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The Medieval Daoist Metaphor of the Cave: Cosmogony, Sacred Geography, and the Human Body

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Abstract This article examines three aspects of medieval Daoist theology and practice formed around the metaphor of the cave: the cosmogony represented by the concept of the Hollow Cave (*kongdong* 空洞), the sacred geography embodied in the Grotto-Heavens (*dongtian* 洞天), and the human body conceived through the Grotto-Chamber (*dongfang* 洞房). The objective of this study is to explore how Daoism interpreted the general notion of the cave, and how Daoist conceptions extended beyond religious discourse to influence the broader intellectual context of medieval China.

Keywords Medieval Daoism. Metaphor. Cave. Cosmogony. Sacred geography. Human body.

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1 Introduction

The cave holds significant metaphorical and mythological meanings across various cultures worldwide.[1] Since prehistoric times, it has functioned as a shelter, sanctuary, burial site, and more, thus naturally associated with concepts such as creation, rebirth, protection, mystery, and divinity. The English word 'cave' is derived from the Latin term *cavus*, meaning 'hollow' or 'concave'. In contrast, the corresponding Chinese character *dong* 洞 traces its etymology to the swiftly flowing water.[2] The meaning of a cave as an enclosed space, whether naturally formed or artificially constructed, was initially represented by the characters *xue* 穴 or *ku* 窟.[3] According to transmitted texts, this connotation does not seem to be attributed to the character *dong* until the later Han period, around the third century (Cai 2019, 15-16).[4] Thereafter, the character *dong* became interchangeable with *tong* 通, which denotes actions such as penetrating, communicating, and thoroughly comprehending. These distinctive traits of the character *dong* thus add additional layers of meaning to the Daoist concept of the cave. In the following discussion, I will first analyze the role of the cave metaphor in shaping Daoist perspectives on cosmogony, sacred topography, and the human body. I will then explore how these three dimensions are interconnected through cave imagery. Finally, I seek to illustrate the significant impact of the Daoist cave metaphor on the intellectual framework of medieval China.[5]

1 An early draft of this paper was presented at the PhD symposium *Metaphors, Conceptualising Horizons of Meaning* at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 26-28 February 2024. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the organizers of this event for their support. I am especially grateful to Jin Wenxin, the moderator of the panel, for her warm welcome and valuable exchange of ideas. I would also like to thank the panelists and audience for their thoughtful questions and critiques. I am deeply indebted to my mentor, Prof. Vincent Goossaert, whose guidance has been instrumental in shaping my research on Chinese religions and whose encouragement continues to inspire me. His insightful critiques and suggestions on this paper have significantly enhanced its quality. Finally, I extend my gratitude to the reviewer and editors of this paper, for their constructive suggestions, which have greatly improved the final version of this work.

2 The ancient Chinese dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Simple Graphs), dated to the second century, defines the character *dong* as follows: "洞，疾流也" (Dong, [means] the swift currents). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

3 *Shuowen*: "穴，土室也" (Xue, [means] the earthen chamber); *Yupian xuebu* 玉篇•穴部: (Jade Chapters, Section on the radical 'Cave') "窟，穴也" (Ku, [equals] xue).

4 Besides, a study of the character *dong* used in the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), a fundamental text of traditional Chinese medicine, offers indirect evidence: see Dong, Jiang 2018.

5 The texts from the Daoist Canon cited in this article follow the monumental compilation, *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (or *Daozang tongkao* 道藏通考), co-edited by Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen (2004).

2 Cosmogony: *Kongdong* 空洞 (Hollow Cave)

Cosmological concerns have been a central theme in Chinese philosophy since its inception. The concept of Dao 道, literally meaning 'the Way', as introduced by Laozi 老子, has been particularly influential and is intrinsically connected to the later development of Daoist cosmogony. It provides a fundamental framework for understanding the universe's origin and structure within Daoist thought.[6] The *Daode zhenjing* 道德真經 (Classic of the Way and Virtue, DZ 664), attributed to Laozi, describes the essential characteristics and formation processes of Dao as follows:

> 有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆。可以為天地母。吾不知其名，字之曰道。(001:007a3-5)
>
> There's a thing that is harmoniously unified, predating Heaven and Earth. It is quiet and vast, independent and unchanging. It goes everywhere and does not get injured. It can be the mother of Heaven and Earth. I do not know its name, so I designate it as Dao.
>
> 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為合。(002:002b1-2)
>
> Dao gave rise to the One, the One generated the Two, the Two produced the Three, and the Three brought forth the Myriad Things. The Myriad Things carry *yin* on their backs and embrace *yang*, blend the *qi* and result the harmony.

The Dao is conceived as the ultimate source of the universe and the Myriad Things, arising not from external forces but from its own intrinsic nature. Medieval Daoism inherited and further developed this conception, interpreting Dao's generative power through two primary approaches. The first interpretation adopts a theological framework, identifying Laojun 老君 (Lord Lao) as the incarnation of Dao, a perspective likely rooted in creation mythology traditions. For instance, it might echoes the well-known cosmogonic myth of Pan Gu 盤古, which depicts how the giant, endowed with immense strength, separated the initial formless chaos into Heaven and Earth, and how his body transformed into various elements of the natural world after his death (Yu 1981, 479-500; Schipper, Ye, Yin 2011). Alternatively, the second approach follows a more philosophical framework, attributing

6 There are undoubtedly other ideas that have contributed to the development of Daoist cosmogony. For a discussion on the multiple sources of Daoist cosmogony, see for example: Wang 2012, 67-85.

the generative force to *yuanqi* 元氣 (Primordial Energy), a fundamental concept grounded in the general philosophy and astronomical sciences of the Warring States period and Han Dynasty (circa the fifth century BCE to the third century CE). These two viewpoints are not mutually exclusive but intertwine in certain aspects (Sun 2006, 50-2). In any case, the phase of *kongdong* 空洞 (Hollow Cave) is an indispensable element in the Daoist view of cosmic formation. See below for two citations that illustrate these approaches.

Consider firstly the following citation from the *Hunyuan huangdi shengji* 混元皇帝聖紀 (Hagiography of the Sovereign Ancestor of the Origin of the Chaos), included in the *juan* 102 of the Daoist encyclopedia *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (Seven Signs of the Cloud Bookcase, DZ1032), compiled by Zhang 張君房 (fl. 1008-29):[7]

> 太上老君者，混元皇帝也。乃生於無始，起於無因，爲萬道之先，元氣之祖也。蓋無光無象，無音無聲，無宗無緒。幽幽冥冥。其中有精，其精甚真。彌綸無外，故稱大道焉。夫道者，自然之極尊也，於幽無之中而生空洞焉。空洞者，真一也。真一者，不有不無也。從此一氣化生，後九十九萬億九十九萬歲，乃化生上三氣。(102:001a5-001b2)
>
> The Most High Old Lord is the Sovereign Ancestor of the Origin of the Chaos. He was born of the Without-Beginning; He emerged from the Without-Cause; He preexisted Ten Thousand Ways; He is the ancestor of the Primordial Energy. Without light, without image, without sound, without noise, without ancestors, and without inception, [he is] dark and mysterious, within which are essences, most true essences. [The essence] is immense without outer boundary, hence it is called the Great Dao. Dao is the Ultimate Sovereign of the spontaneity. Within the dark Non-Being, the Hollow Cave was created. This Hollow cave is the True One. The True One is neither Non-Being nor Being. From this one energy, ninety-nine trillion, ninety-nine billion years later, the generation of the Three Energies proceeded.

In this statement, the Hollow Cave is equated with the True One, which is brought into being by the vague and formless Dao. It is only at this point that the One energy begins to transform and generate the Myriad Things. At the same time, a cosmogony centered around Primordial Energy is also present within the same compilation. In *juan* 2 of the *Yunji qiqian*, which specifically contains treatises

7 Notice that during the time when this encyclopedia is compiled, Daoist currents and textual traditions had developed very different cosmologies, sometimes even competing, as we will see.

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on cosmology from various lineages, there is one passage entitled "Kongdong" 空洞 (The Hollow Cave):

> 道君曰: 元氣於眇莽之內，幽冥之外，生乎空洞。空洞之內，生乎太無。太無變而三氣明焉。[...]上氣曰始，中氣曰元，下氣曰玄。[...]故一生二，二生三，三者化生以至九玄，從九反一，乃入道真。氣清成天，滓凝成地，中氣為和，以成於人。三氣分判，萬化稟生。日月列照，五宿煥明。(002:002a6-002b5)

> The Lord of Dao states: Primordial Energy existed within the Vague and Vast, outside the Dark and Mysterious. It gave rise to the Hollow Cave. Within the Hollow Cave, the Great Non-Being was born. The Great Non-Being undergoes transformation, leading to the clarification of the Three Energies. [...] The upper energy is called the Preliminary [Energy], the middle the Cardinal [Energy], and the lower the Mysterious [Energy]. [...] Thus, the One generated the Two, the Two generated the Three, and the Three transformed to produce the Nine Mysterious. The Nine [Mysterious] returned to the One and thereby entered the True Dao. The clear energy formed Heaven, the heavy energy congealed into Earth, and the middle energy harmonized [the energies] to create humanity. The Three Energies differentiated and transformed into the Myriad things. The sun and the moon were arrayed, and the five planets were illuminated.

This citation suggests that the Hollow Cave represents a particular phase in the formation process but can also refer to the entire sequence of creation. It is not a term consistently used across all Daoist cosmological texts. For example, *juan* 2 of *Yunji qiqian* contains other chapters that present cosmogony as recorded in various earlier texts. The terminology varies, as reflected in titles such as *Hunyuan* 混元, *Hundun* 混沌, and *Hundong* 混洞 (respectively: Origin of the Chaos, Primordial Chaos, and Chaotic Cavern).Nevertheless, from a functional perspective, equivalents to the Hollow Cave can be identified within these systems, signifying a crucial stage in the preliminary cosmogonical process.

How, then, is cosmological idea elucidated through the metaphor of the cave? First, the materiality of the cave provides a vivid image of the One generated by Dao: indistinct, dark, elusive, ineffable, and mysterious. It represents the formless origin that is neither *Non-Being* nor *Being*, but the union of these complementary opposites. Secondly, if we consider the etymology of the Chinese character for 'cave' as related to rapidly flowing water, we understand that the Hollow Cave is not a static, empty space, but rather a dynamic chaos filled with vitality, endless potentiality and generative fertility. An analogy may be drawn between the movement, differentiation, and reintegration of energy (*qi* 氣) into the Myriad Things, and the way in which water

flows, diverges, and converges to form new streams. Thirdly, the cave metaphor illustrates Dao's attribute of connectivity. As explained in *Daode zhenjing guangyi* 道德真經廣義 (Comprehensive Meaning of Dao De Jing, DZ 725), a commentary on *Daode zhenjing* by the prominent Daoist scholar Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933): "道，通也。通以一氣生化萬物" (4:6b9) (Dao signifies passage and communication. Through the One energy, [Dao] generates the Myriad Things). Hence, Dao is portrayed as the principle that links the primordial cosmic chaos with all forms of life.[8]

3 The Sacred Geography: *Dongtian* 洞天 (Grotto-Heaven)

The Grotto-Heaven is one of the most emblematic and well-known sacred landscape systems in Daoist religious tradition (Raz 2010, 1399-442; Hahn 1988, 145-56; Hahn 2000, 683-707).[9] Consisting of caverns located within or beneath actual mountains in China, the Grotto-Heavens are conceived as the dwellings of immortals and realms rich in the materials required for producing elixirs. At its core, the journey to these Grotto-Heavens is a pursuit of immortality.

According to transmitted texts, the concept of Grotto-Heaven can already be found in Shangqing 上清 (Highest Purity) tradition, dating back to no later than the fourth century (Miura 2017, 336-40). The first full systematization of the geo-cosmology of Grotto-Heavens known to us was achieved in *Tiandi gongfu tu* 天地宮府圖 (Diagram of Celestial and Terrestrial Palaces and Residences), composed by the Shangqing patriarch Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎 (647-735). Based on this earlier work, Du Guangting, an eminent Daoist at the late Tang court, compiled a comprehensive catalog and guide to the Daoist spiritual landscape, titled *Dongtian fudi yuedu mingshan ji* 洞天福地嶽瀆名山記 (Record of Grotto-Heavens, Blessed Places, Ducts, Peals, and Great Mountains, DZ 599).[10] The preface of this *Record* outlines the pivotal role of Grotto-Heavens within the context of Daoist geo-cosmography as follows:

8 This specific usage of the character *dong* is also evident in the categorization and nomenclature of the Daoist Canon, in which Dongzhen 洞真, Dongxuan 洞玄, and Dongshen 洞神, constitute three fundamental categories, indicating that through these texts, one can access the mystery, the spirits, and the state of immortality.

9 Several other systems exist, as noted in the *Mingshan ji* (Records of Great Mountains) (DZ 599), which will be mentioned later: "又有海外五嶽，三島十洲，三十六靖廬，七十二福地，二十四化，四鎮諸山。" (001b5-6) (In addition, there are the Five Peaks beyond the Seas, the Three Isles and Ten Continents, the Thirty-Six Pure Hermitages, the Seventy-Two Blessed Places, the Twenty-Four Dioceses, the Four Regulators and other various mountains).

10 For more details on the Grotto-Heaven's historical development, see Verellen 1995, 272-9. See also Weiss 2012, 31-60.

> 乾坤既闢，清濁肇分。融為江河，結為山嶽。或上配辰宿，或下藏洞天。皆大聖上真，主宰其事。則有靈宮閟府，玉宇金臺。或結氣所成，凝雲虛構。[…]為天地之關樞，為陰陽之機軸。(001a2-8)
>
> When Heaven and Earth were separated, and the pure [*qi*] was distinguished from the turbid, the great rivers were formed from melting, and the towering mountains through solidification. Above, the stellar mansions were arranged; below, the Grotto-Heavens were stored. Governed by great sages and superior Perfected, these Grotto-Heavens contain divine palaces and spiritual residences, jade halls and golden terraces – towering structures formed from congealed clouds and solidified *qi*. […] [These places serve as] the pivot of Heaven and Earth, the axle of Yin and Yang.

Moreover, the Grotto-Heavens are interconnected by numerous intersecting paths, forming an extensive subterranean network. Consider the following citation from *Zhengao* 真誥 (Declarations of the Perfected, DZ 1016) by Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456-536), an early text of the Shangqing tradition, which provides a detailed description of the configurations of the Grotto-Heaven in Gouqu 句曲:

> 句曲洞天，東通林屋，北通岱宗，西通峨嵋，南通羅浮，皆大道也。其間有小徑雜路，阡陌抄會，非一處也。(11:7a8-10)
>
> From the Grotto-Heaven of Gouqu [extend] great paths, eastward to Linwu, northward to Mount Dai (in Shandong), westward to Mount Emei (in Sichuan), and southward to Luofu (in Guangdong). Between them lie numerous intersecting paths, [the Grotto-Heavens] are not [confined] to a single place.

This interconnectivity is a defining feature of the Chinese concept of cave, as evidenced by the linguistic equivalence between the characters *dong* (cave) and *tong* (connected) mentioned earlier. Such a specific topological perspective likely draws inspiration from ancient geographical concepts. For instance, the mythical geographical treatise *Hetu guadixiang* 河圖括地象 (The River Chart and the Diagram Encompassing the Earth), probably dating back to Han Dynasty, states: "The famous mountains and great rivers are interconnected through caves and hollows" 名山大川，孔穴相連 (Yasui, Nakamura 1994, 1091). The center point of this network is called *dongting* 洞庭 (cave court), and the underground channels are referred to as *dimai* 地脉 (Earth's veins).

In contrast to those ancient mythical paradises, such as Penglai 蓬萊 (Campany 2006, 291-336), which are believed to exist in far-off seas and accessible only through an arduous journey, the Grotto-Heavens

are situated both within and beyond visible topography. Though continuous with the physical landscape, the Grotto-Heavens form independent microcosms with their own spatial and temporal cycles. As *Zhengao* states: "The sun and moon inside Grotto-Heavens are like those of the Great Heaven (outside), dispensing their light in turn to shine within" 按諸洞天日月[...]蓋猶是大天日月，分精照之 (011-006b1). The internal world of Grotto-Heavens mirrors the external world so closely that individuals who accidentally enter it may not realize they have crossed into another realm.

This unique spatiality links Grotto-Heavens with tombs, another significant representation of the cave metaphor. As art historian Hung Wu noted:

> More profoundly, a grotto-heaven and a tomb were connected by a shared imagination: both places were located in this world but were governed by specific temporal and spatial orders that distinguished them from the surrounding environment of this world. (Wu 2010, 60)

Moreover, Grotto-Heavens are closely associated with tombs due to their shared function as passages toward transcendence. "Any tomb is created first as a vacuum, – it starts out as a pit dug in the earth, rocks or wood piled up to make a hole, or a cave carved in a hillside" (Wu 2010, 17). By the mid to late Western Han (around the first century BCE), these tombs evolved into the chamber grave (*shimu* 室墓) structure. In Han conceptions of the afterlife, death did not represent an ultimate end but rather a transition toward immortality, which could be attained through postmortem cultivation. The chamber grave depicts three distinct spheres, each corresponding to one of the major systems of visual representation: the idealized posthumous underground residence that mirrors the opulent life of the deceased; the cosmic environment that transforms the tomb into a symbolic microcosm; and the immortal paradise embodying the belief in postmortem immortality (Wu 2010, 7-17; Jiang 2015, 28-42). The tomb serves as a crucial medium for the transformation of the body, offering a passage from mortality to immortality, thus paralleling the Grotto-Heavens as the gateway to the transcendent world.

In addition, it is essential to emphasize the deeply intertwined relationship between the inner Grotto-Heavens and the outer mountains, which endowed the former with attributes of fertility and enlightenment. Mountains had long evoked awe and inspired religious imagination due to their majestic height, reaching into the clouds. In ancient Chinese mountain cults, great mountains were revered as guardians of the space, believed to secure and stabilize

(*zhen* 鎮) the physical world.[11] While Daoism aligned with the broader imperial and popular veneration of mountains as symbols of spatial authority, it particularly focused on their interior (Michael 2016, 23-54). Hidden within these mountains – whose etymology signifies "emitting the *qi* that forms Myriad Things"[12] – the mysterious caves are associated with the image of the earth's womb. Just as the primordial hollow cave that created the universe and living beings, the Grotto-Heavens are envisioned as a matrix for producing precious materials for elixir compounding, as well as a site of cosmic revelation (Verellen 1995, 265-90).

Finally, it is worthwhile to revisit the initial assertion of this section, that the journey to Grotto-Heavens is primarily a quest for immortality, and to delve into its deeper implications. In Grotto-Heaven literature, the motif of the 'ignorant intruder' frequently appears as a cautionary figure: a mortal who accidentally enters the eternal and blissful paradise but ultimately retreats due to his attachment to mundane life, thereby losing the paradise forever. Nonetheless, in actual Daoist practice, Grotto-Heavens are exceedingly difficult to locate. Access is reserved for a select few who possess both resolute intention and esoteric techniques. Such an adventure encompasses physical movement, for example, the techniques applied for the exploration often involve the use of *Wuyue zhenxing tu* 五嶽真形圖 (Diagram of the True Form of the Five Peaks), which depicts the true form of the great mountains,[13] and functions as a talisman to protect practitioners from malevolent spirits believed to reside in the mountains.[14] More significantly, the journey consists of a meditative peregrination into a hidden realm beyond the tangible landscape. The enigmatic forms illustrated in the essential talismanic atlas *Wuyue zhenxing tu*, serve more as a guide for an inner journey than a map of topography. Thus, through the cave, one embarks on a passage to the inner realm and into the "pervasive and fecund emptiness which is the Dao" (Raz 2010, 1405).

11 The inspection tours (*Xunshou* 巡守) conducted by emperors to the Five Peaks (*Wuyue* 五嶽) – which are located at the four cardinal directions and the center – serve as a significant symbolic assertation of imperial control over the realm. Similarly, the imperial ritual ceremonies known as *feng* and *shan* rites (*Fengshan* 封禪) predominantly performed at the central Mount Tai 泰, are intended to affirm the emperor's Heavenly Mandate (*Tianming* 天命), thereby legitimating the emperor's divine authority to rule. For a more in-depth discussion of these imperial rites and their corresponding Daoist interpretations, see Tsai 2004.

12 The *Shuowen jiezi* explains the character *shan* 山 (the mountain) as "山，宣也。宣氣散生萬物。" (Equal to *xuan* 宣, which emanates *qi* to form Myriad Things).

13 For a further in-depth study of this diagram and the concept of True Form, see Schipper 1967, 114-62; Huang 2012, 165-76; Steavu 2019, 94-101.

14 For a more comprehensive study on the relation between the concept of True Form and Grotto-Heaven, see Cheng 2013, 95-106.

4 The Conception of the Human Body: *Dongfang* 洞房 (Grotto-Chamber)

The imagery of hollow spaces and connective tunnels remains influential in Daoist conceptions of the human body. The term *dongfang* 洞房 (Grotto-Chamber) here refers to a specific area within the head and reflects the body's cavernous features. Consider the following excerpt from a Shangqing text dated to the late fourth century, *Ziyang zhenren neizhuan* 紫陽真人內傳 (Esoteric Biography of Perfected of Purple Yang, DZ 303), which reveals the conceptual similarity between the internal cavern of the body and those found in the cosmos and mountains:

> 真人曰: 天無謂之空, 山無謂之洞, 人無謂之房也。山腹中空虛, 是為洞庭。人頭中空虛, 是為洞房。(12b1-3)
>
> The Perfected says: 'the emptiness of heaven is referred to as 'hollow', that of mountains as 'grotto', and that of a human body as 'chamber'. The void within the belly of mountains is termed the 'Cave Court', while the emptiness within a human head is designated as the 'Grotto-Chamber'.

The Grotto-Chamber can be literally understood as a residence for the primordial oneness. In the *Baopu zi* 抱樸子 (Master Who Embraces Simplicity, DZ 1185), a fundamental text on alchemy, immortality, and philosophy, the author Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-363) delineates the locations of the primordial One inside the body as follows:

> 道起於一, 其貴無偶, 各居一處, 以象天地人, 故曰三一也。[...] 一有姓字服色, 男長九分, 女長六分, 或在臍下二寸四分下丹田中, 或在心下絳宮金闕中丹田也, 或在人兩眉間, 卻行一寸為明堂, 二寸為洞房, 三寸為上丹田也。(18:1a5-1b6)
>
> The Dao starts from the One, whose value is unparalleled. [The One] resides separately [in the three parts of the body], representing Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, and thus is referred to as the Three-Ones. [...] The One possesses a name, trappings, and color. It measures nine *fen* for men and six *fen* for women. It dwells within the Lower Cinnabar Field,[15] located two *cun* four *fen* below the navel; or may be situated within the Middle Cinnabar Field, beneath the Deep Red Palace – the Golden Gate of the heart; or between the eyebrows, where moving one *cun* backward (toward

15 The Cinnabar Field (*dantian* 丹田) refers to an energy center within the body where vital energy (*qi*) is believed to be stored and cultivated.

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> the center of the head) reveals the Brilliant Hall, two *cun* the Grotto-Chamber, three *cun* the Upper Cinnabar Field.

This passage indicates that the One represents both the primordial state preceding creation and a divine entity within the human body.[16] Its presence signifies the integration of the Dao within the human form and underpins the primary objective of Daoist body cultivation: to revert to a unified state with the original One and thereby attain immortality. The human body is conceived as a microcosm that essentially mirrors the universe in both nature and structure (Pregadio 2006, 121-58). The entire cosmos is incorporated within the body:

> every single part of the body corresponds to a celestial or geographical feature of the world – the body is the world. Vice versa, the world is also in the body. There are a sun and a moon, stars and planets, mountains and rivers, cities and fields, roads and passageways, palaces and towers. (Kohn 1993, 162)

Such landscape of the inner realm should seem familiar when recalling the configuration of the Grotto-Heavens. Similarly, the immortals residing in the Grotto-Heavens have their counterparts in the body: the Body Gods (*shenshen* 身神). These anthropomorphic deities inhabit various parts of the body, each with a specific name, physical appearance, and trappings. They are the gods inside the body that correspond with the gods of the heaven above.[17] Through the specific meditation technique known as *Cunsi* 存思, which means keeping something in mind and contemplating it, practitioners visualize the Body Gods and their associated body parts according to the instructions. This practice aims to maintain these divinities in their proper locations, helping to prevent illness, ensure divine protection, and ultimately achieve longevity and immortality.[18]

The next point worth investigating is the cave's tunnel-like feature as it appears in Daoist conceptions of the human body. In this view,

16 While the concept of the One is polysemous across different traditions, for a comprehensive study of the notion of the One and its associated practices, see Schipper 1993, 130-59. See also Kohn 1989, 125-58.

17 For example, one emblematic set of divinities resides in the Nine Palaces within the head, which "are symbolic representations of the totality of the universe within human beings. Also present as the Constellation of Nine Palaces in the sky, they are cosmologically related to the nine provinces as established by the sage emperor Yu in his circuit of China as well as to the Writing of the Lo River, a sacred numerological chart representing the nine provinces and thereby the division of the entire world". For additional reference, see Kohn 1991, 236-7.

18 For a more thorough study on the essential practice of early Daoism Cunsi, see Cheng 2017, 141-76; see also Huang 2010, 57-90; see also Li 2009, 174-95.

the internal cave of the body is not a completely enclosed space but is interconnected with the external world without any separation. Through meditation practices, adepts engage in an ecstatic flight, which refers to a spirit excursion across the heaven, the mountains and the body. Such mental trips take place in an intermediary world created by the "active imagination" (Robinet 1989, 160-1). Although this world is imagined and therefore not physically real, it is nonetheless considered real, as it is inhabited by individuals who, through their experiences, create a new self. Thus, the seemingly limited physical body in this way is turned inside out and expanded infinitely. The microcosm of the body is inverted to encompass the macrocosm, as *Ziyang zhenren neizhuan*, introduced at the beginning of this section, further elaborates in its discussion of the body's internal cavern:

> 是以真人處天處山處人，入無間。以黍米容蓬萊山，包括六合，天地不能載焉。(12b3-4)
>
> Therefore, the perfected resides in heaven, within mountains, and within the human body, without any separation between them. [Through his body he travels freely, as if] a single grain of millet could encompass Mount Penglai,[19] embracing the six directions,[20] [so vast that even] Heaven and Earth could not contain it.

5 Conclusion

Up to this point, through a succinct exploration of the three essential domains – the cosmos, the mountain, and the human body – we have observed how the cave metaphor consistently permeates medieval Daoist epistemology. On the one hand, the cave, as a dark and mysterious space, stimulates religious imagination regarding the primordial cosmic creation, sacred sites concealed within the terrestrial landscape, and the human body as a dwelling for divine forces. On the other hand, the specific connotation of the term 'cave' in Chinese language – implying fast-moving water and tunnel-like features – adds further dimensions to each of these realms. This perspective elucidates how Primordial Energy differentiates and transforms into the Myriad Things, how Grotto-Heavens scattered across the Chinese land are interconnected to form a network, and how the body's internal systems correspond with the external world.

19 A mythical mountain in Chinese folklore and Daoist tradition said to be located on islands in the Eastern Sea, often imagined as paradisical realm where dwells the immortals.

20 It literally denotes the north, south, east, west, up, and down, and is frequently employed to refer to the entire universe.

Moreover, these realms are not isolated but are linked through fundamental analogies. They represent "merely relative phenomena, closely interrelated and quickly overcome once one has entered the visionary mode" (Robinet 1989, 164).

The formation of Daoist epistemology is intrinsically associated with the intellectual background of ancient China. The three essential spheres previously discussed are grounded in the 'correspondence theory' (*ganying* 感應) found in Pre-Qin and Han cosmology and philosophy, which posits that Heaven (*tian* 天), Earth (*di* 地), and Humanity (*ren* 人) are dynamically related. A comprehensive analysis of how each of these spheres is situated within the broader intellectual context exceeds the scope of this paper. My focus here is to illuminate how the Daoist cave metaphor, in turn, contributed to shaping the specific perception of the cave in medieval Chinese thought and its enduring influence.

Firstly, in the Chinese language, the character *dong* appears in words such as *dongguan* 洞觀 (to observe deeply), *dongxi* 洞悉 (to fully comprehend), and *dongcha* 洞察 (to perceive insightfully), where '*dong*' functions adverbially to denote clarity or profound understanding – a usage that remains common today. However, such a linguistic application was not prevalent in earlier periods. It is reasonable to infer that the Daoist cave metaphor, representing a site of enlightenment and transcendence, contributed to this semantic expansion.

Secondly, in literary tradition, the renowned tale *Taohuayuan ji* 桃花源記 (Record of the Peach Blossom Spring) written by Tao Qian 陶潛 (Yuanming 淵明, 365?-427), depicts a secluded, hidden realm free from the turmoil and corruption of the outside world. In this narration, the protagonist, a fisherman, enters a paradisaic land through a small opening in the mountain. After passing through a narrow corridor, the world of the Peach Blossom Spring revealed to him. This tale became a symbol of idealized harmony and peace in the collective imagination, inspiring numerous adaptations and interpretations throughout history (Bokenkamp 1986, 65-77; Yang 2013, 329-78). Notably, Tao's tale was recorded shortly after the Daoist revelations at Maoshan 茅山 (364-370), documented in the *Zhengao*, which describes the configurations of Grotto-Heavens.[21] The parallels between literary discourse and Daoist sacred geography are evident, particularly in the structural correspondence between the internal microcosm and the external macrocosm, as well as in the shared yearning for simplicity, transcendence and utopian harmony.[22] Moreover, 'Taoyuan' 桃源 (Peach Spring), a concrete

21 For a thorough study on these revelations, see Strickmann 1981.

22 For a more detailed discussion on the Daoist influence on this tale, see Miura 2017, 388-97. In addition, one should not overlook the influence of the hermit tradition, which

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location in Northern Hunan 湖南 that is closely tied to the setting of Tao's tale, demonstrates an even stronger association with Daoism. It was included in the Daoist numerological configuration of sacred topology, the 'Thirty-Six Grotto-Heavens'. Furthermore, historical records indicate that a Daoist monastery existed at the site of Peach Spring, receiving official recognition in 748, with its foundation likely dates back to Tao's era (Meulenbeld 2021, 1-39).

Thirdly, in the tradition of visual and architectural arts, the later aesthetic principles of Chinese garden design provide an evident example of the Medieval Daoist cave metaphor's long-lasting influence. When addressing this issue, the concept of 'Hutian' 壺天 (Pot-Heaven), which shares many similarities with the Grotto-Heaven, is frequently mentioned. This notion first appeared in the hagiography of an immortal named Fei Changfang 費長房, found in *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Book of the Later Han). The text narrates that Fei observed an old man selling medicines in the market who, every day after the market closed, jumped into a pot. Fei then paid him a formal visit and was invited into the miraculous world inside the pot. The idea of considering a garden as a Pot-Heaven for the secluded retreat of a literati emerged as early as the Tang dynasty. For instance, Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) wrote in his poem *Chou wuqi jianji* 酬吳七見寄 (Reply to Wu Qi's Letter): "誰知市南地，轉作壺中天" (Who knows [this] place in the south of the town has become a heaven in the pot). After the Tang dynasty, the concept of Pot-Heaven became a key idea in garden design. It was used to designate the garden itself as a serene space for contemplation, relaxation, and introspection, providing an environment where individuals could retreat from wordily distractions, engage in spiritual cultivation, and reconnect with nature. Furthermore, the Pot-Heaven embodies the artistic techniques of garden arrangement, with the aim of reflecting natural scenery withinthe limited scale of a garden, where a simple rockcan represent a mountain, and a small pond can symbolize a vast ocean. What is particularly notable about how the cave metaphor is concretized in garden design is the setting of transitional spaces, often represented by specific architectural elements or winding corridors. These spaces are frequently named after Grotto-Heavens and resonate with the transitional function of the former, which serve as gateways to the immortal's world (Zhou 2018, 74-5).[23] These examples are merely a few, and the influence of Daoist cave metaphor remains a propound topic deserving further scholarly exploration.

significantly shaped the motif of the Peach Blossom Flower, as well as early Daoist practices and reverence for mountains. See Michael 2016.

23 For more examples of the influence of the Daoist cave metaphor on visual and architectural art traditions, see Little 2000, 147-62; Stein 1990; Jiang 2003, 56-62.

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