

THE STORY OF A TEMPLE

Commissioned by Allerd Stikker



In loving memory of Anneke Dorina Stikker 1955–2004

Commissioned by Allerd Stikker
Text: Liset Hamming
Photography: Alexander Mercer
Translation: Ivette Jans
Design: Rosa Vitalie
Print: Mud Company

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At the foot of Taibai Shan, 2005

THE SETTING



QINLING MOUNTAINS

Deep in the heart of China lies the dusty province of Shaanxi. The north of Shaanxi is bordered by a desert, the east by the Yellow River and the south by the Qinling Mountains. The capital, Xi'an, means 'Western Peace' and lies on the Wei, a river that flows into the Yellow River together with the Jing and Luo rivers. North-east of Xi'an resides the ever-silent Terracotta Army of 9099 terracotta soldiers who were given as grave goods to the first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi or 'First Emperor of Qin' (259–210 BCE). Qin was the name of an area straddling Shaanxi and several other provinces. Qin Shi Huangdi founded the Qin Dynasty in 221 BCE. He united all the separate states of his dynasty to create a vast Chinese empire under one rule, effectively becoming the first emperor of China. The name 'China' is derived from Qin. During long periods of Chinese history, Xi'an (then known as Chang'an or 'Eternal Peace') was the capital of the Chinese empire. At the apex of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), the city walls of Xi'an accommodated over one million inhabitants and more than a thousand temples. The city owed its wealth primarily to the northern silk route, which began near Xi'an and continued to the eastern border of the Roman Empire.

Running from east to west, the Qinling Mountains dissect the provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu and Henan. This mountain range, 250 miles long and 150 miles wide, forms a natural cultural barrier

between China's north and south. The northern flanks feature a hot, dry climate while the southern flanks are mostly warm and humid. North of the mountains, wheat cultivation predominates and, to the south, rice crops alternate with tropical forest. This forest is home to numerous rare plant varieties and various rare animal species such as the Qinling panda. The central range is known as the Zhongnan (or Taiyi) Mountains and considered the birthplace of Daoism because it is said to be the place where Lao Zi wrote the Dao De Jing. The highest peak of the Qinling Mountains, in the middle of the Zhongnan section, is Taibai Shan (approx. 12,300 feet). This peak is one of the 180 sacred mountains found in China.

Just over a third of the way up Taibai Shan, at an altitude of 4,400 feet, stands the Tiejia Daoist Ecology Temple together with the Ecology Education Centre. They were built at the initiative of the local Daoist community, with construction executed by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), and co-funding provided by the Ecological Management Foundation (EMF). Building works were completed in 2007. The temple and education centre arose where the Tiejia Temple had stood for more than 1,300 years until the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when hundreds of temples in China's sacred mountains, including the old Tiejia Temple, were damaged or destroyed.

SACRED MOUNTAINS

Tradition regards nine of China's mountains as sacred but, over the years, Daoists have developed a system that recognises 180 sacred mountains across the whole of China. Of the original nine, four are sacred to the Buddhists and five to the Daoists. The latter five represent the main points of the Chinese compass, with the centre as the fifth point. In the east lies Tai Shan (in ancient China regarded as the highest mountain in the world), the south features Heng Shan, the west Hua Shan (where Lao Zi is said to have lived and taught) and the north yet another Heng Shan (but with a different meaning in Chinese). The fifth peak, Shong Shan, lies right in the middle. Together, the five sacred mountains represent the territory of the Chinese empire and are a symbol of national unity.

In Chinese folklore, the first legendary sovereigns of China went on excursions or formed processions to the summits of the five sacred mountains. Every visit took place at the same time of the year. The excursions were hunting trips and ended in ritual offerings to the reigning god. The emperors, starting with the First Emperor of Qin, formalised these expeditions and incorporated them into state ritual as prescribed by Confucianism. With every new dynasty, the new emperor hurried to the sacred mountains in order to lay claim to his newly acquired domains. Barring a number of interruptions, this imperial

custom was preserved until the end of the last dynasty, when, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, Yuan Shikai had himself crowned as emperor at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. But just to be safe, he also made an offer to the mountain god of the northern Heng Shan.

Back in ancient times, mountains were places of authority and fear, ruled by dark forces and faithfully worshipped. One reason for such worship was the value of the mountains to human existence as a spring of welfare and fertility, as the birthplace of rivers, as a place where herbs and medicinal plants grew and as a source of materials to build houses and tools. A basic element of Daoist thought was, and still is, an intuitive feeling of connectedness with nature. For Daoists, everything is alive, including the rivers, the rocks and the grass. Earth, humankind and the universe (heaven) are all equally important and interdependent parts of the whole. As early as the 4th century, the Daoists presented the high priests with the 180 precepts of Lord Lao for how to live a good and honest life. Twenty of these precepts focused explicitly on the conservation of nature, while many other precepts were indirectly aimed at preventing the destruction of nature. Respect for nature has indeed been a key component of Daoism from the very outset and, in its own right, explains why the mountains are considered sacred. In addition, Daoists see mountains as a means of communication between heaven

and earth and as the place where immortality can be found. Through the centuries, sacred mountains have become places of pilgrimage, where hundreds of Daoists have been known to gather in temples and caves. The Chinese expression for ‘pilgrimage’ is actually an abridged form of the expression ‘show respect for the sacred mountain’. The sanctity of China’s sacred mountains is the reason why even today these mountains still host an exceptional diversity of plants, trees and animal species.

GREAT WHITE MOUNTAIN

One of the 180 mountains that acquired a sacred position at a later stage is Taibai Shan. This sacred position is clear from the various important names the mountain has had. During the reign of the legendary, morally perfect Three Sovereigns (2852–2070 BCE), the mountain was called Dun Wu Shan (Mountain of Rich Goods). During the Xia Dynasty (2070–1600 BCE), it was known as Tai Yi Shan. Tai Yi is the brightest star in Chinese astrology, with all other stars orbiting around it. In Daoism, Tai Yi is a supreme deity and the mountain its physical representation. Furthermore, Tai Yi symbolises Tai Ji, the god who stands for balance and harmony. It was Tai Ji who gave birth to everything and therefore occupies a prominent place in Daoism.

Ancient texts say that in the Wei and Jin period (220–589), the spirit of planet Venus descended ‘west of Gui Shan in the Zhongnan Mountains’, where Taibai Shan is located. Here, the spirit of Venus metamorphosed into magnificent white jade. Ever since, the mountain has been known as Taibai Shan, or literally Great (*tai*) White (*bai*) Mountain (*shan*). The name, however, also refers to the permanent snow covering the summit of what is the highest peak in the Qinling range.

Daoists believe that the sacred mountains are interconnected via an underground network of *dong tien* or ‘heaven caves’ with *dong* meaning ‘to penetrate something’ and *tien* referring to ‘heaven’. Going back as far as the 4th century, heaven caves were places where heaven and earth touched. By entering such a cave, you penetrate deep within the mountain and arrive in the world of immortals: you enter ‘the beyond within’. There are thirty places spread throughout China where a heaven cave is known to exist but there are probably more. Taibai Shan has dozens of caves but only one is a heaven cave called Bieyou Dong Tien or ‘Place of Charm and Beauty’. Bieyou also refers to a celebrated poem by a famous Daoist poet, Li Taibai, from the Tang Dynasty:

Question and Answer in the Mountain

*You ask me why do I dwell in these green mountains,
But I smile without a reply, only an easy mind.
The river flows away silently, bearing the fallen peach blossoms,
Here is another world, but not the world of man.**

Li Bai, alias Li Taibai (701–762)

Source: *Li Bai’s Complete Works*. Beijing: Zhonghua, 1977 as cited in Cheng, Pei-kai & Fan, Ka Wai (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Research of Chinese Culture*. Singapore: Springer, 2013.

*A reference to the legendary Peach Blossom Valley, where, deep in the mountains in ‘a different world’, happy people (immortals) live who know nothing of our existence.

THE THREE GODS OF TAIBAI SHAN

Sacred mountains each have their own god or several gods and Taibai Shan is no exception. Chinese gods are often historical figures, such as Lao Zi, who are elevated to gods first through their popularity amongst ordinary folks and then by the ruling emperor. Stories about the origin of the three gods of Taibai Shan therefore go back a long way.

The oldest tale is about a man from Li Yang by the name of Gu Chun, meaning ‘Spring Valley’, who lived deep inside the forests of Taibai Shan during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). When he died, his family buried him but, during the night, his body got up and they saw him leave. Local residents thus believed that he was the god of Taibai Shan and built a temple for him, calling it Taibai (and sometimes Gu Chun) Temple.

More recent stories talk of not just one but three Taibai gods because, during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), there were three lakes on Taibai Shan. These lakes were revered for their water and cooling effect and were represented by the three Taibai gods, who were known as Ku Ji (Relieving the Suffering), Hui Min (Benefiting the People) and Ling Ying (Enlightening Answers). Local residents, however, called the three gods Da A Fu (The Great Fortune), Er A Fu (The Second Fortune) and San A Fu (The Third Fortune).

But according to poet and politician Yu Youren, the three Taibai gods are Yao, Shun and Yu, or the three demi-gods Earth, Heaven and Water from Chinese legend. And according to the old master Ren Fa Rong, the three Taibai gods are Bo Yi, Shu Qi and Zhou Ben from the Shang Dynasty (17th–11th century BCE). Bo Yi and Shu Qi were two princes of the Kingdom of Gu Zhu and Zhou Ben was a general. The king made Shu Qi the crown prince even though Shu Qi was only the third son and Bo Yi the eldest. After the old king passed away, Shu Qi asked Bo Yi to be the new king but Bo Yi said, ‘We shouldn’t resist our father’s will,’ and ran away to Taibai Shan. Shu Qi didn’t think it was appropriate for him to succeed to the throne since tradition dictated that the throne should be inherited by the oldest son. He therefore gave the throne to the middle son, Ya Ping, and ran after Bo Yi to Taibai Shan. When the Zhou Dynasty overthrew the Shang Dynasty, the two brothers believed it was not right for a vassal lord such as the duke of Zhou to snatch the kingdom from its lawful ruler. Having been told that ‘all under heaven now belongs to the Zhou king’, they refused ever to eat again and so starved to death on Taibai Shan. Zhou Ben, the general, chose the same fate. Learning of their deaths, the wise minister of the Zhou Dynasty, Jiang Ziya, made the three men local gods of Taibai Shan for their great virtue and sense of righteousness.

Others claim that the third god is not Zhou Ben but Li Bai, the famous poet also known as Li Taibai.

During the Qing Dynasty of the 18th century, the province of Shaanxi requested approval from the emperor to incorporate the Taibai gods into official provincial celebrations. This did not come about immediately. In 1774, the 39th year of the Qianlong emperor, Shaanxi province again asked for consent and, this time, it was granted. As a result, the Taibai gods—previously ranked as mere dukes—acquired the official title of king.

The many different names for the same Taibai gods illustrate an important fact about the way the Chinese think: in China, a given question can always have multiple answers. Just as the average Chinese may find refuge in the traditions of Buddhism as well as Daoism, in Confucianism and even in Christianity, so too is the right answer one thing today and another thing tomorrow.

It is in this historical, cultural and spiritual setting that the story of a temple unfolded.

*How vast is great Taibai
The Stars across its slopes arrayed
From Heaven it stands three hundred li
From Mortal Earth so far away.*

Li Bai, alias Li Taibai (701-762)

The image shows the interior of a traditional Chinese temple. Three large, dark-colored statues are positioned on a raised stone platform. Each statue is completely covered by a bright yellow plastic sheet, which is draped over the top and sides, leaving the forms hidden. The background consists of a grey, textured wall with some vertical lines. Above the statues, the dark wooden structure of the temple's roof is visible, featuring intricate carvings and beams. The lighting is somewhat dim, highlighting the texture of the plastic and the wood.

THE STORY

The three Taibai Shan gods, draped and waiting for the finishing touch. Paintwork could not begin until the deities had been invited down to enter the statues, 2007

THE OLD TIEJIASHU TEMPLE

So just over a third of the way up Taibai Shan, there once stood an old Tiejia Temple, hidden amongst the foliage of age-old trees. The temple was built at the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and remained there until the Cultural Revolution. It was one of the oldest temples dedicated to the gods of Taibai Shan and the first temple on the route taken by pilgrims along the south side of the mountain. Once there, the pilgrims were given water and could rest in preparation for the climb to the summit. Every year, between 9 June and 9 July of the Chinese lunar calendar, all temples on Taibai Shan gathered for the big temple feast at the old Tiejia Temple. There was a lively market, rituals were performed and many pilgrims started the trail to Ba Xian Tai (Terrace of Immortalisation), the top of Taibai Shan. The summit was the place where Jiang Ziya, the wise minister of the Zhou Dynasty who had helped overthrow the corrupt Shang Dynasty (2nd millennium BCE), had made immortal all those who had come to his aid.

Like many temples in China, the Tiejia Temple was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. It was this spot where ARC, at the initiative of the local Daoist community and co-funded by EMF, built the Tiejia Temple and Ecology Education Centre for the worship of the Taibai gods and to stimulate what had been such

an important part of Daoism since ancient times, namely preserving the natural environment.

Tiejia means 'Iron Armour' and *shu* means 'tree', referring to the three-thousand-year-old tree that had always stood by the entrance to the old temple and survived the Cultural Revolution. The edges of its leaves are often serrated, which is why people call it Iron Armour Tree. The tree is known for the curse that is cast on anyone who destroys it. This is why during the Cultural Revolution not even the Red Guard students dared to harm it. The tree is the protector of the Taibai gods and is still worshipped as much as the gods themselves.

According to residents from the Taibai Shan area, there was a Daoist monk around the middle of the 20th century whose name, ironically, was Mao. He was living in the old Tiejia Temple when the Cultural Revolution broke out. The residents tried to defend the temples and mountain from attacks by the Red Guard but the old temple was destroyed and the monk was forced to leave. After the Cultural Revolution, in the 1980s, opportunities to restore Daoist temples grew slowly but steadily. First, local residents built a few simple rooms where the Taibai gods could reside. Then, in the 1990s, a request to reopen the temple was submitted to the local government body responsible for monitoring religious activity. Permission was granted and, under the leadership of the Louguan Tai Temple, where Lao Zi is said to have written the Dao De

Jing, the rooms regained their use as a place of quiet rest and contemplation. In the autumn of 2002, four extra rooms were built. Now the three Taibai gods each had their own room, with the remaining rooms available for the monk of the Louguan Tai Temple, who was going to live there, and his guests. Slowly but surely, the old Tiejia Temple came back to life, just like many other temples in China. Following many years of ravage and ruin, Daoism seemed just as robust and indomitable as the sacred mountains themselves.

READY FOR TAKE-OFF

In 2004, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) appealed to ARC for help because they wanted to build an eco-resort on Taibai Shan and had discovered the seven rooms at the site of the old Tiejia Temple. Earlier, WWF had already built a number of panda sanctuaries to protect the environment of the Qinling panda. The eco-resort was now supposed to start generating income as a means of financing those sanctuaries. WWF asked ARC to investigate. ARC's secretary-general Martin Palmer met the vice-abbot of the Louguan Tai Temple, Master Ren Xingzhi. Both quickly saw the opportunities for a fruitful and sustainable partnership. These meetings gave rise to the plans for a Tiejia Daoist Ecology Temple with an Ecology Education Centre next door.

To help finance the execution of the plans, an appeal was made to Allerd Stikker, founder and chairman of EMF. Allerd was immediately enthusiastic because the construction of the new temple and education centre fit perfectly within the objectives pursued by EMF. Respect for nature has always been deeply rooted in Daoist thought and is crucial to China in the present era of ecological crisis. Through the Ecology Education Centre, the Daoist monks of the Tiejia Temple would be able to organise meetings and training programmes designed to help people think in terms of sustainability, not only local visitors but also monks from other temples. ARC's ambition was to inspire all temples and help them set up their own ecology education centres, thereby facilitating a network of such centres throughout the sacred mountains. These considerations convinced EMF that a financial investment would reap rewards. The Chinese government kept an eye on proceedings via the state-controlled China Daoist Association, something that was inevitable in a country like China. The plans were also supported by the provincial government of Shaanxi, partly because extreme poverty in the region was relatively widespread and building works would fill the state coffers. All in all, no previous project had ever witnessed a marriage of such seemingly opposing forces as Daoism, the economy and respect for nature. He Xiaoxin, the Chinese architect who had been selected to design the Tiejia Temple and Ecology Education Centre, started rolling up her sleeves.

COMFORT AND BLESSING

At a central point in every Daoist temple stands an incense burner. The tradition of burning incense originated during the Zhou Dynasty (1000–256 BCE) when king Zhou Wen Wang used the rising smoke to send his prayers to heaven. In one of the meetings between Martin Palmer and Allerd Stikker about the construction of the Tiejia Temple and the Ecology Education Centre, Martin explained that it was customary for an outsider to donate the incense burner to the temple. In that same year of 2004, Allerd's oldest daughter, Anneke, had died of cancer. It had been an emotional year, full of despair and distress. Martin suggested that Allerd should donate the incense burner in memory of Anneke. Allerd gratefully accepted the proposal. Together with He Xiaoxin, he and his family embarked upon the design of the incense burner.

2005: PRELIMINARY OPENING

In the autumn of 2005, Allerd with his family and friends, accompanied by Martin and his wife, left for Xi'an to inaugurate the temple. When they arrived, it appeared that not a single stone had been laid! But the beauty of the spot where the temple should have been was all the more palpable. And shining in the Chinese autumn sun, the incense burner stood on a small

table. It was plated in red bronze, robust but refined, with elegant horses galloping along the top edge—horses she had loved so much and that, in Daoist tradition, carry the soul of the departed to eternity.

*With all your animals, houses, dreams and memories
Your horses have now taken you to a safe place.*

With the aid of ancient rituals and in the presence of visitors and Daoist monks, including Master Ren Xingzhi, the first act was to bless the land. Master Ren Xingzhi directed a ritual called Bu Gang Ta Dou (Gang and Dou being two stars in Chinese astrology) where a Daoist monk 'danced on the stars', moving from one symbol to the next, all prearranged on the ground, so that the balance between heaven and earth would be restored and heaven would infuse the land with its power. He then blessed the incense burner, upon which the burner turned from red bronze to holy bronze. A piece of yellow paper, with words symbolic of our sins, was burn so that Anneke could leave her earthly existence without any sins, and the words sung made sure that the horses would safely carry her to eternity.

QUARRELLING GODS

At the end of the ceremony, the contractor responsible for the build called a meeting with

Martin, Allerd, a local government representative and Master Ren Xingzhi. After extensive apologies, it became clear why the works had yet to get going.

'The current design of the temple is too small.'

'Too small?'

'Yes, three gods will each get a place in the temple and need more space to separate them than the current design allows.'

Allerd and Martin blinked at each other in surprise.

'The gods need more space?'

'That's right, because they don't get along. A few extra yards will preserve peace and harmony in the temple.'

'You don't say!'

A few extra yards cost money which they didn't have and that's why construction had not begun. Just to be sure, Allerd queried the importance of three gods.

'Why not just one god?' he asked tentatively.

'Oh no, because these three gods guard the Great White Mountain and each of them needs a place in the temple. And besides, they work in shifts!'

Back outside, Allerd and Martin had to laugh.

'Well, Allerd, here's karma for you. In your days as a businessman, you've cracked some tough nuts with uncompromising trade unions and now you're stuck with a bunch of unionised gods!'

Allerd promised the monies required and the construction of the Tiejia Temple could finally get underway.

2007: OFFICIAL INAUGURATION

In June 2007, after a long winter that was so cold that building works had to be put on halt, the entire company again flew to Xi'an, this time accompanied by Allerd's whole family. They visited the Louguan Tai Temple, continued their journey through the Qinling Mountains, and arrived in time for the inauguration. The ceremonies for the opening of the Tiejia Daoist Ecology Temple and the Ecology Education Centre were even more beautiful than the blessing of the land in 2005. The tables were bigger with more generous bowls of fruit and more candles, symbols and musical instruments. There were twice as many visitors and Daoist monks. The buildings were resplendent with banners and flags. In the centre of the temple, at the foot of the three Taibai gods and surrounded by flowers, the incense burner shone bright. Again, Master Ren Xingzhi directed the dancing on the stars so that heaven could pass its power to the temple and the education centre.

Since the 2007 inauguration, the temple and education centre on Taibai Shan have been the epicentre of an effort to make China's Daoist temples more sustainable and to create an awareness of sustainability issues. The two structures are also a place of rest and contemplation, where visitors can send their prayers to heaven. In this way, the incense burner of the Tiejia Temple does not only keep alive Anneke's

memory but others can find in her memory a source of hope, comfort and reflection.

RESPECT FOR NATURE AND TRADITION

Unlike Buddhist temples, Daoist temples are generally modest and simple in size and structure. Daoist temples are so at one with nature that it often seems as if they grew from the earth and stones that surround them. They are certainly not built for you to stand by the window and admire the view. After all, you are part of that view and not merely a spectator, just as in following the Dao, or the Way, you become part of the way. The Tiejia Temple too is modest in size and constructed with sustainable, natural materials from the region. In the background, you can hear the constant babble of the stream that flows along the front of the temple.

Like almost all other Chinese temples, the Tiejia Temple faces south. In China, the south is the direction of the divine, of heaven. This is the reason why the Taibai gods of the temple also face south, making everyone else face north, towards the earth. There is another difference between the Chinese and western ways of thinking about the four directions. In western culture, we see the east as the direction of spirituality: the Garden of Eden and the Holy Land lie in the east. But in China, the west is

the place of spirituality. Emperor Ming (58–75) dreamt of a saint from the west, had him tracked down and thus ushered Buddhism into China. Lao Zi, too, left for the west, which in China is not only seen as a spiritual place but also as a gateway to the afterlife.

Finally, if the construction of the Tiejia Temple is to be fully understood, the Chinese philosophy of *feng shui* (literally ‘wind water’) should be borne in mind. This three-thousand-year-old philosophy focuses on the minimal obstruction of *qi*, or vital energy, and fits in with the Daoist notion that we live our lives together with and as part of everything around us. It was therefore important that the Tiejia Temple was built as much as possible as an integral element of its surroundings and the natural environment. Going by the rules of *feng shui*, the temple stands in an ideal spot: against the background of a sacred mountain with a stream flowing along the front and tall, old trees all around.

The design of the temple follows the traditional style of temples from the Qing Dynasty. This style requires the square surrounding the temple and the temple itself to be symmetric, with the temple standing at the centre-back of the square and flanked by other religious buildings. In the case of the Tiejia Temple, the Ecology Education Centre is located to the west of the temple and one of the old temporary rooms to the east. During construction, the education centre was positioned a few yards too far to the

east, making the design of the square no longer perfectly symmetric and the square a bit smaller than planned. But the walls of the temple site follow tradition to the letter, with a natural hedge of shrubs instead of a stone structure.

The temple walls themselves are clad in tiles. The roof of the temple features all kinds of symbols of immortality and hope such as butterflies, fishes and bats, and a dog that barks when evil spirits come near. The ends of the stone pipes punctuating the roof consist of angry-looking faces that keep away evil spirits. On the underside of the temple roof, the wood is red as is one of the outside walls of the education centre. Red stands for good luck, the sun and energy, and Daoists consider this the most ‘powerful’ colour of all.

When you enter the temple, the three Taibai gods—now known as Da (Great) Taibai, Er (Second) Taibai and San (Third) Taibai—stand in the middle of a spartan space. On both sides of the gods, the walls are covered with murals. And in the centre, by the feet of the gods, stands the incense burner.

In the temple, Daoist monks jingle a bell so that the gods, who sometimes doze off, know you are there. But the monks only do this if it's clear that you have come to pray! They ignore casual visitors and the gods probably do so as well.

