

Article

The Bestowal of Noble Titles upon the Mountain and Water Spirits in Tang China †

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Abstract: In the Tang era, official sacrifices to mountain and water spirits became more methodical than those of the preceding dynasties. What deserves more attention is that the imperial court bestowed noble titles, which were normally awarded to aristocrats and powerful officials, on the twenty-eight mountain and water spirits, including the Five Sacred Peaks, Four Strongholds, Four Seas and Four Waterways. These practices reflected the two-sided attitude of the Tang rulers to the mountain and water spirits. When confronting violent political changes, the rulers yearned for blessings and protection from these natural deities. On the other hand, with the expansion of monarchical power in the secular world, they sought to establish their authority in the realm of divinity. Running parallel in most cases, the bestowal of nobility and the official sacrificial system constituted the official cult of mountain and water spirits, which survived until the first years of the Ming Dynasty.

Keywords: noble titles; mountain and water spirits; Tang era



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1. Introduction

As a kind of natural deities, mountain and water spirits were worshipped from ancient times on. In the Tang era (618–907), the cult of mountain and water spirits prevailed greatly in the fields of state rituals, institutional religions and popular religions. Scholars approached some aspects of this cult, including the images of the spirits of Mount Hua 華山 and Mount Tai 泰山 described in the literary sketches (Dudbridge 1995, pp. 86–116; Jia 2002, pp. 13–52), the history of the Temple of South Sea Spirit (Zeng 1991, pp. 311–58; Wang 2006, pp. 55–97) and the contribution of Daoism and popular religions to the state sacrifices to mountain and water spirits (Lei 2009, pp. 39–50, 133–218).

This essay focuses on a political measure related to the cult of mountain and water spirits. In the Tang era, while the official sacrifices to these deities became more methodical than those of the preceding dynasties, the imperial court extraordinarily bestowed noble titles, which were normally conferred upon the consanguineous royal clan members and meritorious officers, on the twenty-eight mountains and water spirits listed in the Table 1. It was understood as the personification of natural deities, which was influenced by popular religions in the Tang era (Lei 2009, pp. 39–50). However, the personification of natural deities appeared as early as the Shang era (ca.1600-ca.1046 BCE) (Chao 1990, p. 106), and the bestowal of nobility was a political behavior essentially. Therefore, the idea of personification is not convincing enough to explain why the bestowal of nobility on these deities happened in the Tang era. This phenomenon should be revisited in the contexts of state rituals and political changes of that time.

Table 1. Noble titles of mountain and water spirits in the Tang era.

Mountains and Rivers	Noble Titles	Year of Bestowal
Mount Song 嵩山	King Tianzhong (Tianzhong Wang 天中王)	688
	Emperor Shenyue Tianzhong (Shenyue Tianzhong Huangdi 神岳天中皇帝)	696
	King Tianzhong (Tianzhong Wang 天中王)	705
	King Zhongtian (Zhongtian Wang 中天王)	746
Luo River 洛水	Duke Xiansheng (Xiansheng Hou 顯聖侯)	688
Mount Hua 華山	King Jintian (Jintian Wang 金天王)	713
Mount Tai 泰山	King Tianqi (Tianqi Wang 天齊王)	725
Mount Heng 恆山	King Antian (Antian Wang 安天王)	746
Mount Heng 衡山	King Sitian (Sitian Wang 司天王)	746
Yellow River 河瀆	Duke Lingyuan (Lingyuan Gong 靈源公)	747
Ji River 濟瀆	Duke Qingyuan (Qingyuan Gong 清源公)	747
Yangtzu River 江瀆	Duke Guangyuan (Guangyuan Gong 廣源公)	747
Huai River 淮瀆	Duke Tongyuan (Tongyuan Gong 通源公)	747
Mount Zhaoying 昭應山	Duke Xuande (Xuande Gong 玄德公)	748
Mount Taibai 太白山	Duke Shenyong (Shenyong Gong 神應公)	749
East Sea 東海	King Guangde (Guangde Wang 廣德王)	751
South Sea 南海	King Guangli (Guangli Wang 廣利王)	751
West Sea 西海	King Guangrun (Guangrun Wang 廣潤王)	751
North Sea 北海	King Guangze (Guangze Wang 廣澤王)	751
Mount Wu 吳山	Duke Chengde (Chengde Wang 成德王)	751
Mount Yi 沂山	Duke Dong'an (Dong'an Gong 東安公)	751
Mount Kuaiji 會稽山	Duke Yongxing (Yongxing Gong 永興公)	751
Mount Yiwulü 醫無閭山	Duke Guangning (Guangning Gong 廣寧公)	751
Mount Huo 霍山	Duke Yingsheng (Yingsheng Gong 應聖公)	751
Mount Yanzhi 燕支山	Duke Ningji (Ningji Gong 寧濟公)	? ¹
Mount Jiweng 雞翁山	Marquis (specific name unknown)	835
Mount Zhongnan 終南山	Duke Guanghui (Guanghui Gong 廣惠公)	837
Mount Zhangren 丈人山	Duke Xiyi (Xiyi Gong 希夷公)	881
Mount Shaohua 少華山	Marquis Youshun (Youshun Hou 佑順侯)	898
Dongting Lake 洞庭湖	Marquis Lishe (Lishe Hou 利涉侯)	905
Qingcao Lake 青草湖	Marquis Anliu (Anliu Hou 安流侯)	905

¹ The exact time of bestowing Duke Ningji upon Mount Yanzhi was not recorded. "Inscription of Shrine Hall of the Spirit of Mount Yanzhi, Duke Ningji" 燕支山神寧濟公祠堂碑 mentions that, Junior Guardian of the Heir Apparent 太子少保 Geshu Han 哥舒翰 built a shrine hall on the foot of Mount Yanzhi upon the bestowal of Duke Ningji on its spirit (Li 1966, 879.4636-37). Geshu Han was awarded Junior Guardian of the Heir Apparent in 753 (Song 1959, 60.323). Thus, the time frame of bestowal could be narrowed between 753 and 755 when the An Lushan Rebellion broke out.

The bestowal of noble titles indicates the superiority of monarchical power over the mountain and water spirits, which could be observed coincidentally in the state sacrifices to these deities. Thus this essay firstly studies how the emperor reconstructed the relationship between these natural deities and himself/herself by changing the way of addressing himself/herself in the prayer texts and treating the prayer tablets, both of which were parts of the state rituals. On the other hand, the bestowal of nobility aimed at spiritual protection

from the mountain and water spirits. This essay then explains why the twenty-eight deities received the noble titles throughout the Tang era through the detailed analysis of the concerned political background. In addition to whether the bestowal of nobility affected the state sacrifices to the mountain and water spirits in the Tang era, the last part of the essay examines the fate of the bestowal of nobility in the following dynasties.

2. Reconstruction of the Relationship between Monarchical Power and Mountain and Water Spirits

In the state rituals of the Tang era, the sacrifices to mountain and water spirits played important roles. These sacrifices were conducted in the capital and the prefectures where the mountains, rivers and seas are located in the form of Confucianism.

In Chang'an, the mountain and water spirits did not act as the main objects of the sacrifices, except the invocations for rain and sun. They were accessorial deities, with other terrestrial ones, in the sacrifice of Square Mound (Fangqiu 方丘) dedicated to the Earth God (Huangdiqi 皇地祇) (Liu 1975, 21.820; Xiao 1972, 1.15). They also took part in the Sacrifice to Hundred Gods (Zha 蜡), which included many celestial and terrestrial deities, in the twelfth month of the lunar calendar (Liu 1975, 24.911; Xiao 1972, 1.15).

Mountain and water spirits were worshipped locally, which could be observed all over the territories. It was the original and principal form of the state sacrifices to them. In the Tang era, the state sacrifices were vertically divided into three levels: major sacrifices (Dasi 大祀), middle sacrifices (Zhongsi 中祀) and minor sacrifices (Xiaosi 小祀). The regular sacrifices to the Five Peaks (Wuyue 五岳), Four Strongholds (Sizhen 四鎮), Four Seas (Sihai 四海) and Four Waterways (Sidu 四瀆) were ranked middle,¹ while those to other mountain and water spirits were minor (Liu 1975, 21.819; Xiao 1972, 1.12). The Prefects (Cishi 刺史), or the Aides (Shangzuo 上佐) when the prefects were absent, were designated to host the ceremonies of Yuezhen Haidu on behalf of the emperor, on the specific dates according to the Five Phases (Wuxing 五行) Theory (Ikeda 1997, pp. 495–96). After the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763), along with the domination of the Surveillance Commissioners (Guancha shi 觀察使) over the prefectures and counties, their subordinates took charge of these sacrifices (Wang 1982, 73.1244–46). Nonetheless, the absence of the chief administrative officers played down the significance of these sacrifices. In some cases, this practice was corrected. Kong Kui 孔戣 (753–825), the Prefect of Guangzhou 廣州, annually conducted the sacrifices to the South Sea from 818 to 820. These sacrifices were followed by favorable weather and good harvest, and his presence was highly appreciated by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) (Ma 1986, 7.487–88).² Only in the *Kaiyuan Ritual Code* (*Kaiyuan Li* 開元禮) could we see the detailed procedure of the institutionalized sacrifices to these deities (Xiao 1972, 35.199–200, 36.201–2). The inscriptions and notes demonstrate that the regulation of these sacrifices was observed on the whole, even in the second half of the Tang era (Wang 1982, 103.1733; Kong 1983, 17.134; Zhou 1983, 37.453).

The special sacrifices to mountain and water spirits were held on specific occasions, such as flood, drought and harvest, by the imperial court envoys (Wang 1960, 33.356–66, 34.367–71). The rituals of praying for rain and sun to these deities were recorded in the *Kaiyuan Ritual Code* (Xiao 1972, 67.350). The local governments also conducted the sacrifices to all deities of mountains and waters within their administrative units, which were not limited to those famous ones mentioned above (Li 1988, 5.288–301, supplement 11.885–88). While the sacrifices organized by the imperial court followed the strict institutional rules, these local sacrifices seemed to be flexible and diverse.

In terms of the sacrifices to mountain and water spirits, what deserves more attention is the reconstruction of the relationship between the monarchical power and these natural spirits. Such relation could be observed in the way of how the emperor treated the ceremonial tables (Zhuban 祝版) on which the prayer texts (Zhuwen 祝文) were written. The prayer text not only expressed the wish to receive the blessing from the deities but also indicated the relationship between the subject and object of the sacrifices. The emperor called himself “Son of Heaven and Subject, X” (X = the emperor’s given name) (Tianzi Chen

Mou 天子臣某), “Son of Heaven, X” (Tianzi Mou 天子某) and “Son of Heaven” (Tianzi 天子), respectively, in the prayer text when worshipping the natural deities of the major, middle and minor sacrifices. He called himself “Emperor and Subject, X” (Huangdi Chen Mou 皇帝臣某), “Emperor, X” (Huangdi Mou 皇帝某) and “Emperor” (Huangdi 皇帝), respectively, in the prayer text when worshipping the ancestors and human deities of the major, middle and minor sacrifices. The only two exceptions were the Shidian 釋奠 sacrifices, which were offered to Confucius and his disciples and to Qi Taigong 齊太公 (d.1015 BCE) and other military celebrities. In these two sacrifices ranked as the middle sacrifices, the emperor called himself “Emperor” (Kaneko 2006, pp. 1–28). In preparation for the major and middle sacrifices, except the Shidian sacrifices, after signing his given name on the prayer tablets, the emperor should face north and then bow down to the tablets twice. The emperor was stipulated to call him “Son of Heaven, X” in the prayer texts and bow down to the prayer tablets in the state sacrifices to Yuezhen Haidu, which belonged to the middle sacrifices.

During the reign of Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705), the situation changed. In 695, in a memorial submitted to the throne, some concerned officials suggested the emperor not bow down to the tablets after signing her given name in the sacrifices to Yuezhen Haidu. Their textual evidence is “the Five Peaks shi the Three Counsellors of State, and the Four Waterways shi the regional lords” 五岳視三公，四瀆視諸侯 in the Confucian canon, *Book of Rites*. Traditionally, the character “shi” 視 in this sentence was interpreted as “being equivalent to” by the most authoritative classics master Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, whose exegesis on *Book of Rites* was accepted into *Five Classics with Orthodox Commentary* (*Wujing Zhengyi* 五經正義) issued in 653. According to Zheng Xuan, this sentence means that the sacrificial animals and vessels used in the sacrifices to the Five Peaks were equivalent to those used by the Three Counsellors of State for meals or sacrifices, and the sacrificial animals and vessels used in the sacrifices to the Four Waterways were equivalent to those used by the regional lords for meals or sacrifices (Zheng and Kong 1980, 12.1336). However, in 695, the concerned officials attempted to interpret this sentence differently, diverting from the widely accepted interpretation provided by Zheng Xuan. In their opinion, the meaning of “shi” was “being regarded as”. Therefore, the deities of the Five Peaks and Four Waterways were regarded as the Three Counsellors of State and regional lords, respectively, which were obviously subjects of the emperor. Superior to the mountain and water spirits in the hierarchy, the emperor should not bow down to the prayer tablets (Shuerbubai 署而不拜). This suggestion was accepted by Wu Zetian (Wang 1991, 22.417).

The way of how the emperor addressed himself in the prayer texts changed temporarily in the reign of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (685–762). In 721, the officials of the court of Imperial Sacrifices 太常寺 submitted a memorial. Based on the relationship between the emperor and the mountain and water spirits constructed by reinterpretation in 695, their proposal is that the emperor should call himself “emperor”, which was used in the two Shidian Sacrifices, rather than “Son of Heaven, X”, and as a matter of course, he should not sign his given name on the prayer tablets (Wang 1991, 23.416). Apparently, the mountain and water spirits were totally treated as subjects of the emperor. This pattern was accepted by Xuanzong intermediately, but it was abandoned in the *Kaiyuan Ritual Code* that was issued in 732 (Xiao 1972, 35.200). However, keeping the superior status over the mountain and water spirits, the emperor did not bow down to the prayer tablets any longer after 695.

After the restoration of the middle and minor sacrifices, which were suspended by the An Lushan Rebellion, the debate on whether the ritual officers should bow down to the prayer tablets emerged in the Zhenyuan 貞元 period (785–805). In the *Kaiyuan Ritual Code*, the ritual officers should bow down to the prayer tablets twice (Xiao 1972, 35.199–200). Quan Deyu 權德輿 (759–818) insisted that ritual officers should abide by this rule. According to him, considering that the emperor did not bow down to the prayer tablets, ritual officers should not be excluded from paying honor to the mountain and water spirits (Dong 1983, 488.4987–88). Pei Kan 裴堪 (d.825), in support of Quan Deyu, regarded the mountain and water spirits not as the real courtiers of the emperor but as the

chamberlains of heaven and earth. Nonetheless, he approved the way the emperor treated the prayer tablets after 695 (Wang 1991, 22.498–99). Though historical sources did not tell us the result of this debate, it is likely that the imperial court persisted in the regulation of the *Kaiyuan Ritual Code*. The opinion of Quan Deyu and Pei Kan demonstrates that the dominance of monarchical power over the mountain and water spirits was generally accepted. This debate could be understood as the extension of the reconstructed relationship between the emperor and the mountain and water deities in 695. Same as the mountain and water spirits that were also regarded as subjects of the emperor hierarchically, the ritual officers questioned whether they should bow down to the prayer tablets twice. Through the debates in the Kaiyuan 開元 (713–741) and Zhenyuan period, the superiority of monarchical power over the mountain and water spirits remained unchanged and was even strengthened. In the Song Dynasty, the emperor called himself “Emperor X” in the prayer texts of the sacrifices to mountain and water spirits (Ouyang 2002, 11.393; Zheng 1983, 4.146). The Song rulers did not act in the same way as Xuanzong, who called himself “Emperor” in the prayer texts of these sacrifices from 721 to 732. Nonetheless, this activity indicated that the personification of these natural deities moved on, and it solidified the monarch–subject relationship between the emperor and these deities.

The bestowal of nobility on the mountain and water spirits shared the same logic with the change of how the emperor addressed himself/herself in the prayer texts and whether he/she needed to bow down to the prayer tablets. Rather than imposing power merely on the human world, the emperor attempted to improve his/her position in the realm of deities. However, different from the normal monarch–subject relationship, the relationship between the emperor and these deities was not so strictly hierarchic. Deeply believing that these deities had formidable force, the emperor revered them.

3. Bestowal of Noble Titles on Mountain and Water Spirits before the an Lushan Rebellion

The bestowal of nobility upon the mountain and water spirits originated on the eve of Wu Zetian’s enthronement. During this period, the cult of mountain and water was deployed as a proof of policy rectification. As a part of the propaganda project to legitimate her enthronement, Mount Song and Luo River were given extraordinary treatment. In the fourth month of 688, Wu Chengsi 武承嗣 (649–698), a cousin of Wu Zetian, forged an auspicious stone, on which the words “The holy mother has come to earth, and will flourish the emperor’s achievement” 聖母臨人, 永昌帝業 were inscribed. He asked Tang Tongtai 唐同泰, a person from Yongzhou 雍州, to submit it to the imperial court, alleging that it was obtained in Luo River. Wu Zetian called this stone “precious illustration” (Baotu 寶圖). In the fifth month, Wu Zetian entitled herself “Sacred Empress Dowager” (Shengmu shenhuang 聖母神皇). The “Precious Illustration” was then revised as the “Precious Illustration Bestowed by Heaven” (Tianshou Baotu 天授寶圖). Luo River was renamed as “Prosperity Forever” (Yongchang 永昌), and so was the newly established county where this stone had been found. Receiving the noble title Duke Xiansheng and the prestigious title Lord Specially Advanced (Tejin 特進), the spirit of Yongchang was offered the same sacrifice as that of the Four Waterways. Neighboring Yongchang, Mount Song was called “Sacred Peak” (Shenyue 神岳) and was conferred several titles, including Grand Preceptor (Taishi 太師), Commissioned with Extraordinary Powers (Shi Chijie 使持節), Commander-in-Chief of Sacred Peak (Shenyue Dadudu 神岳大都督) and King Tianzhong. Grass cutting and grazing at Mount Song were forbidden (Liu 1975, 24.924–25). Since then, the bestowal of noble titles upon the mountain and water spirits was followed until it was prohibited by Emperor Taizu 太祖 (1328–1398) of the Ming Dynasty in 1370.

After the establishment of the Wu Zetian regime, the noble title of Mount Song was upgraded. In 696, after Wu Zetian successfully conducted the Feng and Shan ceremonies, Mount Song was bestowed the title “Emperor Shenyue Tianzhong”.³ The wife of the Mount Song spirit was promoted to Empress Tianzhong (Tianzhong Huanghou 天中皇后), from Consort Ling (Lingfei 靈妃) that had been conferred on her in 695 (Liu 1975, 23.891). The prominent status of Mount Song could be traced back to the reign of Emperor Gaozong

高宗 (628–683). Timothy H. Barrett pointed out that the destiny of Gaozong lay in the hands of Mount Song according to his birth year (Barrett 1996, pp. 44–45). In addition, political situation also contributed to the prestige of Mount Song. The imperial court, located in the Guanzhong 關中 area, suffered from a shortage of material supply. Therefore, Luoyang was no less important than Chang’an. When residing in Luoyang, Gaozong put the emphasis on the neighboring mountains. In the first month of 683, he sent the envoys to offer the sacrifices to the mountains, including Mount Song (Liu 1975, 5.110). In the eleventh month, having accepted the suggestion of Wu Zetian, Gaozong intended to run the Feng and Shan at Mount Song (Liu 1975, 23.889). Unfortunately, he failed to host them because of the deterioration of his health conditions. Mount Tai had been the only option to accommodate the Feng and Shan ceremonies in the Tang era. After the establishment of the Tang regime, Mount Song became an alternative option for the first time. Courtiers requested Emperor Taizong 太宗 (598–649) to host the Feng and Shan at Mount Tai in 631. While Taizong modestly declined it, he complained about why Mount Song was not regarded as the appropriate place for accommodating the Feng and Shan ceremonies (Wang 1991, 7.96). However, during the reign of Taizong, in the two failed attempts to host the Fang and Shan, following the ritual tradition, imperial court still preferred Mount Tai rather than Mount Song. After accomplishing the Fang and Shan at Mount Tai in 665, Gaozong considered placing the Fang and Shan at Mount Song. Although he was too ill to host the Fang and Shan at Mount Song, this measure was practiced by Wu Zetian in 696. That Mount Song became an alternative place for the Fang and Shan and was the first to receive the noble title among the mountain and water spirits demonstrates that the imperial court attached importance to it.

After claiming the throne, Xuanzong favored Mount Hua in a way similar to how his grandparents treated Mount Song. Though he arranged several imperial tours away to Luoyang, he spent most of his ruling time in Chang’an, benefiting from the improvement of goods transportation from the east of the country to Guanzhong. The promotion of Mount Hua resulted from the reestablishment of the political center in Chang’an significantly. In 713, Mount Hua was bestowed King Jintian. In the edict, which announced this decision, stressing Mount Hua’s significance in guarding Chang’an, Xuanzong wished to obtain spiritual protection from it. He sent an eminent Daoist, Ye Fashan 葉法善 (616–722), who was skilled in the magic arts, to offer the sacrifice to Mount Hua (Song 1959, 74.418).

The cult of Mount Hua was imprinted by Xuanzong’s personal feature. He was born in 685, which was the year of Yiyou 乙酉 in accordance with the Sexagenary Cycle (Ganzhi 干支). Yiyou belonged to the Gold in the theory of Five Phases, and so did Mount Hua as the Western Peak. It means that the destiny of Xuanzong lay in the hands of Mount Hua. In 713, the deity of Mount Hua was named King Jintian (Golden Heaven) (Liu 1975, 23.904). The relationship between Xuanzong and Mount Hua was praised repeatedly by Xuanzong and his officials (Dong 1983, 41.447; Qiu 1979, 24.2160). The climax of the cult of Mount Hua could be observed in the proposals of conducting the Feng and Shan there. In 735, the prime minister, Xiao Song 蕭嵩 (d.749), suggested Xuanzong conduct the Feng and Shan at Mount Song and Mount Hua (Wang 1991, 8.162). Though Xuanzong rejected this proposal, the ministers looked upon these two peaks, adjacent to Chang’an and Luoyang, as the suitable place for the Feng and Shan ceremonies. In 750, an attempt to run the Feng and Shan at Mount Hua was put into discussion again. In a memorial, Cui Qiao 崔翹 (683–751), the Minister of Rites (Libu Shangshu 禮部尚書), used both the governmental accomplishment of Xuanzong and the relationship between Mount Hua and the emperor to justify this proposal (Wang 1960, 36.405). Xuanzong then enthusiastically ordered the Censor-in-Chief (Yushi Dafu 御史大夫), Wang Hong 王 (d.752), to build the sacrificial altars and other subsidiary facilities on Mount Hua. Unfortunately, the preparation was terminated by a fire disaster (Liu 1975, 23.904).

During the reign of Xuanzong, the serialization of the noble titles of mountain and water spirits deserves attention as well. Mount Tai, next to Mount Hua, was the second peak to receive the noble title. In the first half of the Tang era, it was not taken for granted

that only at Mount Tai should the Feng and Shan be conducted, but the status of Mount Tai was still the most distinguished among the Five Peaks. As for all Feng and Shan which were conducted throughout the Tang, one was at Mount Song and two at Mount Tai. In 725, after accomplishing the Feng and Shan at Mount Tai, Xuanzong bestowed King Tianqi upon the deity of Mount Tai. The meaning of Tianqi is “on a par with heaven”; therefore this noble title was highly prestigious. He commanded that the sacrificial standard of Mount Tai should be higher than that of the Three Counsellors of State (Liu 1975, 8.188–89). As mentioned above, since 695, the Five Peaks had been regarded as the Three Counsellors of State. Thus, Mount Tai was treated distinctively among the Five Peaks.

It seems that Xuanzong was not inclined to bestow the noble titles on a large number of mountain and water spirits, except Mount Hua and Mount Tai, during the first part of his reign. After changing his reign title from Kaiyuan to Tianbao 天寶 (742–756), he intentionally assigned the specific noble titles upon Yuezhen Haidu, in terms of the differential among these deities. In 746, Xuanzong bestowed the noble titles upon Mount Song, Mount Heng and Mount Heng in an edict (Wang 1991, 47.977).⁴ The Four Waterways received the noble titles in 747, while the Four Strongholds and Four Seas did so in 751 (Wang 1991, 47.977).

In 751, along with the bestowal of nobility on the Four Strongholds, Mount Huo received the noble title as well, although it was not appointed the Central Stronghold until the Northern Song. The deity of Mount Huo was a part of the mythology of state establishment in the Tang era. When the troop of Li Yuan 李淵 (566–635) was in trouble, an old man dressed in white, claiming that he was ordered by the deity of Mount Huo, showed them the way to capture Huoyi 霍邑 (Liu 1975, 1.3). In 702, the army of Eastern Turkic approached Taiyuan 太原, and Wu Zetian dispatched Yin Yuankai 尹元凱 (d.727) to run a sacrifice to obtain the spiritual protection of the deity of Mount Huo to help the Tang to beat them off (Zhang 1992, 25.228). The retreat of the enemy strengthened the image of Mount Huo as a guardian angel. In 723, Mount Huo was looked upon as a regional lord, who was offered the same sacrifice as the Four Strongholds (Wang 1960, 33.358). Equivalent to the Four Strongholds, Mount Huo was conferred the noble title simultaneously in 751.

Daoism became the most powerful religion during the second half of the reign of Xuanzong. The endorsement of Daoism was not only triggered by the religious purpose but also by political concern so as to integrate it into the ideology of the empire and to secure its political order. Mount Zhaoying and Mount Taibai, though neither had a long-lived tradition nor a preeminent reputation, were titled nobility due to the supernatural events of Daoism, around the same time as the serialization of the noble titles of Yuezhen Haidu. In 748, Laozi 老子, who was identified as the remote ancestor of the Tang rulers, allegedly appeared on the Huaqing 華清 Palace, Huichang 會昌 County. Xuanzong, a devout believer in Daoism, viewed this event as the blessing of ancestors. Huichang County and Mount Huichang were renamed Zhaoying 昭應 County and Mount Zhaoying, respectively. The meaning of Zhaoying is fulfillment of prophecy. Moreover, Mount Zhaoying was bestowed Duke Xuande, which means profound virtue, and a shrine temple was constructed there. Li Hun 李渾, who came from Mount Taibai, declared that an immortal descended into the Jinxing 金星 Cave and left a jade inscribed with “the emperor will live forever” 聖上長生久視. The Censor-in-Chief, Wang Hong, upon the request of Xuanzong, came into the cave and found the jade. On account of this auspicious event, Laozi and the successive emperors of the Tang were added the honorific titles. Mount Taibai was conferred Duke Shenying, which means telepathy from deities (Liu 1975, 24.927).

4. Bestowal of Noble Titles on Mountain and Water Spirits after the an Lushan Rebellion

After the An Lushan Rebellion, the noble titles were no longer bestowed upon the mountain and water spirits on a large scale. Only a few deities were titled nobility.

As a part of the project of state rebuilding, the imperial court deployed the state rituals to communicate with the various deities, pray for their blessing and express the monarchical perception. The rulers did care about their own position in the spiritual world, even though

their power of governing the actual empire was restricted severely. In other words, the imagined power did not keep pace with the actual power. For instance, after recapturing Chang'an, the Tang was eager to restore the Suburban Rites to justify the legitimacy of the surviving regime and demonstrate the authority of the central government (Jiang 1996, pp. 442–58; Wu 2006, pp. 112–19). Though less important than the Suburban Rites, the cult of mountain and water spirits was utilized as an effort to revive the Tang.

By conciliating the rebel forces, Emperor Daizong 代宗 (727–779) ended the An Lushan Rebellion. However, with the collapse of the political order shaped in the first half of the Tang era, the regime was in deep crisis. Marked as the guardian angel after Li Yuan rose in arms, the deity of Mount Huo was a supernatural ally from which Daizong sought spiritual protection. In 764, less than two years after enthronement, he sent the envoys to conduct the sacrifice to it. In the edict, he firstly recalled how this mountain had shown its benevolence to his ancestors and then earnestly expressed the hope that it could continuously protect the royal clan and consolidate his own power (Wang 1960, 34.367–68).

With the popularity of the cult of mountain and water spirits, the bestowal of the noble titles on these spirits continued. Located in the perilous area in the vicinity of Chang'an, Mount Zhongnan was titled nobility during the reign of Emperor Wenzong 文宗 (809–840). In an edict promulgated in the fourth month of 837, the significance of Mount Zhongnan was emphasized in two aspects. One is that it could bring a favorable temperature by generating rain and cloud. The other is its critical geographical location (Wang 1991, 47.978). The imperial court conferred Duke Guanghui on this mountain in the ninth month of the same year.

Although the intention to strengthen the monarchical power conceptually, through the state rituals, and consequently reshape the political order was effective, it was conversely restricted by the current political situation to a certain extent. The imperial court paid attention to the sacrifices to mountain and water spirits, but the influence from the emperor was in decline, with the erosion of monarchical power from some powerful ministers. When running the sacrifices to the important mountain and water spirits on behalf of the emperor, those ministers played a dominant role. For instance, in the “Notes on the Shrine Hall of Mount Wu” (Wushan Citang Ji 吳山祠堂記), the author, Yu Gongyi 于公異 (d.792), mainly depicted the relationship between Mount Wu and a meritorious general named Li Sheng 李晟 (727–793). In 769, after Li Sheng was assigned to pray for rain at Mount Wu, a bumper harvest was brought to the locality. He regarded it as an auspicious omen. In the first years of the reign of Emperor Dezong 德宗 (742–805), Li Sheng resisted the attacks from the Tibetan on Jiannan 劍南 and suppressed the rebellions of the Hebei 河北 and Shuofang 朔方 Frontier Defense Commands (Fanzhen 藩鎮). He attributed his own success to the blessing of Mount Wu. In 783, upon the request of Li Sheng, who was by then promoted to the Minister of Education (Situ 司徒) and Secretariat Director (Zhongshu Ling 中書令), Dezong sent a eunuch named Meng Xijia 孟希價 to bring the brocade robes and belts to Mount Wu. The “Notes on the Shrine Hall of Mount Wu”, which was written for this sacrifice, was full of the praise of the contribution of Li Sheng to the Tang (Dong 1983, 513.5218–19). This event resulted from the pressure of Li Sheng on a large scale.

The ministers exerted their influence on the bestowal of nobility upon the mountain and water spirits. On his way to assume the post of the Military Commissioner of Western Shannan Circuit (Shannanxi Dao 山南西道), Wen Zao 溫造 (766–835) encountered heavy rain. He then prayed for sun to Mount Jiwen, and the weather cleared up in a while. Wenzong heard about it. In 833, Wen Zao was appointed the Censor-in-Chief. He told this story to Wenzong, and the emperor conferred a noble title on Mount Jiwen (Liu 1975, 165.4318).

At the end of the Tang era, the political situation became highly unstable. Imperial court attempted to both obtain spiritual protection and demonstrate the authority of sovereignty by bestowing the noble titles upon the mountain and water spirits. After the force of Huang Chao 黃巢 (820–884) occupied Chang'an in 880, Emperor Xizong 僖宗 (862–888) spent four years in exile in Chengdu 成都. In the next year, Xizong accepted

the suggestion of an outstanding Daoist named Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933) and conferred Duke Xiyi on Mount Zhangren, adjacent to Chengdu, to take advantage of its magic power to prolong the rule of the Tang (Dong 1983, 88.923, 89.937). Thanks to Du Guangting, Daoism thrived once again during the reign of Xizong, after being overlooked for more than three decades (Barrett 1996, pp. 93–94). He was so actively engaged in the sacrifice to Mount Zhangren that this sacrifice was performed in the form of Daoism rather than Confucianism.

Meanwhile, facing the chaotic political situations, the Frontier Defense Commands also resorted to the help of mountain and water spirits. In 885, the troops from Lulong 盧龍, Chengde 成德 and Yunzhong 雲中 attacked the Yiwu 義武 Army, whose Military Commissioner was Wang Chucun 王處存 (813–895). Wang Chucun was loyal to the Tang and allied with the Military Commissioner of Hedong 河東 named Li Keyong 李克用 (856–908) (Sima 1956, 256.8321). When Li Keyong came to rescue Wang Chucun, they conducted a sacrifice at the Northern Peak Temple. After reaching a temporal compromise with the enemy, Li Keyong withdrew troops to Hedong. When passing through the Northern Peak Temple, he conveyed thanks to the deity of Mount Heng (Wu 2000, pp. 210–11).

The Frontier Defense Commands not only treated the spiritual protection of the mountain and water spirits seriously but also interposed in the bestowal of nobility upon them. In 895, the troop of Han Jian 韓建 (855–912), the Military Commissioner of Hua 華 Prefecture, allied with that of Li Maozhen 李茂貞 (856–924), the Military Commissioner of Fengxiang 鳳翔, and Wang Xingyu 王行瑜 (d.895), the Military Commissioner of Bin 邠 Prefecture, was garrisoned in Chang'an. It resulted in the tangled fights between the supporters of Xizong and his opponents, and Xizong had to leave Chang'an. On his way to Hezhong 河中, Xizong was detained by Han Jian and moved to the Hua Prefecture. Han Jian imposed coercion upon Xizong and his favorite courtiers (Xue 1976, 15.204). Even though Xizong was released to Chang'an, he was still controlled by Han Jian until Han Jian surrendered himself to Zhu Wen 朱溫 (852–912) in 901. In 898, Mount Shaohua, located southeast of Zheng County in the Hua Prefecture, was nominated Marquis Youshun. The Hua Prefecture was the birthplace and headquarter of Han Jian. He sought political benefits by bestowing nobility on Mount Shaohua. In the "Panegyric on the Stele of Marquis Youshun, Mount Shaohua", written by Fang Ye 房鄴, Han Jian was extolled as a loyal general who rescued the Tang. Han Jian's Conquer of Chang'an and control of Xizong were represented as heroic undertakings of eliminating evil ministers around the emperor and consolidating the Tang power (Dong 1983, 819.8629–30). The edict of this conferment was promulgated in the name of Xizong, but this event was dominated by the warlord.⁵ At the turn of the ninth and tenth centuries, as regents of the emperor, warlords actually controlled the political practices.

5. Epilogue

In the Tang era, three ritual codes were promulgated. Among the *Zhenguan Ritual Code* (Zhenguan Li 貞觀禮), *Xianqing Ritual Code* (Xianqing Li 顯慶禮) and *Kaiyuan Ritual Code*, only the last one was completed after the deities of Mount Song, Mount Hua and Mount Tai were titled nobility. In the *Kaiyuan Ritual Code*, their noble titles were not mentioned at all, even in the prayer texts. At the end of the eighth century, *Record of Suburban and Temple Observance for the Great Tang* (*Datang Jiaosi Lu* 大唐郊祀錄) was compiled by Wang Jing 王涇. In this collection of the routine rituals, the noble titles of Yuezhen Haidu were referred to in both the survey and the prayer texts (Wang 1972, 8.787–88). However, the bestowal of nobility imposed few effects on the whole procedure of the state sacrifices to the mountain and water spirits, and so did the sacrificial grades. Ranked middle, the Five Peaks and Four Seas were conferred kings, and the Four Strongholds and Four Waterways were only conferred dukes. Ranked minor, Mount Taibai, Mount Zhaoying, Mount Yanzhi and Mount Zhangren were titled dukes, but it did not help to promote their sacrificial grade to middle. Only Mount Zhongnan received annual sacrifices with reference to the Four Strongholds after 838, in response to the suggestion of the Ritual Academy (Taichang

Liyuan 太常禮院). Since then, this sacrifice was conducted on one of the last eighteen days of the sixth month (Jixia Tuwang Ri 季夏土王日), on which Mount Song, the Central Peak, was offered the regular sacrifice (Wang 1991, 47.978). Therefore, Mount Zhongnan was treated as “the Central Stronghold” by the standard of middle sacrifice in some way. This change was realized not by the bestowal of nobility but by the specific edict.

The state sacrifices to the mountain and water spirits and the bestowal of nobility on them were two aspects of the official cult of these deities from 688 to 1370. Tangled with a long history, the former was a standardized system. The latter resulted from the interference from the political power. Though sometimes interweaved, these two aspects ran parallel in most cases.

From the end of the Tang era on, the regional deities, including the mountain and water ones, received the noble titles. For instance, Lake Dongting and Lake Qingcao were conferred Marquis Lishe and Marquis Anliu in 905 (Liu 1975, 20.797). This trend became more prevalent in the Song Dynasty. A large number of regional deities received the noble titles and plaques that were signed by the emperors (Hansen 1990, pp. 79–95). During the reign of Emperor Shenzong 神宗 (1048–1085), Wang Gu 王古 (d.1106), an Erudite of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices (Taichang Boshi 太常博士), suggested the emperor clarify the relative status of the noble titles of the various deities. The final goal was to “control the deities in order” 錫命馭神, 恩禮有序 (Toqto’a 脱脱 1977, 105.2561). In the Song Dynasty, the Five Peaks were titled emperors. The noble titles of the Five Strongholds and Four Waterways were promoted to kings. These titles continued to exist in the Jin and Yuan Dynasties. Although owning the titles of emperors, the Five Peaks were not equal with the real emperors. Bestowed the titles by the imperial court, these deities were still treated as vassals.

Taizu of the Ming Dynasty opposed the bestowal of noble titles upon the mountain and water spirits. In his opinion, Yuezhen Haidu were ruled by the grace of heaven. Their identities and undertakings were controlled by heaven. The bestowal of noble titles upon these deities transgressed the boundary between the realm of deities and that of the human world. Therefore, Taizu removed the noble titles from the mountain and water spirits and resumed their original names (Yang 1962, 53.1034–35). It means that the ruler gave up the idea of dominating the realm of deities. In addition to the mountain and water spirits, the noble titles of city gods, loyal officials and martyrs of the previous dynasties were revoked. These activities met the requirements of rectifying the state rituals and reconstructing the relationship between the deities and humans.

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Notes

- ¹ The Five Peaks, Four Strongholds, Four Seas and Four Waterways are abbreviated to Yuezhen Haidu 岳鎮海瀆 below.
- ² The implement of the official sacrifices to the South Sea, see (Wang 2021).
- ³ The noble title of Mount Song was degraded back to “King Tianzhong” after the downfall of the Wu Zetian Regime.
- ⁴ This edict mentioned that Mount Song had no noble title. It implied that the noble title, which was conferred on Mount Song, had been canceled or derecognized.
- ⁵ Similarly, the suburban rites and ancestral temple rites during this period were intervened by Han Jian and Zhu Wen (Wu 2006, pp. 119–21).

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