

## Manifestations of the Mountain: Preliminary Remarks on the Utopian Study of Potalaka in Pre-modern East Asia

Steffen Döll\*

### Abstract

This paper proposes to examine Potalaka, the mythical dwelling place of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara, as a spatial configuration where utopias, be they religious, philosophical, political, or literary, are presumed to be actualized. It shows that all over Eastern and Central Asia the topos of Potalaka was deployed within actual landscapes. This served the purpose of establishing continuities between utopian space and this very world: the distance between the two, it was believed, could actually be overcome by physical travel. Further, already existing features in natural and cultural geographies were sublimated and/or subdued: it became possible to localize the incorporation of concepts from Daoism or Japanese folk religion into an overarching Buddhist cosmology. On the other hand, descriptions of Potalaka mountains rely heavily upon terminology and imagery prefigured by Daoist and Confucian discourse. This characteristic allowed for the closing of the gap—this time, an ideological one—between utopias from different traditions. And while it is invariably Buddhism that claims the leading role for itself, the interaction between Chinese and Japanese conceptions led to a kind of mutual idealization—the somewhat surprising constellation of the one being the other’s utopia.

### I. Introduction: utopian associations\*\*

In the aftermath of the Mongol attacks on Japan in the years of 1274 and 1281, the Kamakura *bakufu* (1185-1333) and the rulers of the Yuan dynasty (元朝, 1271-1368) stood as declared enemies upon either shore of the East China Sea. And while international relations were strained to the extreme, exchange on other levels peaked: Beginning with Myōan Eisai (明菴栄西, 1141-1215) travelling to China in 1168 and 1187, Japanese Buddhist monks went to the continent on a regular basis and brought back with them the complete set of Song dynasty (宋朝, 960-1276) religion and culture. Numerous Chinese Buddhist masters, on the other hand, especially from the Chan (禪) tradition, went to Japan, prefigured the officially sponsored institution of Five Mountains (五山) Zen Buddhism, presided over the newly established, huge monastic complexes of

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\* Japan Center, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany  
E-mail: steffen.doell@lmu.de

\*\* Acknowledgement: I would like to express my gratitude to the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, Seikei University, for a generous fellowship in the autumn of 2011 that facilitated research on a variety of projects—among others the present essay.

Kamakura and Kyoto, and—last but not least—served in political and advisory functions to *bakufu* representatives. Among these emigré monks, Yishan Yining (一山一寧, 1247-1317) stands out in several respects. He came to Japan not as an unknown fledgling master but as a national teacher (國師) and superintendent of the Buddhist institution (總統, the highest office available in the clerical hierarchy) of Zhejiang province. Even more surprising and completely contrary to the customs then, he was not invited by any Japanese party but came to Japan unbidden and as an official representative of the Yuan administration. It is small wonder, then, that he was met with hostility and suspected by the *bakufu* as a Mongol spy: Only narrowly did he escape execution and was temporarily put under arrest before finally being acquitted of all charges and released<sup>1</sup>.

Upon closer inspection, Yishan's biography reveals that he was granted the title of "National Teacher" as well as the office of superintendent only a few days before his departure to Japan where his mission was to "effect goodwill between our two countries" (*Issan goroku*, T 2553: 80.331c<sup>2</sup>). This suggests on the one hand that Yishan was above all a political functionary and that the initial suspicion of espionage may indeed have been justified. On the other, the question becomes: Why was Yishan chosen as emissary? Why not a more official representative? The answer sounds obscure: At the time the mission was to depart, Yishan presided over Guanyin monastery (觀音寺) on Mount Baotuo (寶陀, also Butuo 補陀 or Putuo 普陀), an island in the eastern ocean off the coast around Ningbo. The island's location close to the shipping routes cutting across the Hangzhou gulf in the direction of Korea and on to Japan made it strategically important to interregional and international trade and exchange. Moreover, the *Fozu tongji* (佛祖統紀) records of the monastery's beginnings:

The monk Egaku (慧鑿) from the country of Japan did obeisance at Mount Wutai (五臺) and was presented with an image of Avalokiteshvara<sup>3</sup>. He wanted to return to his home country by way of Siming (四明) [i.e. a mountain to the southwest of Ningbo], but when the boat passed Mount Baotuo, it ran upon rocks and could not go any further. The crew was doubtful and in fear of their lives and said: "It seems that maybe the time is not yet ripe to revere this image east of the ocean. We would ask you to leave it here at this mountain." And

<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, he was put in charge of—among others—Kenchō 建長 and Engaku 圓覺 monasteries in Kamakura as well as Nanzen 南禪 monastery in Kyoto. He became one of the major religious figures in early 14th century Zen Buddhism and made his influence felt through his disciples—Kokan Shiren (虎關師鍊, 1278-1346), Sesson Yūbai (雪村友梅, 1290-1347), and Musō Soseki (夢窓疎石, 1275-1351) among them—well into the Muromachi period (1392-1467). For further details on Yishan, the other emigrant monks of the 13th century, and the early *gozan*, see my book (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Editions marked by "T" refer to the Tokyo University online edition of *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*: <http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/ddb-bdk-sat2.php> (all internet resources were accessed September 30, 2012). "T" is followed by serial number, volume, page, and column.

<sup>3</sup> Literally the *bodhisattva* that "observes the sounds of the world," the name was translated to Chinese as Guanyin (j. Kannon) or Guanshiyin (觀世音菩薩, j. Kanzeon). He is the personification of mercy and compassion and in Buddhist mythology can change his appearance in order to support and assist sentient beings. He plays a major role in Buddhist canonical scriptures such as the *Avatamsaka Sutra* or the *Lotus Sutra*. In China and Japan Avalokiteshvara is often depicted as a female *bodhisattva*.

indeed doing so, the boat floated and moved again. But Egaku still was loath to leave the image and craved to take it with him. But as he could not leave, he put together a hut above the ocean in order to attend to the image.

As this anecdote indicates, Avalokiteshvara monastery's traditional association with maritime trade and traffic also made it a well-frequented religious site for sailors praying for mild weather and safe voyage. In time, it even became a famous destination for pilgrims that hoped to receive Guanyin's protection and visions of the great *bodhisattva*. After the above passage, the *Fozu tongji* continues:

Mount Baotuo is situated in the middle of the Great Ocean. From the city of Yin [i.e. Ningbo] one has to cross the water to the south-east for six hundred *li* (里). Then, one arrives at a remote place that the *Avatamsaka Sutra* speaks of as “Shores of the Southern Seas.” There lies a mountain that is called Potalaka, and the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara dwells there [...] On this mountain is a cave that is filled with the sound of water. The ocean's waters are swallowed and exhaled again, and day and night one hears the crashing of the waves. In front of the cave, there is a stone bridge, and those who abide by the ritual come here in heartfelt prayer. Some have a vision of the great *bodhisattva* in seated meditation; some see Sudhana<sup>4</sup> bowing, then looking up again, and finally turning towards them; some merely see a clear receptacle of emerald jade; some see nothing but a *kalavinka* bird dancing in the air.

Six or seven miles from the cave there is a great *aranya*, a forest, and this is where people from the nations and dynasties east of the ocean come and go to congregate and trade (T 2035: 49.388b-c).

With this attribution, the last piece in answer to the initial question falls into place: Potalaka—of which “Baotuo,” the island's name, is a transliteration—is a Buddhist pure land and the dwelling place of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara who was worshipped throughout Buddhist Asia. Indeed, frequent attempts were made to identify Potalaka with specific topographic features of different regions throughout Central and Eastern Asia. Wherever Mahāyana Buddhism gained a permanent foothold, Potalaka mountains were made out in natural geographies. Not only are there Manchurian, Korean, and Chinese Potalakas, but Avalokiteshvara's mythical dwelling place also gave its name to Budala Palace, the traditional seat of the Dalai Lama—who himself is seen to be a reincarnation of the great *bodhisattva*—in Lhasa. In the case of Japan, Mount Potalaka (補陀落山, j. Fudaraku-*sen*) was among others believed to be situated in the Kumano-Nachi area, on the Ashizuri peninsula, and/or the Nikkō region (where it is also called Futara-san (二荒山)).

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<sup>4</sup> The story of Sudhana is found in the *Gandavyuha Sutra*, itself a part of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Sudhana was a young Buddhist practitioner that follows the advice of the *bodhisattva* Manjusri and visits 53 sages and *bodhisattvas*. 28th among them is Avalokiteshvara.

Given these facts it seems that Yishan can be adequately characterized as a decidedly political figure chosen by the Yuan administration as emissary to the enemy country of Japan because his current status was believed to emphasize religious commonalities that were more fundamental than the present enmity between China and Japan:

- He presided over an Avalokiteshvara monastery that was founded by a Japanese on his pilgrimage through the sacred places of China;
- The monastery he presided over was a center of Avalokiteshvara worship and international trade;
- The mountain Avalokiteshvara monastery is located upon invokes a sacred space the concept of which, even though it had its particular manifestations, was shared by all Mahāyana Buddhist communities.

These three features are obviously interrelated and exemplify the matrix of the issues this paper addresses. It hopes to indicate general characteristics of utopias in East Asia<sup>5</sup> as well as suggest typological categories that allow for the classification of similar phenomena. East Asian utopias, it is claimed, function as mediators and connectors between differing traditions, between actual and mythopoetical geographies and landscapes, between political interests and literary intuition, religious responsibilities and artistic associativity, between individual expression and social conceptualization. Their study contributes to each of these fields and provides a fresh outlook on where and how they come together—or depart from their common ground. For this reason, the following analyses will rely on a wide range of pre-modern Chinese and Japanese materials but nonetheless do not in any way claim to be complete. Rather, they are to suggest possibilities of further studies into East Asian utopian thought and writing.

## II. Potalaka in between Buddhisms, or: how do you get there at all?

All Potalakas, be they purely mythological or manifestations of the mountain embedded in actual geography, draw their legitimacy from out of the original description in the *Gandavyuha* chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*:

Due south from here, there is a mountain that is called Potalaka. There dwells the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara, who is called He Who Observes While Remaining Within Himself (觀自在)[...] When, going forth steadily and carefully, [Sudhana] reached this mountain, he looked in every place there was for the great *bodhisattva*. He finally met him in the rocky valleys of the

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<sup>5</sup> For the concept of utopia in general cf. Levitas (1990). An in-depth analysis of the historical development of utopian thought in China cf. Bauer (1974).

mountain's western face, where water springs forth, glittering and shimmering, where trees stand together in forests, dense and impenetrable, where fragrant grasses grow soft and lush. Respectfully he circled him clockwise and prostrated himself. The *bodhisattva* He Who Observes While Remaining Within Himself sat with his legs fully crossed upon a precious stone of diamond while all around him *bodhisattvas* without number sat reverently upon similar precious stones. For them, he expounded the Law of great compassion, and made sure that all sentient beings equally grasped this same Law. When Sudhana had finished observing his preachings, he felt great happiness and began to dance for joy. He folded his hands together and perceived truthfully, and for a long time his eyes did not blink (*Dafangguang fo huayan jing*, T 279: 10.366c).

While the *Avatamsaka* is definitely articulate about the merits of encountering Avalokiteshvara upon Potalaka, it does not become clear how to actually get there. This remains a constant problem for utopian writers also addressed by Xuanzang (玄奘, died 664) in his travelogue *Datang xiyu ji*:

To the east of the Malaya mountains (秣剌耶山) is Mount Potalaka. Its paths are dangerously steep; its rocky valleys are precipitously sloped. On the mountain's top there is a lake. Its waters are as clear as a mirror and issue into a great river. On all sides it flows around the mountain, circulating around it twenty times until it emerges into the southern ocean. By the side of the lake stands a celestial palace built of stone. This is the abode for the *bodhisattva* He Who Observes While Remaining Within Himself as he comes and goes. Those who wish to see the *bodhisattva* must cross the waters of ocean and river without regard for their own life and ascend the mountain. And even though they may forget all these dangers and adversities, there are only a few who actually reach their goal. Still, even to those that remain at the foot of the mountain but pray and whole-heartedly wish to see him, he might appear in the shape of Shiva or even as a practitioner of the outer ways smeared with ashes [i.e. a Yogin]. He then consoles and encourages them and helps them to carry through with their vow (T 2087: 51.932a; cf. the translation in Läänemets 2006: 306-7).

As a practice of “getting there,” the practice of *Fudaraku tokai* (渡海) or *Fudaraka ni wataru* Potalaka has drawn special attention (cf. Kanno 2007; and Moermann 2007). It must be remarked that these collocations are generic terms that do not refer to singular or homogeneous, but decidedly heterogeneous phenomena. It seems to be the case that only in the course of time descriptive coherence was accumulated by successive expansion of these terms' semantic fields. One of the earliest instances of what would only later come to be described by *Fudaraku tokai* is found in *Konjaku monogatari*

*shū*. It is of help in guessing at the beginnings of and thereby suggesting a certain historical development within such practices:

Once upon a time there was a monk who lived at the Tennō monastery. He was called Dōkō. Year in, year out he would read the *Lotus Sutra* and thus practice the Buddha-Way. Also, he would not fail to go to Kumano and spend his summer months in retreat there.

One time, when he was on his way back from Kumano to his home monastery and came by the coast of the ocean near the village of Minabe in Ki province, the sun set, and he decided to pass the night under a great tree that was standing there. When it had just become midnight, twenty or thirty men upon horses came near to the tree. He thought: "Who are they?" But then one of them asked: "Is the old man of the tree trunk present?" From the tree trunk there came the answer: "The old man is present." When Dōkō heard this, he was surprised and alarmed: "There is a man in the trunk of this tree?" The men upon the horses said: "Come out quickly and join us!" Again, from the tree came: "Tonight I cannot come with you. The reason is that my pack-horse has broken a leg and hurt itself; I cannot ride it. Tomorrow, I will heal its injury or else get another horse; then, I will be able to come with you. I have become old and walking does not agree with me anymore." He then perceived the men on the horses, after hearing these words, going past him.

When the night became dawn, Dōkō was extremely anxious about these happenings, and when he went looking around the tree-trunk, there was nobody there - only stones put together to look like deities that watch over roads and borders (*sae no kami*). They looked ancient and weather-worn and seemed to have been there for long years. There were only male images there but no female ones. In front of them there were several *ema*<sup>6</sup> but the bases at their feet were in disarray. When Dōkō saw this, he thought: "This must be what the Road-God was speaking of last night!" He found this even stranger but bound up the frayed legs of the horse images with string and returned them to their original state. Dōkō thought: "Let us see what happens with them tonight," and when the sun set, he was still at the tree-trunk. Exactly at midnight, just as the night before, many men upon horses came near. This time the Road-God also emerged, mounted a horse, and went with them.

When morning came and Dōkō heard the Road-God returning, an old man approached. He did not know him, but he bowed before Dōkō and said: "Because the saintly man before me treated the legs of my pack-horse the other day, I was able to fulfill my duty. I do not think that I can somehow repay your

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<sup>6</sup> Nowadays, *ema* (絵馬) are mainly taken to refer to small wooden plaques at Shintō shrines written with pictures and prayers. Here, *ema* seem to have been of somewhat larger size and are understood quite literally to mean "painted horses; pictures of horses".

kindness. I am the Road-God around here, and those many men upon horses were demons of plagues and epidemics. When they come into this country, they do not fail to use this old man to lead the way. And if I do not do their bidding, they hit me with their whips and abuse me with their words. This bitterness is hard to bear. So now I wish to discard this frail appearance of a deity and gain as quickly as possible the body of superior virtue. Would that I could rely on the worthy powers of the saintly man before me!" Dōkō answered: "Even though the things you pronounce are recommendable, they are beyond my powers." The Road-God in turn said: "If the saintly man before me were to remain under this tree for another three days and read the *Lotus Sutra*, I would through the powers of the *Lotus* at once be able to discard this body of bitterness and be born into a place of bliss!" Then, he vanished without a trace.

Dōkō followed the Road-God's words and stayed there for three days and nights and whole-heartedly read the *Lotus Sutra*. When the fourth day came, the same old man as before approached him. He bowed before Dōkō and said: "By the compassion of the saintly man before me I will now discard this body and gain a worthier one. I will be born at Mount Potalaka, become an attendant to Kannon and ascend to the rank of a *bodhisattva*. This is only because I have heard the *Lotus*. If this saintly man before me was of a mind to know whether this is true or false, I would ask him to make a small brushwood boat from the twigs of grasses and trees, put a wooden image of me inside, let it float upon the ocean, and see what happens with it." Again, he vanished without a trace.

Thereupon, Dōkō again followed the Road-God's words. At once, he made a brushwood boat, put the Road-God's image inside, went to the seashore, and let it float upon the ocean. At that time, there were neither winds blowing nor waves moving, but still the brushwood boat quickly disappeared towards the south. When Dōkō saw this, he stood weeping until the brushwood boat could not be seen anymore, bowed reverently, and returned. There was also in this same village an old man who in a dream witnessed the Road-God from under the tree. The deity had turned his shape into that of a *bodhisattva* that emitted light, glittering and shimmering, and produced music, and, pointing towards the south, he rose and soared into the distance. Dōkō believed this with all his heart, and when he returned to his monastery he never ever neglected to read the *Lotus Sutra* (*Konjaku monogatari shū* 13.34, pp. 256-8).

Here is an almost paradigmatic characterization that brings together all the essential elements of the *Fudaraku tokai* narratives: the boat, the ocean, the southern direction, the continuity between here and there. There are still more issues in these passages that warrant further discussion; they will again be taken up again below.

*Fudaraku tokai*, however, was not always as peaceful as in the above legend. In its later, more extreme shapes it was attested by Jesuit missionaries to Japan in the 17th century to have included ritual suicide by voluntary drowning oneself near the shore

or by starvation and dehydration on board of boats on the open ocean<sup>7</sup>. This may have been only a late development as earlier practitioners seem to have been loath to confront death in order to reach a Pure Land. A valuable source in this respect is the following anecdote from *Hosshin shū* by Kamo no Chōmei (鴨長明, ca.1153-1216).

At a certain time, there was a man in Sanuki province whose name was of third rank. The eldest son of his wet-nurse, when he came of age, wished to be born in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha and became a monk. In his heart the man of third rank thought: “The state of this our body is subject to a myriad of things and may not turn out to be at all that we wish for. If one were to contract a serious illness and could no longer think about one’s end, it might be hardly possible to attain the original state of mind required for rebirth in the Pure Land.” Thus he came to think that only by dying without an illness would it be possible to have the right thoughts when one’s end finally came, and so he decided to burn his body. “But will I be able to bear it?” he said, and heated two hoes until they were red-hot in order to put them on the left and right and himself between them. This he did frequently, but however he wanted to burn himself he could not even bring himself to look at the scalding hoes. Still, “It’s not that big of a deal,” he said and made to carry through his resolve. But then he thought: “To light up one’s body must be easy enough. However, this might not permit one to renew one’s life and go to the Land of Utmost Bliss<sup>8</sup>. And insofar that I am a mere ordinary person how am I to be sure that no doubts arise in my heart when I meet my end? Rather, it must be that Mount Potalaka is the one place even within this our world where one can go with one’s present body!” And so he came to think that he wanted to go there and accordingly stopped trying to burn his arms. As there was a place in Tosa province that he knew, he went there and prepared a new but small boat. All day he spent therein and learned how to use the rudders. Subsequently he spoke with a sailor and demanded: “Tell me when a wind from the north will blow and not let up!” When he finally met this wind, he set sail in his small boat, boarded it all alone and set out to the south. Though he had a wife and children, his resolve stood firm and there was no way to stop him. They could only vainly gaze in the direction into which he had vanished to cry and grieve. The people of this time estimated that the quality of his intent was not at all shallow and that undoubtedly he must have made his way (*Hosshin shū* 3.5, pp.86-7; cf. Moermann (2007: 273)).

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<sup>7</sup> Both *Fudaracu tokai* and *Fudaracuni vataru* are listed in the Japanese-Portuguese dictionary *Vocabulario da Lingoa de Iapam* (1603). The Jesuits apparently were not too well-informed about the practices they were observing as they seem to have connected Potalaka only with Amida, not with Avalokitesvara (cf. the letter translated in Moermann (2007: 277-9)).

<sup>8</sup> The “Land of Utmost Bliss” (極樂) is a translation of Sanskrit Sukhavati, the Pure Land of Amida Buddha.



The narrative revolves around the conviction that only a firm belief in the grace of Amida Buddha ensures rebirth in Sukhavati, his Pure Land of Utmost Bliss. And since illness and the general frailty of old age might be an obstacle to such a belief—the man of third rank reasons—it is better to die while still of sound mind. His subsequent experiments are designed to gain a general idea of what to expect when one burns oneself. But uncomfortable as they are, they do not serve to strengthen his resolve. Therefore he decides to forgo birth in Sukhavati and instead opt for the voyage to Avalokiteshvara's Potalaka—an option he is able to realize with brilliant success.

What is of importance for the purpose of this paper's argumentation is that the story draws a clear distinction between the goal and practices of rebirth in Sukhavati and those of travel to Potalaka. It is explicitly stated that while one has to die—an early and somewhat sudden death seems recommendable—in order to reach Sukhavati, the shores of Potalaka are gained “with this one's body,” i.e. in one's present existence. Potalaka is thus not removed in time but in space; it does not require a rupture in one's mode of existence but is very much a part of this world; it is not so much a paradise as Sukhavati but rather a utopia.

The *Konjaku monogatari shū* narrative given above only superficially contradicts the *Hosshin shū* outlook on *Fudaraku tokai*. For the Road-God, there is indeed an existential rupture involved, and the expression “to be born” (*umarete*) certainly is used. But since he is a supernatural being that can obviously choose to be immaterial (e.g. hidden within a tree trunk) as well, death seems too harsh a word for him discarding his *kami* existence in exchange for a “superior body.” Furthermore, the small boat that is constructed from the most mundane of materials seems to remain on the physical side of this world at least until it vanishes from the observer's view.

On the other hand, the relation between Sukhavati and Potalaka never was one of exclusion but of mutual complementation. The Japanese monk Ennin (圓仁, 793-864), traveling China and recording his experiences and observations in *Nittō guhō junrei kōki*, makes note of his visit to Kaiyuan (開元) monastery in Fujian province on the seventh day of the third month in the fifth year of the Kaicheng era (開成), i.e. 840. Although there were Kaiyuan temples—named after the Kaiyuan era (713-741) during which they were established—all over China, the one in Fujian province was already built in 685 and renamed only in 739:

On the outer edge of the west corridor leading to the Buddha Palace of Kaiyuan monastery, there is a Hall for the Monks of the *samgha* [i.e. the Buddhist community]. On the northern wall within, there are paintings of the Pure Land in the west and the Pure Land of Potalaka. I was told that they were painted because of a request by emissaries from the Country of Japan. Upon the wall documentation of how the paintings came to be is written, but the characters have altogether faded. The only thing I was able to ascertain were the three characters “The country of Japan.” To the left and right of the Buddha images, the names of the benefactors had been written down, and these were all ranks

and titles, surnames and first names of people from the country of Japan[...] When I made to ask about this, there was no one who could explain about things. It was not even known in which year the ambassadors of our dynasty came to this region.

Here also, as was the case in *Fozu tongji*, there is clear indication of China-Japan relations coinciding with the instance of Potalaka imagery. Also, visual depictions of Potalaka next to Sukhavati suggest that this was not a question of “either-or” but one of “as well as.” This suggestion gains argumentative weight as it is reiterated in iconographical instructions contained in texts such as *Bukong juansuo shenbian zhenyan jing* (cf. Matsumoto 1984) or the *Fusō ryakki*. The latter explicitly states:

Within the grounds of Koufuku (興福) monastery one hall was constructed in which an image of the *bodhisattva* Kannon was installed. Depictions of the pure land of Mount Potalaka were ornamenting the western half while depictions of the pure land of Amida were ornamenting the eastern half. (*Fusō ryakki*)

Although the spatial distribution of Sukhavati and Potalaka representations must remain subject to further discussion it becomes clear that the relation between them was by no means one of exclusion but rather one of mutual dependence. This inclusiveness seems to have been typical for discourses centering on Potalaka, while Sukhavati discussions generally seem more self-contained. But Potalaka’s inclusivism went much further to include even non-Buddhist traditions.

### **III. Potalaka, Penglai, and others, or: why go there in the first place?**

In the passages quoted above from *Konjaku monogatari shū*, Potalaka is presented as a kind of utopia for the Road-God, i.e. a better place far removed from the afflictions of his current state of existence. Of his actions, he gives only partial account: As the deity that is in charge of the infrastructure around Minabe, he cannot but lead the way for the demons of plague and sickness when they come to wreak havoc among sentient beings. If he refuses them his services, he himself is threatened and attacked. By leaving behind his *kami* existence he also benefits the community in the area: Without someone to lead the way, we can assume, the demons will go astray and their attempts at afflicting the population will remain ineffective. Thus, the Road-God’s choice of Potalaka over his traditional tree-trunk is a wise one in every respect: It is as advantageous to himself as it is to the ones around him, and it puts the demons at a severe disadvantage. Therefore this tale also told its Japanese audience the story of how Buddhism, though it may seem to be something else altogether, fulfills all the traditional native and folk religions’

functions (and much more)—but without their drawbacks. And yet again, Potalaka is the symbol for this subordination and sublimation.

Similar examples abound. Especially powerful in terms of linguistics and of imagery comes from *Henjou hakki seirei shū*, written by Kūkai (空海, 774-835). He tells the story of Shōdō, a pious man that decides to ascend the heights of Mount Potalaka. This time, Potalaka is even less removed, less otherworldly, but integrated into the actual landscape of the Nikkō area:

At long last, in the first year of the Jingo Keiun (神護景雲) era [767], in the first third of the fourth month, he set out to ascend the Mountain of Potalaka. But the snows were still deep and the cliffs stood steep while clouds and mists and thunder threatened to confuse him, and thus he could not climb to the top. So he turned around, made station halfway up the mountain for three times seven days and then returned home. Then, in the first year of the Ten'ō (天応) era [781], in the first third of the fourth month he once more undertook to scale the mountain but again could not make the ascent.

In the second year of the same era [782], in the middle of the third month, he copied canonical scriptures for all the different gods of the heavens and of the earth, produced drawings of the Buddhas, girt his trousers and wrapped his feet, discarded his previous life and pledged himself to the Way exclusively. Carrying the canonical scriptures and the images upon his back he came to the foot of the mountain. There, for seven nights in a row, he read the canonical scriptures and did obeisance in front of the Buddhas. Resolutely he made a vow and said: “I would have the gods and spirits know: I beg you to purify my heart. The canonical scriptures and images that I have copied and produced, I will not fail to sacrifice for the gods as soon as I reach the mountain-top in order to heighten the glory of the gods and enrich the happiness of sentient beings. Humbly I beg of you: Benevolent Gods, increase your glory! Poisonous Dragon, [deity of clouds and mists,] draw in the mists! Mountain Spirits, lead the way and help my vow! If I do not reach the summit, I will not become a *bodhisattva*!”

When he had thus made his vow, he set out across the bright white fields of snow and clung to green leaves like jewel pendants. When he had come half the way to the top, as his body was tired and his strength exhausted, he made camp for two nights. Then, at long last he could see the peak and was wildly fascinated [by the view]. It was as if he had been dreaming and now had woken up. Without mounting a raft he suddenly had entered the river above the clouds [i.e. the Milky Way], and without swallowing mysterious medicine he witnessed the Caves of the Gods. Half of him rejoiced [over the wonders he was to behold once he reached the summit], while the other half of him was troubled [over the hardships he would still have to endure until then]. He barely managed to hold on to his mind and spirit.

As to the shape of the mountain, from east to west it was like dragons sleeping, and there was no limit to what one could overlook. From south to north it was like tigers crouching, and it was excellent for making oneself comfortable and resting. It bore comparison even to the mysterious heights of Mount Sumeru, the summit of the cosmos, and it drew around itself a belt of lesser mountains like ringed irons. It smiled down upon the lower peaks of the Heng and Dai Mountains of eastern China and mocked the meekness of the western Mountains of Kunlun and of those mountains the fragrance of which makes men drunk. When the sun rose, Potalaka was the first to be lit; when the moon came up it set latest there. Even without the mysterious powers of heavenly sight ten thousand leagues stood before one's eyes. Why would one still care to ride a swan when the white clouds lie to one's feet? [...] The high peaks of all four directions were reflected in the waters of the lakes at the foot of Mount Potalaka and thus stood on their heads, and upon its slopes naturally were different grasses of a hundred kinds as well as trees and rocks. Higher still, silvery snow covered the ground, and droplets of ice glittered on the trees as if golden flowers came forth on their branches. The mirrors of the lakes selflessly reflected everything and among the myriad colors which one could have escaped reflection? Mountains and waters thus reflected each other in such beauty that it was almost painful to watch (*Henjō hakki seirei shū* 2.1, pp.124-127).

The topics deployed in Kūkai's narrative are in keeping with the Potalaka portrayals quoted above: The majesty of the mountain and the seeming impossibility to make it to the summit; the enterprise succeeding only when spiritual protection is invoked and Buddhist artifacts and icons are carried along; the surrounding imagery of flowers and bodies of water; the clearness of a mirror as metaphor for the universality of Avalokitesvara's compassion. Still, new elements are also introduced, above all the comparison of Potalaka with and subsequent subjugation of mountains from Chinese mythology. To the fleeting eye, the heights of the mountain might be mistaken as the "Caves of the Gods," i.e. the abode of Daoist immortals, yet these are commonly reached by "swallowing mysterious medicine" or "riding a swan" through the air, i.e. by Daoist practices of self-cultivation. Buddhist Potalaka, on the other hand, can be reached and scaled in this very body—if one merely relies on the protection of the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*. Then, having braved the difficulties of the ascent, one is recompensed by the farsightedness that is explicitly likened to the *bodhisattva's* powerful gaze. There can be no doubt about it: To Kūkai, though it integrates elements of Daoist mytho-geography, Potalaka is far superior to other sacred spaces such as Kunlun.

Yet another—and, one might claim, far more complex—model of Buddhist-Daoist interaction enters the field of vision by way of the Mount Potalaka in the Kumano region (cf. Moermann 2005) and the historical events associated with it. They figure in the developments of Chinese mythology and its adaption in Japan: At a time most dramatic

in Chinese history, when the wars of unification under the first Qin emperor (秦始皇帝, 259-210 BCE) were in full swing, there were many who planned regicide. The emperor himself, in turn, took somewhat surprising countermeasures. The situation is vividly described in the *Huainan Hengshan liezhuan* of the *Shiji*:

In former times, the Qin emperor distanced himself from the Way of the ancient kings. He murdered the masters of the Daoist arts, burned the books of poetry, disregarded ritual and righteousness, thought highly only of brute force, and relied solely on punishment and penalties. He redirected grains from the fertile coasts and had them transported to the barren interior. At that time, though men would plow their fields, the crops were insufficient; though women and children would spin and weave, the cloth would not be enough to cover their bodies [...] Corpses lay strewn for thousands of miles, and blood covered the fields and acres. The common people were exhausted, and among ten households there were five that came near to open rebellion.

But then the Qin emperor had Xu Fu (徐福, born 255 BCE), a master of magic, set out across the open sea in order to find the wonders of the gods. When Xu Fu returned, he lied to his master and said: “Your minister has met a grand deity upon the ocean. He said: ‘Are you a messenger from the emperor in the west?’ Your minister answered: ‘This is correct.’ — ‘What is it that you want?’ I said: ‘I would ask you for the medicine that grants long years and a fulfilled life.’ The deity said: ‘The manners of your Qin dynasty king are shallow. I will let you see this medicine but I will not let him have it.’ Therefore I went with him in south-eastern direction. When we came to the island of Penglai, I saw a palace covered in auspicious plants. There were servants there and they had the appearance of copper dragons, and when they rose towards the light they illuminated the heavens. There, your minister bowed in reverence and asked: ‘What is that I shall present you with as an offering?’ The deity of the ocean said: ‘If you were to come up with the eldest sons and good daughters from notable families as well as a hundred artisans, then your wish will be granted.’” The Qin emperor was highly delighted and sent off three thousand good men and women as well as seeds from the five grains and a hundred artisans. Xu Fu then settled in a fertile country with them and became their king, never to return to the Qin emperor. After these events, the common people grieved and hurt and yearned for their lost loved ones, and among ten households there were six that came near to open rebellion (*Shiji*).

The passage describes the catastrophic situation the military campaigns of the Qin emperor have led to; the sufferings of people and country; and the clever deceit with which Xu Fu manages to save the best of Qin’s people and make a new beginning. The central mechanism in Xu Fu’s cunning stratagem is, of course, the invocation of Penglai. From cosmo-geographical texts it was common knowledge in ancient China that on the

edges of the known world there were places—usually mountains—where deities, Daoist immortals, and other supernatural beings dwelt, most famous among these Kunlun in the west and the islands to the east beyond the waves of the Bohai Sea<sup>9</sup>.

The commentaries to the *Haineibei jing* (海内北經) of the *Shanhai jing* give an account of Penglai's characteristics that may be taken as representative for the general attributes of the immortals' islands:

Penglai lies in the middle of the ocean. [Commentary:] Thereupon dwell immortals. Their palaces and houses are made of gold and jade, and the birds and beasts around there are all white. If one gazes out to Penglai from afar, it is as a cloud in the middle of the Bohai sea (*Shanhai jing*).

It is no wonder, given the directions to the immortal islands beyond the eastern oceans, that Japan was sometimes suggested to be one of them, and indeed there are instances of “Penglai” and “Yingzhou” referring to none other than the Japanese archipelago. In light of this localization of Daoist immortality and the legend of the Qin emperor's emissary, it is also hardly any wonder that Xu Fu was thought to actually have landed in Japan, sometimes presumed to even have founded Japanese civilization (cf. Howland 1996: 86-92). Today, the Kumano region, traditionally regarded as the place where he disembarked, still is the center of Xu Fu belief in Japan. And it seems unlikely to be mere coincidence that one of the most revered mountains in the Kumano area is called Potalaka.

Things become less circumstantial when returning to the island of Mount Baotuo off the Ningbo coast. There, sometime in the middle of the 12th century, Hongzhi Zhengjue (宏智正覺, 1091-1157) came to visit the place that, some two hundred years after Egaku lived there, had already become known as one of the Three Sacred Mountains of Buddhism<sup>10</sup> and a major site for pilgrimages. Hongzhi met the abbot and several other high-ranking members of the Baotuo clergy; of course, poems were exchanged. One is a prime example of an emotive, visually suggestive, densely constructed irregular poem:

To thoroughly perceive one's heart-mind has nothing to do with the phenomena of the world, but to thoroughly perceive the phenomena of the world also has nothing to do with one's heart-mind. The dreams in lofty abodes among the clouds cool the amber-colored trees; the light of ocean and moon penetrates coral forests. Shadows vibrate among wind-shaken bamboo; echoes emerge from autumnal slabs of stone. The tangled woods of the myriads of

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<sup>9</sup> *Shiji* and *Hanshu* (漢書, 5th century CE) enumerate the three islands of Penglai, Fangzhang (方丈), and Yingzhou while *Liezi* (列子, 5th century BCE) gives five: Daiyu (岱輿), Yuanqiao (員嶠), Fanghu (方壺), Yingzhou (瀛洲), and Penglai (蓬萊).

<sup>10</sup> The other two sacred mountains given most frequently are Mount Wutai, where the *bodhisattva* Manjusri (with the major attribute of wisdom) was believed to dwell, and Mount Emei upon which the *bodhisattva* Samantabhadra (associated with meditation) supposedly had made his abode. Cf. Ishino (2010) for a thorough portrayal of the interaction between clergy and lay pilgrims in the early 17th century.

phenomena in unison preach the Buddhist *dharmā*, but above them, on the rocky heights of Mount Potalaka, there is one who already knows their sounds (*Hongzhi chanshi guanglu*, T 2001: 48.113a).

First, the staggering diversity of phenomena is vividly portrayed through images and metaphors, before the poem's last two lines retract the discourse into a concise formulation of doctrine: While it is true that not a single phenomenon is outside of the Buddhist teaching, it takes one with great powers of realization to actually perceive their underlying unity. The “one who knows the sounds” plays not only upon the name and translation of Avalokiteshvara as Guanyin or Guanshiyin, but also draws on an anecdote attributed to the *Liezi* classic: Whenever Yu Boya (俞伯牙) played the zither, Zhong Ziqi (鍾子期) would, through the music, know his friend's state of mind. The relation between the two was so close that when Ziqi died, Boya stopped playing altogether and destroyed his instrument, for there would never be anyone else that understood him and his music as Ziqi had done.

One more poem by Hongzhi ends upon another invocation of Chinese mytho-history:

Lord Mei came in the manner of an immortal to this island when it was in spring. He regarded mundane foods as mere means to an end. The wonderful wisdom of Guanyin is present in every single particle of dust (T 2001: 48.96b).

These lines refer to the legend of Meifu (梅福) who, during the latter days of the Former Han dynasty (206 BCE to 8 CE), had led an unsettled life in and out of office before going into seclusion. He was supposed to have come to Mount Baotuo, and it is to the mysterious properties of this mountain and its master Avalokiteshvara that Hongzhi attributes Meifu's success in finally becoming an immortal.

From the above, the following can be deduced: Reacting to non-Buddhist traditions, the Potalaka paradigm followed two general discursive strategies. One was to annex topoi from Daoism, Japanese native religions etc. by claiming Buddhism's absolute superiority and blatantly subduing other traditions, as was the case with the presentation of the Road-God as an essentially tragic existence or with Kūkai's outlook from Potalaka over the mountains of China. The other was more nuanced and included linguistic devices—citation or variation of, and association with, established literary and philosophical topoi—fashioned to embed Buddhist concepts into preexisting mythologies. This strategy led to overlaps between Buddhist and non-Buddhist utopias, and the latter were in the process construed as tentative and imperfect revelations of the penultimate and universal characteristics of Potalaka.

#### **IV. Mutual utopias: China and Japan**

It is hardly surprising that Japanese texts sometimes took up on the notion of their

archipelago being Daoist China's utopia. This worked, however, well also within Japanese Buddhist discourse where even in the early decades of the Heian period (794-1185) similar argumentations were employed. An example of surprising complexity is that of the *Denjutsu isshin kaimon*, which was written in the generation after Saichō (最澄, 767–822), founder of the Japanese Tendai school. One episode centering on Nanyue Huisi (南嶽慧思, 515–577)—who was claimed to have been the teacher of Zhiyi (智顛, 538–597) and was thus of paramount importance for Tiantai/Tendai's self-conception—relates how he was visited by Bodhidharma, “a *sramana* from the countries in the west” (cf. also Faure 1997: 112-3). When he met Huisi on Mount Heng, he asked:

“How many years have you been practicing in this out-of-the-way place?” The master of meditation, Huisi, answered: “More than twenty years.” Bodhidharma asked: “Have you received any spiritual visions? Have you come into the possession of some kind of supernatural powers?” Huisi answered: “I have neither received spiritual visions nor come into the possession of spiritual powers.” After some time, Bodhidharma sighed and said: “To grow tired of meditative immersion is easy, but to leave this murky world behind is hard. Out of the blue I have met you for nothing else than to converse with you in order to extinguish the grave faults committed through eons as innumerable as particles of dust. For the time being, take heed to your pure-hearted friend! Then, for a long time, excellent causes for future rebirths will grow. But monk, oh monk! You must exert yourself! Why would you remain on this mountain and not go out into the ten directions? For me, causes and effects have equally come to an end and only east of the ocean lie prosperity and growth. For me, in the lands beyond this mountain there are no more opportunities. Here, the people's emotions are coarse and malevolent. They act greedily and possessive; they eat by way of murder and harm. I would ask of you: Provide for the true teaching to develop and spread through China, and put an end to murder and harm!” Huisi asked: “Who are you?” Bodhidharma answered: “I am void emptiness.” After they had talked with each other for a while longer, Bodhidharma took his leave, turned east, and walked away. Even the emperor's countenance was not able to hold him back (T 2379: 74.653b-c).

Seemingly frustrated with Buddhism's situation in China and the Chinese's stubborn adherence to the canonically outlawed custom of killing animals and eating their flesh, Bodhidharma announces his intention to go east and asks Huisi to be his lieutenant in China. At a cursory glance it might seem a weak argument to have the patriarch of another tradition, namely Chan/Zen, order about one's own founding figure. It must be kept in mind, however, that—especially in Japan at that time—Zen, far from being an independent school, was perfectly integrated within the totality of Buddhist doctrines and practices. Furthermore, throughout all Buddhist traditions the figure of Bodhidharma came to be interpreted as a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara. The



assignment Huisi took upon himself therefore functions more than anything else as a legitimization by the great *bodhisattva* himself. Again, his self-characterization as “void emptiness” is a frequent description of a mirror’s nature, which has already figured in the above descriptions of Potalaka landscapes.

It is this complex network of associations and doctrinal relations that a final example, again by Yishan, relies upon. In his *Recorded Sayings* there is included a series of three hymns on Avalokiteshvara that merit close inspection. Although it is difficult to ascertain whether these had been composed while Yishan was still living on Mount Baotuo—or even prior to that—or when he had already settled in Japan, the *Denjutsu isshin kaimon* episode seems to act as background knowledge without which especially the last poem would be nearly unintelligible.

He erects a great round mirror that in itself is as empty as the treasury of the Thus Come Ones [i.e. the Buddhas]. Not a single shape arises therein, neither moving nor motionless. Waters flow around precipitous cliffs. He lowers his head and listens.

Over the ocean he treads on boats of lotus leaves and, pondering, gazes upon the moon in the waters. Single drops of rain fall from the twigs of the willow, and a clear coolness spreads through the dust. How is this not the realm of universal salvation?

The man upon the rocks of Potalaka has thirty-two bodies to manifest himself in. And just like myself, while he may cross the darkness of the east, he does not depart from *samadhi* (*Issan kokushi goroku*, T 2553: 80.327c).

Perfectly without ego, Avalokiteshvara stands in the first verses upon Potalaka’s cliffs over the turmoil of the waves—or perhaps rather the turmoil of the world. Once more it is precisely the continuity between the utopia of the *bodhisattva*’s abode and the world of suffering and ignorance that makes the image work. The lines of the second poem claim the identity of world and utopia; they are hardly in need of further interpretation. Suffice it to say that the full moon as a metaphor for perfect enlightenment is reflected in the waters that, as the above quotations have shown, have several connotations: When calm and still, water is as egoless as a clear mirror, but when in confusion it is violence and detriment personified. In the last poem Yishan identifies himself, first with Avalokiteshvara, but second also with Bodhidharma: The “darkness of the east” is not only the ocean but perhaps also the vastness of China that is as yet unaware of the true Buddhism that will spread through the efforts of Bodhidharma and Huisi. And just as the light of the *dharma* was brought east by the patriarch of Chinese Chan, first to China, then on to Japan, so will Yishan take it upon himself to follow in the *bodhisattva*’s footsteps to act as ambassador to Japan.

## V. Conclusion: the utopian impulse

This paper has proposed to look at the form and function of places such as Potalaka in pre-modern East Asia in order to come up with a typology and topology of utopian projections and voyages. It has become clear that actual and sacred geographies were seen as interconnected, but also that therefor utopias rest upon the notches—or perhaps rather the fault lines—where concepts from different and sometimes even contradictory traditions entangle, relate to one another, and are deployed within discourse.

If an attempt is to be made at importing the results of the discussions that have been underway in utopian studies in the fields of history of thought, politology, social sciences, literary studies etc. into the historical situation of the East Asian context, difficulties are encountered. First and foremost among these is an eschatological issue. The term “utopia” was coined by Thomas Morus (1478-1535) who, playing upon the double entendre of *ou-topia* and *eu-topia*, projected an ideal form of state, society, and communalism to either the most removed parts of the actual world or to the most parodistic parts of political discourse. But as the white spots on European maps of the world continued to shrink, subsequent utopian thinkers and writers tended to interpret utopia not in terms of geography (as is the case with Shangri-La, Atlantis etc.) but of history: The ideal state of things was not to be found in some out-of-the-way spot of the world but either to be met in the aftermath of an unavoidable cataclysm; or to be socially constructed within the flow of time. The first alternative has dystopic elements to it and happens in a mythical or timeless time, as time itself becomes meaningless by the end of the world. The second is atypical in that it is of utter unimportance where the new eutopia will be created; important is only when this creation will take place.

In the light of these utopian conceptions, East Asia seems to present a rather divergent picture and set of problems. It is true that there exist mythologies, for example those of the blessed time of Shun and Yao in China, or the Age of the Gods in Japan, or even the three times in Buddhism, that seem structurally similar to the tale of the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man. But whether these conceptions are actually best addressed by the term “utopia” seems questionable: From them, there can follow no orientation towards the future. In a way it might even be claimed that the assumption of paradises—the eviction from which brought about history and communal time in the first place—functions as an obstacle to the utopian impulse (cf. Griffin and Moylan 2007). If that is the case, the spatial and mytho-geographic ideals this contribution has been calling utopias are indeed aptly described by the concept: The islands of Daoist immortals and Avalokishvara’s Potalaka—eutopian as they are—form a stark contrast to the situation found in the here and now. They are undoubtedly located within this world, and though the problem of their availability is of paramount importance in texts dealing with them, it is first and foremost a question of how to make the voyage, seldom of when to make it; never of if.

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