

ROCK ENGRAVINGS OF MASKS IN CHINA

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Representation of masks in rock art flourished in all continents of the world. They reflect a spiritual world unknown to us. It is the imaginative way in which they are portrayed and the emotion of joy and sorrow they seem to convey, that makes them so interesting and arouses us to muse over things of the remote past.

In China these mask engravings always occur in regions with remote mountainous and deep secluded valleys; towering crags and grotesque peaks thrust themselves towards the sky. In Inner Mongolia, there are high mountain ridges and sheer cliffs around the Molihaqi rock art site. Usually this is quiet and beautiful but, in the rainy season, torrents of water rush down the mountain to shake the valley. In the Ustai rock art site there are two cliffs which stand facing each other - resembling, from a distance, a palace gate. Many pictures of masks are carved on the greyish white rock - on the northern faces there is a picture 1.68 metres high and 2.56 metres wide, depicting many human, animal, half human and half animal face with very strange shape. There is an open area in front of the cliff; perhaps this is where the human groups of those times held their ceremonies.

Discovery

There is an ancient geographical book about rivers, named «Shui Jing Zhu», written over 1,500 years ago. It says that there were many human faces engraved on boulder by the Changjiang (Yangtze) River, in Silin Gorge, Hubei province. On the southern bank the boulders are lofty and steep because of the many shoals and rapids. They are submerged in the summer and appear above the water mirror in the winter. Along several ten meter stretches, the boulders were covered with face figures, big and small, some showing beards and hair very clearly. This place was appropriately called «Face Shoal».

The oldest record of «faces shoal» in Chinese literature reminds me of the mask rock art of the Amur river in the far eastern USSR. There the masks constituted the major part of the rock drawings of the Neolithic culture of this area some five or six thousand years ago. Sadly though, in «Face Shoal», these rough boulders bearing the imprint of creative thought and revealing the mysterious world of prehistoric art have been polished by time and the figure have been obliterated. Nothing remains of «Face Shoal» today.

Time passes swiftly, like flowing water, and over one thousand years later, in 1915, another mask engraving site was discovered in Huaan, Fujian province, by Prof. Hua Zhongjin. In 1927, the Swedish archaeologist Bergman, found mask engravings at the southern foot of Yinshan, Inner Mongolia. Fifty years later, in 1976, the Chinese archaeologist Gai Shanlin, rediscovered many engravings in Yinshan. The Yinshan area is now one of the major rock art areas in China and the archaeologists first discovery was a mask engraving.

Since then, many mask engravings have been discovered: in Liangyungang (1979), Jiangsu province; in Baichahe (1981) and Haibowan (1981), Inner Mongolia au-



Fig. 117 - Mask figure with tatouage and frontal ornaments. Rock engraving from Yinsban mountains. Inner Mongolia (Site 5).



Fig. 118 - Mask. Rock engraving from Yinsban mountains. Inner Mongolia.

ent masks. These could possibly represent deities and around them are many holes, circles and lines, expressing the sun, the moon and the stars.

Type

The enigmatic stylized mask engravings are so varied that it is difficult to divide them into any definite groups, but all the same they show a certain unity of form and style and can be classified by certain definite features. There are different ways to divide these types. Some people divide them into five types according to their shapes: circular, elliptical, cordate, square and truncated; some divide them according to their characteristics, such as skeleton-like, human face-like, monkey face-like, ghost face-like, etc. However, here I have arbitrarily divided the mask rock art of China into four types.

1. Non-outlined

Non-outlined face engravings are found in Kodiak Island, Alaska; in Valcamonica, Italy; also in yinshan, Lianyuangang and Huaan, China.

In certain cases the non-outlined mask is represented in an abstract and stylized manner. I do not think that they are all of the same period and belong to the same cultural background, but an important common characteristic is that most of them do not seem to depict real human faces. In Lianyuangang, there are many engravings with only dots - two for eyes, a third sometimes representing the mouth or nose. The prehistoric artist does not even attempt to do the outline of a face - he draws a mouth, a pair of eyes above it and leaves it at that. The eyes and mouth are usually rendered by concentric ovals or circles or, alternatively, the eyes are not round but are slanting, fishshaped, and appear to convey a strange emotion. Of course, there are some more complicated non-outlined face engraving-

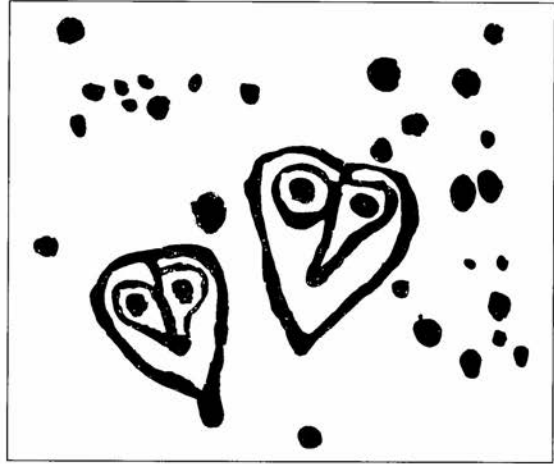


Fig. 119 - Two masks associated to cup-marks.
 Rock engraving from Yinshan mountains.
 Inner Mongolia (Site 5).

ings - there are those with arched eyebrows and in Huaan we can even find engravings with moustaches! The curious way of depicting the faces of these figures is that all the emphasis is on the eyes - they can be called oculi-face. It is said that the eyes are essential because it is through a man's eyes that his soul looks out.

2. Semi-outlined

These mask figures are partly drawn with an outline and partly non-outlined. We may call these semi-outlined faces or masks.

We can find semi-outlined mask rock art in America, in Australia and also in China. The semi-outlined face engravings are often strikingly laconic, conventionalized, abstract representations, but the prehistoric artist did attempt to outline some parts and perhaps had partially painted outlines which have now been eroded away. Semi-outlined faces are always drawn with rays emerging, crowning them on the top of the head. Similarly surrounded semi-outlined apelike and crani-form masks are found in the Ussuri area, far eastern USSR. In Yinshan there are many semi-outlined masks, which are broad at the top and taper sharply at the bottom to a rounded or truncated chin. Although they are very incomplete, these masks suggest the face of an ape. Some scholars were under the misapprehension that a character in «Xi You Ji», a novel of the fifteenth century, was the basis for this rock art. The apelike character was infinitely resourceful, and his powers was given full play in the novel, but obviously the book is much later than the rock art. In Lianyuangang, Jiansu province, we can also find semi-outlined face engravings with lines coming out of just the top of the head. According to the mask rock art evolution, these lines gradually developed into the head-dress which I will discuss later.

3. Outlined

The most common type of mask rock art is «outlined». In north America, beach boulders with outlined mask designs are found in Bella Coola River, British Columbia and in Cape Alava, Washington; the petroglyphs are pecked on granite and show weeping eyes.

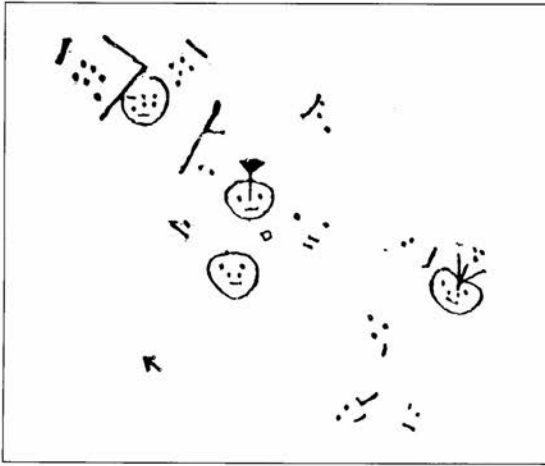


Fig. 120 - Masks and ideographic sequences, some of them seem to have a numeric value. Rock engraving from Liaryungang, Jangsu (Site 49).

In Helanshan, Ningxia and in Haibowan, Inner Mongolia, most of the mask engravings have an elliptical or oval outline but some are circular. Others are elliptical at the top and cut off horizontally at the bottom, some are also square or cordate. The outline of the face is deeply cut, the face is always grotesque in appearance, the expressions are strange and changeful. They have eyes, eyebrows, a mouth and nose; some show teeth or a very big nose with the bridge standing out over the eyebrows, others look comical and have exaggerated large ears. There are also those showing large slanting eyes looking out from under heavy, drooping lids, expressing imperious bearing, while on other the corners of the mouth are raised to express an affectionate smile. The round depressions of the nostrils and the wide fleshy parts are finely modelled, but in this case the outline is a square. Meanwhile some faces look even stranger as there are many additional short straight and curved lines. These can be considered to be masks, they also suggest the customs of tattoo which existed in those times.

4. Headdress

Besides many masks with just a pecked pair of eyes and some outlined faces showing a form of tattooing, we cannot forget that there are also many more complicated face engravings - a splendid headdress or a kind of halo made up of lines arranged symmetrically around the face. The paintings of Wandjina, at the head of the Prince Regent River in Australia, may also be considered as headdressed masks.

The most common headdress is the one with many prickles around the head, which may suggest bird feathers or a kind of halo to represent the sun. It is very difficult to be sure what was in the artist mind - perhaps it was both of these things. Some mask engravings have very long horns and could represent an animal mask.

In Helanshan, Ningxia, some mask engravings have another type of headdress which is a tall pointed hat, some have very long strings of beads. Some face engravings show females, praising their hair looking like flowers or wearing earrings and pigtails. Their graceful bearing and refined manners present a completely

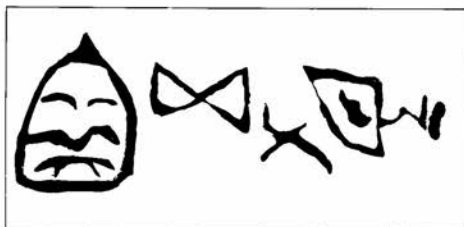
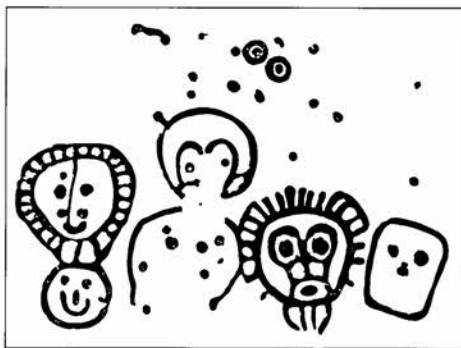


Fig. 121 - A Mask figure in an ideographic sequence. Rock engraving from Yinshan mountains. Inner Mongolia (Site 6).

Fig. 122 - Masks and cup-marks. Rock engraving from Yinshan mountains. Inner Mongolia (Site 5).



new appearance and mirror the features of those times. They have filled the old rocks with life and vitality and can probably explain the life of the people, which is the most vital and rich raw material for literature and art.

Dating

In Yinshan and Helanshan areas, the degree of wind erosion and the colours (patination) of engravings form an important basis for our study of the dating. Some rocks which bear the mask drawings have been worn away. Some flang-stones were broken and the shapes are incomplete or blurred - non just the dots of the eyes are faintly visible.

Mask engravings in Helanshan and Haibowan are carved on very hard limestone slopes, but most of the drawings have been eroded away and only a small part remains. This small part was saved because the figures were deeply carved or had been covered by sand and earth. The patination of the engravings is also very dark, of the same colour as the rock surface; another indication that the date is old.

There is an old myth recorded in an ancient book, «Shan Hai Jing». It is said that long ago two tribal chieftains attacked each other. One of them, named Xian Tian, was killed by having his head cut off. After this catastrophe he used his nipples as eyes and his navel as a mouth, and he is described as doing a rude fighting dance. For prehistoric people the eyes were the most important part of the body - even if you had lost your head you could live again if another pair of eyes could be found. I think the non-outlined masks, which just showed two eyes and a mouth, reflect the same ideal as this myth. It all belongs to the remote past.

Moreover mask designs had appeared in the Neolithic sites in China. In Shenxi, Shanxi, Shandong, Henan, Gansu, Qinghai and Zhejiang provinces, the face designs on painted potteries, pottery figures, bone objects and jade sculptures were discovered in Neolithic sites. The Middle Phase of Yang-Shao culture has been dated by Anderson, the Swedish archaeologist, to the Neolithic period from about 2,200 to 1,700 B.C.. The Early Phase of Yang-Shao Culture is found in Pam-Pò, South Shensi. The site is that of a large village extending over two and a half acres. It was excavated in 1954 and is today completely roofed in by a museum. Several of the Pan-Pò painted bowls are also embellished with queer human masks and a fish motif painted on the inside surface. The geometrical mask has two fish-shaped ear ornaments which appear to be whispering into the ears. These painted bowls have been dated to about 4,000 B.C.

This clearly illustrates that mask designs were widespread in China in the Neolithic age. It is also reasonable to consider that most of the mask engravings belong

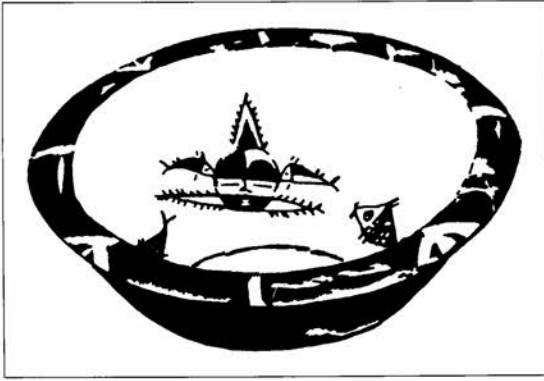


Fig. 123 - Decorated pot with red painted mask and fishes. Shanxi Province, Early Yang-shao Culture, ca. 4.000 B.C.

to the Neolithic age. The non-outlined face engravings are usually the earliest, the semi-outlined occurring a little later. The face engravings of Lianyungang and Huaan, according to Chinese scholars, are dated to about 3,000 B.C., in the Neolithic period. Some are later, however, especially some of the headdressed masks which are very much later; for instance the face engravings in Helanshan and Haibowen. In Helanshan some face engravings bear inscriptions of Xixia (1038-1227 A.D.); most probably they were produced in that time.

Conclusion

Mask engravings in rock art show us the lively, formative and true to life materials that made up the mental world of their makers. Over the mask engravings we frequently find raylike projections, which crown them at the top and sometimes form a border at the sides. Possibly, the rays are a connection with the sun, the moon and the stars. Not only the earliest non-outlined, but also the elaborately decorated, outlined anthropomorphic face engravings were always found surrounded by many dots. The vast sky, the boundless wilds, the clusters of brilliant stars in the endless space: these are the places where many gods dwell, especially the sun deity.

The worship of divinities was widely spread in the prehistoric world. Some Chinese scholars and I think that the idea of deities was born because of man's longing for existence, and throughout the history of humanity they appeared in different forms. In the beginning there was the animal god, then the idea of the spirit was formed. The early hunters' idol was a hunting deity, the shapes always being zoomorphic (the non-outlined and semi-outlined mask engravings can be considered zoomorphs, and are found in Lianyungang, Huaan and Yinshan). In those days man did not have absolute predominance over the animals. The physical strength of lions and tigers and their sharp teeth often overcame the cunning of early man. In their struggle with animals these primitive people often felt themselves weak. The animals power could be imagined to be a supernatural force and thus the power of the animals: animal worship emerged. In rock art most animal masks are highly decorated, reflecting the animal worship and the super human strength that was possessed by the beasts.

After the development of stock-raising and the gradual conquering of the animal's power, people changed to the protective deity of animal husbandry. The sun, stars and sky became the objects of worship, and there are a great number of drawings showing these things in Yinshan, Lianyungang and many other rock art sites. This is evidence of the change. The sun illuminates every corner of

the land and, with wind, rain, thunder and lightening, dictates the lives of the people. If the weather was fine the forage grass would grow luxuriously, enabling the domestic animals to survive. It is reasonable to assume that the herdsmen wished to avoid a sudden change for the worse in the weather; hence the development from the worship of animals to the worship of deities in the sky.

Later on the deities became human in shape. I, perhaps arbitrary, consider that this occurred after the establishment of patriarchy. Of course this is just a generalisation and each site must be examined individually. There is a transition state in this development when there was a wide variety of idol forms. The figures shown are half-human and half-animal; anthropomorphosis was prevalent at that time. Most of the outlined and headdressed face engravings in China are anthropomorphic and are found in large number of them in Helanshan and Haibowen. Nevertheless most of the anthropomorphic face engravings in these two regions show human forms. Finally, kind and gentle figures evolved; in Haibowen a harmonious family group is depicted.

Some general lines of an evolution can be recognized in the sequence of face engravings. Changes follow the development of protective forces and the process of conquering nature. If we could put in an order the mask engravings of every period according to their age, the objective law of the development of mask engraving would appear.

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