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# A Study on the Establishment of Wudang Guard and Its Context of Geographical and Environmental *Fengshui* Survey

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to clarify the real institutional attribute of the Wudang Guard, reveal the integration mechanism between military survey techniques of the Ming Dynasty and Taoist geographical and environmental *fengshui* craftsmanship of Wudang, and reconstruct the collaborative operation mode of imperial mountain construction. Based on first-hand historical materials such as *Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty*, *Taiyue Taihe Mountain Gazetteer* and stone inscriptions, it examines the institutional origin, power responsibility boundary of the Wudang Guard, sorts out its engineering practices in mountain site survey, Taoist temple site selection and water system regulation, and traces the inheritance chain of the craftsmanship from the Ming Dynasty to contemporary times. The Wudang Guard was not a statutorily independent military unit, but a supporting garrison force detached from the Junzhou Defense Battalion and stationed in Wudang Mountain. It formed a three-in-one mountain construction paradigm of "Taoist pattern judgment field survey by garrison troops-project implementation". Refined over the Ming and Qing dynasties and sustained by Xu Benshan in the Republican era, this craftsmanship has been fully restored and passed on by the contemporary core inheritor Liu Kaifu, with Yan Tianrong and Yin Tianfu among his successors. The practical survey methods introduced by the Wudang Guard make up for the deficiency of traditional *fengshui* which overemphasizes theoretical deduction. This composite mountain construction craftsmanship possesses important historical documentary and living cultural research value.

**Keywords:** Wudang Guard; *Wei-Suo* System of the Ming Dynasty; Geographical and environmental *fengshui* survey; Taiyue Taihe Mountain; Mountain construction; Craftsmanship inheritance

## I. Introduction

Traditional geographical and environmental *fengshui* is a practical knowledge system integrating the investigation of mountain landforms, architectural spatial construction, the philosophy of human-nature harmony, and ancient ritual order. As a royal Taoist sanctuary recognized by successive dynasties, Wudang Mountain had made topographical evaluation a prerequisite for temple construction as early as the Tang and Song dynasties. In the tenth year of the Yongle reign of the Ming Dynasty, the Yongle Emperor issued an edict to construct the royal Taoist complex at Wudang Mountain. The mountain-construction project mobilized national resources and lasted for more than ten years, covering a mountainous territory stretching for approximately 400 kilometers. In addition to Taoist officials, civil administrators, and craftsmen, the imperial court dispatched garrison troops to Wudang Mountain,

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tasked with mountain-path excavation, forest conservation, and topographical reconnaissance. Hence, a special garrison system gradually took shape, later known as the "Wudang Guard".

Existing studies mainly focus on Wudang Taoist ideology, architectural forms and statue art, while specialized research on the institutional evolution, functional orientation and geographical and environmental *fengshui* practice of the Wudang Guard remain insufficient. Based on core historical sources such as the *Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty*, local chronicles, imperial edicts, and stone inscriptions, this paper first clarifies the historical nature of the Wudang Guard and examines the garrison troops' involvement in topographic mapping, water system renovation, and site selection. Furthermore, it interprets the integration mechanism between official survey technology and Taoist environmental theories to reconstruct the complete operational system of royal mountain construction in the Ming Dynasty. Finally, the study traces the full inheritance pedigree of this *fengshui* craftsmanship, aiming to supplement historical evidence for research on traditional mountain human-settlement construction.

## II. Origin and Textual Research on the Institutional System of the Wudang Guard

### A. Institutional Origin

The *Wei-Suo* System constituted the military foundation of the Ming Dynasty. As recorded in *History of the Ming Dynasty* (Volume 90), Treatises on Military Affairs II, "The Ming conquered the whole country by military force, abolished the old system of the Yuan Dynasty, and established guards and battalions from the imperial capital down to prefectures and counties." According to Ming military statutes, the "Wudang Guard" was never formally listed among official military units. It was a conventional name for garrison troops of the Junzhou Defense Battalion dispatched to Wudang Mountain for construction-related missions.

In the tenth year of the Yongle reign, the imperial court appointed Zhang Xin, Marquis of Longping, and Mu Xin, Prince Consort, to take overall charge of the construction project at Wudang Mountain. During the preparatory phase, troops were transferred from the Jingzhou Guard and the Wuchang Guard to open up mountain trails, quarry building stone, and clear sites for large-scale projects. An imperial edict recorded in the *Veritable Records of the Ming Taizong* (Volume 228), issued in the 22nd year of the Yongle reign, stated: "For the required labor force, select personnel from the officers and soldiers of the Junzhou Defense Battalion." This edict institutionalized the regular participation of the battalion's troops in the Wudang construction project.

In the first year of the Hongxi reign, the imperial court exempted the auxiliary troops of the Junzhou Defense Battalion from miscellaneous corvée labor and ordered them to be permanently stationed in the vicinity of Wudang Mountain. Three core duties were defined: first, patrolling the entire mountain territory to deter unauthorized settlers and prevent the destruction of forests and unfinished structures; second, maintaining Taoist temples, mountain paths, and embankments on a daily basis; and third, accompanying Taoist priests to explore mountain peaks and valleys, recording mountain contours and water systems, and compiling topographical records. Thus, the functional framework of the Wudang Guard was formally established.

During the Chenghua reign, Wei Gui, the supervising eunuch of Taiyue Taihe Mountain, further demarcated patrol boundaries and established formal mountain-reconnaissance mechanisms. Consequently, this garrison force, tasked with both

mountain security and topographical investigation, gradually acquired the designation "Wudang Guard" in local chronicles and regional documents.

B. Analysis of Functional Boundaries

As a supporting garrison force for the mountain construction project, the Wudang Guard was not a field army and undertook no border defense or combat missions. Its functions fell into three categories.

First, security and mountain conservation: troops conducted zonal patrols within demarcated mountain boundaries, protected mountain forests and temple complexes, regulated mountain land development, and prevented unauthorized land reclamation and deforestation.

Second, project support: troops built mountain paths, quarried building stone, leveled construction sites, and fully cooperated in the construction and renovation of temples.

Third, geographical reconnaissance: together with senior Taoist priests such as Sun Biyun and Ren Ziyuan, garrison officers and soldiers surveyed the Seventy-Two Peaks, marked topographical points, measured elevation differences and terrain contours, and sketched simple landform sketches to provide measured data for overall landscape planning.

In terms of the division of labor, the Wudang Guard was responsible only for field investigation and data collection, rather than site selection or layout planning. A collaborative pattern was thus formed: Taoist priests determined the overall layout, while garrison troops carried out on-site reconnaissance.

## III. Engineering Practices of the Wudang Guard in Wudang's Geographical and Environmental *fengshui* Survey

In the eleventh year of the Yongle reign, the imperial court ordered Sun Biyun to assess the mountain and water landscape of Wudang and plan the overall layout of the temple complexes. As recorded in the *Taiyue Taihe Mountain Gazetteer*, "By imperial order, Biyun traversed the peaks and cliffs to select sites for the palace halls". Officers and soldiers of the Junzhou Defense Battalion accompanied these large-scale mountain reconnaissance missions, clearing trails, determining orientations, and conducting topographic measurements to collect primary geographical data.

A. Research on Macro-Scale Mountain and Water Pattern

The natural landform of Wudang Mountain is characterized by the "Seventy-two Peaks bowing toward the Main Summit." Construction during the Ming Dynasty followed this natural landscape pattern, centering on the Golden Hall at Tianzhu Peak and arranging temple groups along the mountain valleys. Troops of the Wudang Guard conducted zonal surveys across the entire mountainous area, documenting stream directions, slope gradients, and soil thickness to compile topographical archives. Drawing on these records, Taoist priests evaluated the macro-landscape and determined the sites for major temples, including Yuxu Palace, Zixiao Palace, Nanyan Palace, and Wulong Palace, thereby laying the foundation for the overall spatial pattern of Wudang Mountain.

B. Foundation Investigation for Individual Temple Buildings

Following preliminary site selection, garrison troops cleared the ground, excavated test pits to assess soil stability and foundation bearing capacity, and documented environmental factors—such as topographic shielding and drainage patterns—to compile detailed survey records. Taoist priests then ultimately determined the hall orientations, building scales, and courtyard layouts based on these geological conditions and the broader landscape environment. Existing architectural traces at Zixiao

Palace and Nanyan Palace, along with relevant historical sources, attest to this collaborative surveying procedure conducted jointly by Taoist officials and the garrison troops.

C. Planning for Mountain Forest and Water System Regulation

Wudang Mountain is characterized by steep terrain and numerous gorges, making buildings and mountain paths highly vulnerable to flooding during the rainy season. To mitigate this, troops of the Wudang Guard regularly monitored the mountain's hydrological systems, assessed catchment areas and erosion paths, and collaborated with Taoist communities to construct drainage ditches, water-storage ponds, and retaining embankments. By adapting to the natural topography, these flood-control projects effectively diverted mountain torrents and mitigated flood risks, thereby achieving a harmonious integration between human construction and the natural mountainous environment. These initiatives serve as classic examples of mountain ecological engineering during the Ming Dynasty.

## IV. Integration and Inheritance of Geographical and Environmental Craftsmanship between the Wudang Guard and Wudang Taoism

In the early Ming Dynasty, the theoretical frameworks of Wudang's geographical and environmental *fengshui* were transmitted primarily through Taoist lineages. Senior Taoist priests, such as Qiu Yuanqing, Sun Biyun, and Li Sixi, possessed both profound religious knowledge and expertise in mountain landscape evaluation, thereby providing macro-level planning strategies for the imperial construction projects. Through prolonged participation in these mountain surveys, officers and soldiers of the Wudang Guard gradually acquired practical skills, including identifying mountain landforms, assessing hydrological systems, measuring distances, and analyzing soil conditions.

Descendants of military households stationed in the region studied Taoist landscape theories during their off-duty hours. They integrated military surveying, distance measurement, and elevation calculations with traditional environmental evaluation theories, developing a practical mountain *fengshui* system that emphasized field reconnaissance and on-site evidence collection. These two groups complemented each other: Taoist priests excelled in assessing macro-scale mountain and water patterns, while Wudang Guard troops specialized in micro-topographic surveys and geological investigations, thereby establishing a bidirectional technical framework of "theoretical assessment combined with field measurement."

In the mid- to late Ming Dynasty, large-scale imperial construction at Wudang Mountain came to an end. Comprehensive topographic investigations ceased, and the duties of the Wudang Guard were reduced to mountain protection and occasional maintenance. Nevertheless, descendants of military households who had mastered these integrated surveying techniques continued to interact with Taoist circles. Detached from the state-sponsored engineering apparatus, this craftsmanship transitioned into the folk sphere, where it was transmitted through oral instruction and practical demonstration in the hinterland of Wudang Mountain.

## V. Evolution of Inheritance after the Ming–Qing Dynastic Transition, Persistence in the Republican Era, and Continuity in Contemporary Times

The turmoil of the late Ming Dynasty led to the collapse of the *Wei-Suo* System, resulting in the dissolution of the Wudang Guard as a formal institution. Nevertheless, the geographical and environmental *fengshui* craftsmanship—integrating

military survey techniques with Taoist theories—endured, transitioning from state-sponsored engineering projects to folk practices.

During the Qing Dynasty, no imperial mountain construction projects were initiated. The inheritors diverged into two groups: some remained in the vicinity of Wudang Mountain and participated in local construction projects such as village planning, shrine construction, and residential site selection; others traveled across the country to conduct mountain reconnaissance and evaluate settlement sites, disseminating this geomantic construction craftsmanship beyond Wudang. In the late Qing Dynasty, Xu Benshan, a senior priest of the Quanzhen Longmen Sect and the administrator of Wudang's religious affairs, inherited and safeguarded this craftsmanship. Xu Benshan (1860–1932, Daoist name Weiqiao, the 15th-generation priest of the Quanzhen Longmen Sect) raised funds to renovate the courtyards of Yuxu Palace, Zixiao Palace, and the main hall of Nanyan Palace. He also supervised the construction of new mountain paths from Chaotian Palace to the Golden Summit, and presided over temple reconstruction, mountain path surveys, and the re-evaluation of historical sites. Before each renovation, Xu Benshan followed traditional workflows: he led fellow Taoist priests to conduct field reconnaissance, examine foundation soil layers, and assess hydrological patterns. Combining Taoist landscape doctrines with on-site measurements, he applied the surveying legacy inherited from the Wudang Guard to restoration projects in the Republican era. Furthermore, he compiled the *Revised Taiyue Taihe Mountain Gazetteer* to document the mountains, rivers, and temple sites of Wudang.

Xu Benshan had numerous historically documented disciples, including Shui Heyi, Luo Jiaopei, Wang Jiaohua, Yin Jiaosheng, Duan Heyan, and Li Helin. Li Helin, originally from Chengdu, Sichuan Province, traveled to Zixiao Palace on Wudang Mountain to become a Taoist priest under Xu Benshan, rather than having been recruited by Xu during a visit to Sichuan. Li Helin mastered Wudang Taiyi Five-Element Boxing and, starting in 1929, taught this martial art on behalf of his master. When the Red Third Army was stationed at Wudang Mountain in 1931, he followed his master's orders and cooperated with fellow disciples to ensure the safety of He Long, welcome the Red Army, and gather military provisions. After Xu Benshan was killed by bandits in 1932, Li Helin left Wudang Mountain and lived in seclusion in Chengdu until his death. Historical records only mention his return to Sichuan in his later years, with no evidence proving that he managed Taoist temples or founded new sects. Most of Xu Benshan's other disciples were natives of Hubei Province. Some accompanied the Red Army on campaigns through the Sichuan-Shaanxi border region after 1931. This later led to the claim that Xu Benshan had recruited disciples in Sichuan. However, available historical sources cannot confirm that Xu Benshan ever traveled to Sichuan to propagate his teachings or establish Taoist sites there.

Following Xu Benshan's death, amidst societal turmoil, the craftsmanship was no longer transmitted through official Taoist institutions. Instead, it relied on oral instruction and practical demonstration within folk master-apprentice lineages, eventually being passed down to the present day.

In contemporary times, this geomantic craftsmanship of mountain surveying—originating from the Wudang Guard of the Ming Dynasty and preserved by Xu Benshan—has been systematically restored, collated, and inherited by its principal inheritor, Liu Kaifu. Over the years, Liu has conducted extensive field surveys of ancient

construction sites across Wudang Mountain, restored Ming dynasty mountain reconnaissance workflows, and systematized landscape surveying techniques. Through these efforts, he has successfully preserved this unique construction system that integrates official and Taoist wisdom.

Among Liu Kaifu's successors are Yan Tianrong, Yin Tianfu, and others. They inherit his comprehensive scholarly lineage and uphold the core Ming dynasty principle of Wudang construction: "prioritizing on-site reconnaissance, supplemented by geomantic principles." They have been extensively engaged in the investigation of ancient heritage sites at Wudang, the environmental assessment of mountainous human settlements, and site selection surveys for folk shrines and dwellings. By carrying forward the six-hundred-year-old Wudang tradition of empirical surveying and the integration of Taoist thought with craftsmanship, they ensure the continuous, living transmission of this rare traditional mountain-building technique.

The thread of this inheritance is clear and verifiable: collaborative construction by officials and Taoists under the Wudang Guard of the Ming dynasty → scattered folk transmission during the Qing dynasty → preservation of the lineage amid the turmoil of the Republican era by Xu Benshan → systematic collation and restoration by Liu Kaifu in contemporary times → ongoing practical application by disciples such as Yan Tianrong and Yin Tianfu. This forms an unbroken lineage for the geographical and environmental *fengshui* craftsmanship of Wudang Mountain.

## VI. Conclusion

Textual research confirms that the Wudang Guard was not an independent military unit recorded in Ming dynasty official codes, but a conventional designation for garrison troops of the Junzhou Defense Battalion stationed at Wudang Mountain. During imperial construction at Wudang Mountain, these troops performed essential fieldwork including topographical reconnaissance, topographic mapping, foundation investigation, and water system measurement. Deeply integrated with the Taoist environmental theories of Wudang, they formed a tripartite mountain construction paradigm: "theoretical judgment, field reconnaissance, and project implementation."

Standardized, empirical military survey techniques introduced by the Wudang Guard compensated for the limitations of traditional landscape geomancy, which overemphasized theoretical deduction and lacked empirical support. They endowed the Wudang construction craftsmanship with rigorous, pragmatic, and empirically grounded technical characteristics, forming a distinctive academic lineage different from geomantic systems in other regions.

This integrated craftsmanship, merging official and Taoist wisdom, survived the fall of the Ming Dynasty and the turmoil of the Republican era. Xu Benshan played a pivotal role in ensuring its survival. In contemporary times, Liu Kaifu systematically restored and sustained this system, and successors such as Yan Tianrong and Yin Tianfu continue to practice and develop it. As a precious living heritage of Ming dynasty mountain governance, imperial mountain construction, and integrated Taoist and military expertise, the construction history and inheritance pedigree related to the Wudang Guard offer valuable supplementary insights for research on China's traditional mountain human settlement history, Ming dynasty military engineering history, and Wudang cultural inheritance history.

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