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## The Mongols and the Womb-Cave of Wutaishan: A Ritual of Fertility or of Rebirth?

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Wutaishan 五臺山 (the Five-terraced mountain in Shanxi province), the abode of bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, was the main international Buddhist pilgrimage site of China, and especially attracted Mongols from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Mongols made pilgrimages to numerous places in Tibet and Mongolia<sup>1</sup> but none of them could compare to mount Wutai, that became a popular destination, attracting both nobles and commoners, laypeople and monks, men and women.<sup>2</sup>

Wutaishan is well known for its majestic built environment (with more than a hundred Chinese Buddhist and Tibetan Buddhist temples and *stūpas*) but I will focus on ritual practices associated with sacred features of the landscape that suggest the popular appropriation of the mountain. These practices inform us, in a way different from the official gazetteers and guidebooks, about how the Mongols and Tibetans reshaped the mountain by superimposing their own pilgrimage traditions to the preexistent Chinese landscape and narratives, and by creating new sites, legends and rituals.

This paper focuses on a particular type of cave, called Mother's Womb-Cave, a must-see of the Wutaishan pilgrimage. This cave is shaped like a womb; pilgrims enter its narrow opening, the head and right arm stretched first, twist their body to crawl into and reach a dead-end chamber evoking a womb where they worship images of Buddhist deities, after which they crawl back through the same way and emerge outside, head first. I will evidence that Wutaishan's Mother's Womb-Cave is linked to several other similar caves of Inner Mongolia (China), the Republic of Mongolia, and Buryatia (a republic of Russia) which form a network of pilgrimage places. At last, I will analyze the different Buddhist and non-Buddhist interpretations and the attitude of the Buddhist clergy towards this "popular ritual", and discuss Rolf Stein's study of womb-caves in India and Tibet in his book *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints de la déesse en Asie Orientale*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Mongolia" here refers to the Mongol-inhabited historical and cultural areas.

<sup>2</sup> Isabelle Charleux, *Nomads on Pilgrimage. Mongols on Wutaishan (China), 1800–1940*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Rolf A. Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints de la déesse en Asie Orientale*. Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1988.

## Wutaishan and the Mongols

Mongols started to be interested in Wutaishan during the Yuan dynasty, and went there in droves from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reason for the popularity of the Wutaishan pilgrimage are many, including the cult of Mañjuśrī, the Qing promotion of the mountain, the promotion of the pilgrimage by high-ranking reincarnations such as Changkya Khutugtu Rölpe Dorjé<sup>4</sup> (1717-1786), as well as the popularity of legends and songs, of guidebooks and maps.<sup>5</sup>

In the late Qing period, when imperial subsidies were cut, the Wutaishan monks organized yearly collective fund-raising expeditions in Mongolia and Buryatia, and convinced Mongol donors to visit the monasteries they had sponsored. Stone inscriptions reveal that the patronage of Mongol donors replaced the declining imperial patronage in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The number of Mongol pilgrims then exceeded that of Chinese and Tibetans.

Mongol pilgrims came all year round, in caravans or alone, sometimes in great prostrations from their home. Because Wutaishan was close to Inner Mongolia, the pilgrimage was affordable to ordinary Mongol families, and could even be assimilated to a nomadization for those who came every year and sold their cattle at the great fair of the 6<sup>th</sup> month.<sup>6</sup> It was “Mongol-friendly”: the mountain had an alpine ecology, with high peaks and steppe-like pastures resembling that of the Mongol plateau. The presence of Tibeto-Mongol Buddhist (Gélukpa) monasteries headed by the *jasag lama*, who was a representative of the Dalai Lama in China, or by the great Inner Mongol reincarnation lineage of the Changkya Khutugtu, was responsible for Wutaishan’s nickname “the Tibet of China”.<sup>7</sup> The Mongols also found there the cult of springs and caves, which is an essential component of pilgrimages in Tibet and Mongolia.

As in other Buddhist pilgrimages, religious motivations (making merit and gaining a better reincarnation for themselves or a relative) are inseparable from the more mundane ones such as curing an illness or seeking prosperity in this life. This is reflected in the Mongolian word for Buddhist merit, *buyan* (< Skt. *punya*), which also means good luck, fortune. In addition, many Mongols also journeyed to Wutaishan for trade or for burial (they carried the bones or ashes of their deceased parents on their back in order to bury them *ad sanctos*).

Mongols’ pilgrimages are documented by a variety of sources—about 350 Mongolian stone inscriptions *in situ* recording donations, hundreds of “certificates of donation”, pilgrimage guides written by clerics, oral and written literature (prophecies, prayers, praises, folk songs, tales, wise sayings), autobiographies and memoirs of high clerics, old people’s memories, map-

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<sup>4</sup> Common Tibetan terms are presented in phonetic transcription based on the THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan. Christopher Atwood’s simplified transcription system is here used for phonetically rendering classical Mongolian terms in the text, except for authors’ names and book titles, which are transliterated in the footnotes and the bibliography. Transcriptions from Cyrillic Mongolian and Russian are added for place names of the Republic of Mongolia and Russia.

<sup>5</sup> Charleux. *Nomads on Pilgrimage*.

<sup>6</sup> Since the Qianlong period (r. 1735-1796), an important horse, cattle and mule trade fair was held during the 6<sup>th</sup> lunar month, attracting traders from all north China.

<sup>7</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there were no less than 99 Chinese Buddhist and 26 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. The main monasteries are grouped around a central gigantic white *stūpa* enshrining a relic of buddha Śākyamuni at Tayuansi 塔院寺 (Stūpa Cloister Monastery), near Taihuai 臺懷, the central village of Wutaishan.

paintings such as the Cifusi 慈福寺 map dated 1846<sup>8</sup> (which was widely diffused, as well as re-carved, and copied on other supports), and archival documents (passports for groups of pilgrims that give them authorization to cross their banner's boundaries, fund-raising petitions, and so on). These various sources give us information on the importance of Wutaishan in the Mongol *imaginaire* and on the practical details on their journeys, including the monasteries and sites they visited,<sup>9</sup> as well as some Chinese monasteries,<sup>10</sup> and the devotions and specific practices at the sacred sites.

Wutaishan was a “complete” pilgrimage that could fulfill all kinds of expectations, thanks to its many relics, sacred statues, holy monks, natural numinous sites, possibility of observing strange meteorological phenomena and obtaining individual and collective visions, and of meeting Mañjuśrī himself in his many disguises. But for the Mongols, a must-see place was a specific cave, the “Mother's Womb-Cave”.

### The caves of Wutaishan

Among the more than a hundred places to visit, the “natural numinous sites”<sup>11</sup> such as caves and grottos, sacred springs, strange rocks, trees, caves, and footprints of bodhisattvas and saints, were as important to visit as the monasteries, famous icons and *stūpas*. They were visible and touchable traces of miraculous manifestations of deities and saints on Wutaishan, sought out by all pilgrims. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, numinous sites are generally identified by high clerics who “decipher” the landscape and perceive in some of its features the natural manifestation of the holiness and power of Mañjuśrī's abode.

Caves were generally of difficult access before the construction of stairways in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (**fig. 1**). They range from small meditation caves, where there is hardly enough room for one person to sit, to large caves turned into temples. Retreatants and hermits such as Rölpe Dorjé searched for such spiritually potent sites to increase the efficacy of their meditations. Some of the caves of Wutaishan were famous all over China, such as the Vajra Cave (Jin'gangku 金剛窟) and Nārayāṇa Cave 那羅延窟, which are part of both the Chinese Buddhist and the Daoist pilgrimage traditions.<sup>12</sup> Mongols and Tibetans especially worshipped Shancaidong 善財洞 (Sudhana Cave), a small cave-shrine sheltered by a temple, where Rölpe Dorjé lived before the construction of Zhenhaisi, and Guanyindong, a hermitage located high up on a hill just north of Nanshansi 南山寺 where the Sixth Dalai Lama (1683-ca.1706) and the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876-1933) were believed to have meditated. The Vajra Cave attracted Mongols and

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<sup>8</sup> A coloured woodblock print of this panoramic map is preserved in the Rubin Museum of Art, New York (53.25" h. x 73.25" w. x 2.375" d.). <http://www.thlib.org/collections/texts/jiats/#!jiats=/06/debreczeny/b9/>

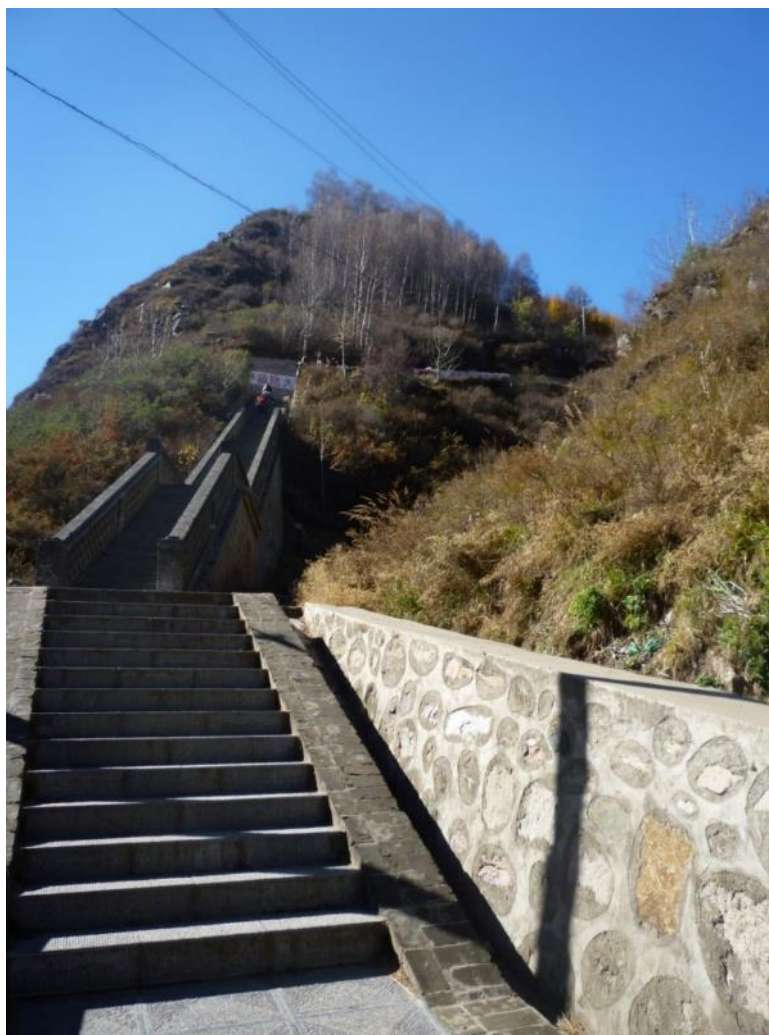
<sup>9</sup> The Great White Stūpa of Tayuansi, Luohousi 羅睺寺 (Rāhula Monastery), Guanyindong 觀音洞 (Avalokiteśvara Cave), Zhenhaisi 鎮海寺 (Subduing the Ocean Monastery)...

<sup>10</sup> Such as Shuxiangsi 殊像寺 (Mañjuśrī Image Monastery).

<sup>11</sup> The sub-section on the numinous traces in the Ming and Qing Chinese gazetteers, repeated in the main Tibetan guidebook, has about 125 “numinous traces” (Ch. *lingji* 靈蹟), classified according to their location on or near one of the five terraces.

<sup>12</sup> For a typology of the Wutaishan caves: Raoul Birnbaum, “Secret Halls of the Mountain Lords: The Caves of Wu-t'ai shan”. *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, 1989-1990, 5, p. 115-140.

Tibetans both for its ancient Chinese past and because it was another residence of Rölpe Dorjé.



*Fig. 1. Modern stairway leading to the cave of Ekhe-yin Umai (Ch. Fomudong/Qianfodong) on a cliff northeast of the Southern Terrace, Wutaishan. © Isabelle Charleux, 2012*

### **The Mother's Womb-Cave of Wutaishan**

The Mongols' favourite place was, and still is, the Mother's Womb-Cave, Ekhe-yin Umai, known in Chinese as Fomudong 佛母洞, "Mother of Buddha Cave" or Qianfodong 千佛洞, Thousand Buddha Cave. It is located on a cliff northeast of the Southern Terrace. Present-day Mongols from the Republic of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, even when they stay only one or two days on Wutaishan, all visit the Mother's Womb-Cave, which is also popular among Chinese. It is part of a Chinese Buddhist monastery: a Chinese monk, Beiyue 悲月, has been restoring and revitalizing the place since 1996 and has collected one million *yuan* in donations to build a kilometre-long stone stairway and path leading to the cave<sup>13</sup> (**fig. 1, fig. 2**). The small

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<sup>13</sup> The path starts at the Baiyansi 白雲寺 (White Cloud Monastery) located south of Taihuai 臺懷.



monastery has recently been enlarged.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 2. The Chinese monk who revived Fomudong in the late 1990s, Wutaishan.  
© Corneille Jest

Although the cave is said to have been discovered in the Ming period, the earliest evidence that I could find of the ritual of crawling into it is in a 1721 Mongolian pilgrimage guidebook: it writes that by crawling inside, those who follow the supreme *dharma* will rid themselves of the “ten black sins” and bad destinies, remember their previous births and obtain enlightenment and the holiness of the Buddha. But those who live by ruse and lies, upon crawling inside the cave, will be tortured.<sup>15</sup> On the 1846 Cifusi map, a man is depicted pushing the bottom of a pilgrim who struggles to get inside the small hole (**fig. 8**).

<sup>14</sup> Raoul Birnbaum visited the cave in the 1980s; see his description of the path, the hermitage, the monk he met there (probably Beiyue), the cave and its ritual in: Birnbaum, “Secret Halls of the Mountain Lords”, p. 137-140.

<sup>15</sup> *Uta-yin tabun ayulan-u orusil süsüg-ten-ü cikin cimeg orusiba* [A Guide to the Five Mountains of Wutai. Ornament for the Ears of the Devotees], written by Lubzangdanjin at A-wang-lao-zang’s behest, printed in 1667 or more probably in 1721, 74+[1] fol. Peking xylograph preserved in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, 51b-52a.

A Mongolian travelogue written by Duke Migwachir (1893-1958), a writer, traveller, poet, and pious Buddhist from Alashan in Inner Mongolia who visited the sacred Chinese mountain in 1938 relates his visit to “Ekhe-yin Agui” (Mother’s Cave):

[T]here is a hole measuring 8 *cun* [25.6 centimetres, which is only just enough for a naked man to pass through]. I, the Duke, took my clothes off except for the trousers. I entered inside with my head and a hand first while a *heshang* [和尚, Chinese Buddhist monk] pushed my feet hard with his shoulders, and finally I just managed to get into it. The head is larger than the body; if the head enters, whatever the size of the body, the body can pass through thanks to the joints. If one does not believe this, he should pierce a 7-8-*cun* hole in his own yurt and go through it: then he will know. [But] this is a real hole. Looking inside with a lamp, I saw that it was as big as a room; there were many clay Buddhas. Soon it was cold and I wanted to get out, but when I said that, the monk closed the entrance [behind me] and, frightened by all kinds of things, I had to make promises [to get him to help me back out]. Then the monk pulled and, since I had no choice, I promised to pay again. I crawled, one hand in the back, the other one on the ear. My head with one hand went out, and then the monk pulled me out with both his arms. If nobody pulls, one cannot get out.<sup>16</sup>

In an article dated 1957, Ferdinand Lessing (who visited Wutaishan in 1930 or 1931) gave a full description of the cave according to his interviews with a Russian Adventist missionary and the Khalkha dignitary Dilowa Khutugtu (1884-1964). His description is more or less similar to that of Duke Migwachir: the hole, about three feet above the ground, with a diameter of 10-12 inches (25.4-30.5 centimetres), was shaped like a *yon*i (literally “vagina” or “womb”, symbol of the Goddess in Hinduism). The pilgrims were advised to remove all excess clothing or even to undress completely.<sup>17</sup> According to the Dilowa Khutugtu, a Chinese monk, nicknamed “the midwife” by the Mongols, assisted the pilgrims and told them how to crawl in:

To enter the grotto the pilgrim would first insert his right arm and his head. The priest would stand below the hole, facing the entrance. The visitor would step on the priest’s shoulder and try to enter the hole by extending his right arm and squeezing his right shoulder through. When he had proceeded so far, he would brace his feet against the shoulders of the priest in order to gain thrust enough to enter the grotto completely.

Then the pilgrim would find himself in a very narrow but widening passage, some three feet long and one foot high, which may be termed as the cervix. Bending and twisting to the left, the tube led into the inner chamber, the matrix, which allowed room for two people to stand.<sup>18</sup> In its centre

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<sup>16</sup> Miγvacir, *Mergen-i bayasqayci cayan teūke: Alaša qosiyun-u barayun güng-ün ilelkel šastir* [White history that rejoices the sages: Report of the Western Duke of Alashan Banner]. Hohhot: Öbür Mongγul-un arad-un keblel-ün qoriya, 2008 [1942], p. 406-407.

<sup>17</sup> Although Birnbaum (“Secret Halls of the Mountain Lords”, p. 139, n. 71) finds this difficult to accept, this is told by Migwachir, by Lessing’s Russian informant (Ferdinand D. Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”. *Studia Altaica. Festschrift für Nikolaus Poppe zum 60. Geburtstag am 8. August 1957*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1957, p. 95) and by Gao Henian 高鶴年 (*Ming shan youfang ji* 名山游訪記. Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2000 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1949], p. 119). On the Cifusi map, the pilgrim’s trousers are visible.

<sup>18</sup> Actually five or six persons (a maximum of nine) can stand in the “matrix”.

was an altar bearing a stone statue of a deity, possibly Tārā of Kuan-yin [Guanyin 觀音],<sup>19</sup> both goddesses of mercy and salvation.

A small lamp in front of the statue gave off a very faint light. The visitor was supposed to touch the altar with his forehead. The blessings expected from this religious rite were ridding oneself of sins and obtaining a favourable reincarnation. The way back was difficult because some visitors were liable to become frightened when they saw the small opening through which they had come and also when they saw the stones, projecting from the walls of the grotto, which they had hardly noticed on their way in because of the darkness.

Often the pilgrims had been impressed with stories of how some persons felt handicapped in gaining the exit because of their sins... sometimes obese persons... found their way out easily while thin people might get stuck in the “bottle-neck”. The return was made headfirst with the left arm extended into the passage.<sup>20</sup>

According to several sources, the pilgrim had to pay a fee in order to enter the narrow passage and an additional “ransom” fee to leave the grotto. The Russian missionary told Lessing in 1931 that the “midwife” was said to sometimes leave devotees stuck and free them only after they had made a vow to offer donations to the clergy: if a person was unable to crawl his/her way out again, he/she was declared by the lamas to be an exceptionally great sinner, and they would release him/her only after he/she had agreed to pay an exorbitant “ransom”.<sup>21</sup> The Dilowa Khutugtu confirmed that the pilgrims had to pay an entrance fee (this is a rare mention of the existence of a fixed entrance fee at a Wutaishan site before the late 20<sup>th</sup> century):

In front of the hole is a stone altar set with offering lamps. In former times the pilgrims deposited merely a few brass coins (“cash”) on the altar. Later the admission fee was set at two coppers, and additional donations for the rite were to be made at the discretion of the pilgrims.<sup>22</sup>

Chinese pilgrims also visited the womb-cave, such as lay Buddhist Gao Henian 高鶴年 in 1899 and 1912, and Chen Xingya 陳興亞's (1882-1959) in 1934.<sup>23</sup> Gao Henian recounts his experience:

The cave is three bays wide, inside, a stone image is worshipped. Inside the cave is a smaller cave. The first time I entered the cave, on the *yihai* year (1899), I had to get undressed and I asked someone to sit on a stool, with his back against the cave entrance. I first stretched my right arm to enter and then my head, then I pushed the man's back with both legs and I entered slowly. Inside the cave, it was dark; a young monk gave (me) a lamp and said: “I give you an eye”. It

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<sup>19</sup> The statue worshiped nowadays is Guanyin. In China, Guanyin is often associated with cults of rocks and his/her image is found in caves and grottos.

<sup>20</sup> According to the Dilowa Khutugtu, interviewed by Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”, p. 97-98.

<sup>21</sup> Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”, p. 96-97.

<sup>22</sup> Interviewed by Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”, p. 97.

<sup>23</sup> Chen Xingya 陳興亞, *Jin Cha Sui youji* 晉察綏遊記. Beijing: Beiping jingcheng yinshuju, 1936, p. 34.



suddenly lit up. I stretched my hand and came up, it was widely bright: a single lamp could dispel a thousand year of darkness. I saw three small buddhas on the stone wall. Even on a summer day, it was extremely wet and a cold air was biting. I walked a few steps, there was several inches deep water. The light of the lamp was shining and I saw the light of a hundred lamps go back and forth being reflected at the water's surface. Suddenly the noise of a big stone that fell in the water seemed to shake the mountain and the lamps disappeared; it was very strange and I invoked bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. I left the lamp and hurriedly went out like in a dream. This year it rained too much and it was difficult to enter.<sup>24</sup>

The Mother's Womb-Cave is nowadays just as popular among Han tourists and pilgrims as it is among Tibetans and Mongols (**fig. 3, fig. 4, fig. 5**).<sup>25</sup> Nowadays, pilgrims help each other under the supervision of a monk. When they come back through the hole, they are informed that they have been within the womb of the Mother of Buddhas and that they have been reborn.<sup>26</sup> The hundreds of pilgrims queuing to enter the cave for several hours in summer have plenty of time to study a board with diagrams and explanations on how to crawl through (**fig. 6, fig. 7**). According to written and oral accounts (including many blogs), present-day pilgrims believe they can erase their sins, get rid of all the evils from their previous life,<sup>27</sup> obtain a second life and even be reborn as a buddha. They are told that the Mother's Womb-Cave is the very womb of Śākyamuni's mother and, like Śākyamuni, they will be reborn out of her armpit. The stalactites inside the cave are said to be the mother's entrails. Pilgrims often shout and cry, frightened by the experience (Raoul Birnbaum was told that "Mongolians, famous for their fervent piety, invariably cry when they enter the inner chamber").<sup>28</sup> When they come out, exhausted and covered with dust, they really do feel like children; they say they feel transformed and regret their past sins.

Mongol lore and practices concerning this cave bring to light a lived religion. As stressed by Lessing and Stein, womb-cave rituals are generally not documented in the official and clerical records,<sup>29</sup> and they are often the object of contempt or indifference from the Buddhist clergy. The Qing dynasty gazetteers such as the *Qingliangshan zhi* 清涼山志 (Gazetteer of Qingliangshan [Wutaishan], preface dated 1596) and the *Qinding Qingliangshan zhi* 欽定清涼山志 (Imperially commissioned gazetteer of Qingliangshan, compiled in 1785) mention the cave under the name of Qianfodong. They recount its discovery in the Jiajing period (1522-1567) of the Ming dynasty, when a monk named Daofang 道方, walking there late at night, followed ten thousand dots of lights into the cave; inside he saw rows of jade buddha images. When he became lost in the cave, he chanted the name of Guanyin, vowing to devote a sacred image to the deity; at that moment, the ten thousand lamps turned into a single light that guided

<sup>24</sup> Gao Henian, *Ming shan youfang ji*, p. 119-120.

<sup>25</sup> I visited Fomudong in 2007 and 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Birnbaum ("Secret Halls of the Mountain Lords", p. 139-140) relates a similar experience.

<sup>27</sup> *Tuotai huangu* 脫胎換骨: "get rid of the carnal envelope and change bones, become a new man".

<sup>28</sup> Birnbaum, "Secret Halls of the Mountain Lords", p. 138, n. 70.

<sup>29</sup> Lessing, "The Question of Nicodemus", p. 95; Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints*, p. 1, 5. Stein (*ibid.*, p. 7-9 and Birnbaum ("Secret Halls of the Mountain Lords)) compare the Mother's Womb-Cave ritual with the lore of Vajra Cave and Nārāyaṇa Cave.

him out.<sup>30</sup> This description may have inspired Gao Heninan's experience with the lamps reflected in the water. These gazetteers do not mention any narrow passage: crawling inside a narrow cave belongs to beliefs and practices that were not considered worthy of attention by literati and clerics. Similarly, in his pilgrimage guide based on Chinese gazetteers,<sup>31</sup> Rölpe Dorjé retells Daofang's discovery, simply replacing Guanyin's name with Mañjuśrī's, but says nothing about the Mother's Womb-Cave ritual itself.<sup>32</sup> The 1721 Mongolian pilgrimage book is the only guidebook I have read that mentions it. Lessing, who bases his study of caves of initiatory rebirth on oral sources, qualifies this practice as "more or less secret", and his Tibetan teacher, the *dorampa*<sup>33</sup> lama Lozang Zangpo "pretended never having heard about such an outrageous rite".<sup>34</sup>



Fig. 6. Board with diagrams and explanations at the entrance of Fomudong, Wutaishan. © Isabelle Charleux, 2007

<sup>30</sup> See for instance *Qingliangshan xinzhì* 清凉山新志, edited by the Chinese lama Lao-zang-dan-ba, third *jasag da lama* of Wutaishan, 1694, 10 *juan*, with a preface by Lao-zang-dan-ba. – 1<sup>st</sup> emended reprint by the Palace Publishing House in 1701 with an imperial preface. – Emended editions in 1785, published in 1811; 1887. – Reprint Taipei, Danqing, 1985 (*Zhongguo fosi sizhi huikan*, 30); *Qinding Qingliangshan zhi* 钦定清凉山志, compiled in 1785, printed by the Palace Publishing House in 1811, 22 *juan* (Library of the Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, Paris).

<sup>31</sup> Wen-shing Chou. *Mount Wutai. Visions of a Sacred Mountain*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> *Zhing mchog ri bo dwangs bsil gyi gnas bshad dad pa'i padmo rgyas byed ngo mtshar myi ma'i snang ba*, by Rol pa'i rdo rje, revised and completed by two of his disciples, 5 chapters, printed at Songzhusi in Beijing in 1831. – Republished as *Zhing mchog ri bo rtse lnga'i gnas bshad*. Xining, 1993. – Translated into Chinese by Wang Lu 王璐: "Sheng di Qingliangshan zhi" 圣地清凉山志. *Wutaishan yanjiu*, 1990.2, p. 7-48, here p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Dorampa* is a degree in Tibetan Buddhist doctrinal studies.

<sup>34</sup> Lessing, "The Question of Nicodemus" p. 95, 97. On similar attitudes of priests toward popular practices at a Catholic pilgrimage: John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow. *Contesting the Sacred. The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*. New York and London: Routledge, 1991, p. 23.



Fig. 7. Pilgrims queuing to enter the cave and a pilgrim entering the hole, Fomudong, Wutaishan. © Isabelle Charleux, 2007

However, some of the Mongol clerics who visited Wutaishan, such as the Dilowa Khutugtu and the Fourth Jebtsündamba Khutugtu Lubsang Tülden Wangchug (1775-1813), were well aware of this ritual.<sup>35</sup> The Fourth Jebtsündamba even wrote a Tibetan inscription on a stele erected at the entrance of the cave, which specified that whoever enters the cave reduces his sins and secures for himself a better reincarnation.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”; Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints*.

<sup>36</sup> According to the Dilowa Khutugtu, interviewed by Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”, p. 97. This inscription is not visible anymore.





Fig. 3. Small temple protecting the womb-cave of Fomudong, Wutaishan. © Isabelle Charleux, 2012



Fig. 4. A Mongol pilgrim pushes her husband inside the womb-cave of Fomudong, Wutaishan. © Isabelle Charleux, 2012



*Fig. 5. Pilgrim walking in great prostrations to Ekhe-yin Umai. Stone relief on the screen-wall at the foot of the stairs leading to Longquansi 龍泉寺, 1912, Wutaishan. © Isabelle Charleux, 2010*

Though not mentioned in historical sources, the cave was also certainly a place where Buddhist practitioners used to meditate and perform rituals. A modern online travellers' guide based on information given by Khejok Rinpoché (1936-2013)<sup>37</sup> during a pilgrimage to Wutaishan he led in 1999 gives a Tibetan Buddhist interpretation of the ritual of the Mother's Womb-Cave that Tibetans call the *Ḍākinī Cave*<sup>38</sup>:

On the rock ceiling at the entrance of the cave one would see a naturally formed triangular hole called the dharma sphere. One enters the inner sanctum through a small opening to emerge again from the inner sanctum through the same hole again, to symbolically go through the birth process from Vajrayogini (Vajravahni)'s womb. The inner cave is said to resemble a womb with rock formation that resemble the ribs and the organs and the shape of the opening bears resemblance of the vagina. The famous Jangya Rinpoche [Changkya Khutugtu Rölpe Dorjé], the lama of Emperor Chien-Lung [Qianlong], meditated on the Naropa lineage of Vajrayogini (Narokhadro) here and attained the inner dakini pureland state. He had a vision of Vajrayogini and when he emerged from the cave, every person he saw was a daka or a dakini to him and everywhere he

<sup>37</sup> Abbot of Dhetsang Monastery, based in Australia since 1986 where he established twelve Buddhist centres, and known as a practitioner of the deity Dorjé Shugden.

<sup>38</sup> Female figures who personify wisdom, and make themselves known to mystics under peaceful or wrathful forms, to offer revelations or tantric teachings in which they may act as partners.



went appeared to him as the mandala of the deity. It is possible to do dakini tsog [tsok<sup>39</sup>] or other practices outside the cave with offerings set up inside. Recently a group performed tsog here and there was a flower rain followed by a gentle hail storm. The event was talk-of-the-town for many days.<sup>40</sup>

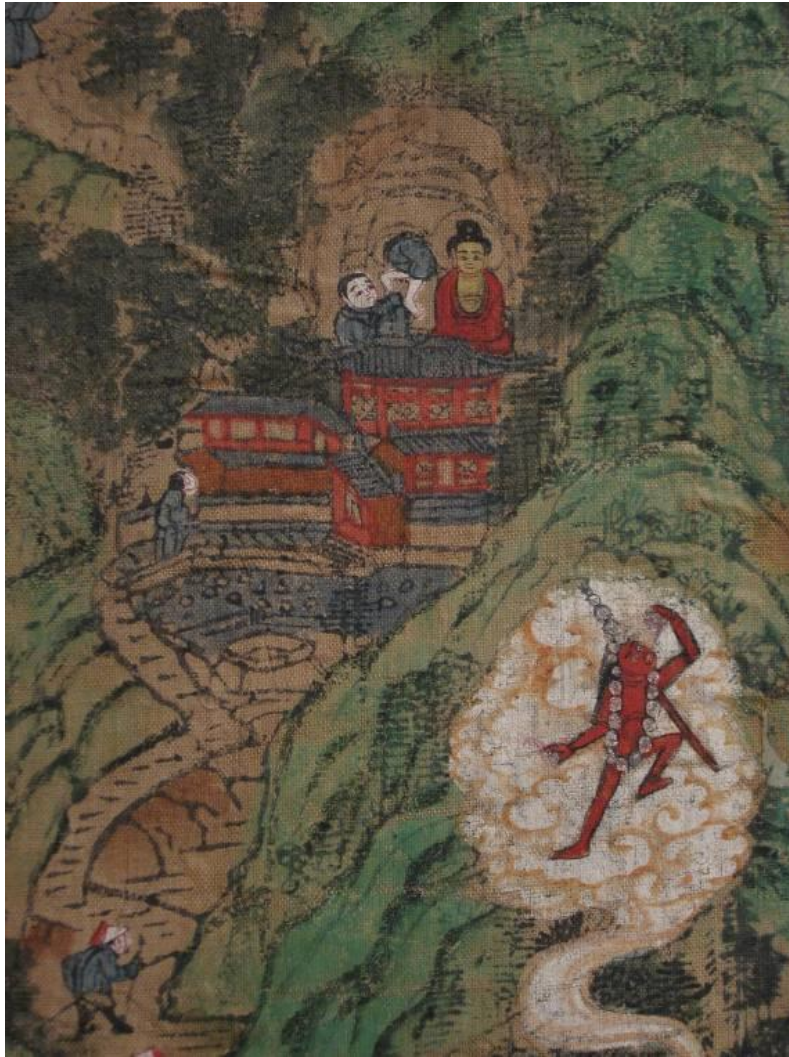


Fig. 8. Pilgrim being pushed into the narrow passage at Ekhe-yin Umai, and naked Vajrayoginī (above Zhenhaisi). Detail of the 1846 Cifusi map, Rubin Museum of Art. (Photography provided by the Rubin Museum of Art, HimalayanArtResource.org, 65371)/© Karl Debreczeny

<sup>39</sup> An important practice of offering and purification in Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Lim, "Pilgrimage to Wutaishan, the Sacred Mountain of Manjushri". Website of the Buddhist International Alliance: <http://www.b-i-a.net/Wutaishan.htm>, accessed December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010. I do not know whether Khejok Rinpoché's mention of Rölpe Dorjé having a vision of Vajrayoginī inside the Mother's Womb-Cave has a textual basis or not, but Rölpe Dorjé wrote several texts about the *Cakrasaṃvara tantra* (which is linked to Vajrayoginī), and it would be interesting to search for mentions of the Wutaishan cave in the colophons of these works. Many caves and shrines studied by Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints*, in the Tibetan and Hindu worlds are also linked to Vajrayoginī.

The Cifusi map depicts an apparition of naked red Vajrayoginī drinking blood out of a human skull in a cloud above Zhenhaisi, just below the cave. Vajrayoginī clearly makes the link between the Mother's Womb-Cave and Zhenhaisi, the monastery-residence of the Changkya (fig. 8).

Another type of cave that seems to be an extension of womb-caves is the “tunnel cave” or “gate” leading to a distant place in a very short amount of time. Tunnel caves formed a particular type of subterranean network that linked great “power places”, essentially making Wutaishan, Lhasa, Kathmandu and Bodhgayā very close to one another.<sup>41</sup>

### The Womb-Cave Ritual in Mongol Pilgrimages

The womb-cave ritual is widely practiced in Mongolia, and some of these caves have become major pilgrimage destinations. I could locate seven monasteries in Inner Mongolia, the Republic of Mongolia and Buryatia which were built above or close to caves called “womb-caves”. Some of them, like in Tibet, are linked to Nyingmapa teachings and lore about Padmasambhava. The most famous “red”<sup>42</sup> monasteries of Mongolia, Lobonchinbu Süme and Khamar-un Kheid, have a womb-cave (actually, a tunnel cave named “womb-cave”).

– Lobonchinbu Süme (Agui-yin Süme) near Dengkou City (formerly in Alashan Banner, Inner Mongolia), a site allegedly “opened” by Padmasambhava, and rediscovered by the Fifth Noyan Khutugtu Danjinrabjai (Cyr. Mo. Danzanravjaa, b. 1803 or 1804-d. 1856).<sup>43</sup> One of the five caves, known as the Cave of the *Ḍākinī*, is accessible from a dangerous climb up the narrow stone steps. It is a narrow vertical tunnel cave descending to the lower floor. The passage is covered in red dust used in Mongol pharmacopoeia. It is dedicated to the bird-like deity Garuḍa, worshipped as a protector of Buddhism and a god of wealth.<sup>44</sup>

– Gilubar Juu (Left Baarin Banner, now in Chifeng Municipality, Inner Mongolia),<sup>45</sup> a monastery said to have been founded around 1770 by the Second Jamyang Zhépa of Labrang Monastery in Amdo (Qinghai Province, China), Könchok Jikmé Wangpo (1728-1791), around caves sculpted in the Kitan-Liao dynasty (907-1125). Its womb-cave called Ekhe-yin Umai is one of the five “extraordinary sites” to visit.

– Tövkhen Kheid (Cyr. Mo. Tövkhön Khiid, Shireet Ulaan Mountain, Bat-Ölzii District,

<sup>41</sup> On tunnel caves, see Charleux, *Nomads on Pilgrimage*, p. 367-368.

<sup>42</sup> “Yellow” designates in Mongolian the Gélukpa school reformed by Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) and “Red”, the other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Lobonchinbu Süme claims to be the only Nyingmapa monastery of Inner Mongolia, and Khamar-un Kheid now has both “red” and “yellow” communities. Today Lobonchinbu Süme has two reincarnated lamas: the Eighth (Kagyüpa) Dilowa Khutugtu (incarnation of Milarépa, who revived religious activities there) and the Sixth Noyan Khutugtu—the Fifth one, Danjinrabjai, nicknamed “the drunkard of the Gobi”, although often seen as a “red”, or a Nyingmapa lama because of his Tantric orientation and his eccentric behaviour, was trained by eminent Gélukpa masters. Both monasteries especially worship Padmasambhava and seem to have mixed the different Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

<sup>43</sup> This great poet, dramaturge and eccentric lama is very famous in Mongolia.

<sup>44</sup> Isabelle Charleux. “Padmasambhava's Travel to the North: The Pilgrimage to the Monastery of the Caves and the Old Schools of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia”. *Central Asiatic Journal*, 46.2, 2002, p. 168-232.

<sup>45</sup> Yesibaljuur, *Gereltii cayan Utai Gilubar juu-yin orun* [The place of Bright White Wutai Gilubar Juu]. Chifeng: Öbür Mongyul-un sinjilekü uqayan teknik mergejil-ün keblel-ün qoriya, 2010, p. 69-70, 123.

Övörkhangai Province, Rep. of Mongolia), the hermitage of the first Jebtsündamba Khutugtu Zanabazar (1635-1723, pontiff of the Khalkha Mongols), said to be founded in 1653-1655 and reconstructed in 1786 by a lama of Erdeni Juu (Cyr Mo. Erdene Zuu) (**fig. 9**). According to legend, it is connected to Danjinrabjai, “who went to Tövkhön for thirteen or fourteen days, almost one half a month, for a rest”.<sup>46</sup> Tövkhen Kheid has two womb-caves, one for women and one for men.<sup>47</sup>

– Khamar-un Kheid (Cyr. Mo. Khamaryn Khiid), founded by Danjinrabjai in Dornogov’ Province, near modern Sainshand (Rep. of Mongolia). This is now the most important pilgrimage of the Republic of Mongolia.<sup>48</sup> People flow from Mongolia and abroad to “revitalize” themselves at the (recently created) “Shambhala energy centre”. To the north of the monastery complex lie a series of thirteen caves where Danjinrabjai and other monks of Khamar-un Kheid lived and meditated for 108 days. There is a long queue to enter the Ekhe-yin Umai (Cyr. Mo. Ekhiin Umai) womb-cave, which actually is an artificial tunnel cave. It is the final stage of the pilgrimage.

– Baldan Bairawun Kheid (Cyr. Mo. Baldan Bereeven Khiid, Ömnödelger District, Khentii Province, Rep. of Mongolia), built in 1654 at the behest of Zanzabar or in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Delgerkhaan range of the Khentii Mountains. It was one of the main Buddhist centers of Mongolia. There are many caves around the site; the Ekhe-yin Khada (Cyr. Mo. Ekhiin Khad, Mother Rock) is located northwest of the Main Hall on the pilgrimage path that circumambulates the monastery: it is an opening in a rock.<sup>49</sup>

– Labrang-yin Süme (Chakhar, Inner Mongolia).<sup>50</sup> This cave was documented by Lessing. The pilgrims had to undress completely before entering and, when inside, had to make nine prostrations in front of a statue of the Green Tārā.<sup>51</sup>

– Alkanay (now a national park, where Buddhist meditants go on retreats), near Chita in Buryatia. The small cave, also known as Mother’s Womb, is linked to Padmasambhava; it is also known as a dwelling place of Cakrasaṃvara and his five *ḍākinīs*.

<sup>46</sup> Yuki Konagaya, Lkhagvademchig Jadamba, Mary Rossabi, Morris Rossabi. *The Practice of Buddhism in Kharkhorin and its Revival*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2013 (Senri Ethnological Reports 115) (<https://www.minpaku.ac.jp/english/research/activity/publication/other/ser/115>).

<sup>47</sup> The cave for women bears the Tibetan inscription: *OM SHRĪ GU HYA rdo-rje btsun-ma’i bhak*, “ōm, glorious secret vajra nun”. Zsuzsa Majer. “Tövkhön, the Retreat of Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar as a Pilgrimage Site”. *The Silk Road*, 10, 2012, p. 107-116., online version: [http://www.silk-road.com/newsletter/vol10/SilkRoad\\_10\\_2012\\_majer.pdf](http://www.silk-road.com/newsletter/vol10/SilkRoad_10_2012_majer.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, “Energy for Tourists and for Pilgrims: Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre in Mongolia”. *Asiatische Studien - Études Asiatiques*, 71(4) (Feb. 2018), p. 1293-1322.

<sup>49</sup> Ulrike Herold, who participated in the restoration of the monastery in the 2000s, described the Ekhiin Khad: “It was on the steep slope on the hill north-east behind the monastery. It was an opening in a rather high but narrow boulder (I think a fir tree was sort growing out of its base) and not really difficult to fit through.... I have seen people crawling under incense burners, which was way more difficult than the rock at Baldan Bereeven Khiid” (Email, August 21, 2020). When I visited it in 2014 I did not see any pilgrims there.

<sup>50</sup> About sixteen kilometres from the Khada-yin Süme, Gool Chagan Banner (Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”, p. 95-96).

<sup>51</sup> Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”, p. 96.





*Fig. 9. A Mongol pilgrim crawling into the womb-cave of Tövkön keyid, Bat Ölzii District, Övörkhangaï Province, Mongolia. © Don Croner*

These monasteries all are important pilgrimage places, and the womb-cave is usually one of the “marvels” to worship among many others, such as special icons, temples and *stūpas*, sacred trees and rocks, meditation caves, and footprints of deities. For instance, the womb-caves of Tövkhen Kheid are one of the sixteen wonders of the pilgrim path. Interestingly, great figures connected to these monasteries, such as Danjinrabjai, Zanabazar, the Fourth Jebtsündamba and the Second Jamyang Zhépa, all visited Wutaishan and may have established a link between Wutaishan’s Mother’s Womb-Cave and the womb-caves of the monasteries they founded.

Womb-caves are also found in regions where Buddhism is absent or marginal, such as among the Buryats of Cis- and Transbaikalia and among the Tuvans, or in places where Buddhism still coexists with shamanic beliefs:<sup>52</sup>

– the womb-cave (Ekhe-yin Umai) of Dayan Deerekhi (Cyr. Mo. Dayan Deerkh, a shamanist deity worshiped for fertility magic) in Tsagan Üür District, Khövsgöl Province (Rep. of Mongolia). The Ekhe-yin Umai is like a womb with a unique, narrow entrance covered with permanent ice. According to Russian scholars who documented it in the socialist period, only women used to crawl in this narrow passage<sup>53</sup>; but the anthropologist Ágnes Birtalan who

<sup>52</sup> Elisabetta Chiodo (*Songs of Khorchin Shamans to Jayagachi, the Protector of Livestock and Property*. Paderborn, München, Wien and Zürich: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000, p. 86, n. 230) believes that Buddhists contributed to keeping the cult of the “mother’s womb” alive, but the following examples show that this ritual has remained alive in non-Buddhist regions too.

<sup>53</sup> Galdanova, G.P., L.N. Zhukovskaya and G.N. Ochirova. “The Cult of Dayan Derkhe in Mongolia and Buryatia”, transl. by Caroline Humphrey. *Journal of the Anglo-Mongolian Society*, 9.1-2, 1984, p. 1-11; see also Caroline Humphrey, “Chiefly and Shamanist Landscapes in Mongolia”. In Eric Hirsch and Michael O’Hanlon eds., *The*

visited the cave in 1998 noticed that everybody, men and women, young and old crawled into the cave. According to one of her informants, people should go naked. The passage is narrow and people are afraid of crawling inside. Nowadays it has become a tourist attraction<sup>54</sup>.

– the Mother's Belly (Ekhe-yin Khebeli, Cyr. Mo. Ekhiin Khevlii), an extremely long and narrow passageway at the White Rock (Tsagan Chiluu, Cyr. Mo. Tsagaan Chuluu) in Khentii Province (Rep. of Mongolia), in a territory inhabited by Buryats;<sup>55</sup>

– the Mother's Womb at Altan Shirguul (Chiyanjin District, Jarud Banner, Tongliao Municipality, Inner Mongolia). Altan Shirguul is a famous site of pilgrimage; "people come to this place from near and far, make their offerings to the spirit of the caves, and crawl through the narrow crevice of the cave... When a person comes out of the cave it is as if he or she came out from his/her mother's womb."<sup>56</sup> This womb-cave was believed to be the birthplace of Buddha.

While the difficulty of crawling inside some of the caves such as those of Wutaishan, Tövkhen Kheid and Dayan Deerekhi appears as frightening,<sup>57</sup> it is not the case in other caves such as those of Lobonchinbu Süme and Khamar-un Kheid, where crawling in is relatively easy. In the absence of caves, narrow holes or tight passages within the pedestal of statues or *stūpas* may convey the same womb symbolism.<sup>58</sup> An example is found in the pedestal of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century iron *stūpa* at Amurbayaskhulangtu Monastery (Cyr. Mo. Amarbayasgalant Khiid, Selenge Province, Rep. of Mongolia): pregnant women crawl under the *stūpa* so that their child is purified of sins.<sup>59</sup> In Maitreya festivals of Inner Mongolia, when the statue of the *bodhisattva* is carried clockwise around the monastery, people gather and compete to crawl underneath the statue and inside the tunnel formed by the lamas upholding the palanquin to ensure that they will be reborn into the world when Maitreya appears in the future.<sup>60</sup> In Mongol temples, I also observed devotees who crawled under the bookshelves stacked with the *Kanjur* (the Tibetan *Tripitaka*) in order to be blessed by the word of the Buddha.

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*Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 149-150. I did not visit this cave.

<sup>54</sup> Ágnes Birtalan visited the cave with a Hungarian Expedition (Email, August 24, 2020). I thank her for having sent me a short film she made during her visit.

<sup>55</sup> Rebecca M. Empson, "'Enclosing' for Growth: Including or Excluding People from Land in Northeast Mongolia". In Isabelle Charleux, Robert Hamayon, Grégory Delaplace, and Scott Pearce eds., *Representing Power in Modern Inner Asia: Conventions, Alternatives and Oppositions*. Bellingham: Western Washington University, 2010, 138.

<sup>56</sup> Chiodo, *Songs of Khorchin Shamans*, p. 85, n. 230, quoting Qong Miliyan, *Altan siryuul-un domuy*, unpublished.

<sup>57</sup> I have never seen someone stuck but at the Wutaishan womb-cave, I saw pilgrims who were too afraid to enter and gave up.

<sup>58</sup> Crawling under pedestals, statues or pillars with a hole is also documented in other parts of Asia (Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints*, p. 15). Lessing ("The Question of Nicodemus") mentions a cult in India where polluted persons pass through an image symbolizing the *yonī*.

<sup>59</sup> Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints*, p. 14.

<sup>60</sup> See pictures of the Maitreya Festival at Mergen Süme, Inner Mongolia, in Uranchimeg Borjigin Ujeed, "Circulating Prophetic Texts. Ethical and Moral Aspects". In Rebecca Empson, ed., *Time, Causality and Prophecy in the Mongolian Cultural Region*. Cambridge: Globe Oriental (Inner Asia Series), 2006, p. 45-47.



## Little Wutaishans

Oral sources clearly relate several Mongol womb-caves to the famous Wutaishan cave. Lobonchinbu Süme's womb-cave is known as the "daughter" of Wutaishan's Ekhe-yin Umai. A learned Tibetan historian, Nyima Dorjé, told Birnbaum that "it is inappropriate to enter the mother cave [at Wutaishan] if one previously has entered the daughter cave [at Lobonchinbu Süme?]"<sup>61</sup>. It seems to be a matter of precedence: one must visit the "mother cave" at Wutaishan before visiting the Mongol daughter. Local people make a link between Dayan Deerekhi's ("shamanist") womb-cave and Wutaishan's Mother's Womb-Cave: "cases are known of people from Zakamen going for the 'gift of progeny' to U-tai, where there also was a cave, Utain Umai".<sup>62</sup>

Three monasteries of Mongolia which have a womb-cave ritual are considered as surrogates of Wutaishan: Gilubar Juu is called "Little Wutaishan"<sup>63</sup>, Tövkhen Kheid, "the Wutaishan of Outer Mongolia", and Baldan Bairawun Kheid, the Utai Gumbüm (Wutai-Kumbum) of north Mongolia<sup>64</sup>. These surrogate Wutaishans do not have a five-terraced configuration, relics of the Buddha or copies of famous Wutaishan icons. Their only link to Wutaishan is actually their womb-cave and its association with child-giving and fertility: none of them have a five-peak configuration nor a replica of temples and icons of Wutaishan.

None of these surrogates is considered as efficacious as the Wutaishan (womb-cave) and could completely replace it. Wutaishan was seen as a unique, original, non-replicable pure land. While these local pilgrimages may be older than Mongols' worship of Wutaishan, they did not replace the great pilgrimage to Wutaishan for Mongols of the modern period: they remained "Little Wutaishans" or "daughters". Undoubtedly, these surrogates developed completely independently up to the moment when a learned cleric saw correspondences and announced a connection with Shanxi's Wutaishan and its womb-cave.

## The Buddhist interpretation of the womb-cave ritual

Lessing writes about Labrang-yin Süme: "It was through the opening of this stone that the faithful seeking purification from their sins were supposed to crawl into the cave in order to

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<sup>61</sup> Birnbaum, "Secret Halls of the Mountain Lords", p. 138, n. 70.

<sup>62</sup> Galdanova, Zhukovskaya and Ochirova, "The Cult of Dayan Derkhe in Mongolia and Buryatia", p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> According to oral sources from Shili-yin Gool and Juu Uda Leagues, Gilubar Juu is one of the Five Utai (Wutai[shan]), which were distinguished by colour: Yellow Wutai is Shanxi's Wutaishan. White Wutai is Gilubar Juu in the Left Baarin Banner, etc. Although Shanxi's Wutaishan is much bigger in terms of the number of temples and *stūpas*, these Five Utai have a comparable numinous natural environment, with healing springs and extraordinary rocks and caves, hell paths and narrow passages, and are said to emit marvellous lights of the colour corresponding to their name. But only Gilubar Juu has a womb-cave (Belgünütei and N. Bükeqada. *Mongγul teüke-yin sudulyan-u ügülel-üd* [Research articles on Mongol history]. Hailar: Öbür Mongγul-un soyul-un keblel-ün qoriya, 2010, p. 1-26, first chapter on "Mongγulcuud-un mörgül-ün orun—tabun Utai-yin tuqai angqan-u sinjilge", p. 1-3; Charleux, *Nomads on Pilgrimage*, p. 371-377).

<sup>64</sup> The Mongolian expression Wutai-Kumbum (a main Tibetan monastery in Amdo/Qinghai Province, China) links the two main pilgrimage sites of the Mongols. Nowadays many Mongols think Wutai and Kumbum are the same.

become reborn, cleansed of all defilement (*nigyl ariyalxu-jin tula* [*nigül arilgalkhu-yin tula*]). According to a lama he interviewed, the rite was first and foremost “a symbolic act aiming at obtaining an advantageous rebirth”.<sup>65</sup> Pilgrims also visit the cave of Lobonchinbu Süme and Baldan Bairawun Kheid<sup>66</sup> to ensure a good rebirth. At Tövkhen Kheid, according to the anthropologist Zsuzsa Majer, “When one crawls in and turning back crawls out, all his or her sins are said to be cleared away, as if being reborn. Here one can also think of every sentient being as his or her beloved mother”.<sup>67</sup> Legend says the womb-cave purification ritual was practiced at the time of Zanabazar”.<sup>68</sup> The womb-cave of Khamar-un Kheid is known as the “birth passage of the mother consort of Kālacakra, Lord of Shambala [Shambhala]”, and the pilgrims who crawl into it are said to be reborn “as Kālacakra deities. They can now enter the Kālacakra *maṇḍala*”.<sup>69</sup> It is said to purify negative karmas, karmic pollutions accumulated over many lives, and to allow a better rebirth in a future life. At the cave of Dayan Deerekhi—although this deity is well-known for fertility magic—the (recent, at least since the late 1990s) interpretation of the ritual is also Buddhist: it is a ritual of rebirth, to be purified from one’s sins and be born again; but those having a bad karma will not be able to crawl in.<sup>70</sup>

According to the general Mongol Buddhist interpretation, it is therefore a rebirth ritual: pilgrims who get out of the cave believe that their sins and bad destinies have been washed away and that they have been reborn (*ireejü törö-*, *dakhin törö-*) sinless and as pure as a child (which may explain why, at the caves of Wutaishan and Dayan Deerekhi, according to some authors, they had to undress). They are thus ensured of obtaining a favourable reincarnation, and according to the various sources cited above, be reborn as a buddha or obtain enlightenment.

These caves can also be the place of Buddhist visualization practices, such as at the Mother’s Womb-Cave of Wutaishan, where Tibetan adepts practice meditations on Vajrayoginī and *tsok* ritual, and at the Alkanay womb-cave.

The womb-caves are associated with various female deities—Tārā, Vajrayoginī, Guanyin, Śākyamuni’s mother, the Mother of Buddhas, *ḍākinīs*—, as well as Kālacakra, Cakrasaṃvara, Garuḍa, or Padmasambhava. Apparently there was no specific Buddhist liturgy recited during the ritual. At Labrang-yin Süme, a “short liturgy” was recited by a monk:

An old Mongolian lama who allegedly had officiated at such ceremonies produced a few Tibetan texts which he said were recited at this occasion. They turned out to be the Saddharmapundarikā

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<sup>65</sup> Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”, p. 96.

<sup>66</sup> According to Ulrike Herold, “Most tourists out there were Buddhists and took it very serious. ... All you had to do was to be absolutely silent and focused (= praying attitude) when crawling through. ... The idea was that you would be reborn on the other side of the rock and all your sins were gone” (Email, August 21, 2020).

<sup>67</sup> Zsuzsa Majer. “Töwkhö, the Retreat of Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar as a Pilgrimage Site”. Majer adds that “next to the caves is a rock formation called baby’s wrap-around (...). It is indicated with the inscription: *E WAM dga’-’khyil rdo-rje brag ... rdzong gling*, ‘vajra rock of the purity of method and wisdom, fortress monastery.’ By standing inside this vertical crack in the rock wall, one is ‘wrapped around’ like a baby; this experience is said to help in obtaining enlightenment by the merit of having gained a precious human birth”.

<sup>68</sup> Chiodo, *Songs of Khorchin Shamans*, p. 85, n. 230.

<sup>69</sup> “Pilgrimage in the Gobi—Danzanravjaa’s Shambala Dornogobi”. <http://www.mongolianmatters.com/mongolia/2008/09/pilgrimage-in-the-gobi-desert/>, video posted on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>70</sup> Ágnes Birtalan, Email, August 24, 2020.

sutra (Mongolian: *Cayan lingxu-a*), a *sādhana* (Mo. *bytygel*) evocation of Mahākāla (M. Gombo, Tibetan: *Mgon-po*) and an invocation to Tārā. “No specific texts were used for this rite, the lama said”.<sup>71</sup>

Quoting another informant, Lessing wrote that at such sanctuaries in Inner Mongolia the lamas performed the (*Dara ekhe*) *mandalshiua* (the four-*maṇḍala* offering to Tārā)<sup>72</sup> that ensures a healthy delivery for pregnant women.

Buddhist monks are present (but not necessarily helping) when the cave is integrated into a monastery, but in other places, such as the Dayan Deerekhi cave, in the past it was shamans who officiated; in some places, the cave is not guarded by a ritual specialist. According to Elisabetta Chiodo, in the past, rituals to the Mother's Womb at Altan Shirguul were originally performed by a shaman (with the sacrifice of a sheep), and later by a *laiching* (a kind of “white shaman”, a ritual specialist who worships Buddhist deities side by side with those of the popular religion). “Nowadays, people perform the rebirth ritual in Altan Siryuul without the participation of ritual specialists”.<sup>73</sup>

### A shamanist ritual?

In some cases in Mongolia and Wutaishan, the womb-case ritual was perceived as non-Buddhist, unorthodox—which explains the silence of the Wutaishan clerics and the scandalized attitude of *dorampa* Lozang Zangpo—, or shamanist, in the case of the caves of Altan Shirguul and Dayan Deerekhi. In the socialist period, the ritual at the Dayan Deerekhi Cave appeared abhorrent to the local lamas, who tried to contain and neutralize its power<sup>74</sup>. According to Caroline Humphrey,

The rituals at these cults must be performed by shamans, not lamas. They involve women penetrating through the narrow crevice of the cave. In the Dayan Derke caves of the Xövsgöl region of north-west Mongolia there were a series of chambers. The shaman said to the person clambering through: “Look up, what do you see there?” The shaman would interpret what the person saw in the gloom. It was good if a ray of light seemed to suggest a child or an animal...<sup>75</sup>

The lamas of the peripheral regions therefore took action against the cave-spirits... tried to destroy or negate it... The reified representation of the female ability to give birth in the cave cults was frightening as well as abhorrent to the lamas. Since the idea was that the power in the caves derived from the untamed sexual drives of the female spirits within, one of the lamas' feeble tactics consisted of setting up male sexual organs, carved out of wood, facing the caves. This was no more than a containing device, which acknowledged the spirits' power.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”, p. 96.

<sup>72</sup> Tib. *sGrol ma'i sgo nas mandal bzhi ba*. Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”, p. 96.

<sup>73</sup> Chiodo, *Songs of Khorchin Shamans*, p. 85, n. 230.

<sup>74</sup> Galdanova, Zhukovskaya and Ochirova. “The Cult of Dayan Derkhe in Mongolia and Buryatia”, p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Humphrey, “Chiefly and Shamanist Landscapes in Mongolia”, p. 149-150, quoting Galdanova, Zhukovskaya and Ochirova. “The Cult of Dayan Derkhe in Mongolia and Buryatia”, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Humphrey (“Chiefly and Shamanist Landscapes in Mongolia”, p. 150)'s conclusions are based on Galdanova, Zhukovskaya and G.N. Ochirova's study ( “The Cult of Dayan Derkhe in Mongolia and Buryatia”). In the late

At Tövkhen Kheid, according to legend, the womb-cave is connected to the giant stone phallus located on a hill near Erdeni Juu, the monastery built on the ruins of Kharakhorum (Övörkhongai Province): “The Living Womb [Tövkhöŋ]) and the Stone Phallus are both inscribed with the letter ‘om,’ thanks to the fifth reincarnation of Ravja [Danjinrabjai]”<sup>77</sup> (the presence on a hill of this phallus, that women and girls use to ride for fertility, is puzzling; some say it was built to protect the monastery and the ruined city).

For anthropologist Caroline Humphrey, the cave ritual belongs to shamanic spirit cults.<sup>78</sup> But womb-caves are present in the central steppe where shamanism has disappeared since the 17<sup>th</sup> century under Buddhist persecution: it is more probably an old popular ritual which has been hijacked and reinterpreted by Buddhists and in some places, by shamans.

### **A popular ritual of fertility, good fortune and revitalization**

The Buddhist interpretation is not the only one, and probably not the oldest one. Lessing explains that Mongols imagine sin as something material, to be scrapped off, physically removed by crawling through a narrow passage. It is not only the Buddhist notion of “sin” (*nigül*) or “bad karma” that Mongols want to scrape off, but also pollution, defilement (*bujar*, from contact with a dead body, for instance), curses (*khariyal*) and misfortune. It is therefore a ritual requiring a physical effort to free oneself from bad things.

Besides, Mongols view mountains as powerful entities that regulate climate, ecology and human fortune. Like Chinggis Khan and other great ancestors, mountains are said to have *sülde* (vital energy, charisma) and are therefore sources of power, that modern Mongols call *energi* (energy, from the Russian).<sup>79</sup> If one collects sand or earth from the mountain, rubs one's body to a rock or inside a womb-cave, he/she will absorb some of its spiritual energy. At the Mother's Belly of the White Rock in Khentii, it is said that by penetrating into the core of the mountain, the pilgrims increase their *khei mori* (“ever-living prospering spirit”, personal life force).<sup>80</sup> The cave of Khamar-un Kheid not only purifies karma but also renews one's spiritual energy.

But for Mongols, the womb-cave ritual is also—and perhaps, first and foremost—a fertility ritual. Mongols revere Mother Earth (Etügen Ekhe) as an important deity,<sup>81</sup> and their word for

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1990s, as documented by Ágnes Birtalan, the ritual at this cave was completely Buddhicized (Email, August 24, 2020).

<sup>77</sup> Konagaya *et al.* *The Practice of Buddhism in Kharkhorin and its Revival*.

<sup>78</sup> Humphrey, “Chiefly and Shamanist Landscapes in Mongolia”, p. 150. For Caroline Humphrey, the cult of womb-caves characterizes the “shamanic landscape”; it is found in regions that have been less influenced by Buddhism (Buryatia, Khorchin, northern borders of Mongolia). She adds that “In central Mongolia, where Buddhist State-oriented society has long since triumphed, lamas were able to dismiss such spirits as unimportant” (*ibid.*). Humphrey was not aware of the presence and reinterpretation of this cult in Buddhist central Mongolia.

<sup>79</sup> While most of Mongolia's sacred mountains are seen as male, the womb-caves are obviously seen as female.

<sup>80</sup> See for instance Empson, “‘Enclosing’ for Growth”, p. 138-139. Helen Hardacre gives the same reason for mountain ascetics who meditate in caves in Japan: “absorb the maximum spiritual power of the mountain and the deities who dwell there” (“The Cave and the Womb World”, p. 150).

<sup>81</sup> Etügen has ancient origins tracing back to the Turks (who called her “Umai”). On Umai/Etügen's history among the Turks, Mongols and Tungus: Evelyne Lot-Falk, “À propos d'Ätügän, déesse mongole de la terre”. *Revue de*

“mother” (*ekhe*) frequently appears in the names given to natural features of the landscape. They may have borrowed this ritual from the Turks, who especially worshipped Mother Umai (*umai* meaning “womb” in Mongolian), protector of newborns and young children. In Mongol epics, dead heroes are placed into a cave, which brings them back to life.<sup>82</sup> The entrance of the womb-cave of Labrang-yin Süme was ornamented with a lotus pattern symbolizing the *yonī*.<sup>83</sup> The cave of Alkanay is especially visited by childless couples or people wishing to help the childless have babies. The Ekhe-yin Umai of Gilubar Juu was especially visited by people hoping to have a child and by those wishing to “repair” misfortune.<sup>84</sup> The Ekhe-yin Khebeli of Tövkhon Kheid is said to ensure fertility and increase one’s *khei mori*. When I visited this monastery in 2009 and 2013, Mongols came in droves to be blessed with a child, and those who saw their vow fulfilled came back with the baby to offer *ex-votos*. Pilgrims crawl into the cave of Dayan Deerekhi to obtain good health, wealth and children: Dayan Deerekhi is said to bestow wealth, particularly for descendants, and to look after children. The cult of this cave, associated with praying for children, probably existed a long time ago and was later added to Dayan Deerekhi’s functions.<sup>85</sup> The Wutaishan Mother’s Womb-Cave also appears for Mongols as a particularly effective place in which to request children. Antoine Mostaert (1881-1971), a Scheutist missionary among the Ordos in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, mentioned Wutaishan as the first place to go for childless couples: “To obtain children, women who can afford it often resort to pilgrimages either to Ou t’ai chan [Wutaishan] (Chansi) or to another renowned place of pilgrimage”.<sup>86</sup> “Women make pilgrimages to Wutaishan as well as to local shrines such as a Chinese goddess of fertility near Yulin 榆林 for Ordos Mongols”.<sup>87</sup>

At the womb-caves of Mongolia and Wutaishan, the Buddhist aim of this ritual—to be reborn purified of one’s sins—, often obscures or overlaps its more pragmatic goals—to obtain children, to benefit from the contact with the Mother Earth, to be revitalized and healed by the Earth’s magnetic energy, to increase one’s fortune, and to purify oneself from defilement and curses.

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*l’histoire des religions*, 149, 1956, p. 157-196; Meng Huiying, *Chenfeng de ouxiang*, p. 237-244. On the cult of the mother-deity Umai (Ome Niang Niang) and of female fertility spirits concerned with bringing children into the world and ensuring their health among the Daur, Manchus and Tungus peoples: Caroline Humphrey and Urgunge Onon, *Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge and Power among the Daur Mongols*. Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 286-293; Meng Huiying 2000: 237-244. An example of the cult of Mother Earth in present-day Republic of Mongolia is the Mother Rock Eji-yin Khada in Töv Province.

<sup>82</sup> Meng Huiying 孟慧英, *Chenfeng de ouxiang—Samanjiao guannian yanjiu* 塵封的偶像：薩滿教觀念研究. Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2000, p. 243; Chiodo, *Songs of Khorchin Shamans*, p. 85, n. 230.

<sup>83</sup> Lessing, “The Question of Nicodemus”, p. 96.

<sup>84</sup> Meng Huiying, *Chenfeng de ouxiang*, p. 242-243.

<sup>85</sup> Galdanova, Zhukovskaya and G.N. Ochirova. “The Cult of Dayan Derkhe in Mongolia and Buryatia”, p. 1-11.

<sup>86</sup> Antoine Mostaert (CICM), “Matériaux ethnographiques relatifs aux Mongols Ordos”. *Central Asiatic Journal*, 2, 1956, p. 292.

<sup>87</sup> Patrick Taveirne, *Han-Mongol Encounters and Missionary Endeavours: A History of Scheut in Ordos (Hetao) 1874-1911*. Leuven University Press: Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation, 2004, p. 443. Another famous place to ask for children in Inner Mongolia was the shrine of Ishi/Eshi Khatun—the “Lady-Mother”, i.e., Sorkhakhtani Begi (d. 1252), Khubilai Khan’s mother—in Ordos Wang Banner (Okada Hidehiro, “The Chakhar Shrine of Eshi Khatun”. In Denis Sinor, ed., *Aspects of Altaic Civilizations*, III. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990, p. 176-186).



## Other womb-caves of Asia

Rolf Stein showed in his extensive study on the cult of the Mother Earth that this rebirth ritual is common in other esoteric Buddhist traditions. Basing himself on examples in the Tibetan and Hindu worlds, he argued that this ritual was, before anything else, a Buddhist ritual borrowed from Hinduism and clearly related to the cult of Tārā, that certainly does not have non-Buddhist precedents.<sup>88</sup> In Japan, the womb-cave is identified with the Garbhadhatu *maṇḍala* (“Womb-world *maṇḍala*”), where the practitioner can reunite himself with Vairocana, attain Buddhahood in this life and be reborn, in the sense of being newly endowed with esoteric knowledge and powers.<sup>89</sup> In a popular Khmer initiatory rite centred on the Birth Cave of Phnom Sampau near Battambang described by François Bizot, the villagers “die” while entering the cave and “come back to life” when they reappear. The tellurian incubation is a symbolic death followed by the symbolic rebirth of the initiate in a higher mode of existence, thus breaking the chain of reincarnations.<sup>90</sup> These scholars all stress the Buddhist aim of this ritual. Conversely, considering the importance of the womb-cave in indigenous practices of Asia, especially in non-Buddhist regions, and the fact that it sometimes appears abhorrent to the local lamas, I argue that for Mongols, it is an ancient Inner Asia ritual linked to the cult of the Earth and later reinterpreted and re-appropriated by Buddhism.

Besides, Stein listed a great number of “testing” ritual caves and passages but did not find examples of womb-caves in Tibet and in the Himalayas.<sup>91</sup> The many narrow tunnel caves and passages he and other scholars described do not have the characteristics of womb-caves either—i.e., narrow enough for a human body to pass through and leading to a dead end evoking a womb—except in literature. Unlike womb-caves, the numerous narrow caves and tunnels of Tibetan pilgrimage sites are used for the ritual testing of one’s positive or negative karma.<sup>92</sup> If

<sup>88</sup> Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints*, p. 6. Rituals at caves and narrow passages are found all around the world: France, Morocco, Russia, Palestine, and so on. Their rituals and mythology are generally linked to the underground world and resurrection from death. Like many pilgrimage practices performed in natural numinous sites, such as fastening ribbons to trees, crawling into a narrow hole or grotto is a universally shared practice that can have different meanings and interpretations (Glenn Bowman, “Processus identitaires autour de quelques sanctuaires partagés en Palestine et en Macédoine”. In Dionigi Albera, Maria Couroucli, eds., *Religions traversées. Lieux saints partagés entre chrétiens, musulmans et juifs en Méditerranée*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2009, p. 33-35), India, etc. In the Western literature, see Michel Tournier’s *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996 [1972], p. 121-133.

<sup>89</sup> Helen Hardacre, “The Cave and the Womb World”. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 10.2-3, 1983, p. 149-176. Male meditants of the Shugendō 修験道 meditate in a womb-cave at Mount Fuji.

<sup>90</sup> François Bizot, “La grotte de la naissance : Recherches sur le Bouddhisme Khmer II”. *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient*, 67, 1980, p. 221-269.

<sup>91</sup> Gombojab Tsybikov mentions in eastern Tibet a narrow passage or cave considered to wash away sins—pilgrims try to pass with a great zeal but the passage becomes tight and tortures those who have sinned for a long time. It is located in a Mongol-populated region, near Dulaan Kheid in the Kukunor area (Gonbochjab T. Tsybikov. *Un Pèlerin bouddhiste au Tibet*, translated from Russian by Bernard Kreise, Paris: Peuples du Monde, 1992 [1919]).

<sup>92</sup> For instance in Western Tibet (two stones called the Bardo defile at Mount Kailash); Central Tibet (Ganden Monastery; Terdrom near Drigungtil); Amdo (Amnye Machen, Drakkar Trel dzong in Peltang); Nepal (Tarap in Dolpo, the Halase-Maratika caves in Eastern Nepal—these caves are shared by Hindus and Buddhists: Katia Buffetrille, “The Halase-Maratika Caves (Eastern Nepal): A Sacred Place Claimed by Both Hindus and Buddhists”. *Pondy Papers in Social Sciences* 16. Pondichéry: Institut Français de Pondichéry, 1994, p. 8-9); Bhutan... See Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints*, p. 11-23; Robert B. Ekvall, *Religious Observances in Tibet: Patterns and Functions*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 241; Corneille Jest, *Dolpo. Communautés de langue tibétaine du Népal*. Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1975, p. 356; Katia Buffetrille, “Montagnes sacrées, lacs et grottes. Lieux de pèlerinage dans le monde tibétain.

the pilgrim succeeds in going through the narrow passage, he/she is ensured of gaining a better rebirth, and is released from the terror of the intermediate state between death and rebirth (*bardo*). Therefore, pilgrims with bad karma may get stuck. “It is believed the clefts and passages change size automatically to allow any morally suitable candidate to pass through, regardless of his or her actual body shape and size”.<sup>93</sup> Tibetans refer to these passages as “narrow paths” (*tranglam*), or “paths to hell” (*nyellam*) because they represent the Gates of Hell (those who pass will escape from hell)<sup>94</sup> or the way leading to a pure land.<sup>95</sup> There is apparently no association with Mother Earth or requests for children in the Tibetan and Himalayan “testing” ritual performed in narrow passages and caves.<sup>96</sup>

By contrast, the terminology of the narrow caves in Mongol areas<sup>97</sup> focuses on the mother (“womb”, “belly”): Ekhe-yin Agui (Mother’s Cave), Ekhe-yin Umai (Mother’s Womb), or Ekhe-yin Khebeli (Mother’s Belly). Most of them are dead ends that closely evoke a womb; others are tunnel-caves that are also called “mother’s womb”. The crawling into the cave evokes the *regressus ad uterum* and the act of conception.<sup>98</sup> Mongol Buddhists interpret it as a ritual to clear away sins and scrape off “bad karma”, but it is not a ritual to evaluate one’s good or bad karma (in which one succeeds or fails).

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Traditions écrites, réalités vivantes”. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Nanterre: Université Paris X, 1996, vol. 2, p. 367-370; Katia Buffetrille, “The Great Pilgrimage of A-myes rma-chen: Written Traditions, Living Realities”. In Alexander W. Macdonald ed. *Mandala and Landscape*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1997, p. 98-100; Toni Huber, *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain. Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 19.

<sup>93</sup> Huber, *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain*, p. 19.

<sup>94</sup> There existed also in Mongolia a tunnel said to be connected to hell. Old people remember that under the floor of Galdan Juu temple of Jaya Gegeen-ü Khüriye (Cyr. Mo. Zaya Gegeenii Khüree, Arkhangai Province, Rep. of Mongolia) at the foot of Mount Bulgan, there was a tunnel-like passage known as “the dark hell” (*kharanggui tamu*): devotees used to enter a dark hole, crawl along the narrow passage and come out of an opening on the left. They believed this gave them a glimpse of hell while they were alive, which was meant to dissuade them from committing sins and encourage them to do meritorious deeds. This passage does not exist anymore (Sürengiin Jünsh. *Zaya bandida Luvsanperenlein ölgii nutag Aryn Saikhan Khangai* [Beautiful Arkhangai: The birthplace of Zaya Bandida Luvsanprinlei]. Ulaanbaatar: Mönkhiiin üseg, 2013, p. 145).

<sup>95</sup> Buffetrille, “The Halase-Maratika Caves”, p. 9-12; Katia Buffetrille, “Reflections on Pilgrimages to Sacred Mountains, Lakes and Caves”. In Alex McKay ed., *Pilgrimage in Tibet*, Richmond (Surrey) and Leiden: Curzon Press, 1998, p. 23. These testing rituals can be performed not only in caves (which can be artificial grottoes) but also in openings within a rock, in narrow passages between two rocks, or on a narrow natural stone bridge across a deep ravine. Stein (*Grottes-matrices et lieux saints*), opposes the motherly character of matrix caves to the male character of rocks under which a subdued demon is pressed. On a similar Chinese merit-testing ritual on Putuoshan: Chün-fang Yü. “P’u-t’o Shan: Pilgrimage and the Creation of the Chinese Potalaka”, in Susan Naquin and Chün-fang Yü, eds., *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, p. 229. In Japan, at Oku-no-in 奥之院, Mount Wakasugi 若杉山, in the Sasaguri pilgrimage, there is a narrow passage between two rocks called the Scissor Rock (*hasami-iwa* 鋏岩) where only the virtuous may pass through. It is said Monk Kōbō-Daishi (弘法大師) (1774-835) split with his cane in a single strike, opening a path to the inner shrine.

<sup>96</sup> In Tibet, childless people who ask for children go to certain lakes or stones (Corneille Jest, *Dolpo. Communautés de langue tibétaine du Népal*. Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1975, p. 360, 365; Katia Buffetrille, personal communication, 2009).

<sup>97</sup> Womb-caves also exist in the Russian republic of Tuva.

<sup>98</sup> Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints*, p. 1.

## Conclusion: The Mongols' Appropriation of Wutaishan

We will never know whether it was the Tibetans, the Chinese or the Mongols who first squeezed into the Mother's Womb-Cave of Wutaishan. According to Stein, there are no true womb-caves in Tibet. Birnbaum thinks that this ritual may originate in "native Chinese traditions, lightly cloaked in Buddhist garb".<sup>99</sup> However, Stein could not find any evidence that the Chinese developed rebirth symbolism and ritual around their caves: Wutaishan's Mother's Womb-Cave would thus be the only known example of a cave of initiatory rebirth in Han China.<sup>100</sup> All the pilgrims including Han Chinese who crawled into the Mother's Womb-Cave at Wutaishan may have in fact been following an ancient Inner Asian fertility ritual of Earth-worship, which is likely to have been exported to Wutaishan: the Mongol pilgrims may have transplanted it to a Wutaishan cave that perfectly matched their requirements—a womb-like cave accessed through a narrow passage. Another possibility is that Tibetans first used it as a karma-testing cave or/and as a Buddhist initiation cave and that, later, Mongols interpreted the ritual as a fertility ritual.

We do not know how, when and by whom these practices were brought to Wutaishan. They are not documented by official records because they do not belong to any learned tradition; the eminent monks never considered them important compared, for instance, to manifestations of Mañjuśrī. However, we can assume that both the lamas, overcoming their disdain for such popular practices to please and attract Mongol and Tibetan devotees, and the pilgrims themselves who already practiced them in their local pilgrimage sites, imported the womb-cave ritual to Wutaishan. The high-ranking lamas who travelled between Tibet, Wutaishan and Inner Mongolia certainly played a role in this transmission and in building links between the Wutaishan Mother's Womb-Cave and Mongol womb-caves.

The popular significance of these practices informs us, in a different way from the Tibetan and Mongol guidebooks, about how the Tibetans and Mongols reshaped the mountain, disrupted and subverted the clerical Buddhist project by reasserting old beliefs and practices: it is ultimately the pilgrims who create the pilgrimage. Sacrality is built through practices. The process of systematization and institutionalization is a slow one, but pragmatic practices are enduring. Although interpretation of these rituals may have changed (such as for the cave of Dayan Deerekhi), their contemporary revival at numinous sites and the custom of burying one's relative on Wutaishan are one of the driving forces behind the revival of the pilgrimage since 1980.

The womb-cave ritual has also been revived in Mongol areas since the 1990s (if not secretly continued during the years of religious persecution). In two places, men were forbidden to enter (in the past, at Dayan Deerekhi Cave) or frequent a separate cave,<sup>101</sup> and more ethnographic fieldwork is needed to document the meaning of these practices, but they are first and foremost "popular" rituals that can do without a religious specialist.

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<sup>99</sup> Birnbaum, "Secret Halls of the Mountain Lords", p. 140.

<sup>100</sup> Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints*, p. 5. This is not completely true, according to Vincent Durand-Dastès and Kristofer Schipper (personal communication, 2007). There exists, for instance, a Chinese equivalent of the womb-cave at Tianlongshan 天龍山, southwest of Taihuai, not far from Wutaishan.

<sup>101</sup> In some Tibetan pilgrimages, such as the Kawa Karpo or Tsari, women are excluded from certain pilgrimage rituals (Buffetrille, "The Great Pilgrimage of A-myes rma-chen", p. 108; Huber, *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain*, p. 120).

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