

THE SACRED MOUNTAINS OF CHINA

A TRIP TO WU T'AI SHAN

BY

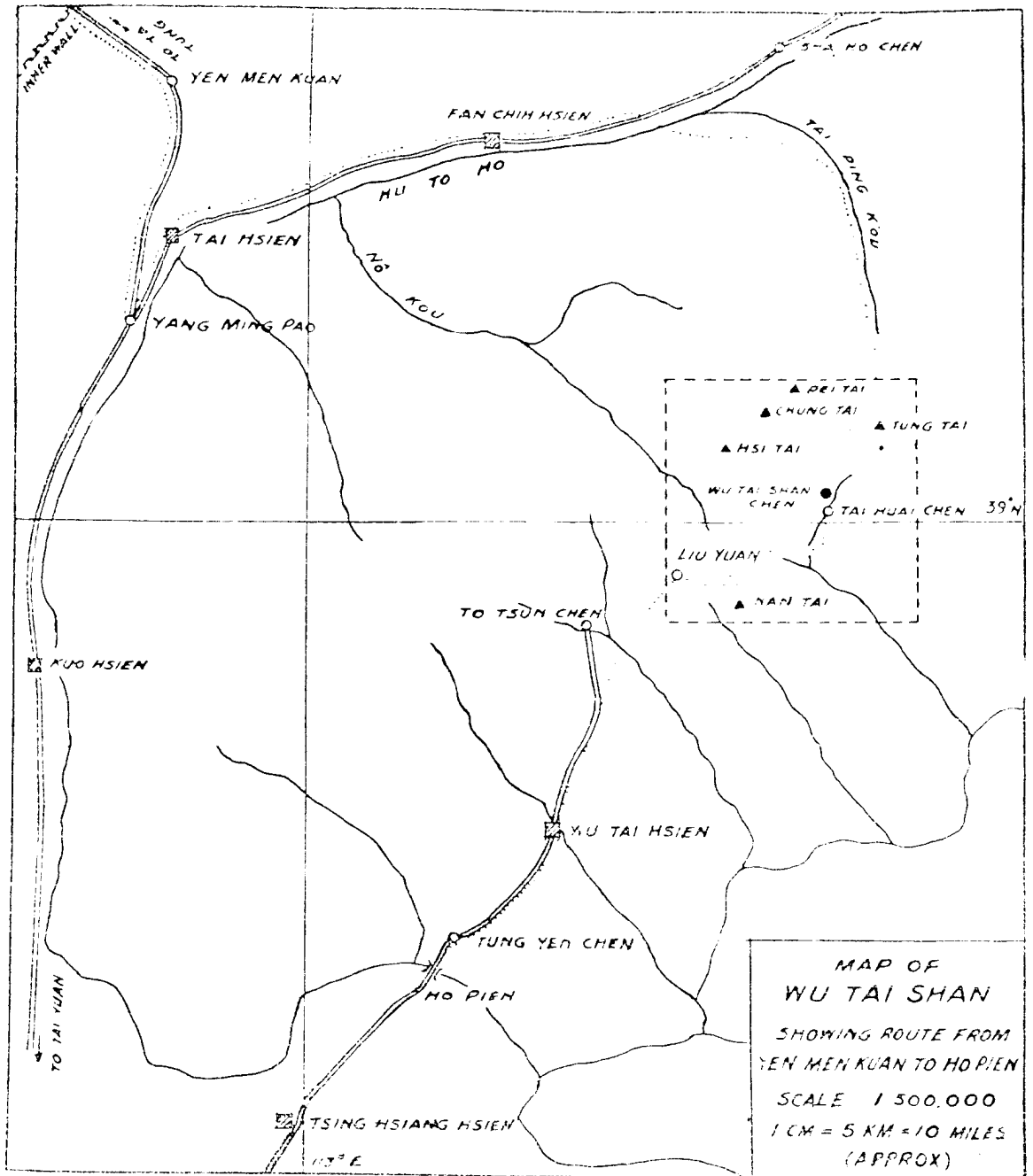
REWI ALLEY and R. LAPWOOD

Wu T'ai Shan (五台山) is one of the four sacred mountains of Buddhism, and is situated in the northern part of the province of Shansi about a hundred miles north-north-east of Tai-yuan Fu, the capital, not far from the Hopch (Chihli) border. It reaches an altitude of 10,000 feet above sea level, and contains innumerable Chinese and Lama temples, being a place of pilgrimage especially favoured by the Mongols. The patron saint of the mountain is Wen Shu Pusa, or Manjusri, one of the most important of the Bodhisattvas, and many, if not all, of the temples and monasteries on Wu T'ai Shan are dedicated to him. The following is an account of a visit to this sacred mountain.

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Due to the settled state of Shansi, travel there, should one be content to use the more primitive means of transport, is safe and comparatively easy. One must, however, be in possession of a properly visaed passport as well as a supply of cards sufficient for the multitude of policemen, who will—most often politely, but always insistently—ask for them, as one travels in this modern Kingdom of Tsin. In our approach to the Wu T'ai Shan (五台山) we came the way of the Mongol pilgrims, who descend every summer from Inner and Outer Mongolia to visit these mountains, which they hold to be particularly sacred.

Leaving Ta-tung Fu (大同) by a crowded Tai-yuan 'bus, we lurched over the deeply rutted and unmetalled road, until further progress was barred by the private car of a military official and his motor truck piled with luggage and women. His efforts to persuade the farmers to pull his transport out of the mud were proving singularly ineffectual when our convoy of three busses brought further assistance, so that after about an hour all were on the highroad once more.



THE CHINA JOURNAL

Recent severe summer rains had washed away several of the poorly constructed wooden bridges, so that streams had to be forded, making it necessary for passengers to alight and be carried across by vociferous countrymen at the expense of a few coppers. As the hills were approached the road became better. It had been metalled in a pass which leads over a range some two thousand feet above the plain—a long pull indeed for the heavily laden 'bus, whose brakes did not work properly, so that when a stop was made on the hill the driver's assistant had to jump out, grab wildly for a stone, and shove it under one of the rear wheels.

With us in the 'bus was an officer with his servant, wife and two children, the youngest of whom, a child of some two years, did all the awkward things a baby can do, much to the disgust of a very beautifully dressed young lady who was most anxious about her silks. It was difficult for her to preserve her clothes and her dignity at the same time.

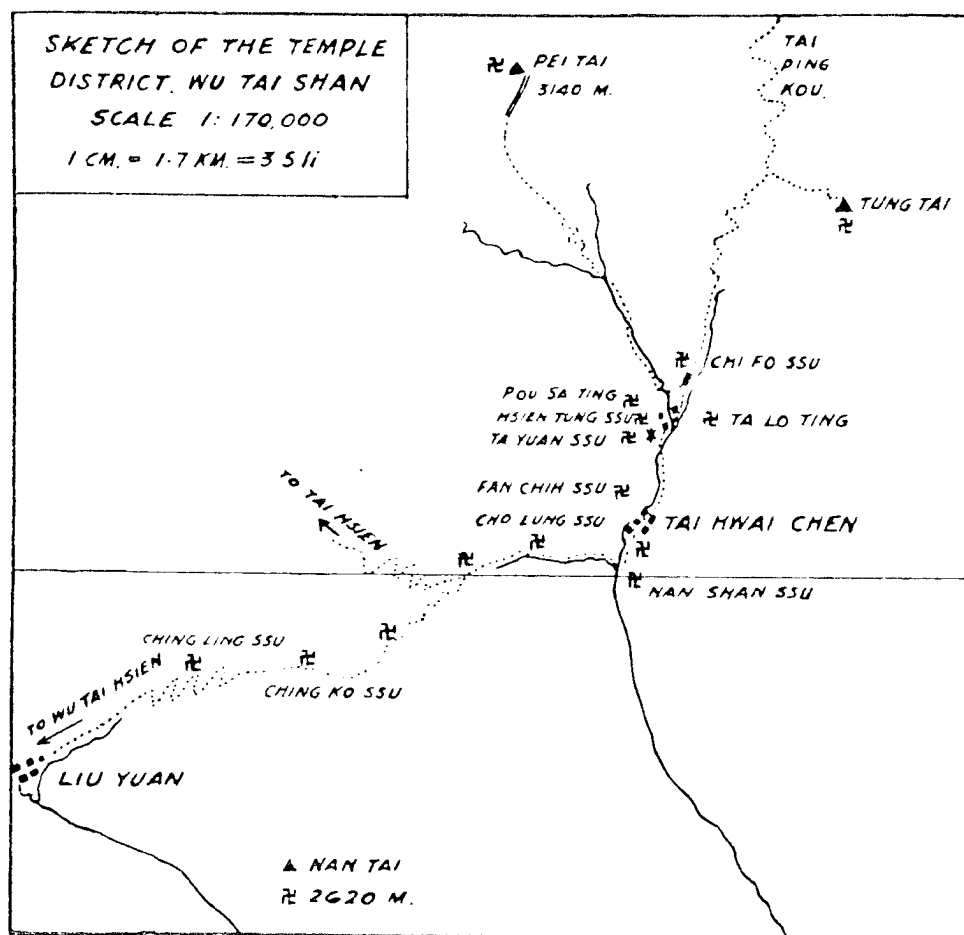
Along this range runs the inner portion of the Great Wall, and here we passed through the Yen Men Kuan (雁門關). It was here that during the Sun Dynasty the famous General Yang Liao kept the invading Mongols at bay. The story of his defence and of the courage of his sons has been a favourite theme with the professional story teller ever since.

At the first stop on the Tai yuan side of the pass lies the town of Yang-ming-poo (陽明堡), where in the late evening we alighted and hired a cart to carry us through the tall *kaoliang* and drooping millet for some twenty *li* to the city of Tai-chou (代州).

This heavily walled city occupies a position of military importance, so that in its centre stands a huge drum tower emblazoned on the face of which are the characters 威鎮三關 or "Protector of the Three Passes." It guards the Lung Wang, Yu Luen and Ling Wu passes, the only roads through that barrier of rugged mountains, the Heng Shan-Chü Chu Range, which cuts off the Ta-t'ung basin from the rest of Shansi. It is a prosperous sleepy old city, now busy, with the financial aid of its affluent military commander, in renovating its twenty-two great street *pai-lou* or memorial arches. The gorgeous colours with which they are being painted will no doubt be duly admired by the country folk as they jog over the deeply rutted and neglected streets.

Here the hospitable English missionaries provided quarters and helped in the arrangements for the hire of a mule litter, so that next morning a start was made on the first stage of the journey to Fan-chih (繁峙), a *hsien* seat some seventy *li* to the east. The second day took us through still more beautiful country of greener fields and clear flowing water. As we crossed the river to the north of the Nan-yu-k'ou (南嶽口), which valley we were to ascend the third day, we noticed the two iron cows which are supposed to hold the river in place and control the flood water. One remembered that the falling of such a cow into the sluice above the lock was regarded by the villagers of a Kiangsi hamlet as the cause of the Great Flood of 1931.

THE SACRED MOUNTAINS OF CHINA



At Nan-yu-k'ou we slept on the benches of a school room which had been confiscated from the Wu Fa Ssu (護法寺), a temple dedicated to Wen Shu (文殊), the patron Saint of Wu T'ai.

In a side hall of the temple, called the Niang Mo Tzu Miao (娘母子廟), stood an image of Kuan Yin flanked by women with bound feet, suckling their babies, and dressed in the local summer costume which leaves both breasts exposed. Near them stood images of men, each carrying bags containing three babies slung over their shoulders—a very interesting example of the naturalistic sculpture and direct symbolism of the country folk.

The valley up which we climbed next day bore the name of T'ai P'ing K'ou (太平口). Near its head we stopped at an inn in a wretchedly

poor village and ate a meal of steamed oatmeal. The people were all tenants of the monks, and a truly miserable lot they were. The valley had originally been forested, and occasional clumps of trees left uncut gave one the impression that the original stand of trees must have been very fine. The work of denudation is said to have begun in the reign of K'ang Hsi (康熙), who encouraged immigration, and to have been continued down to recent times.

At the head of the valley came a stiff climb up to a saddle under the East Peak or Tung T'ai (東台). The way was made very beautiful by a profusion of wild flowers of all colours, which, we found later, cover most of this high country where terraced cultivation is impossible. Pilgrims pick the petals and take them back to their sick relatives, who then receive by this method the direct blessing of Wen Shu. This saint is Majusri, the Buddhist God of Wisdom, who is stated to have been born from a ray of light emanating from the head of Buddha, having no parents and thus born free from sin. He introduced Buddhism to Nepal, and is sometimes represented sitting on a lion with a sword in his hand, for one of his miracles was the killing of a lakefull of aquatic monsters in that country.

In the pass, some four *li* from the Tung T'ai, was a half-built temple, beside which sat a group of Mongol pilgrims, the leader of whom was busily engaged writing down in Mongol script in a very modern notebook descriptions of the places of interest visited for the edification of those at home.

From this point the Tung T'ai may be easily ascended, a gently sloping path leading some four *li* through meadow-like slopes to a strongly built temple kept by three hospitable monks. The temple is dedicated as usual to Wen Shu, but contains little of interest. Outside are three tall stupas, heavily built of stone. At many of these temples a fierce dog does his best to break his chain and get at the newcomer, but in daylight there is no danger. At night, however, the dogs run free, and he would be an unwise visitor who arrived on the Tung T'ai after dusk.

In the descent on the far side of the pass temples became thicker, the bottom of the valley being dominated by a giant white stupa at the foot of the Pu-sa Ting (菩薩亭), the central lamassery, which is a line of buildings planned in the shape of a dragon. This temple is said to have been founded some fourteen hundred years ago by the Tartar Emperor, Hian Wen Ta. It is built at the top of a series of one hundred and nine wide stone steps on a hill about four hundred feet above the temple village, which itself is about six thousand feet above sea level.

We made our quarters in the very hospitable Ch'i Fu Ssu (七佛寺) on the hillside where comfortable rooms were assigned us. On the porch of the main hall of this temple a gaunt Mongol lama was busy prostrating himself on an inclined board facing the main image. The process seemed to be one continuous motion, pads being used for the knees and hands. The lama was sweating profusely, though the evening mountain air was cool enough.

The next day many temples were visited, both lama and Chinese Buddhist. It is said that in Imperial times there were as many as three



朝聖到名山見古剎叢林群賢畢至

Shan, the famous Sacred Mountain of North Shansi.

THE SACRED MOUNTAINS OF CHINA

hundred and thirty places of worship here, but that now only one hundred or so remain, of which thirty are lamasseries.

Richthofen, however, states that on his visit in about 1870 only about half the temples were kept in repair, so that this is possibly a permanent state. There is an extraordinary number of tombs, usually in the form of small stupas, which may easily be accounted for by the fact that it is considered to be a fortunate thing to be buried in Wu T'ai, there being many accounts of pious elders being carried thither from far Mongolia so that it might become their last resting place.

Everywhere one may see lama influences—prayer flags, praying wheels that should be turned in the direction in which the Sun moves and bearing the words "*Om Mani Padme Hum*," fierce images seated on grotesque animals, brightly coloured scarves and butter lamps.

Descending from the little temple of Fan Chia Ssu (梵家寺) situated on a small peak overlooking from the south the main group of buildings and the stupa, we met a small procession of Mongols from Outer Mongolia, several of the younger members of which wore foreign dress, while their elders wore the old-fashioned bright silks. They all stopped at a sacred spring below us, bared their heads and washed them in the spring waters. As we came up the younger ones noticed us, and quickly abandoned their reverential attitude, looking rather uncomfortable. The elders, however, went on with their little ceremony, oblivious of our intrusion.

On the hillside a young grass cutter came up and entered into conversation. He said he was very tired of grass cutting, as that occupation brought him in about sixteen cents a day, and that it was always raining on Wu T'ai anyway, which made grass cutting difficult. He wished that he could wear shorts as we did, but was sure that his father would never hear of any departure from the conventional trousers fastened round the ankles with tape. He thought that the people in the vicinity were a dirty lot, and that where his family originally came from they used to wash quite often, a habit that they had completely abandoned since coming to Wu T'ai, where, moreover, there was never anything to eat other than steamed oatmeal, which he considered to be an unpleasant diet.

Coming back to our temple we passed a huge procession of lamas, Chinese priests and pilgrims, who had been attending an initiation ceremony at a temple up the valley. These were estimated to be about three thousand persons in all, and their coloured gowns and robes as they filed along the mountain path showed up well against a hillside already bright with flowers. Each person carried a large steamed bun, a present from the religious house concerned. One Mongol toddler in bright brown silk pointed a chubby hand at the watching foreigner, and, turning to his parents said, "Oriss"—Russian.

The next day we climbed the North Peak, or Pei T'ai (北台), choosing the direct path, twenty five *li* from Wu T'ai village, in preference to the longer forty *li* mule-litter track which runs first up to the col between the North and East Peaks and then along the ridge westwards. The ascent is fairly laborious, but neither unduly long nor difficult, for the

THE CHINA JOURNAL

village is between six and seven thousand feet above sea level, while the Pei T'ai is about ten thousand three hundred feet in altitude. Our way led first through the long valley which sweeps up the north beyond the big temples, and after half an hour suddenly ascended a steep ridge and ran along the crest. At first the mists rose kindly above us, but, after we had been walking for two hours, they settled to a steady level and we found ourselves following a diminishing track without landmarks to guide. We soon arrived on a cold bleak moor, and the patch dipped downwards. For half an hour we made a tentative and careful advance in the apparent direction of the upward slope, and then the mists scattered for a minute or two, unveiling a glimpse down to the sunlit limestone of the northern cliffs and the long valley of the Hu T'o Ho beyond. The hills around us lay shrouded, and our relief was considerable when we met a shepherd who was able to put us back on the right road, from which we had diverged. A few minutes more saw us on the summit, where we quickly sought the shelter of the sturdy building, which proved on entry to be the Pei T'ai Ting (北台頂). The four hospitable priests set us on the *k'ang*, while one descended into a miniature inferno to heat up the room, and the others brought tea, sweetmeats and information.

The most noticeable things about the temple were not its ornaments or images, for, excepting Wen Shu and a human figure with a lion's head, none arrested the attention, but the details of construction; for this building had walls six feet thick, iron shuttered windows and a roof arched inside, but flat outside, with no eaves or tiles. It had certainly been built more to withstand the elements than for beauty. One of the monks offered to show us the way down, which he said was hard to find, and came out into the damp driving mist with us. We started off on a broad well-constructed road, but, to our astonishment, this ended on open moorland after three *li*.

On other sacred mountains the path starts from the bottom and fades away towards the top, but this was just the reverse. A little further on we regained our morning path, not surprised that we had strayed from such an indiscernible route. An ascent in mist would be better made with a guide.

In the evening we loaded up our mule-litter and proceeded down the valley to Nan Shan Ssu (南山寺), on which monastery much stone work is being done. This huge temple reminds one of some Norman castle, for inside are winding stairs through great thick stone walls to towers and pavilions.

Refusing polite and very pressing invitations to stay, we made our departure and ascended the No K'ou to another magnificent Chinese Buddhist temple, the Chiu Lung Kang (九龍崗), where a great white elaborately carved stone *p'ai-lou* has been erected recently, while further work is still being carried out.

The place is gorgeously painted, the work having been done in recent years. The monks are few, but it must take the revenue of much land to keep such a palace in its present state. Here we stayed the night while a rainstorm flooded the courts, passing on and leaving us with a

THE SACRED MOUNTAINS OF CHINA

still clear morning and fine clean washed mountain air in which to continue our way. We journeyed out of the valley and over the hills past the Nan T'ai (南台) and several great temples, amongst them the Chin Kou Ssu (金閣寺) and the Ch'ing Liang Ssu (清涼寺), where a large rocking stone is believed to possess special virtue, until at night we came to the Tseng Sheng Ssu (尊勝寺), another resplendent place under the same government as the Nan Shan and Chiu Lung Kang.

Here a great new pagoda and its surrounding twelve-sided cloister containing thirty-three groups of images are nearing completion. The Abbot, his steward and the monks treated us with exceptional courtesy and regaled us with excellent food, sending us on our way the next day rejoicing exceedingly, each of us with a copy of an inscription taken from a little old Tang pagoda in the front courtyard, beside which a replica has been erected, so that, when the old one falls, another will still be standing. Thus we left these beautiful valleys and hills with their lavish temples, their multitudes of priests, their princely Mongol spenders and the miserable hovels of their tenant farmers, whose scanty crops of oats and potatoes replace the old time forests.

The last day with our mules brought us through charming rolling country, past the citadel of Wu-tai Hsien and the scattered town of Tung-yeh (東冶), down to the bus station. This stands beside the Hu T'o Ho, a river now spanned by a fine bridge, opposite Ho-pien (河邊), the retreat of the modern Lord of Tsin, Yen Hsi Shan. Here up-to-date houses and a tall factory chimney front a well metalled road leading to Tai-yuan Fu. A new railway line, a branch of that which is being constructed between Tai-yuan and Ta-t'ung, is also cutting across to this political centre, so that within a few years the visitor to Wu T'ai will have a comparatively easy journey from this railhead.

The old Imperial route to Wu T'ai from the Peking-Hankow Railway is still able to be used, though, perhaps, not offering so much interest as the routes here described.

The usual route out from Wu T'ai is past the Nan Shan Ssu straight down the valley and then over the watershed to Wu-t'ai Hsien, a journey which takes three days instead of the two in which it can be accomplished by taking our somewhat rougher route.

One looks forward to the time when good communications will make this trip possible to the many people who would greatly benefit by so inexpensive a holiday in such wonderful mountain air, away from the enervating heat of the cities of the plains.