

Buddhism, Four Sacred Sites of

Sì Dà Fójiào Míng Shān 四大佛教名山

The four sacred sites of Buddhism in China are Wutai Shan, Emei Shan, Jiuhua Shan, and Putuoshan, mountain homes of Buddhist enlightened ones. Although the religious complexes at these sites are smaller than those existing at the height of Buddhism's existence in China, the “holy mountains” remain attractions for their religious context and artifacts and for their natural beauty.

The “four most famous Buddhist mountains” (*sì dà fójiào míng shān*) were traditionally considered as *bodhimanda* (mountain residences) of bodhisattvas (*pusa* in Chinese), spiritual beings who, according to Buddhist scriptures, assist all sentient beings in transcending suffering. The Chinese tradition of “paying respect to a holy mountain” through pilgrimage (*chaobai sheng shan*) predates the arrival of Buddhism in China. This pilgrim tradition was mentioned in the *Shujing* (fifth century BCE compilation of documents relating to ancient Chinese history), and it was probably related to the ancient cosmology according to which mountains provided access to the heaven, served as pillars for the sky, or constituted abodes where Daoist sages, shamans, and immortals lived. Buddhist monks hoped to visit the four mountains; there was a widespread belief among them that the bodhisattva of each mountain would take the form of an individual and show itself to pilgrims, sometimes in the form of another monk, sometimes as a beggar. Pilgrims traveled

long journeys, from their points of departure to one of the mountains, by making a prostration—touching the ground with the head every three steps. It was customary for pilgrims to visit in this way all the temples and shrines in the mountains. Lay Buddhists visited these mountains in great numbers to make vows (*huanyuan*) or to perform penance. Many nonbelievers also traveled to the sacred sites to accomplish a feat from which they could derive prestige. The pilgrimages were often in groups because the journey to the nearest cities to the sites was sometimes long and dangerous.

Wutai Shan: Five Terraces Mountain

Wutai Shan, or the “five terraces mountain,” in Shanxi Province, is the *bodhimanda* for Wenshu Pusa (the bodhisattva of Wisdom; in Sanskrit, Manjusri, “Gentle Glory”). It is often referred to as the “first of the four sacred Buddhist mountains” because it was the first to be identified as sacred. Temples were built during the rule of Emperor Ming Di (reigned 58–75 CE), and by the time of the Qi dynasty (550–577 CE) up to two hundred existed, but most were destroyed later. Today over fifty-eight temples remain, including the oldest wooden structures of China, the Nanchan Monastery and the East Hall of Foguang Monastery, built in 782 and 857, respectively.

Because it has long been difficult to access, Wutai Shan was spared much of the destruction of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Currently, better roads have facilitated access to the site, and it has become a major



Chinese visitors climb Emei Shan (Mount Emei) in Sichuan. Emei Shan is one of the most sacred sites of Buddhism. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

tourist destination. Tradition claims that Wenshu can offer pilgrims extraordinary visionary experiences, and the site is also considered a location of importance for Daoists. The Chinese government hopes that Wutai Shan will be added to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) list of World Heritage Sites. Yedou Shan, the highest of the five peaks, has an elevation of 3,061 meters.

Emei Shan: Towering Eyebrow Mountain

Emei Shan, or the “towering eyebrow mountain,” in Sichuan Province, is the *bodhimanda* for Puxan Pusa (the bodhisattva of Benevolent Action; in Sanskrit,

Samantabhadra, the “Universal Worthy”). Many consider Sichuan to be the first location in China where Buddhism was practiced, and claim that it is in this area that the first Buddhist temple was built in the first century CE. By the fourteenth century, the site had over one hundred temples, monasteries, and other buildings. Seventy of these remain today, but only twenty are active.

Because of the wet climate, the summit is often foggy. Under certain meteorological conditions, refraction of water particles produces rainbow rings that surround one’s shadow over a sea of clouds below the summit. Known as “Buddha’s light,” this phenomenon has inspired devotees to jump off the cliff convinced that this was a sign from heaven calling them, which prompted the authorities to set up barriers to prevent suicides. Emei Shan’s scenic area, which includes the carved stone Buddha of Leshan,

was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996. At 71 meters high, the sitting Buddha statue is the tallest of its kind in the world, and with an elevation of 3,096 meters, Emei Shan is the highest of the four sacred mountains.

Jiuhua Shan: Nine Glorious Mountains

Jiuhua Shan, or the “nine glorious mountains,” in Anhui Province, is the *bodhimanda* for Dizang Pusa (the bodhisattva of Salvation; in Sanskrit, Ksitigarbha, the “Earth Treasury”). This bodhisattva, who has vowed to delay the attainment of Buddhahood until all beings are freed from hell, is much revered in East Asia.

In 719 CE, a wandering Korean Buddhist, Kim Kiao Kak, came to his journey’s end and founded a temple dedicated to Dizang Pusa. After Kim’s death, the site’s eminence rose. During the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), there were about 150 temples and thousands of monks in residence. By the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), there were as many as 360 temples and between four thousand and five thousand monks and nuns. But as a consequence of the destruction caused by political and social upheavals from 1851 until 1976, the site now counts only seventy temples and monasteries.

The tradition claims that the area received its name after the poet Li Bai wrote that its nine mountains were holding heaven. The area is difficult to access, but this relative isolation makes it more peaceful than the other great tourist site in Anhui Province, Huangshan (Yellow Mountain). The highest of the peaks in the area is 1,342 meters high.

Putuoshan: Mountain of the “One who Perceives Sounds”

Putuoshan, on the island of Zhoushan in Zhejiang Province, derives its name from Potalaka, the *bodhimanda* of

Guan Yin (the “One who Perceives Sounds”) Pusa, the Chinese version of the bodhisattva of Compassion (in Sanskrit, Avalokitesvara, the “Lord who looks down”). A feminine figure, Guan Yin is a revered bodhisattva throughout East Asia.

Putuoshan became a site for Buddhist pilgrims slightly later than the other mountains. In 916, the island became the primary shrine to Guan Yin, and during its heyday, it counted over eighty temples and nunneries, as well as over 120 shelters that could house over four thousand monks and nuns. Today, there are five hundred resident monks on the island. This is noteworthy in the history of contemporary Buddhism because it was chosen as a retreat by the famous reformist monk Taixu.

Much closer to the wealthy and densely populated parts of China, Zhoushan is easy to access, and therefore it is a popular tourist destination. Foding Shan, the highest peak on the island, rises 297 meters.

The four sacred mountains of Buddhism, each dedicated to a different Buddhist holy being, remain pilgrimage and tourist destinations today.

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Further Reading

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