

Searching for Sacred Mountain

DIRECTED BY GARY MARCUSE AND SHI LIHONG

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JON SAWYER

PRODUCED BY FACE TO FACE MEDIA IN ASSOCIATION WITH WILD CHINA FILM AND THE PULITZER CENTER ON CRISIS REPORTING.

2014, COLOR

20 MINUTES, ENGLISH

TO ACCESS THE FILM AT GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE DOCUMENTARIES, VISIT [HTTPS://TINYURL.COM/CUZFBCHV](https://tinyurl.com/cuzfbchv).

FOR A TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR THE FILM, VISIT [HTTPS://TINYURL.COM/RTRJ7BB4](https://tinyurl.com/rtrj7bb4).

Reviewed by Dave Aftandilian, Blake Hestir, and Mark Dennis

Photo montage from scenes in *Searching for Sacred Mountain*. Source: Screen captures from *Searching for Sacred Mountain* on the GEJ website at <https://tinyurl.com/cuzfbchv>.

This review was written by three colleagues and close friends at Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth, Texas. Although slightly unusual in this sort of review, we believe that describing our academic training and contemplative practices will help readers better understand our comments that represent, like any good interpretive exercise or classroom discussion, multiple, sometimes-incompatible assumptions, orientations, and conclusions. Rather than a shortcoming, however, we see these points of divergence modeling robust critical thinking based on deep and compassionate listening, and mindful engagement and interpretation.

Dave Aftandilian is an anthropologist whose teaching and research focus especially on animals and religion in cross-cultural perspective. He cofounded and directs TCU's minor in human-animal relationships (HARE) and serves on the executive committee of TCU's Contemplative Studies Program. Blake Hestir is a professor of philosophy who teaches and writes on ancient Greek philosophy, philosophy of mind, and ecological interconnection. He is a yoga and mindful movement practitioner, and serves as associate director of the Contemplative Studies group. Mark Dennis is a professor of religion and director of the Contemplative Studies group whose teaching and research focus on Japanese Buddhism, Japanese literature, and contemplative studies. In this way, we all teach in the humanities but are also deeply committed to contemplative practice—mindfulness, meditation, yoga, and so on—and regularly teach these practices to our students.

We have been working with students and colleagues at TCU to make the CALM minor, an acronym for compassionate awareness and living mindfully, set to begin in fall 2022. Our mixed reactions to the film represent, in part, this distinct academic training filtered through the prism of our contemplative practices, especially CALM's core values, which ask us to listen deeply and compassionately to the suffering of others and not to turn away from their pain, whether it manifests in the lives of the Chinese or Tibetan peoples, birds like the Tibetan bunting or the Himalayan vulture, or the very earth that sustains us. Indeed, these CALM values inform how we three relate to each other, to human and nonhuman animals, and to our shared environment, as well as to how we teach our students, conduct our research, and interpret a film like *Searching for Sacred Mountain*.

Jianqiang's friend and documentary filmmaker Shi Lihong is shocked by his sudden shift away from state-sanctioned atheism to traditional Buddhist wisdom.

General Impressions

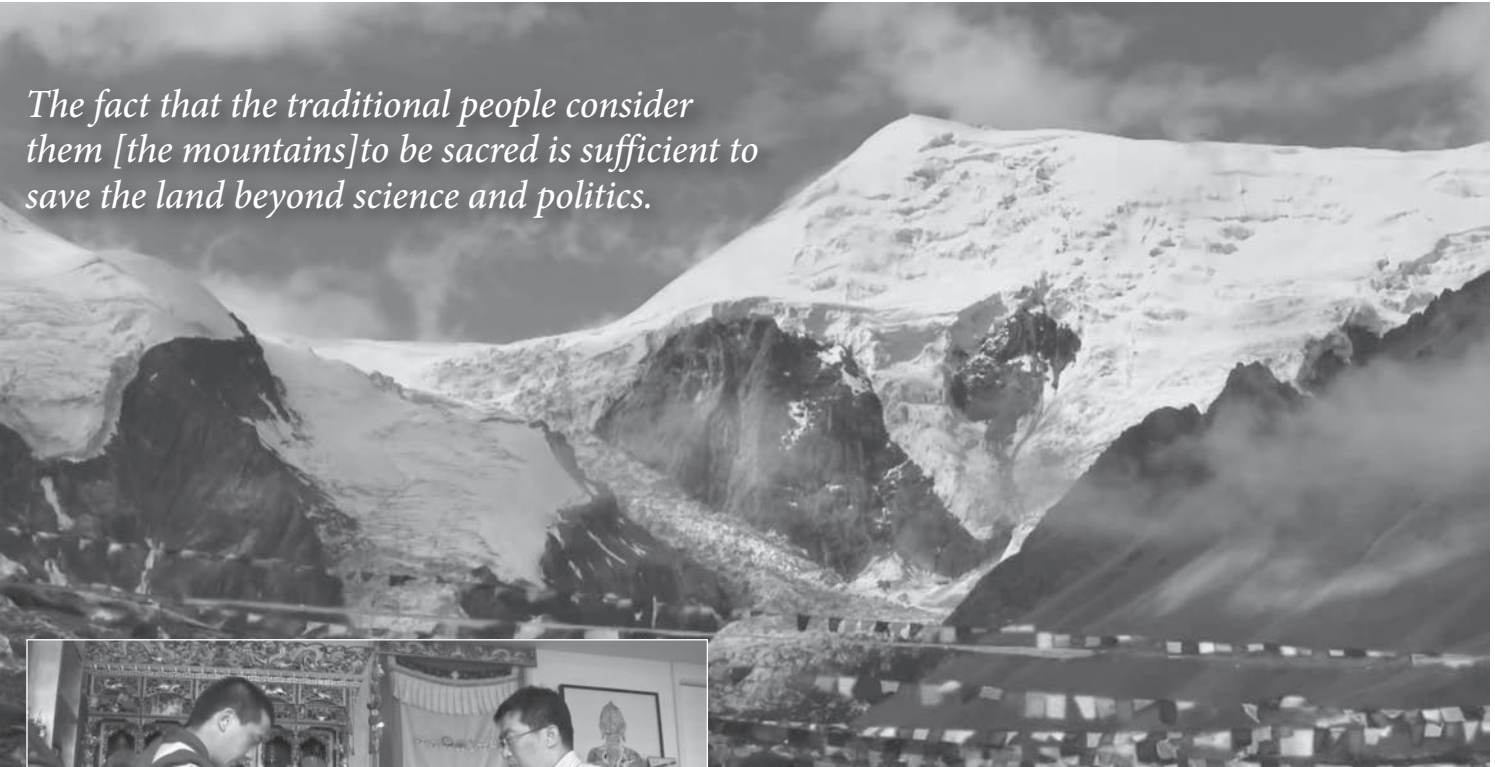
When viewed through these values, we agree that the documentary has many commendable elements. It offers viewers stunning imagery from the vast Tibetan landscape and moving portraits of individuals trying, each in their own way, to live a compassionate and mindful life. These stories include a moving portrait of Tashi Sange—whom Dave views as the film's star—a Tibetan Buddhist monk who seeks to preserve the local environment, save endangered bird species, and engender among local children an appreciation for the sacredness of all sentient life. But when we draw more heavily from our academic training in religion, philosophy, ethics, and postcolonial studies, we find various limitations or, perhaps, lost opportunities with the film, although we differ on the specific limitations and the degree to which they may detract from the film's strengths and hopeful message.

Sacred Summary

Searching for Sacred Mountain explores the multidimensional intersections of urbanization, environmental degradation, traditional religion, and mental health in contemporary China. Author, director, and PBS *NewsHour* contributor Fred de Sam Lazaro narrates the personal experiences of journalist Liu Jianqiang, conservation biologist Shi Lihong, Tibetan Buddhist lama Tashi Sange, and film director Lu Zhi, who share a mutual concern for the environment and human well-being.

The documentary opens with the story of Liu Jianqiang, one of China's senior environmental investigative reporters, who—like many Chinese—is challenged by a world increasingly threatened by industrialization, consumerism, and climate change. Yet like a growing number of others in China, Jianqiang has turned to traditional spirituality for a sense of well-being and meaningfulness. He claims that environmental activists and those who work for public welfare like himself need more powerful spiritual support, because despite all their hard work for the common good, they regularly face what he describes as “the darkest side of the world.” He shares with

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(Top) Prayer flags mark a sacred mountain. Source: Screen capture from *Searching for Sacred Mountain* on the GEJ website at <https://tinyurl.com/cuzfbchv>.

(Bottom) Jianqiang meditates with his instructor, a Tibetan Buddhist monk. Source: Screen capture from *Searching for Sacred Mountain* on the GEJ website at <https://tinyurl.com/cuzfbchv>.

de Sam Lazaro, “Every day what we see is polluted air, polluted rivers, and the slaughter of wild animals. This kind of negative energy attacks us all the time . . . [T]he situation in China is getting worse every day. Where do we draw our strength from?” Jianqiang eventually finds this strength in the teachings and practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

Jianqiang’s friend and documentary filmmaker Shi Lihong is shocked by his sudden shift away from state-sanctioned atheism to traditional Buddhist wisdom. Lihong suspects the turning point occurred during Jianqiang’s time in the beautiful preserve of the Nianbaoyuze mountain range, the region of the so-called “sacred mountains” west of Sichuan, where he spent time with a Tibetan Buddhist monk while developing his story on China’s water resources. Curious to discover the story, Lihong sets out with a film crew to the headwaters of the Yangtze, Mekong, and Yellow rivers high up in the sacred mountains to interview Tibetan lama Tashi Sange at the Monastery at Baiyu.

Lama Sange has enjoyed a lifelong close spiritual relationship with the sacred mountains, and along with his community work and painting practice, he happens to be working on his own documentary about birds and wildlife, particularly the Himalayan vultures threatened by human-caused environmental pressure. Lama Sange’s unique approach combines old traditions with new technology to present nature in a way that helps others develop a sense for the deep interconnection of all living creatures.

De Sam Lazaro interviews Dr. Lu Zhi, a conservation biologist at Peking University working with Tibetans in these ecologically fragile

mountains. Her research reveals that what stands in the way of rampant logging and urban development is the designation of a central area of ancient forests as “sacred” areas. Simply the fact that the traditional people consider them to be sacred is sufficient to save the land beyond science and politics. Her research shows that where the beliefs in sacred mountains are strong, as in the area of the Baiyu Monastery, wildlife flourishes.

Sacred Strengths

Each of us found elements of the film that were commendable and moving. Dave, for instance, observes that it establishes a strong connection between religion and the environment, making a reasonably persuasive case for harnessing religious motivations to inspire conservation of China’s vast natural resources and beauty. As noted above, he found Tashi Sange to be an inspiring figure whose love for the natural world is infectious and whose evocative paintings help raise awareness among the local population about endangered birds on the Tibetan Plateau, including the Tibetan bunting and Himalayan vulture. We see him climb dangerous mountain crags to feed starving vultures, reminding Dave of other spiritual and religious leaders who are known for a deep compassion for all creatures, like St. Francis. Dave observes that the film would be useful in a religion and the environment course taught from a comparative perspective and, possibly, a course on religion and science, since conservation biologist Dr. Lu Zhi is quoted regularly.

Blake observes that the film offers viewers a clever weaving of stories within stories within stories that helpfully raises awareness about pressing social and environmental issues that China and many other nations around the world are facing. The stories expand beyond the personal and ultimately are each tied into the sacred mountains and the power of the land to reveal profound insights about our place in the world. At the heart of one of these sacred mountains is Tashi Sange, who joyfully runs up lush



(Top) Lama Tashi Sange tells Shi Lihong about the Dragon God in the lake. Source: Screen capture from *Searching for Sacred Mountain* on the GEJ website at <https://tinyurl.com/cuzfbchv>.

(Left) Tibetan schoolchildren learning about birds with photos from Tashi Sange.

Source: Screen capture from *Searching for Sacred Mountain* on the GEJ website at <https://tinyurl.com/cuzfbchv>.

green hills leading a gaggle of delighted schoolchildren who have the good fortune of a weekend field trip to learn about nature. His story is that of the land and all living creatures. For him, the *where* of the sacred is simply right in front of us and within us, all a rich ecological tapestry.

Mark concurs with these comments about the power of the film's wonderful cinematography that captures scenes of stunning beauty that are juxtaposed to the rampant environmental degradation that has bedeviled modern China—the very issues that motivated Liu Jianqiang to find spiritual solace in Tibetan Buddhist teachings.¹ Indeed, those scenes of natural beauty could serve in the classroom as a form of contemplative practice in the broadest sense, leading to all manner of illuminating reflection. For instance, the universality of the human, animal, and environmental issues raised in the film, which Blake returns to below, could be paired with other contemplative films, such as Ron Fricke's *Samsara* (2011).

Instructors might also use the beautiful scenes of nature and, in particular, Tashi Sange's communing with local birds, as jumping-off points from which to investigate human conceptions of and assumptions about other-than-human animals. In his religion and environment classes, Dave asks his students to complete several "animal meditations."² Through these nature-based contemplative exercises, students learn to become more attentive to other-than-human animals. In so doing, they often come to view these animals more as persons like us, worthy of our compassion and care. Another possibility would be to ask students to imagine entering into the embodiment and consciousness of the birds that Tashi Sange loves so

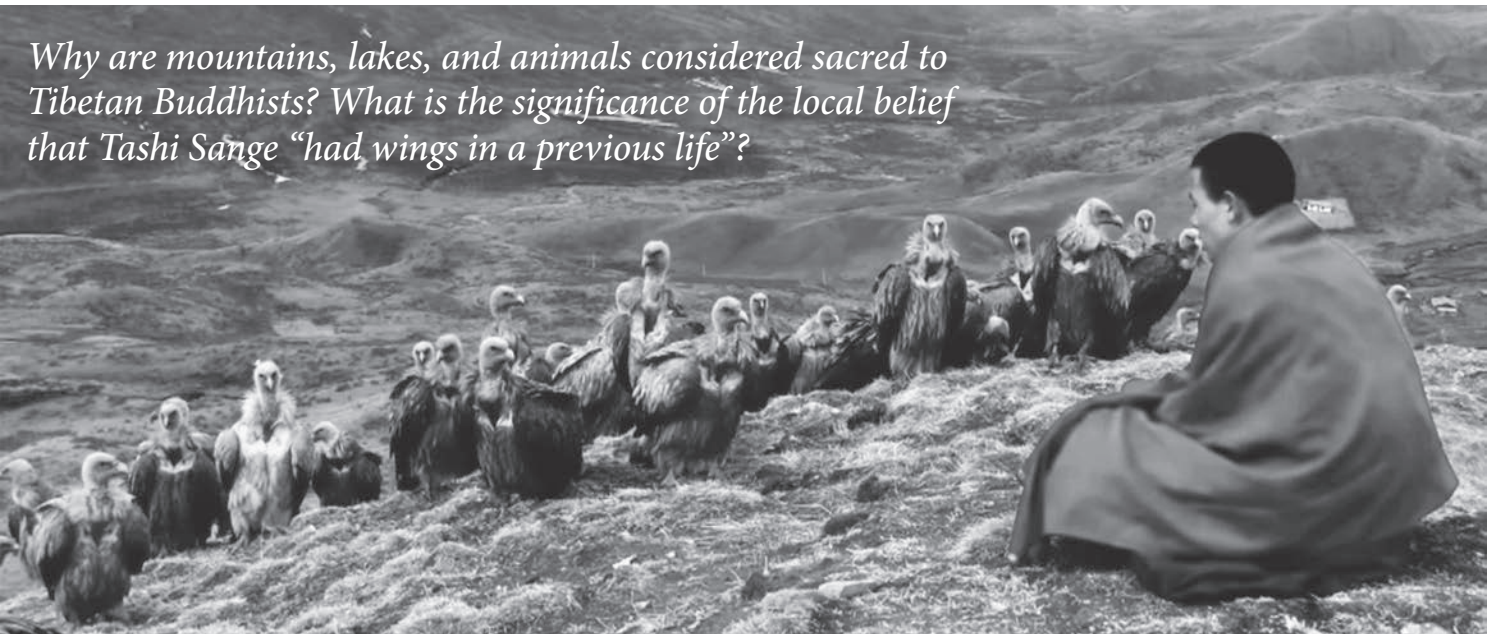
dearly and seeks to save; perhaps one of the guided online animal meditations, such as the Great Egret meditation by Jon Leland, which Dave introduced to our group, would fit well with such an exercise.³

But instructors could also engage in similar exercises with the film's main characters. Blake observes in this regard that the documentary, although short, is successful in its subtle interweaving of these narratives that becomes itself a reflection on all our shared stories and relations. The path of reconnection with the human–earth–ecosystem is simultaneously one of scientific and spiritual awakening to a deeper understanding and appreciation for the natural world. It eventually dawns on Jianqiang that the mountain Buddhists do not merely care for other people, they care for all living creatures.

Liu Jianqiang and Lu Zhi both discover ways of looking at environmental conservation on the Tibetan Plateau, where Buddhist monks and villagers have preserved these vast tracts of land for centuries. These new ways of looking, though, are manifested differently. Whereas Lu Zhi develops a richer understanding of the importance of environmental conservation through a realization of the power that the "sacred" designation brings to the preservation of the land's natural balance, Liu Jianqiang's way is one of spirituality. Blake adds that his personal journey up the sacred mountain to write the news story unexpectedly opens Liu Jianqiang to profound self-discovery and the story weaves into his personal life in a way he had never imagined, opening him to a sense of belongingness and peace.

Blake notes that on a larger scale, the documentary takes some notice of environmental justice, although Dave wonders if this element of the film should have received greater attention. The film references talk among politicians who at least give the appearance of paying attention to the importance of addressing environmental issues. However, the film mostly gestures toward the inherent value of respecting multiple

Why are mountains, lakes, and animals considered sacred to Tibetan Buddhists? What is the significance of the local belief that Tashi Sange “had wings in a previous life”?



Tashi Sange with the buzzards that he cares for. Source: Screen capture from *Searching for Sacred Mountain* on the GEJ website at <https://tinyurl.com/cuzfbchv>.

authoritative reports on earth care practices from the sciences and the Chinese wisdom traditions such as those of the Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucians. In this way, the film documents a movement in China that has parallels in the US, where many concerned with climate change, environmental degradation, and ecological injustice are beginning to realize the importance of adopting a radically inclusive stance on how to approach these issues.

Missed Sacred Opportunities

Herein also lies, perhaps, a missed opportunity for the film. Mark, who teaches the Tibetan genocide in his world religions and religion and violence classes, observes that the film offers only oblique references—possibly due to censorship or the fear thereof—to China’s rampant censorship, quashing of dissent, marked consolidation of power, and the increasingly brutal actions to “reeducate” the Tibetans and, more recently, other ethnic minorities such as the Uyghurs and Mongols under the Xi government.

The Chinese government’s brutalization of Tibetans began soon after the Communists’ 1949 ascension to power. The Red Army invaded Tibet in 1950 and quickly overran the country, thereby gaining control of a strategic stronghold at the Rooftop of the World. Since then, the government has exploited the country’s vast natural resources, violently assimilated and indoctrinated the Tibetan people into the dominant culture, much as it is doing now in Xinjiang, Mongolia, and elsewhere. Without knowledge of this brutal history, the seemingly harmonious images depicted in the film of smiling Chinese government officials and Tibetan Buddhist monks could easily be taken at face value.⁴

Second, when viewed from a religious studies perspective, viewers would have benefited from at least a cursory discussion of Tibetan Buddhist cosmological and ethical systems. That information would enable students to better understand some key questions left unanswered that Dave identified: Why, for instance, are mountains, lakes, and animals considered *sacred* to Tibetan Buddhists? What is the significance of the local belief that Tashi Sange “had wings in a previous life”? And who are the “living Buddhas” who signed one of his bird paintings? Dave also recommends asking students to consider potential problems with instrumental uses of religious beliefs in this way, particularly by individuals who do not share them.

The film is accompanied by a six-page teacher’s guide that offers a synopsis of the film, its subject areas, and clear summaries of its four

main sections (a time stamp for each section would have been helpful). The teacher’s guide links to lesson plans provided by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting and offers discussion questions and supplemental materials, suggesting, “An introductory class on Buddhism and ecology would help students prepare to view the film.” Aside from this welcome but time-consuming suggestion, there is little in the guide or the discussion questions that engage deeply with Buddhism generally or Tibetan Buddhism specifically, nor with the troubled modern history of

Tibet and China. We agree that targeted discussion questions and shorter supplemental readings such as those listed in endnote 4 could lead students to a more enlightening engagement with these issues.

Conclusion

These sorts of investigations would provide students with a base of knowledge from which to make fascinating cross-cultural comparisons. Blake, for instance, notes that Western scientists and indigenous wisdom traditions, like we see in the film, have much to contribute to the worldwide challenge of environmental degradation. For example, environmental biologist and citizen of the Potawatomi Nation Robin Wall Kimmerer argues that the awakening of ecological consciousness requires the acknowledgment and celebration of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living world. Kimmerer is a proponent of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, a way of understanding our ecological interconnection through the lived experience of land and place guided by a deeply spiritual empiricism. Here, Dave urges instructors to consider the United Nations Environment Programme’s publication titled “Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity.”⁵



Blake adds that the idea of the sacred in ecology is something that our own culture would do well to explore. As Yuchi Maskoke writer and environmental leader Daniel Wildcat writes in *Red Alert! Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge*, “In order to live well and fruitfully on this planet, humankind must sense the sacred in an experiential world beyond the human-created environments, information, and images that currently surround us.”⁶

Building on a variety of Western scientific studies, Travis Ray, Scott Franz, Nicole Jarett, and Scott Pickett found that nature-enhanced meditation positively impacts mindfulness, connectedness to nature, and pro-environmental behavior.⁷ Their message, embraced in our CALM principles, parallels the experience of Lihong, who recognizes that in finding environmental connection, we unlock the door to our own sacred center. Dr. Zhi observes that Buddhism’s approach to the concept of protection is through an act of self-discipline. Do laws based on punishment or economic incentives based on financial rewards work best? She notes that the Buddhist system is different: “it comes from the heart of the people.”⁸

Blake concludes, and Dave and Mark concur, ultimately that is what *Searching for Sacred Mountain* is about. The nature of human experience in its inherent interconnection with the land and all living creatures is the key to our awakening, our well-being, and our motivation for promoting the fundamental importance of environmental justice and earth care practices. In this way, the film fits nicely within a set of valuable and constructive conversations about the environment and mental health. In this respect and given its length, the film could be a helpful teaching resource for undergraduate courses across the liberal arts and sciences when accompanied by discussion of other larger issues the film does not explore in any detail. ■

NOTES

1. See Chai Jing’s 2015 *Under the Dome* for an exploration of these issues in China: <https://tinyurl.com/khwnpfxc>.
2. For descriptions of these exercises, see Dave Aftandilian, “Connecting Students [and Faculty] to Place and Animals through Contemplative Practices,” in ed. Lucas F. Johnston and Dave Aftandilian, *Grounding Education in the Environmental*

Humanities: Exploring Place-Based Pedagogies in the South (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 17–38.

3. See animalmeditations.com.
4. For information on the Tibetan independence movement, please visit freetibet.org. For a listing of articles on Tibet and Sino–Tibetan relations, see “World: Tibet,” *The New York Times*, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/5x7j6w87>. Students might read the following as companion pieces: Edward Wong, “Tibetans Fight to Salvage Fading Culture in China,” *The New York Times*, November 28, 2015, <http://nyti.ms/1Pi6f6w> together with Chris Buckley, “Tibetan Who Spoke Out for Language Rights Is Freed From Chinese Prison,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/aw6a85d4>. The latter article describes the January 2021 release from prison of Tashi Wangchuk, who was featured in the 2015 article. On artistic censorship, see, Amy Qin, “From a Tibetan Filmmaker, an Unvarnished View of His Land,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/nwn89xx>. Although dated, *Tibet: Cry of the Snow Lion* (2002) offers an excellent introduction to the Chinese military’s invasion and brutal occupation of Tibet.
5. Please visit <https://tinyurl.com/mrmfvpra> to download a PDF of the book in English.
6. D. Wildcat, *Red Alert! Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge* (Golden Co.: Fulcrum Publishing, 2009), 29.
7. Travis N. Ray et al., “Nature Enhanced Meditation: Effects on Mindfulness, Connectedness to Nature, and Pro-Environmental Behavior,” *Environment and Behavior* (2020): 1–27.
8. Shi Lihong and Gary Marcuse, “The Science of Sacred Mountain: An Extended Interview with Dr. Lu Zhi,” *The Pulitzer Center*, November 29, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/2u8m22zy>.

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