Mount Fuji, or Fujisan as it is called in Japanese, is an object of faith for Japanese people and a place that their hearts draw support from, as expressed by the official name that it is registered as a Cultural World Heritage Site under: “Fujisan, sacred place and source of artistic inspiration”.

The culture of faith relating to Mt. Fuji can be generally classified into three types. The first is a faith expressed through actually climbing Mt. Fuji (mountain pilgrimage, or tōhai), the second is a faith expressed through viewing Mt. Fuji from a distance (worship from afar, or yōhai), and the third is a faith expressed through creating pictures or literature featuring Mt. Fuji.

What follows is an explanation of two of these types—mountain pilgrimage and worship from afar—provided by Mr. Yukie Takeya, Professor Emeritus of Takushoku University and leading scholar on the subject of Mt. Fuji.
Following a route that is meant for tōhai at Mt. Fuji is itself an act of faith and is said to be a way of performing Fujizenjō (Fuji ascetic training), which is the practice of reaching enlightenment through climb Mt. Fuji. There are many tōhai routes, but only four are registered as part of the Cultural World Heritage Site: the Omiya-Murayama tōhai route, which was established as the first tōhai in the 12th century; the Yoshida tōhai route, which takes pilgrims from the base of the mountain to the peak; the Suyama tōhai route, which begins at the Suyama Sengen shrine at south east face of the mountain; and the Subashiri tōhai route which begins at the Subashiri Sengen shrine at the eastern face of the mountain.

The Ochūdō route that circles around the Mt. Fuji mountainside is a sacred path that traditionally, only those who had climbed to the top of Mt. Fuji three times were permitted to walk. Although today only part of this route can be walked due to a danger of rockslides and falling rocks, it is popular as a trekking course rich with highlights such as forests filled with greenery and the Osawa collapse, an area where erosion of the surface is in progress.
At the crater of the summit, one can find the Fuji eight peaks, which include Ken-ga-mine, the highest point in Japan, as well as Hakusan-dake. The journey around these peaks, "o-hachi meguri", is also famous.

In Japanese folklore, caves among the mountains and coasts are regarded as a metaphor for the womb, and passing through such caves is a rebirth ritual that allows one to obtain a new life. The entirety of Mt. Fuji itself can be thought of as a large womb, and the caves at the base of the mountain have the name o-tainai (inside of the womb). There are eight representative examples of these that are called the Fuji 8 tainai – of those, the Funatsu tainai and Yoshida tainai are registered as part of the World Heritage site. Since these two tainai are located beside the Yoshida tōhai route, people visit them the day before embarking on tōhai and perform rituals such as purifying their bodies in the water in the cave. They are considered sacred ground at which to express faith during the Mt. Fuji pilgrimage.

Although in the past women were not allowed to climb Mt. Fuji, women were allowed to enter the tainai, which made them important places of faith that woman of the time could access directly.

*Highlighting Japan* took the opportunity to interview some pilgrims who had climbed Mt. Fuji for the purpose of tōhai.

“\nThe significance behind climbing Mt. Fuji is what you learn about yourself” says Mr. Tadokoro, kannushi at Shibuya Hachimangu shrine. “Climbing Mt. Fuji is similar to life. Reaching a goal is an uphill struggle, but there is also the descent after reaching the goal. Having the courage to aim for something and the courage to back out is important. One attraction in climbing Japan’s highest mountain is finding out one’s limits and experiencing with one’s body how strenuous the ascent is.” Tadokoro attempted his second climb at night, first paying homage at Hongu Sengen Shrine. According to Tadokoro, kannushi take it in turns to attend to the shrine at the peak of Mt. Fuji. In times past, the kannushi would place essentials such as food and water in a wooden frame lined with canvas and ascend to the peak. Tadokoro’s assistant and fellow priest, Florian Wiltschko, first climbed Fuji when he was 24, considered an unlucky age in Shinto belief. During his ascent, the weather deteriorated, and the wind blew so strongly that without his stick, he would not have been able to stand. Looking back on his unlucky age, Wiltschko considers himself lucky to have descended unscathed.

While Mt. Fuji is a symbol of Japan, for those who choose to climb it, this famed mountain is also a route to the self.
An explosive boom in the faith surrounding Fuji arose, as did a group called Fuji-kō who regarded Mt. Fuji as an object of faith. However, since it was not easy to travel from Edo to Mt. Fuji and since women were forbidden to visit at the time, only young groups of men from among the Fuji-kō group were able to perform tōhai. Thus, in order to allow men and women of all ages to enjoy Fuji tōhai, miniature imitations of Mt. Fuji called Fujizuka (Fuji mounds) were constructed. Although they are not included among the objects that make up the Cultural World Heritage Site, there are many Fujizuka that have been designated as Cultural Properties by the national government of Japan or by local governments. Famous Fujizuka within the precincts of Tokyo include the Shitaya-sakamoto Fuji (within the grounds of the Onoterusaki shrine), the Nagasaki Fuji (beside the main shrine building of the Fuji Sengen shrine) and the Ekoda Fuji (within the grounds of the Ekoda Sengen shrine).

One such Fujizuka is found at Shinagawa Shrine near Shinbanba station in Tokyo. According to the shrine's kannushi, Mr. Suzuki, the Fujizuka, built between 1869-72, is a relatively late addition, and is said to bestow the same benefit on those who climb it as climbing Mt. Fuji.

The Sengen shrines, which are distributed in all regions of Japan from Hokkaido in the north to Nagasaki in the south, are also important relics of the foundations of the Mt. Fuji faith culture. From the late Nara period to the Heian era, an increase in Mt. Fuji's volcanic activity led to Mt. Fuji being called the great god of Sengen rather than just a mountain, and the people's awe and fear of the mountain (god) increased. This great god of Sengen was enshrined by the Sengen shrines, eight of which are registered as part of the Cultural World Heritage Site including the Mt. Fuji Hongu Sengen shrine (located in Fujinomiya, Shizuoka) and the Kitaguchi Hongu Fuji Sengen shrine (located in Fujiyoshida, Yamanashi).

Such aspects demonstrate the depth of the faith surrounding Mt. Fuji, and it is hoped that its registration as a Cultural World Heritage Site will serve as a chance to learn even more about the mountain of faith, Mt. Fuji.