History and Memory in the Visionary Landscape of Qing-Dynasty Wutai Shan

My book project examines pilgrimage and religion in the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) through a study of the shifting visionary terrains of Wutai Shan 五台山 (the Mountain of Five Terraces). The mountain range of Wutai Shan located in Shanxi Province on the northern frontier of China is believed to be the earthly abode of Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. But the same tradition that asserts the worldly location of Mañjuśrī’s abode also maintains its elusiveness to ordinary worldly perception. The notion that true Wutai Shan lodges only within the realm of pure perception instigated a lively tradition of texts and images describing the landscape of this ineffable realm from as early as the seventh century CE. During the Qing dynasty, when Wutai Shan flourished as a major center of Tibetan Buddhism for Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan constituents of the empire, the vocabularies of this descriptive tradition also expanded and transformed to mirror the dynamics of this development on the ground. Qing-dynasty texts and images not only revealed new miracles, deities and apparitions of Mañjuśrī, and charted new panoramas and cosmologies of the sacred terrain from within their own religious traditions, they also displayed a genuine and persistent interest in enlivening the historical memory of Wutai Shan and of Chinese Buddhism stretching back the founding of Buddhist religion and its early transmission to China.

The task of locating the synthetic religious landscape of Wutai Shan in its myriads of visual and visionary manifestations during this period of transformation is the subject of my talk. The five chapters of the book project outlined below examine how particular Qing-dynasty literary and artistic productions of the visionary landscape reinvented a millennium-old ecology of pilgrimage and monastic activities. By analyzing how and why Wutai Shan is realized and reinvented in a variety of genres and mediums (biographies, gazetteers, sacred images, maps and wall paintings), I argue that representations of the visionary landscape constitute the core of the mountain’s religious identity, defining the ways Wutai Shan came to be viewed with more potency than do its physical topography and material structure or holdings. The seemingly
intangible discourse of religious vision, as this study will demonstrate, is both the source and product of Buddhist visual culture.

The introductory chapter begins with the journey taken by an eminent Buddhist teacher from Eastern Tibet and more than a thousand of his disciples to Wutai Shan in 1987. Their extraordinary visit unleashed a flood of memories of Wutai Shan's vibrant visionary landscape that left little trace in its hollowed temple grounds in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. This near-contemporary pilgrimage reveals the building blocks of Wutai Shan’s visionary landscape—narrative of miraculous encounters, memories of past masters, sites of sacred empowerment and treasure revelation, traditions of meditative insights, circulation of guidebooks and images, and creation of surrogate sites of pilgrimage. The chapters that follow mine key sources where these defining aspects of the visionary landscape are collected and articulated. Chapter Two examines hagiographical/biographical materials as sacred topography. In analyzing textual and pictorial biography of a resident Tibetan Buddhist master in the Qing Court and his close network of teachers and students in the second half of the 18th eighteenth century, I wish to highlight spiritual lineage as integral to the structure of a visionary landscape. Chapter Three deciphers the interrelation between imperial and private productions of multi-language gazetteers and guidebooks of Wutai Shan that peaked during in the late 18th and early 19th century. That Chan and Huayan Buddhist tales, along with pre-Buddhist legends, are faithfully preserved and re-interpreted Tibetan language guidebooks calls into question how Tibetan Buddhists, and in particular Gelukpa hierarchs and scholars, re-imagined Chinese Buddhist history and the place the Gelukpa tradition therein. As these texts became singular and primary source for pilgrims from Tibet and Mongolia, they also played an instrumental role in mediating and dictating pilgrims’ experience of Wutai Shan.

Chapter Four considers a chain of replicas and temples commissioned by the Qianlong Emperor in and around the capital based on a single image of Mañjuśrī on a Lion. Images made after the same apparition can be found in Dunhuang, Japan, and Central Tibet across several centuries, and none other than Qianlong was more aware of the copies’ ability to metonymically represent the abode of Mañjuśrī. As the chapter shows, the scale and scope of Qianlong’s re-enactment effectively advanced a distinct Manchu Imperial Buddhist identity, at the same time as it perfected the identity of a distinctly Manchu Wutai Shan in the original mountain range. The final chapter contemplates the phenomenon of widely circulated maps and wall paintings of
Wutai Shan in Tibet and Mongolia during the early 19th century. By contrast to metonyms of Wutai Shan explored in Chapter Four, pictures of Wutai Shan not only constitute specific sites and visions into a cosmologically coherent whole, they are often incorporated into larger cosmographical program of sacred spheres. I trace the process by which different visions and miracles of the past, both on and off Wutai Shan, are subsumed and remapped onto one pictorial space in order to present its history in a complete panoramic totality. My talk will focus on the two different strategies of negotiating the past and reinventing Wutai Shan in Chapters Four and Five.

A major part of research for this project comes from my dissertation, which was primarily concerned with Tibetan Buddhist perspectives on Wutai Shan. Each of my dissertation chapters had focused on a moment between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries when an individual—including lamas and an emperor—reshaped the way in which Wutai Shan was viewed and remembered. However, the transparency with which every individual engaged with Wutai Shan’s numinous past fascinated me, and their stories continue to refuse simple delineation of culture and traditions. In restructuring the materials into a book manuscript, I shift the focus 1) from persons to genres and mediums, and 2) from particular historical moments to the complex temporalities of a visionary topography. One reason for and challenge in this restructuring is the fact that the world of visions follows a different spatial-temporal matrix than the perceivable historical one. In other words, how should the materials be organized in a way that follows the logic of this matrix while maintaining sensitive to historical chronology? To me, this book is as much about the Qing dynasty as it is about historical memory and a sense of timelessness, which I feel was perhaps what late Qing-period pilgrims hung on to as they witnessed the institutional and material decline of temples and monasteries.