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THE HUASHAN ROCK ART SITE (CHINA): THE SACRED MEETING PLACE FOR SKY, WATER AND EARTH

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Abstract. The Huashan rock art site of China is located in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, neighbouring with Vietnam. It is generally believed that the rock art at the Huashan site was created between the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE) and Eastern Han dynasty (26–220 CE), by an ethnic group named Luo Yue. This article goes beyond the conventional Chinese perspective, and tries to explore the possible connection between the landscape of the Huashan rock art site and the cosmological beliefs of the Luo Yue people.

Introduction

The Huashan rock art site may be considered to be one of the most impressive pre-historic painted panels of the world. The site is located in the Zuojiang River valley of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, a border area of south-west China, neighbouring Vietnam (Fig. 1). This area is well-known for its picturesque landscapes, featuring high limestone mountains. About eighty-one rock art sites have been discovered throughout the valley; the Huashan rock art site is arguably one of the most spectacular (GCRB 2011: 3) (Fig. 2). Huashan is called 'Pay Laiz' in the local Zhuang language, which literally means 'a mountain with colourful paintings'. It is situated at the south-western corner of a series of limestone peaks. At the foot of the mountain the wide and calm Mingjiang River, a tributary of the Zuojiang River, approaches from the south-west and makes a sharp turn to the north-west.

On the precipitous western cliff of the Huashan mountain, which overhangs the running water, more than 1800 rock art motifs are painted, covering an area of more than 4000 square metres. It is thought to be the largest rock art panel in the world (Liu 2006: 23). The paintings of the Huashan rock art site are highly standardised. All the images are monochrome, painted in a brownish-red colour, and represented in two dimensions without a sense of perspective or depth of field (Fig. 3). In contrast to other rock art of south-western China, and other rock art traditions from greater China and elsewhere in the world, 'scenes' of daily-life activities, such as those described as 'hunting', 'herding', 'gathering' and 'battling', are not found in the Huashan panel. Only a few motif types are depicted; these are mainly anthropomorphs, zoomorphs and figures supposedly depicting implements, such as

'swords', 'daggers', 'drums' and 'bells'. More than 85% of the motifs are anthropomorphous (Qin et al. 1987: 158). These figures are represented either in frontal view or in profile, all with the same posture: arms stretched up at the elbow and legs semi-squatting. With a strong sense of uniformity, the typical composition of the images is one of a large frontal view of a distinctly 'human' figure that dominates the centre, mostly with a 'sword' hanging at the waist or held in hand, a 'dog' under the feet, and a bronze drum-like object nearby, surrounded by lines of smaller profile 'human' figures



Figure 1. Location of Huashan rock art site (based on the distribution map of Rock arts in China, Chen 1989: 22–23).



Figure 2. A frontal view of the Huashan mountain (photograph courtesy of He Bingjie).



Figure 3. A part of the Huashan rock art panel (photograph courtesy of He Bingjie).

without 'weapons'.

Over the past few decades, many Chinese scholars (e.g. Qin et al. 1987) have been trying to decipher the meaning of Huashan rock art motifs, with many explanations proposed but no unanimous conclusion drawn so far. As well, anthropologists and ethnographers have documented the accomplishments of the culture and traditions of the local ethnic minorities, whose ancestry is generally considered to have produced the rock art of the Huashan site. This paper will assess the interpretations proposed by Chinese scholars relating the Huashan rock art motifs with the local ethnic culture, and take into consideration the significance of the location of the site itself to provide a novel perspective to understand the production of this extraordinary site.

The Huashan rock art site and the local ethnic culture

In the past, Chinese scholars who studied the Huashan rock art have generally focused their research on the interpretation of the motifs and the cultural meanings behind the images (e.g. Qin et al. 1987; Chen 2001). Distinctive from the mainstream Han ethnic culture, the local culture, which is thought to have produced this unique rock art, is considered to have been created by ethnic minorities of south-western China, who shared more resemblance to the ethnic groups of Southeast Asia than to the northern Chinese. The local ethnic minorities have a long and complicated history, and their names have been changed and differently recorded through time. However, it is generally believed by Chinese scholars that an ancient group called Luo Yue was responsible for producing the Huashan rock art site between the Warring States Period (403 – 221 BCE) and Eastern Han dynasty (26 – 220 CE) (Qin et al. 1987: 137). In many areas of the world the political events in the area where rock art is situated are unknown for the time the rock art was produced. The assumption is that the politics of the area were static and uneventful. However, both historical and archaeological sources prove that this was not the case in the Guangxi area in the period when the Huashan

rock art is presumed to have been painted. Therefore, a brief discussion of the historical and archaeological background of this area helps to better understand the ethnic culture of the Luo Yue people.

The historical and archaeological background of Huashan rock art site

The account given in this section is complicated by the geographical location of the Huashan rock art site in an area located close to the Sino-Vietnamese border. Traditionally, the Chinese historians and French sinologists have described the Vietnamese history, from its recorded beginning in the third century BCE to its independence in the tenth century CE, as a branch of Chinese history, while the Vietnamese scholars, on the other hand, view this era as a time of temporary intrusion into an already established culture (Taylor 1983: 1). This disagreement also has affected the interpretation of the archaeological findings in both Guangxi and northern Vietnam. To gain a balanced review, views from both Chinese and Vietnamese perspectives will be considered in this section.

1. From the beginning of the Bronze Age to the end of Warring States Period (c. 2000–221 BCE)

From the second millennium BCE, mainland China stepped into the Bronze Age. The first two dynasties, Xia dynasty (c. 2070 – c. 1600 BCE) and Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE), dominated mainly the Yellow River valley in what is known as Central Plain. After the establishment of the Zhou Dynasty, royal relatives and generals were given control over fiefdoms in an effort to maintain Zhou authority over a vast territory. The fiefdoms later became more detached and turned into small states. The eastward move of the capital from Haojing to Chengzhou in 771 BCE marked the end of Western Zhou period (1046–771 BCE), and the following Eastern Zhou period (771–221 BCE) was subdivided into two periods: the Spring and Autumn Period (771–403 BCE), during which the Zhou territory was broken up into a multitude of small states that were essentially independent, and the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE), when seven major states had emerged as the dominant powers (Lewis 1990: 578).

While the early Han Chinese dynasties ruled the area of the Yellow River valley, three major powers of the non-Han populations, the states of Shu, Chu and Yue, appeared in the area of the Yangtze River valley. It is the third state that is of interest to us. The state of Yue occupied the lower reaches of the Yangtze River (Taylor 1983: 14). It is believed by the Chinese historians that the Yue state was founded by the people loosely belonging to one group, the Yue, who inhabited the south-eastern coastal area. After the Chu state destroyed the Yue state in 334 BCE, the Yue people expanded south-westwards along the coast. By the late Warring States Period (c. 300–221 BCE), their expansion covered the whole Chinese southern coastal area and reached northern Vietnam (Liu 2005: 26). Along with the expansion, a number of

small kingdoms and principalities emerged. The ancient Han Chinese historians referred to them as 'Bai Yue' (literally 'hundreds of Yue') (Brindley 2003: 12), and the Luo Yue group was one of them.

Based on historical records and archaeological findings, most scholars agree that the Luo Yue people inhabited an area from Guangxi in China to the Red River Plain in Vietnam. However, the current border between China and Vietnam makes the study of the Luo Yue people subject to nationalism from the two nations. Chinese scholars view the Luo Yue as an ethnic group descended from the Yue people, while their Vietnamese counterparts see them as an indigenous ethnic group. I would like to propose that the term 'Luo Yue people' refers to both the indigenous people and the immigrant Yue people, and their cultures mutually affected each other and finally mingled into a common culture. My argument could be strengthened by historical evidence. According to historical texts, the Luo Yue people cut their hair short and tattooed their bodies (Hutcheon 1996: 4). These traditions could also be seen among the Yue people, as recorded in *Shi Ji (Records of the Grand Historian)*.

In Vietnam, the transition period from pre-History into history is poorly documented and mainly based upon legends (Tarling 1992: 116). In order to compensate for the lack of historical sources, however, Vietnamese scholars have used archaeological sources. Archaeological research in the past years has shed more light on the account of pre-History. Vietnamese archaeologists date the beginning of their civilisation to the Phung-nguyen Neolithic culture of the late third millennium BCE, which flourished in the Red River Plain throughout the Neolithic era until about 1500 BCE, the early Bronze Age (Taylor 1983: 7). Phung-nguyen sites are located on slightly elevated terrain commanding stream valleys above the confluence of the Red and Black Rivers. Based on changes in pottery typology, there are three phases, the early, middle and late phases. Only eleven sites from the late phase contained bronze, and no recognisable metal artefacts have been found. The fragments were, however, made of a tin bronze (Higham 1996: 87).

Archaeological excavations have identified a series of regional settlement concentrations from the Red River Plain in Vietnam to the Pearl River valley in China, dating from the Bronze Age (c. 1500–600 BCE). They have a number of features in common. These communities cultivated rice and maintained domestic stock. They also included skilled workers of clay and stone, as the archaeological findings contained a number of fine wares fired under controlled conditions at high temperatures, and stone tools and ornaments of high quality. The excavated bronze objects include bronze vessels and different weapons. Pivotal sites of this period include Yuanlongpo, an important ancient cemetery about 200 km from the Huashan rock art site. Chinese scholars associate the cemetery to the Luo Yue people. During excavations of the site, a wide variety

of grave goods was encountered, about 10% being bronzes (Higham 1996: 94). Already, these provide a portent of the warfare which was to dominate later bronze assemblages in this region: the items include spearheads, axes, arrowheads, and daggers or short swords. From the distribution of grave goods one can also see the possibility of social hierarchy (Allard 1995: 19).

In about the sixth century BCE, a more hierarchical society based on small village or family groups appeared. This gave birth to the Dong-son culture, which the Vietnamese archaeologists dated from the sixth century BCE to the first century CE. Iron came to be employed for weapons and tools during the Dong-son period, but bronze still dominated and the bronze technology became more advanced and sophisticated. Most evidence for assessing the Dong-son culture came from cemeteries. Four cemeteries, Viet Khe, Chau Can, Xuan La and Minh Duc, stand out because of the survival of coffins cut from tree trunks. All lie on the fringes of the lower Red River delta. These tombs contain many bronze and a few iron artefacts. The former included drums, armaments, agricultural implements, vases, situlae and human figures (Higham 1996: 111). The Vietnamese scholars associate their legendary Hung kings to the Dong-son culture. According to tradition, the Hung kings were the rulers of the kingdom Van-Lang (Sardesai 1998: 9). In the last half of the third century BCE, the last Hung king was defeated by Thục Phan, the first figure in Vietnamese history documented by reliable sources, who proclaimed himself An Duong Vuong ('King An Duong'), renamed his newly acquired state from Van-Lang to Au-Lac (in Chinese 'Ou Luo') (Taylor 1983: 13). The Au-Lac kingdom was centred at Co Loa, the ramparts of which dominate the flat plain north of Hanoi. The ethnicity of Thuc Phan has been debated by the Chinese and Vietnamese scholars, as the former held that he originated in the north while the latter assumed his native identity (Qin 2007: 12). However, as the new state's name 'Au-Lac' implies, Thuc Phan was most likely a lord from the Xi Ou ('Western Ou') group of Bai Yue.

Another important site of this period called Yinshanling was found in Guangxi, 600 km from the Huashan rock art site. Yinshanling site is also a cemetery, from which 108 intact or nearly intact graves have been unearthed. Very few bones survive, but 59 different categories of grave goods have been identified, including ten forms of pottery vessel, clay spindle whorls, three forms of bronze vessel and bronze swords, arrowheads, spearheads, halberds and battle axes. Bronze tools have also been found, including axes, chisels, scrapers, drill points and knives, bells, ladles and belt buckles. Iron offerings include spearheads, axes, adzes, knives and scrapers. Whetstones were commonly found (Higham 1996: 111). The Yinshanling site is dated as from mid-Warring States Period to Eastern Han dynasty (c. 350 BCE – 220 CE), and more than 60% of the tombs belong to the Warring States

Period (403 – 221 BCE). Chinese scholars associated these tombs with the Xi Ou people, another group of the Bai Yue, thought to have had a very close relation with the Luo Yue people (Wei 2008: 32). When compared with the contemporary cemeteries of Dong-son culture, one is particularly struck by the quantity of bronzes, and the abundance of weapons of the Yinshanling site.

2. *From the beginning of Qin dynasty to the end of Eastern Han dynasty (221 BCE – 220 CE)*

In the mid and late 3rd century BCE, Qin state, the most powerful of the seven states dominating the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE), destroyed all the other states and gained control over the whole of mainland China. Then, in 221 BCE, Qin became the first ruling dynasty of Imperial China, with Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BCE) as the First Emperor. Qin Shi Huang, renowned for the building of the Great Wall and creating the terracotta army, launched further conquests towards both south and north against the non-Han peoples. Beginning at 219 BCE, Qin's armies pushed into the southern region. In 214 BCE the Qin Empire even built a major canal, called Lingqu, 34 kilometres in length, to sustain a substantial supply line for the wars (Needham et al. 1971: 300). However, the conquering of the 'south barbarians' was not as easy as the Emperor expected. According to the Chinese historical texts, the Xi Ou and Luo Yue peoples put up a fierce resistance, taking advantage of the harsh environment of deep mountains and tropical forests to hide themselves and ambush the Qin troops. For three years the Qin troops could not 'take off their armour nor put down their cross-bows' (Major et al. 2010: 149). It took Qin four years to finally conquer south-western China and northern Vietnam (Bodde 1987: 33). The state of Au Lac was most likely overthrown as well. Qin divided the new southern conquest into three commanderies: Nanhai, Guilin and Xiang. Among them, Guilin incorporated the Huashan mountain where the rock art is located. After the fall of the Qin Dynasty, beginning in 209 BCE, northern China became a chaotic stage of peasant rebellions. In the south, Zhao Tuo, a Chinese military commander of Qin, took control of the three commanderies, and founded the kingdom of Nanyue ('Southern Yue') (Womack 2006: 100). As to maintain local unity, Zhao Tuo embraced the Luo Yue customs and encouraged interracial marriages, and he designated the indigenous Luo Yue lords to act as local administrators (Jiang 1980: 177). The Nanyue kingdom palace ruins and royal tombs have been found in the city of Guangzhou, with more than 1000 bronze and iron artefacts excavated. Besides, a bronze seal inscribed 'Seal for Captain of Tu Pho County' was uncovered at Thanh Hoa, a Dong-son site in northern Vietnam during the 1930s (Liu 2005: 26). Owing to the similarity to seals found at the tomb of the second king of Nanyue, this bronze seal is recognised as an official seal of the Nanyue Kingdom, demonstrating the cooperative relationship between the Han rulers and the local Luo Yue lords.

In Vietnam, the rulers of Nanyue are referred to as the Trieu Dynasty, the Vietnamese pronunciation of the Chinese surname Zhao. Actually, the name 'Vietnam' is probably derived from 'Nam Viet', the Vietnamese pronunciation of Nanyue (Ooi 2004: 932).

The Nanyue kingdom endured until the area was integrated into the Han Empire in 111 BCE (Liu 2005: 26). After that, the Han Empire incorporated the entire area in their new administrative structure, terming it a Zhou (district), and further sub-divided it into nine Jun (county). This situation lasted until a rebellion led by the Trung sisters, two aristocratic women from the region of Me Linh in northern Vietnam, occurring in 40 CE. The Chinese general Ma Yuan suppressed the rebellion in 43 CE and established a new system of commanderies (provinces) (Higham 2002: 109). Generally, after that and until 939 CE, except short periods of sporadic rebellions, south-western China and northern Vietnam were under the administrative rule of China, until the Vietnamese kingdom gained its independence (Taylor 1983: 250). It is believed that the period when the Han Chinese culture prevailed in this region marked the decline in the production of rock art in Huashan area, which most likely ceased in the time of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE) (Qin et al. 1987: 126).

In conclusion, according to most scholars, the Huashan rock art was produced during a period when tremendous historical changes happened in this area. Historians referred to the period before the Han conquest in about 210 BCE as Pre-Qin period, during which the non-Han peoples in this region had established their unique culture and identity. From the last half of the third century BCE, contacts and conflicts between the native populations and the Han peoples from the north increased sharply, as Qin finished conquering all the other states in mainland China and marched its troops southwards. After several years of harsh battles, the natives were defeated. The conquest of the Qin Empire marked the beginning of Han Chinese colonisation of this area, deeply affecting local populations and their culture, and that is why, before further analysis of the art, the discussion of the historical and archaeological background of this area, during the time frame when the rock art was probably produced, is important.

The religious beliefs and the rock art

Scholars have often argued that the effort people made to paint the magnificent images by taking high risks climbing the precipitous cliffs cannot have been driven by mundane needs. Indeed, a spiritual motive seems to have been behind the production of the Huashan rock art and therefore an understanding of the ancient Luo Yue people's religion is a necessary key to unlock the site's meaning. There is no evidence that the ancient Luo Yue people had a writing system, and we know little about their customs from the Chinese written sources (Luo 2006: 23). After the Han conquest in 111 BCE, the Han Chinese culture extensively influenced this area, greatly affecting the indigenous

Luo Yue culture. Many of their religious beliefs were lost through time but some were maintained (Qin 2006: 256) and it is argued here that these allow us to better understand the production of the Huashan rock art.

The connection between an ancestor worship of the Luo Yue people and the motifs painted in the Huashan rock art was already mentioned by Qin Shengmin and others (e.g. Qin et al. 1987: 175). Yet, there is much more that can be said about how the motifs are related to the Luo Yue religion and also about how the spiritual traditions of the artists can be linked to the location of the site itself. The aim of this article, therefore, is to search for the spiritual traditions that the ancient Luo Yue people may have had and to propose a possible explanation of why this very site was chosen to produce this grandiose rock art panel. In order to approach this information, it is proposed here that it is worthy to re-examine in depth the religious beliefs and traditions held by the ethnic groups believed to be the Luo Yue's descendants.

There are several groups believed by scholars to be the Luo Yue's descendants: the Zhuang people, mainly living in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China; the Viet (also called 'Kinh') people, the ethnic majority of Vietnam; and the Muong people, an ethnic minority inhabiting the mountainous region of northern Vietnam (Dao 1976: 233). Conventionally, Chinese scholars who study the Huashan rock art only resort to the Zhuang culture and rarely look beyond the Sino-Vietnamese border to take the culture of these Vietnamese groups into account. Therefore, the discussion below will not limit itself to the Zhuang culture as a possible cultural context for the Huashan rock art site. My approach will be a step forward by incorporating some research on Vietnamese culture and other relevant Southeast Asian cultures.

Religious beliefs among the Luo Yue's descendants

Based on historical records and the studies of modern Zhuang and Muong people, scholars defined the Luo Yue's religion as animism and ancestor worship (Qin 2006: 256; Dao 1976: 235). Animism is a religion focused on the belief that nature includes spiritual beings, sacred forces and similar extraordinary phenomena. It encompasses the belief that souls exist not only in humans but also in natural objects, including animals, plants, rocks, geographic features such as mountains or rivers, or other entities of the natural environment (Birn 2006: 80). Ancestor worship is also referred to as a form of ancestral cult. Beliefs of this cult centre on the ability of the dead to protect kinsmen in return for worship from them (Birn 2006: 72). The two forms of religion are not incompatible in the same society, although anthropology has seen these as disparate religions when, in fact, they are just two different religious practices. Both animism and ancestor worship still exist today among the Zhuang people, Muong people, and some other ethnic groups related to the Luo Yue people.

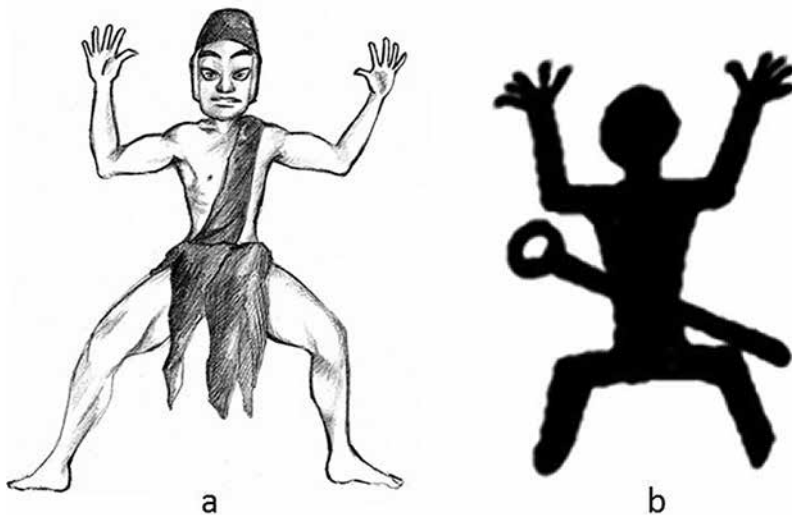


Figure 4. Comparison between a shigong doing a ritual dance and a 'human' motif of Huashan rock art site: (a) shigong, the local wizard, dancing with the 'frog posture' in a ritual called 'xingma dance' (sketched by Gao Qian); (b) a frontal-view human motif of Huashan rock art site (after Qin et al. 1987: Fig. 311).

In Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the very diffuse topography has made the Zhuang peoples live in relatively small groups. Environmental and cultural diversity has promoted different spiritual practices. The local animistic cults address a rich variety of spiritual beings, and there is no clear division between such spiritual beings and local gods (Yu 2004: 10). Chinese scholars have categorised the spiritual beings and gods worshipped by the Zhuang people into mainly four groups, each with a most important god representing the rest, as listed below (Liao 2002: 6).

- (1) Thunder: represents all things related to the sky, such as celestial beings and all types of weather.
- (2) Water: represents all things related to the earth, such as stone and soil, river and fire.
- (3) Flower: represents fertility.
- (4) Frog: represents all animals, especially those have a close relationship with agriculture.

In Zhuang people's mythology, the four gods are closely related by another god, Baeuqloegdoz, the god of ancestors. Baeuqloegdoz, brother of the thunder god and the water god, uncle of the frog god, and husband of the flower goddess, is unique in his human nature, as he is considered by the Zhuang people today to be the great ancestor and the first Zhuang individual. Below, the ethnographic sources regarding the three elements of thunder, water and frog, along with the god of ancestors, and how scholars have related them to the depictions in the Huashan rock art site are explored. It is argued that rather than the rock art site being related to just one of the three elements, as seems to be suggested by current scholarship, the site is actually related to all three elements.

a. Thunder (Duzbyaj)

The ethnographic sources

Among all the spiritual beings, the thunder god has been viewed as the most important. According to the origin myths of the Zhuang people, at the beginning, the world exploded into three parts. The upper part became the sky, where all the deities reside. It is ruled by Duzbyaj, the thunder god. The middle part became the earth, where humans live. It is led by Baeuqloegdoz, the god of ancestors. The lower part became the water, where the monsters live, and it is ruled by Duzngieg, the water god (Luo 2006: 173). It is not difficult to understand why thunder has been viewed as the mightiest god ruling the sky. According to scholars, the ancient Luo Yue culture is closely associated with rice cultivation, and even the name 'Luo' was derived from one type of paddy field (called 'Luo field' in historical records) developed by them for growing rice (Qin 2007: 14). Agricultural production

is highly dependent on weather, climate and water availability. In south-western China, the humid subtropical climate causes thunder to be popularly perceived as a mysterious weather phenomenon, which always brings about abundant rainfall, essential for a good harvest (Liao 2002: 68). Therefore, in antiquity, thunder was deified as the god in charge of weather and sky. Today, some Zhuang groups in the Zuojiang River valley still pay homage to the temples of the thunder god and, if prolonged droughts occur, rituals will be held to ask the thunder god for rain (op. cit.: 74). Actually, because agriculture still plays the most important part in the local economy, ceremonial rituals devoted to the thunder god have been extensively practised among the Zhuang people (op. cit.: 42).

Thunder in the Huashan rock art site

According to some scholars, the Huashan rock art site was created to worship the mighty thunder god (e.g. Yu 2004: 164). The thunder god is not directly depicted by the images but the main reason for this interpretation lies in the uniform posture of the 'human' motifs. The anthropomorphs, either in frontal view or in profile, are all painted in the same posture, with arms bent up and legs semi-squatted. This posture is interpreted as 'frog posture' by most scholars (e.g. Liao 2002). Frogs are closely related to the thunder god in the Zhuang ethnic religious beliefs. They are perceived as sons and daughters of the thunder god and messengers between heaven and earth (Jiang 1991: 12). Even today, the local ethnic groups still practise rituals and ceremonies in which they imitate frog postures in dancing to entreat the thunder god for favourable weather, such as a widespread ritual named 'xingma dance', performed by local wizards called *shigong* (Liao 2002: 363) (Fig. 4).

Because the painted 'human' motifs strikingly resemble the so-called 'frog dance', it is possible that the paintings represented a grand ritual in which people danced with a frog posture to worship the thunder god (Liao 2002: 82).

b. Water (Duzngieg)

The ethnographic sources

In subtropical regions, floods and droughts, both related to water, alternatively affect agricultural production. Like thunder, water also plays a crucial role in the Zhuang culture. However, unlike the thunder god Duzbyaj, the water god Duzngieg has been viewed as evil. In the Zhuang mythology, Duzngieg is the largest water monster, responsible for causing floods and droughts. Scholars interpret Duzngieg as a water snake, a rhinoceros or a crocodile (Qiu 1996: 298; Luo 2006: 173; Liao 2002: 194). According to historical records written in the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), the Luo Yue people tattooed their bodies with patterns of water predators as a way to deter them (Chapuis 1995: 7). Today, the Zhuang people's cult of the water god is mainly represented in two types of rituals: 'land sacrifice' and 'water sacrifice'. The former refers to rituals held in the temples devoted to the water god, while the latter applies to rituals performed on the rivers. In 'water sacrifice', people wearing special costumes paddle the wooden boats, whose prows and sterns have been sculptured into the shape of a dragon or water bird, beat drums and gongs, and throw offerings into the water, as a way to please the water god (Qiu 1996: 299).

In the Zhuang mythology, water also represents the underworld. There have been many funerary rituals with water playing an important role among different Zhuang groups (Liao 2002: 195). For example, in some groups, when someone dies, before the funeral their family will carry the person's clothes to the riverside, and pray for the water god to guide the dead in the underworld (Liao 2002: 182). If we take a look beyond the Sino-Vietnamese border, something that has not been traditionally done by Chinese scholarship, there is more evidence concerning the relationship between water and funerary rituals. On the Red River Plain, the Luo Yue (called 'Lac Viet' in Vietnamese) created a magnificent bronze culture between about 700 BCE and 100 CE, named Dong-son culture. Some scholars have studied the decorations on the Dong-son drums to explore the rituals of the Luo Yue people (e.g. Higham 1996: 124). Dong-son drums are characterised by the motifs of flying herons and plumed people in boats. According to Victor Golubew, the motifs symbolised the golden boat carrying the soul of the dead to the Island of Paradise which rose in the middle of the Ocean of Clouds (Golubew 1929: 38). Charles Higham (1996: 133) also stated that the 'boat scenes' decorated on bronze drums excavated in Vietnam probably represent funeral rites, in which context the herons would symbolise longevity and the boats may be carrying away the dead

spirit. Moreover, some Vietnamese today still carry their dead to eternity over the oceans on 'Bat Nha' junks, a type of sailing boats (Chapuis 1995: 8). In fact, not just in the Dong-son culture, bronze drums have been found in abundance in south-western China, and they are the most representative implements of many non-Han ethnic cultures in this area. The function of the drums, often found in burials, remains debatable: according to historical records, they have been used in warfare, funerary and other ceremonial rites (Heidhues 2000: 19). According to the historical text *Hou Han Shu* (*History of the Eastern Han*), Ma Yuan (14 BCE – 49 CE), the Chinese general who subdued a Vietnamese uprising in 40–43 CE, confiscated and destroyed the bronze drums of the Luo Yue chieftains who were his adversaries (Tan 1987: 587), attesting to the drums' significance in the local culture. Bronze drums were normally richly decorated, usually with a starburst pattern in the centre of the tympanum, and surrounded with geometric patterns, 'scenes' of 'daily life' and 'war', 'animals', 'birds' and 'boats'. Even though the 'scene' of boats carrying plumed people is a common theme decorated on many types of bronze drums, the Shizhaishan type (called Dong-son type in Vietnam) has the most similar 'scenes' in the decorations compared to those of the Huashan rock art site. Shizhaishan type bronze drums were widely excavated in south-western China and Southeast Asia. According to the Chinese scholars, they were popular between 600 BCE – 100 CE, as indicated by ¹⁴C dating (Wang 1990: 540). Vietnamese scholars claimed an earlier beginning of 700 BCE (Nyuyen 1974: 101).

Vietnamese scholars also argue that it is possible that the Luo Yue people were the ancestors of the Dayak people (e.g. Dao 1976: 132). The Dayaks of Kalimantan and other parts of Borneo in Southeast Asia have the tradition of sending their dead to the ocean on a type of boat. Their funeral ritual resembles the boat motifs on the Dong-son drums. They believe that the boats, which now carry the dead away, once carried their ancestors from somewhere else to the island (Dao 1976: 132).

Water in the Huashan rock art site

The Huashan rock art site has been closely related to the water god because of its 'boat scenes'. The 'boat scenes' depicted on the Huashan rock art panel resemble the rituals devoted to the water god as practised by the Zhuang people today (Qiu 1996: 299). I would argue that they also resemble the 'boat scenes' cast on many bronze objects from the Dong-son culture, such as bronze drums and vessels (see Higham 1996 for a study of these drums) (Fig. 5). There is no way to be certain whether the 'boat scenes' of the Huashan rock art panel represented similar rituals in antiquity, but it is reasonable to assume that the water cult played an important role in the ancient Luo Yue spiritual practices. Furthermore, a large number of circle motifs were painted on the Huashan rock art panel, interpreted by most scholars as bronze drums (Qin et al. 1987:



Figure 5. Comparison of 'boat scenes': (a) a 'boat scene' from group 13, panel 1 of Huashan rock art site; (b) a 'boat scene' decorating a bronze drum (after Qin et al. 1987: Fig. 315-1).

167). Among the Zhuang people, there are folklores about bronze drums flying out during nights to fight with Duzngieg, the water god who brings floods and droughts to the earth (Luo 2006: 175). So it is possible to argue here that the depictions of bronze drums in the Huashan rock art site represent the Luo Yue people's yearning for a world without natural disasters.

c. Earth (Baeuqloegdoz)

The ethnographic sources

In Zhuang mythology, the middle part of the world 'earth', where human beings live, also has a representative god, Baeuqloegdoz, the god of ancestors. However, the worship of Baeuqloegdoz is more closely related to the religious practice of ancestor worship than to that of animism, since Baeuqloegdoz is viewed by the Zhuang people as their first ancestor (Liang and Liao 2005: 1). According to legends, Baeuqloegdoz defeated his two brothers, the thunder god Duzbyaj and the water god Duzngieg, and created human beings with the goddess Mehmyok, who has become the flower goddess representing fertility and childbirth (Liao 2002: 118). Baeuqloegdoz has been greatly respected by

the Zhuang people. For example, in rituals, if the local wizards, the *shigong*, need to ask for help from the gods, they must ask Baeuqloegdoz first, and then also the other gods (Yu 2004: 32). Except for the worship of Baeuqloegdoz, general ancestor worship has been pervasive in the Zhuang region. In festivals, rituals devoted to ancestors could be seen almost everywhere (Liao 2002: 176).

Earth in the Huashan rock art site

Another interpretation of the Huashan rock art site argues that it represents the ancestor worship of the Luo Yue people (Qin et al. 1987: 175). For example, the dominant human figures of each 'scene' could be interpreted as the depictions of great leaders in Luo Yue people's memory. Today, many Zhuang people still believe that people's souls exist after the body perishes, and the souls of ancestors would protect

the descendants if worshipped properly (Liao 2002: 27). Some Zhuang groups still deify their renowned ancestors to be the local guardian gods or goddesses (Liao 2002: 32). According to some Vietnamese scholars, similar beliefs could be commonly found among the Muong people of Vietnam (Dao 1976: 235). Moreover, the ethnic minority Gaoshan people in Taiwan, whose ancestors are believed to have had close relations with the Luo Yue people, still have the tradition of carving their ancestors' images on wooden boards and paying homage to the carved boards. Those images all have the same posture, with arms bent up and legs apart, sometimes with a sword hanging at waist, resembling the 'human' motifs of Huashan rock art (Qin et al. 1987: 176) (Fig. 6). Considering the essential connection between ancestor and the earth in the Zhuang people's cosmology, it is highly possible that the ancestor worship presumably depicted in the Huashan rock art could be viewed as a spiritual practice devoted to the great earth.

The Luo Yue's cosmology and the location of the Huashan rock art site

According to archaeological findings, since at least from the second half of the first millennium BCE, the Luo Yue people have lived in small-scale societies in the region encompassing south-western Guangxi and northern Vietnam. Yet, this ethnic affiliation has a weakness that needs to be looked at: if they were indeed the authors of the rock paintings, why was the Zuojiang River valley the only area selected to be decorated? And why was the Huashan mountain particularly chosen to produce the art with the greatest scale, the most grandiose 'scenes', and the largest number of images? To answer these questions, it is necessary to understand the

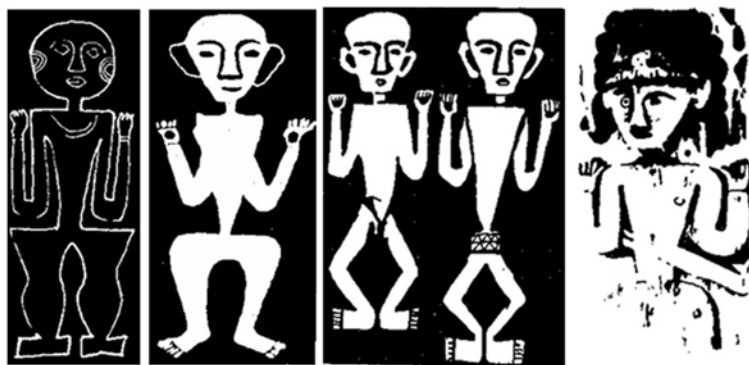


Figure 6. Images of Gaoshan people's ancestors, carved on wooden boards (after Qin et al. 1987: 176).

cultural context of the art at the time when it was produced, and to analyse the connection between the culture and the location of the rock art sites.

As mentioned above, even though each interpretation of the Huashan rock art has its own evidence and explanation, there is no way to determine the exact meaning behind those ancient images. In this article, I do not intend to compare or argue among the different interpretations proposed by previous scholars. My purpose is to provide a new perspective to view the connection between the Huashan rock art and the Luo Yue people's cosmology: to see it from the location of the site itself.

In the Zhuang people's widely accepted origin myth the universe is divided into three sections: sky, water and earth. The thunder god, the water god and the god of ancestors, three most important spiritual beings, respectively dominate the sky, water and earth (Qiu 1996: 73). Therefore, it seems reasonable to make the assumption that the Luo Yue people's cosmology was also related to the sky, water and earth. This assumption could be also supported by the fact that the various spiritual beings believed to exist by the Zhuang people altogether belong to three main groups: celestial beings and weather phenomena; animals and plants; water phenomena and water predators. The three groups precisely represent sky, earth and water. Besides, it is interesting to notice that in the Zhuang ethnic language today, thunder, cloud, sky and fire are still pronounced very similarly. It is argued that this is influenced by the ancient cosmology of the Zhuang people's ancestors, who considered the four natural beings as generally the same things (Qiu 1996: 49). Significantly, an analysis of the Vietnamese mythology further strengthens this assumption. The Vietnamese associate their ancestors to Lac Long Quan, a god of the ocean. He came to the Red River Plain and married Au Co, a goddess of the mountain, and they gave birth to one hundred children, who became the first Lac Viet people ('Luo Yue' in Chinese) (Taylor 1983: 13). In the myth, the relations among mountain, ocean and plain are clear, as a god from the ocean and a goddess from the mountain met on plain and produced the human race. In the traditional cosmologies of many ethnic groups in the world, mountains always represent the sky. As Mircea Eliade stated, 'mountains are the nearest thing to the sky, and are thence endowed with a twofold holiness: on one hand they share in the spatial symbolism of transcendence ... and on the other they are the dwelling of the gods' (Eliade 1958: 99). Besides, mountains are often perceived as the place where sky and earth meet; and a path one can take to pass from one cosmic zone to another (1958: 100). Eliade's idea is still used in attempts to interpret rock art around the world, such as in Scandinavian (e.g. Helskog and Olsen 1995) and Upper Palaeolithic rock art (e.g. Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988). Ocean or rivers represent the water. For people living in coastal areas, ocean is the broadest form of water. Similarly, inland people view

rivers as major symbols of water (Boric 2003: 57). Just as mountains are pathways to the sky world, so may rivers be passages to the underworld. Furthermore, it is easy to understand that plains or fields represent the earth, as on flat lands agriculture is generally more productive and early civilisations flourish more easily. Therefore, the relations among mountain, ocean and plain in the Vietnamese mythology could be seen as evidence demonstrating the significance of the connections among sky, water and earth in the Luo Yue religion. Likewise, it is reasonable to argue that in the Luo Yue religion, mountains, rivers (or oceans), and fields (or plains) were directly related of the cults of sky, water and earth.

Based on the above, it is reasonable to assume that the place where the Huashan rock art site is located was perceived by the Luo Yue people as a special place, a place where intangible forces are manifested in physical aspects of the environment. According to Eliade, the occurrences of unusual features in the landscape that indicate the presence of power can be defined as *hierophanies* — manifestations of the sacred (Eliade 1958: 14). *Hierophanies* is the plural form of *hierophany*, which combines the two ancient Greek words *ἱερός* (*hieros*), meaning 'sacred, holy sign', and *φαίνω* (*phainō*), meaning 'show, appear'. People are not free to choose the sacred places. On the contrary, people seek for sacred places by the occurrence of unusual signs in the landscape (Eliade 1959: 28).

What are the unusual features in the landscape of the Huashan rock art site? The site is situated on the almost vertical cliff of the Huashan mountain besides the Mingjiang River, which runs a sharp turn from the south-west to the north-west at the foot of the mountain. The painted cliff, surrounded by mountain ranges in the north and east, overhangs the river and faces directly to a flat field on the other side of the river. The river is wide and the water flows gently. Viewed from the opposite bank, the triangular-shaped Huashan mountain is clearly reflected on the surface of the river. As archaeologist Jiang Zhenming noticed during his survey of the site, 'a dense crowd of red-painted figures thickly dotting the cliff mingled together in red colour, as if they were flaming up under the red glow of the setting sun, jumping on the river, dancing on the cliff and ascending to the sky' (Jiang 1991: 11).

I propose that the unusual features in the landscape of the Huashan rock art site were viewed as *hierophanies* by the Luo Yue people, and then they produced rock art as a way to access the sacred power embodied by the features. According to the detailed description of all the rock art sites distributed in Zuojiang River valley (Qin et al. 1987: 25–122), compared with other painted mountains, only Huashan is of a triangular shape, which provides a solemn ambience as if it peaked directly into the sky. About 68.3% of Zuojiang rock art sites are located beside a turn of the river (Qin et al. 1987: 21). In antiquity, the turns on the watercourse were perceived as the places where the water monsters

dwelt as boat wrecks always happened in such places. So the location of the Huashan rock art site probably indicates the Luo Yue's beliefs concerning the cult of water. Furthermore, while the Huashan mountain is half-surrounded by ridges, a flat field appears on the other side of the river, embraced by the peacefully running water and facing the precipitous cliff directly. In such a sense, the mountain, river and field have been combined in a way the ancient Luo Yue people might have viewed as sacred. Moreover, the orientations of the natural features might have also played a part as to make the place significant. Today, in the Zuojiang River valley, during the rituals devoted to the thunder god asking for rainfall, the animal sacrifices should be placed heading towards the south-east, the direction which the rain is believed to come from (Liao 2002: 74). Even though we cannot assume the Luo Yue's preference of directions based on the beliefs of the current Zhuang people, it is still reasonable to say that particular orientations manifested in the landscape contributed to the sacredness of the place. In sum, I propose the assumption that the Huashan rock art site was chosen because of its unique landscape, where the mountain, river and field combined together in a certain way as a manifestation of sacred power. It is also reasonable to infer that the Luo Yue people believed that sacred power could be accessed by producing rock art in such a place, and their yearnings would be best received by the gods if rock art was created in such a place.

Conclusions

China possesses a wealth of rock art, among which the rock art of Huashan mountain is extraordinarily impressive, not only in the context of Chinese rock art but worldwide. Since its academic discovery in the 1950s, the Huashan rock art site has been studied by Chinese scholars for more than half a century, with volumes of research products generated. The previous studies have been generally focused on the interpretation of the motifs. In this article, I have introduced the possible connection between the location of the site itself and the cosmological beliefs of the Luo Yue people. In order to inspect the possible reasons for the selection of the Huashan mountain to produce the grandest site of the art, I have analysed the spiritual traditions of the descendants of the Luo Yue people, believed to have been responsible for the creation of Huashan rock art, and also assessed the previous interpretations of the Huashan rock art motifs. This discussion considers information coming from Vietnam, which so far has been ignored by Chinese scholars, and connects the rock art site not only with a single element from the local ethnic cosmology, but with three of them. My analysis makes it reasonable to make the assumption that in the Luo Yue's cosmology, mountain, river and field could be perceived as the representations of the three major elements that form the universe: sky, water and earth. Therefore I have proposed that the unusual features in

the landscape of the Huashan rock art site were viewed as manifestations of the sacred by the Luo Yue people, and then they chose this place to produce spectacular rock art to access the sacred power embodied by the site's natural features.

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