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Formation of the Traditional Chinese State Ritual System of Sacrifice to Mountain and Water Spirits

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Abstract: Sacrifice to mountain and water spirits was already a state ritual in the earliest dynasties of China, which later gradually formed a system of five sacred peaks, five strongholds, four seas, and four waterways, which was mainly constructed by the Confucian ritual culture. A number of modern scholars have studied the five sacred peaks from different perspectives, yielding fruitful results, but major issues are still being debated or need to be plumbed more broadly and deeply, and the whole sacrificial system has not yet drawn sufficient attention. Applying a combined approach of religious, historical, geographical, and political studies, I provide here, with new discoveries and conclusions, the first comprehensive study of the formational process of this sacrificial system and its embodied religious-political conceptions, showing how these geographical landmarks were gradually integrated with religious beliefs and ritual-political institutions to become symbols of territorial, sacred, and political legitimacy that helped to maintain the unification and government of the traditional Chinese imperium for two thousand years. A historical map of the locations of the sacrificial temples for the eighteen mountain and water spirits is appended.

**Citation:** Jia, Jinhua. 2021.Formation of the Traditional Chinese State Ritual System of Sacrifice to Mountain and Water Spirits. *Religions* 12: 319. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050319>

Academic Editor: Mario Poceski

Received: 9 March 2021

Accepted: 26 April 2021

Published: 30 April 2021

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Keywords: five sacred peaks; five strongholds; four seas; four waterways; state ritual system of sacrifice; Chinese religion; Chinese historical geography

1. Introduction

Sacrifice to mountain and water spirits was already a state ritual in the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–ca. 1046 BCE) and continued in the Zhou to Qin dynasties (ca. 1046–206 BCE). From the Western Han (206 BCE–8 CE) to the Northern Song (960–1126) eras, imperial courts gradually formed a ritual system of mountain- and water-directed state sacrifices, consisting of the five sacred peaks (*wuyue* 五岳),¹ five strongholds (*wuzhen* 五鎮), four seas (*sihai* 四海), and four waterways (*sidu* 四瀆), which was mainly constructed by the Confucian ritual culture. This system lasted through the end of the last imperial dynasty (Qing) in 1911.

This essay studies the formational process of this sacrificial system and its implied religious-political conceptions, focusing on two major issues. The first issue is the origin of the five sacred peaks, the earliest and most significant components of the system. Starting with Édouard Chavannes (1865–1918), a number of modern scholars have studied the five sacred peaks from various perspectives, yielding fruitful results,² but major problems are still being debated or need to be plumbed more broadly and deeply. The second issue is about the formation of the full sacrificial system of the five sacred peaks, five strongholds, four seas, and four waterways. While the Western language scholarship has almost overlooked this system, some Chinese and Japanese scholars have studied its different stages and aspects. Yet a comprehensive description of the formational process of this important system is still lacking. Applying a combined approach of religious, historical, geographical, and political studies, and drawing upon both transmitted and excavated sources, in what follows I examine these two issues with new arguments and conclusions.

2. Origin of the Designation and Composition of the Five Sacred peaks

The origin of the five sacred peaks is confusedly and complicatedly documented in various early sources, about which some scholars have conducted general literature reviews.³ Those reviews are inspiring but inadequate, and each scholar has offered a different interpretation and conclusion. Therefore, it is necessary to undertake a new, brief yet comprehensive review and explication here.

In the Shang dynasty, sacrifice to mountain and water spirits was already a state ritual, as seen in the oracle bone inscriptions (Chen 1988, pp. 594–96; Chang 2010, pp. 159–62; Liu 2017, pp. 528–30). One of the most frequent objects in the sacrifice was explained as *yue* 岳, referring to great mountain (Sun 1992, 1.26), about which scholars have agreed but with different opinions as to whether *yue* refers to general mountains (Ding 1988, p. 407) or to a specific mountain, such as Mount Taiyue 太岳山 (also named Mount Huo 霍山) in Shanxi (Qu 1960, pp. 62–67), Mount Song 嵩山 in Henan (Sun 1992, 1.20; Allan 1991, pp. 99–100; Liu 2017, pp. 511–12), or Mount Hua 華山 in Shaanxi (Guo 1983, pp. 93–94; Zhan 1992, p. 68).

Subsequently, the literature of the Zhou (ca. 1046–256 BCE) to the early Han contains new and different references to *yue*, roughly comprising two groups. In the first group, the term *yue*, four-*yue* 四岳, or great-*yue* 大岳 is related to clan ancestors, genealogies, and ancestral spirits. In the *Guoyu* 國語 (Discourses of the States; Lai 2000, 3.138), the term four-*yue* refers to the legendary figure Gonggong's 共工 four grandsons, who helped Yu the Great 大禹 in taming the waters and were thus awarded noble titles with the surname Jiang 姜. Uncovering the veil of the legendary figures, here four-*yue* can be interpreted as referring to the ancestors of the Jiang tribe. In the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo's Commentary, Zhuang 22, Yin 11, Xiang 14), *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of Poetry, no. 259), the *yue*, great-*yue*, or four-*yue* are also described as the ancestors or ancestral spirits of several clans derived from the Jiang tribe, such as Xu 許, Shen 申, and Fu 甫 (Gu and Liu 2005, pp. 77–79). In addition, in the *Shangshu* 尚書 (Book of Documents; Kong and Kong 2000, 2.47–58, 3.65), the legendary sage king Yao 堯 had conversations with the four-*yue*, and another sage king Shun 舜 met with the lords of the four-*yue* daily. Again, uncovering the legendary veil in both records, the four-*yue* can be interpreted as referring to clan chiefs/lords who were in charge of the lands in the four quarters.

In the second group, *yue* or four-*yue* refers to mountains or mountain spirits. The *Zuozhuan* (Zhao 4) lists the term four-*yue* together with the names of mountains and places as perilous passes over the nine precincts (*jiuzhou* 九州). Scholars have explained this kind of four-*yue* as referring to the great mountains in the four quarters generally (Zhou 2012, pp. 52–57) or to the borders defining the territory of the Zhou (Kleeman 1994, p. 228). Furthermore, in the covenant documents excavated from Houma 侯馬 and Wenxian 溫縣, the Jin 晉 state in the Spring-Autumn period often requested Yueshen 岳神 (Spirit of Yue) as a witness and named the spirit as Yuegong 岳公 (Sire of Yue). This Yuegong may refer to the spirit of Taiyue Huoshan 太岳霍山 (Grand Yue of Mount Huo), the mountain worshiped by the Jin people (Wei 2010, pp. 76–83; Zhao and Lang 2017, pp. 1–5).

The *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Classic of Mountains and Seas) encompasses both groups by recording seven different *yue*: *chongyue* 崇岳 (lofty great mountain), *beiyue* 北岳 (northern great mountain), *yueshan* 岳山 (peak of great mountain), *yue* (great mountain), *zhuyue* 諸岳 (varied great mountains), *nanyue* 南岳 (southern *yue*), and *xiyue* 西岳 (western *yue*). The first five refer to great mountains and the last two to clan ancestors (Yuan 1985, pp. 29, 60, 93, 123, 260, 272, 299).

In summary, in early sources there are roughly nine different implications of the term *yue*, four-*yue*, or great-*yue*—namely, as Mount Taiyue or Mount Huo, the spirit of Mount Huo, Mount Song, Mount Hua, other names of mountains, clans and lineages, clan ancestors and ancestral spirits, clan chiefs and lords, and a general name for great mountains or borders in the four quarters. Can we reconcile so many meanings of *yue*? Here I offer a new hermeneutical solution from the perspective of ancient people's mountain worship and worldview for reconciling and correlating all these different implications. Since all

mountains were regarded as spirits by ancient people,⁴ the names of mountains were also the names of spirits. Furthermore, because humans often settled their communities in mountain areas, local clans were inseparably connected to mountains in belief, life experience, and administration. Thus, *yue*, four-*yue*, or great-*yue* referred to both mountains and the spirits of the mountains, as well as extending to the clans, clan chiefs and lords, and clan ancestors and ancestral spirits who dwelled in the mountain areas. Consequently, these seemingly different records are in fact interrelated with one another. Moreover, this concept of correlating human communities with the natural environment and supernatural divinities presents the early characteristic of ancient Chinese correlative thinking and beliefs, which later developed into the heaven-human resonance, object-subject connection, and the all-embracing system of yin-yang and five-phase cosmology during the late Warring States to early Han period.

None of those early records discussed above refers to the designation and composition of the five-*yue*/five sacred peaks, and all the four-*yue* mentioned are also unrelated to the composition of the five sacred peaks. The early texts that do mention the five sacred peaks are the three Confucian ritual classics, the *Yili* 儀禮 (Classic of Ritual), *Zhouli* 周禮 (Ritual of Zhou), and *Liji* 禮記 (Records of Ritual). Since all these classics contain records concerning sacrifices to the five sacred peaks and four waterways, many modern scholars have followed the traditional view that this sacrificial scheme was already established in the Zhou dynasty. However, when we examine relevant sources carefully, we find this view is unsubstantial.

First, scholars have now generally agreed that although these classics contain contents and materials of the Western Zhou to the Spring and Autumn period, they were probably completed during the period from the Warring States to the early Han, and some portions may include ideal designs for the unified imperium by scholars of the Qin to early Han, not necessarily actual religious-political institutions.

Second, the records concerning the five sacred peaks and four waterways in these texts are inconsistent and contradict each other. For example, the *Liji* (Zheng and Kong 2000, 11.396–397, 12.451) says “great mountains and waters are not for enfeoffment” 名山大澤不以封 in one place and “the regional lords offer sacrifices to the great mountains and waters in their lands” 諸侯祭名山大川之在其地者 in another. The same classic (Zheng and Kong 2000, 11.425–426) also records that the king of Zhou held inspections on Mount Tai 泰山 and the southern, western, and northern sacred peaks, without naming Mount Tai as the eastern sacred peak and without mentioning the central sacred peak.⁵ The *Zhouli* (Zheng and Jia 2000, 33.1020–1034) lists nine strongholds in nine precincts, in which four of the five sacred peaks are included, but without naming them as sacred peaks.

Third, although the sacrifice to mountains and waters became ritualized during the Zhou era, the king of Zhou possessed the mountains and waters “all under the heaven” mostly in name, and he could in fact offer sacrifice to most of them only at a distance or on inspection tours. The regional lords were the ones who actually owned the mountains and waters within their lands, so that they could offer sacrifices to them both at a distance and in person. Both transmitted and excavated early texts contain extensive records concerning regional lords’ sacrifices to the mountains and waters in their lands during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States periods (Yang 2012, pp. 287–313; Yang 2011, pp. 4–26; Niu 2020, pp. 20–24; Tian 2015, pp. 258–63), but none of them uses the terms of *yue*/sacred peak and *du*/waterway, with the three ritual classics as exceptions. In the two texts compiled during the late Warring States period, the *Guanzi* 管子 (Master Guan Zhong) emphasizes the relationship between mountain-water and government but never mentions the five sacred peaks and four waterways; the *Liushi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Annals of Sire Lü) uses the five-phase scheme to explain the sacrificial rituals and governmental activities but never mentions the five sacred peaks that embody this scheme. The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* uses a scheme of five classics to list mountains in the five quarters of south, west, north, east, and central and describes in detail the sacrifices made to mountains, but it never mentions the designation of the five sacred peaks and the sacrifice to them. All these point

to a reasonable conclusion that the sacrificial scheme to the five sacred peaks (and the four waterways) had not been established in the pre-Qin period.

Neither did this scheme appear in the Qin dynasty. The Qin abolished the old system of enfeoffment and established a new prefectural system under a centralized government. As a result, sacrifices to the mountains and waters were unified, ending the pre-Qin situation of regional lords sacrificing to those located in their own lands. The Qin defined seven mountains and four rivers in the central Shaanxi plain and five mountains and two rivers in the eastern region as great mountains and rivers and added other minor mountains and rivers to form a state sacrificial network (Sima 1963, 28.1372–73; Yang 2011, pp. 4–10; Niu 2020, pp. 26–32; Tian 2015, pp. 277–93). This network included four of the five sacred peaks (without Mount Heng 衡山, the later southern sacred peak) and all the four waterways, but none of them were named as *yue*/sacred peak or *du*/waterway (Gu 1933/2004, pp. 12–23). This fact tells us that no such sacrificial scheme of the five sacred peaks and four waterways existed yet in the Qin. In addition, when Ying Yin 嬴駟, the lord of the Qin state, offered sacrifices to Mount Hua (the later western sacred peak) to pray for the healing of his illness, he did not use the term *yue*/sacred peak (Li 2006a, pp. 343–61). The stele inscription of sacrifice to Mount Tai (the later eastern sacred peak) by the First Emperor of Qin (r. 247–210 BCE) also contains no mention of the term sacred peak (Sima 1963, 6.242–47).

Then, when did the designations of the five sacred peaks and four waterways first appear in datable texts? Here for the first time, I find that these designations are first seen in the *Xinyu* 新語 (New Discourses) by Lu Jia 陸賈 (240–170 BCE) dated between 206 BCE and 195 BCE. The text reads (Wang 1986, 1.6, 1.13):

The land is partitioned by the five sacred peaks, divided by the four waterways, schemed by marshes, and connected by springs. 地封五岳, 畫四瀆, 規洿澤, 通水泉。

At that time, the four waterways were blocked, and the flood caused damage. Therefore, Yu dredged the Yangzi and Yellow Rivers, guiding the four waterways to flow into the seas. 當斯之時, 四瀆未通, 洪水爲害。禹乃決江疏河, 通之四瀆, 致之于海。

Lu Jia's *New Discourses* was commissioned by Liu Bang 劉邦 (r. 206–195 BCE), founder of the Han dynasty, and written when Liu was on the throne (Sima 1963, 97.2697–701). It is thus reasonable to speculate that the designations of the five sacred peaks and four waterways may have been the geographical layout for a unified imperium formed roughly from the late Warring States to 195 BCE.

Still, Lu Jia did not list the specific compositional elements of the five sacred peaks and four waterways. The earliest extant identification of the specific mountains associated with the five sacred peaks is found in Mao Heng's 毛亨 commentary to the *Classic of Poetry*, also dating roughly from the late Warring States to the early Han:

Yue refers to the four sacred peaks: Mount Tai of the eastern sacred peak, Mount Heng of the southern sacred peak, Mount Hua of the western sacred peak, and Mount Heng of the northern sacred peak. In the Yao era, the Jiang clan were made the four lords and in charge of the sacrifices to the four sacred peaks, fulfilling the duties of regional lords. Then, in the Zhou era, there were the Fu, Shen, Qi, and Xu clans/states. 岳, 四岳也。東岳岱, 南岳衡, 西岳華, 北岳恒。堯之時, 姜氏爲四伯, 掌四岳之祀, 述諸侯之職。于周則有甫, 有申, 有齊, 有許也。 (Mao et al. 2000, 18.1419)

Mao Heng thus identified four of the sacred peaks but without the central sacred peak. He related these mountains with different implications of the term four-*yue* from earlier texts, including clan chiefs/lords and clan lineages descended from the Jiang tribe, thus showing traces of transition from the four-*yue* in literature to the actual four sacred peaks in geography. The *Book of Documents* describes Shun's seasonal inspection tours to Mount Tai and the southern, western, and northern sacred peaks; although it does not clearly name Mount Tai as a sacred peak, Shun's visit to it in the springtime implies its match

with the eastern sacred peak according to the five-phase theory. Likewise, Kong Anguo's commentary on this record named the same specific mountains of the four sacred peaks as Mao Heng did (Kong and Kong 2000, 3.65).⁶ The first designation of Mount Song as the central sacred peak is seen in Emperor Wudi's decree issued in the first year of Yuanfeng (110 BCE; Ban 1964, 6.190–91). The *Erya* 爾雅 (Correct Words; Guo and Xing 2000, 7.239) lists all the five sacred peaks, but it follows Wudi to identify Mount Huo as the southern sacred peak (see further below). Thus, in accordance with these texts, the compositional elements of the five sacred peaks likely gradually took shape in the period from the late Warring States to the mid-Western Han.

The change from four sacred peaks to five sacred peaks with the addition of the central sacred peak was obviously influenced by the five-phase theory, which emerged in the late Warring States and matured in the Western Han (Robson 2009, pp. 32–42). Mountains and waters were symbols of state territories, and this was especially true in the case of magnificent mountains. The four sacred peaks were related to the four lands (*situ* 四土) in the four cardinal directions/quarters (*sifang* 四方). The four lands recorded in the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang era embodied the combination of various relationships between the Shang kingdom and its bordering states/tribes (Keightley 1979–1980, pp. 25–34; Wang 2000). In the Zhou era, the four great mountains represented the regional states in the four quarters guarding the central court, which was a symbol of the relationship between the Zhou court and the regional lords. The addition of the central sacred peak by the mid-Western Han symbolized a unified and centralized imperium and bureaucracy. More importantly, during the Western Han there were continuing disputes concerning the cyclical revolution of the five powers (*wude* 五德). For example, in the reign of Emperor Wendi (r. 180–157 BCE), scholars argued about Han holding the power of Earth, Water, or Fire; by the reign of Emperor Wudi, Ni Kuan's 倪寬 (d. 103 BCE) and Sima Qian's opinion was adopted, and Han's power was confirmed as Earth (Sima 1963, 26.1260; Ban 1964, 25b.1270–71). Earth represented the central, and thus the addition of Mount Song as the central sacred peak was a part of the ritual-political construction of cosmological power and centralized imperium.

The composition of the four waterways was probably completed in the same period as well. The *Shiji* quotes a record from the “Tang gao” 湯誥 (Announcement of Tang) in the *Book of Documents*:

In the east is the Yangzi River; the north, the Ji River; the west, the Yellow River; and the south, the Huai River. With the four waterways regulated, all people had their homes. 東爲江, 北爲濟, 西爲河, 南爲淮, 四瀆已修, 萬民乃有居. (Sima 1963, 3.97)⁷

Scholars have generally agreed that, in the *Book of Documents*, those chapters with contents before the Zhou dynasty were mostly composed later, probably from the Warring States to the Western Han. The *Erya* (Guo and Xing 2000, 7.250) also records the same names of the four waterways.

3. Emperor Wudi's Taking Back of the Sacred Peaks and the Establishment of the Sacrificial Scheme of the Five Sacred Peaks and Four Waterways

In the early Han, the Qin prefectural system was changed and a combined system of enfeoffment and prefecture was adopted. At that time, kings of princedoms possessed vast territories and were powerful in their own right (Ban 1964, 14.393–94; Yan 2007, pp. 10–19; Zhou 1987, pp. 6–7). Because many great mountains and waters lay within the territories of the princedoms, the kings once again offered sacrifices to the mountains and waters in their lands, largely returning to the situation of the pre-Qin era. For instance, the *Shiji* records:

At the beginning, the famous mountains and great rivers in princedoms were offered sacrifices by supplicants of the kings, not by officials of the emperor. 始名山大川在諸侯, 諸侯祝各自奉祠, 天子官不領. (Sima 1963, 28.1380–81)

The “Xiyue Huashan bei” 西岳華山碑 (Stele of the Western Sacred Peak of Mount Hua) established in 161 also states:

When Emperor Gaozu first ascended throne, he abolished the excessive sacrifices of the Qin. Emperor Taizong (i.e., Wendi) followed suit and ordered relevant offices to manage it. Those mountains and waters within the princedoms were offered sacrifices by the kings seasonally. 高祖初興, 改秦淫祀. 太宗承循, 各詔有司. 其山川在諸侯者, 以時祠之. (Gao 1997, p. 270)

Thus, we can infer that although the designations of the five sacred peaks and four waterways already appeared in the early Han, these had not yet officially entered the state sacrificial system.

Later, both Emperors Jingdi (r. 157–141 BCE) and Wudi made great efforts to weaken the power of the kings and reduced their territories to only one prefecture each, so that princedoms gradually became equal to prefectures and the kings remained in name only. As a result, the centralized administration of the prefectural system in the Qin era was restored (Yan 2007, pp. 19–30; Zhou 1987, pp. 6–7). Among those imperial efforts, Emperor Wudi’s gradual taking back of the jurisdictional and sacrificial right of the five sacred peaks was of primary importance for the final establishment of the state sacrificial system to mountains and waters. Previous scholarship has not paid attention to this major event yet, which is examined carefully as follows.

First, about the western and central sacred peaks, Mount Hua was located in Huayin 華陰 and from the beginning belonged to the metropolitan area of the Han court (Ban 1964, 28.1543–44); in 205 BCE, Shen Yang 申陽, the king of Henan, surrendered to Emperor Gaozu and thereupon Mount Song returned to the central court (Ban 1964, 1.33). Although these two sacred peaks were thus under the management of the central court before Emperor Wudi, it was he who in 110 BCE ordered temples to be built on both mountains to begin the imperial sacrifice to the mountain spirits (Gao 1997, p. 270; Ban 1964, 6.190–91).

Second, the other three sacred peaks were actually taken back step by step by Emperor Wudi from the princedoms. As for Mount Tai of the eastern sacred peak, according to the *Shiji*, sometime between 122 BCE and 117 BCE the king of Jibei 濟北 knew that Emperor Wudi would be performing the grand sacrificial rituals of *feng* 封 and *shan* 禪 on Mount Tai and so he presented the mountain in his territory to the emperor (Sima 1963, 28.1387, 12.458). Since the emperor made the decision of the *feng* and *shan* rituals first, the king in fact had no choice but to return the mountain.

The situation of the southern sacred peak meanwhile was quite complicated. The *Shiji* records that Emperor Wendi abolished the princedoms of Qi 齊 and Huainan 淮南 and ordered the grand suppliant (*taizhu* 太祝) to offer sacrifice to the major mountains there; the annotator Zhang Shoujie 張守節 (fl. 736) commented on this record that these mountains referred to Mount Tai in Qi and Mount Tianzhu 天柱 in Huainan (Sima 1963, 28.1380–81). However, both the *Shiji*’s record and Zhang’s commentary were incorrect. As just studied, it was not until Emperor Wudi’s reign that Mount Tai was returned to the central court. Furthermore, in 174 BCE, Emperor Wendi put Liu Zhang 劉長, the king of Huainan, to death for political conspiracy and then appointed Liu Xi 劉喜 to succeed upon the throne in 168 BCE (Ban 1964, 4.121). In 164 BCE, Wendi then divided Huainan into three portions and appointed Liu An 劉安 (179–122 BCE) as the king of Huainan, Liu Bo 劉勃 as the king of Hengshan 衡山, and Liu Ci 劉賜 as the king of Lujiang 廬江. Subsequently, in 153 BCE Emperor Jingdi transferred Liu Ci to Hengshan and changed Lujiang to a prefecture (Ban 1964, 44.2144; Zhou 1987, pp. 46–57). Because Mount Tianzhu, also named Mount Qian 潛山 or Mount Huo 霍山, was located in Lujiang prefecture, it was therefore not until 153 BCE that this mountain returned to the central court. In 122 BCE, Emperor Wudi ordered that Hengshan princedom become a prefecture (Ban 1964, 44.2156) and so Mount Heng, designated the southern sacred peak by early Han scholars of classics such as Mao Heng and Kong Anguo, also became a possession of the central court. Then in an imperial tour to Mount Tianzhu in 106 BCE, Emperor Wudi redesignated this mountain as the southern sacred peak. The *Shiji* records:

In the winter of the next year [106 BCE], the emperor inspected the Nan prefecture and reached Jiangling, from where he went east. He ascended Mount Tianzhu in Qian district and named it the southern sacred peak. 明年冬, 上巡南郡, 至江陵而東。登禮灋之天柱山, 號曰南岳。 (Sima 1963, 28.1387; Ban 1964, 25.1243, 6.196)

Finally, in 114 BCE Emperor Wudi took back Mount Heng 恒山 of the northern sacred peak. The *Shiji* records this event as follows:

The king of Changshan committed a crime and was removed from his office. The emperor enfeoffed his younger brother in Zhending for carrying on their ancestral sacrifice and changed Changshan to a prefecture. Then, the five sacred peaks were all in imperial prefectures. 常山王有罪, 遷, 天子封其弟于真定, 以續先王祀, 而以常山爲郡。然後五岳皆在天子之郡。 (Sima 1963, 28.1387, 12.458; Ban 1964, 14.417)

Both Hengshan (Mount Heng) and its location in the Hengshan principedom were changed to Changshan 常山 to avoid Emperor Wendi's name taboo (Liu Heng 劉恒).

In sum, Emperor Wudi's recovery of the jurisdictional and sacrificial right of the five sacred peaks can be summarized as follows:

1. Mount Hua originally belonged to the imperium's metropolitan area; Wudi built a temple there to begin the imperial sacrifice in 110 BCE.
2. Mount Song returned to the central court in 205 BCE; Wudi built a temple there to begin the imperial sacrifice in 110 BCE.
3. Mount Heng 衡山 returned to the central court after Wudi abolished the principedom of Hengshan in 122 BCE; Mount Tianzhu/Huo returned to the central court in 153 BCE and was redesignated as the southern sacred peak by Wudi in 106 BCE.
4. Mount Tai was presented to Wudi in 122–117 BCE by the king of Jibei.
5. Mount Heng/Chang 恒山/常山 returned to the central court after Wudi abolished the principedom of Changshan in 114 BCE.

Therefore, at the time when Wudi performed the *feng* and *shan* sacrificial rituals to Mount Tai in 110 BCE, all five sacred peaks belonged to the imperial prefectures; then in 106 BCE, the emperor redesignated Mount Tianzhu/Huo as the southern sacred peak, which differed from the designation of Mount Heng as the southern sacred peak by the early-Han scholars. In fact, Mount Heng was located in the south of China and conformed to the principle of the five-phase scheme that matched the five sacred peaks with the five quarters; Mount Tianzhu, on the other hand, was located in the central region of Han territory and thus was not appropriate to be called the southern sacred peak. The reason for Wudi's redesignation was probably because Mount Heng itself was remote and so inconvenient for imperial tours, as suggested by Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324), Gan Bao 干寶 (ca. 286–336), and Xu Lingqi 徐靈期 (d. 474).⁸

Clearly, Wudi had his own political and religious agenda in reclaiming his jurisdictional and sacrificial right to the five sacred peaks before performing the *feng* and *shan* rituals on Mount Tai. Just like the First Emperor of Qin, Wudi's real purpose for the *feng* and *shan* rituals was to report to heaven and earth his great achievements in unifying the imperium and to announce his sovereign power sanctioned by heaven's mandate. The five sacred peaks symbolized the layout of the four quarters surrounding the center, a sign for the unification and centralization of the imperium. Wudi abolished principedoms, suppressed riots, and expanded Han territory. Taking back the five sacred peaks was also a symbol of his achievements, demonstrating that the central court already held both the divine authority and jurisdictional right. Furthermore, the emperor was fond of making requests of the divine; his interest in imperial tours and sacrifices to the mountains and waters were often accompanied by his aim of seeking the spirits and immortals (Tian 2015, pp. 316–17).

The direct result of Emperor Wudi's taking back of the five sacred peaks was the official establishment of the sacrificial scheme of the five sacred peaks and four waterways by Emperor Xuandi (r. 74–49 BCE). According to the *Hanshu*, in the third month of the first

year of Shenjue (61 BCE), the sacrifice to the five sacred peaks and four waterways was officially established as an annual regularity in state ritual, which was to be held four times a year (Ban 1964, 25.1249; Gu 1933/1996, p. 581). Meanwhile, sacrifices to the sacred peaks and waterways were also attached to other kinds of major state ceremonies (Niu 2020, pp. 39–42).

Although the following Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern dynasties (220–589) were mostly a division period, many of the states continued this sacrificial scheme with Mount Tianzhu/Huo as the southern sacred peak in order to implement the ritual ceremonies and sanction their political legitimacy. Those ceremonies were usually attached to major sacrifices to heaven and earth or were performed distantly, and only the sacred peaks and waterways located within each dynasty's territory were actually offered sacrifices. In the third year of Taichang (418), the Northern Wei even established a Temple of Five Sacred Peaks and Four Waterways (Wuyue sidu miao 五岳四瀆廟), placing all the nine spirits together in order to hold sacrificial ceremonies conveniently (Wei 1974, 108.2737; Liang 2009, pp. 205–18; Niu 2020, pp. 50–101).

Then, in 589 Emperor Wendi of Sui (r. 589–604) “made Mount Heng in the south the southern sacred peak and demoted Mount Huo to be just a famous mountain” 以南衡山爲南岳，廢霍山爲名山 (Li 1992, 3.69). The cosmographical layout designed by the early-Han scholars, which better suited the geographical deployment of the four quarters surrounding the center and the five-phase cosmological framework, was thereupon resumed. This scheme of five sacred peaks with Mount Heng as the southern sacred peak was subsequently followed by all later dynasties.

Some scholar has contended that the Northern Zhou 北周 had already changed the southern sacred peak to Mount Heng, according to a record in the *Wushang biyao* 無上秘要 (Supreme Secret Essentials; Niu 2020, p. 128). However, although the *Wushang biyao* was compiled under the order of Emperor Wudi of the Northern Zhou (r. 561–578), it is an important Daoist encyclopedia, and the record concerned uses the Daoist title of the Lord of the Five Sacred Peaks (Wuyuejun 五岳君) to name the spirits, describing them with the corresponding elements of the five-phase framework (Wushang biyao 1988, 18.43, 19.47). Under this framework, Mount Heng is obviously more suitable to the elements related to the south, as it is actually located in the far south. Therefore, this text reflects the Daoist list of the five sacred peaks but does not necessarily represent the state ritual scheme of the Northern Zhou; otherwise the Sui that directly followed the Northern Zhou would not have to make the change.

4. The Five Strongholds, Four Seas, and the Finalization of the State Sacrificial System

Although scholars have studied the sacrificial scheme of the five strongholds and four seas respectively, there are still some controversial issues, as well as the lack of a comprehensive description. This section offers a new explication of the controversial issues and a full picture of the finalization of the sacrificial system, including all of the five sacred peaks, five strongholds, four seas, and four waterways.

The designation of “stronghold” is first seen in the *Zhouli*, which records in one place “four strongholds and five sacred peaks” 四鎮五岳 without giving the names of specific mountains, and “nine strongholds in nine precincts” in another place (Zheng and Jia 2000, 22.697–698, 33.1020–1034). The latter record includes Mount Guiji 會稽山 in Yangzhou 揚州, Mount Heng 衡山 in Jingzhou 荊州, Mount Hua in Yuzhou 豫州, Mount Yi in Qingzhou 青州, Mount Tai in Yanzhou 兗州, Mount Yue 岳山 (i.e., Mount Wu) in Yongzhou 雍州, Mount Yiwulü 醫巫閭山 in Youzhou 幽州, Mount Huo 霍山 in Jizhou 冀州, and Mount Heng 恒山 in Bingzhou 并州. In his commentary to this record, Zheng Xuan divided the “nine strongholds” into four strongholds (Mounts Guiji, Yi, Yiwulü, and Huo) and five sacred peaks (Mounts Tai, Heng, Hua, Wu, and Heng; Zheng and Jia 2000, 33.1020–34). Obviously, Zheng was simply trying to reconcile the two different records in the *Zhouli*, without providing any other early evidence; his listing of Mount Wu as one of the five sacred peaks but without Mount Song did not fit any composition of this designation.

Some scholar asserts that Zheng Xuan followed the two sets of five sacred peaks in the *Erya* (Niu 2014, pp. 37–44). However, although the *Erya* does list another set of five mountains (Hua, Wu, Tai, Heng, and Heng), it does not designate this set as the five sacred peaks. Xing Bing's commentary to this set seems to be reasonable: "To record these five mountains at the beginning [of the section] is to list the famous mountains of the middle kingdom" 篇首載此五山者, 以為中國之名山也 (Guo and Xing 2000, 7.231).

During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern dynasties, sacrifices to the five sacred peaks and four waterways were often accompanied by more or fewer strongholds (Fang 1974, 19.584–585; Wei 1973, 6.108, 6.114; Liang 2009, pp. 205–18; Wang and Zhang 2011, pp. 181–85). Then, in 594 Emperor Wendi of Sui ordered that temples be established in four strongholds, including Mount Yi as the eastern stronghold, Mount Guiji as the southern stronghold, Mount Yiwulü as the northern stronghold, and Mount Huo as the Jizhou stronghold; in 596, another temple was built on Mount Wu as the western stronghold (Wei 1973, 7.140). Together, the Sui maintained a designation of the five sacred peaks and four strongholds (Wei 1973, 2.45–46), excluding Mount Huo and without naming it as the central stronghold. I suppose that such a designation probably followed the five sacred peaks and four strongholds recorded in the *Zhouli* and did not dare to go beyond this classic. The Tang dynasty followed the same designation and sacrificial scheme (Xiao 2000, p. 199; Liu 1975, 21.820). It is notable that Mount Huo enjoyed a respectful position under the Tang, for it was the ruling house's place of origin, with the legend of the mountain spirit providing divine power for establishing the new dynasty. In 751, the spirit of Mount Huo was given the title of Yingshenggong 應聖公 (Duke of Responding to the Sage; Du 1984, 46.263; Liu 1975, 1.23; Wang 1987, 120.1873). Yet it was not listed as the central stronghold, which, in my opinion, was again possibly influenced by the *Zhouli*.

Initially the Song dynasty followed suit and listed only the four strongholds (Wang 1987, 120.1873). Then in the sixth year of Qiande (968), Mount Huo was added as the central stronghold to become five strongholds, but "soon the sacrifice to the five strongholds was again lacked" 既而五鎮之祭復闕 (Li 1987b, 9.13–15). Some scholars had not noticed this fact and inexactly contended that the sacrifice to the five strongholds had continued ever since 968 (Wang and Zhang 2011, p. 183). In fact, it was not until the sixth year of Taiping xingguo (981) that the designation and sacrificial scheme of the five strongholds was finalized (Toqto'a 1977, 102.2485–86).

The worship of the sea spirits originated in ancient times as well. The Chinese character "hai" 海 refers both to shallow sea areas near the continent and to large lakes. In the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Master Zhuang Zhou), the spirit of the north sea was called Ruò 若 and the spirit of the south sea Shù 儻. In the Chu songs, the sea spirit was also called Ruò. Meanwhile, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* provides detailed accounts of the names and characteristics of the spirits of the east, west, south, and north seas (Wang 2006, pp. 16–19). The Lu 魯 state made sacrifice to the east sea within its territory, and the Qin state made sacrifices to the four seas (Zuozhuan, Xi 31; Chen 2001, 11.574). According to the *Shiji*, a Sihai 四海祠 (Shrine of the Four Seas) was established in the Yong 雍 area (Sima 1963, 28.1375; Li 2006b, p. 146). Such a sacrifice was probably a distant ritual to the spirits of the seas. Some scholar asserts that the four seas here referred to the four quarters, the same meaning as "all under heaven," with the reason being that the Yong area was in the Qin region and far away from the seas (Niu 2016, pp. 245–49). This assertion is not substantial because the Qin state did make sacrifice to the four seas, as mentioned above.

When the First Emperor of Qin made his imperial tours to the east, he offered many distant sacrifices to the spirits of seas along the coast (Sima 1963, 6.223–94). From 61 BCE, the sacrifice to the five sacred peaks and four waterways was often accompanied by sacrifice to the sea spirits (Ban 1964, 25.1249), while after, the Han sacrifices to the sea or four seas were also attached to other court sacrificial rituals (Wang 2006, pp. 30–49). During the Sui, a temple for the east sea was built in Guiji district and another for the south sea was built in Nanhai 南海 town (present-day Guangzhou, Guangdong; Wei 1973, 7.140). In the Tang, the sacrifice to the east sea was changed to Laizhou 萊州 (present-day Laizhou,

Shandong), and the sacrifices to the west sea and north sea were performed distantly in the temples of the Yellow River and Ji River, respectively (Du 1984, 46.1282). As for the north sea, there had been no definite location, with either the Bohai 渤海 or lakes and areas in the remote north referred to, for example, Lake Baikal and Lake Balkhash. Then in the reign of Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) of the Qing dynasty, the sacrifice to the north sea was changed to the performance of distant rituals in Shengjing 盛京 (in present-day Shenyang, Liaoning), while in the reign of Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–1795), a temple for the north sea was established in the Shanghai pass 山海關 (Qinding Daqing huidian zeli 1987, 83.616; Qinding Huangchao wenxian tongkao 1987, 100.244–45). As for the west sea, it generally referred to lakes on China's western border, and a temple was once built beside Lake Qinghai 青海湖 under the Qing (Wang 2006, pp. 1–15; Wang 2015, pp. 24–31; Niu 2016, pp. 245–49).

From the time of the Southern-Northern dynasties to the Sui, the designation of *yue-zhen-hai-du* 岳鎮海瀆 (sacred peaks, strongholds, seas, and waterways) often appeared in records of sacrificial rituals, but it was then used as a general term rather than as a specific system (Wei 1973, 6.110, 7.126–27, 130, 148). According to the available literature, it was not until the reigns of Emperors Gaozu (r. 618–626) and Taizong (626–649) in the early Tang era that the five sacred peaks, four strongholds, four seas, and four waterways became an official designation (Du 1984, 46.1282; Liu 1975, 21.819–20).

Eventually, with the addition of the central stronghold, in 981 the state sacrificial system of the five sacred peaks, five strongholds, four seas, and four waterways was finalized. According to the *Songshi* 宋史 (Song History; Toqto'a 1977, 102.2485–86), on the day of the beginning of spring, sacrifices were offered to Mount Tai of the eastern sacred peak at the Daiyue Temple 岱岳廟 in Yanzhou 兗州 (present day Tai'an, Shandong), Mount Yi of the eastern sacred peak at the Dongzhen Temple 東鎮廟 in Yizhou 沂州 (present day Linqi, Shandong), the east sea at Donghaishen Temple 東海神廟 in Laizhou 萊州 (present day Laizhou, Shandong), and the Huai River at Huaidu Temple 淮瀆廟 in Tangzhou 唐州 (present day Tongbai, Henan). On the day of the beginning of summer, sacrifices were offered to Mount Heng of the southern sacred peak at Nanyue Temple 南岳廟 in Hengzhou 衡州 (present day Hengyang, Hunan), Mount Guiji of the southern stronghold at Nanzhen Temple 南鎮廟 in Yuezhou 越州 (present day Shaoxing, Zhejiang), the south sea at Nanhaishen Temple 南海神廟 in Guangzhou 廣州 (present day Guangzhou, Guangdong), and the Yangzi River at Jiangdu Temple 江瀆廟 in Chengdufu 成都府 (present day Chengdu, Sichuan). On the day of the beginning of autumn, sacrifices were offered to Mount Hua of the western sacred peak at Xiyue Temple 西岳廟 in Huazhou 華州 (present day Huayin, Shaanxi), Mount Wu of the western stronghold at Xizhen Temple 西鎮廟 in Longzhou 隴州 (present day Pinglu, Shanxi), and the west sea and Yellow River at Hedu Temple 河瀆廟 in Hezhongfu 河中府 (present day Puzhou, Shanxi; the sacrifice to the west sea was performed distantly). On the day of the beginning of winter, sacrifices were offered to Mount Heng of the northern sacred peak and Mount Yiwulü of the northern stronghold at Beiyue Temple 北岳廟 in Dingzhou 定州 (present day Quyang, Hebei; the sacrifice to Mount Yiwulü was performed distantly) and the north sea and Ji River at Jidu Temple 濟瀆廟 in Mengzhou (present day Jiyuan, Henan; the sacrifice to the north sea was performed distantly). On the day of the earth god, sacrifices were offered to Mount Song of the central sacred peak at Zhongyue Temple 中岳廟 in Henanfu 河南府 (present day Dengfeng, Henan) and Mount Huo of central stronghold at Zhongzhen Temple 中鎮廟 in Jinzhou 晉州 (present day Huozhou, Shanxi).

Figure 1 marks the locations of fifteen temples of sacred peaks, strongholds, seas, and waterways in the Northern Song, among which the northern stronghold, north sea, and west sea were outside of the Northern Song territory, and their spirits were attached to Beiyue Temple, Jidu Temple, and Hedu Temple respectively, to which sacrifices were performed distantly. The Northern Stronghold Temple (Beizhen Temple 北鎮廟) was first built in the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), the North Sea Temple (Beihaishen Temple 北海神廟) and West Sea Temple (Xihaishen Temple 西海神廟) were built in the Qing dynasty,

and the Beiyue Temple was moved from Dingzhou to Hunyuanzhou 渾源州 (present day Hunyuan, Shanxi) in the early Qing. Since these four temples were not in the Northern Song territory, I mark them with light color.



Figure 1. Temples of the five sacred peaks, five strongholds, four seas, and four waterways in the Northern Song (The Northern Song map is based on Tan (1982–1987, v. 6.1).

To sacrifice to each mountain and water spirit on their corresponding day of beginning of spring, summer, autumn, winter, or the earth god (eighteen days before the beginning of autumn) was a ritual scheme called “greeting the seasonal *qi* in the five suburbs” (wujiao ying qi 五郊迎氣), which started from the Sui-Tang period. This scheme was based on the five-phase cosmology and matched the five quarters of the mountains and waters with the five seasons.⁹

5. Conclusions

In this essay, I apply plentiful primary and secondary sources to examine issues concerning the formation of the traditional Chinese state ritual system of sacrifice to mountain and water spirits. Five major discoveries and conclusions can be drawn from the examination.

First, I clarify the confused records and scholarly debates concerning the origin of the designation and sacrifice of the five sacred peaks. In the documents from the Shang dynasty to the Western Han, we see different records concerning the term *yue*, *four-yue*, or *great-yue*, variedly referring to individual or general mountains, spirits of mountains, clan genealogies, clan chiefs and lords, and clan ancestors and ancestral spirits, to which scholars have offered different interpretations. I propose a new argument that all these can be explained and reconciled with the ancient Chinese people's mountain worship and worldview: because all mountains were perceived as spirits, the names of mountains were also the names of spirits, and local human communities established close connections with their mountains. Thus, these terms were used to refer to both mountains and the spirits of the mountains, as well as extending to the clans, clan chiefs/lords, and clan ancestors/ancestral spirits who dwelled in the mountain areas.

Second, because the three ritual classics describe a sacrificial scheme of five sacred peaks and four waterways, many scholars believe this scheme had already been established in the Zhou dynasty. I retort to this opinion by indicating that in the Zhou era the king possessed all the great mountains and waters only in name, while the regional lords held the jurisdictional and sacrificial right to mountains and waters within their territories. The sacrificial scheme of the five sacred peaks and four waterways was not actually implemented during this period. The unified Qin imperium (221–206 BCE) then began integrating the sacrifices to the great mountains and waters but still without yet using the designations of *yue*/sacred peak and *du*/waterway.

Third, I indicate that the first datable appearance of the designations of the five sacred peaks and four waterways is seen in the *New Discourses* composed by Lu Jia between 206 BCE and 195 BCE. Thus, these designations were probably formulated from the late Warring States to 195 BCE and represented the cosmographical design for the unified imperium modeled on the five-phase theory that formed during this period.

Fourth, most importantly, I for the first time reveal Emperor Han Wudi's significant action of taking back the sacrificial right of the five sacred peaks from regional princedoms, with his agenda of holding both the divine legitimacy and jurisdictional right for the unification and centralization of the imperium. The emperor's action led to the official establishment of the sacrificial scheme of the five sacred peaks and four waterways in 61 BCE.

Fifth, I provide solutions for several controversial issues concerning the eventual completion of the sacrificial system of the five sacred peaks, five strongholds, four seas, and four waterways in the Northern Song in 981 CE, therefore offering a full picture of its formational process.

Thus, mainly constructed by the Confucian ritual culture, those geographical landmarks were gradually integrated with religious beliefs and ritual-political institutions to become a symbolic system of territorial, sacred, and political legitimacy and to help maintain the unification and centralization of the traditional Chinese imperium for about two thousand years.¹⁰

Funding: This research was funded by Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and partner institutions, grant number 895-2016-1009.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The Chinese character *yue* 岳 was first translated as “sacred mountain” by sinologists. Edward Schafer coined the term “marchmount” to translate *yue* so as to connote “the ancient belief that these numinous mountains stood at the four extremities of the habitable world, the marches of man’s proper domain, the limits of the ritual tour of the Son of Heaven” (Schafer 1977, p. 6). This term has since been generally followed by scholars. Recently, James Robson has used a new translation of “sacred peak” for *yue* (Robson 2009, pp. 334–35, n31). I agree with Robson that “sacred peak” is a clearer translation of *yue* and adds one more reason that *yue* originally meant “great mountain” and that its derived implications are much more complicated than what Schafer stated (see further below).
- ² See mainly Chavannes (1910), Gu (Gu 1933/2004, Gu 1933/1996), Sakai (1937, pp. 70–118), Qu (1960, pp. 62–67), Kroll (1983, pp. 223–60), Yoshikawa (1991, pp. 215–78), Kleeman (1994, pp. 226–38), Tang (1997, pp. 60–70), Wu (2005, pp. 616–41), Robson (2009), Zhou (2012, pp. 52–57), Tian (2015), and Niu (2020).
- ³ See mainly Gu (Gu 1933/2004, Gu 1933/1996), Qu (1960, pp. 62–67), Kleeman (1994, pp. 226–38), Tang (1997, pp. 60–70), Wu (2005, pp. 616–41), Robson (2009), Zhou (2012, pp. 52–57), Niu (2020, pp. 3–13).
- ⁴ In both transmitted and excavated texts, we see numerous records of worship and sacrifice to famous or nameless mountain spirits. The most typical records are seen in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, which lists in detail sacrifices and jade ware offered to mountain spirits of all quarters.
- ⁵ This record is about the same as the legendary sage king Shun’s inspection recorded in the “Shundian” of the *Book of Documents* mentioned previously, showing that both should be later formulations.
- ⁶ Both the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* 漢書 (*Han History*) mix the original text with Kong Anguo’s commentary when citing this passage (Sima 1963, 28.1355–56; Ban 1964, 25.1191). This mixed citation, with the fact that Kong Anguo identified Mount Heng as the southern sacred peak, not Mount Huo as designated by Emperor Wudi in 106 BCE, demonstrates that Kong’s commentary was not simply contrived by Mei Ze 梅賾 (also named Mei Yi 梅頤; fl. 317–322) in the Eastern Jin, as many Qing-dynasty and modern scholars assumed, but possibly had earlier documental support. In fact, in recent decades a number of scholars have argued about the reliability of the *Guwen Shangshu* 古文尚書 (*Book of Documents in Old Scripts*) and Kong Anguo’s commentary. For a summary of this new scholarship, see Chen (2013, pp. 109–13).
- ⁷ This quotation is not seen in the transmitted *Book of Documents*.
- ⁸ The *Erya* records Mount Huo as the southern sacred peak, which obviously follows what Emperor Wudi established. To this record, Xing Bing’s commentary cites Guo Pu’s words to suggest that Wudi’s decision was made because Mount Heng was too remote (Guo and Xing 2000, 7.239). The *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (*Readings for His Highness Compiled in the Taiping Xingguo Reign-Period*; Li 1987a, 39.9) offers a similar saying by citing Guo Pu’s words, Gan Bao’s 干寶 *Shoushen ji* 搜神記 (*Records of Seeking for Divinities*), and Xu Lingqi’s 徐靈期 (d. 474) *Nanyue ji* 南岳記 (*Records of the Southern Sacred Peak*). See Tang (1997, pp. 60–70). There have been great disputes by both traditional and modern scholars concerning the two southern sacred peaks (for summaries of these disputes, see Robson 2009, pp. 57–89; Niu 2014, pp. 37–44; Tian 2015, pp. 306–17), but the original events and factors were in fact quite clear and simple.
- ⁹ For a detailed discussion of this ritual, see Niu (2017, pp. 105–12). The ritual ceremonies of the sacrifice to those mountain and water spirits were rich and complicated and had continued changing and being enriched, as recorded in official histories, stele inscriptions preserved in the temples, literati’s works, and local annals. Because of the limited space, this essay is unable to cover this topic.
- ¹⁰ During this long period, this sacrificial system gradually interacted and integrated with other religious traditions such as Daoism, folk cults, and Buddhism, especially in its local manifestation and dissemination. Those sacred mountains and waters that are located in the borders also became the loca for the interaction and fusion of the beliefs of various ethnic groups, and some of the spirit worships were even disseminated abroad. These are topics that require further research.

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