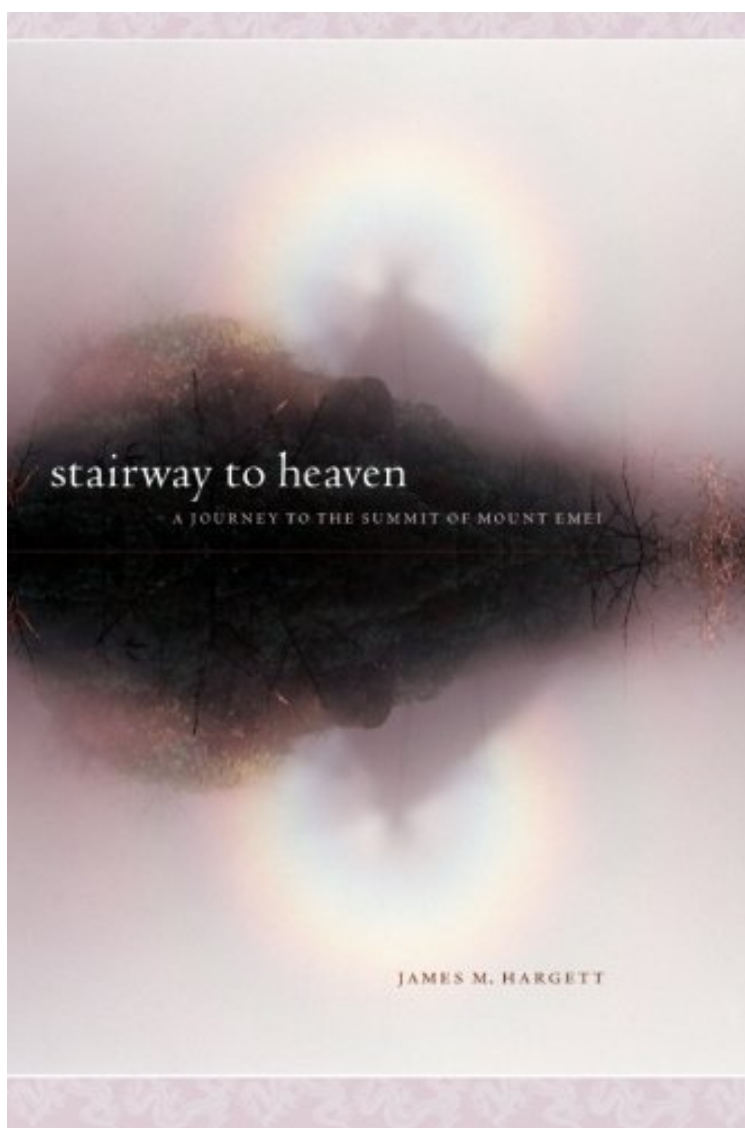


[E-BOOK] Stairway to Heaven: A Journey to the Summit of Mount Emei (SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture)

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James M. Hargett

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James M. Hargett : Stairway to Heaven: A Journey to the Summit of Mount Emei (SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Stairway to Heaven: A Journey to the Summit of Mount Emei (SUNY series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Awesome history of the mountain!By C. PierceAs I had personally been to this precious summit this was a great memory read for me to relive my climb and enjoy the view again.7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Worth the Journey -- A Landmark Work in the History of Chinese ReligionBy Roseanne E. FreeseJames Hargett in his *Stairway to Heaven - a Journey to the Summit of Mount Emei*, writes an outstanding work introducing the reader to the physical, spiritual, and political geography that has shaped one of the greatest holy mountains of China. Mount Emei, or Emei Shan in Chinese, is a vast mountain in the heart of Sichuan Province in southwestern China and is now recognized as an UNESCO World Heritage Site. The mountain, however, is full of paradoxes. Home to many varieties of "precious lights," the ten-thousand foot tall mountain did not enter into the realm of Chinese history -- when the poet Zuo Si wrote a rhapsody about the mountain in the third century. It was not until the time of the tenth or eleventh centuries that the mountain was even summited. Rather than merely relying on just a chronological approach to writing a biography of this magnificent mountain, Hargett centers his work on the account left by the Song Dynasty official and Buddhist pilgrim Fan Cheng Da (1126-1193) who climbed the mountain in 1177. Using Fan's work as a compass and road map to the mountain, Hargett takes us through a physical and historical journey to Mount Emei. As we gain in elevation and perspective, he also presents an astonishing amount of research collected from poetry, travelogues, and national histories regarding this wonderful place on the western frontier of the Middle Kingdom. Hargett then layer upon layer skillfully weaves in the accounts left by the Tang Dynasty poet, Li Bo, the Ming Dynasty Buddhist and Daoist gazetteers, and, the actions taken by the Emperors and national officials to endow, control, suppress, or revive access to the mountain. Hargett, who is a Professor of Chinese at the University at Albany State University of New York, has also personally climbed the mountain and this experience intimately illuminates his subject and infuses his writing with a delicate and subtle flavor. One of the remarkable strengths of Hargett's work is his balance. Rather than getting caught up in a secondary debate as to how to classify the mountain and its boundaries, he shows us how Chinese aesthetics, natural geography, Buddhism, Daoism, and ethnic consciousness all have contributed to creating the identity of Emei Shan. Emei Shan is as much a peak, a range, a tourist attraction, and a place that is as much visited in the mind as well as on foot. The core of his work revolves around revealing -- in ascending steps -- the nature of Emei Shan. The mountain is shown first as that distant range in a faraway place on the periphery of the Chinese heartland. Like the first Chinese visitors, Hargett shows us Emei as a home to extraordinary physical beauty that would later attract Daoists who discover Emei's capacity to serve as a bridge from the mundane to immortality. Once established as a holy place, Buddhist monks rediscover Emei Shan who not only use its topography to retell the virtues of the Buddha, but also transform it into a home for the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra (Puxian Pusa). In effect, they create a new physical and metaphysical history. Now triply endowed by its nature, its holiness, and its history, Emei Shan becomes the focal point of national political interest as emperors bestow their prestige upon the mountain and monks and nuns offer their intentions for the benefit of the State. This social, natural, and metaphysical symbiosis now consciously matures and becomes a center of gravity for other holy mountain ranges and -- by implication -- for China as a whole. Although this was not the conscious intention of Hargett's work to compare Western vs. East Asian concepts of time and place, his study of the temporal, physical, and metaphysical space that shapes Emei Shan provides a rich exploration into the essence of the Chinese world view. Carefully documenting and qualifying his observations, he shows how Emei Shan itself is a simile for the transition from center to periphery and a bridge between heaven and earth, a galaxy without boundaries. Unlike the linear view of creator vs. created and measured vs. unmeasured that are the driving concerns of the Western approach to reality, Hargett richly reveals the Chinese ideal of the action and interaction between man, society, and universe, an interaction that spirals out and back, looping again and again, and where there is distance, but never an edge. Despite the density of information on geography, personalities, and events that have shaped the 2,000-year human history of the mountain, Hargett's writing remains lucid and well framed, carefully guiding the reader from stage to stage and place to place. His translation of Chinese terms is superb. He introduces the reader to dozens of unique Chinese concepts, such as "Zhengshi" or "official historical works" and "Dao Shi" or "Daoist adepts." His English renderings ring true to their original Chinese meanings but are concrete and easily assimilated. I never once had to, as the Chinese put it, "zhou mei tou" or "frown my brow" in reading this excellent work. That being said, there were two, minor oversights. On page 131 there is a typo, "hot bowels" instead of "hot bowls" and the two photos of famous paintings of Emei Shan on pages 62 and 174 were so dark as to make render them ineffective as illustrations of the mountain's beauty. While one can use Hargett's *Stairway to Heaven* as a physical and historical roadmap to Emei Shan, it is my hope that Hargett in future editions of the work would take more time to explain two very interesting side trails. These two observations are given with the realization that side trails can be difficult, for side trails by their nature can just as readily delay as well as shorten one's approach to the summit. The first side trail is regarding the role of one major visitor to the mountain, the Daoist Hu Shi An (1593-1663). Hargett many times refers to his works, especially the tome *Yi E Lai*. Perhaps his closeness to Hu's reflections led Hargett to omit by accident a translation of the work's title, which I would render as "Translating the Tones of [Mount] E." More importantly, we never get a full sense of who Hu Shi An was and why his *Yi E Lai* was so influential to the development of Emei Shan's identity, especially as Hu Shi An apparently wanted to promote his particular, if not entirely historically reliable, vision of the

great mountain. The second side trail that I would encourage Hargett to explore is the place and meaning of Sheshen Yai or Suicide Cliff. Although Suicide Cliff does overlook a near 5,000-foot drop, he writes, "it is not difficult to imagine how a zealous pilgrim might, in a moment of ecstatic frenzy, attempt the leap directly to the 'Pure Land.'" (See page 184.) My concern here is that while mentioning this dark yet significant tradition of suicide by Buddhist pilgrims a number of times, he does not provide any historical context for it. Although Buddhist suicides by fire are first documented as becoming widespread in the 5th century in the *Lives of Eminent Monks* (Gao Seng Zhuan) and *Lives of the Nuns* (Biqiuni Zhuan), both works of the early sixth century, the ties with Pure Land, China's earliest indigenous Buddhist Tradition (Zong), are only contemporaneous at best. Speaking on broader, ethical terms, suicide is considered to be the taking of life in Buddhism and since the creation of the first monastic communities in Eastern India, it is also a *parajika*, or major transgression, the attempt of which is grounds for immediate expulsion from the Sangha or Buddhist monastic community. I point out the significance of this side trail, not so much as to raise questions concerning the evolution of this peculiar Chinese tradition, but to point out that such exploration may have also led the author to consider Emei Shan's role in the development of Buddhist philosophy. However, as there are already many fine works on the history of Buddhist ideas in China, I am more than satisfied to have enjoyed such a well-written and well-constructed history, demography, and economy of one of the greatest natural and spiritual wonders of the world. Through Hargett, we are able to truly visit this great mountain and like Li Bo, we are invited to transcend the earthly realm and join the Immortals. This brief review cannot do justice to the scope, vision, and depth of learning that Hargett brings to the fields of Chinese history and Chinese religion. In short, I can think of no one better to guide me on this "journey of 10,000 miles."

A consideration of China's Mount Emei, long important in Chinese culture and history and of particular significance to Buddhists. Located in a remote area of modern Sichuan province, Mount Emei is one of China's most famous mountains and has long been important to Buddhists. *Stairway to Heaven* looks at Emei's significance in Chinese history and literature while also addressing the issue of sense of place in Chinese culture. Mount Emei's exquisite scenery and unique geographical features have inspired countless poets, writers, and artists. Since the early years of the Song dynasty (960-1279), Emei has been best known as a site of Buddhist pilgrimage and worship. Today, several Buddhist temples still function on Emei, but the mountain also has become a scenic tourist destination, attracting more than a million visitors annually. Author James M. Hargett takes readers on a journey to the mountain through the travel writings of the twelfth-century writer and official Fan Chengda (1126-1193). Fan's diary and verse accounts of his climb to the summit of Mount Emei in 1177 are still among the most informative accounts of the mountain ever written. Through Fan's eyes, words, and footsteps and with background information and commentary from Hargett the reader will experience some of the ways Emei has been constructed by diverse human experience over the centuries. James M. Hargett's work adds rich layers to our understanding of one of China's most important sacred sites. *Journal of Asian Studies* I am impressed by the extensive use, contextualization, and painstaking translation of primary materials as a means of rendering a multilayered, intimate, insider perspective on Emei. The intellectual contribution of this work is that it makes clear as no other study has, the significant role Emei, and, by extension, mountains in general have played in Chinese culture. William Powell, University of California at Santa Barbara

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About the Author James M. Hargett is Professor of Chinese at the University at Albany, State University of New York.