Book Review

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James Robson

*Power of Place: The Religious Landscape of the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue 南嶽) in Medieval China*


During the past two decades, an ever-increasing body of scholarship has examined the cultural import of Chinese sacred sites.¹ *Power of Place* sheds new light on this issue by surveying the dynamic and diverse spatial characteristics of the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue 南嶽) during the medieval era. Robson, an associate professor of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University, adopts a sophisticated methodology that features the

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blending of geographical and historical modes of analysis. Moreover, his scholarship encompasses a broad base of sources, including a twelfth-century work entitled *Nanyue zongsheng ji* 南嶽總勝集 (Record of the Collected Highlights of Nanyue), the *Nanyue zhi* 南嶽志 (Gazetteer of Nanyue; 1883) by Li Yuandu 李元度, the Northern Song Daoist hagiography *Nanyue jiu zhenren zhuan* 南嶽九真人傳 (Biographies of the Nine Perfected of Nanyue), and data from a lost work entitled *Nanyue shiba gaoseng zhuan* 南嶽十八高僧傳 (Biographies of the Eighteen Eminent Monks of Nanyue). The result is a case study that not only does justice to the complexity of one of China’s most vibrant sacred sites, but also clarifies far-reaching issues of Chinese religious history.

Apart from the Introduction and Conclusion, *Power of Place* consists of eight chapters divided into two main sections. Part I (Situating Nanyue) opens with an examination of sacred peaks (*yue* 嶽) in ancient Chinese culture, particularly the malleable classification systems used to define them (the discussion of two separate *Erya* 爾雅 systems on pp. 40-41 is especially illuminating). Robson also notes that both sacred peaks and so-called “garrison mountains” (*zhenshan* 鎮山) were conceived of as places of immense power, being incorporated into the state cult as a means of protecting the empire (pp. 36-37). Data presented in Chapter 2 reveals the intense processes of contestation that fueled the categorizations of sacred peaks, with at least three different mountains becoming associated with the title “Nanyue”, namely *Hengshan* 衡山 (Hunan 湖南), *Huoshan* 霍山 (Anhui 安徽), and *Tiantai shan* 天台山/Chicheng shan 赤城山 (Zhejiang 浙江) (pp. 60, 82). The empire was hardly on the sidelines during such struggles, one prominent example being the decision by Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 141-86 BCE) to “move” Nanyue from Hengshan to Huoshan (pp. 66-70). Chapter 3 features a detailed study of how Nanyue was actually represented, including both its physical landscape (various peaks) and mythical landscape (narratives about figures ranging from the sage kings to Zhurong 神fusion) (pp. 97-122). Robson also observes that
contemporary representations of Nanyue reflected ambivalent images of the south, with the mountain serving as a buttress to guard regions that were both economic heartlands and dreaded places of exile (pp. 122-125).

Part II (The Daoist and Buddhist Histories of Nanyue) examines the ways in which leading religious specialists and their patrons attempted to construct their own images of the Southern Peak. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on biographies of eminent Daoists, including accounts of how these specialists undertook key ritual changes such as eliminating the use of “bloody (meat) offerings” (xueshi 血食) (pp. 157-158) while also engaging in processes of “contact and contention” with local Buddhists (p. 203). Robson’s research further indicates the importance of imperial (and even eunuch) recognition and patronage as seen in rites like Throwing Dragon Slips (tou longjian 投龍簡) (pp. 158-159). Most importantly, these two chapters convincingly validate the potential for using data from Nanyue to compose local (or even regional) histories of medieval Daoism. On the one hand, texts from this site stress the ties that bound Daoist specialists to Nanyue and contributed to its aura of efficacy. On the other hand, their contents reveal previously unknown facets of medieval Daoist history, such as the presence of an alternative Shangqing 上清 lineage.

In Chapter 6, Robson greatly enhances our understanding of women in medieval Chinese religion through his detailed treatment of cults and practices centering on female practitioners at Nanyue. This chapter is most noteworthy for its discussion of the cult of Wei Huacun 魏華存 (252-334 CE), including its influence on the interaction between the Zhengyi 正一 and Shangqing 上清 movements (p. 190) and its role in the reinstatement of the title Nanyue from Huoshan to Hengshan (p. 201). Some might question Robson’s identification of Xiwangmu 西王母 as a “Daoist goddess” (p. 185), however, while his lengthy presentation of the history of Wei’s cult on pp. 196-200 runs the risk of deflecting reader attention from its relationship to Nanyue.

Chapters 7 and 8 are among the most thought-provoking sections of the book, and should have a significant impact on future research about
medieval Chinese Buddhism. These two chapters trace the lives of eminent Buddhist practitioners, including the renowned monk Huisi 慧思 (515-577 CE) who made a vow to practice asceticism and repent for previous wrongs at Nanyue (pp. 216-220). Robson not only continues his examination of the synergy between Buddhists and Daoists at Nanyue (pp. 224-225), but also details efforts by Buddhist specialists to assert their hegemony over this site by converting local spirits to Buddhism, choosing new toponyms, and erecting stupas for renowned practitioners (pp. 221-223, 259, 316). Be that as it may, Robson’s goal in writing these two chapters involves far more than describing Buddhism’s impact on this site. Instead, he draws on this data to “put Nanyue back on the map of Chinese Buddhist history” (p. 213) by adhering to an approach similar to that employed in the chapters on Daoism, namely by showing how the growth of Nanyue’s Buddhist communities shaped this religion’s overall historical development. For example, Robson’s data effectively rewrites the history of early Chan 禅 (Zen) Buddhism by showing how some monks could be portrayed as Daoist transcendent (some were even said to have achieved “corpse-liberation” or shijie 尸解), stressing the importance of ox-head Chan (niutou Chan 牛頭禪) (pp. 272-274), noting that the only two lines of Chan Buddhism to survive the Huichang 會昌 persecution during the 840s had links to Nanyue (p. 274), and pointing to the links between Nanyue Chan Buddhism and forms of Chan practiced in Sichuan 四川 (pp. 278-301). Robson also provides new data on Nanyue’s importance in the spread of Pure Land (Jingtu 淨土) Buddhism (pp. 301-306), while also clarifying this site’s role in the development of Tiantai 天台 Buddhism (pp. 226-232).

Taken as a whole, Power of Place represents a major step forward for the field of medieval Chinese religions. Robson deserves credit for achieving an effective rapprochement between geographical and historical modes of analysis that draws on leading works of “place studies” scholarship.² He is also well

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² See for example Henri Lefevre, The Production of Space, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith
aware of relevant research in the field of Chinese Studies, utilizing results of scholars like Li Yinghui 李映輝, Suzuki Tetsuo 鈴木哲雄, and Yen Shang-wen 颜尚文 while also employing the data he has collected to reveal a new vision of Chinese sacred sites that encompasses their physical, mental, and social aspects while also appreciating their diverse and contested meanings. This book also benefits from a broad comparative perspective, considering European representations of mountains (p. 20) and treating data on Nanyue in light of Robert Hertz’s classic study of the cult of St. Besse (pp. 189-190).³

*Power of Place* also demonstrates the elaborate reverberation between Buddhists and Daoists at Nanyue, with Robson convincingly arguing that such phenomena have the potential to challenge the “traditional boundaries used to demarcate the Chinese religious landscape” (p. 3). Nonetheless, one wishes he had devoted more effort to elucidating the exact nature of what he describes as a “recent movement within sinology known as ‘Buddho-Daoist studies’” (p. 3). The footnote to the above quotation simply cites brief portions of two review articles on Daoist Studies by Anna Seidel and Franciscus Verellen, which do not necessarily qualify as representative forms of Buddho-Daoist research. In contrast, recent book-length studies by Stephen Bokenkamp and Christian Mollier that seem to be prime examples of a Buddho-Daoist approach are listed in the Bibliography but not thoroughly discussed.⁴ This is not to deny that *Power of Place* features numerous examples of mutual borrowing between Buddhism and Daoism (one instance is the detailed analysis on pp. 286-290), but this merely involves the presentation of data, not an explanation of how such information can help promote the development of a new field. Robson

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also concedes that sorting the data on Buddhism and Daoism into separate chapters seems to be at odds with his Buddho-Daoist conceptualization (p. 323), while the claim on p. 321 that these two religions “colonized” the history of Nanyue needs further elaboration. In short, while this book succeeds in questioning traditional normative categories for Chinese religions, including those shaped by European conceptualizations, Robson’s analysis is based on a largely revisionist framework. This in turn might explain the book’s final sentence (“place studies deserve a place in the studies of Chinese religious history alongside considerations of time (history) and thought (doctrine”) ), which, while indubitably valid, does not represent the kind of conceptual breakthrough that could shape the fields of Buddho-Daoist studies or Chinese religions as a whole.

A related issue involves the relationship between religion and the state, a phenomenon that appears in nearly every chapter but deserves far more extensive analysis. One particularly thought-provoking discussion may be found on pp. 150-152, where Robson attempts to reconsider conventional wisdom regarding Liang Wudi’s 梁武帝 (r. 502-550) suppression of Daoism by showing that he also patronized it. This point is certainly valid, but it is essential to carefully consider the manifold ways in which emperors interacted with Buddhism and Daoism, which could include shifting support between these two religions, simultaneously supporting both, or patronizing a particular religion while also suppressing specific sub-groups and specialists. In the case of Wudi, recent research has shown that he supported Daoism during the first years of his reign, meaning that his patronage of Nanyue Daoists during the early sixth century may not be all that surprising. Moreover, while Wudi proved to be a devout Buddhist during the later years of his reign, he did not hesitate to assert imperial hegemony over Buddhist specialists who challenged his authority.5

5 James A. Benn, Burning for the Buddha: Self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007); Liu Shufen 刘淑芬, “The Return of the State: On the
Despite these few flaws, the overall significance of Robson’s scholarship remains unchallenged. In drawing on a wide range of sources to study the historical development of Nanyue from the perspective of local religious geography, *Power of Place* has set a new agenda for the field that will continue to shape research for years to come. This book should also prove invaluable for use in courses on Chinese religions.

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