



“Cave Motifs in Chinese and Armenian Literature: Portals to the Mystical World and Their Literary Legacy”

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Abstract: Caves as abodes of supernatural forces are significant in traditional Chinese religions, specifically Taoism. In Taoist sources, caves are described as places where or through which a chosen individual gains access to a world entirely distinct from the real one. Caves also serve as representative symbols of the otherworld in Armenian traditions. However, they do not always conceal a blissful realm within them, as is often the case in Taoist writings. This article explores caves as symbols of the heavenly and blissful worlds in Taoist works, and Armenian caves as locations harboring supernatural powers.

Keywords: cave, Taoism, immortality, Chinese Literature, Armenian folklore

Introduction: Exploring the Cultural Significance of Caves in Different Societies

Across diverse cultures, folk stories, legends, and myths enshroud the profound significance of caves. These enigmatic natural formations have served multifaceted roles throughout history, encompassing religious, ritualistic, and aesthetic functions. Notably, within the tapestries of Armenian and Chinese cultures, an array of traditions, myths, and behaviors intertwine with the significance of mountains and caves.

The narratives associated with caves predominantly intertwine with the nomenclature and geographical positioning of specific mountains, given the habitual proximity of caves to the bases, slopes, or summits of these landforms. For instance, a group of revered mountains in China holds sacred status, invoking veneration and distinct reverence among the Chinese populace (Mount Tai 泰山, Mount Hua 华山, Mount Heng 恒山, Mount Song 嵩山 and Heng Mountain 衡山). Integral to these mountains are the caves that reside within them, often embellished with temples at their entrances or adorned with statues depicting figures from Buddhist or Taoist traditions.

Taoism, an influential philosophical and religious tradition in Chinese culture, venerates mountains as sanctuaries, offering solace from the rigors of civilization. These natural landscapes symbolize freedom and seclusion, providing a refuge where individuals seek medicinal herbs and other substances. Moreover, these mountains harbor the essential components requisite for Taoist alchemical practices, including mineral resources and precious

stones such as emeralds, crucial for formulating elixirs promising immortality and eternal youth. Notably, the caves of these mountains are believed to be inhabited by immortals¹.

In the Armenian culture, mountains, stones, and caves, exemplified by landmarks such as Maruta Mountain, Masis Mountain, Aragats, Mrav, Nemrut, and Andok, hold a central place in the spiritual traditions of the Armenian people². Notably, Mount Nemrut attained prominence as a site of worship, initially dedicated to the god Khaldi and subsequently evolving to revere the deities Aramazd and Vahagn. Legends surrounding the caves of Mount Masis, conversely, associate them with malevolent spirits and enigmatic phenomena.

This article embarks on an exploration of several Chinese and Armenian traditions and narratives concerning caves. Primarily, it demonstrates the interconnectedness of these narratives and, through comparative analysis, elucidates the role and significance of caves in the cultural lives of both nations. The discourse culminates in the revelation that while the external characteristics of these cave stories diverge, they share common motifs. Foremost among these shared motifs is the centrality of caves as places of religious veneration, inextricably linked with various rituals or revered figures. Within the scope of this article, we refrain from delving into the Christian connotations of caves, as such an exploration constitutes a complex and extensive field of study.

For comparative insights, Armenian folk tales, such as "Little Mher" (Փոքր Մհեր) and "Artavazd and Artashes" (Արտավազդ և Արտաշէս) are juxtaposed with Chinese sources, including Taoist narratives and the renowned work Taohua yuanji 桃花源記 ("Peach Blossom Spring") by the eminent Chinese author Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365–42).

This article employs a multifaceted approach, combining analytical, comparative, and cross-cultural methodologies. The analysis hinges on a synthesis of primary narratives, traditions, and stories from these two distinct cultures, showcasing the interplay and connections within their respective cave lore. The multifaceted methods employed allow for a comprehensive examination of the stories' cultural and symbolic significance, uncovering the shared motifs and distinctions that exist between these narratives.

¹ Schafer Edward H., *Mao Shan in T'ang Times* (Boulder:SSCR Monographs no.1.rev.ed. 1989), 22-24.

² For more details see Samvel Dilanyan, *Armenian Sacred Mountains* (Yerevan: Edit Print, 2012).

Cave Motifs in Chinese Literature: A Portal to the Mystical

The presence of cave narratives in Chinese religious and artistic works bears profound cultural and spiritual significance. Caves, known as *dong* 洞 in Chinese, play a pivotal role within the tapestry of Chinese culture, intrinsically intertwined with Taoism and Buddhism. These natural formations often functioned as hermitages not only for Taoist sages but also for Buddhist monks, offering solitude for spiritual contemplation.

Beyond their role as sanctuaries for spiritual reflection, caves held an additional, enigmatic significance. They were seen as gateways to a world concealed from ordinary human sight, inhabited by immortal beings central to Chinese folklore and belief. In the realms of Taoism, caves serve as transcendental passages, connecting the terrestrial and the supernatural.

Taoist tales concerning caves frequently share recurring motifs, typically featuring a protagonist, often accompanied by an animal companion, notably a dog. These narratives, though possessing common elements, were crafted with varying objectives in mind. One such illustration of these tales can be found within the *Liexian Zhuan* 列仙传 ("Biography of the Immortals"), attributed to Liu Xiang 刘向 (77-622 BC). A narrative called *Hanzi* 寒子 recounts the journey of a man named Hanzi, a resident of the Shu 蜀 region, who inadvertently follows the canine into a cave. Their exploration within the cave extends for over ten days, eventually leading them to a realm adorned with palaces and pavilions embellished with lush pines and vibrant blooms, and guarded by immortal sentinels.

In this realm, a woman presents Hanzi with a missive and a collection of elixirs, instructing him to deliver them to Lord Qiao 乔公, the Magistrate of Chengdu 成都. Enclosed in the missive are fish, which, following a year submerged in water, metamorphose into dragons. Impelled by this mystical encounter, Lord Qiao dispatches Hanzi back to the cave mountain, commencing a cycle of traversing between the mortal and immortal dimensions, a journey undertaken more than a hundred times. Hanzi, over time, establishes a permanent residence within the mountain, occasionally descending to safeguard his family and tribe. Recognizing his transcendent stature, the people of Shu constructed a temple at the cave's entrance in his

honor. This act propels the veneration of Hanzi, with his cult expanding to the southern regions, offering promises of protection and happiness³.

This narrative underscores the cave's role as a liminal space, bridging two worlds and concealing a mystical realm of wonder and inaccessibility. The protagonist's serendipitous discovery of the cave portal enables his transitory passage between these realms, ultimately leading to his attainment of immortality. Moreover, the story embodies a more profound significance: the ritualistic connection between the mortal and immortal domains, exemplified by Hanzi's apotheosis as an object of worship, promising prosperity and protection through the act of veneration⁴. We may say cave narratives within Taoist lore serve as symbolic portals to the transcendent, encapsulating the essence of the human desire to bridge the ordinary and the mystical.

These narratives often serve as vehicles for conveying the mystical. Among the earliest accounts, we find the "grotto passage" from the late 3rd to early 4th century Taoist canon, known as *lingbao wufu jing xu* 靈寶五符經序 ("Scripture of Five Talismans of the Numinous Treasure"). This account is a seminal example of the "cave-paradise" motif, recounting the journey of a Daoist seeker dispatched by Emperor HeLu 闔閭 of the Wu Kingdom 吳 on a quest to discover a heavenly scripture hidden within a cave beneath Lake Tai 太. This tale distinguishes itself by its fantastical depiction of the cave, replete with dragons, phoenixes, miraculously quenching waters, and other wonders. The protagonist, an accomplished recluse, has attained the *dao* 道 (way) and, through sacred rituals, retrieves the hallowed scripture from the cave, subsequently presenting it to the emperor⁵.

Such Taoist narratives, replete with enchanting cave paradises, would leave an indelible mark on later Chinese writers and artists. Among the most renowned literary works influenced by these traditions is "The Peach Blossom Spring" by Tao Yuanming. In this masterpiece of Chinese literature, Tao Yuanming takes his readers on an imaginary journey into a cave, positioning the description of the cave paradise as the focal point of the narrative.

³ Zhang Jinling and Chen Manming, ed. *Xinyi Liexianzhuan* 列仙传 (A new translated Biographies of Arrayed Immortals), Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 1997, 226.

⁴ Sing-chen and Chiang, Lydia. "Visions of happiness: Daoist utopias and Grotto paradises in Early and Medieval Chinese Tales," *Utopian studies* 20(1):97-120 (Penn State University Press, 2009), 103.

⁵ Stephen Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1997), 377-98.

Tao Yuanming's work is distinguished by its portrayal of a blissful world concealed within a cave, a world akin to the sanctuary sought by the Daoist seekers of ancient tales. The hero embarks on a journey that transcends the physical realm, venturing into the cave, and unveiling a utopian realm that exists beyond the mundane world. It was Tao Yuanming who pioneered the concept of the cave-paradise, placing it at the narrative forefront, and providing an evocative glimpse into the mystical and the extraordinary. The story narrates that during the reign period Tai yuan 太元 (326-97) of the Jin 晉, a fisherman from Wuling 武陵 wandered along a stream and stumbled upon a grove of peach trees stretching along its banks. Following the grove, he found a spring and a hill with a small opening. Curious, he entered and emerged into an open field. In this place, the fisherman saw some kind of heavenly world with beautiful scenery, imposing buildings, and people working in the fields.

In the sequel, it is mentioned that these people arrived during the Qin dynasty 秦 (221-207 BC) amid times of chaos, and they have remained there since, isolated from the outside world. A fisherman stays briefly, leaves markers along his path for a potential return, and conveys all this to the ruler. The ruler dispatches men to locate this hidden realm following the markers, but they are unsuccessful in finding the concealed location⁶.

When comparing these three stories, we observe several important points. Firstly, the cave hides a world distinct from reality, a paradisiacal realm, signifying that it is a place filled with wonders or a gateway to the celestial world. Secondly, the cave, along with the world concealed within it, is not visible and accessible to everyone; not everyone can discover the cave and enter the new world. Thirdly, the protagonists in each story encounter the cave unexpectedly, highlighting chance as the means of discovery rather than deliberate search or intention. Lastly, there is the presence of a ritualistic or cultic element.

In all three stories, the heroes discover the cave-paradise purely by accident. This highlights one of the fundamental Taoist principles, the use of the concept of wuwei 无为 (inactivity), which implies naturalness and spontaneity. The characters do not access the cave through mystical incantations but rather stumble upon its entrance by chance, which can only be found by those not actively seeking it.

⁶ Anthology of Chinese Literature, Volume I: From Early Times to Fourteenth century, ed. by Cyril Birch (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 167-68.

Regarding "The Peach Blossom Spring," it is worth noting that the author does not solely focus on moral criticism of the corrupt world they inhabit. They also express a desire for a place where people can live, akin to those who took refuge in the cave in their story. The author emphasizes the Taoist concept of Laozi's ideal society model⁷, known as xiaoguo guamin 小國寡民 (a small country with few people). This downplays the significance of Taoist esoteric practices and reinterprets the cave-paradise stories, making them more appealing to the educated class familiar with Taoist philosophical teachings and yearning to escape the chaotic real world⁸.

The existence of numerous Taoist texts written about dongtian 洞天 (cave-paradise) worlds has led Chinese researchers to believe that, in any case, people in times genuinely believed in the existence of an otherworldly immortal realm⁹. Li Jianguo 李劍國 agreed with Lu Xun's 魯迅 quotation that Tao Yuanming "did not superstitiously believe in demons and gods,¹⁰" however Tao Yuanming had a clear fascination with spiritual beings¹¹. Other researchers interpret it as a real place where people sought shelter from external threats and tried to find the exact location where that cave-paradise could be located. Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 and Tang Changru 唐長孺 provide detailed speculations about the possible location of the "Peach Blossom" site¹².

The Taoist theory of heaven and earth originated during the Eastern Jin Dynasty (AD 317-420) and reached its final form during the late Tang (618-907) and Five Dynasties periods (907-960). Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536) from the Six Dynasties, Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎 (639–735) from the Tang Dynasty, and Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933) from the late Tang and Five Dynasties can be regarded as representative figures in the three important stages of

⁷ Sing-chen & Lydia Chiang. "Visions of happiness", 115.

⁸ Lee Fongmao 李豐楙. 洞天與內景: 西元二至四世紀江南道教的內向游觀(Grotto Heavens and Inner Realms: The Inner Visualization Meditations in Jiangnan Daoism from Second to Fourth Century), *Dong Hwa Journal of Chinese Studies* 9 (2009), 157-197.

⁹ Chan, Timothy; Wai, Keung. "A Tale of Two Worlds: The Late Tang Poetic Presentation of the Romance of the Peach Blossom."(*Font T'oung Pao* 94.4, 2008), p. 209-245; Mark Meulenbeld, "The Peach Blossom Spring's Long History as a Sacred Site in Northern Hunan", *T'oung Pao* 107.1-2, (2021), 1-39.

¹⁰ Lu Xun 魯迅, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue 中国小说史略*(A Brief History of Chinese Fiction), Shanghai: Beixin shuju, [1925] 1936.

¹¹ Li Jianguo 李劍國, *Tangqian zhiguai xiaoshuo shi 唐前志怪小說史*(A History of Strange Novels Before Tang Dynasty), Beijing: Renmin, [1984] 2011, 466.

¹² Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, "Taohuayuan ji pangzheng 桃花源記旁證," *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 11.1 (1936): 79–88; Tang Changru 唐長孺, "Du 'Taohuayuan ji pangzheng' zhiyi 《讀〈桃花源記旁證〉質疑》," in *Wei Jin Nanbeichaoshi lunji xubian 魏晉南北朝史論集續編*, Beijing: Sanlian, 1959, 163–177.

development of this theory¹³. The best explanation of the concept of Dongtian 洞天 can be found in the early Qing dynasty classic Ziyang zhenren neizhuan 紫阳真人内传(«Inner Transmission of Zi Yang Immortals»). According to some interpretations of the text, dongtian has two meaning. Broadly speaking, dongtian encompasses the sky (heaven), mountain caves, and empty spaces within human heads. In Taoist understanding, these three realms are believed to be inhabited by various levels of true men and immortals, including celestial gods, earthly immortals, and personal gods. The narrow interpretation of dongtian is confined to mountain caves. However, these are not ordinary caves as commonly understood, but rather interpreted with religious, and geographical significance. In Taoist theories of sacred places, dongtian refers to various caves of different sizes¹⁴.

Caves of Culture and Spirit: Exploring Armenian Traditions

In Armenian culture, caves were not only associated with Christianity, serving as places for monks to practice hermitage but also played a significant role in Armenian legends. They often concealing an invisible realm—another world or the underworld—where evil heroes were chained or heroes voluntarily were locked away.

Armenian folklore, myths, and traditions contain numerous stories related to the use of caves and their cultural importance. Two different approaches to caves can be found in the Armenian folk epic "Sasna Tsrer" and the legend of "Artavazd and Artashes." In the "Sasna Tsrer" epic, the main character of the chapter of "Little Mher." Little Mher voluntarily imprisons himself within a cave, he will come out from the cave only when world will be transformed. In the legend of "Artavazd and Artashes," king Artavazd is forcibly confined in a cave and will only emerge at the end of the world.

According to Armenian historian Moses of Khoren's epic tale, Artavazd is locked in a cave, bound with an iron chain, and he attempts to escape the underground world with the aid of dogs to bring about the world's end. However, blacksmiths strengthen their shackles with their hammering¹⁵. According to versions reported by historians Yeznik and Vardan Areveltsi, Artavazd is confined alive in the caves of Mount Masis by dragons or demons. Should he

¹³ Zhang Guangbao 张广保. Daojiao de dongtianfudi lilunde qiyuan ji lishi fazhan 道教的洞天福地理论的起源及历史发展 [The Origin and Historical Development of the Taoist Theory of Cave and Blessed Land]. 《道家的根本道论与道教的心性学》, Bashu shushe, 2008, 588-648. Also see Li Jianguo 李剑国, Tangqian zhiguai xiaoshuo shi 唐前志怪小说史, 466-480.

¹⁴ Zhang Guangbao. Daojiao de dongtianfudi lilunde qiyuan ji lishi fazhan, 590-1.

¹⁵ Moses of Khoren, History of Armenians. (Original text by M. Abegheyan and S. Yartunyan, Tpkhis, 1913), B.

escape, he would bring about the world's destruction or emerge someday to do so¹⁶. In the continuation of the myth, it is said that dogs lick their chains, causing them to weaken. To prevent his escape, blacksmiths strike the stone slab with a hammer one to three times on New Year's Eve or the first day of the new year.

This myth about King Artavazd has been examined by numerous researchers, as it provides insights into the ritual practices of ancient Armenians. Within this myth, we can discern the origins of the New Year ritual and its significance¹⁷. As characterized by Harutyunyan, "Artavazd-Shitar appears as a world-destroying monster, a dragon representing the chaotic forces of the earth. Blacksmiths, seen as representatives of the deity who establish cosmic order, battle against him in a ritual ceremony. At the start of the New Year, they repair the world that has neared the brink of decay at the end of the old year."¹⁸ The cave serves as a location for concealing evil forces, specifically Artavazd, to prevent him from bringing about the world's destruction. The eschatological beliefs of ancient Armenians are also embedded in this myth.

Caves in Epics: Eschatological Themes and Shelter from Chaos

In the Armenian folk epic, an alternative portrayal of cave use can be observed, tied to eschatological ideas and beyond. This narrative, exemplified by Little Mher's self-imposed seclusion in a cave with plans to emerge later, showcases significant differences from similar tales. While both narratives exhibit eschatological and ritualistic elements, variations exist in the reasons for the heroes' seclusion and the conditions for their emergence.

For instance, in stories from the Mshō typological group of the epic, where the myth of Mher is present, Little Mher's emergence is often linked with the impending transformation of the world. His exit from the cave is tethered to a specific societal indicator: an extraordinary growth in the size of grains, such as barley and wheat: "When the barley grain reached the size of a nut (or 'when the barley was the size of a cashew nut'), only Mher would emerge from the cave"¹⁹.

Comparing this with "Peach Blossom Spring," where people willingly seclude themselves in a cave, fleeing the real world to create their idyllic haven away from the chaos caused by rulers' wars, a similarity emerges. However, the inhabitants of this secluded community in the Taoist tale have no desire to leave the cave. We can draw a parallel with Little Mher. In both cases,

¹⁶ Eznkai Koghbatsvoi, *Sects.* (Tiflis, 1914), A, IE.

¹⁷ Sargis Harutyunyan, *The Armenian epic and the world epic heritage.* (Yerevan, 2014), 14.

¹⁸ Sargis Harutyunyan, *The Armenian epic and the world epic heritage,* 14.

¹⁹ The translation is mine, see Armenian folk epic «Davit of Sassoon» (Yerevan, 1961) B I, 44, 101, 102, 195, 246, G 55, 441.

the cave acts as a shield, protecting those within from the outside world. Weary of the injustices and turmoil of the world, Little Mher chooses to isolate himself in a cave, planning to reemerge only if the world undergoes change. Similarly, in Tao's narrative, the people find immense joy in their cave dwelling and are uninterested in leaving, though they eagerly accept newcomers seeking refuge from the chaotic external world.

Cave Narratives: Contrasting Perspectives on Abundance and Purpose

The narrative of "Little Mher" has received extensive scholarly attention, with studies by M. Abeghyan, H. Tumanyan, S. Harutyunyan and others. Researchers have compared Mher's character with similar heroes from different cultures, highlighting commonalities and distinctions.

In the context of S. Harutyunyan's observation that "the people desire abundance and social welfare, often expressed through the quantity of wheat,²⁰" it becomes evident that differing cultural and philosophical ideals shape the criteria for prosperity. While Taoist ideals prioritize simplicity, scarcity, and essentials for a happy life in a small, harmonious society²¹, the Armenian folk epic emphasizes grandeur and abundance as indicators of well-being.

Little Mher's decision to seclude himself in a cave in the Armenian epic carries profound motivations. Cursed by his father and rendered immortal, he is disinherited. The instability of the ground beneath him, feigned and desecrated, prompts him to question his relevance to this world. This introspective moment is illustrated in the epic when Mher tests his innocence by striking a stone with his sword. According to Shahverdyan, Mher's concern for all of humanity, coupled with his inability to rectify an unjust world, compels him to withdraw from that world.²²

In Taoist stories, heroes do not always find themselves in caves by happenstance. In the first and second tales, individuals actively seek a sacred book whose principles, if adhered to, would restore order in the world. Little Mher, on the other hand, departs from this world, leaving the task of world transformation to future generations. In Taoist works, religious figures prioritize following their teachings and adhering to the rules of their sacred texts as a means to establish harmony and order in the world.

²⁰ Sargis Harutyunyan, *The Armenian epic and the world epic heritage*, 20-21.

²¹ Laozi 80

²² Gayane Shahverdyan, *From Little Mher to Christ* (Yerevan, 2001), 110.

Conclusion

In the comparative analysis of Chinese and Armenian cave narratives, it becomes evident that despite differing purposes, motivations, and central themes, there are common features shared by these traditions. Within these works, several essential ideas are emphasized.

Firstly, the significance of the cave is a recurring theme in both Armenian and Chinese narratives. The cave is portrayed as a place with a deceptively simple exterior, concealing a mysterious and supernatural world within. Through caves, individuals in these narratives find themselves in alternate realms, be it the blissful and heavenly worlds in Chinese stories or the underworld, the detention site of malevolent forces, or the sanctuary of virtuous heroes in Armenian tales. Notably, descriptions of Chinese Taoist fantasy worlds, sacred books, and secret formulas are absent from Armenian traditions.

As a concluding observation, the caves serve as gateways to the supernatural, and those who enter them often acquire or already possess supernatural qualities. In Chinese Taoist stories, people may find the key to immortality, becoming immortal upon arrival, while in Armenian legends, characters like Little Mher are already supernatural beings capable of living eternally within the cave. Conversely, figures like Artavazd are presented as supernatural and malevolent forces, and only the cave can contain their power, preventing them from emerging and wreaking upon the world. These narratives reflect the eschatological ideas of ancient Armenians, encompassing notions of world destruction and transformation, while the Chinese tales embody the Taoist pursuit of an ideal, heavenly world.

In both cases, the cave stories outline the emergence and regulation of a cult or ritual. As we have seen, in the case of Armenia, it is connected with the Navasard festival and the cult of the dying-resurrecting deity, while in the case of China, it is associated with the emergence of the cult of Taoist saints.

In several Armenian folk tales, gold and precious stones are hidden in caves. Surprisingly, much like in Taoist stories, these treasures are discovered by a random passerby. For example, in one of the folk tales related to the Armenian Cave of Temapoos, a villager happened upon a hole leading to the cave in the mountain. He found numerous precious stones and gold inside, put them in a bag, placed it on a donkey, and left. However, upon realizing he had left his walking stick in the cave, he returned. Unfortunately, the time for the cave door to open had passed, and the cave closed, trapping him inside. The donkey returned home with its load.

In a manner somewhat akin to the tales of the Taoist mystical world but not entirely equivalent, there were also stories among the Armenian people. For instance, the legend of the widow of Artsvakayr, located on the south side of Moks, tells of Huri-fairies living in the cave. They supposedly emerge from the cave on the night of funerals and dance in the natural surroundings, with the cave said to hold many riches and treasures.

In all Chinese and Armenian works, the wealth stored in the cave cannot be taken out; it cannot become the property of the outside world. If someone manages to remove these treasures in any way, they must return to the cave voluntarily or by force.

In summary, caves play a significant role in both Armenian and Chinese narratives as a location, a crossroads, or a boundary that separates the real world from the supernatural realm. Beyond their function as passageways, caves also represent a supernatural and otherworldly dimension. In Chinese stories, caves have a positive connotation, serving as paradisiacal realms inhabited by benevolent supernatural forces and immortals. In Armenian folklore, caves hold a more passive and neutral position. What matters most is not the physical appearance or descriptions of the cave but the role ascribed to it; a cave is a mysterious place that shelters malevolent and other supernatural forces.

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