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Xie Lingyun, Preface To "Record of Excursions To Famous Mountains"

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40 | Xie Lingyun, Preface to *Record of Excursions to Famous Mountains*

THE PROMINENT EARLY-FIFTH-CENTURY poet Xie Lingyun (385–433) has been acclaimed for his long, descriptive literary masterpiece “Rhapsody on Dwelling in the Mountains.” He also earned an eternal niche in mountaineer lore for his use of footwear specially designed with removable platforms (literally, “teeth”) front and rear to facilitate either ascent or descent of mountains. For Xie Lingyun, the mountains represented pleasurable relief from officialdom, and he took to making outings following his appointment in 422 as Governor of Yongjia (modern Wenzhou, Zhejiang). Perhaps based on these outings, Xie Lingyun chronicled local landscape in a work titled *Record of Excursions to Famous Mountains*. While only a few fragments remain of this work, much or all of its brief, yet revealing, preface has been preserved.

In early-medieval China, mountains were associated with the salutary release from worldly encumbrances and perturbations, even though such wilderness was the perennial home of ordinary woodcutters. Men of the scholar-official class who chose to withdraw from a position in the administration were known by convention as “men of the mountain forests.” In the Preface, Xie Lingyun implies that one ordinarily fulfills one’s physical needs in places and situations which are not necessarily beneficent; he is certainly referring to government postings. Yet one’s natural leanings are toward intimate communion with the natural world, the world of mountains and waters beyond the constraints of the world of men. Irrespective of Xie Lingyun’s own personal vicissitudes (he was executed publicly for having supported an uprising against the ruling faction), the concepts expressed in his short preface evince a benign image of the natural world, a sentiment common to Xie’s time that still is a commonplace in traditional Chinese cultural attitudes.—AB

Preface

Clothing and food are what human life requires, while mountains and waters are what one’s natural disposition gravitates toward. Those of today, mired in the entanglements which accompany their needs, simply inhibit their natural inclinations.

The common view is that the root of joy fulfilled is found in a glorious (official) residence. Those, then, who bed in the cliffs and drink from the torrents are lacking in great aspirations, and thus always are found withered and haggard. I declare that it is not so. The Superior Man is solicitous about things by temperament, and by ability succors them. Damage due to things gone out of control can only be put in order by men of talent; thus at times there are cases of compromising oneself (i.e., compromising one’s natural inclinations) so as to assist others. How could they consider the arena of fame and gain to be more worthy than the realm of purity and expansiveness?

Speaking in terms of emperors, then there was the one who released his sovereignty at Dinghu

(the Yellow Emperor gave up temporal rule and ascended to the heavens at Dinghu). And in terms of heritors to the throne, then there was the one who severed all restraints at Mount Song (Xu You renounced Yao's offer of the throne and lived unfettered at Mount Song). Further, Tao Zhu (i.e., Fan Li) loftily forsook the stewardship of Yue, and the Lord of Liu (Zhang Liang) voluntarily retired from being Tutor of the Han. If we extrapolate from these examples, then it becomes clear.

—AB