

# Exploration of the Mountain Sacrificial System in the Han Dynasty

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**Abstract.** Natural worship is a unique spiritual activity of human civilization that has existed since ancient times, arising from the awe-inspiring feeling that humans have towards mountains, rivers, and all things in nature. The mountain sacrifice system is a ritual practice that developed from the spiritual development of natural worship. Since the mythological era, the worship of natural phenomena and objects has existed, and Confucianism incorporated the ethics of nature into its doctrine, including mountains and rivers in its philosophical concept of Earth. During the Han Dynasty, rulers reorganized and reformed the mountain sacrifice system and formed the core ritual of the Taishan Mountain sacrifice. The various functions of the Han Dynasty mountain sacrifice ceremony reveal social customs during the Western Han period and Confucian related rituals. The changes in the mountain sacrifice policy during the Han Dynasty reflect the political strategies of rulers and the connection between Confucianism and its rituals. This article analyzes the changes in the Han Dynasty mountain sacrifice system and the basic situation of Han people's worship and beliefs through close reading of texts. It aims to demonstrate the peculiarities of the Han Dynasty mountain sacrifice system and its connection with Confucianism and its rituals.

**Keywords:** Mountain Sacrifice System; Han Dynasty; Mountain; Worship.

## 1. Introduction

The worship of nature is a unique spiritual activity in human civilization since ancient times. It is a sense of awe that arises from human recognition of mountains, rivers, and all things. The mountain sacrifice system is a cultural practice that has developed from the spiritual development of nature worship. As early as the pre-Qin period, the worship of "mountains" was prevalent, especially in ancient texts such as the Classic of Mountains and Seas, which devoted a separate category to myths and stories related to "mountains" and referred to Kunlun Mountain as the ancestor of all mountains. Famous myths such as Gong Gong's anger hitting Mount Buzhou also reflect the collective unconscious cultural concept of primitive human nature worship.

During the Spring and Autumn period, Confucianism incorporated natural ethics into its teachings. For example, the recording of "Zengzi" states: "Heaven is round, Earth is square...the essence of Yang is called spirit," reflecting the interaction between individual consciousness and natural forces in Confucianism. The philosophical concept of "Earth" includes "mountains and rivers." During the Qin Dynasty, the rulers re-planned and ordered the sacrificial system for mountains after unifying the six states. During the Han Dynasty, rulers further institutionalized mountain worship and held many unprecedented high-level sacrificial activities. On the one hand, the rulers inherited the previous sacrificial system, and on the other hand, they reformed it, reflecting the uniqueness of the Han Dynasty mountain sacrifice system.

The Confucian school was a school that valued the "mountain" image and connotation during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Liu Xiang mentioned Confucius's views on "mountains" in "Shuo Yuan: Distinguishing Objects": "The spirits of mountains and rivers are sufficient to regulate the world. Their protection is divine. The worship of mountains and rivers is for the lords of the state, while the worship of the ancestral temple is for the princes. All belong to the

king." This shows that Confucianism placed "mountains and rivers" in the position of gods related to the state's ancestral temple.

During the Han Dynasty's national sacrifices, rulers reformed their mountain sacrifice policies many times. Except for the temples of local princes, which were managed by local authorities, most of them followed the Qin Dynasty's system. During the reigns of Emperor Wen and Emperor Wu, many new temples were built, and the sacrificial ritual core of Mount Tai's Fengshan ceremony was formed [1]. By the end of the Western Han Dynasty, the sacrificial system was abolished, and the central government handed over the mountain sacrifices, except for the Five Sacred Mountains, to local officials, reflecting a local management color. The unique feature of the mountain sacrifice policy during this period was that most of the sacrificial ceremonies were carried out with the emperor's Fengshan ceremony. The changes in the Han Dynasty mountain sacrifice system reflect the rulers' political strategy and the connection between Confucian ritual education.

This article uses a close reading method to analyze the changes in the Han Dynasty mountain sacrifice system, clarify the basic situation of Han people's sacrifice and belief, and explore the various functions of Han Dynasty mountain sacrifice ceremonies to uncover social customs and Confucian-related rituals in the Western Han period.

## 2. The Reform of the Mountain Sacrifice System in the Han Dynasty

During the Western Han Dynasty, there were three stages of reform regarding the mountain sacrifice system. The first reform was undertaken by Liu Bang, the founder of the Han Dynasty. "Han inherited Qin's system" was a typical feature of Han's political policies, and the sacrificial system also inherited Qin's sacrificial system. Many times, sacrificial activities and political rule were linked together. Liu Bang decentralized the mountain sacrifice rights of various regions to local princes and kings, allowing Qin's 'temple officials' to perform sacrificial rituals according to the previous Qin Dynasty ceremony and to worship the four directions of heaven and earth according to seasonal changes, while the rulers chose not to participate in the sacrificial process of "mountains and rivers." As recorded by Sima Qian in "The Book of the Grand Scribe: The Book of the Feng and Shan Sacrifices": "In the Annals of Gaozu, it is said, 'In the second year of his reign, in the sixth month, he ordered the temple officials to sacrifice to the four directions, heaven, earth, mountains, and rivers, according to the seasons.'" The concept of "seasonal sacrifice" here is believed to be in line with the concept of "seasonal sacrifice" in the "Rites of Zhou: Office of Earth and Cultivation of Farmers" by the author.

During the reign of Emperor Wen of Han, there was a reverse policy regarding mountain sacrifices. The rulers reclaimed part of the rights to sacrifice mountains and rivers to the central government. Along with this move was the introduction of a policy of centralization, which led to the dismissal of local princes and kings, and more and more land returned to the central government. As evidenced in "The Book of the Grand Scribe: The Book of the Feng and Shan Sacrifices": "At first, the names of the mountains and rivers were in the hands of the feudal lords, who offered sacrifices to their own, and the officials of the Son of Heaven did not preside over them. When the Qi and Huainan states were abolished, they ordered the Grand Sacrificer to offer the same ceremonies as before, according to the seasons." During this period, sacrificial activities were presided over by the Grand Sacrificer, from "each offering their own sacrifices" to "the abolition of the state of Huainan."

The changes made by Emperor Wen of Han to the mountain sacrifice system were inseparable from the administrative division of the political system. The Zhou Dynasty's feudal system distributed land to local princes and gave them corresponding resources, and at that time, each local prince's sacrifice to mountains was not uniform. During the Qin Dynasty, due to the policy of unification, the feudal system was abolished, and changes were made to policies related to politics, resulting in unified planning for mountain sacrifices across various regions. In the Han Dynasty, the feudal system was reintroduced, coexisting with the county system, and the chaotic administrative division made it

impossible for some famous mountains to be sacrificed by monarchs like in the Qin Dynasty. Instead, local officials held sacrificial ceremonies.

The change in the mountain sacrifice system by Emperor Wen of Han was closely related to the administrative division of the political system. The Zhou Dynasty's feudal system distributed land to local lords and obtained corresponding resources. At that time, the mountain sacrifices of various local lords were not unified. During the Qin Dynasty, due to the policy of unification, the feudal system was abolished, and changes were made to policies related to politics, resulting in unified planning for mountain sacrifices in various regions. However, during the Han Dynasty, the feudal system was reintroduced and coexisted with the county system. This administrative division in a chaotic state caused some famous mountains in certain areas to be worshipped not by the monarch like during the Qin Dynasty but by local officials.

The third major change during the Western Han Dynasty was during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, during which the reform of the suburban sacrifice system and the formation of the famous "Five Sacred Mountains" concept took place. The term "Five Sacred Mountains" first appeared in "The Book of Rites, The Spring Officials, The Great Steward" which stated, "With blood, we sacrifice to the Ancestral Temple, the Five Sacrifices, and the Five Sacred Mountains." The initial concept of the "Five Sacred Mountains" was still based on the Yin and Yang Five Elements, and later transformed into the concept of mountains. The author holds the same view as Mr. Gu Jiegang, believing that the concept of the "Five Sacred Mountains" evolved from the "Four Sacred Mountains" of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty. Although the term "yue" initially did not specifically refer to the mountains in the four directions but rather to the legendary leaders, four "mountain gods," "yue" was a modifying concept. However, because the Four Sacred Mountains had a clear directional orientation, the later concept evolved into a mountain-related concept.

Unlike Emperor Wen of Han, who did not like the Shoufen ceremony, Emperor Wu of Han's mountain sacrifice reform brought about significant changes in the overall pattern. It was, in general, a "de-Qinization." [2] Due to the heavy use of many Confucian scholars during this period, their status was revived, and the classic theory of Confucianism was taken out and given attention. Specifically, the court set up five classics scholars to study Confucian classics, strengthened centralization, and the theoretical belief in sacrificing mountains, especially the special "sacred mountains," was a method for the monarch to strengthen centralization. This made Emperor Wu of Han begin to focus on imitating ancient rulers' hunting and mountain sacrifice to increase the central government's spiritual control over the localities through sacrificial rituals. This was also a manifestation of promoting Confucian ritual system establishment. Specifically, because the several mountains included in the "Five Sacred Mountains" are distributed in the four directions of the country, worshipping the mountains of the four directions means that the gods of the four directions recognize that these territories are under the rule of Emperor Wu of Han and can no longer be left to local officials to ignore central authority, accumulate wealth, and do as they please. The central government reclaims the right to sacrifice mountains, unified scheduling, and also controls the materials related to mountains and rivers, which cannot be separated from the economy. "The Annotation of Salt Taxes" points this out, "Famous mountains and great lakes are not to be enfeoffed...floating affairs of strange people, who desire the goods of mountains and seas, to enrich the people." The reclaiming of mountain sacrifice rights is merely to monopolize the state's mountain and river materials economic rights.

Emperor Wu of Han took a series of actions to implement this idea, as recorded in "The Annals of Emperor Wu of Han" in the Book of Han: "In May, he issued an edict saying, 'The rivers and seas nourish thousands of miles, and the sacrificial officials are ordered to conduct sacrificial rituals for the mountains and rivers as a yearly event, with proper ceremonies.' " Emperor Wu of Han built a temple specifically for sacrificial rituals for mountains and rivers, and visited Mount Song many times. During this process, Mount Song was also deified. In "The Annals of Emperor Wu of Han", it is recorded that "the next day he personally climbed Mount Song. The imperial censor and his subordinates were there, and when they were near the temple, the officials and soldiers all heard

someone shouting 'long live the emperor' three times." When Emperor Wu of Han climbed Mount Song, he heard someone shouting "long live the emperor" three times, but when he asked the civil and military officials around him, no one answered. From then on, there was a legend that the god of Mount Song shouted "long live the emperor" when he saw the emperor. Mount Song became the "Central Mountain" outside of the "Four Mountains", and the concept of mountain and river sacrificial rituals as part of the national sacrificial system was established. The power to conduct sacrificial rituals for these mountains was held in the hands of the emperor, and since then, later rulers have rarely changed this defined pattern. In the classic texts of Confucianism, there are stories of Emperor Shun touring and hunting on Mount Yue, which divided the mountains for climbing and categorized the people participating in sacrificial rituals into different levels and specifications. Emperor Wu of Han was both reverting to tradition and innovating.

As for how to conduct mountain sacrifices, "The Annals of the Suburban Sacrifices" in the Book of Han describes Emperor Wu of Han's ritual: "Do not cut down the trees on the mountain." He protected Mount Song, a deep mountain, forbidding the cutting of trees and exempting the mountain from taxes to supply the temple on Mount Song.

Regarding the worship of Mount Tai, Emperor Wu of Han followed the tradition of Qin Dynasty's Fengshan ritual. According to "The Records of the Grand Historian: Fengshan", "Emperor Wu of Han led his officials on an eastern expedition to Mount Tai and had a stone erected at the summit of Mount Tai." Emperor Wu of Han erected a stone and performed a ritual at Mount Tai. After completing the "climbing and sealing" ritual, the mountain god represented by Mount Tai acknowledged the legitimacy of Emperor Wu of Han.

As for why Mount Tai was chosen as a popular sacrificial site, the author believes that Mount Tai, the highest peak in the Yellow River Basin, made the emperor believe that it was the closest place to the heavenly palace. Worshipping Mount Tai was a way to approach the heavenly palace and the sun, a place close to mythical legends, to complete the process of "divine right of kingship". The "seal" in "Fengshan" refers to worshipping the "heaven", and the "shan" refers to worshipping the "earth". After worshipping the heaven and earth, the gods were informed.

During the Eastern Han Dynasty, the central government abolished the system of sending envoys to attend sacrificial rituals and replaced it with local officials. Although some traditions of the Qin Dynasty were preserved, many new changes were made. In the practice of mountain worship, the rulers' sacrificial policies were not strictly enforced or adhered to. For example, local officials rarely performed the sacrificial rituals themselves and instead appointed others to perform the rituals. Many of the sacrificial rituals reflected a tendency to abandon the Qin system and adhere to Confucianism. However, the sacrificial standards and situations during this period were incomparable to those of the Western Han Dynasty. For example, rulers did not personally go to the "Five Mountains" to perform a series of rituals during mountain worship. The "Five Mountains" were managed locally and could be adjusted according to the actual situation. These were all related to the establishment and promotion of the suburban sacrificial system, and there were also phenomena of mountain worship among the people.

### **3. The Functions of the Mountain Sacrifice System**

Initially, the function of mountain sacrifices was directly related to natural events, such as rainmaking, and later expanded to include praying for changes in secular seasons. Firstly, "mountains" were regarded as the place where ancient people prayed for rain. Due to their tall appearance, mountains were believed to be the source of rainwater, as recorded in "The Left Turn": "During the Zheng Dynasty drought...they had an affair with Sangshan." This shows that when droughts occurred, ancient people sought help from mountain gods, demonstrating that primitive worship was attached to mountains.

Secondly, "mountains" can be the place where oaths are made, as in the colloquial saying "swearing vows on mountains and pledging oaths on seas." For example, Zheng Xuan's annotation to

"The Rituals and Rites": "When swearing oaths, the oath god must mention the sun, moon, and mountains and rivers because they are prominent symbols," points out that, like the sun and moon, "mountain gods" are witnesses to oaths and are tools for establishing credibility and authority.

Moreover, at the national level, worshipping mountains is a symbol of recognizing the legitimacy of imperial power and stabilizing the country's fortune. The mountain sacrifice system gradually became closely linked to the political system. Among the "Five Sacred Mountains," Mount Tai was the most important mountain to be worshipped, and Han Dynasty rulers worshipped it the most frequently. Since Emperor Qin Shi Huang held the Fengshan ceremony at Mount Tai, the status of Mount Tai has been firmly established. On the one hand, the Fengshan ceremony was used to prove the legitimacy of imperial rule, making people believe that the emperor was appointed by heaven and was the only one who could communicate with heaven, coordinating the relationship between heaven, earth, and human beings. On the other hand, it also humanized and deified mountain gods, reporting their political achievements to the mountain gods, announcing them to the world, and gaining popular support. The behavior of rulers when gaining power and the throne is more direct in this regard. For example, when Yao handed over the throne to Shun, as depicted in "The Book of Documents," the scene was like this: "He held an assembly before God...and looked upon mountains and rivers, and made an oath to all the gods." This use of the behavior of informing the gods of mountains and rivers at the time demonstrated the legitimacy of their acquisition of the right to rule the country. It can be seen that even before the famous Fengshan ceremony at Mount Tai in the Qin Dynasty, there was already a tradition of legitimizing political power through mountain sacrifices.

Furthermore, "mountain gods" are guardians of a country's peace and prosperity. For example, in "The Spring Officials" of "The Book of Rites," it is stated that "they were sealed at the great shrine, and the soldiers were sacrificed to the mountains and rivers." In ancient times, mountainous and riverine areas were places where troops could stop during battles. When the army stopped, they would perform the "mountain sacrifice" ceremony to pray for the protection and defense of the "mountain gods," ultimately returning safely and winning the victory of the battle. Since the terrain was a crucial factor during ancient warfare, and in the era when "the most important affairs of the country are sacrifice and warfare," both "sacrifice" and "warfare" were equally important and had a high status, so neither could be neglected.

In addition to these common functions, "mountain sacrifices" are also closely related to the fate of the country. For example, in "The Odes of Lu Feng Gong," it is stated that "he ordered Lu Gong to be a marquis in the east, giving him mountains, rivers, land, and dependent subjects." When appointing officials, mountains and rivers were used for appointment and division. For example, in "The Annals of Lu," it is recorded that "if mountains and rivers are altered, the ruler will be overthrown." The interpretation in "The Mao Shi Commentary" is that even if the names of the mountains and rivers are changed, the relevant sacrificial rituals cannot be abolished because it will have a significant impact on the country's fortunes.

#### **4. The Influence of the Mountain Sacrifice System during the Han Dynasty**

Since the concept of "Five Sacred Mountains" was established, this concept has rarely been changed in later generations, and the belief in the Five Sacred Mountains gradually became a fixed and traditional concept. When later rulers built their capitals, they also considered whether the location of the city was in the middle of the Five Sacred Mountains or whether the distribution of the Five Sacred Mountains was in a harmonious and reasonable position. For example, they would try to locate the city near Mount Song, known as the "Central Sacred Mountain," as mentioned in Volume 266 of "The Qing History Manuscript," which says "The direction of the Sacred Mountains should be taken into account when determining the location of the imperial city." The Five Sacred Mountains were regarded as a ruler for selecting the location of the capital. During the Western Han Dynasty, Chang'an was chosen as the capital to be closer to Mount Hua, known as the "Western Sacred Mountain," located in Shaanxi Province. Similarly, the location of the Forbidden City was chosen to

be backed by Mount Tai, as a Feng Shui treasure. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, the capital was built in Luoyang, which is close to Mount Song, known as the "Central Sacred Mountain," and had convenient political and economic conditions for development.

In addition to the influence of the concept of the Five Sacred Mountains, the concept of the "Mount Tai Mountain God" also spread to the people. During the Western Han Dynasty, a popular saying was that after people died, their souls would go to the underworld, and one of the destinations of their souls would be the mountains [3]. Since the Qin Dynasty, Mount Tai has always been popular, not only as a place for emperors to demonstrate their legitimacy but also as a "God of Longevity" in folk beliefs that can attract the souls of people. As recorded in "The Book of Later Han": "When Chinese people die, their souls go to Mount Tai." In fact, the belief that Mount Tai is the entrance to the underworld still exists today.

Moreover, the mountain sacrifice culture is closely related to the development of Confucianism. We often say "A benevolent person enjoys mountains," which is a Confucian idea that uses the rich and multi-meaning image of "mountains" to bear the noble morality of not pursuing fame and wealth and not being swayed by power and influence. Throughout history, there have been heroes who chose to retire, and they often chose the mountains as their place of retreat.

## 5. Conclusion

The origin of the mountain sacrifice system dates back to the primitive worship of nature, which evolved into an institutionalized practice. After undergoing reforms during the Han Dynasty, the power balance between the central and local governments was altered, impacting the political and cultural phenomena of the time. This process reflects the continuous awakening of human self-awareness in the face of natural forces. From the perspective of transitioning from worship to utilizing natural laws and rituals to govern the country, the reforms of the Western Han mountain sacrifice system indirectly promoted progress at both the political and social levels. Exploring the mountain sacrifice system helps us understand the changes in the ruling class's control over the "mountain" imagery, the origins of the Western Han "mountain sacrifice" system, and its influence on later generations. During this process, we can to some extent glimpse the changes in social customs at the time and the gradual establishment of Confucian rituals in the realm of sacrifice.

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