

Feasibility Study on the Nomination of “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands: Cultural Landscape of Taoist Worldview”

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Abstract

“Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” are a unique Taoist conceptual system of sacred places in China. These sacred spaces, located in spectacular and abundant landscapes where immortals dwell in legend, reflect the Taoist worldviews about the balance of nature, society, and belief in immortality. The system was first recorded in the 2nd century and came to maturity in the 7th century, during which 118 locations across China were established by 2 Taoist masters as the official components of the system. This system had a profound impact on rituals, literature, painting, and gardening art in China and other countries in East Asia. Taoists have kept these places as spiritual and natural sanctuaries for over 1,000 years. In the context of a Feasibility Study for the Nomination of “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands: Cultural Landscape of Taoist Worldview” on to the World Heritage List, this article aims to give a brief introduction and analysis of the sacredness of the Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands.

KEY WORDS: Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands, Taoism, Sacred Mountain, Cultural Landscape, Serial Heritage

1. Introduction

“Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands,” 洞天福地, are a unique Taoist conceptual system of sacred places in China. For Taoist disciples, these spectacular and abundant places are the dwellings of immortals, the transition between Heaven and Earth, and the entrance from the human world to the celestial world. Taoist priests deemed the “Cave Heavens” (洞天 Dongtian), literally meaning Heavens in the Cave, but also called Grotto-heavens or Speluncean Heavens, to be senior portals to reach deities in Heaven. The “Blessed Lands” (福地 Fudi), also translated as “Places of Bliss”, are regarded as junior portals to reach Earthly deities, which humans can access these once they cultivate themselves.

1.1 Location

This system consists of the 10 “Major Cave Heavens” (十大洞天 Shi Da Dongtian) (Mt.Wangwu 王屋山 [Fig. 1], Mt.Weiyu 委羽山, Mt.Xicheng 西城山, Mt.Xixuan 西玄山, Mt.Qingcheng 青城山, Mt.Chicheng 赤城山, Mt.Luofu 罗浮山, Mt.Juqu 句曲山, Mt.Linwu 林屋山, Mt.Kuocang 括苍山), 36 “Minor Cave Heavens” (三十六小洞天 Sanshiliu Xiao Dongtian) and 72 “Blessed Lands” (七十二福地 Qishier Fudi). The majority of these components are located in the Southeast and Southwest provinces of China [Fig. 2] such as Sichuan, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Anhui, Fujian, Jiangxi, Shandong, Henan, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Hunan, Hubei, Guangdong, Guangxi, and the Gansu Province, which was the main territory of the Tang Dynasty (619-907).

1.2 History

The belief that the “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands”



Figure 1: Drawing of Mt. Wangwu 王屋山图, the 1st Major Cave Heaven. Source : Drawings of Famous Mountains in the World 天下名山图, Qing dynasty (1644-1912).

were a link to the world of immortals derived from the ancient Chinese belief that immortals resided in Mount Kunlunshan 昆仑山 (the ideal centre of Heaven and Earth in Ancient Chinese cosmology) and the “Three Immortal Mountains on the sea in the Warring States Period” (475 B.C.-221 B.C.). These immortal mountains could not be reached in reality.

During the 2nd Century, 24 mountain sites in Shu 蜀 (Sichuan Province) were chosen as Zhi 治 (parishes) by Taoist masters, which could be considered the origins of nature reserves because of the strict prohibition of hunting, felling, mining, or any source of pollution. The Taoist adepts inhabited Zhi during peacetime, observing detailed rules for protecting all living beings around Zhi, while the general public were also allowed to live there during wartime or famine (Sheng 2010).

Many Taoist sanctuaries were established with the spreading and expanding of Taoism through other provinces in the following centuries, with numbers reaching more than 150. These tangible places, with landscape beauty, vegetation, and

wildlife, started to be revered as “Cave Heaven” or “Blessed Lands” and provided an alternative path to the immortal mountains. As late as during the Southern Dynasties (420-589), 36 “Cave Heavens” appeared as a concept in the record of Zhen Gao (Hongjing 456-536).

During the Tang Dynasty, two famous Taoist masters, Sima Chengzhen 司马承祯 (639-727) and Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933), researched, assessed, and made a detailed list of 118 sites under three levels: 10 “Major Cave Heavens”, 36 “Minor Cave Heavens”, and 72 “Blessed Lands” (Chengzhen 639-727, Guangting 850-933). This conceptual system was widely accepted and gradually propagated, with a profound influence on rituals, literature, painting, and gardening art in China, as well as in other Eastern countries.

■ 2. Sacredness of “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands”

Generally speaking, a “Blessed Land” represents the wonderland that human beings can reach in life. Its



Figure 2: Locations of Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands. Source : Illustrated by CHCC in May , 2017.

rich soil and graceful landscape allow people who inhabit them to attain immortality, or at least good health and longevity. Therefore, a “Blessed Land” is a concept that can be applied to other places besides just the 72 “Blessed Lands”. In fact, there are 88 recorded “Blessed Lands” in different ancient documents.

Compared with the “Blessed Land”, the concept of a “Cave Heaven” is rather complex and more abstract. In the ideal model of a “Cave Heaven” there are four entrances in four directions. Some entrances exist in reality and can be recognized while some are only conceptual and cannot be found. Every “Cave Heaven” is a small world, just like the outside world, surrounding the centre, Mount Kunlunshan, and connecting with each other. The sacred space of a “Cave Heaven” generally has the following

conceptual characteristics [Fig. 3]: inaccessible entrance, another world, birth of a new life, and a window to the sky. People who hope to enter the “Cave Heaven” have to fast, pray, and undertake a long journey to find the entrance and get inside the cave. In this process, they will experience separation, limen and aggregation.

To some extent, similar inaccessible entrances and symbols of rebirth in caves can be found in other cultural contexts, like Tie Yangzom of Tibetan Buddhism in China and Mount Omine of the Shugendō tradition in Japan. The difference is that caves in other religions are independent and can be accessed, while caves in the “Cave Heaven” in Taoism are believed as external portals, mouths, or “gas openings” linked to the other world and to the other “Cave Heavens”, which could hardly be confirmed

as physically accurately given the deep and narrow inner structures.

Since the portals of a “Cave Heaven” were important to people, the early Taoists used to live beside the entrance where they set altars to worship Taoist immortals living in this area. Gradually, these altars became building complexes that, over time, became sacred historical sites [Fig. 4, Fig. 5]. Similarly, the existing “Blessed Lands” became Taoists’ sacred sites for the cultivation of vital energy, surrounded by abundant resources and gifted with scenic beauty.



Figure 3: Ideal Model of the Cave Heaven. Source : Illustrated by Tao Jin 陶金 of CHCC in May, 2017.



Figure 4: Drawing of Mt. Juqu (Huayang Cave Heaven), the 8th Major Cave Heaven. Source : Base map: Maoshan Chronicle 茅山全志, Qing dynasty (1623-1692). Illustrated by the author in May, 2018.



Figure 5: Sacred Compositions of Mt. Juqu (Huayang Cave Heaven), the 8th Major Cave Heaven. Source : Photograph: CHCC in July, 2016.

■ 3. Significance

“Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” are an important part of the traditional Chinese worldviews about the balance of nature, society, and their belief in immortality. These places represent the embodiment of the concept “Harmony between Man and Nature” (天人合一 Tian Ren Heyi), which stands for the unity of man’s body with the mountains, rivers, and earth. The distribution of “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” records the development of Taoism. This conceptual system has influenced traditional landscape design in China, as well as literature, landscape painting, and garden arts in other East Asian countries. The landscape, architecture, rituals, and literature related to “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” have been safeguarded and have survived to this day.

Compared to other World Heritage properties, where religious beliefs are part of the Outstanding Universal Value [Fig. 6], very few properties include Taoism in their statement of significance. However, with Buddhism listed as one of the main religions, there are 7 World Heritage properties in China (Mogao Caves, Dazu Rock Carvings, Longmen Grottoes, etc.) and 43 World Heritage properties in other Asian countries. Even though 4 famous Taoist mountains have already been inscribed (Mt.Wudangshan 武当山, Mt.Qingchengshan 青城山, Mt.Longhushan 龙虎山, and Mt.Sanqingshan 三清山), their association

to Taoist beliefs was not considered as part of their Outstanding Universal Value. In the case of Mt. Wudangshan, the architectural value of the group of buildings (WHC 1994) has been stressed in its statement of Outstanding Universal Value, while in the case of Mt. Dujiangyan-Qingchengshan (WHC 2000) the scientific value of its ancient irrigation system has been praised. Moreover, Mt. Longhushan (WHC 2010) and Mt. Sanqingshan (WHC 2008) have been inscribed as Natural Heritages, with no acknowledgement of their religious value.

■ 4. Current situation

Each site is separately managed by 3 different types of departments: religion departments (Religious Activities Site in State Administration for Religious Affairs of P.R.C, China Intangible Cultural Heritage in Ministry of Culture of P.R.C), cultural heritage departments (World Cultural Heritage and Cultural Relics Protection Units in State Administration of Cultural Heritage) and natural heritage departments (World Natural Heritage and National Park of China in Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of P.R.C, Nature Reserve of China in Ministry of Environmental Protection of P.R.C, National Forest Park of China in State Forestry Bureau, National Geopark of China in Ministry of Land and Resources of P.R.C). In most sites, management systems are focused on single ancient buildings or limited scenic spots and do not provide protection for the integral area or recognize the sites as a system.

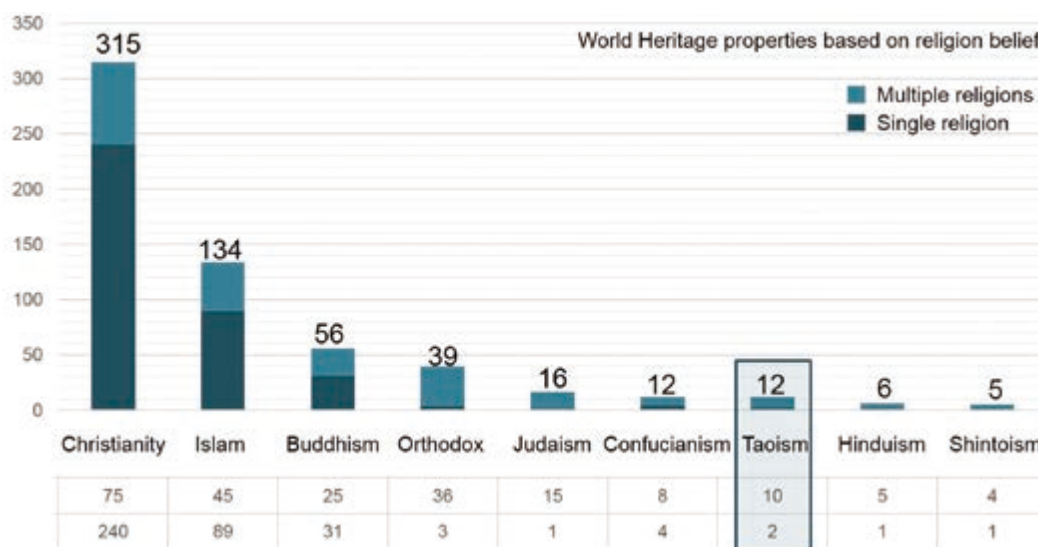


Figure 6: World Heritage properties based on religion belief. Source : Illustrated by the author in May, 2017.

Nevertheless, an alternative comprehensive approach to heritage conservation could support the protection of the “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” system. For instance, the concept of Cultural Landscape in the World Heritage context is broad, flexible, and applicable to heritage sites that represent a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, which is sometimes expressed through intangible cultural values. As a cultural landscape representing the Taoist religious system, “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” need to be conserved and managed by overarching policies that provide a consistent approach to the whole system.

Following comprehensive research on the subject (Aishan Foundation 2013) and seeking the support of the local administration, the request for the nomination of the cultural landscape of “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” was officially proposed by the Chinese Taoist Association in 2018.

“Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” could be nominated as a Cultural Landscape, which represents the “combined works of nature and of man”. Under the sub-category of “associative cultural landscape,” this property could be listed on its virtue of its powerful religious associations to its natural environment, like other sacred landscapes, such as Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range in Japan (WHC 2004), Tongariro National Park in New Zealand (WHC 1993), the Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain in Kyrgyzstan (WHC 2009), Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove in Nigeria (WHC 2005), rather than based on material cultural evidence. In addition, a nomination as a serial property could have international relevance and provide a more powerful and comprehensive interpretation of all values.

■ 5. Recommendations

As a result of this feasibility study, “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” could meet the criteria for OUV as a Cultural Landscape World Heritage site.

The monuments and sites that form the cultural landscapes of “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” originated from the period of Han Dynasty (202 BC to 220 AD) and illustrate the interchange and development of Taoist religious cultures. The

caves, Taoist temples and their associated rituals in “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” bear a unique and complete testimony of the development of local Chinese beliefs over the past 2,000 years. The sites and the sacred cave landscapes of “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” provides endless legends about immortality, great ancestors and initiation, and are directly and tangibly associated with living Taoist rituals, traditional folk religion, as well as artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance in China and other East Asian countries. “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” are exceptional landscapes in terms of natural beauty, with caves, mountains, vegetation, and wildlife, where no hunting, land clearing, mining, or pollution was allowed in ancient China making them important protected areas for almost 2,000 years.

“Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” embody the sustainable and environment-friendly Taoist worldview of oriental naturalism. The continuous conservation of “Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands” reflects the Chinese ideal for an Earthly paradise in both spiritual and natural sanctuaries. Therefore, its nomination and possible inscription would fill existing gaps in the World Heritage List as well as positively contribute to dealing with the world’s environmental problems by showing a comprehensive picture of ancient China.

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