

BUILDING A SACRED MOUNTAIN

THE BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE
OF CHINA'S MOUNT WUTAI

WEI-CHENG LIN



BUILDING
A SACRED
MOUNTAIN

龍宮之蘭若

聖王之山嶺

大竹林之寺

中聖之頂

聖王之中觀

大聖之殊真身殿

大聖之殊真身殿

大福聖之寺

大達安之寺

大聖之殊真身殿



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The Buddhist Architecture of China's Mount Wutai

WEI-CHENG LIN

A China Program Book

University of Washington Press | Seattle and London



This book is made possible by a collaborative grant
from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.



Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from the
Millard Meiss Publication Fund of the College Art Association.

This book was also supported in part by the China Studies Program, a division of the
Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington,
and by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

© 2014 by the University of Washington Press
Printed and bound in the United States of America
Design by Barbara E. Williams; typeset by BW&A Books, Inc.
Cartography by Deborah Reade
Composed in Dante, typeface designed by Giovanni Mardersteig and Charles Malin
17 16 15 14 5 4 3 2 1

Frontispiece is a detail of Plate 10: Mount Wutai west wall mural, Mogao Cave 61.
Courtesy of Dunhuang Academy.

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University of Washington Press
PO Box 50096, Seattle, WA 98145, USA
www.washington.edu/uwpress

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lin, Wei-Cheng, 1969–

Building a sacred mountain : the Buddhist architecture of China's Mount Wutai /
Wei-Cheng Lin. — First [edition].

pages cm — (Art history publication initiative)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-295-99352-2 (hardback)

1. Wutai Mountains (China)—History. 2. Buddhist architecture—China—Wutai Mountains.
3. Buddhist monasteries—China—Wutai Mountains. 4. Buddhism and culture—China—
Wutai Mountains. I. Title.

DS793.W8222L56 2014

951'.17—dc23

2013031629

The paper used in this publication is acid-free and meets the minimum requirements of
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed
Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1984.∞

To my parents

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has been a long, twelve-year journey since I started the first research on Mount Wutai. A journey that I could never have completed without the guidance, support, and good wishes of colleagues, friends, and family along the way.

No one has provided me with more intellectual and moral support than my mentor Wu Hung, who was my advisor in this project in its early stages. No one has done more to encourage and push me to reconsider how Buddhist architecture could be defined and studied in relation to the history of the sacred mountain. I owe him the intellectual inclination, as well as the skills, to think historically, holistically, and creatively. To him, this book is offered, although I know he thinks it should have been completed years ago.

I am also indebted to Yen Chüan-ying and Katherine Taylor, who helped me conceptualize this project and who advised me in the subsequent research and writing. My great appreciation also goes to the rest of my University of Chicago community: Joel Snyder, Richard Neer, Katherine Tsiang, and Hans Thomsen for their advice at various stages of this project; and my Chicago colleagues Delin Lai, Yudong Wang, Catherine Stuer, Sun-ah Choi, and Seunghye Lee, as well as the late Cong Liu, among others, for the many conversations and discussions we shared; from them I learned a great deal in intellectual maturity and collegial relations.

Many of my teachers, colleagues, and friends have read or heard parts of this work, and offered their honest and valuable comments. I am truly grateful for Michael Nylan's correction of my use of the term *zhenrong*; Yumin Lee's kind words on my study of Mogao Cave 61; insightful opinions from an anonymous reader of *Artibus Asiae* regarding the icon of the "new-mode" Mañjuśrī; and much feedback and encouragement from Wendi Adamek, Raoul Birnbaum, Sheng-chih Lin, Shu-fen Liu, Amy McNair, Liang-wen Pan, Shou-chien Shih, Michelle Wang, and Dorothy Wong. During my several trips to China, I could not have accomplished much at all without timely and generous help from Chai Zejun, Li Qingquan, Li Yuqun, Zhang Zong, and Zheng Yan. Special thanks are owed to Shi Jinming, the director of Shanxi Provincial Museum, whose enthusiastic assistance made each of my trips to Shanxi much easier and more enjoyable. Fan Jinshi, Peng Jinzhang, and Zhao Shengliang of Dunhuang Academy were also wonderful supporters of my project during my research trips in Dunhuang.

My colleagues in the Triangle Area have provided me with their unfailing support in the past five years since I arrived in Chapel Hill. My thanks go to Stanley

Abe, Glaire Anderson, Jan Bardsley, Paroma Chatterjee, Eduardo Douglas, Pika Ghosh, Jim Hirschfield, Li-ling Hsiao, Michelle King, Cary Levin, Charles D. Orzech, Mary Sheriff, Daniel Sherman, Wenhua Shi, and Jiayun Zhuang. Beyond creating a rich and stimulating intellectual environment, these colleagues have helped me in various ways through the difficult times and frustrations I encountered while writing my book. Hsi-chu Bolick, East Asian bibliographer at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, deserves a special note for never failing to answer any of my requests. I also benefited from the Carolina Asia Center, the Program in Medieval and Modern Studies, and the University Research Council of UNC at Chapel Hill for their research support, which made the completion and publication of my book possible.

I would also like to express my appreciation to those who have generously assisted me in preparing my manuscript and illustrations. I owe much to Shih-shan Susan Huang for sharing many useful tips about publishing a first book, and Jason Steuber for his expertise and advice in the publication business. Thanks also to Beverly Foit-Albert, Guo Zhicheng, Jungmin Ha, Sonya Lee, Li Yuqun, Puay-peng Ho, Sun Xiaogang, Katherine R. Tsiang, Yen Chüan-ying, Zhang Zong, Zhao Shengliang, and Zhao Xiaoxing, as well as the Academia Sinica, Daigoji, Dunhuang Academy, Seiryōji, and Wenwu Press, for permitting me to use their images. In particular, I am very grateful to Lin Zhu for granting me the right to use Liang Sicheng's drawings, and to Fu Xinian who graciously let me use his drawings of Foguang Monastery. I also appreciate Chia-ling Chen, Dora C. Y. Ching, Annie Feng, Guo Daiheng, Alexandra Harrer, Shih-ming Pai, Sarai Mai, Mei Mei, and Wang Guixiang for their help with acquisition of image permissions. At the University of Washington Press, I am fortunate to have worked with Lorri Hagman and her excellent staff, and appreciate their patience and effort in guiding me through the stressful but valuable learning process of producing a book. I also wish to thank the two anonymous readers of my manuscript for their careful and thoughtful comments, which greatly improved the quality and arguments of the book. Thanks also go to Margaret McCormack, Deborah Reade, and Carol Wengler for their assistance with various aspects of the production, to Barbara Williams and her team for managing the production so patiently and professionally, and to Maura High for her meticulous and excellent copyediting that truly improved the overall quality of the book.

Last, this book bears my utmost gratitude to my parents, for their unceasing love and support throughout my career. They never fail to encourage me by letting me know they care for whatever I do and have confidence that I will succeed. Without their support, the long journey would not have been completed. My final thanks is reserved for my wife, Kim, whose unconditional support and untiring proofreading of my manuscript many, many, many times over are forever remembered. Also not forgotten is that in the past busy years of my career, she has been a wonderful and dedicated mother to our son, Joseph, who has learned to say, "Baba, you should go write your book," when he wants me to let him be. To all of you, I am forever grateful.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINESE DYNASTIES

Shang	ca. 1600–ca. 1045 BCE	Northern Dynasties	386–581
Zhou	1045–256 BCE	Northern Liang	398–439
Western Zhou	1045–771 BCE	Northern Wei (Tuoba)	386–534
Eastern Zhou	770–256 BCE	Eastern Wei	534–49
Spring and Autumn		Western Wei	535–56
(Chunqiu)	770–476 BCE	Northern Qi	550–77
Warring States		Northern Zhou	557–81
(Zhanguo)	475–221 BCE	Sui	581–617
Qin	221–206 BCE	Tang	618–907
Han	202 BCE–220 CE	Liao (Khitan)	916–1125
Western Han	202 BCE–9 CE	Five Dynasties	907–1279
Xin (Wang Mang's		Song	960–1279
Usurpation)	9–23	Northern Song	960–1127
Eastern Han	25–220	Southern Song	1127–279
Three Kingdoms	220–65	Yuan	1260–368
Wei	220–65	Ming	1368–644
Shu Han	220–63	Qing	1644–911
Wu	222–80		
Western Jin	265–317		
Eastern Jin	317–420		
Southern Dynasties	420–589		
Liu Song	420–79		
Southern Qi	479–502		
Liang	502–57		
Chen	557–89		

BUILDING
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Early Buddhist Monastic Architecture in Context

Mountain cults in China may have developed long before the creation of the written word.¹ Since antiquity, mountains were thought to embody the mythical and primordial power and energy that created cosmological order, structured geographical hierarchy, and sanctioned political authority. Soaring between heaven and earth, mountains were considered not only places inhabited by the divine but divinities themselves.² As China's dynastic history unfolded, mountains with extraordinary features found their way onto the imperial map as physical and territorial markers and anchors of the land under heaven within which the emperor ruled.³ Mountains received sacrifices and revealed the heavenly mandate, for the greater a mountain was, the more spiritually potent it became, as the epigraph taken from Ge Hong's *Master Who Embraces Simplicity* emphasizes. The myth, the imagined, and the imaginary were forged to cultivate the natural into something admirable, awesome, and sacred; myth and history in this case were equally important in the formation of what has been termed Chinese mountain culture (*shan wenhua*).⁴ After Buddhism arrived in China in the first century CE, however, this culture, with its conception of mountains and the practices of mountain cults, was significantly modified, and took a very different trajectory.

Never before in China had a mountain cult been established because a specific, named deity was said to reside in the mountain and assist and benefit religious practitioners. Mount Wutai was the first to be accorded recognition as *the* Buddhist "sacred mountain," and it was granted this status because the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, or Wenshu Pusa, one of the great bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism, was believed to live there.⁵ This recognition, in a land where Buddhism was initially a foreign religion, began no earlier than the fifth century CE and continued into the Tang dynasty (618–907), as Mount Wutai developed not only as the domicile of the bodhisattva but eventually as one of the most important Buddhist centers in Tang China, drawing pilgrims from neighboring nations such as India, the birthplace of Buddhism.⁶ The importance and popularity of the new "sacred mountain" cult at Mount Wutai is evident in the restructuring of Buddhist

*All mountains, whether larger
or smaller, have gods and spir-
its. If the mountain is large, the
god is great; if the mountain is
small, the god is minor.*

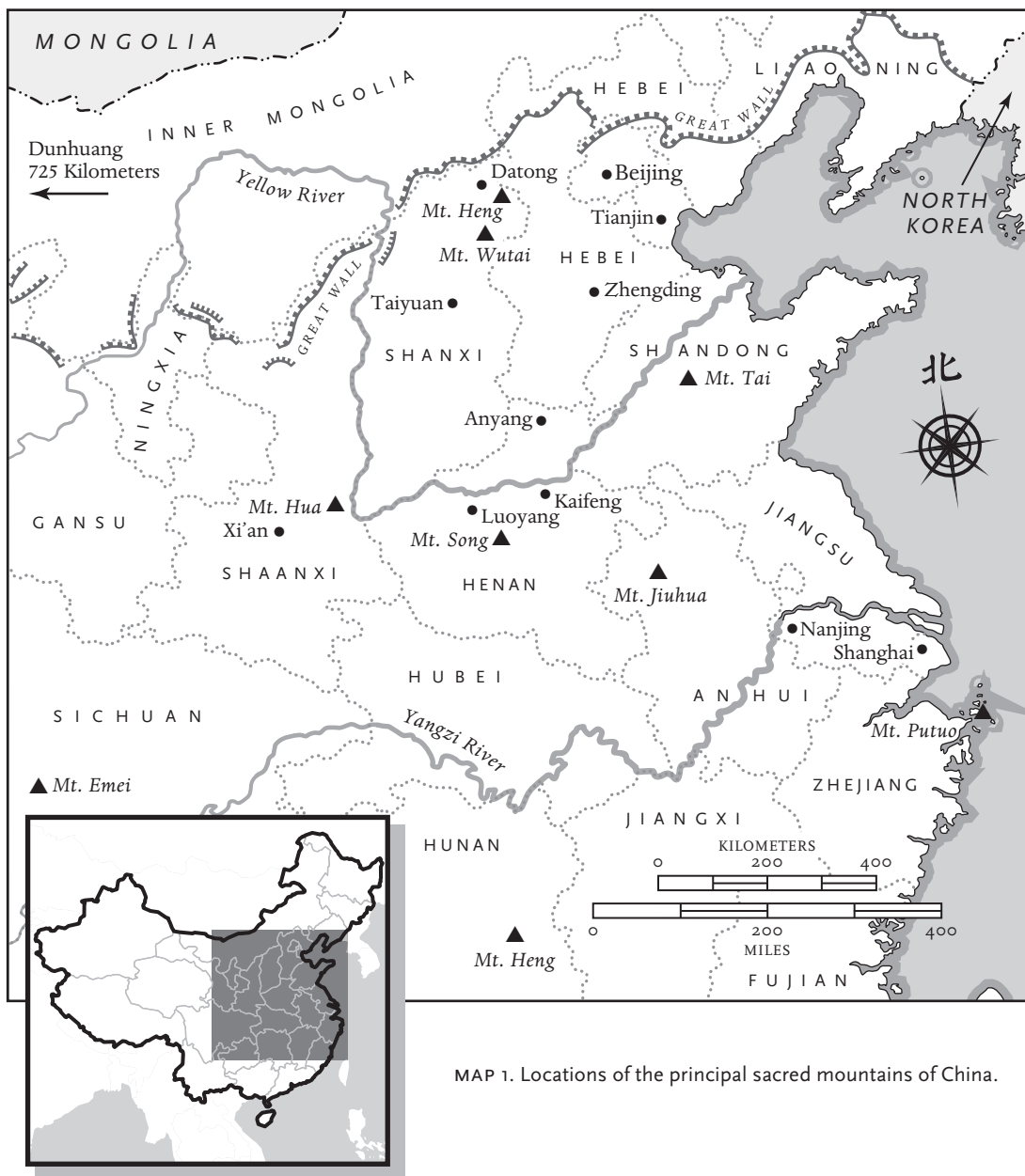
—Ge Hong, *Master Who
Embraces Simplicity* (Baopuzi)

sacred geography after the identification of Mount Wutai as a Buddhist mountain, when Buddhism's geographic center in India gradually shifted to China from the fifth through the tenth centuries.⁷ What is more, Mount Wutai was only the first of four mountains recognized in premodern China as associated with specific Buddhist bodhisattvas, and the pattern by which it was built into a Buddhist sacred site became the model for the later three.⁸ It is not an overstatement to say that Mount Wutai occupied one of the most prominent positions in China's religious geography and played a paramount role in the early Buddhism of medieval China, from the end of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) until the end of the tenth century.⁹

Mount Wutai's development into a Buddhist sacred mountain involved a complex historical process that domesticated and localized the sacred presence of the foreign deity in ways that show how Buddhism was realized, practiced, and expressed in the religious landscape of medieval China. When the history of Mount Wutai is examined against long-standing Chinese mountain culture, several fundamental questions arise: How was Mount Wutai, a native mountain whose early history was relatively unknown, converted into a Buddhist mountain? How was its natural terrain sanctified in Buddhist terms and its sacrality revealed to believers? And what did the transformation of the site and maintenance of its sacrality entail? Did monastic architecture, built or unbuilt (e.g., in visionary experience), help establish Mount Wutai as *the* sacred mountain by reconfiguring and reconceiving its topography and thus affirming its sacrality?

Studies of sacred sites have often begun with issues related to pilgrimage, placing much emphasis on the history and legends of site, saints, or miraculous events.¹⁰ Concepts such as rites of passage or *communitas* have also been evoked, focusing on the transformative experience of pilgrimage to the site but not on the site itself.¹¹ A sacred site, however, also belongs to a spatial category—located at a geographical place, characterized by its topographic features, and delimited in a specific space—such that the sacrality of the site is also necessarily bound and explicated in spatial concepts and physical terms.

It was a deeply rooted view in ancient Chinese mountain culture that all mountains were potentially numinous and potent. At least two sets of determinants influenced the construction of sacred mountains. First were their intrinsic qualities. Mountains inspired spiritual associations by virtue of their extraordinary topographies—tremendous mass and height or unusual features such as grottos, caverns, chasms, and so on—suggesting not only solidity and endurance but also a mythical interior of secret treasures, energy, or power. Also, mountains were surrounded by clouds and emitted vapors, as if they were breathing, so were thought of as the source of life that nurtures all things and beings. Mountains, moreover, contain spectacular rock formations and harbor strange flora and fauna. All these natural and physical characteristics are intrinsic to mountains and can be cultivated, revealed, and explored. The second set of qualities is extrinsic. They include apparitions and visions peculiar to the mountain; relics, images, or texts originating elsewhere yet miraculously uncovered there; or steles, shrines, or other buildings that mark the site—all exterior to the mountain proper but weav-

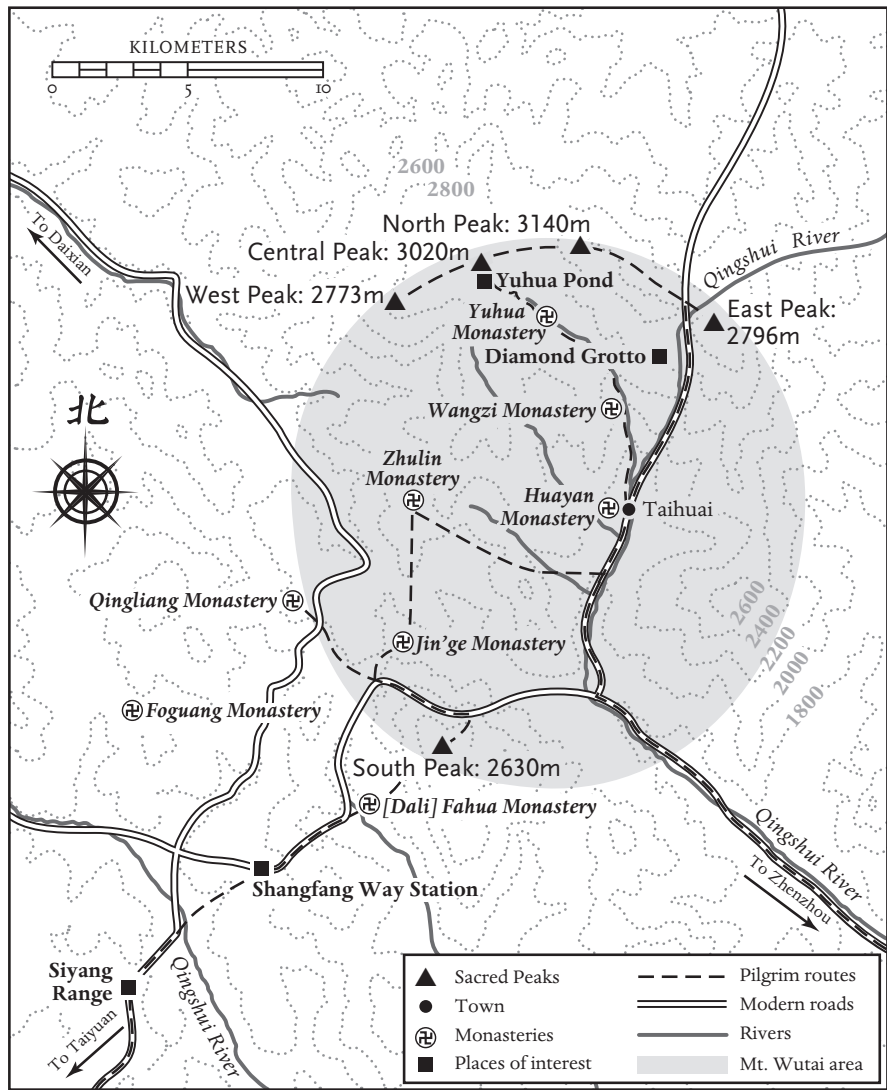


MAP 1. Locations of the principal sacred mountains of China.

ing layers of significance into the mountain topography. These also bring about particular viewpoints—bureaucratic, historical, and religious or related to myth, memory, and imagination—in dialogue with intrinsic characteristics to provide the language with which sacred mountains can be described and their sacrality defined.

Located in present-day Shanxi Province in northern China (map 1), the sacred area of Mount Wutai extends over an extensive mountainous region, approximately 336 square kilometers in size.¹² Although it is referred to as a mountain

MAP 2. The area of Mount Wutai, bounded by West, Central, North, and East Peaks in the north and the South Peak in the south.



(shan), Mount Wutai is actually a cluster of mountains with five towering peaks, each with a high and roughly domed or terrace-like grassy mountaintop—as indicated in its Chinese name, Wutaishan, which literally means “mountain of five terraces.” Although not corresponding exactly to the cardinal directions, the five peaks have since the mountain’s earliest history been designated based on their relative positions: Western, Central, Northern, and Eastern Peaks clustered in the north, and the Southern Peak in the far south (map 2). The highest of the five peaks is the Northern Peak at 3,140 meters above sea level; the lowest, the Southern Peak at 2,630 meters. Together, the five peaks encircle and demarcate the area known as Mount Wutai.

Mount Wutai’s prominent topography would have appeared to Buddhist practitioners in medieval China as more than merely natural; it would have also had

some numinous and spiritual quality. Ennin (794–864), a Japanese pilgrim monk, who arrived at Mount Wutai in 840, was deeply moved when he first saw the sacred mountain: “[As soon as] I saw the Central Peak while heading toward the northwest, I prostrated myself on the ground and worshiped it. Here was the realm presided over by Mañjuśrī. Its five [sacred] peaks were round and tall, yet without vegetation, shaped thus like overturned bronze bowls. Gazing at them from afar, my tears rained down involuntarily. Plants and flowers that grew here were rare and different from elsewhere; how extraordinary this place was!”¹³ The looming peaks were unmistakably the five sacred markers of the holy domain where the rare flora grew; but the power of the extraordinary place lay, more importantly, in the presiding bodhisattva, who had come to reside at the mountain site and whose presence its landscape evoked. As Ennin concluded: “This is Mount Qingliang [Mount Wutai], the Golden World [Pure Land of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī], who manifests himself right here for our benefit.”¹⁴

Indeed, the process of Mount Wutai’s changing identity from native mountain to a Buddhist sacred site can be characterized as a shift from a *place*-oriented conception to a *presence*-oriented one. As has been suggested by scholars, hagiography in miraculous legends, acts, or visions necessarily includes a spatial dimension, which establishes the meaning and spiritual import of sacred topography.¹⁵ The conversion of Mount Wutai involved a historical process of reappropriating, reinterpreting, or even replacing the intrinsic determinants of the sacred site with extrinsic ones.¹⁶ Thus the initially foreign deity, Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, was seen and located in the native mountain through ritual, vision, and architecture. In this regard, the monastic architecture at Mount Wutai was built not so much to partake in the numinous qualities intrinsic to the sacred site as to construct and construe the sacrality of the site by virtue of its own built environment. Buddhist architecture was one of the primary, if not the most prominent, means of cultural and material intervention through which Mount Wutai was developed into the first Buddhist sacred mountain in medieval China.

In recent years, studies of Chinese sacred geography have departed from the earlier practice of separating the sacred and the profane into exclusive categories,¹⁷ instead seeing the sacred as constructed and contested by various influxes, not only religious or spiritual but also sociopolitical and historical. In addition, studies on space and place have contributed analytical terms and methodologies for understanding how the sacred could be valorized in spatial experience and localized in place.¹⁸ This “spatial turn,” which recognizes the critical role of space and place in the perception and conception of the sacred, is also coupled with a strong emphasis on the temporal aspect of the sacred geography; that is, in recognizing the multiple histories and multivalent significance of a sacred site as it evolves and fluctuates in the *longue durée*, as we know from several recent studies.¹⁹ The different religious traditions coexisting at Mount Heng (Hengshan), also known as the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue), has been analyzed from a microhistorical viewpoint. A “cultural stratigraphy” has been proposed to account for the multilayered narratives of pilgrimage that have accumulated around Mount Tai (Taishan), or

the Eastern Sacred Peak (Dongyue). Likewise, attention has been drawn to the “complex amalgam” of nature, history, religion, and human experiences in the historical development of Mount Emei (Emeishan) as a Chinese sacred mountain.²⁰ This book shares with those studies a view of sacred geography as multifaceted, requiring an approach both contextual and interdisciplinary to unravel its complexity. Architecture—its site, space, image, and built environment—provides a critical point of access to this complexity, as well as to the essential concepts, practices, and history of Chinese sacred mountains.

This use of architecture as the primary lens of investigation is also apt for my topic, particularly in the context of the broader religious and material culture of this period. Medieval China, already enthusiastic for material luxuries, developed a fascination with the material world without negating the potential of that world as the agent, sign, form, or embodiment of the divine.²¹ Material objects or things were not rejected but often considered indispensable to the understanding and attainment of the immaterial. For example, it was thought that miracle-performing relics could inspire the “corporeal imagination” and living icons could elicit a “visceral vision”; in these cases, the corporeal and visceral rendered the sacred and potent more immanent and experiential.²² In the same vein, architecture was not simply the building of structures; it was material-spatial construction that could structure and represent the divine presence in its fullest manifestation. By extension, the larger, built environment of a monastic complex and the mountain landscape, reconfigured and reconceived by the building of monasteries, could also reveal the manner in which the devotee perceived the divine.²³ An icon from Mount Wutai depicting Mañjuśrī mounted on the back of a lion was known as the “icon of the true presence of Mañjuśrī” (*Wenshu zhenrong xiang*). Despite its materiality, the statue was believed to be able to manifest the true divinity of the bodhisattva. A monastic structure or “image hall” was then built to enshrine the icon at the very place where the bodhisattva was recorded to have been frequently encountered. Named after the icon, this image hall was called the Cloister of Mañjuśrī’s True Presence (*Wenshu Zhenrong Yuan*), its purpose to locate the amorphous presence of the divine, realized not only in the materially bound icon but also in the space of the physical building. The hall was built on the highest ground of the monastery, at the very center of the sacred mountain area. In this symbolic and spatial functionality, the architecture mediated the ways in which the icon would be perceived, approached, and venerated, while the icon itself, in the built environment of the monastery, would in turn make the faithful feel as if they were in Mañjuśrī’s true presence, at the center of his terrestrial domicile.

Monastic architecture, in its multiple capacities and functionalities, is the key to Mount Wutai’s sacrality, as it developed from a natural mountain into a Buddhist one. Serving as it did a new belief system, the Buddhist monastery, as an instance of Chinese architecture, cannot be properly discussed except in the context of the new religion. Since China had never before produced a separate building style or tradition exclusively for Buddhism, a monastery could be so identified only by the monastic functions it served or the divinity it accommodated. Thus, as I examine

the roles that monastic architecture played in transforming Mount Wutai, I will use the history of the sacred site to provide contextual frameworks in which this architecture can be analyzed and defined. It is in such an intercontextual investigation that we begin to see the emergence of the sacral architecture, or architecture of the sacred,²⁴ in medieval China, one that was developed and built alongside the rise of Buddhism.

Beyond Physical Structure: Foguang Monastery in Its Modern and Historical Context

By its most straightforward definition, architecture is the art or practice of designing and constructing buildings, and it concerns itself most directly with the physical form, building material, and architectonic structure of buildings, built or unbuilt (as in the case of architectural plans, representations, the imagination, etc.). Architecture also refers to various “ideas” of the building—as dwelling or living space, sacred or secular, real or utopian.²⁵ Sacral architecture incorporates both these definitions, in that it goes beyond physical structure, encompassing building as defined, portrayed, or revealed in text, legend, image, or vision in direct relation to the discourse of sacrality. Monasteries are often discussed as mere architectural “containers” for the actions of a religious community. Yet, as Buddhist textual records testify, a monastery is also described in terms such as the setting of the natural or urban landscape; its contents of relics, statuary, paintings, and powerful deities that fill the architectural space; and the history accrued through such means as hagiography, divine presence, and imperial recognition.²⁶ Monastic architecture in this regard is not just a building structure but an integral component in dialogue and dialectic relation with other monastic components, which together gave form and substance to the monastery as a religious/sacred institution—in medieval China, as elsewhere.

A diary left by an unnamed pilgrim who traveled to Mount Wutai in the early tenth century includes an itinerary of his visit. Although fragmentary, it provides a glimpse into one of the most famous monasteries of the sacred site, the Monastery of Buddha’s Radiance (Foguangsi):²⁷

After traveling for forty *li* I arrived at Foguang Monastery. At night on the twenty-seventh day of the fifth lunar month, I witnessed [at the monastery] luminous lanterns in a cloud form [flying] in the dark [sky] eighteen times. Meanwhile [I also worshiped at] the Main Buddha Hall, a building with a seven-bay facade, containing a Buddha triad in the middle, flanked by Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī on one side and Bodhisattva Samantabhadra on the other. At the Maitreya Pavilion, a three-story building with a seven-bay facade, [I venerated] seventy-two worthies, ten thousand bodhisattvas, and sixteen Lohans. There were also the relics pagoda of Monk Jietuo [561–642] and another one for Suozigu [n.d.]. They were said to have been Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra reincarnated [in this world]. The grand building of the Constant Abiding

[Changzhu] Cloister had a five-bay facade; its upper story was used as a sutra repository, and the lower section, living quarters for the assembly, daily lodging more than five hundred people. In addition, the monastery also had many other rooms, corridors, halls, various structures, and several other cloisters; there were simply too many to count every meritorious devotion and ritual taking place inside the monastery.²⁸

As suggested in this pilgrim's account, the monastic architecture at Foguang Monastery appeared as part of its overall religious scene and landscape. Not separate from visions (e.g., flying lanterns), icons, or legends, the "sacral architecture" included the ritual ensemble and the ambience, helping the practitioner envision the transcendent reality of Mount Wutai and experience the holy presence of the presiding bodhisattva.

Focusing beyond the physical building and its textual representation, therefore, this book tracks and analyzes the building of the monastic architecture of the site from idea to actuality as a process of thinking, expression, and practice of the religion. Also, because representation operates in motifs and vocabularies, how the monastery was represented cannot be separated from the motifs and vocabularies with which it was discussed and built, nor the motifs and vocabularies from the monastery. It is thus important, when we consider the study of medieval Chinese architecture, to do so with this new set of agendas in mind.

To students of Chinese architecture, Mount Wutai will not be unfamiliar, for it retains one of the nation's oldest surviving timber structures, the Great Buddha Hall (Da Fodian) at Foguang Monastery (plate 1), the same monastery visited by the tenth-century pilgrim quoted above.²⁹ Dating from 857, the Great Buddha Hall is one of only four timber structures surviving from Tang-era China, and it is the grandest in scale and highest ranked in structural style. It was brought to light in 1937 by members of the Institute for Research in Chinese Architecture (Zhongguo Yingzao Xueshe) led by the preeminent architectural historian Liang Sicheng (1901–72).³⁰ Its "discovery" in the modern era as the then earliest surviving example of Chinese traditional timber structure guaranteed it attention then, and continues to attract it today. Its reentry into history in the 1930s, however, also brought it into a completely different context. Architectural historians since Liang Sicheng have focused on its timber-frame structure. The building was studied carefully, its structure examined and compared with the official medieval building manual, *Treatise on Architectural Methods* (Yingzao fashi), promulgated in 1103, with regard to its building method and formal features.³¹ Liang produced precise and detailed diagrams (figs. 1.1a, 1.1b) to illustrate the structural principles and form, facilitating a more abstract analysis, which transformed an age-old building craft into a modern discipline. With its striking profile and style, the Great Buddha Hall at Foguang Monastery embodies the excellence of its historical heritage, in which it serves as the "iconic prototype" of its own architectural tradition and pedigree.³² For Liang Sicheng and many of his colleagues and later students, rather than merely a Buddhist monastic complex, Foguang Monastery was more importantly



FIGURE 1.1a. Section and elevation of the Great Buddha Hall, Foguang Monastery, Mount Wutai. 857 CE. From Liang, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*, fig. 24j. Diagram courtesy of Lin Zhu.

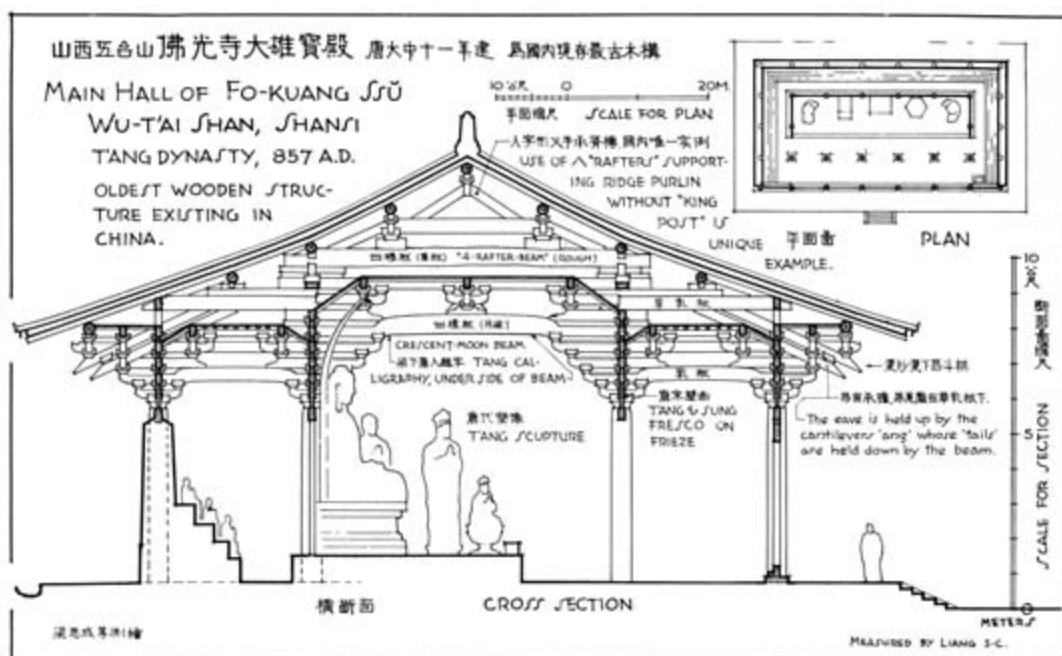


FIGURE 1.1b. Cross section of the Great Buddha Hall, Foguang Monastery. From Liang, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*, fig. 24k. Diagram courtesy of Lin Zhu.

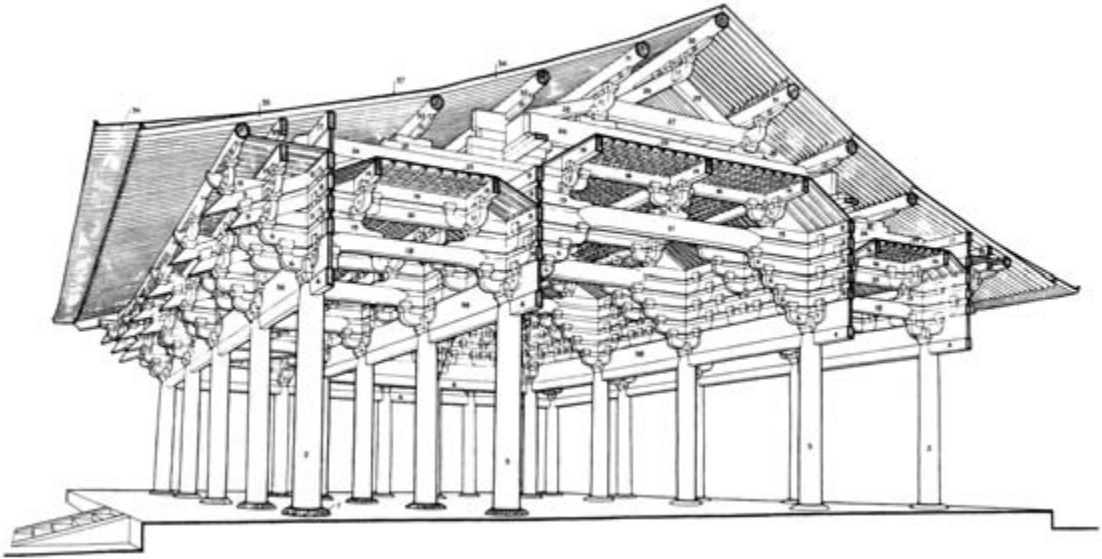


FIGURE I.2.
Orthogonal view of
the Great Buddha
Hall, Foguang
Monastery. After Fu
Xinian, “Wutaishan
Foguangsī jianzhū,”
fig. 4. Diagram
courtesy of Fu
Xinian.

a *locus classicus* in China’s architectural history. It is in this new, modern context that the significance of the building was discovered anew.

While the Great Buddha Hall continues to captivate scholars as a cultural relic, the modern discovery of Foguang Monastery also raises questions. The Great Buddha Hall was investigated in an analytic framework that was largely predetermined by a focus on its structural system and historical evolution, and the terms of analysis were much aligned with the modernist emphasis of Liang Sicheng’s times on structural rationalism and formalism.³³ After Liang’s death in 1972, though the historical circumstances greatly changed, the structural approach and vocabulary that Liang introduced continued to be dominant. The structural framework of Chinese wooden buildings is visualized even more rigorously, illustrated in the fully detailed orthogonal perspective (fig. I.2) created by Liang’s students, which turned the three-dimensional building into an abstract simulacrum. Most recently, from 2004 to 2006, a research team from the School of Architecture at Tsinghua University (the program founded by Liang Sicheng in 1946), using X-ray scanning tools, conducted a scientific investigation of the Great Buddha Hall, measuring each structural component and its current condition and revealing different modular systems used throughout the building.³⁴ We have gained much more knowledge since 1937 about the structural skeleton of the Buddha Hall and its importance in the history of Chinese wooden architecture, but at stake is the cultural and religious context inscribed in the skin of the building, so to speak, which has faded almost into oblivion.

The Great Buddha Hall is a single-story structure, seven bays across and four bays deep, standing on a foundation of 34 by 17.66 meters.³⁵ It matches the scale of the main image hall described in the travel diary of the tenth-century pilgrim. As the diary recorded, the Great Buddha Hall contains the original triad of the three Buddhas, Śākyamuni, Amitābha, and Maitreya, flanked by two bodhisatt-



FIGURE I.3. Main icons enshrined in the Great Buddha Hall, Foguang Monastery. 857 CE. The central three main deities visible in back row, from right to left, are the Buddhas Maitreya, Śākyamuni, and Amitābha; they are in turn flanked by the bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī at the farther end of the altar and Samantabhadra at the closer end outside the picture. Each of the three main Buddhas is also flanked by two attending (standing) bodhisattvas and two kneeling bodhisattvas presenting offerings. From Chai and Chai, *Shanxi gudai caisu*, 37. Photograph by permission of Wenwu Press.

vas, Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra (fig. I.3). Also surviving at Foguang Monastery (fig. I.4) are an early-Tang relics pagoda (*shenta*), likely one of the two pagodas mentioned in the diary, and two sutra pillars (*jingchuang*), one of which bears the date 857 and engravings of a *dhāraṇī* sutra pivotal in the history of Mount Wutai.³⁶ A smaller structure, the Hall of Mañjuśrī (Wenshu Dian), enshrining a statue of Mañjuśrī riding a lion (fig. I.5), was built in 1137 during the first revival period in the monastery's post-Tang history. The statue, in an iconic style of the bodhisattva's "true presence" specifically tied to the sacred mountain, may have been the reason Foguang Monastery was later renamed the Chan Monastery of the True Presence of Buddha's Radiance (Foguang Zhenrong Chanyuan), as stated on the large Ming-period plaque hanging over the central entrance of the Great Buddha Hall (fig. I.6; see also fig. C.2).³⁷

Stepping outside the monastery in 1937, Liang Sicheng was awed by the magnificent view of the mountains surrounding the Tang monastic complex. A similar

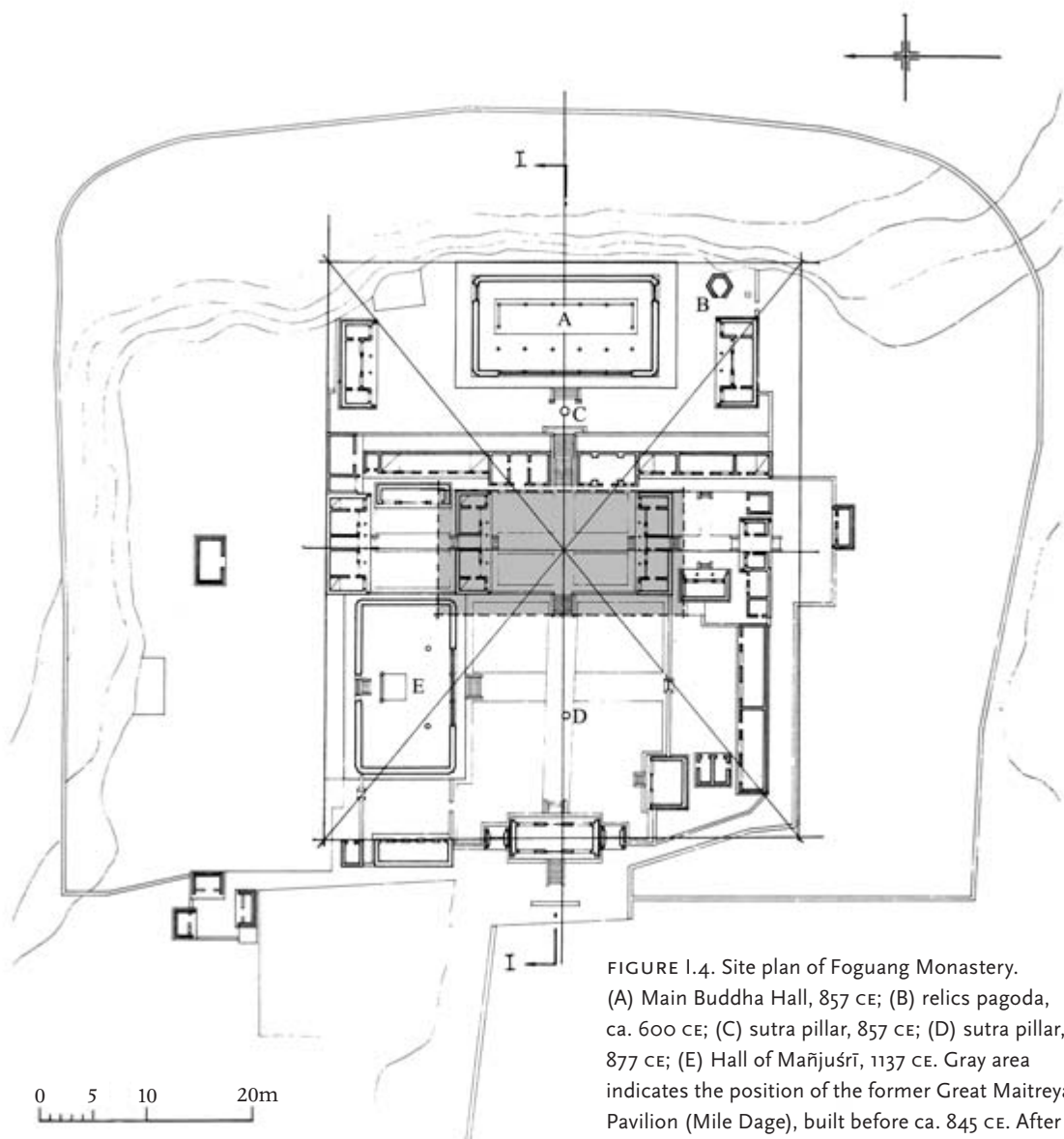


FIGURE 1.4. Site plan of Foguang Monastery. (A) Main Buddha Hall, 857 CE; (B) relics pagoda, ca. 600 CE; (C) sutra pillar, 857 CE; (D) sutra pillar, 877 CE; (E) Hall of Mañjuśrī, 1137 CE. Gray area indicates the position of the former Great Maitreya Pavilion (Mile Dage), built before ca. 845 CE. After Fu Xinian, “Wutaishan Foguangsi jianzhu,” 235. Diagram courtesy of Fu Xinian.

landscape also inspired Zhencheng (1546–1617), author of the Ming gazetteer of Mount Wutai, to describe the monasteries at the sacred site in 1595: “Of the monasteries at Mount Wutai, some are embraced amid the five peaks, some emerge between mountains, some arise from rocky peaks, and some soar high atop the clouds. Pavilions and towers of monasteries appear in the misty air; temple bells chime and resound in the smoke of incense fragrance. The Golden Pavilion floats aloft as if a heavenly city manifests itself. . . . In such an inconceivable realm the sacred land looms miraculously.”³⁸ Chiming bells, smoking incense, and monastic buildings were all part of the sacred landscape of Mount Wutai, creating a reli-



FIGURE 1.5. The “true-presence” (*zhenrong*) icon of Mañjuśrī riding a lion, Hall of Mañjuśrī (Wenshu Dian), Foguang Monastery. 1137 CE. From Liang, “Ji Wutaishan Foguangsi de jian-zhu,” *Wenwu cankao ziliao*, pl. 42.

gious aura and aspiring to the inconceivable. But only through monasteries did the sense of the sacredness of the site become more perceivable and experiential.

The intimate correlation between the mountain and monasteries at Mount Wutai is suggested in an enormous mural that depicts a panorama of Mount Wutai inside a tenth-century image cave in Mogao near Dunhuang, an important Buddhist center lying at the western border of Tang China, approximately three thousand kilometers from Mount Wutai.³⁹ Ten building complexes labeled as “great” (*da*) monasteries are depicted across the width of the mural, and among them is a walled cloister enclosing a two-story building and identified in the accompanying cartouche as Foguang Monastery (plate 2). Neither isolated from the surroundings nor separated from a large monastic network, Foguang Monastery was built within the sacred terrain of Mount Wutai and the historical matrix of the site. Yet Foguang Monastery as depicted in the mural bears no resemblance to any of the existing

FIGURE 1.6. Name plaque inscribed “The Chan Monastery of the True Presence of Buddha’s Radiance,” over the entrance to the Great Buddha Hall, Foguang Monastery. 1614 CE. Photograph by author.



structures; in fact, the Mount Wutai in the visual representation yields no obvious cartographic reference to its reality except for the five sacred peaks. As a representation, however, the mural with its visual vocabularies and tropes (see chapter 6) was meant to transform the sacred site into an “image” that mediates between viewer and the depicted architecture, spatial practice, spiritual experience, and the evoked visions, all together as a holistic experience. Integrated in the cohesive and hegemonic landscape of the sacred mountain, the monastic architecture in both reality and imagery served to structure physically, symbolically, and representationally the access to the sacrality of the site.

To address the gap between our understanding of Chinese Buddhist monasteries and the ways monasteries were represented in history as sanctified institutions or numinous sites,⁴⁰ this book brings both textual and visual representations of the monastery into discussion. Yet monasteries at Mount Wutai were also physical structures built at the mountain site as part of the religious landscape in both architectural and topographic terms. The physical site, topography, and building structures, forms, and practices all substantiate the perceptual representation and conceptual discourse of monasteries. Outside the scope of this study are the building styles, structural details, and trades involved in timber-frame architecture in medieval China, the analysis of which would in any case be limited by the small

number of examples surviving from this early period. Instead, I concentrate on identifying the ways in which the Buddhist “sacral architecture” developed in medieval China, in order to illuminate both the ontological and contextual roles of monasteries—as built, recorded, visualized, or imagined—in the historical trajectory in which Mount Wutai was transformed into *the* sacred mountain.

Toward an Intercontextual Study of Monastic Architecture at Mount Wutai

Even before the excursion taken by Liang Sicheng and his colleagues into the mountainous area of Mount Wutai in 1937, several Japanese scholars had already ventured to the sacred site, photographing mountain scenery and monastic buildings, including the Great Buddha Hall of Foguang Monastery. As early as the 1920s, Japanese scholars in Buddhist history and art and architectural history had published articles about Mount Wutai.⁴¹ What most interested them were the long-standing history of the sacred mountain and the structures and artifacts surviving in situ that witnessed the rise and fall of the ancient site. Their photographs and writings depicted monasteries at Mount Wutai as part of the site’s religious history, activities, and topography (fig. 1.7). But detailed research on specific monasteries or a historical overview of monasteries built at Mount Wutai had not yet been attempted.

The first monograph to take a more inclusive approach, aiming to provide a historical survey of Mount Wutai’s past and present, is the landmark work *Godaisan* (Mount Wutai), coauthored by two Japanese scholars, Ono Katsutoshi (1905–88) and Hibino Takeo (b. 1914) in 1942.⁴² Realizing the enormous spatial expansion of the mountain range and the wealth of its visible and invisible histories and legends, Ono and Hibino decided to divide their book into two sections: the first gives a history of the site (*rekishi*), and the second, their personal observations of Mount Wutai as they found it, written in the form of travelogue (*kikō*).⁴³ Brought together, the two halves ably recapitulate the long history of Mount Wutai. Informative and historical as it is, however, this first book-length research on Mount Wutai fits better in the category of the traditional gazetteer, although supplemented and updated with photographs, building diagrams, site plans, maps, and bibliography. The two different sections also testify to the fact that Mount Wutai in the early twentieth century was already a very different site from the medieval one that the authors tried to retrieve.

At the start of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), indeed, Mount Wutai was revitalized after a short period of decline but with a rather different religious outlook.⁴⁴ The Manchu emperors, pious believers of Tibetan Buddhism (which like Chinese Buddhism regards Mount Wutai as an extremely important sacred site), supported the monastery authorities and sponsored extensive building projects in the mountains, converting major monasteries into centers of Tibetan Buddhist practice throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The increasing presence of Tibetan Buddhism decisively changed the practices, traditions, and schools with



FIGURE 1.7. View of the valley and the town of Taihuai, the geographic center of Mount Wutai and the site of its largest monastic complex, Great Huayan Monastery (Da Huayansi), during the Tang period. Early 20th century. From Tokiwa and Sekino, *Shina bukk'yō shiseki*, vol. 5, pl. 4.

which the monasteries had previously been associated. Over time, Mount Wutai was altered so much that its present state little resembles the well-documented religious landscape when the sacred mountain cult first flourished in the Tang dynasty; the physical structure remains, in the five peaks, the famous (numinous) places, and buildings and icons such as the Great Buddha Hall and statues inside Foguang Monastery. The challenge for any historical project of the sacred mountain is how to reinstate its historical past and reconstruct the earlier context buried under layers of its new political and religious fabric.⁴⁵

Accordingly, this book examines the monastery in three critical and interrelated contexts. First, monasteries at Mount Wutai were built foremost as efficacious places of practice. The monastic layout, icons, buildings, and topography were all important constituents of each monastery, organized to create a liminal space for encountering the divine and collaboratively aspiring to the transcendent. Second, monasteries at the sacred mountain were never isolated; they were part of a large network created by different factors, most prominently the pilgrimage. The monastic network or system restructured the ways in which mountain terrains were conceived and the sacred topography was configured. Third, each monastery was bound by the physical context of Mount Wutai—its five peaks, orientation, and range—but as a sacred site, it could not be deciphered or comprehended without

monasteries that functioned as the “spatial syntax” of its sacred topography. Monasteries at Mount Wutai were not only the context of the religious practice but also the content and components of the larger sacred mountain context.

More broadly, “building a sacred mountain” as a topic of inquiry considers space, place, and building as interrelated notions, which address different ways in which monastic architecture served as a cultural intervention in the process of site making.⁴⁶ To a greater degree than other genres of art or artifacts, a building is inextricably tied to the site upon which it stands, and yet, unlike some other sacred objects (texts, relics, icons, etc.),⁴⁷ its presence and immobility activate the divine and saturate the space, turning the initially unqualified site into a particular place. Moreover, architecture in its actuality is site-specific, and since it can’t be moved, it necessarily entails travel (as in pilgrimage) across space, establishing a broader spatial relation and hierarchy critical to the experience and imagination. More specifically, in Buddhism, the pilgrimage journey was often taken metaphorically as a path (*mārga*) to get from “this shore” to “the other,” from this world to the next. In this regard, the liminality of the sacred mountain was not only temporal but also spatial in its topography and architecture, and those who traveled to Mount Wutai could experience the divine presence in that liminal space. The totality of the interrelations among space, place, and building made Mount Wutai more perceivable as a sacred site. Sacrality, after all, is “a category of emplacement.”⁴⁸ And it is through a conception of this totality that it became possible to reproduce a Mount Wutai that takes *place* elsewhere, and by extension, to reconceptualize Mount Wutai as a particular kind of place—that of “the” monastery.

To explore the multiple contextual and functional roles of the monastery in building a sacred mountain at Mount Wutai, the book’s chapters revolve around twin foci: monastery and mountains. Each focus has its separate tradition and history, within the larger context of Buddhist expansion in China, for certainly, monasteries had already been built at mountains elsewhere in China when Mount Wutai became identified as a Buddhist sacred mountain. The book is thus conceived to explore the intricate and changing relations between monastery and mountains that not only led to the building of Mount Wutai but also developed it into one of the most important features of Buddhism in medieval China.

Chapters 1 and 2 answer two related questions: How was “building” monasteries at Mount Wutai from the fifth and sixth centuries onward different from the earlier building efforts, and why may these monasteries be seen as the pivotal means of intervention that changed people’s perception of the mountains? In answer, I will show the monastery as a particular place where the practitioner began to encounter and understand the presence of the initially foreign divinity, and posit that Mount Wutai, recognized as *the* sacred mountain, was developed against a specific historical and regional background. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 reconstruct the history of the bodhisattva cult at Mount Wutai during the seventh through the ninth centuries. Each of these chapters, using one major monastery as the focus of analysis, takes on a particular factor—topography, vision, and iconography—in its exploration of how the monastery was conceived and built to mediate critical

aspects of the bodhisattva cult at the sacred mountain. Together these three chapters suggest that the development of Mount Wutai during the period when the bodhisattva worship climaxed is a history of its sacral architecture. From a different viewpoint, chapter 6 investigates the pilgrimage at Mount Wutai. As a kind of “spatial practice,” the increasingly popular pilgrimage conceptually transformed the mountain site—its five sacred peaks and monasteries—into a structured totality, conducive to both literary and visual representation. Eventually Mount Wutai could no longer be experienced without the mediation of this representation, the “metamonastery,” which reveals the divine origin and presence, vision, ideology, and history—the essential components and qualities of monasteries that built Mount Wutai into the Buddhist sacred mountain.

As the first monograph dedicated to the early history of Mount Wutai in medieval China, *Building a Sacred Mountain* posits a complex historical process that involved factors both intrinsic and extrinsic to the mountains, arguing that this complexity cannot be properly unraveled without taking into account the functioning and ontological role of the monastery in the transformation of Mount Wutai into a sacred mountain. The book thus offers a methodological departure from previous scholarship on Mount Wutai by shifting the focus of analysis from the site to the sight of divinity and from mountains to the monastery, a shift that enables us to investigate both the religious and the cultural inventions that made Mount Wutai a sacred site. In using the monastery as an analytical lens, the discussion is not limited to the physical structure of architecture but includes icons, murals, space, and ritual, as well as topography and vision, stressing not only the monastery’s material properties and liturgical functions but also its visionary and discursive potentials as understood in medieval Buddhism. To a great extent, *Building a Sacred Mountain* challenges the current scholarship in the history of traditional Chinese architecture by introducing an intercontextual strategy or approach—architecture is always a context itself and the content of a larger context—to explore the multivalent significance of Buddhist architecture other than just its building structure. The timber frame of a monastic structure can be distinguished in terms of regional or period style and practice, but often not its particular religious or spiritual meaning, which, in a historical process, was layered onto the structure by inscribing, naming, decorating, or spatializing it for particular monastic purposes. In examining the layers of meanings of monastic architecture at Mount Wutai, this book provides an alternative perspective from which to study and write the history of Chinese sacral architecture in medieval China.

Building the Monastery, Locating the Sacred Presence

In 248 CE, during the Three Kingdoms Period (220–65), a monk of Sogdian ancestry named Kang Senghui (d. 280) arrived in Jianye, present-day Nanjing, the capital of the Wu Kingdom in the south. Buddhism was not yet popular then in southern China, and Kang, determined to establish the practice there, “built a hermitage, set up images, and performed rituals.”¹ One version of the story tells that when he was interrogated by the suspicious Wu ruler, Sun Quan (182–252), who demanded evidence to prove the divinity of the foreign god he worshiped, Kang replied, “It has been more than a thousand years since the Thus-Come-One [*rulai*]² passed away, but the bone relics he left behind still shine divinely and beyond measure. Long ago King Aśoka erected as many as 84,000 stupas [to hold the Buddha’s relics], for building stupas was the means to manifest the salvific influence [of the Buddha] bequeathed to later generations.”³ Kang was referring to the tale of the Indian king Aśoka (ca. 304–232 BCE), the devout and ideal Buddhist ruler who, with the help of *yakṣas* (nature spirits), distributed the relics of the Buddha throughout the Indian subcontinent in a single day in order to promote Buddhism.⁴ Sun was skeptical but was willing to build a stupa if Kang could indeed produce relics and prove himself; if he failed, he would receive due punishment. After Kang performed several concentrated rituals and said prayers in a quiet room for twenty-one days, his entreaties were answered: relics miraculously appeared, rattling in a bottle and emanating a five-color radiance. Sun Quan held up the bottle and tipped the relics onto a bronze tray, but they smashed the tray as soon as they struck it. Sun was awed, uttering, “Such a rare omen!” Keeping his promise to enshrine the relics, Sun subsequently built a stupa, which then became the first Buddhist monastery, named Monastery of the First Built (*Jianchusi*).⁵

While the story is a fabrication written retrospectively to account for the early patronage and spread of Buddhism in southern China, it nonetheless epitomizes the basic components and pattern of reception, understanding, and practice of this initially foreign religion in the first centuries after its arrival in China. It also points to the importance

Upon seeing the building, one is inspired to take vows to become a Buddhist; looking at it, one no longer thinks of returning. A building as such that increases one’s meritorious rewards and promotes one’s goodness is called “monastery.”

—Daoshi, *Jade Grove of the Dharma Garden* (Fayuan zhulin)

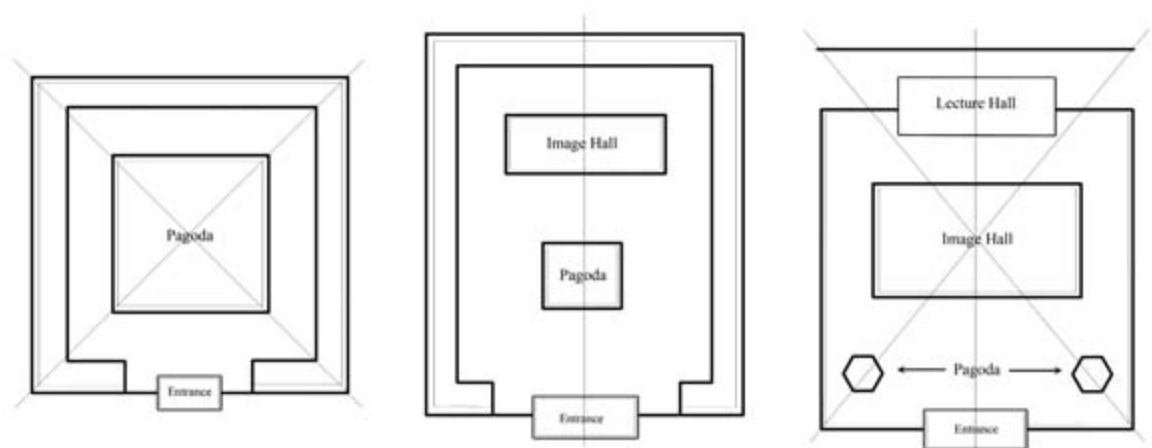


FIGURE 1.1. Three basic layouts of early Buddhist monastic compounds based on the position of the stupa or pagoda and its relation with the main image hall. Diagram by author.

of the divine presence in the origin of the monastery, as manifested in the tangible form of images and relics, as well as to a particular architecture built to accommodate the Buddhist divinity. Before Buddhism, neither relics nor images were worshiped religiously in China, nor was the stupa (or pagoda, its narrower and taller counterpart in East Asia) a traditional building type. In the centuries following the founding of Jianchu Monastery, other monasteries were built and various forms of practice developed, including liturgical ritual, precept observation, and icon-focused meditation and visualization, along with prolific translation of sutras and the production of images. All this activity firmly established Buddhism as a “practice religion” in China.⁶ Monastic architecture in China also developed, beginning with the pagoda for enshrining relics. At the same time, Buddhist monasticism became more and more elaborate, following monastic regulations and liturgical procedures devised to assist practitioners to see and comprehend the divine presence of the Buddha in a monastic, that is, ritualistic environment. As the architectural layout and space of the monastery evolved, it was increasingly perceived as a sanctioned, effective field of religious practice. By the end of the sixth century it was within the four walls of the monastery that the divine was observed, venerated, and reenacted. In other words, monastic practice was intimately correlated with architecture during this early period in the shaping of Buddhist monasticism, centered on the conception and experience of the divine presence.

Scholarly research on Buddhist monastic architecture in its initial stage in China is relatively sparse—understandably, since there is a lack of surviving material.⁷ The primary approach has been textual, augmented by evidence from archaeological sites and building remains. Much of the research has also looked at the building types of early Indian Buddhist construction—stupa, *caitya* (worship hall), and *vihāra* (assembly hall)—and how these were transmitted eastward and eventually adapted to a Chinese architectural style and vocabulary. The general consensus among scholars is that monastic architecture developed in three stages, transitioning from a stupa/pagoda-centered layout, to a binary plan of pagoda and additional Buddha (image) hall, to a monastic precinct centered on the Buddha hall (fig. 1.1).⁸ In terms of spatial configuration, the earlier plan centered on a