itself. In other words, rather than “talk at” readers about the mountain, most of whom have probably never visited Sichuan, I will attempt to lead readers on a “trip” to the mountain. Ideally, we should all gather at the Loyal-to-the-State Monastery (Baoguo si) in the foothills, and then begin our ascent on foot. Over the next two or three days, before finally reaching the summit, much of Emei's place and space would unfold before our eyes. We would also observe how people have interacted with the mountain in the past and how they continue to do so today. While this approach may be ideal, for logistical reasons it is not practical. I propose that we instead take a trip to the mountain vicariously through the writings of the twelfth-century writer and official Fan Chengda (1126–1193). Fan's travel diary and verse accounts of his climb to the summit of Mount Emei in 1177 still rank among the most detailed and informative descriptions of the mountain ever written. Through his eyes, words, and footsteps, along with background information, explanation, and commentary provided by me, we will discover and experience some of the ways in which the mountain has been “constructed” by diverse human experiences over the centuries.

ON STUDYING MOUNTAINS

*mountain: a natural elevation of the earth's surface, usually rising more or less abruptly from the surrounding level, and attaining an altitude which, relatively to adjacent elevations, is impressive or notable.*³

—The Oxford English Dictionary

A fascinating area of inquiry that partly inspired the writing of this book concerns the different methodologies one can use to study mountains as cultural phenomena in China. There is no consensus on this issue in the scholarly community. Since I have already outlined the approach and

context I will use to determine how Mount Emei's physical environment was understood and utilized in traditional China and how it continues to be modified today, it seems appropriate to now comment on previous studies about mountains in China and recent trends in the field. This background will help to illustrate how my approach differs from my predecessors.

In Western scholarship concerning mountain traditions in China, one frequently encounters the expression "sacred mountain(s)."⁴ This is especially the case with reference to China's most famous group of peaks, the Wuyue, often translated as the "Five Sacred Mountains" or "Five Marchmounts"⁵ (I will say more about the Wuyue later). The expression "sacred [Chinese] mountain(s)" originates in Western scholarship and has no precise counterpart in ancient or modern Chinese.⁶ Presumably, scholars use this expression to demarcate certain "sacred" mountains in China from those that are not so "sacred." Mircea Eliade's term "profane" is even sometimes invoked when referring to "nonsacred" or "secular" space and mountains in China.⁷ As a starting point, I would argue that the so-called separation between "sacred" and "profane" space has no place in scholarship about Chinese mountains because no such distinction exists in the Chinese context.⁸ Mountains in China might be best described as multipurpose or multifunctional. That is to say, they serve many functions, some religious, some nonreligious, for a variety of people, oftentimes *simultaneously*. To cite just two examples, many hermits in the traditional period took up residence on Mount Emei because they thought it was an ideal place for meditation and study, while numerous businessmen today run hotels on the mountain simply to make money. It might also be mentioned that Buddhist monasteries on Emei and elsewhere, in addition to their religious interests and pursuits, have always engaged in business ventures of one sort or another, such as land ownership and management, operating industrial installations, managing financial transactions, providing lodging and meals to pilgrims, selling incense and candles, and so on.⁹ Now, if someone decides to study one particular aspect of a mountain—for example, the development of Buddhism on Mount Emei—this is certainly a legitimate and potentially worthwhile endeavor. However, as I have already argued, to *define* Mount Emei solely as a "Buddhist mountain" is parochial and downright misleading. The development of Buddhism on the mountain is a central factor in its long history, but it is not the only one; there are many others. My "five imprints" represent the factors I regard as most important.

Scholars in China, on the other hand, have often lumped China's best-known mountains into one broad category, which they call "famous

mountains" (*mingshan* 名山). This term is also problematic because it lacks precise definition. Virtually any mountain in China that has gained attention on just about any level can be declared *ming*, or "famous." Furthermore, ideas in China about which mountains were "famous" changed over time.¹⁰ In other words, which peaks deserve the title *mingshan* would depend on the historical period we are talking about and the ideas about "famous mountains" circulating at that time. The gray area here is substantial. Therefore, use of *mingshan* as a critical term to enhance our understanding of the role of mountains in Chinese culture is limited. Having said that, there are still selected mountains in China that have consistently maintained their *ming* status over time. The Wuyue, mentioned earlier, certainly fit into this category, as does Emei shan.

Mount Emei was never part of the state-controlled Wuyue system. Yet, it has enjoyed an ever-increasing level of "famous" status from at least the Western Jin period (265–316) right up to today. We know about the mountain's long-standing reputation because it is confirmed in textual sources. The earliest of these is a reference in Zuo Si's (ca. 250–ca. 305) well-known literary composition "Shu Capital Rhapsody" ("Shudu fu"). While delimiting the peripheral area around Chengdu, the ancient capital of Shu (or Sichuan), Zuo Si writes: "It adjoins the layered barriers of [Mount] Emei."¹¹ This line, probably written some time around the year 280,¹² is the earliest, reliable mention of Mount Emei in surviving written records.¹³ Thereafter, we see a steady stream of literary references to the mountain that increase over time. The richest periods for written sources on the mountain—poems, inscriptions, travel diaries, local histories, and mountain gazetteers—are the Ming (1368–1644), Qing (1644–1911), and the early Republican (Minguo) eras. I will use these sources to help contextualize Fan Chengda's experience on the mountain in 1177 and Emei's subsequent development into modern times.

As far as my own research approach is concerned, I acknowledge the influence of two distinguished scholars whose work pioneered the study of mountains in China: Édouard Chavannes (1865–1918) and Edward H. Schafer (1913–1991). Chavannes' study of Mount Tai (Taishan) published in 1910 and titled *Le Tai chan: essai du monographie d'un culte chinois* consists largely of annotated translations of relevant historical texts, prayers, and stele inscriptions. Many of the source texts used for his study were gathered by Chavannes himself in the form of rubbings taken from inscriptions in temples on or near the mountain. Chavannes' main goal was to define the role of Taishan as it relates to the Wuyue system, popular beliefs, and especially religious rites. The varied content of *Le Tai chan* reveals that he did not view the historical development of the mountain as static. Instead,

he saw a dynamic process over time that included local lore and a period of Buddhist influence. In other words, the role of Mount Tai in Chinese culture was a complex one that developed and changed over time. This is an important point that applies to all of China's *mingshan*: the way man viewed, interpreted, and used these peaks changed through the dynasties. One common paradigm related to change observed by many scholars is an initial period of Daoist-related activity followed by a later period of Buddhist influence.¹⁴ The development of Daoism and Buddhism on Mount Emei follows this same pattern.

Edward H. Schafer's monograph *Mao Shan in T'ang Times* has also played an influential role on the methodological approach followed in this book. As was the case with *Le Tai chan*, Schafer has a particular, well-focused interest: Mount Mao (Maoshan; in modern Jiangsu) and its relation to a form of Daoism known by the same name that flourished among the upper classes of China between the fifth and tenth centuries. This persuasion of Daoism is also known as Shangqing, or "Supreme Clarity." In constructing the history of Daoist and alchemical traditions associated with Maoshan and the surrounding region, Schafer mines numerous texts, especially the verses of Tang poets. The author specially notes the importance of Tang poetry as a historical-geographical source. Rather than rely solely on Daoist works concerning Maoshan, Schafer consults a wide variety of texts, such as geographical treatises and gazetteers, many of which are not Daoist in orientation. One aspect of Schafer's methodology that influenced me is that in defining Maoshan's role as a "Daoist mountain" he carefully considers landscape and natural history, including the mountain's geological base, limestone caverns, and avian community; various structures, especially religious edifices, that dotted Maoshan's landscape in the Tang; and secular life and local industries in the area. Although Schafer's main interest is religious Daoism, readers of *Mao Shan in T'ang Times* get a full picture (as far as the sources will allow) of the physical features of the mountain, why it attracted human interest, and the results of that attention. This is what I will do with Mount Emei. The trails blazed by Chavannes and Schafer have defined the basic ingredients to my research approach: close attention to all primary sources available; presentation of selected, annotated translations; and the idea of viewing the development or evolution of the mountain and its relation with humans over time as a *dynamic* rather than a static process.

Over the last twenty years or so, the study of China's mountain traditions has burgeoned in the West, especially among scholars in the United States and Europe whose main research interest is traditional Chinese religion. One of the key issues to emerge from this body of work concerns

methodology: is it productive and knowledge producing, some scholars ask, to follow the more “traditional” approach and study Chinese religion along strict sectarian and hence insulated lines? For instance, should researchers interested in one particular “Buddhist” mountain, such as Mount Wutai (Wutai shan) in Shanxi, limit their attention to only Buddhist-related texts, issues, and traditions? Should scholars concerned with a particular “Daoist” mountain, such as Mount Qingcheng (Qingcheng shan) in Sichuan, only pursue a Daoist-related research agenda? The late Anna Seidel (1938–1991) challenged this “traditional” approach, concluding it had led to the “particularly distressing gulf of mutual ignorance [that] separates Buddhist and Taoist studies.”¹⁵ One positive result of this debate has been the emergence, in the works of some scholars, of a methodological perspective that seeks to bridge the “distressing gulf of mutual ignorance” Seidel described more than a decade ago. Scholars following this interdisciplinary approach are now building bridges across traditional sectarian lines, primarily Buddhist and Daoist. In my view, there have been some excellent results to date and, assuming current publishing trends continue, we can expect to see more in the future.¹⁶

CRASHING CONTINENTS AND SALTY SEAS

*Although the geology of Asia seems to present a chaotic jumble of land forms, much of the deformation of the surface, when viewed as a whole with the help of satellite photographs, seems to fall into a simple, coherent pattern attributable to a single cause: a geological collision between the Indian subcontinent and the rest of Eurasia.*¹⁷

—Peter Molnar and Paul Tapponnier

In the early years of the twentieth century a few scientists, most notably the German meteorologist Alfred Wegener (1880–1930), suggested that the earth was once comprised of a single, massive, chunk of land, which later broke apart to form the major continents in the world today.¹⁸ Although many experts were initially skeptical about Wegener’s theory of “drifting continents,” later discoveries confirmed his hypothesis. Today most geologists agree that the world’s continents have indeed moved apart. This phenomenon has a special name: “plate tectonics.” The idea of plate tectonics is simple: the earth’s crust is made of up several rigid plates, comprised of both continents and oceans, all moving in different directions.

About forty-five million years ago, two of these continental “rafts,” the Indian plate and the Eurasian plate, collided. The land along the

impact zone was violently squeezed together, buckling and deforming the earth's crust. One major consequence of this crash of continents was the creation of the Himalayas, the highest mountains in the world. The crest of the Himalayas marks the precise collision line. Another result was the lifting of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, which established the west-to-east river drainage pattern followed by China's major rivers. Even today China is still gradually pushed eastward to make room for India's continued "drift" northward. It is the pushing motion of this displacement that causes most of China's earthquakes.

In addition to creating the Himalayas and Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, the collision between the Indian and Eurasian plates engendered widespread rifting, which in turn led to dramatic vertical uplift and subsidence. These upheavals were most intense in western China, closer to the impact zone and where the earth's crust was thickest (about 70 km/42 mi). This explains why the western part of the country is now higher than the eastern part. The elevated regions formed by this rifting process are today's mountains; those areas that subsided are today's basins and plains.

China's mountain systems are often classified according to their directional orientation, of which there are five general types: (1) west-to-east; (2) north-to-south; (3) north-to-east; (4) north-to-west; and (5) arc-shaped mountain chains. The first of these, mountain systems that run from west-to-east, are especially important because they mark key geographical boundaries in China. For instance, the Kunlun Mountain Range (Kunlun shanling) forms the dividing line between southern Xinjiang and the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. From the border of southern Xinjiang, the Kunlun Range then runs eastward into modern Qinghai province where it diverges to form the Bayan Har or Central Kunlun and Nanling chains. The second of these, the Nanling chain, extends southwest, where it forms the Min Mountains (Minshan) in northern Sichuan. This chain, in turn, continues on a southerly course and forms several smaller ranges, one of which is known as the Qionglai Mountain Range (Qionglai shanling). Mount Emei stands alone on the very southern fringe of this range.¹⁹

Before the crash of the Indian and Eurasian plates, the area now known as Sichuan, along with most of Southeast Asia, sat at the bottom of a huge, salty ocean. As a result of the great collision and later geological changes, this ancient sea vanished long ago. But remnants of its legacy, such as salt deposits, natural gas, and even marine fossils, remain deep within the bowels of Mount Emei. Access to the heart of the mountain is provided by caverns or grottoes (*dong* 洞). Emei's numerous grottoes, varying in size, are found at lower (about 650 m/2,132 ft), mid-mountain (about 1,700 m/5,576 ft), and higher elevations (about 2,100 m/6,888 ft).

In some traditional sources, these caves are collectively designated as Mount Emei's "grotto heaven" (*dongtian* 洞天). The word *tian* (or "heaven") in this expression refers to a counterworld or counteruniverse where Daoist adepts sometimes retreated to practice various meditation, visualization, and life-extending techniques.²⁰ It is not surprising, then, that Mount Emei's grottoes have long served as the setting for numerous ancient tales and as the home of some of its most famous and eccentric residents. Several of these legendary figures will be discussed in chapter 4.

SOURCE OF LIFE, ABODE OF GODS

*All mountains, big and small, have gods and spirits.*²¹

—Ge Hong (283–343)

China's first comprehensive dictionary, the *Shuowen jiezi* (or *Shuowen*), compiled by Xu Shen (ca. 55–ca. 149) in 100 AD and presented by his son to the throne in 121, defines mountains as follows: "'Mountain' means propagate vital breath and disperse and give life to the myriad beings."²² The significance of this definition cannot be overstated, for here, in what is China's most authoritative ancient dictionary, we are told that mountains propagate or exhale (*xuan* 宣) the very vital breath (*qi* 氣) of the universe, thereby dispersing and giving life (*sansheng* 散生) to the "myriad beings" (*wanwu* 萬物; that is, all living things). According to the *Shuowen jiezi*, then, mountains are the very source of life. Why would Xu Shen define mountains in such a way? At the outset we should note that rain, essential for human survival, came from the clouds that gathered above China's numerous peaks. Moreover, as in many other cultures throughout the world, because of their height mountains were viewed as points of contact between the human world and the heavens above. Related to this is the idea that mountains possess spiritual significance because they were believed to serve as the abodes of gods or spirits. This belief is confirmed in numerous ancient texts. As an example, consider the following passage from the *Record of Ritual* (*Liji*), one of the classic works of Confucianism. The extant version of this text probably dates from about the time of Xu Shen's dictionary: "Mountains and rivers are the means by which [the earth] plays host to ghosts and spirits."²³ Since mountains host spirits (*shen*), the Chinese believed they possessed spiritual power. This point plays an especially prominent role in the discussions that follow in subsequent chapters, for many people in traditional China believed that the divine or spiritual potency of mountains could, on special occasions and under the right circumstances, be tapped and used for the benefit of man.

That is not to say, however, that all mountains were thought to be allies of man. The line from the *Record of Rites* quoted in the previous paragraph mentioned that mountains also hosted ghosts (*gui*), which in China were never regarded as beneficial in human affairs. Indeed, some heights were viewed as potentially harmful to man and, at times, even deadly. As early as the fourth century, some observers still viewed mountains as what might be called “zones of terror.”²⁴ The famous literary recluse Ge Hong (283–343), one of China’s first advisers on mountain travel, offers a warning: “Most of those who are ignorant of the proper method for entering mountains will meet with misfortune and mishap.”²⁵ To avoid such calamity, Ge Hong advised would-be mountain sojourners to take certain precautions. For instance, climbers should fast for seven days before their ascent, embark only during auspicious months of the year, and always wear certain talismans. Dangling a nine-inch mirror on one’s back was believed to especially useful in warding off *mei*, or goblins.²⁶ The inspiration for Ge Hong’s advice is twofold. First, he was concerned with visitors being unfamiliar with the strange sights, sounds, beasts, and vermin who inhabit mountain environs; and second, he was worried about human encounters with ghosts or goblins. This second point is significant in our discussion. While all mountains host spirits that serve as governing deities, not all of these are “proper spirits” (*zhengshen*). Some “lesser mountains” (*xiaoshan*) have noxious spirits and thus do not bring good fortune to man.

Ge Hong’s advice and prescriptions tell us much about how man first came to understand mountains in China. In addition to their spiritual connections and attributes, mountains also have special or unusual *physical* features that inspire fear and reverence in human beings. Here I refer specifically to dramatic mountain topography, unfamiliar meteorological or geological phenomena, and strange beasts. Imagine a flatlander hearing the haunting roar of a tiger echo through one of Mount Emei’s deep, mist-shrouded canyons for the first time. When man attempts to understand or deal with the fears inspired by such places, he reasonably concludes that mountains are the abode of spirits and gods. The presence of spirits and gods offers an immediate and convenient explanation for the unusual qualities of high-altitude environments: these are unique territories that host extraordinary beings. In turn, this explanation leads to other, related conclusions. For instance, since mountains are inhabited by “local” spirits, it seems they might act as intermediaries to even higher celestial beings. Here we find the explanation as to why so many people in traditional China, from emperor to commoner, often journeyed to mountains to offer

sacrifices: mountains can serve as contact points between the mortal world and realms, powers, and beings that lie beyond.

Early in Chinese history, probably sometime during the late Zhou or early Han, a special group of peaks in China were selected by imperial authority to serve as official, state-sanctioned mountains.²⁷ These are the Wuyue, mentioned earlier. They include Mount Tai in Shandong, the “Eastern Yue”; Mount Hua (Huashan) in Shaanxi, the “Western Yue”; Mount Heng (Hengshan) in Shanxi, the “Northern Yue”; Mount Heng (Hengshan) in Hunan, the “Southern Yue”; and Mount Song (Songshan) in Henan, the “Central Yue.” In 72 BC Emperor Xuan of the Western Han dynasty (r. 74–49 BC) formally institutionalized the Wuyue and ordered that state ritual ceremonies be performed there. Government officials were dispatched to these mountains, where state rituals would be carried out. Among the most significant of these was the *feng* and *shan* rituals performed at Mount Tai in Shandong. On some occasions, emperors personally attended and participated in these ceremonies.

The purposes of these sacrifices were many. The *feng* ritual, for instance, performed on the summit of Mount Tai, was designed so the emperor could express his thanks to Heaven for conferring upon him the mandate to rule. The *shan* ritual, on the other hand, carried out at the foot of Mount Tai, offered the emperor an opportunity to express his thanks to the Earth for a bountiful harvest. These rituals and the Wuyue came to be associated with the emperor’s legitimate authority, sanctioned by Heaven, to rule. The various compass points marked out by the Wuyue signified the empire’s four geographic regions and defined the cultural boundaries of China. When this happened, the Wuyue moved beyond their local reputations and assumed roles in a comprehensive, nationwide system of religious, social, and political beliefs. Of course, there was nothing sacred or historical about these mountains until humans started “altering” them by bestowing names, defining them as sites for official state ceremonies, and associating them with various symbolic qualities.²⁸ This is essentially what happened with all of China’s so-called *mingshan*. They were first tagged, for specific reasons, with an assortment of titles or names. Over time they acquired various associations and qualities, determined in large part by location, physical geography, and especially the actions (or interactions) of humans there. It is the accumulated experience of these activities that defines a famous mountain’s place within China’s cultural cosmos.

AN EXTRAORDINARY PLACE

*Mount Emei is so high—
Its heights pierce the heavens!*²⁹

—Dagui (Ming dynasty Buddhist monk)

To most Western readers, the word “mountain” suggests a single mass of rock and earth prominently rising from the earth’s surface. Humans have always found it necessary to give names to these conspicuous land forms, especially when they are first “discovered.” Certainly one purpose of these designations is to establish an “identity” for reference purposes. For instance, it is much easier to say “Mount Whitney” than “the highest peak in the contiguous United States, located in Sequoia National Park in east-central California.”

Since ancient times the Chinese have also customarily bestowed names on their mountains, and have done so for probably the same reason. It makes sense to use specific names to identify specific places. We must be mindful, however, that the Chinese do not always use these toponyms to identify *single*, prominent elevations of earth. In fact, on many occasions what appears to many Westerners as a single name is actually a collective term referring to a *number of* peaks within a defined area. Yellow Mountain (Huangshan) in Anhui province is a good example. Its surface area covers more than 150 sq km/93 sq mi and is dotted with seventy-two individual peaks, each with a separate name. In many ways, it resembles what Americans would think of as a national park. Mount Emei’s physical layout follows this same general pattern.

The perimeter of the area usually identified as “Mount Emei” extends for more than 600 sq km/360 sq mi.³⁰ Four peaks within this zone traditionally comprised “Mount Emei.” Although each of these mountains is known by a host of different names, most often they are simply called “Big Emei,” “Second Emei,” “Third Emei,” and “Fourth Emei.” Among these, Big Emei has received the most attention. There are many reasons that account for Big Emei’s fame, but two stand out: first, it possesses some of the most sublime mountain landscape scenery in all China; and second, Big Emei’s own trio of summits marks the three loftiest points on Mount Emei. The highest of these, standing at 3,099 m/10,167 ft above sea level, is called the “Ten Thousand Buddhas Summit” (Wanfo ding). Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, all references to “Mount Emei” will be to the Big Emei section of the mountain.

Geologists often discuss the chronology of the earth’s development in terms of thirteen geological periods. The oldest rocks in the world date

from the earliest of these intervals, the Precambrian, which goes back to about four billion years ago. After the Precambrian period (roughly, 570 million years ago), the earth developed through twelve additional geological periods. One prominent feature of Mount Emei's physical environment that makes it unique is that rock from ten of the thirteen known geological periods is found there. This brings tremendous visual diversity to the physical face of the mountain. The pinkish hue of the Emei's special blend of granite, prominent at lower levels, always attracts the attention of visitors, as do the rich beds of purple and green shale. A stratum of marine limestone measuring over 1,000 m/3,280 ft thick, deposited by the great Sichuan salty sea mentioned earlier, sits on top of this granite base. Aside from limestone, Mount Emei's rich deposits of dolomite and basalt also contribute to the ever-changing physical appearance of the mountain. As for the summit, it is sheathed by a layer of dark-red basaltic lava that in some places measures 350 m/1,148 ft thick. The entire mountain is formed by a large anticline, the eastern section of which has been eroded away by the flow of rivers. This is one reason that climbing trails have always approached the mountain from the east.³¹ Experienced mountain travelers outside of China would probably not be impressed upon reading that Mount Emei's anticline rises to a height of just over 10,000 feet. There are certainly numerous peaks around the globe that reach much greater elevations. But the fact is, China's most famous mountains are not especially lofty. The main peak of Mount Tai stands 1,545 m/5,067 ft, while the highest of the Wuyue, Mount Hua in Shaanxi, measures 2,154 m/7,065 ft at its loftiest point. What distinguishes Emei shan from other mountains is its dramatic and breathtaking *verticality*. I use this term to refer to prominent, conspicuous local relief; specifically the marked elevation difference between the highest point on the mountain ("Ten Thousand Buddhas Summit") and the lowest point on the Sichuan plain far below. Consider the following: on a direct line, the distance from the base of the mountain to the summit is no more than 10 km/6.2 mi, yet the difference in elevation is 2,563 m/8,406 ft. The violent upward thrust that created Mount Emei pushed the earth's crust almost completely vertical. The steep and often serrated land forms that resulted from this uplifting, especially Mount Emei's soaring peaks and steep escarpments, some of which drop 2,000 m/6,560 ft to valleys below, all contribute to the *conspicuous* nature of the local relief around the mountain.

An inevitable result of such dramatic verticality is the creation of multiple climatic and biotic regions within the same mountain environment. On Mount Emei there are three such zones. The climate at the foot of the mountain, as well as that on the surrounding plain, is tropical, with