Introduction

This book concerns the religious history of a sacred mountain in China from its beginnings as a sacred site in antiquity through the end of the Tang dynasty (618–907). The Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue 南嶽)—also known as Hengshan 衡山—is one member of a special class of mountains collectively known as the Five Sacred Peaks (wuyue 五嶽), which have been prominent features on the religious, cultural, and political landscape throughout Chinese history. I embarked on this study of Nanyue with the following questions in mind: How might we further our understanding of Chinese religion by shifting our focus away from sectarian divisions? What new insights might emerge from the study of a religious site rather than an exemplary Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian religious figure or doctrinal text? What new vantage points could an investigation of the history of a single site—such as a sacred peak with a rich religious history—provide? What are the salient features of Chinese sacred sites in premodern China? This book is an attempt to address those questions and to demonstrate, through the investigation of one sacred peak, that “place studies” have a role to play in research on Chinese religion alongside considerations of time and thought.

The name Nanyue is not well known—even among sinologists—at least not as well known as the venerable Taishan, visionary Wutai shan, or picturesque Huangshan, but not because of its lack of significance or a shortage of sources on the site. Why, it might be asked, does the field need a book-length study of this mountain rather than an examination of one of China’s other famous sacred peaks? Initially it seemed that a detailed study of any one of China’s unstudied sacred mountains would be a worthwhile undertaking, but the intractable historical and
methodological questions raised by Nanyue kept drawing my attention to that mountain. Nanyue deserves attention as one of the Five Sacred Peaks within the imperial cult, but my decision to study this particular mountain was sealed when I encountered a twelfth-century monographic history of the site, entitled the *Nanyue zongsheng ji* 南嶽總勝集 (Record of the collected highlights of Nanyue; hereafter *Collected Highlights*) in the Buddhist canon.¹ On the basis of that source, I envisioned that this study would be situated squarely within the field of Buddhist Studies, but the project ultimately grew in different directions. The *Collected Highlights* stood out from similar texts because it was also included in the Daoist canon (HY 606). The unique presence of this mountain monograph in both the Buddhist and the Daoist canons forced me to ask new questions about it and its place in contemporary scholarship. Why had previous scholars studiously ignored the *Collected Highlights*, which is conveniently found in the modern editions of the two main religious canons? It appears that precisely what attracted my attention to this text—its uncertain classification—was also what condemned it to fall between the disciplinary boundaries traditionally used to demarcate the field of Chinese religions.

Further study of the *Collected Highlights* revealed that its presence in the Buddhist and Daoist canons was not an accident but a reflection of the religious legacy of that site. In addition to being a fundamentally important site for local cults and the imperially instituted cult of the Five Sacred Peaks, Nanyue was perceived by Buddhist monks to be an efficacious place to practice meditation and by Daoist anchorites as a potent place for concocting elixirs, attaining the way, and ascending as transcendentals or immortals. The “Preface” to the *Collected Highlights* reflects the fact that a sectarian perspective cannot properly account for Nanyue’s multidimensional history, and it lays bare the author’s goal of providing a record of the mountain that does justice to its Daoist and Buddhist histories.

As for the records concerning Hengshan, the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue), there are the two large and small records, entitled *Xunsheng* 尋勝 (Searching out the highlights) and *Zhengsheng* 證勝 (Confirming the highlights), and also the *Shenggai ji* 勝概集 (Collected summary of the highlights) and *Hengshan ji* 衡山記 (Record of Hengshan). All of them were by contemporaries curious [about the site], [but] editorial mistakes (shulüe 疏略) are numerous, and each
of them reveals only one corner [of the whole picture] and its coverage does not extend to wider issues. Buddhist monks compiled the Xunsheng, which excised or overlooked everything related to Daoism; and Daoists compiled the Zhengsheng, which was silent on matters relating to Buddhism. Not only do they fail to investigate the [history of the] two religions [at this site] from beginning to end, but they also obscure the special uniqueness of all the peaks. . . . For this reason I have used my leisure time after taking care of my garden to combine the previous four records and to expand them considerably, expunging repetitions and filling in omissions in order to redress this problem.2

The inclusive nature of the “Preface” to the Collected Highlights and the fact that a rich variety of sources for the site are readily available in other Buddhist and Daoist collections (canonical and extra-canonical) raised a number of interpretive issues not easily resolved. Contrary to what might be expected from the prevailing view that the Five Sacred Peaks are Daoist mountains, in opposition to the “four famous [Buddhist] mountains” (sida mingshan 四大名山), the version of the Collected Highlights in the Buddhist canon was longer and more detailed than the severely edited version in the Daoist canon. This disjuncture between a long-held perception and the textual record caused me to feel some of the same frustration expressed in the “Preface” to the Collected Highlights. Like the authors of the two monographs criticized in the passage quoted above, most modern scholars of Chinese religion have tended to approach it from the perspective of either Buddhist studies or Daoist studies, to the exclusion of the other. The nature of Nanyue’s textual legacy, therefore, necessitated a methodology that challenged the traditional boundaries used to demarcate the Chinese religious landscape, an approach in line with a recent movement within sinology known as “Buddho-Daoist studies.”3

Fieldwork done at Nanyue in 1990 reinforced the necessity of a non-sectarian approach. Entering the Nanyue Temple (Nanyue miao 南嶽廟), the main religious institution at the base of the mountain, I encountered a Daoist priest and a Buddhist monk sitting at a table selling incense and amulets. In the lull between visitors, they were jointly studying one of the primary texts of Confucianism, the Lunyu 論語 (Analects). Today the Nanyue Temple is jointly managed by Daoists and Buddhists, who occupy abbeys and temples situated to the right and left, respectively, of the main hall. The recent construction of these
religious institutions does not reflect a shift to a new ecumenical spirit. Rather, their presence is a structural feature of the temple clearly noted on a map in Li Yuandu’s 李元度 (1821–87) Nanyue zhi 南嶽志 (Gazetteer of Nanyue) published in 1883, and it is best understood as a modern echo of Nanyue’s premodern religious history.4

To argue for the necessity of a nonsectarian approach to the study of Nanyue is not, however, to propose that the religious landscape there was thoroughly or even partially syncretic. Focusing on a specific site rather than on a foundational religious thinker or an exemplary text makes it possible to explore the ways that different religious traditions—and different lineages within a single tradition—established an institutional presence at Nanyue, mapped religious meanings onto that site, and interacted with one another, sometimes amicably and at other times contentiously. The limitations of studying Nanyue as simply a “Buddhist” or “Daoist” site will become as apparent as they would be, for example, by studying a sacred site such as Jerusalem from the perspective of a “Christian” history—as if the Copts, Ethiopians, Syrian Jacobites, Armenian Catholics, and Greek Melkites could be reduced to a unitary voice—to the exclusion of Judaism and Islam. Although there is evidence that reveals close interactions among different religious traditions at Nanyue, other evidence suggests contestation over sacred sites, efforts to maintain distance and establish boundaries between the traditions, and a range of competing discourses about the religious nature of the mountain. Accordingly, this book aims to demonstrate that multiple forms of religious spatial representation and practice can be present within the same sacred landscape and that the complementarities and tensions among those traditions need to be addressed. Religions, like societies generally, are much messier than our theories about them.5

One of the goals—and challenges—of this study has been to capture the full complexity of Nanyue’s religious landscape. Since the focus here is on a single site, this task may appear quite manageable, yet in many ways this mountain was a microcosm that reflected key imperium-wide historical and religious developments even as it played an important role in shaping those larger developments. The religious landscape of Nanyue is like other objects whose true complexity is revealed on close examination, such as the Kabyle house, studied by Pierre Bourdieu, which is organized by the same oppositions and
homologies that order the whole universe. How are we to represent that complexity in narrative form? This question is especially acute given Nanyue’s extensive textual record. Like Robert Darnton’s analysis of a massive manuscript about Montpelliér, this book does not aim to chronicle every detail of the site. Rather, my goal is to use the textual material to get inside the site—to the extent possible—and “roam around in the world” constructed in these texts. But even the limited world delineated in the Collected Highlights is still unmanageably large. The mountains of detail available required difficult decisions about what to include and what to exclude. I have tried to retain all that is most essential to understanding this site, but other scholars might make different decisions based on their own concerns. At times, therefore, more attention is dedicated to describing what we know about Nanyue and its religious traditions, and at other times questions are raised, problem areas are noted and pondered, and possible new avenues of inquiry are suggested.

I remember well the sense of excitement I felt upon reading Edouard Chavannes’s foundational Le T’ai chan, a study of Taishan, the Eastern Sacred Peak. Some scholars have proclaimed Le T’ai chan “modern Western Sinology’s first great original achievement” for the way that it combines “historical awareness and archaeological sources.” The reasons for my own excitement about Chavannes’s place-based study were his methodology and its demonstration of the value of studying Chinese religious history from the perspective of a specific site. Although the study of Chinese sacred mountains has attracted interest in recent years, the focus has been on their representations in art and their role in pilgrimage. Despite the groundbreaking nature of Chavannes’s work, in the century since its publication in France it has remained the only book-length treatment of one of China’s sacred peaks from the perspective of local religious geography. There is as yet no study in any language that details the nature and historical development of the classification systems used in China to organize different sets of sacred mountains.

Given the abundant textual record available for the study of Chinese sacred mountains, it is surprising that they have thus far not attracted much critical attention from scholars of sacred geography or local history. Although a number of conferences have been convened and
collections of essays produced on the topic of Chinese landscapes and sacred spaces, the study of China’s sacred mountains has not advanced much beyond the landmark early works of Chavannes and Michel Soymié. Paul Kroll, in a pointed critique of recent work on Chinese sacred geography, asks “where it is all leading?” and suggests that we must begin to “skirt the reductive categories and smooth clichés” about sacred mountains. Studies of Chinese sacred geography began to blossom following the sudden increase in place studies within different branches of the social sciences, but there was surprisingly little cross-fertilization. Despite the development of sophisticated theoretical frameworks for thinking about the nature of sacred space, studies of China’s intricate network of sacred mountains remained at a frustratingly abstract level. As I began to formulate the parameters of my own research, I grew increasingly uneasy with the trajectory of recent studies of Chinese sacred geography. It became apparent that there was no adequate point of departure for devising a study on the multidimensional religious history of one of China’s sacred mountains.

This book draws from recent work that seeks a rapprochement between geographical and historical modes of analysis. The methodological underpinnings of this book are, therefore, situated at the intersection of a number of nested disciplines and recent theoretical concerns within the humanities: place studies, sacred geography, and local or micro-history. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were calls for the reassertion of place in social theory by those who claimed that space had been given less priority than time and had been “treated as the dead, the fixed, the immobile, the undialectical. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, [and] dialectic.” Rather than merely replace time with space, however, scholars were urged to bring these two fundamental categories of analysis into closer alignment, a “geohistorical synthesis” as some have termed it.

A rich literature on “place studies” has subsequently emerged and is now well established within academic discourse; the effects have already begun to be felt in just about every discipline within the humanities. Yet, in an assessment of the “fate of place” in the present academy, Edward Casey remarked on the remaining gaps: “there is precious little talk of place in philosophy—or, for that matter, in psychology or sociology, literary theory or religious studies.” Despite the focus in
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much present work on the spatial dimensions of diverse aspects of modernity, postmodernity, capitalist development, and other contemporary concerns, there is still much among the plethora of new approaches to spatial analysis of potential value to the field of premodern religious studies.

If there is one discipline that we would expect to be shot through with spatial theory, it would be the subfield of religious studies concerned with the study of religious geography, but there remains a paucity of studies that engage that methodology. The categories of “sacred space and sacred time” were considered fundamental elements in the study of religion from Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century through Emile Durkheim in the late nineteenth century to Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade in the mid-twentieth century. These fundamental categories underwent important modifications as they came to be filled with ever more essentialized claims about the inherent numinous power of certain sites. From the opposition between sacred and profane places found in Durkheim, Eliade developed his influential ideas on sacred mountains. Eliade famously suggested that mountains were numinous entities that reveal, or manifest, themselves to us through hierophanies, kratophanies, and epiphanies.17 Eliade’s work set the agenda for much of the subsequent scholarship on sacred space by historians of religion, but recent work by Jonathan Z. Smith, Allan Grapard, and others has shifted the discourse on sacred space from an emphasis on sacred sites as merely manifestations of the “holy” or as sacred “centers” toward entirely new questions that open new avenues of research.18 It is within this new body of research, which seeks to account for the multifaceted nature of sacred sites through an analysis of their social, political, and religious histories, that this study of Nanyue is situated.

Although there are a variety of ways to parse a landscape, Henri Lefebvre’s conceptual triad, later adapted to good effect by David Harvey, is useful for thinking about how to represent the mental and material aspects of a site. Lefebvre and Harvey discuss three different levels of space—the physical, the mental, and the cultural—and propose three different analytical dimensions for attending to those different facets of a place. The physical includes the material nature of a site and its use by the people who inhabit it (built environment and territorial organization). The mental level deals with ideology and the perception and
representation of a space (maps and coded representations). The third dimension, the cultural, is concerned with how a site is imagined and infused with symbolic meaning. In some cases, as the examples discussed in this book attest, the projected or imagined ideals have the potential to achieve real effects. Lefebvre did not clearly articulate the fine distinctions among these three dimensions, and I have not stuck closely to them in my analysis of Nanyue. Chapter 3 introduces the physical and imagined nature of that sacred mountain, and the rest of the book seeks to use all three vantage points to study the ways Buddhist and Daoist institutions altered the physical landscape and how their doctrines and ideas shaped the imagination of that landscape.

Sacred mountains exist in time as much as they do in space. Viewing sacred sites as unchanging, or timeless, entities, fails to recognize how histories accrue to places over time. Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, borrowed Einstein’s term “chronotope” (literally, “time-space”)—which was used to designate the fusion of temporal/spatial structures—to capture how “time thickens, as it were, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history.” Landscapes, while seemingly natural and in opposition to the cultured spaces of the built or urban environment, are also social products with complex histories. To account for the multidimensional ways that religious history became materialized within the sacred purlieu of Nanyue, the theoretical orientations available in the fields of local and micro-history are useful. Local and micro-history provide particularly apposite methodologies for approaching Chinese religious history, since the writing of local histories has long been a key component of Chinese historiography. Local histories provide a delimited textual base replete with information on religious, social, political, and economic factors often occluded in standard histories. As awareness of the regional nature of Chinese culture has become more pronounced in contemporary scholarship, there has been a concomitant increase in studies of local or regional religious history.

Much of the recent work on local history has, however, focused on the Song dynasty (960–1279) and later, and little space is devoted to local religious history. Given the important connections between religion and mountains in China and the well-developed literary genre of mountain monographs, detailed research on sacred mountains is a particularly
fruitful way to track the rise, development, and interactions between particular religious traditions within a precisely delineated time and space.

This work aims to study Nanyue from the vantage point of its local regional religious history, while bringing that work into dialogue with larger historical and religious issues at the imperium-wide level. The methodological approach elaborated in this Introduction is not meant to serve as a grand theoretical map or general theory applicable to all sacred sites in all parts of China at all times. Rather, I am attempting to show that the methods articulated in the subfields of religious geography and local or microhistory are the most suitable for thinking about—and asking questions of—the material under consideration in this study. One fundamental insight to emerge from this book’s engagement with historical geography is the general premise that space/place is not static but a situational and dynamic entity. Attention to the concerns formulated within microhistory have also proved beneficial in helping to discover and illuminate the vestiges of previously occluded Buddhist and Daoist figures and movements at Nanyue, what might be called the “lost peoples” of Chinese religion. But, once those figures are “found” and described, they still must be situated within the broader context of the study of Chinese religions. How, for example, does Nanyue and the religious developments situated at that mountain during the pre-Song period fit into—or force us to reimagine—the religious landscape of China? This is a question posed throughout this study as it tacks back and forth between the regional and the national levels of history and religion.

In order to situate this study of a Chinese sacred mountain within a larger historical and cultural context, Chapter 1 begins with a comprehensive analysis of the Chinese mountain classification systems—the ways that Chinese sacred mountains are situated within a variety of numbered sets. In contrast to much writing on Chinese sacred geography that emphasizes the antiquity and enduring nature of the mountain classification systems, this book highlights their dynamic nature. A careful reading of pre-Han sources such as the Shijing 詩經 (Book of odes), Shujing 書經 (Book of documents), Shi ji 史記 (Records of the historian), and Erya 爾雅 (Examples of refined usage) reveals that a set of five sacred mountains solidified rather late in Chinese history and
other sets of sacred mountains evolved in tandem with changing cosmological conceptions. Those early sets of mountains shifted geographically with the rise and fall of the early Chinese imperium (initially localized in the north and then expanded to the south). Although scholars of sacred geography have tended to focus on enduring traditions rather than change, the findings of this study challenge us to consider the evolution of Chinese sacred geography in relation to changes within Chinese cosmography and political geography.

As I was analyzing how the Five Sacred Peaks system attained its present shape, a surprising history of Nanyue emerged and forced me to ask a deceptively simple question: Where was Nanyue perceived to be located throughout Chinese history? As I discuss in Chapter 2, Nanyue presented a particularly interesting problem since multiple mountains became simultaneously associated with the title “Nanyue” and the name was attached to at least three different mountains before the Sui dynasty (581–618). It was not that Nanyue was flying all over the Chinese landscape or that it was magically moved in a physical sense (although some mountains were perceived to have done precisely that). Rather, the signifier yue 嶽 (sacred peak) was an elevated title conferred on a special category of mountains, and it was that designation—and all the rituals that came with it—that was shifted from mountain to mountain. Once a mountain was deemed one of the Five Sacred Peaks, it then became the location of special rituals reserved for the deities of that category of eminent peaks. Arguments about the location of Nanyue have raged among historians from the time of Sima Qian 司馬遷 (died 110 BCE) down to the present day; the controversy over sacred geography is still being fought in China today.

In Chapter 3, the focus turns from contextual issues to a detailed study of the mountain site in Hunan province known as Nanyue from the Sui dynasty to the present.26 This chapter, which provides a general introduction to Nanyue and its textual sources, is framed in terms of two fundamental interpretive categories: physical geography and mythical topography. The discussion of Nanyue’s geographic setting relies on the rich material in the *Collected Highlights*. The first third of that text is devoted to the mountain’s topographical features, revealing that Nanyue was not a single peak but an extended sacred environment that incorporated 72 peaks spread out over a vast terrain. The *Collected High-
lights also includes a long list of herbs and medicinal plants available at Nanyue that attracted Daoist and Buddhist religious figures who hoped to find and ingest them in order to attain longevity or immortality.

Nanyue’s mythical topography is explored through a consideration of the ways that the site was imagined and represented in historical and literary sources. Mythological layers of meaning were mapped onto specific sites at Nanyue through the importation of legends about past heroes and sages, and at the same time religious images from Buddhist and Daoist sources were correlated with Nanyue’s topographical features. Representations of Nanyue were, however, quite diverse and often contradictory. Whereas elite scholar-officials sitting in the northern capital might emphasize the “darker” associations of the Nanyue region—many scholar-officials were sent into exile there—Daoists and Buddhists perceived the place to be particularly efficacious for attaining transcendence and practicing meditation (dhyāna). Nanyue was imagined as a Blessed Terrain by Daoists and as a Pure Land by Buddhists. These images of Nanyue ultimately became realities as important figures from major religious movements settled among its peaks and valleys. Nanyue’s place in Buddhist and Daoist history and the impact of those religious traditions on the local history of the site are treated in detail in the second half of this book.

Digging deeper into the archives for sources on Nanyue’s religious history revealed important new Buddhist and Daoist sources. These previously unstudied manuscripts—and manuscript fragments—were essential resources for filling out the picture presented in the Collected Highlights and are used to structure the chapters in the second part of this book. Chapter 4 utilizes the *Nanyue jiu zhenren zhuan* 南嶽九真人傳 (Biographies of the Nine Perfected of Nanyue), which contains detailed biographies of nine eminent Daoists from Nanyue, to write a history of that group of transcendent who, despite having attracted the attention of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty (502–57), have remained outside the ken of modern scholars. Chapter 5 focuses on Tang dynasty Daoism, utilizing a local history entitled the *Nanyue xiaolu* 南嶽小錄 (Short record of Nanyue; hereafter Short Record). The Short Record focuses on the sacred geography of the site, with entries on significant peaks and waterways, and on the eminent Daoists who practiced at this site and ultimately ascended to heaven as transcendent. That valuable record,
written toward the end of the Tang dynasty, gives the impression that the author was looking back from a time of decline to what he saw as a period of religious splendor on the mountain in the hope of recovering that history from local records and transmitting it to later generations. These two local Daoist records provide detailed snapshots of Daoism at Nanyue during two key historical epochs and are, therefore, important sources for an unknown chapter in Chinese Daoist history. Indeed, these are precisely the types of sources that Anna Seidel emphasized were untapped and contain “mines of information” in need of further study.27

As I was writing these two chapters on Nanyue’s Daoist history, it became apparent that an even more surprising and unknown history was also waiting to be written. That history, presented in Chapter 6, involved a significant presence of female Daoist cults at Nanyue centered on the important female Daoist Wei Huacun 魏華存 (252–334)—also known as Lady Wei (Wei furen 魏夫人)—who is best known for transmitting the Shangqing 上清 manuscript corpus to her disciple Yang Xi 楊羲 (330–86) in a series of nocturnal revelations. Lady Wei’s history is integrally related to the shifting location of Nanyue since it forces us to question the way that her entire history is represented in the sources. Although her terrestrial history was firmly situated far to the east at the mountain that was (for a short time) known as Nanyue, when the title of Nanyue was returned to its present location in the Sui dynasty, Lady Wei’s “history” was literally carried along and mapped onto that site. Once this happened, female Daoist anchorites began to arrive there during the Tang to search out her traces and set up new altars. Eventually a cult of female Daoists began to form around sites associated with her memory.

The last two chapters are devoted to Nanyue’s rich Buddhist history in the pre-Tang and Tang periods. Chapter 7 explores the earliest traces of Buddhism and then considers the dramatic impact that the arrival of the Tiantai patriarch Huisi 慧思 (515–77) had on the religious history of the site. In this account we witness the strategies employed by Buddhists to institute a new sacred geography at a sacred mountain with a long religious history. I extend the discussion of Huisi with a consideration of the surviving fragments of a lost work entitled Nanyue shiba gaoseng zhuan 南嶽十八高僧傳 (Biographies of the eighteen eminent monks of Nanyue). Those fragments—and the extant preface to the
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text—provide an enigmatic list of eighteen eminent monks described as meditation \((dhyāna)\) specialists but who are closely related to the development of Tiantai. Although the founding Tiantai patriarch Huisi heads the list, these eighteen monks are best understood as being united by their affiliation with the sacred site of Nanyue and the power of its soteriological potential, rather than as a narrowly defined Tiantai lineage. That is to say, the Biographies of the Eighteen Eminent Monks of Nanyue presents us with a lineage constituted by association with a particular sacred place. This study distinguishes itself by utilizing—in addition to the monographic Collected Highlights in the Buddhist canon—local histories and epigraphic evidence largely neglected by Buddhologists, who have only recently begun to venture away from the narrow confines of the Buddhist canon.

Chapter 8 traces the growth and evolution of the Buddhist community at Nanyue during the Tang dynasty and demonstrates that Nanyue was arguably one of the most significant Buddhist centers in all of China. At Nanyue, key figures traditionally classified in the Tiantai, Chan, Vinaya, and Pure Land Buddhist traditions lived and established lasting monastic institutions. In discussing the advent and development of those Buddhist movements at Nanyue, however, I also urge the need to blur the lines among those divisions in order to account for the complexity of the religious practitioners and the institutions that housed them. For a variety of historical, religious, geographical, and political reasons, it was from the mountain fastness of Nanyue that—after surviving the Tang religious persecutions—the major Buddhist movements spread to other parts of the Chinese imperium.

Although the Buddhist and Daoist religious histories of Nanyue are discussed in separate chapters—which may give the appearance of clear sectarian divisions—that division was necessitated by the constraints inherent in the structure of a printed book and a desire for clarity. The reader is regularly reminded, however, of the co-presence of Buddhists and Daoists on the mountain and their intertwined histories. Ample space is, therefore, devoted to deeper reflection on the complex interactions between Buddhists and Daoists—both amicable and contentious—a topic that has begun to attract increasing interest among scholars of Chinese religions. By considering the nature of the relationship between Buddhists and Daoists at Nanyue, this book engages the
work of Buddho-Daoist studies and critically examines the notion of religious mixing as a feature of the Chinese religious landscape. The *Power of Place* offers a methodological departure from previous studies by considering important issues on the ground in local settings rather than merely through the lens of elite polemical essays and rarefied debates at the imperial court. As this study shows, the “boundaries” traditionally used to demarcate Chinese religion may be less like a “great wall” and more akin to the definition of “boundaries” found in the American writer Ambrose Bierce’s cynical *Devil’s Dictionary*: “In political geography, an imaginary line between two nations, separating the imaginary rights of one from the imaginary rights of the other.” Although it would be incorrect to say that in the premodern context the boundaries separating Buddhism and Daoism were completely illusory, we are nonetheless forced, for the time being, to cope with a situation in which the distinct boundaries separating normative traditions have been elevated to such an extent that it has traditionally been difficult for scholars in the fields of Buddhist and Daoist studies to see over or around them. Fortunately, there are recent signs that those boundaries are being breached. Architects use the term “desire lines” to describe the types of rutted pathways that develop on grassy fields between buildings and show the ways people negotiate more efficient routes from place to place. Eventually, these lines become part of the built environment in the form of paved sidewalks. Within the fields of Buddhist and Daoist studies, we are beginning to see the formation of “desire lines” created by scholars who have begun to construct walkways (in both directions) connecting the traditionally separate entities of Buddhism and Daoism. It is my hope that this work will further solidify those new routes and that eventually place studies and the mutual consideration of Buddhism, Daoism, and local religious history will become well-worn pathways deserving a concrete location in the study of Chinese religions.