

ANCIENT ROCK ART IN CHINA

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In 1975, an archaeologist working in Inner Mongolia became extremely interested in an account in the book 'Shui Jing Zhu', written over 1,500 years ago by Li Danyuan, a geographer of the Western Wei dynasty (386-534). It said that there were painted cliffs in Mount Yinshan and that these paintings included many horse-like figures. The archaeologist decided to investigate and the following year the rock paintings were discovered in Langshan district, western Mount Yinshan. Since then, great efforts have been made and more than one thousand rock paintings have been discovered. They have been named the 'Yinshan rock paintings'.

In this case, it was an ancient book that led to the discovery. In fact, rock paintings are often mentioned in ancient Chinese texts. For example, a book of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) mentions the Mount Huashan rock paintings, saying that they can be seen at certain times but disappear at other times — as if some celestial beings lived on the cliffs. The pointing of fingers at these paintings was not allowed, according to the book, and those who neglected this warning became very ill. For generations this story had been related, becoming more and more tinted with legendary colour.

Many rock paintings recorded in classical literature have not yet been discovered. The famous book 'Shui Jing Zhu' record that at Mount Yellow Cow on the bank of the Changjiang river in the Hubei province, there are figures representing a herdsman leading a cow. But nobody can see them now. Most probably they vanished long ago.

On the other hand, several rock paintings exist which are not recorded in any ancient literature. For instance, in Cangyuan county of Yunnan province, a popular legend says that there are many figures on the cliffs, that appear from time to time and have been regarded as magic figures. By following this legend, the archaeologists finally discovered the Cangyuan rock paintings.

Rock paintings are found throughout the whole country but most of them are in the areas of minority ethnic nationalities and were produced by the folk artists.

The Yinshan rock paintings mentioned above were works of the nomadic tribes. The analysis has shown that they were executed over a long period. Some of them consist of figures closely resembling those on the bronze plaques of Xiongnu (Hun). Perhaps they were also the work of the Xiongnu. Some of them bear inscriptions of Huihe (Ouigor) and Xixia (1038-1227) and most probably they were produced by these peoples. Some of them have inscriptions in Mongolian characters on them, bearing witness to their Mongolian origin.

The Heishan rock paintings in Giansu province were produced before the Han dynasty (2nd cent. B.C.-3rd cent. A.D.) by the people of Qian, Dayueze and Xiongnu. Some paintings in northern Xingjiang (Chinese Turkestan) were evidently made by people living in this region.

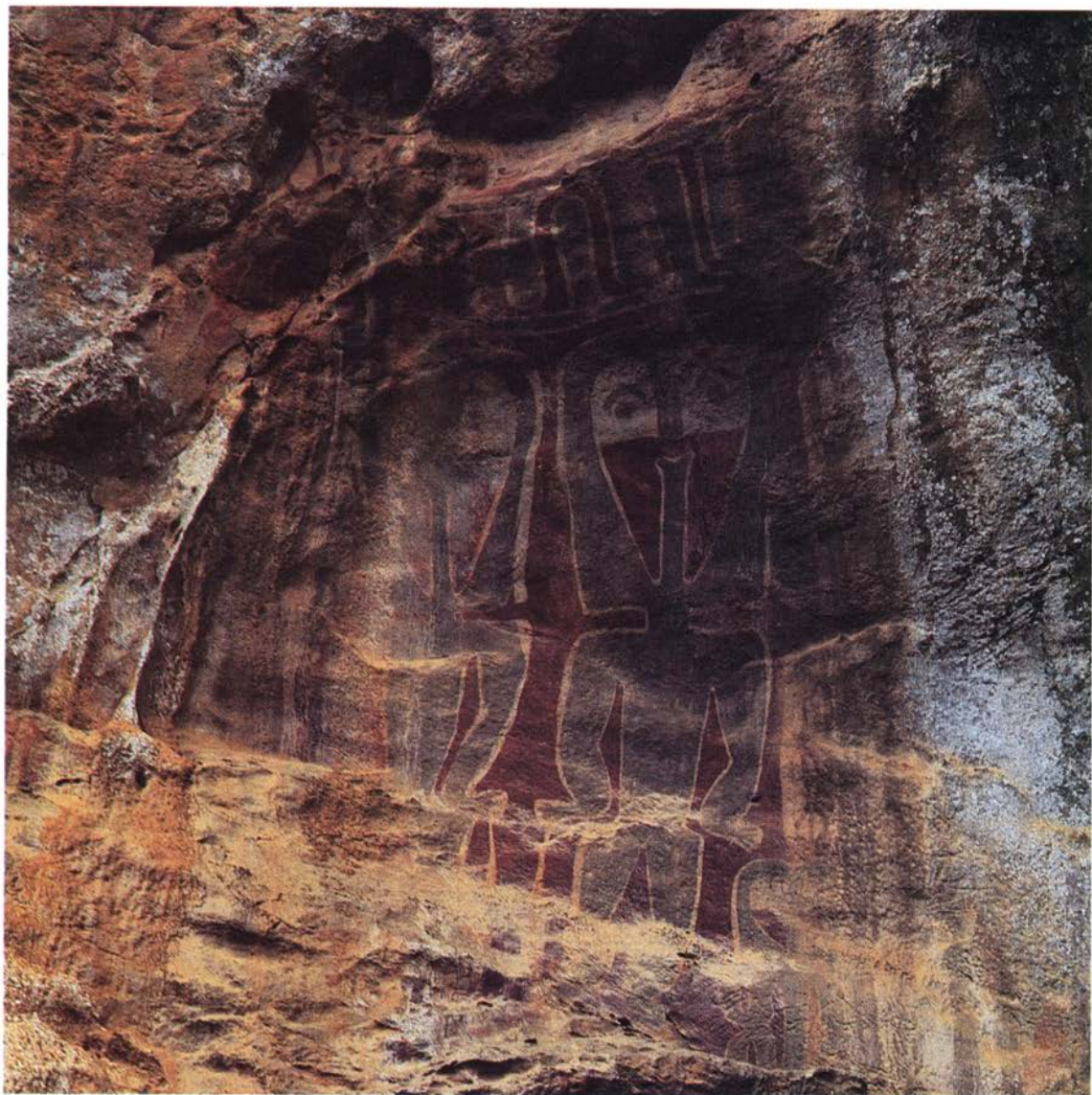


Fig. 86
Rock painting at Malipo, Yunnan Province,
China.

Figg. 87-88
Rock paintings at Huasban, Guangxi Autono-
mous region, China.

Gongxian rock paintings in Sichuan province were painted by the Bo people who lived there during the Yung dynasty (1271-1368). The rock paintings in Cangyuan on Mount Awa might be the work of the people of Wa nationality. The rock paintings distributed along the banks of the Zuojiang river, are the work of Zuan painters. It is uncertain when they were made but certainly not later than the Han dynasty (C-14 dated ca. 3,000 B.P.).

Some rock paintings are situated in regions where now there are no minority ethnic nationalities, such as Lianyingang in Jiangsu province, which was inhabited by an ancient people, the Eastern Yi in the Shang dynasty (16th-11th cent. B.C.); we know that they were the rock artists. It can be said that the rock paintings that have been discovered so far in China are exclusively



the work of minority ethnic nationalities. This is a characteristic they all have in common. Most of them appear to be the expressions of human groups that were pre-literate or non-literate when they produced this art.

These rock paintings are composed of signs, symbols, figures and various patterns which reflect the daily life, work and worship of the minority ethnic nationalities, thus they are a good record of national characteristics.

The artists of northern grasslands were fond of their hunting and nomadic life. The rock paintings of Yinshan consist of a large number of hunting scenes, scenes of warfare and festivals, in which a great variety of objects are

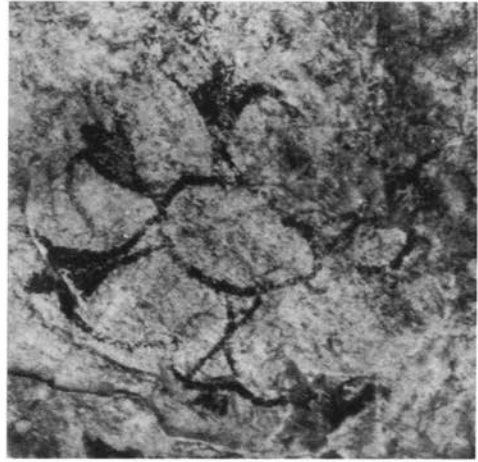


Fig. 89
Dancing, Rock painting at Cangyuan, Yunnan
province, China.

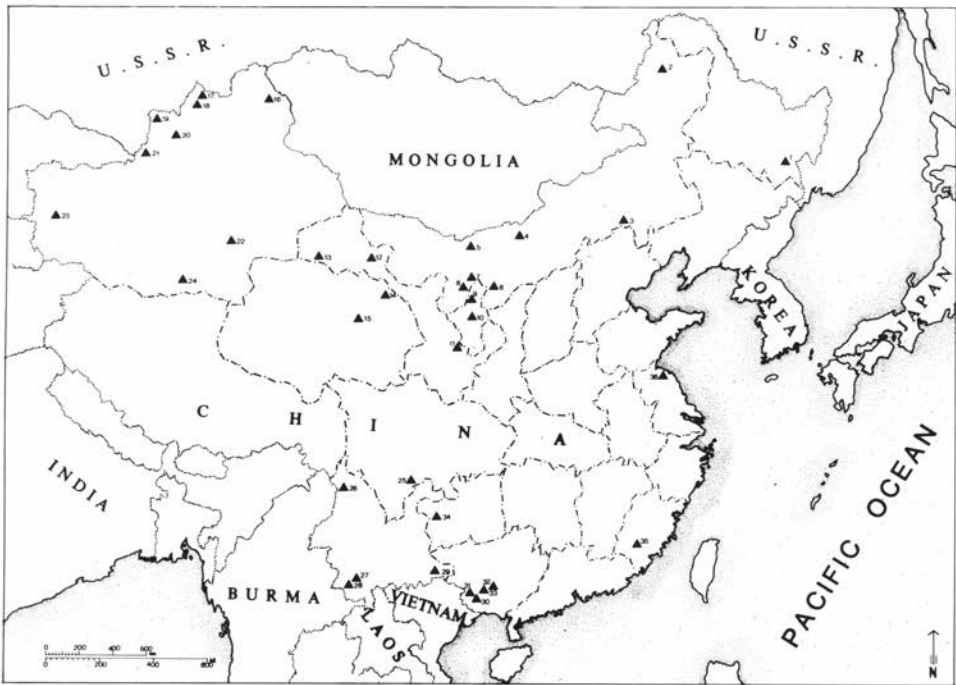
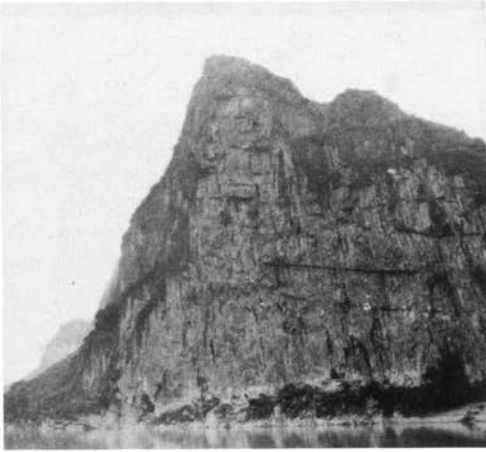


Fig. 90
Rock painting of China-An inventory of rock
painting zones.

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|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Hailin Heilongjiang. | 14. Hongshouquan Xingjiang |
| 2. Eerguna Inner Mongolia | 15. Gangou Xingjiang |
| 3. Kesbiketeng Inner Mongolia | 16. Nileke Xingjiang |
| 4. Daerbanmaomingan Inner Mongolia | 17. Akeyazi Xingjiang |
| 5. Wulate Inner Mongolia | 18. Sangzhu Xingjiang |
| 6. Chaoge Inner Mongolia | 19. Quruq Yingjiang |
| 7. Dengkou Inner Mongolia | 20. Gongxian Sichuan |
| 8. Alasban Inner Mongolia | 21. Nujiang Yunnan |
| 9. Helan-shan Ningxia | 22. Gengma Yunnan |
| 10. Heishan Gansu | 23. Cangyuan Yunnan |
| 11. Halonggou Qinghai | 24. Panjiang Guizhou |
| 12. Babamauligou Qinghai | 25. Huashan Guaxi |
| 13. Eming Xingjiang | 26. Longzhou Guaxi |
| | 27. Chongzou Guaxi |
| | 28. Fusui Guaxi |
| | 29. Huaan Fujian |
| | 30. Liangyungang Jiangsu |



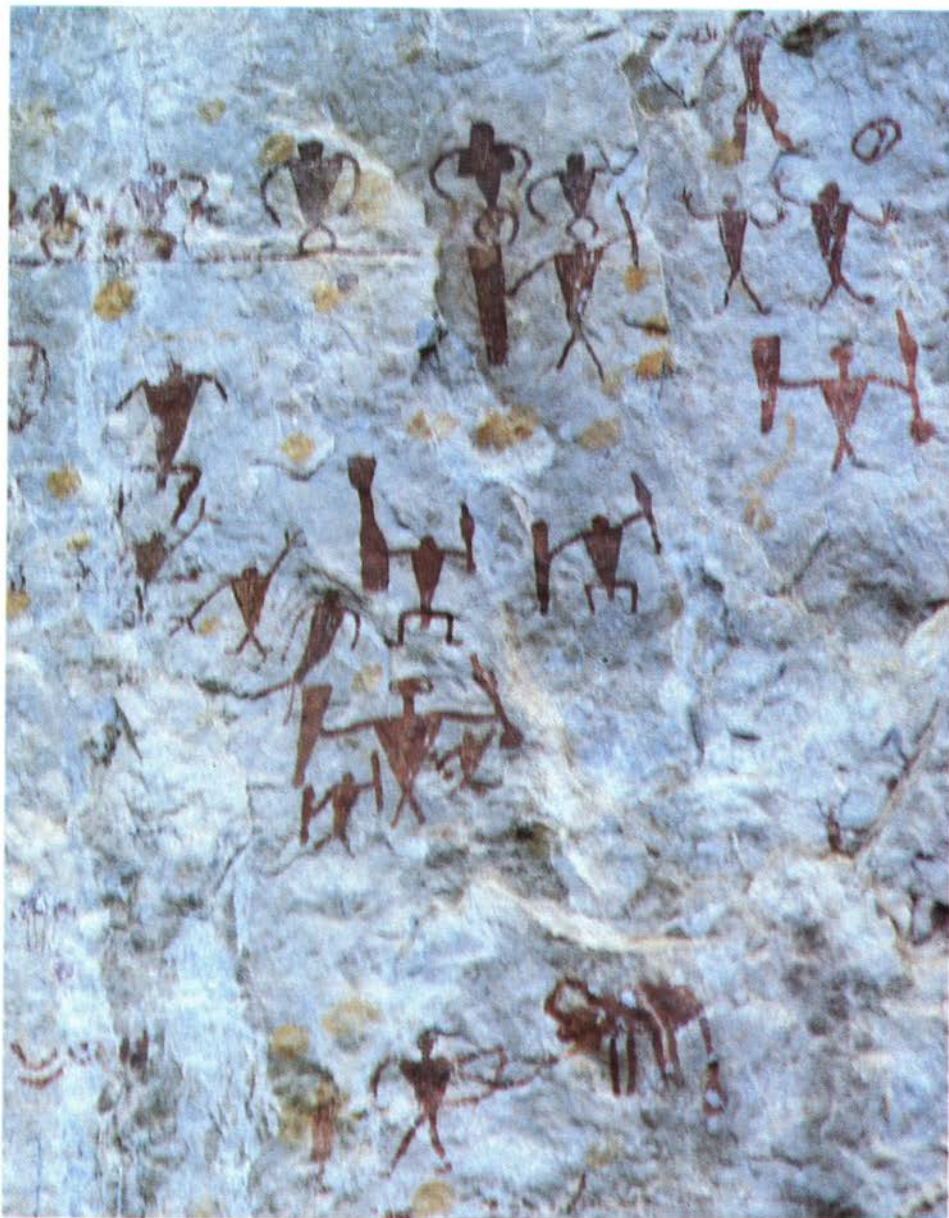
*Fig. 91
A site of rock paintings at Huashan,
Guangxi autonomous region, China.*

*Fig. 92
The author, before the rock paintings
at Nuashan, Guangxi autonomous re-
gion, China.*



represented reflecting a nomadic way of life. These include tents, barrows, wheels, celestial beings, their ancestors, heavenly bodies, handprints, footprints, etc. The economic activities, daily concerns, religious beliefs and ideologies are recorded in vivid images.

The simplest pictures of the Yinshan rock paintings consist only of a flying arrow, heading for a fawn. They symbolised the action of hunting. A flock of sheep are on their way to pasture, being herded by a dog. This picture is full of life.



The most complicated paintings describe scenes of warfare between nomadic tribes. They attack one another with bows and arrows and the defeated warriors who survived are seen fleeing in panic – some of them have been killed. While the conquerors are depicted full of strength and grandeur with headdresses of long cocks' feathers, the defeated warriors look downcast. These pictures are of great historic value since they show the scenes of actual ancient wars.

In Gansu province, there are Heishan rock paintings also depicting nomadic people hunting the wild ox, deer, birds, tigers etc. The wild animals are running, struggling or searching for food. Among these paintings, there is an outstanding picture of a hunter and a camel. The hunter, intending to catch the camel is throwing a rope or lasso. The distance between the hunter and

the camel is well portrayed – a rare example of perspective drawing.

The rock paintings of Xinjiang were first discovered in the 1920s. Since then many more have been found. One of the pictures discovered in Hongsohitouqan in Emin county describes the scene around a herdsman's tent. One mounted herdsman is driving the sheep while another is standing at the tent door. A dog is inside the tent. Analogous peaceful scenes can still be seen today in real life all over Kinjiang's autonomous region.

The rock paintings of Yunnan and Guaxi provinces can be considered as typical of southern China.

Some of the paintings in Cangyuan county, near the frontier of Burma include many human figures – sometimes more than a hundred in a single scene. These figures are seen to be dancing, fighting or hunting. The picture of the village is of great interest. The extent of the village is symbolized by a circle within which there are more than ten houses (surprisingly resembling those depicted in the rock art of Valcamonica in Italy). Outside the circle, there are several zig-zag lines, perhaps representing the paths winding through the mountains. The paths are crowded with people driving sheep and pigs in all directions away from the village; some people are busy husking rice with a pestle and mortar, preparing for a sumptuous feast. Perhaps the villagers were about to hold a feast to celebrate successful hunting.

Sixty sites have been found in Guangxi region but the greatest number of rock paintings are found in Huashan. The name 'Huashan' literally means the 'Mountain of the Paintings'. These paintings have almost 1300 figures, the biggest being 3 metres in height while the smallest one is only 30cm tall. They are distributed over thousands of square metres and are close to each other; all the figures are dancing, with their arms raised and legs apart. There are several big figures with swords hanging by their waists who might be rulers or warriors. The Huashan rock paintings are distinctive in form and

*Fig. 93
Rock paintings at Cangyuan Yunnan province,
China.*

*Fig. 94
Hunting, rock engraving at Helan,
Ningxia Autonomous Region, China.*



simple in style. The exact subject of these paintings is not known to us. They may represent a triumphal festival, a meeting before an expedition, the offering of sacrifices to gods or ancestors, or a feast. The figures are painted in bright colours, fully vigorous, exciting and valiant. They are finished very skilfully and are of high artistic quality.

The Lianyungang rock paintings are of great interest. Most of the figures represent mythical being represented as anthropomorphic heads on the end of stalks; perhaps they reflect the worship of the earth and sun, as agriculture was the main resources of the people.

The compositions are naive and simple, reflecting the desires of the people in their early development. In a picture from Gongxian, the fish caught by a fisherman is even larger than the man himself. No doubt the artist hoped to have the chance of catching such a large fish. Another picture in Yinshan describes a scene of hunting, in which two hunters are firing arrows at two long horn goats. The arrows strike the goat's head and chest. How lucky they were.

The artists were skilled at representing images of animals. The paintings of Inner Mongolia and Xingjiang include a great number of very life-like representations of sheep and goats. The artists of southern China were familiar with monkeys and buffaloes. One of the Cangyuan rock paintings shows monkeys climbing the mountain hanging their tails downward while those going downhill have their tails upwards. This shows that the artists were well acquainted with monkeys. We can say that realism is a trend from the beginning of this art.

Left aside a few rare exceptions, all figures are represented in two dimensions with no perspective and no depth of field. However the images are of varying size, reflecting differences in social rank. Even though the figures are flat, great expressiveness was achieved by making full use of the silhouettes. In this way, emotions, including violent feelings, are expressed. These methods are simple but also clever.

Chinese rock art show some regional characters; primarily, rock paintings, mostly using red mineral pigments are common in the south of China, while in the north and northwest rock engravings are widespread.

The characteristic of this art is a combination of sharp observation and rough style. The rough, freehand figures are very true to life, an effect which later artists have often failed to reproduce, despite many attempts.

Résumé: L'art rupestre de la Chine englobe des centaines de sites où l'on trouve de nombreuses peintures et gravures appartenant à des époques diverses. Certaines œuvres sont relativement récentes et peuvent être attribuées à des périodes bien définies de l'histoire, d'autres sont plus anciennes. Il s'agit presque toujours de créations de populations marginales ou de minorités ethniques qui ne connaissaient pas l'écriture, reflétant la vie des peuples chasseurs et des instants de vie, les coutumes, les croyances qui sont une importante source d'informations sur l'histoire des peuplades qui ont séjourné dans plusieurs provinces du territoire chinois. L'étude systématique de ce grandiose patrimoine culturel est en cours.

Riassunto: L'arte rupestre della Cina include centinaia di siti dove numerose pitture e incisioni rupestri appartengono a periodi diversi. Alcune opere sono relativamente recenti e attribuibili a periodi storici definiti, altre sono più antiche. Sono quasi sempre la creazione di popolazioni marginali o di minoranze etniche che non conoscevano la scrittura e riflettono la vita di popoli cacciatori e pastori. Tramite loro si ricostruiscono brani di vita, credenze e abitudini. Costituiscono pertanto una importante fonte di informazioni per la storia delle nazionalità che hanno abitato varie province del territorio cinese. Lo studio sistematico di questo grandioso patrimonio culturale è in corso.