Mount Tai

Tai Shan

A sacred and scenic site since prehistoric times, Mount Tai (Taishan), in Shandong Province, has figured in the lives of Chinese elite and Chinese commoners; it maintains its hold on the Chinese imagination to this day.

Mount Tai (Taishan) is a sacred mountain in Shandong province, 450 kilometers south of Beijing. The mountain has been significant to Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, nationalism, and imperial ritual. At 1,545 meters Mount Tai, the highest peak in the North China Plain, was the site of prehistoric agricultural rain worship. In 1987 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated Mount Tai a World Heritage Site.

Sacred Rites

Beginning in the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE), Mount Tai became the chief of four sacred mountains (yue) used for imperial legitimation rites at cardinal compass points: Mount Tai (Eastern Peak, or Dongyue), Mount Heng (southern, or Nanyue), Mount Hua (western, or Xiyue), and Mount Heng (northern, or Beiyue). The Book of History, a compilation of documents going back to the sixth century BCE, describes the sage rulers Shun and Yao completing essential circuits of the mountains. By the late Zhou or early Han period (206 BCE–220 CE) a fifth, central peak, Mount Song (Zhongyue) was added to the collection of Daoist sacred mountains.

Special imperial legitimation rites dedicated to heaven were performed by emperors on top of Mount Tai, and special rites to earth on a hill at the base of the mountain. First performed by Qin Shihuangdi in 219 BCE, the rites legitimated an emperor’s rulership and commended his virtues. Emperor Han Wudi (reigned 140–87 BCE) performed these rituals several times. Both Qin Shihuangdi and Han Wudi linked their performances with their quests for immortality. Only four later emperors performed these solemn rites: Guangwudi (reigned 25–57 CE), Gaozong (reigned 650–683), Xuanzong (reigned 713–755), and Zhenzong (reigned 998–1022).

According to the fourth-century BCE text Mencius, Confucius climbed Mount Tai. Many admirers of Confucius have followed in his footsteps, ascending the slopes of Mount Tai in hopes of increasing their sagacity. In the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) a Confucian temple was built on the mountain.

Mount Tai and Life, Death

Because the sun rises in the east, Mount Tai, as the eastern sacred peak, was seen as the source of all life and therefore the leader of the five sacred peaks. By the late first century BCE people believed the mountain presided over death; by the middle of the second century CE, when people died, they were said to “return to Mount Tai.” Buddhist beliefs about reincarnation and an underworld were gradually integrated with indigenous Chinese beliefs until
by the seventh century many Chinese believed that souls returned to Mount Tai and passed through a series of ten courts in the underworld, where they were judged and punished before rebirth. The personified god of Mount Tai was the judge in the seventh court. Popular worship of this god centered on reducing the period of suffering for recently departed relatives. The vast majority of pilgrims during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) and the early Ming dynasty journeyed to worship the god of Mount Tai as a judge in the underworld.

By 1550 the popularity of the god of Mount Tai had diminished greatly. In contrast, the popularity of the goddess of Mount Tai, Bixia Yuanjun, steadily increased over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (when Guanyin, a Buddhist goddess, and Mazu, a Daoist goddess, also became popular). The goddess of Mount Tai is an important northern Chinese fertility deity, although she continues to be appealed to for more general well-being and success. Accordingly, women of childbearing age prayed and still pray to her, especially for sons. Assistant goddesses specialize in eye ailments and aspects of pregnancy or infancy—for example, conception, delivery, nursing, and smallpox (which was contracted in infancy or early childhood). Pilgrimages to the Bixia temple on top of the mountain were extremely popular during the late imperial period from the mid-Ming (c. 1500) onward through the Qing (1644–1912), averaging at least 400,000 people a year, mostly traveling from within 350 kilometers.

During the late imperial period literati from the entire country made the trip, often when passing near the mountain on official business. Most of them sought inspiration through communing with nature, viewing historic sites, admiring the content and calligraphy of inscriptions, reciting poems about the mountain by famous poets such as Li Bai (Bo) (701–762) and Du Fu (712–770), and writing their own reflections about Mount Tai in poetry and prose.

Two important visitors to Mount Tai during the late imperial period were the Manchu emperors Kangxi (r. 1662–1722) and Qianlong (reigned 1661–1795) of the Qing dynasty. Both rejected the idea of performing the feng and shan rituals because they were not actually ancient rites found in any classical texts and because the rituals implied that rulership could reach a point of perfection. Kangxi used visits to the mountain to demonstrate to the Han Chinese elite that the Manchu understood and respected Chinese practices and history. Qianlong used the mountain to further his own aggrandizement, even having the text of several of his poems engraved as the largest inscription on the mountain.

Continuing Religious Site

The mountain also became an important symbol of Han Chinese nationalism. The governments of Republican China (1912–1949) and People’s Republic of China (1949–present) both sought to secularize the sacred mountain. Publications and laws criticized many of the religious practices on the mountain as superstitious and sought to focus visitors’ attentions on historic and natural sites. Despite these attempts, religious worship on the mountain thrived during the Republican period. After 1949 religious worship across the country was restricted. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) all temples were closed and the primarily Daoist resident monks and nuns sent away to perform secular work elsewhere.

With the economic reforms of the 1980s came a lessening of restrictions on religion. The government undertook many restoration projects on the mountain, including restoration of many temples. Religious practitioners were again allowed to reside in some temples. While the majority of visitors today would not identify themselves as religious pilgrims and the Communist party remains officially atheist, religious practice on Mount Tai continues to flourish.

Internationally the mountain has gained greater visibility. Many overseas Chinese include a visit to Mount Tai when in China. In 1987 UNESCO named Mount Tai a World Heritage Site. The Chinese government chose to include Mount Tai as one of the Chinese sites for an international New Year’s Day 2000 broadcast. In 2005 the baby panda born in the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., was named Taishan after more than 200,000 Internet votes from around the world.

Brian R. DOTT

Further Reading

A Guided Pilgrimage

While there is much written about pilgrimages to the sacred Mount Tai (Taishan), there is often no mention of paid and guided tours of the mountain, an early form of spiritual tourism. Chang Tai, a seventeenth-century member of the Chinese literati, chronicles his experiences on a guided “pilgrimage” to Mount Tai.

The company sets a fixed rate for renting rooms, hiring sedan chairs, and paying mountain fees. Visitors are charged on the basis of three classes: upper, middle, and lower. All the visitors are met upon their arrival, entertained when they descend from the summit, and escorted when they leave. Each day there are several thousand visitors.... The guides are from about a dozen families. On an average day eight thousand to nine thousand visitors come, while the number can reach twenty thousand on the first day of spring. The entrance fee is collected at twelve fen per person, so the annual collection amounts to two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand taels. The magnitude of Mount T’ai, alas, can be measured by the number of the guides or the amount of the fees!


