KEYWORDS: ***China – Pastoralism – Agriculture – Xixia – Xiongnu***

MOBILE AND SETTLED: THE PETROGLYPHS OF HELANKOU, NINGXIA, WESTERN CHINA

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Abstract. The Helankou petroglyphs are concentrated on the cliffs and boulders near the entrance of a mountain gorge in the Helanshan range of Ningxia. A few motifs are found also deeper inside the gorge. The Helankou imagery includes presumed faces (a design that connects this site with the 'face' tradition of Inner Mongolia and inner Asia), 'animals' and inscriptions that reference Buddhism. Based on style and iconography the Helankou rock art has generally been interpreted as the timeless production of inner Asian pastoral nomads, who in their perennial conflict with the settled world were roaming the northern Chinese border zone. However, the different amount of weathering and the diversity of the motifs, interpreted in light of historical and archaeological evidence, indicate that these petroglyphs were produced over an extended period of time by a variety of different ethnic groups that interacted in the area.

Shifting identities

In China, rock art sites are concentrated in the northern, western and southern border territories inhabited by China's minorities. Conversely, they are rare in the central plain and coastal areas between the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers now settled by Chinese agriculturalists (Fig. 1).[1] Though it is possible that ancient rock art may have simply disappeared from China's agricultural heartland due to high population pressure following neolithisation, or that it is absent due to the lack of suitable rock surfaces, this distribution pattern inevitably suggests a dualistic correlation between the presence/absence of rock art and the different cultural milieus, visual practices and belief systems of the various peoples of China. In particular, it appears to support the idea that 'rock art' is not associated with literate civilisations like that of China, and it is instead the natural expression of 'non-literate' people. As a result, rock art is often seen either as the work of pre-Historic people or of non-Han pastoralists or horticulturalists who historically inhabited the lands at the edges of

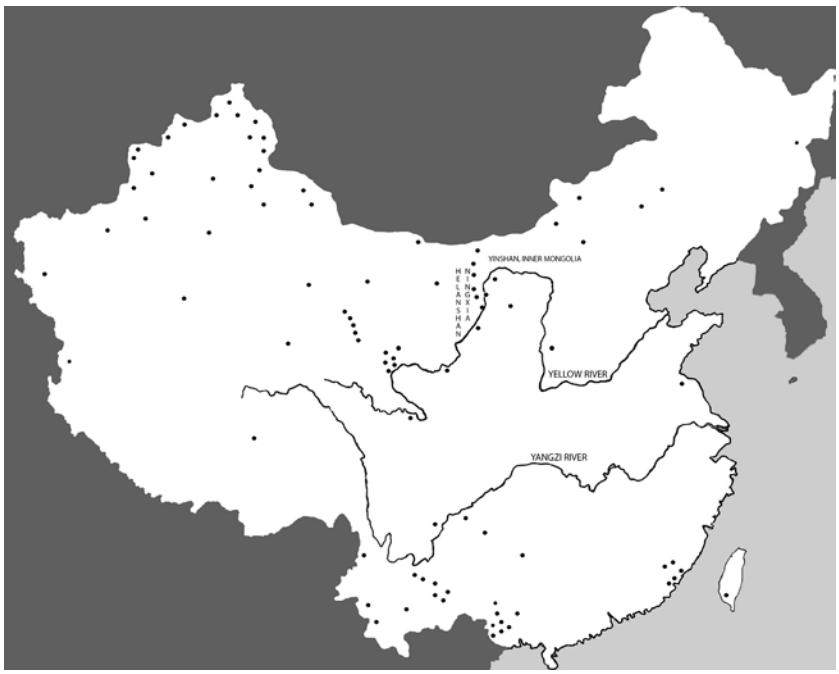

Figure 1. *Rock art locations in China.*

1 Some petroglyphs (cupules, lines and other signs) have been recently discovered at a site in the central plain Jucishan (Xinzheng co. Henan province). Their dates are still being debated. Report presented by Cai Quanfa at the 3rd International Helanshan Rock Art Conference and Festival, Yinchuan, Ningxia, June 2010.

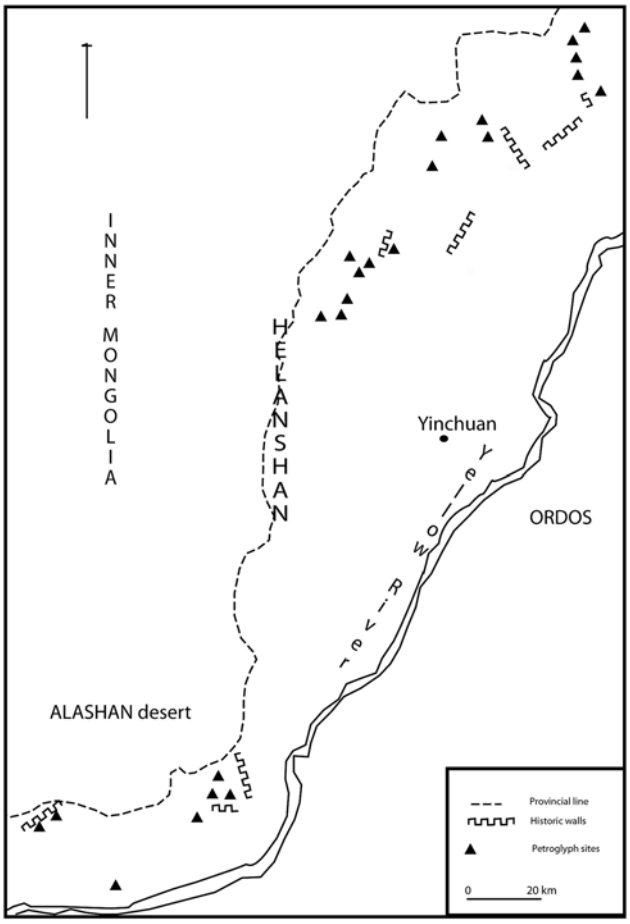

Figure 2. *Helanshan rock art locations, Ningxia province.*

the Chinese agricultural world.

This classification practice is unsurprising, since marginalising identity politics is common with minorities in many parts of the world. However, when applied to antiquity these distinctions erase the key role a variety of ethnic groups played in the process of formation of the modern Han Chinese, and suggest that 'minorities nationalities' have always been an 'other' to the Han (Hostetler 2000). This dichotomous analysis raises questions on our definition of 'rock art', the nature of the phenomenon, and the notions of authorship and ethnic identity in antiquity.

Methodology

To explore the nature of the rock art phenomenon and its connection with the construction of ethnic identities, I focus on Helankou (the 'mouth of the Helan'), a petroglyph site in the Helanshan, a mountain range in northwest China's Ningxia province (Fig. 2). I argue that at Helankou the making of images emerged from the long-term interaction between mobile and settled peoples and their landscapes. The identities and appurtenances of these populations were constantly shifting and their use of the site helped claim a territory that was important to many. To show these trends, I describe the site's geographic setting and petroglyph distribution, attempt to analyse the petroglyphs' iconography, provide a proposed and tentative chronology, and link the rock art palimpsest to historical and archaeological evidence.

Geographic setting

The Helankou petroglyph site is within one of the numerous canyons that dissect the eastern foothills of the central Helan mountains (Helanshan) (Fig. 3). Ranging in height between 1200 m and 3500 m, these mountains run north–south for 200 km, framing the western section of the great bend of the Yellow River. Though not forbidding, the Helanshan are wide enough (20–30 km) to create a natural break between the deserts and steppes of inner Asia and the greener lands of the Chinese world. A few kilometres to the east of Helankou, the Yellow River bend creates a fertile floodplain that is one of the northernmost Chinese agricultural outposts. This position caused the Helanshan to be a meeting point of varied populations and different subsistence strategies.

Figure 3. *Helankou site: the canyon entrance looking east.*

Like the mountains and rocky deserts of nearby Inner Mongolia and Gansu, the Helanshan are part of the northern frontier region and are rich in rock art. Numerous sites consisting of clusters of petroglyphs (but rarely of painted motifs) are disseminated along the north–south length of the Helan range in canyons, on hilltops or on alluvial boulders. The style and subject matter vary at each site, but most localities exhibit stylistic unity and an inclination to

represent apparent hunting and pastoral themes (Li Xiangshi and Sheng Zilong 1994; Demattè 2004). From this point of view, Helankou is both predictable and exceptional.

As one of the largest Helanshan petroglyph localities, Helankou shares the themes and styles of local rock art, but is unique for its concentration of images, variety of themes and quality of imagery. The settings of the site are also significant. The Helankou canyon originates in the west near Shaguozhou peak (3558 m) and descends winding to the east to an elevation of c. 1500 m, ending with an alluvial fan that stretches towards the Yellow River about 50 km north of Yinchuan, Ningxia's capital city (Mo et al. 1999). Though located in an apparently barren and rocky desert, the site is not deprived of the natural resources necessary for human survival. The Helankou area has plenty of water year-round and the nearby canyons and hills are rich in plants (greens, berries and mushrooms) and small animals. Grasses and plants could provide a viable environment for animal grazing, but grazing is now prohibited because the area has been turned into a natural preserve. In antiquity, when the environment was less dry than today and the Helanshan were renowned for their lush and lively woods, native populations could subsist on wild resources, marginal agriculture and/or pastoralism (Li and Zhu 1993).

Petroglyph distribution

According to recent estimates, the site extends over 12 km^2 and includes 5679 images. Most petroglyphs are concentrated in the first 5 km from the eastern opening of the Helankou gorge and are pounded on the smooth sandstone cliffs and on boulders disseminated on the alluvium. A smaller number is in the deeper recesses of the gorge, but in general the density of images declines as the distance from the entrance of the canyon increases.

Xu and Wei (1993) have created a classification of the Helankou petroglyphs into eight major loci. Within these loci, petroglyphs are further arranged in clusters of up to twenty images, which often exhibit some degree of stylistic homogeneity. Lately, a new classification of the site in six areas has been proposed.[2] Though expanded in space this new system is not as detailed as the earlier one. Below, I employ Xu and Wei's (1993) classification and, wherever possible, I refer to petroglyphs by listing their locus in Roman numerals and their group in Arab ciphers.

Proceeding from the exterior towards the interior of the gorge, loci I-V are on the 'northern' side of the canyon, and loci VI-VIII are on the 'southern' side

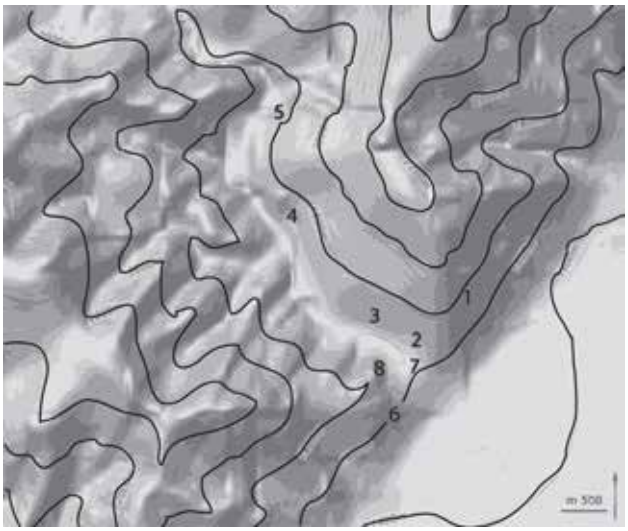

Figure 4. *Helankou site: distribution of the eight main loci (adapted from Google Maps).*

(Fig. 4). Locus I is on the northern outcrop outside the eastern end of the canyon. Its few images, a large 'tiger' and few smaller 'animals', face east. Locus II is on the north cliff at the entrance of the canyon and holds 25 groups of petroglyphs distributed at different heights (between 0.8 m and 10 m from the canyon floor). The images, simple faces and some animals, face south. Locus III, the largest location, is 180 m west of locus II and holds 59 clusters. The images face south and are distributed from ground level to a height of 30 m. Locus III includes a large panel with inscriptions, animals and over twenty faces. Locus IV is 1000 m west of locus III, at a point where the Helankou canyon narrows and switches from an east-west to a north-south direction. Nine groups of petroglyphs are executed on low polished boulders in a dark section of the cliff. Locus V is another 1500 m into the canyon, always on the northern cliff. Here, six clusters of petroglyphs (mainly 'faces') are pounded on boulders at the bottom of the canyon.

Locus VI, an outcrop on the southern cliff outside the canyon's mouth, has six groups of petroglyphs, which face east and feature 'faces' and 'animals'. Locus VII is theoretically on the 'southern' side, but consists of dislodged boulders distributed in the alluvium at the mouth of the gorge. The integrity of this group is problematic because many stones were moved from their original environment by floodwaters or by recent flood control work. The imagery includes 'animals', simple 'scenes' and circular signs that may be faces. Locus VIII is an outcrop of polished boulders on the southern cliff at the canyon entrance. With 35 groups of petroglyphs, this location is dense with imagery, in particular with the deeply executed iconic 'faces' of Helankou.

Though some petroglyphs are not in their original location, this distribution pattern suggests that there is a correlation between imagery and site topography. At the canyon opening the gorge is wide (c. 50 m)

2 According to the new system the site is divided into six areas (A–F): A is the southern outcrop outside the canyon, B is the southern cliff, C the northern cliff, D the northern outcrop outside the canyon, E is the northern alluvium, and F the southern alluvium (Li Chengrong 2010).

Figure 5. Helankou: petroglyph with apparent human and animal motifs.

with smooth, accessible and sun-exposed cliffs. To the contrary, just half a kilometre into the canyon the landscape is more forbidding: the gorge narrows, the cliffs grow taller and steeper, and direct sunlight is scarce. The location of the images suggests that the makers had a preference for rocks that are smooth and illuminated by the sun for a good part of the day. The northern cliffs near the entrance appear to have been particularly desirable as they face south or east, but sections of the southern canyon cliffs facing east were also used. These are not unusual choices as the sun can enhance the petroglyphs' visibility and some ritualistic-religious conventions might invite sun exposure.

Style and iconography

Helankou rock art, like most northwest China rock art, consists solely of open-air petroglyphs. Painted motifs are not known at Helankou and are rare in the Helanshan, having been documented only at one grotto site (Li Xiangshi and Sheng Zilong 1994).

Figure 6. 'Animal combat scene', vandalised by retracing (panel VIII-33).

Helankou petroglyphs appear to have been produced with different techniques. Some were pecked into the rock with pointed stones, others were probably first delineated and then ground deeply into the rock with stone tools. Bronze and iron tools, though available from the first millennium BCE, were probably too valuable, inefficient and rarely used (Su Yinmei 2004). They may have been employed at the tail end of the petroglyph tradition to incise Historic inscriptions or to scratch some simple motifs.

Based on style and subject matter, Helankou rock art is often associated with the tradition of inner Asian rock art of Bronze Age pastoralists like that of Kazakhstan, southern Siberia and Mongolia (Martynov 1991; Demattè 2004). Though correct for part of the imagery, this interpretation is reductive as it ignores the ethnic and cultural complexities of Ningxia's history. Analysis of the iconography shows that, beyond the more predictable animal representations, Helankou exhibits a diversified imagery, including 'faces', hands, human figures and even inscriptions. Three main themes have been identified: (1) animal representation with a focus on pastoral life; (2) group or individual 'face' representations occasionally associated with hands and schematic human figures; (3) Historic inscriptions in Xixia or Chinese relating to Buddhist or official matters.

Though it is difficult to pin down the dates of petroglyphs, the zoomorphic and the epigraphic groups may have some chronological significance. The first is thought to represent the petroglyph production of the late Bronze Age and Iron Age (500 BCE–200 CE), whereas the latter embody the Historic phase of the site. The 'faces' may fall in part between them, but their great stylistic variation indicates that they are unlikely to date to a single period. The 'face tradition' probably emerged in the Bronze Age, developed over time, and continued also in the later Historic period.

Zoomorphs

Animals, both wild and domesticated, occupy an important part in the rock art of Helankou. Often they are represented as apparently domesticated food sources like sheep, goats and cattle, and work resources like dogs and horses. Less prominent are the 'camels', which are visible at other Helanshan sites, and generally date to later phases. 'Domestic animals' appear individually, in small groups or in 'narrative scenes'. Single animals are occasionally represented with detailed care, such as a 'horse' with an inflated belly, perhaps a pregnant mare

(III-57). In the 'scenes', 'human' figures often play prominent roles in 'controlling' the other 'animals'. In one panel, a person appears to defend a herd from a 'fox attack' (III-54); in another, a bovine is flanked by two figures and six other 'people' stand in a row nearby (though perhaps originally unrelated to the 'scene'). In these contexts, the trappings of nomadism ('animal pens, tools, bows and arrows, and occasionally carts') are displayed (Fig. 5).

Among wild animals, 'mountain goats, deer and tigers' dominate, though other creatures such as 'foxes, lizards' and possibly birds appear as well. 'Deer' and 'tigers' are often represented individually, but occur also in pairs or small groups. Single 'tigers' or 'deer' tend to show the might of the animal, like a 'tiger' with striated mantel at the beginning of the northern cliff (I-1) and a 'running deer' from the southern cliff (VIII-23). Pairs, characteristic of Xiongnu art, show 'rams' confronting each other, or a 'deer' and a 'tiger engaged in a deadly struggle' (II-21, VIII-33) (Fig. 6). Full bodied 'humans' are simply drawn and lack details. They appear near 'wild animals', occasionally afoot or on horseback brandishing 'bows and arrows' (Fig. 7).

Figure 7. *Potential narrative scene (panel III-54).*

This subject matter links Helankou petroglyphs to the inner Asian pastoralist artistic tradition. 'Deer, tigers and hunting or shepherding scenes' are common themes at other Helanshan sites (such as Siyanjin) and at locations along the Chinese northern frontier, like the Yinshan of Inner Mongolia and the Heishan of Gansu. Further away, comparable material is found in the rock art of Mongolia, southern Siberia and central Asia, all areas that in the late first millennium BCE were home to different groups of pastoral nomads (Gai 1986; Gansu Provincial Museum 1990; Martynov 1991).

Figure 8. *'Face' panel with Xixia inscriptions and barely visible zoomorphs (panel III-4).*

Figure 9. *Faint 'face' (recently discovered and unnumbered).*

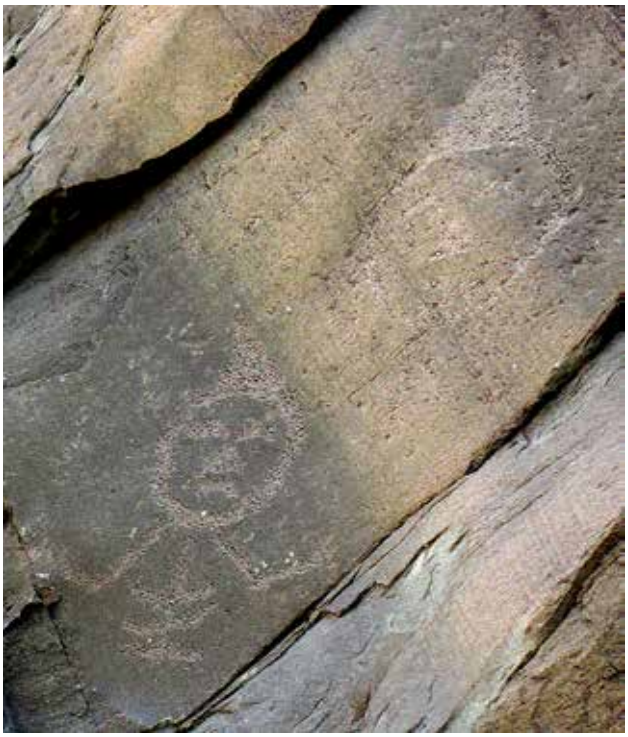

Figure 10. *'Faces' with pointed 'lama hat' (panel V-5).*

'Faces'

Face-like images are the most numerous and characteristic icon of Helankou. A recent count put their number at 708. 'Faces' appear singly, in groups, or mixed with other imagery. Single 'faces' are found almost everywhere along the canyon, but groups of faces are concentrated at the entrance of the canyon (He Jide 2010). Many are visible in large panels in flat and sun-exposed stones on both the north and south cliffs. Some groups consist of only three or four 'faces', but four large panels (III-4, III-6, III-31, IV-7, VIII-27) hold between ten and twenty. Similar 'faces' often appear on the same rock panel or at least in proximity of each other. Though clustered in stylistically coherent groups, 'faces' are not segregated from others motifs, but often share the rock panel with both 'animals' and inscriptions (Fig. 8).

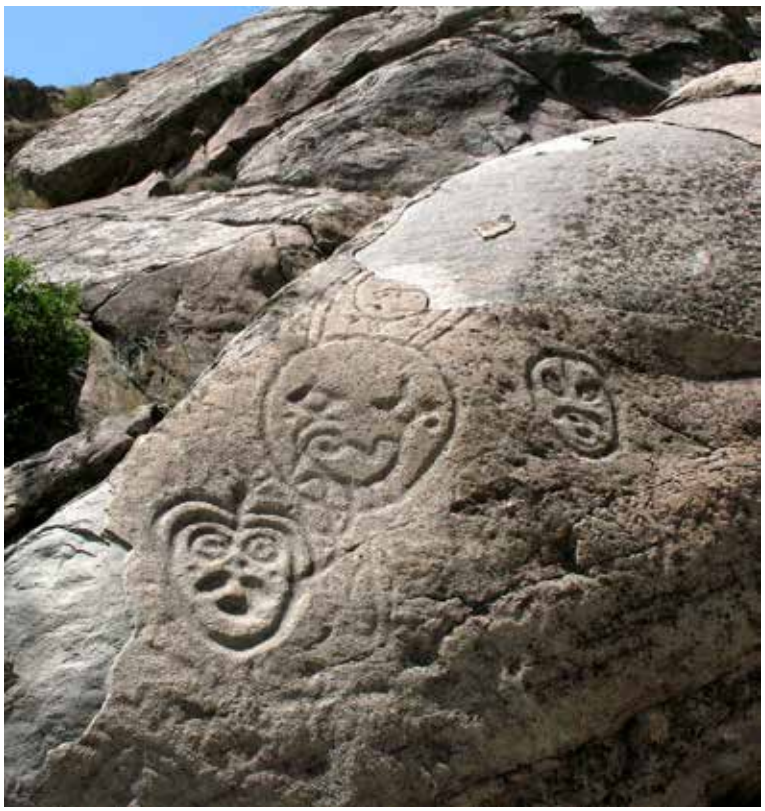

Figure 11. *Deeply pounded 'faces' near the entrance of the Helankou canyon (panel VIII-7).*

These icons exhibit remarkable typological and stylistic variation. They range from small, simple and shallow delineation of the human face, to large, deeply engraved and complex images. Many seem recognisable as faces; others may represent masked individuals, face ornamentation, grotesque features, or even animals. Yet others are difficult to interpret. Their state of preservation varies: some, worn and barely visible, may be very ancient, whereas others, clearly visible and with little patina, may be more recent. The simplest are circular outlines, perhaps meant to be seen as human faces, but with only traces of eyes and mouths (II-23) **(**Fig. 9). Some simple 'faces' wear crowns or long, pointed hats (III-27, III-30, V-5), perhaps a reference to the headdresses of Buddhist

Figure 12. *'Face' with ray-like protrusions vandalised by repeated ink rubbings (panel III-45).*

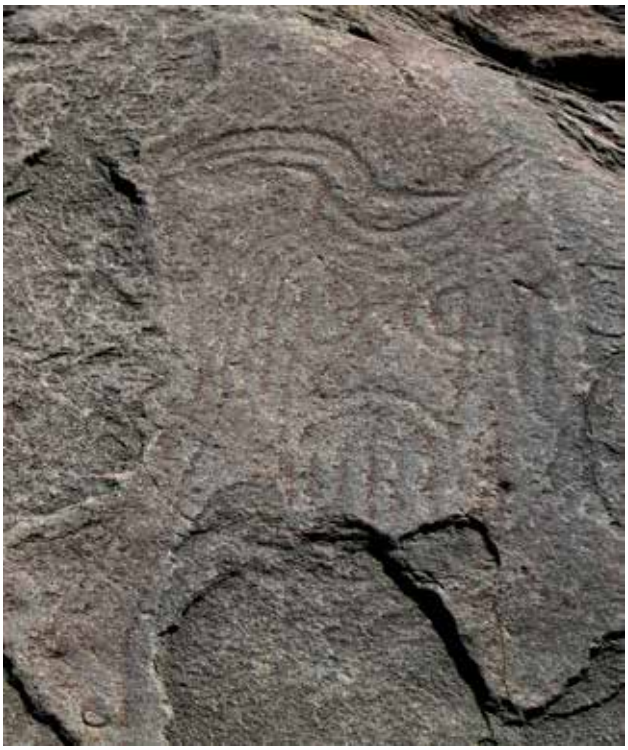

Figure 13. *Square 'face' with protrusions that may represent hair and beard (panel III-50).*

lamas (Fig. 10). Occasionally, engraved hands appear next to them. A considerable number of 'faces' clustered on a large panel at the entrance of the canyon have peculiar features: they have closed or no eyes and often have antenna-like lines emerging from the heads (III-4). These protrusions, which appear at the ears, chin or top of the head, may represent beards and a peculiar hairdo (Fig. 8). Further up the canyon, two skeletal figures with similar faces have been interpreted as *wu*, spirit mediums or shamans. Several deeply-hammered and grotesque 'face' types are concentrated in locus VIII. Three such images are visible on a polished boulder near the entrance at the south side of the canyon (VIII-7): the lowest one has an elongated visage, round and deep eyes, moustache and a hat-like cover on top; above, a large round 'face' has grotesque eyes, a bizarre snout combined with a fanged mouth and two protrusions on the head; next, a smaller face features elongated oblique eyes, moustache and round mouth. Similar icons are visible on nearby rocks (Fig. 11). Complex faces are found also in different loci, but they are hammered less deeply and differ in style. In locus III, one has large round eyes and a crown of rays (III-45), another a square outline, 'beard' and head projections (III-50); yet another may represent a monkey (Figs 12 and 13). Similar square faces are found also in locus VI (VI-1). Related to the face icon are circular outlines that contain abstract designs, with minimal or indirect references to facial features (IV-1, IV-7) (Fig. 14). Some

Figure 14. *Symbols or abstract 'faces' (panel IV-7).*

Figure 15. *'Face' outlines with petal-like appendices (III-24).*

Figure 16. *Xixia inscription next to 'face' motif (III-6).*

are created by a combination of straight or curved lines that suggest masking or facial decoration, scarification or tattoo. In these clusters, there are also faces or face outlines surrounded by rays (III-31, III-11) or petal-like appendices (III-24) (Fig. 15).

'Faces' are common in the local and inner Asian rock art traditions. Beyond Helankou, they are documented at other Helanshan sites (such as nearby Sugukou) and at various locations in Inner Mongolia (Ge'er'aobao Gou and Molehetu Gou in the Yinshan), Mongolia and southern Siberia (Gai Shanlin 1986; Martynov 1991; Francfort 1998).

Epigraphic group

Inscriptions are of two kinds. The earliest are in Xixia script and have mainly a Buddhist content. The more recent are in Chinese and date to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE). The largest concentration of Xixia inscriptions is next to a large 'face' panel. There, a 'face' is flanked by a five-character inscription. Different interpretations have been given of its content, but there is agreement that it refers to Buddhism and reads something like: 'Virtuous law is the source of goodness'. Other Xixia characters nearby mention the Buddha and the number 5, which may be a reference to the Five Buddhas (Figs 16 and17). Ming inscriptions are segregated from the petroglyphs and appear within well-defined rectangular outlines. One is a government edict of the Jiaqing reign (1522–1566 CE) regarding the construction at Helankou of a military outpost and checkpoint (Xu and Wei 1993: 75, 83, 85).

At rock art sites in north and west China inscriptions in Tujue, Xixia, Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese often mingle with images. For instance, at Heishan (Gansu) and at Alxa Right Banner (Inner Mongolia), petroglyphs are interspersed with religious texts, edicts or official records of the empires (Gansu Provincial Museum 1990). These texts signal the connections among different signing activities at a single site.

Chronologies and challenges

The rock art of Helankou is difficult to date with precision. Scientific dating has not been carried out and may be difficult to implement because many petroglyphs have been retraced, lined with paint or otherwise vandalised, making it impossible to observe the original surface and the level of patination. However, the use of different tools and techniques, the variable amounts of weathering, and the changes in style and iconography indicate that the images were produced over an extended period of time.

Two main chronologies have been put forth for the rock art of the Chinese northern frontier. Concerning the rock art of the Yinshan of Inner Mongolia, Gai Shanlin (1986) has proposed three main periods: (1) *Neolithic – early Bronze Age* (8000–1000 BCE); (2) *later Bronze Age – early Iron Age* (1000–500 BCE); (3) *Historic* (500 BCE–1800 CE). These are further sub-divided in phases, though it is debatable whether such level of detail is attainable (Demattè 2004). Gai's periodisation is based on the analysis of three main elements: style, subject matter and inscriptions. The basic time frame is built with the analysis of subject matter in light of local cultural and natural history. These data provide *termini post quem* or *ante quem* for the representation of particular animals (now extinct, domesticated etc.),

Figure 17. *Xixia inscriptions (panel III-6).*

purported objects (cart, bow and arrows, saddle, stirrup etc.) or practices (horseback riding). Further refinement was obtained by comparing the petroglyphs' style against that of archaeologically excavated material, particularly metal ornaments and weapons from Bronze Age burials. Finally, Historic inscriptions set the dates for the waning of the figurative tradition.

Gai's Yinshan chronology, though related to the archaeology and history of the northern frontier, does not necessarily reflect the peculiarities of the more southerly Ningxia region and of the Helanshan in particular. Xu and Wei (1993) have therefore proposed a modified chronology for the Helanshan rock art: *phase 1, Shang – Zhou dynasties* (1600–200 BCE, but mainly 700–200 BCE); *phase 2, Qin, Han, Northern and Southern Dynasties* (200 BCE–600 CE); *phase 3, Sui, Tang, Xiaxia, Mongol Yuan* (600–1300 CE). Unlike Gai who named his phases based on the local archaeological periodisation, Xu and Wei link their three phases to Chinese dynastic history, even though the Helanshan were more often subject to nomad control than to Chinese imperial rule.

Recently, the Helanshan chronology has been subjected to some revision. Some have argued for earlier dates for the Helanshan petroglyphs, and by extension to Helankou, proposing Bronze Age, Neolithic and even Palaeolithic phases (Li Xuejun 2010). At present, there is no evidence to support Paleolithic or even Neolithic dates for Helankou. To the contrary, Wei is now convinced that most Helankou petroglyphs may be later than originally argued his 1993 publication with Xu (Wei Zhong, pers. comm. June 2010). A look at Ningxia history and archaeology can help develop a new tentative chronology.

Archaeologies, histories and ethnicities

Given its position straddling the Helanshan and its proximity to pan-Asian routes, Ningxia is a historic gateway between the steppe world and the fertile lands of China and was often affected by migratory fluxes. From peaceful population movements to outright military invasions, migrations caused the mingling of Asian nomads with previously established sedentary or semi-sedentary peoples. Over millennia, these exchanges created the northern Chinese populations. Though few archaeological excavations have taken place in the Helanshan, evidence from adjacent areas supports the picture of a fluid ethnic environment with a mosaic of distinct, but interdependent cultures (Ningxia … 2005).

Significantly, the earliest instance of Eurasian core and blade technology in China is found at Shuidonggou, an Upper Paleolithic site in the Ningxia Ordos datable to c. 29 000–24 000 BP and related to earlier sites in Mongolia and southern Siberia (Ningxia … 2003; Madsen et al. 2001). However, Helankou, which is across the Yellow River from Shuidonggou, has yielded no evidence of Palaeolithic activity. The Helanshan Neolithic is likewise ephemeral, though a few Neolithic potsherd have been discovered during informal surveys and there are claims that Helankou has Neolithic house foundations, altars and kilns (Zhang Jianguo 2010).[3] This and the presence in northern Ningxia of microliths suggests that people were few, mobile and reliant more on hunting and pastoralism rather than on agriculture (Su Xihong and Li Xiangshi 2007). The closest Neolithic sites, in nearby Gansu and southern Ningxia, were part of the Majiayao and Qijia cultures, a late Neolithic horizon of

3 Some archaeologists believe that the village remains to the south of Helankou date to the Neolithic, but others think they are a few hundred years old. The site has not been excavated. Report presented by Chen Bin at the 3rd International Helanshan Rock Art Conference and Festival, Yinchuan, Ningxia, June 2010.

the upper Yellow River valley characterised by painted pottery and millet agriculture. In Gansu, where the landscape is mountainous as in the Helanshan, buff handmade ceramic is decorated in black and red with patterns similar to those that appear in Helankou rock art. Similar evidence comes from Neolithic sites in the fertile Guyuan plain of southern Ningxia (i.e. Caiyuan), an area that differs in climate and topography from the rocky Helanshan (Ningxia … Museum … 2003; Xie 2002).

By the early Bronze Age, Ningxia was occupied by a mixture of agriculturalist and pastoralist populations, whose subsistence practices fluctuated with climate change and other upsets. The earliest historical records, the Shang dynasty (1600–1045 BCE) oracle bone inscriptions, mention that the territories to the west of the Shang domain in the middle Yellow River valley were home to the Qiang 羌. This appellation, which etymologically is related to the term *yang* 羊, 'sheep', refers to western pastoralists who were the nemesis of the Shang, but who were likely related to the founders of the subsequent Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE) (Shelach 1996).

In the late Bronze Age and Iron Age, Turco-Mongolian and Indo-European pastoralists (like the Xiongnu) dominated the Helanshan, which served as the porous border between the Chinese world and the steppes, but southern Ningxia (the Guyuan plain) was controlled by the state of Qin. When in the late 3rd century BCE the Chinese established first the Qin (221–207 BCE) then the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) empires, the Helanshan remained a frontier zone with a heavy Xiongnu presence. Though tension existed between different subsistence strategies, textual records and archaeology show that people mingled and traded (Tian and Guo 2005). At this time identities were fluid and economic backgrounds unstable, consequently agriculturalists periodically switched to pastoralism and vice versa. Some Xiongnu groups became increasingly assimilated into the Chinese world, whereas others kept to nomadic practice and found their centre further north, in Inner Mongolia, Mongolia proper or southern Siberia. Depending on their degree of mobility, pastoralists left different traces in the archaeological record. Burials and rock art sites are the most common remains recorded and provide information about their ritual places and travel routes. Less is known about their settlements, which could consist of easily overlooked encampments (Tian and Guo 2005) or of more substantial settlement misinterpreted as belonging to Chinese agricultural communities (Di Cosmo 1999).

With the disintegration of the unity of the Chinese empire in the early third century CE, Asian nomads exercised increased influence on the northern frontier, setting up semi-nomadic state entities that at times included a good part of Ningxia. The Xianbei, an ethnically mixed group originating in eastern Mongolia and Manchuria, made several incursions into northern China starting from the mid-2nd century, and eventually set up a Sino-barbarian dynasty, the Tuoba Wei (386–535) (Liu Xueyao 1994; Chen Sanping 1996). At this time, new peoples and religions began entering China via the Silk Road. As one of the western gateways to China, Ningxia was impacted by these changes and the local culture added Indian and central Asian elements to the pre-existing mix of Chinese and steppe culture. From the fourth century the area was influenced by Buddhism, as is documented by the construction of temples and grottoes, like Xumishan (Ningxia … Beijing University 1997). Foreign influence increased during the Tang dynasty (618–906 CE), when Ningxia served as buffer zone against the Türk Tujue empire (6th–8th centuries). Contemporary burials show that Ningxia was heterogeneous and that foreign peoples and religions thrived, as documented by Zoroastrian communities of Sogdian merchants based at Guyuan in southern Ningxia (Guyuan Museum 1996).

The transition towards an increasingly settled lifestyle becomes noticeable in the 11th century, when Ningxia, then contended by the Song Chinese, the Tibetan Tufan and the Liao Khitan, became the centre of an altogether new political entity, the Xixia dynasty (1038–1227 CE), with the capital at Xingqing (modern Yinchuan). Set up by the Tangut Dangxiang, an ancient nationality native to western China and formerly active in the Ordos, the Xixia dominated northwest China, developing an idiosyncratic culture and writing system (Kychanov 1993). Archaeological remains and Xixia texts show that the Tangut were actively engaged at Helankou, which was close to the imperial tombs.

Inscriptions in Mongol found in the Helanshan (not at Helankou) show that the epigraphic tradition continued also after the bloody destruction of the Xixia dynasty by the Mongols in the 13th century. With the downfall of the Tangut, Ningxia was transformed: the north, once the seat of the dynastic capital, lost political importance, whereas the south was settled by the Hui, central Asian Muslims and Arabs relocated by the Mongols. These changes contributed to the progressive drying up of the figurative Helankou petroglyph tradition, though sporadically images continued to be made by the local agro-pastoralists. With the territorial expansion of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, Ningxia became firmly embedded in the Chinese world. The Helanshan retained their heterogeneous ethnic heritage, but the appearance of imperial edicts and inscriptions in the Helanshan and at Helankou signal the growing Chinese control in the area (Li and Zhu 1993: 229–230).

Proposed chronology

Reliable scientific dates are not available for Helankou petroglyphs. Dates obtained by lichenometry in the 1990s placed some Ningxia rock art between 2000–1000 BCE (Li and Zhu 1993), but more recently

the petroglyphs of nearby Damaidi have been dated by the same method to four phases between 13000 and 1000 BCE, which appears exceedingly early (Su and Li 2007: 58–63). Here I therefore propose a four-phase periodisation grounded on the local archaeological and historical sequence. Petroglyphs are classified by stylistic and content analysis in accordance with art historical methodology (Baxandall 1988; Gombrich 1960). To link the petroglyphs to datable excavated material, I have followed the comparative archaeological method employed also by Tang and Gao (2004) for the periodisation of the petroglyphs of the Tibetan region of Qinghai. Tang and Gao (2004) placed these petroglyphs in four phases between 1500 BCE and 800 CE, which were then tested by microerosion age estimates. Though Qinghai is culturally and geographically removed from the Helanshan, this chronology is not dissimilar for the one proposed here for the Helankou. Given the thorny problem of dating petroglyphs directly, beyond the limited certainties described above, dates are tentative and my periodisation is provisional (particularly as it relates to the earliest phase).

Phase 1: pre-500 BCE. A few elementary 'faces' and 'animals' simply pecked and barely visible may be older than most other Helankou petroglyphs. Their limited number and visibility make it difficult to assign them to a specific culture, but their state of preservation as well as the exfoliation and patination of the hammered surfaces could place them in the early Bronze Age (Fig. 9).

Phase 2: 500 BCE–200 CE. Most Helankou rock art with animal subject matter ('hunting, shepherding, animal combat') may date to this phase. Subject matter and stylistic analysis link these petroglyphs to the material culture of Eurasian nomads like the Xiongnu, who were active in Mongolia and the Chinese frontier in the late Bronze and Iron Ages (Figs 5 and 6). Time and culture markers, such as the domesticated horse, bow and arrow, and the saddle without stirrups used by nomads up to the third century, seem to place these petroglyphs within this date range (Dien 1986). Similarities between the petroglyphs and portable metal objects (belt buckles, clothing ornaments, horse trappings and weapons) found in Xiongnu burials in Ningxia (Ordos and Guyuan), Inner Mongolia and beyond support these dates as well (Su 2004). Some 'faces' may also date to this phase as they are similar to the small bronze faces excavated from northern China's Bronze Age burials attributable to pastoralists, such as Xiaheishigou (Chifeng, Inner Mongolia), or likely to have been influenced by pastoralist cultures such as Liulihe (Kessler 1993: 48, Chai 1992; Beijing shi … 1995; Csorba 1996).

Phase 3: 200–800 CE. The bulk of Helankou rock art is likely to date to this phase. It probably includes most 'faces' (like the deeply hammered 'faces' and the panels of 'faces' at the entrance of the canyon) (Fig. 11); some 'animals' (such as the 'domesticated camel' introduced once the climate became dryer); and a variety of 'signs'. Based on stylistic and thematic considerations these images can be attributed to later Historic semi-settled population, who occupied the area in the middle and late first millennium, such as the Xianbei (c. 150–400 CE), Qianghu and Tujue Turks (6th–8th centuries).

Phase 4: post 800 CE. This phase consists of inscriptions and later petroglyphs attributable to settled and semi-settled later Historic populations, such as the Xixia, Tibetans, Mongols, the subjects of the Ming and Qing dynasties (Figs 16 and 17). It documents the intrusion of writing in northern zone rock art and the progressive demise of the old tradition of figurative rock art.

Interpretations

Like other northern zone sites, Helankou rock art has been interpreted based on iconographic and cultural analysis. This approach is necessary and useful, but petroglyphs are sometimes forced into rigid iconographic groups with predetermined interpretations or are left out because they do not fit the prevailing narrative.

For instance, in China rock art is sometimes seen as a wholly religious phenomenon so that faces, full bodied humans, hands, symbols and even animals tend to be interpreted as religious icons, either of the nomads or of other pre-Historic (Neolithic) communities (Li Xiangshi and Zhu Cunshi 1993). Religious interpretations, which are reliant on subjective readings of the iconography, focus on animism, sexual and fertility cults and more recently on shamanism. Supporters of animistic interpretations see evidence of worship of the sun, animals and the natural landscape as a whole (Ban 1991; He Jide 2010). Following the interpretations of the rock art of neighbouring southern Siberia, faces and circles with radiating patterns are read as solar symbols of Indo-Iranian origin absorbed by Turco-Mongolian nomads. The solar theme is occasionally connected with the deer whose antlers are thought to indicate sunrays (Fig. 15) (Chen Zhaofu 1991; Gai 1986; Martynov 1991). Scholars influenced by shamanistic theories are inclined to view faces (sometimes called masks) or skeletal figures as representations of shamans (He Jide 2010). However, there is little evidence linking Helankou petroglyphs with shamanic practice, and, in themselves, faces and skeletons do not prove that shamanism was relevant to petroglyph production (Dematte 2004). Another approach sees the petroglyphs, particularly those depicting animals and pastoralist activities ('shepherding, hunting, travelling') as straightforward representations of nomadic life (Su and Li 2007). In this context, inscriptions in Chinese or other languages can be seen as intrusions from the settled world with little connection to the petroglyph of the non-literate 'nomads'. The idea that rock art is a representation of the makers' life or culture is correct, but it also is limiting because image-making is not simple description.

Ethnographic or historic data offer alternative

interpretations. For instance, faces and animals could be images of propitious spirits or offering to them. Ethnographic records report that Mongolian hunters create faces on trees or rocks that they venerate before the hunt to propitiate the spirits of mountains and forests (E-Suritai 1993). The association of 'faces' with apparent animals and hunting scenes may give support to this hypothesis, even though it is not known whether this practice existed at Helankou. Alternatively, faces may be stylised ancestors' portraits created by clans or families for ritual purposes and decorated with images of animals that were relevant to the life of the deceased (He Jide 2010). Ancestor worship is central to the beliefs of Turco-Mongolian and Chinese populations and both have created images of their ancestors for worship (Stuart and Rawski 2001; Heissig 1970). Some burial artefacts that are culturally related and stylistically similar to the Helankou faces may support this theory. The first are the Turkic *balbaal*, anthropomorphous stones figures with faces resembling those from Helankou, which are erected near nomadic burials and may represent deceased leaders or warriors (Ermolenko 2006). More ancient, but related to the *balbaal*, are the so-called deer stones of Mongolia. These also appear to mark burials of nomad leaders, but they picture antlered deer and may refer to a 'deer goddess' (Martynov 1991; Jacobson 1993). Finally, burial masks used to cover the face of the deceased in nomadic or Sino-nomadic elite tombs of the later Historic period also resemble some Helankou faces and may be related to that tradition (Inner Mongolia … and Zhilimu … 1993).

Still, even these interpretations have limits. What is certain is that the mass of petroglyphs at Helankou indicates that the act of engraving rocks in the landscape embodied a greater scope than just representation or worship. Petroglyphs were likely used in both secular or religious activities, from recording histories and personal spiritual quests, to the telling of myths and legends, to the performance of both private and public rituals. Helankou is a complex and multilayered site created over millennia by the cumulative efforts of people who operated with different intents, but were united by their belief in the place's symbolic or practical significance. As is often the case with rock art, the landscape is the catalyst that brings people together to create a site (Dematte 2004; Arsenault 2004).

Historic and sacred landscape

The concentration of petroglyphs in distinct clusters at the opening of the canyon signals the importance of the location. This is reiterated by the (as yet undated and unexcavated) stone cairns, building foundations and kiln remains that made up a small village on the southern side of the alluvial fan (Zhang Jianguo 2010). As the name implies, Helankou was the gateway that pierced the Helanshan and led first to the depth of the mountains and then to the Asian steppes. It facilitated the inward and outward movements of people and animals and it was the source of beneficial waters and violent floods. The mouth of the canyon was therefore both dangerous and attractive and may have been perceived as a liminal place, a spiritual and material threshold where people could connect with the beyond or encounter the foreign. Even today, inhabitants are in awe of place and petroglyphs: local folk tales suggest that people are afraid of the dangerous spirits residing in the deeper recesses of the canyon and believe that the Helankou 'faces' are gatekeepers that prevent attacks of these malevolent entities on lowland villages (Helankou Museum staff, pers. comm. 2008).

Though these stories represent one more accretion of meaning on the images, their identifying the rock art as 'defence' against dangerous forces is relevant. Archaeological evidence indicates that historically the area was occupied and visited by different people and had a strategic importance. The Helanshan often marked the border between China and the nomads and defensive structures abound in the area. Approximately ten kilometres into the Helankou canyon is *Huangcheng taizi* (皇城台子, foundations of the imperial city), most likely the site of the ancient *Guzha xinggong* 古⊠行⊠, a seasonal Xixia imperial palace and military outpost. The ruins of the walled citadel, which comprise a kiln area, some burials, and a multi-room palace with stone foundations, plinths, bricks, tiles, porcelain and stone sculptures, indicate that Xixia elites used and patrolled Helankou, perhaps as a hunting ground or a strategic pass. Chinese imperial inscriptions and nearby Ming watchtowers and fortifications indicate that even later empires were invested in the defence of Helankou (Xu and Wei 1993).

The religious landscape is also relevant to the interpretation of the site and many elements link Helankou to Buddhism and other cults. The Buddhist inscriptions in Xixia are worth particular attention. Some comment on the petroglyphs' spiritual meaning and associate them with the Buddha, showing that, though devoted to Buddhism, the Xixia were in awe of rock images. Others are repetitions of the name 'Buddha' as if the inscription were a representation of the Buddha and practically an offering, like the small Buddha icons of cave and temple sites (Ningxia … Beijing University 1997). Beyond these texts, also some imagery, like the 'faces' with pointed lamas hats, may relate to Buddhism. Religious connections are also in the surrounding territory. Near Helankou there are a number of Xixia sites dedicated to Buddhism and ancestral devotion. The Buddhist complex of Baisikou is at the opening of a canyon, a few kilometres south of Helankou. It includes two pagodas, the ruins of a third and a temple, the ancient monks burial ground and a more recent construction. On the eastern Helan foothills south of Baisikou is the vast Xixia imperial cemetery that in its 50 km^2 area holds the tombs of nine emperors and over 300 elite burials (Han 1995; Steinhardt 1993; Guyuan Museum 2004; Ningxia …

2005). The proximity of these sites and the alignment of Xixia stone cairns along the way suggests that in the past the entire area may have been akin to a pilgrimage route associated with devotional and ritual activities.

The association of petroglyphs, settlements, religious and defensive structures shows that petroglyphs were part of a constructed landscape in a contested territory (Demattè 2004). Both images and constructions were cultural symbols: they may have been territorial claims by local or incoming populations, visual markers for travellers, or warnings to foreign onlookers. Their presence helped people appropriate the place that was home, held valuable material resources or had spiritual significance.

Conclusion: a palimpsest of people

Though the meanings of these petroglyphs may ultimately be inaccessible to us, a way to understand Helankou is to see the entire site as a palimpsest whose historical accretion documents the complexity of local interactions and the emergence of new identities. To this regard, a panel with over twenty 'faces' interspersed with 'animals' and Buddhist inscriptions (III-4) (Fig. 8) is illuminating. Stylistic and iconographic variation, alongside differences in patination, indicate that the various motifs shared the same stone canvas even though they probably referred to different ideologies. This interaction reiterates the historical and cultural intricacy of Ningxia, a region where ethnic and cultural identities were often changing. It also suggests that the most likely authors of the Helankou rock art were a mosaic of people active in northern Ningxia at different times: from the pre-Historic pastoralists and marginal agriculturalists of the Neolithic and Bronze Age, to the Historic nomads and subjects of the early Chinese empire, to the citizens of Sino-nomadic states, to the various nationalities of the later Chinese empire. Whether or not they emerged primarily from a pastoral background, they were heavily involved with the settled world and ended up shaping it in significant ways. Ultimately, these varied people are what made the modern Chinese.

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