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How to cite:

Mei Xueqin and Jon Mathieu. "Mountains beyond Mountains: Cross-Cultural Reflections on China." In: "Crossing Mountains: The Challenges of Doing Environmental History," edited by Marcus Hall and Patrick Kupper, *RCC Perspectives* 2014, no. 4, 31–41.

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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087



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Federal Ministry of Education and Research

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LMU LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT MÜNCHEN

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## Mountains beyond Mountains: Cross-Cultural Reflections on China

We left Munich's Central Station for a short trip to the Alps on the morning of 16 August 2013—"we" being Mei Xueqin, a Chinese historian specialized in the environmental history of the Industrial Revolution and industrialization generally; and Jon Mathieu, a Swiss historian with a focus on mountain regions. We were both RCC Fellows, and we were heading towards a small place in the Swiss Engadine for a summer school on the transnational history of mountains. Mei had never been to the Alps before. She was curious about what they looked like and whether they were very different from the Chinese mountains she was acquainted with. Jon had been coming to this part of the Alps from a tender age (his parents came from the Engadine), but never in the company of a Chinese historian. The day had dawned gloriously, the train ran smoothly, and thus, quite naturally, a conversation developed about the particularities of mountains East and West. How were they perceived in the past, and how did this perception change over time?

We were both in agreement with Donald Worster about the significance of culture. Recently he had stated that "the study of the human past, or what we call history, has fundamentally been about how cultures change over time and how those changes have made an economic, political, and social difference. We historians have never been able to *explain* those cultural changes very well, but we have managed to show how such changes in a people's values, perceptions, and attitudes underlie the distribution of power, the rise and fall of religions, the relationship between the sexes, and the technologies that power our civilizations, to name only a few of the greatest consequences."[1]

To be sure: it is not easy to assess a people's values, perceptions, and attitudes. Which indicators should historians choose in the case of mountains, which ideas and practices, and how can we trace them through historical sources? Perceptions of mountains have a particular weight, since they have often been seen as a symbol, or embodiment, of nature as a whole. When the French Revolution wanted to stage the "reconciliation with nature" that the *philosophes* had been talking of for so long, they designed large public theatrical displays involving "holy mountains" where white-clad women—the goddesses of

1 Donald Worster, "The Flow of Empire: Comparing Water Control in China and the United States," *RCC Perspectives* 2011, no. 1, 3.

reason—received the "laws of nature" from a "Supreme Being." This is just one conspicuous example of the cultural appropriation of mountains during the Enlightenment and Romanticism by the elites in Europe.

In the course of the conversation, as the train moved from Munich to the Alps, Jon remarked that the European appropriation of the Alps was indeed a great cultural change—interesting, and well studied. But, he added, Chinese mountain culture had impressed him very much with respect to its historical age, social power, variety, and systematic territorial layout. The Chinese example was far too little known in Western scholarship. He had recently touched upon it in a book about mountains in modern times. That comparative attempt, however, was hampered by the cultural and linguistic gap between researchers East and West, since it could draw only on studies published in European languages. Mei likewise emphasized the difficulties of crossing linguistic and cultural borders. She knows these difficulties in detail, and has spent many years confronting them as a translator of Western historical books into Chinese. We both agreed that if there is one major challenge in doing environmental history today, it is located in this kind of cross-cultural communication.

Thus we decided to enter into something of an experiment, born out of intellectual curiosity and the train journey we shared. Jon would write down some of his impressions of the history of Chinese mountain culture that he had learned about *from the outside*. Mei would then describe her experiences and reflections about the same subject *from the inside*. Let's see what happens!

### Jon: Chinese Mountains from the Outside

"There is no such thing as *the* Asian perception of nature," I learned from a scholarly overview of ways of seeing nature in Asia.[2] As in the West, perceptions in Asia are also differentiated. Within one culture there are often many, partly controversial points of view, which—together with actual environmental transformations—change again and again. Nevertheless, according to this overview, there are certain general traits in many Asian societies that can be identified: In comparison to the West the distinction between

2 Citations for all passages quoted here are given in Jon Mathieu, *The Third Dimension: A Comparative History of Mountains in the Modern Era* (Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 2011), 129–32; I follow that section rather closely.

"nature" and "culture" was usually less categorical. "Nature" was therefore viewed more in context and had to be continually redetermined and redefined. This often happened by ritualistic means, and the ritualization in many Asian societies was tantamount to a sacralization of nature. When elaborate religious teachings were also added, the landscape was literally "empowered" and charged with religious or spiritual energy. In the Indo/Sino/Tibetan cultures this spiritual empowerment was widespread—albeit with diverse driving forces and characteristics.

The Chinese variant of this, in my view, had a decidedly political character. There are various clues pointing in that direction. Even the Emperor, for example, showed a keen and official interest in mountains. In studies at hand, I came across several prayers of the Emperors to the holy Eastern Mountain, Mount Taishan. When Wanli succeeded to the throne of the Empire as the 13th Emperor of the Ming Dynasty in 1572, he was barely 10 years old. Shortly thereafter, entirely in the style of earlier rulers, he addressed the following words to Mount Taishan:

> O God, You give birth to everything which must bloom, and You concentrate the supernatural energy in Yourself. You are the eternally lasting glory of the oriental lands. You assure the peace of the people and of all beings. Ten thousand generations have really found help from You. Now, through the rights of heredity, I have been invested with supreme power. With deference I perform the rites; oh God, would You accept the sacrifices and listen to the prayers; stand by my dynasty.

Several months before his death, Wanli's predecessor had ordered that the temple of the mystical Jade Emperor on Mount Taishan be renewed and rebuilt in such a manner that it would envelop the highest rocks of the Eastern Mountain. The mountain had long been dotted with shrines, temples, inns, small shops, and other buildings and monuments. Now the summit would receive a religious identity, too, indicated by the temple's inscription: "Summit of the Jade Emperor, Repaired by Imperial Order." The Jade Emperor was the sovereign ruler of the Taoist pantheon, the members of which were assumed by the faithful to reside in the remote Kunlun Mountains in the west of the empire. However, at Mount Taishan one could appeal to many other deities and persons who had become immortal. For example, in the vicinity of the aforementioned temple, Wanli's predecessor-but-one had begun with the construction of a temple to Confucius, which was then finished during Wanli's reign. Many stories circulated regarding what

the great philosophical master was supposed to have said at Mount Taishan, which had the effect of spreading his cult further.

At this famous place one could also pay homage to the Deity of Mount Taishan itself. Emperor Wanli did this only from a distance and never personally undertook the pilgrimage. However, three of his successors visited the Eastern Mountain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They left behind numerous inscriptions, including some which were related to the mountain deity himself, for example: "The Associate of Heaven Who Is the Guardian of the Empire" (1684) and "Tai Peak Bestows Happiness upon Us as a Reward" (1731). These attributes were in keeping with popular ideas that were widespread in China. In numerous cities and villages of the empire there were temples dedicated to Mount Taishan, in which written characters emphasized the mountain's godly qualities: "His holy virtues equal those of heaven," "His godly power rewards and punishes," and "to escape His deep sight is difficult."

**Figure 1:** Mount Taishan, Shandong Province, in 2007. At that time the mountain was likely visited by more than six million people per year. Photo by Jiang, via Wikimedia Commons.

Just as common, and well documented, was the popular pilgrimage to Mount Taishan in the early modern period, which continued after the declaration of the republic in 1912.

Until the communist revolution in 1949 one could count thousands of pilgrims daily during the main months. Later, as the People's Republic of China began to open up, Mount Taishan once again attracted many pilgrims and more and more tourists. In 1987 it was added to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (right after the Great Wall). At roughly 1,500 meters it is not high, but as far as I can see, this mountain has the oldest and densest cultural tradition in the world!

**Figure 2:** "Image of the True Form of the Five Peaks." The five holy mountains of the Confucian-Taoist tradition represented on a print from a stone column engraved around 1614. Edouard Chavannes, *Le T'ai Chan. Essai de monographie d'un culte chinois* (Paris, 1910).

In my view, Chinese mountain culture is also unique in a territorial sense. Mount Taishan did not stand alone; it was part of a vast system of holy mountains. The Five Peaks of the Confucian-Taoist tradition include, besides the Eastern Mountain (the most important of them), a holy mountain in the north, in the west, in the south, and in the middle of the Chinese Empire. Their heights are conspicuously modest (roughly 1,290 to 2,020 meters), and the distance between them quite considerable (over 1,400 kilometers from the Northern to the Southern Mountain). The Five Peaks were represented with particular signs and characterized by a series of quasi-administrative criteria. From experts in toponymy, I learned that the mountains had spoken names: "Tai" (Taishan, the Eastern Mountain) meant "prosperity, peace, and tranquility;" "Heng" (Hengshan, the Northern Mountain) meant "endurance and tenaciousness;" "Hua" (Huashan, the Western Mountain) meant "flower;" and so on. According to ancient Chinese literature the Five Peaks were early checkpoints for the inspections of the empire by the Emperor and his delegates. In general it was believed that the mountains ensured the stability of the Earth with their weight. In materialized form, the "Image of the True Form of the Five Peaks" represented a talisman of great protective power.

It is general knowledge that in the first centuries CE, Indian Buddhism, which has an interest in nature much like that of Taoism, reached China. In the style of the Five Peaks, Chinese Buddhism later brought forward its own system with the four holy Buddhist mountains, also dispersed far across the land. At the most important of them, there were hundreds of small and large monasteries and temples in the early modern period. The introduction of Buddhism and the particular political situation were among the reasons for a new perception of the landscape and mountains that gained currency in Chinese society starting in the fourth century. Paul Demiéville, a well-known scholar from an earlier generation, has described this development as a veritable romantic revolution, in which fleeing from civilization became a leitmotif.[3] The mountainous landscape was a theme in paintings and in literature during this period and continued to exert influence and spawn new artistic developments for a very long time. Even Chairman Mao Zedong still stood in the shadow of this classical tradition and wrote poems about the mountains.

So, in the end, it seems to me that the Chinese mountain experience is not only particularly intense and expressive, but is characterized by two structurally opposing phenomena: on the one side a close connection with the governmental-political structure and the systematic territorial layout, and on the other side an early criticism of civilization and romanticization of nature. I have the impression that "romanticism" was a rather different thing in China than in Europe. If we put the two phenomena under the same heading, however, the Chinese version came about more than a thousand years earlier.

### Mei: Chinese Mountains from the Inside

Jon's thinking and writing about the Chinese perception of their mountains is very interesting and important because it highlights some key aspects, especially regarding political and religious themes. However, his ideas appear a bit simplified, and reflect to some extent the understanding of foreign friends of Chinese mountain culture. Simplified or not, this understanding has a role to play in stimulating us within China to think about our own traditions. It is really quite important for us to "do" China's environmental history through these kinds of perspectives, from both the outside and the inside—this might help us to escape some of the shortcomings of knowing only one side of the story. China

3 Paul Demiéville, "La montagne dans l'art chinois," in *Choix d'études sinologiques (1921–1970)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973), 364–89.

"complements, and contrasts with, the environmental histories of other major countries and peoples. It often provides a critical analytical challenge when testing any general theory mostly formulated in some other context," as Mark Elvin has written.[4] This point of view is certainly reasonable when we discuss perceptions of nature focusing on mountains and compare China with other countries and peoples.

One should always keep in mind that Chinese mountain culture is very complex; we have to go deeper into China's history and culture before we draw any simple conclusions. For example, when we talk about the Five Peaks or The Five Great Mountains (五嶽/五岳/Wǔyuè), we certainly know that they refer to five of the most renowned mountains in Chinese history, and they were the subjects of imperial pilgrimage by Emperors throughout ages. But this kind of knowledge about the Five Peaks in Chinese culture is not very profound. To understand why there are precisely five of these mountains, not six or any other number, we should also know the origin of the Five Peaks and the cultural meaning of the number five. Then we must at least come to grips with the Chinese mythological system and traditional scientific knowledge.

According to Chinese mythology, the Five Peaks originated from the body of Pangu (盤古/盘古/Págǔ), the first being and the creator of the world Mount Tài (東嶽/东岳/Dōngyuè), owing to its prominent location, is believed to have been formed out of Pangu's head. Mount Heng in Hunan province (南嶽/南岳/Nanyuè) is believed to be a remainder of Pangu's right arm; Mount Heng (恒山) in Shanxi province (北嶽/北岳/Běiyuè), his left arm; Mount Song (中嶽/中岳/Zhōngyuè), his belly; and Mount Hua (西嶽/西岳/Xīyuè), his feet. Because of its eastern location, Mount Tài is associated with the rising sun, signifying birth and renewal. Due to this interpretation, it is often regarded as the most sacred of the Five Peaks. Every year there are lots of people who visit Mount Tài and pray for their families and friends while they enjoy the sunrise and the landscape there. I climbed Mount Tài three times with my classmates and my students, and was deeply impressed by both its natural beauty and its long cultural history.

As to the meaning of the number five, it is a recurring theme in Chinese traditional science and spirituality, as in the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, water), the five cardinal directions (East, South, West, North, and Center), and the System of Five

4 Mark Elvin, "Introductory Remarks," in *The Retreat of the Elephants: an Environmental History of China* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), xxi.

Phases (五行/Wǔ Xíng). The Five Peaks were chosen in accordance with the five cardinal directions of Chinese geomancy (風水/风水/Fēng Shuǐ). Certainly, the exact locations of some Yuè (mountains of the Five Peaks) which pointed to a particular direction underwent change. For example, Nányuè (Mount Heng) once referred to a different peak. It is said that before the Sui dynasty, Nányuè referred to Tianzhushan in Anhui province, and that this was proclaimed by Emperor Wudi of the Western Han Dynasty when he visited it in 106 BC. Under the Sui dynasty, Emperor Wendi changed Nányuè to refer to Héng Shān (衡山) for the purpose of ruling. Here, the meaning of *héng* (衡) is "balance," quite different from the prior name Héng Shān (恒山), in which *héng* (恒) means "eternal." This change also reflects the expansion of the country in that period.

Based on the aspects related above, we would say that the mountain in China's history had two kinds of existence. On the one hand it was a tangible mountain, on the other an invisible mountain. The former is the "natural" mountain, and has its own location, size, topography, landscape, wildlife, and so on. There are many sources that record detailed information on these points. Among them, the *Mountains and Rivers Gazetteer* or *Local Landscape Records* (山川志/Shanchuan Zhi) are very important, and almost every local chronicle includes landscape records. Moreover, China's famous mountains have their own history. *China's Famous Mountains Gazetteer* (中国名山志/*Zhongguo Mingshan Zhi*), which was published by the China National Microfilming Center for Library Resources (http://swzx.nlc.gov.cn/zxjj.htm) in 2005, is a series of 16 volumes of mountain history. It has great value because it gives a comprehensive overview of research on the history of China's famous mountains, published in a collection for the first time in contemporary mainland China.

The natural mountains have always been associated with peoples' lives in many ways. First of all they provide resources and livelihoods. For my father's family, mountains were the source of firewood as well as of many local foods such as chestnuts and other nuts. My family used to live in a mountain valley of Tàihu county in Anhui province, and moved to a plain because of the building of the Huating reservoir in the 1950s. After that, every year in winter, my parents would go to the old mountain area to harvest firewood for the next year. Villagers living on the plains can get some firewood from mountain areas for free, but they pay with their effort and time. I always remember that when I was 13 or 14 years old, I followed my mother and other villagers to walk 15 or more kilometers into a mountain valley to collect pine needles. We got up quite

early and brought some food and water along. Then we worked a whole day in the mountain valley and returned back home at dusk, carrying a load of pine needles. Of course, this work was very hard and beyond my capacity at that age, but it was a good test of my physical strength and psychological endurance. Strength and endurance are the kinds of qualities that Chinese attribute to their mountains.

**Figure 3:** Huating Lake and Mountain of Dragon, Anhui Province, the birth place of Mei's father. The lake is actually a reservoir. It was built in the 1950s and caused Mei's family to migrate from the middle of the mountain to the plains. Photo courtesy of Lu Xinlin.

However, mountains also posed various kinds of threats to people in the past. Wild animals from the mountains were one of these threats. My father once told me that at the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s there were two accidents that happened in my clan. One of my distant uncles was injured by a wolf while herding cattle on a mountain. His hip was bitten so seriously that his mother had to have the skin of her left leg removed so that the doctor could sew up her son's wound in a county hospital. Another relative was taken by a wolf when he was three years old, after following his mother and brother to the kitchen garden one afternoon. These kinds of accidents often happened, and we still saw wolves that had come down from nearby hills passing through field ridges up to the 1960s and 1970s. So mountains with their wild animals were a terrible force in my heart as well as in many Chinese minds.

**Figure 4:** The first part of "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains" by Huang Guangwang (1269–1354). Ink on paper hand scroll, currently kept in the Zhejiang Provincial Museum in Hangzhou. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

Strength, endurance, and terror are amongst the qualities attributed to mountains by us Chinese, and these qualities are also a part of China's invisible mountain. This is certainly a mountain in perception, and has a variety of meanings and imagery. The invisible mountain includes Jon's analyses of the two structurally opposing phenomena. The imagery of mountains in ancient Chinese poetry has been an interesting subject of research. It had a lot of metaphorical applications—holiness, eternity, barriers, morals, refuge, and so on. Ancient poetry including mountain imagery is an important part of Chinese mountain culture, and has a special value for us due to its exploration of Chinese perceptions of nature. Landscape drawings are also very important and valuable sources for this investigation because they have the characteristics both of tangible and invisible mountains. I give here an example painted by the famous Yuan Dynasty painter Huang Guangwang in the mid-fourteenth century.

## Conclusions

**Jon:** This was a great insider's lesson about Chinese mountains! Mei's input confirms that cooperation in the larger scholarly community is extremely important for research. Cross-cultural communication continues to be a challenge, but it is both possible, and fun. I hope that not too much local specificity gets lost with the simplifications that

might be necessary in comparative studies. Geographers tell us that between one-fifth and one-fourth of the surface of the earth consists of mountain regions. As a result, there is great potential for the emergence of and changes in "people's values, perceptions, and attitudes," to take up these words again. My impression of the specific power of mountain perceptions in Chinese history and contemporary society has been reinforced by Mei's account.

**Mei:** It is quite a big task for us to really know the mountains and their unique cultural implications when we do environmental history research. I have visited many mountains within and beyond China, and I understand that there are many more that I have never experienced: as stated in a Chinese expression, "there are mountains beyond mountains." The direct meaning of this phrase is that there is a higher peak in front of (or behind) any peak, and there is more beautiful scenery beyond what you see. Metaphorically, it means that there are always people who are even cleverer than you. So this phrase might encourage people to persevere and to do better in order to realize their aims. I agree with Jon that when we discuss and research any subject in environmental history, we need to strengthen communication and cooperation in the larger scholarly community. We might then cross both the physical and cultural barriers and understand nature—and ourselves—better.