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From Mountain Faith to Pengxuan Dongtian - A Study on the Evolution of Dongtian in the Vicinity of Mount Tai

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Abstract: Using Mount Tai as a case study, this paper examines the significance of “Dongtian fudi” in Taoist cosmology and their role in the sacralization of natural geography. In Taoist thought, cave heavens are sacred realms where heaven and earth converge—abodes for immortals and sites of spiritual cultivation—symbolizing transcendence and access to the Dao. Drawing on ancient texts, the study outlines the classification and distribution of these sites to reveal their underlying cultural logic. As the foremost of the Five Sacred Peaks, Mount Tai holds a distinguished status and is further elevated by its designation as the “Pengxuan Dongtian.” Through analysis of associated legends, rituals, and inscriptions, the study highlights Mount Tai’s central role in Taoist belief across dynastic periods. It also explores the mountain’s spatial connections with other cave heavens and its position within Taoism’s sacred geography.

Keywords: belief in Taishan; Cave of Heaven; Taoist cosmology; feudalism; sacred geography

1. Introduction



Caves represent a distinctive element in early folk beliefs and the evolving religions worldwide, with the cave serving as a symbol of the universe having a long-standing history in both Europe and China. The cave serves as the abode of the gods, a link between two realms, and is partially accessible to mortals. This phenomenon is particularly evident in Taoism, which has even given rise to the term “Cave Heaven.” Cave Heaven, fully described as “a cave in which there are other worlds,” is defined by the phrase, “the sky is not called empty, the mountain is not called a cave, and the human is not called a room”. (Miller, 2012) Taoist practitioners associate the concepts of the cave, heaven, and man, as reflected in the Tao Te Ching. According to this text, man follows the law of the earth, the law of the earth follows the law of heaven, the law of heaven follows the law of the road, and the law of nature follows the law of the road. In the perspective of Taoist practitioners, the sacred is found within the mundane world. (Miller, 2003)

Consequently, through an act of mimetic sorcery, Taoist practitioners believe that practicing in a cave near the divine abode can lead to immortality. Scholars suggest that the concept of “dongtian” originated from the Shangqing school of Taoism. This catalog included “cave days”, comprising “ten major cave days” and “thirty-six minor cave days”. The majority of these “cave heavens” were situated in renowned mountains and perilous locations, initially chosen for their suitability for rituals. Taoism subsequently evolved and enriched this original form of natural rituals. (Hahn, 1988) In his renowned article on Taoism, Verellen discusses the diverse attributes of “cave heaven,” which serves as a sanctuary, a site for enlightenment and transcendence, and the pinnacle of paradise, all situated within the sacred mountain. This indicates that the “cave” was selected by practitioners not only as the dwelling of deities and a venue for human practice but also as a retreat to evade the tumult of the era (Verellen, 1995). A unique tale exemplifies this concept in “The Story of Peach Blossom Garden,” where the protagonist traverses a small cave to discover a peaceful realm devoid of conflict and detached from the outside world. This narrative vividly illustrates the notion of a heavenly sanctuary within the cave of “Cave Heaven,” a refuge sought by individuals to flee from the turmoil of wars and chaos. This illustrates the concept of finding sanctuary within the cave, where individuals seek refuge from conflict (Chiang, 2009). Consequently, in Taoist cosmology, a connection can be established between heaven and earth through a cave.



2. From Early Folk Beliefs to Sacred Places in Tarzan

Taoism evolved from the legend of Fang Shi, Taoist canon and folk beliefs, in order to counterbalance with the political and religious environment at that time, it copied the basic model of the regime in the form of organization, using personal centralization, local partition means. Many of these “twenty-four zhis” are related to mountain ranges, originated from the practices of folk sects such as Zhang Lu, who were united in politics and religion. (Yi, 2001) The “twenty-four zhis” are often associated with mountain ranges. Around the local rule, each “zhi” was also assigned a corresponding person in charge, as the Han Tianshi Shiji, Volume 2, states, “Twenty-four zhis were established, and four additional rules were set up to respond to the twenty-eight constellations. Positive gas through the lower, to sixty A sub-birthday, belonging to each rule, set thirty-six Jinglu, seventy-two blessed land, 360 famous mountain rank, each set of God’s Division.” That is to say, from this period of “zhi” to become a systematic cave of heaven and paradise, the beginning of each place on the corresponding responsible deity, this development and Taoism itself is inseparable from the organization. In this process, Taishan Fujun was also absorbed into the Taoist deity system and became an honored deity. Dongxuan Lingbao Wuyue Guben Zhenshangtu” said: “East Yue Taishan Jun, leading the group of gods 5,900 people, the main rule of death and life, the master of the ghosts of the marshal also, blood food temple sacrifices Zongbo also. Commonly worshiped by the ghosts and shrines of the evil spirit of the gods and the dead, are returned to Taishan by the crime of ko yan.” The duties of this venerable god are no different from those of the original Taishan Faith God, only more specific. In Ge Hong’s “Pillow Book”, another god is mentioned, “Tai Hao’s for the Qing Di, Dai Zong Mountain,” the Qing Di is the embodiment of the five elements, the idea of the five elements can be seen to have been absorbed by Taoism.

In this summary of the cave theory, it is very important to focus on each cave has a deity, which is obviously from the development of this governmental mythological system, and the mountain inhabited by the deity is the earth immortal. In “Hug Park Zi - On Immortality”, it is said, “The upper classman lifts his form and ascends to the void, which is called the Heavenly Immortal. The sergeant who traveled to the famous mountains is called the Earth Immortal. The lower ranked immortals who die first and



shed their mortal forms later are called “Corpse Immortals”. It can be seen that there is a hierarchy of gods and goddesses, and the ones who live in the mountain are medium status gods and goddesses, sergeants. Taishan also certainly has a corresponding deity, “Hold Parker Zi Nei Chuan - Jindan” said, “is the ancient Taoist priests, the cooperation of divine medicine, must enter the famous mountain, not only in the mortal mountain, is for this also. And according to the immortal scripture, you can think about cooperation with the immortal medicine, there are Huashan Taishan Huoshan Cangshan, this is all the positive God in its mountains, which or the people of the earth immortal”, that is to say, these mountain ranges are inhabited by the gods. Cave Heavenly Bliss Records” recorded, “the second Dongyue Taishan cave. The name of the cave is Pengxuan Dongtian, and it is located in Qianfeng County, Yanzhou, and it is ruled by the Duke of Shantu. This Shantu Gongzi is also recorded in the “Biography of the Immortals - Shantu”, “Shantu, Longxi people also. Less good horse ride, the horse spoiled the folded feet, mountain Taoist taught to serve rhubarb, angelica, live, bitter ginseng, served a year and not addicted to food, the disease is healed body light. Chasing the Taoist asked, since the cloud: ‘five mountains make, the famous mountain medicine. Can follow me, you will not die.’ Shan Tu followed for more than sixty years, returned to the line of mother’s clothing in the mound, the period of years to go, do not know what.” He was a hermit who took the path of spiritual cultivation after being guided by Taoist priests in the mountains. In the “Zhouyi-Kun Gua II”, it is said that “Heaven and earth are closed, and the wise man is hidden”, which not only means that the spiritual qi of heaven and earth is declining, resulting in the seclusion of those who have the ability to live in seclusion, but also means that those who have the ability to live in seclusion to the place where there is a spiritual qi, and the two are corresponding. The purpose of the hermit is also the pursuit of longevity, which Max Weber addresses in Konfuzianismus und Taoismus, where he argues that longevity is the purpose pursued by the hermit, and that longevity is also one of the characteristics of the gods and goddesses. Thereby, mountains, gods, and longevity are closely bound together by Taoism, the key to which is the twofold attribute of the cave, connecting heaven and earth.

3. Status and development of Taishan Cave Days



Taoism centered on man's quest for immortality, with the fangshi believing that finding an immortal and swallowing a sacred potion would lead to longevity, and Tarzan was in the midst of such a folk cult because of its ability as a meaningful mountain range for hell and fealty. Early Taoist immortals were mysterious, either born or with no one knowing the process of their cultivation, only that they had the chance to do so. With the development of Taoism, practitioners were not satisfied with relying on external forces and coincidences to achieve their goals, but hoped for a more stable and feasible means, so the method of internal elixir cultivation was put forward, and even exaggerated as the most effective means, in the Wujing Psalm, "Learning of immortality must be learning of heavenly immortality, but only the jindan is the most effective". It shows that Taoist practitioners try to cultivate themselves by means of inner cultivation, and such an inner cultivation is the sympathy between the small universe and the big universe, and they believe that the laws of operation of the heaven and the earth and the laws of action of the human body are the same. This also means that all things in the world have similarities and connections. Just as the small universe of the human body corresponds to the big universe outside, the caves in the natural mountain ranges can also correspond to the outer heaven and earth, forming the relationship between the outer heaven - the cave heaven - the earth. In the traditional Chinese cosmology of the unity of heaven and man, the cave heaven and the world of bliss connect the two realms of the earth and the immortal world, expanding the immortal mountains and holy places in the Taoist legends, and the famous mountains, rivers and natural landscapes in the folk reality become the concrete embodiment of the fairyland of people's imagination(Xu, Zeng, Tang, Bai, & Wang, 2024) In the cultivation of Neidan, it is extremely important to realize the importance of the spirit. In Neidan practice, what is extremely important is the unity of qi, nature, and life, and meditators will see the peaks of the body as glimpses of deeper meditation, especially through contemplation to cultivate the relevant qualities, and one may realize that these same qualities can be cultivated in oneself through intensive and prolonged meditation. And as mountains have properties that include distance, elevation, solidity, and stability, practicing at their intersections is a retreat for the body and a place for meditation.

Caves can also be understood as entry points to the earth, the landscape and the Tao, where one finds oneself in the womb of the land, and they are also associated with darkness, emptiness and inclusiveness. These characteristics make it possible for



the aura of the mountain to converge in the caves, and thus the best place to practice in the mountains is in the caves, where the practitioner can get closer to heaven and feel the “heavenly air” of the first birth of heaven and earth. Similarly, this place is also full of dangers, crisis and opportunities. Thereby, the character of Taishan as a hell is once again revealed, and people believe in the underworld of Taishan, and this breath between life and death will help Taoist practitioners to better transcend life and death. And what is special is that the terrifying attribute of Taishan as a hell only became more serious after the introduction of Buddhism, and the early Taishan underworld was just another place for people to live after death. Like the traditional Chinese folk belief of ancestor worship, people do not consider death to be unbearably painful or the world after death to be an endless disaster, but rather the worlds of life and death are connected, and there is even the possibility of becoming immortal after death.

The natural geographic attribute of Mount Tai as the Five Mountains, with its continuous mountain range, was also understood by monks as a holistic sacred attribute, which was also absorbed by the cave theory. That is to say, naturally, mountains connect the world, but also in sacred geography, the “Five Mountains” connect the sacred universe. The Five Sacred Peaks are not only a geographical concept, but also a vast coordinate system that transcends their natural characteristics. (Lei & Zhao, 2022) The five sacred peaks are not only a geographical concept, but also a vast coordinate system that transcends their natural features. The Shuo Wen Jie Zi - Shan Bu says of the mountains, “Shan: Xuan yi. Xuanqi, gives birth to all things, and there are rocks and heights.”, which means that mountains are not static rocks, but can produce things in the world through the movement of qi, the emission and circulation of the essence of life. And while Taoism emphasizes the inner rather than the outer aspects of the mountain, practitioners perceive that the clouds around the peaks and the hidden potential in the earth merge in secret caves in the mountains to produce the gold, jade, and minerals needed for alchemy. These grottoes extend far down the mountain and are microcosms with their own sun and moon (Raz, 2009) The “Cave Heaven” is a place where the sun and the moon are epitomized. This idea is even more prominent in the ideal model of the “cave”. There are four entrances in four directions, some of which are real and recognizable, while others are conceptual and impossible to find. Each “cave” is a small world, connected to each other around the central Kunlun Mountain, just as in the outside world. (ZHU, 2018) The “Cave



Heaven” is a small world, like the outside world, centered around the central Kunlun Mountain and connected to each other. Thus, it is only natural that Mount Tai, as one of the most important mountains in sacred geography, has gained a supreme status in Taoism, and that its cavernous heavens are ranked second among the “36 cavernous heavens”.

4. Conclusion

As an indigenous Chinese religious tradition, Taoism’s cave system unveils the profound interconnectedness of a vast and intricate mystical universe, where the celestial deities and earthly mortals exist in close proximity, and where individuals can bridge heaven and earth through caves. This unity is exemplified by the inseparable link between natural and sacred geography, with Mount Tai assuming a central role in this intricate web.

In ancient mythology, Mount Tai served as a gateway to the underworld, providing Taoist priests a platform to mediate between gods, humans, and spirits. Through the ritualization of this eerie locale, practitioners believed they could harness supernatural forces through ceremonial practices and sorcery. Taoism ingeniously interwove the realms of sea and land immortality, creating a systematic network of caves and celestial sites that were interconnected, embodying the notion that “famous mountains and rivers, and caves and caverns are linked.” Within this holistic integration, Mount Tai’s unique cultural significance positioned it at the heart of the celestial caverns, with the local deities of Mount Tai assimilated into the Taoist pantheon as revered divinities. The evolution from ancient mountain worship to the Dongtian system of the Han and Tang dynasties vividly illustrates the gradual construction of the Dongtian realm. Initially resembling a governmental hierarchy of deities necessitating earthly representations, this system evolved towards the popularization of mystical practices and the practitioners’ pursuit of aligning the macrocosm with the microcosm. This transition marked a shift from grand-scale worship to personal cultivation. The progression from sacrificial rites to power-seeking sorcery and ultimately to celestial attunement showcases the mythologization and gradual formation of caves in response to the evolving needs of practitioners.



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