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From Imperial Altar to Global Icon: The Transatlantic Journey and Transformation of Mount Tai Culture in the United States

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Abstract

Mount Tai, a paramount symbol in Chinese civilization, embodies a complex synthesis of political, religious, aesthetic, and ethical values. This paper traces the transatlantic journey of Mount Tai culture into the United States, examining its reception and transformation across different historical periods. It argues that its perception evolved through distinct phases: from an exotic and often misunderstood "Oriental" spectacle in early missionary and traveler accounts, to an object of academic knowledge systematized by sinologists, and finally to a malleable cultural resource appropriated within American literature, art, and popular culture. Throughout this process, core Chinese significations—particularly its imperial political theology and intricate folk religious systems—were largely filtered out or diluted. In their place, attributes such as its natural monumentality, spiritual sublimity, and metaphorical stability were selectively emphasized and reconfigured to align with American cultural paradigms, including individualism and consumerism. This study illuminates the dynamic interplay of power, selective interpretation, and creative adaptation in the global circulation of non-Western cultural symbols.

Keywords

Mount Tai culture; American sinology; cross-cultural communication; symbolic transmutation; cultural adaptation

Introduction

Mount Tai has long transcended its geographical significance to become a "cultural peak" embodying the political, religious, aesthetic, and ethical spirit of the Chinese nation. From ancient sacrifices to the institutionalized Fengshan ceremonies since the Qin and Han dynasties, it was constructed as the ultimate ritual site for political legitimacy. Concurrently, folk beliefs like that of Bixia Yuanjun established it as a major religious center. In literature and art, countless texts have endowed it with an aesthetic of loftiness and grandeur. Arguably, Mount Tai is a super cultural symbol integrating multiple dimensions.

When this complex symbol entered the United States—a nation imbued with Protestant ethos, Enlightenment rationality, and pragmatism—its original meaning structure faced profound reshaping. While research on Mount Tai's intrinsic culture is abundant, systematic studies on its dissemination and transformation in the West remain scarce. This paper attempts to fill this gap, viewing the dissemination of Mount Tai culture in the U.S. as a dynamic cross-cultural practice. Core questions include: Through which channels did it enter American society? How did American interpretations evolve across different historical stages and among various groups? Ultimately, what image has Mount Tai been transformed into within the American cultural landscape?

To answer these, this paper unfolds from a historical context and media forms. It traces Orientalist impressions from the late 19th to early 20th century, analyzes how American Sinology intellectualized Mount Tai in the mid-to-late 20th century, and explores its appropriation in literature, art, and popular culture from the late 20th century onward. Finally, it examines Mount Tai as a "World Heritage" site and a symbol of diasporic identity. Through this examination, the paper outlines a genealogy of Mount Tai's evolution in the U.S. and reflects on the power structures inherent in cross-cultural communication.

1. First Encounters and Spectacles: Accounts by Missionaries and Early Travelers

From the late 19th to early 20th centuries, Mount Tai entered the American consciousness through the accounts of Protestant missionaries and early travelers, framed by an Orientalist discourse (Said, 1978). Their narratives formed a distorted yet captivating "first impression."

Missionaries, driven by a civilizing mission, interpreted Chinese society through a lens of religious presuppositions and civilizational hierarchy. Arthur H. Smith's *Chinese Characteristics* (1894) is representative. In his narrative, Mount Tai was dissected into fragmented examples supporting his arguments about Chinese "negative traits." Pilgrimage practices were cited as evidence of a "lack of precision" or "nervelessness." Most crucially, in discussing "Pantheism and Polytheism," Mount Tai's folk belief system became a focal point of attack. Smith argued that pilgrims' piety stemmed not from genuine spiritual surrender but from fear and utilitarian pursuit of benefits. Deities like Dongyue Dadi and Bixia Yuanjun were seen as manifestations of chaotic "idol worship," obstructing the recognition of the Christian God.

While missionaries like Smith and Gilbert Reid provided valuable ethnographic records of late 19th-century folk practices, their value judgments were thoroughly negative. They applied a monotheistic framework to a complex, polytheistic system, selectively ignoring its philosophical depth, political functions, and profound folk psychology. In their narratives, Mount Tai was reduced to a "pagan fortress" needing conquest by Christian light.

Travelers, such as Isabella Bird, brought a different perspective driven by scientific exploration and exotic adventure. In *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* (1899), Bird described Mount Tai with intense visual impact, marveling at the stone steps, cliff inscriptions, and the panoramic view from the summit, which she termed a "fairyland." These descriptions successfully introduced Mount Tai as a magnificent composite landscape to the West.

However, Bird's understanding was superficial and historicized. She showed interest in the Fengshan ceremony but viewed it as a long-extinct ritual of "Eastern despotic monarchs," disconnected from living cultural vitality. This "historicizing" tendency was a typical Orientalist strategy, freezing cultural traditions as historical specimens (Said, 1978). Furthermore, she primarily regarded pilgrims as exotic social customs, part of a drama titled "Oriental Pilgrimage," rarely delving into the meaning of their practices or the community bonds they sustained.

Through such accounts and accompanying photographic collections, the image of Mount Tai as a "geographical wonder" and "exotic charm" took root. While failing to convey cultural essence, these narratives stimulated Western curiosity, laying the groundwork for its future as an international tourist destination. Both missionary critique and traveler appreciation objectified Mount Tai as an "Other" to be observed and consumed, consolidating a Western-centric cognitive mode that simplified its complexity to confirm Western civilizational superiority.

2. Knowledge and Deconstruction: Academic Interpretation in Sinology

Post-World War II, American Sinology evolved into a rigorous discipline, shifting perceptions of Mount Tai from impressionistic narratives to systematic academic analysis. This was both a "knowledge-building" endeavor and a "disenchanting" deconstruction.

The "Harvard School," particularly through John K. Fairbank's macro-historical framework, provided context for understanding Mount Tai's role in the traditional Chinese political order. Scholars began to dissect the Fengshan ceremony not as exotic history but as the ultimate performance of the "Mandate of Heaven" concept (Spence, 1974). It was analyzed as the highest political-cultural practice where emperors confirmed their ruling legitimacy. This transformed Mount Tai's image from a "chaotic center of pagan worship" to a highly organized national ritual center, and from a "romantic wonder" to an institutionalized symbol of power. This academic "disenchantment" used rational analysis to strip away mystical and romantic veils, interpreting sacredness as that of political authority.

In religious studies, Stephen F. Teiser's work was a landmark. In *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (1994), he revealed how the native deity "Taishan Fujun" was absorbed

and transformed by Chinese Buddhism, becoming a key judge in the Buddhist hell system. This showed Mount Tai's religious influence was not local but, through Buddhism, shaped the afterlife imagination across East Asia. Meanwhile, scholars like Kenneth Pomeranz studied the belief in Bixia Yuanjun, highlighting its gender dimensions and social functions for women in traditional society, and examining the social organization of pilgrimage activities (Pomeranz, 1997; Naquin & Yu, 1992). These studies presented Mount Tai as a living, multi-layered "religio-folkloric complex."

In literary and art history, sinologists traced Mount Tai's evolution as a cultural motif. Literary studies analyzed how poems by Du Fu or Li Bai used Mount Tai to express Confucian engagement or Taoist transcendence (Owen, 1981). Art historians, notably Wu Hung, analyzed Mount Tai's "monumentality." In *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (1995), he argued that Fengshan stone inscriptions were not mere texts but constructs of political authority and historical narrative through materiality and location. Paintings of Mount Tai were seen as visual constructions of "the order of all-under-heaven" (Hay, 2001).

Thus, mid-to-late 20th-century American sinology achieved a systematic leap in understanding Mount Tai, transforming it into a complex knowledge system. However, this academic deconstruction paid a price: disciplinary fragmentation turned Mount Tai into a meticulously labeled "specimen," potentially dissipating its integrated sacredness and emotional resonance.

3. Reconstruction and Appropriation: Mount Tai in Literature, Art, and Popular Culture

From the late 20th century onward, the dissemination of Mount Tai culture permeated the American public sphere, undergoing bold processes of meaning reconstruction and cultural appropriation, far beyond the confines of academic sinology. This dynamic engagement across literature, visual arts, and popular culture reveals how the sacred mountain was translated, fragmented, and reconstituted to serve new narratives within the American socio-imaginary.

In literary domains, Mount Tai was predominantly employed as a flexible symbolic resource rather than a geographically or historically specific entity. For Chinese American writers, it often served as a potent spiritual anchor for diasporic identity construction, symbolizing an enduring connection to ancestral cultural roots and functioning as a symbolic counterweight to experiences of alienation or marginalization within mainstream society (Said, 1993). In contrast, within mainstream English literature—particularly in genres such as fantasy and science fiction—the name and core attributes of "Mount Tai" (e.g., "majesty," "antiquity," "sacredness") were widely borrowed, yet systematically evacuated of their specific Chinese historical, political, and religious contexts. It thus transformed into a floating, de-contextualized signifier, effortlessly integrated into Western archetypal narratives as a universal "Axis Mundi," "source of divine power," or "relic of a lost civilization" (Clute & Grant, 1997).

Within the visual arts, American artists engaged in a distinct practice of formal appropriation. Elements such as Mount Tai's millennia-old cliff inscriptions inspired creations that focused on their monumental scale, textured materiality, and abstract symbolic composition, aligning more closely with Western artistic traditions like Abstract Expressionism or Land Art than with the original calligraphic and literary meanings (Kraus, 2004). Similarly, photographers framing Mount Tai's landscapes frequently adhered to the European-derived "Picturesque" or "Sublime" aesthetic traditions, seeking perspectives that emphasized majestic grandeur and awe-inspiring nature in a manner reminiscent of Ansel Adams's glorification of the American wilderness, thereby often diluting the traditional Chinese aesthetic pursuit of "harmony between humanity and nature" (Andrews, 1999). In the new media era, this tendency toward visual simplification has been exponentially amplified. Circulated through platforms like Instagram and YouTube, Mount Tai's image increasingly conforms to a standardized, algorithm-friendly "visual postcard" aesthetic, where its profound cultural depth is compressed into brief, consumable captions highlighting visual spectacle over contextual meaning (O'Neill, 2017).

A particularly telling case of this transformative appropriation occurs in American popular culture, specifically in the implicit projection of Mount Tai's symbolism onto Superman's "Fortress of Solitude" in DC Comics. The fortress's depiction as comprising towering, immutable crystals embedded in a remote, awe-inspiring landscape has frequently drawn parallels to the iconic imagery and metaphorical weight of Mount Tai (Duncan & Smith, 2013). This represents a profound "creative misunderstanding." It successfully captures and translates Mount Tai's core connotations of unshakable stability and immense weight into the American cultural lexicon. However, this translation involves a decisive stripping away of the symbol's original collective and political context—its associations with imperial order and cosmic mandate. These attributes are instead internalized as the defining qualities of the individual superhero: his indestructible physical strength, unwavering moral firmness, and the lonely solitude borne of his

exceptional nature (Gordon, 2017). Thus, a Chinese symbol quintessentially representing collective, imperial order is thoroughly "individualized" and repurposed as a representation of archetypal American heroic virtue.

Across these diverse domains, Mount Tai underwent extensive processes of "symbolization" and "universalization." It evolved from a culturally specific Chinese icon into a de-contextualized "cultural component" available for free reinterpretation and recombination. While this greatly expanded its global visibility and cross-cultural resonance, it simultaneously risked hollowing out its historical depth, reducing it to a superficial exotic ornament or a commodified product fully assimilated into the logic of global consumerism.

4. Mount Tai in the Contemporary Context: Universal Values, Identity Politics, and Global Labels

In the 21st century, Mount Tai's image in the United States is shaped by two competing discursive frameworks: a universalist heritage narrative and diasporic identity politics.

Its 1987 designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site was pivotal. The label of "outstanding universal value" systematically reshaped its presentation in U.S. media, education, and tourism, re-framing it as a "treasure of all humanity" (UNESCO, 1987). This universalist approach enhances global visibility and promotes cross-cultural respect. However, it inherently involves a process of selective de-contextualization (Winter, 2014). Mount Tai's profound political symbolism as the ceremonial Fengshan site is simplified into a historical footnote of "ancient emperor sacrifices," its intricate political theology effectively emptied. Its comprehensive folk belief systems are often folklorized into "mythology" or "tradition," weakening their status as living religions. Furthermore, its embedded spiritual and philosophical values are translated into dehistoricized, universal experiences such as "awe towards nature," blurring specific Confucian or Daoist contexts. The result is the construction of Mount Tai as a largely depoliticized, aestheticized "sublime object" for global consumption, integrated into a narrative underpinned by Western modernity and consumerist logic (Harvey, 2001; Meskell, 2018).

Conversely, for the Chinese American community, Mount Tai functions as a vital "site of memory" (Nora, 1989), actively deployed in cultural identity construction and preservation. It appears prominently in visual culture during public festivals like the Chinese New Year, serving as a visual marker of ethnic presence and reinforcing community cohesion. Within heritage language schools, classical poems about Mount Tai are taught to transmit cultural values such as resilience and lofty aspiration (Louie, 2004). In family settings, idioms like "a responsibility heavier than Mount Tai" are used to impart ethical guidelines across generations (Wong, 2017). Chinese American artists and scholars also engage in reproducing its meanings, from literary explorations of cultural roots to critical academic analyses of appropriation (Chow, 2014). Here, Mount Tai is a warm, living resource for sustaining diasporic identity.

Thus, contemporary Mount Tai exists at a culturally contested node. As a World Heritage commodity, it is standardized and de-contextualized for global audiences. As a diasporic memory site, it remains a potent symbol for cultural continuity and negotiation. This dual trajectory illustrates the paradoxical fate of cultural symbols in globalization: they face co-option and simplification by dominant discourses, yet simultaneously enable spaces for creative adaptation and identity assertion within specific communities.

5. Conclusion

The century-long journey of Mount Tai culture in the United States reveals a clear trajectory: from Orientalist spectacle, to sinological knowledge object, to appropriated cultural resource. A central finding is the fundamental reconfiguration of its core meaning. Aspects most specific to Chinese civilization—its imperial political theology and comprehensive folk belief systems—were marginalized as incommensurable. Conversely, its physical grandeur and abstract steadfastness demonstrated cross-cultural mobility, being detached from native contexts and woven into American narratives like the individualist heroism of Superman.

In the contemporary landscape, Mount Tai holds competing meanings. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is enshrined in a universalist, often de-contextualizing discourse. For Chinese Americans, it is an active "site of memory" for diasporic identity. This case illustrates a paradox of global cultural exchange: recognition in a new environment often necessitates simplification, de-contextualization, and adaptation to the recipient culture's logics. The story of Mount Tai in America is one of active, transformative appropriation, underscoring that global cultural flows are shaped by power dynamics, where symbolic meaning is continually contested and remade across borders.

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