Rock Paintings in Yunnan, China
Some New Light on the old Shan Kingdom

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The southwestern part of Yunnan Province of China, bordered by Laos and Burma, is a tropical and mountainous region. Many ethnic groups live there. It is one of the least explored parts of the world, and very little was known about it until recently. Since 1960, I have done fieldwork on the archaeology and ethnohistory of this region. This prolonged study has resulted in the discovery of rock paintings (Wang Ningsheng 1982), among other things. Through these paintings, we can learn something about the ancient history of this region.

Rock paintings are distributed in the northern part of Cangyuan County (沧源县) (E. Long. 98°52'-99°42', N. Lat. 23°3'-23°30'). In my three surveys there (June through February 1965; July 1978; February 1982), ten rock painting sites were located and recorded (Fig. 1b; Lin Sheng 1966, 1983).

Techniques

All of the paintings were done in the open on the surfaces of vertical cliffs. Up to now, no paintings inside caves have been discovered there. The paintings, without exception, were done in red pigment. A spectrum analysis suggests that hematite or similar iron-oxide ores were used by the rock painters who could obtain it nearby. Old pits of hematite ore were dis-covered at two sites (Sites 5 and 10). Ethnographic data suggests that the binder for mixing the pigment was probably ox blood. For example, in the 1950s, the Wa (佤)—a major ethnic group in Cangyuan—still used this substance as a binding medium in the paint for ceremonial drawings on their headmen's "large houses."

While the finger seems to have been the main painting implement, a kind of brush was also used to create the larger drawings. In Site 5, we can discern traces of brush painting. The most distinguishing features of technique of the Cangyuan rock paintings are as follows:

1) The drawings are smaller than those in other rock paintings in the neighboring region of Ning-ming County, Guangxi (Guangxi Minzu Diaocha Zu 1963). For example, the height of human figures generally ranges from 5
to 30 centimeters. The largest is only 50 centimeters or so. Dozens of drawings may be crowded into a space of about 1 meter square.

2) Compared with rock paintings in the neighboring regions, Ningxia (Xixia), County, Guangxi, and Gong County (Xizang, Sichuan; Guizhou; and Yunnan) (Fig. 7), the Cangyuan drawings are not high off the ground. The highest is only 6 or 7 meters from the ground. By "the ground," I mean the narrow standing space that exists in front of every painted cliff.

3) Rock painters did not care about rendering details. For example, none of the animals or human figures have ears. The drawings are like silhouettes.

4) Rock painters did not express correct proportions. Sometimes, however, there is intentional distortion in order to exaggerate and stress the importance of certain parts of the body, for example, the elephant's trunk, the buffalo's horns, the hunter's arm which holds a crossbow.

5) Rock painters often used symbols in their painting. For example, it is probable that animals or human figures were painted upside down or lying on the ground to express their death (Figs. 9, 14), or that certain human figures were painted much larger than others to express their important position or high rank.

In short, the technique of the rock painters of Cangyuan seems to be simple and primitive, but their works are impressive. Many of the expressive methods they used in their paintings are distinctive and skillful. Anyone who sees these rock paintings is deeply moved by their vitality.

Subject Matter and Interpretation

About 800 drawings are scattered on the cliffs at ten sites. The subject matter may be classified into the following categories.

1) Hunting. There are hunters with crossbows shooting leopards or tigers (Fig. 4); a hunter spearing deer; hunters running after elephants (Fig. 2); and a hunter chewing some prey or being surprised by a prey like a wild boar (Fig. 5).

2) Herding: A man leads a herd of yellow cattle or buffalo (Fig. 14).

3) Supernatural figures: An archer standing in the center of a dancing sun (Fig. 16); a man whose lower body is a fish's tail (Fig. 17). Most of these figures probably have a mythological origin.

4) Houses: Pile dwellings (Fig. 6) and tree huts (Fig. 7).

5) Natural World: Trees (Fig. 3), mountains, caves.

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3) Warfare: Some warriors hold weapons while others lie on their sides to indicate their death or defeat (Fig. 9).

4) Village Life: A circle represents the border of a village and encloses many pile dwellings with people pounding grain nearby. Several lines connected to the outside of the circle represent paths or roads. Figures of people and animals are shown walking on roads towards the village. Some people are carrying weapons, while others are driving pigs and oxen. These domestic animals seem to have been captured from other villages (Fig. 6).

5) Pouring: Pairs of people, each with a pail, pour grain in a common mortar (Fig. 18).

6) Dancing: In many sites, dancers hold shields and weapons to imitate fighting or hunting (Figs. 11, 15). In Site 7, five dancers are waving their arms and standing in a circle to perform a dance (Fig. 12).

7) Acrobatics: Among the dancers, we find a few men performing juggling and balancing acts, such as a man standing on the shoulders of another, or balancing a long pole on his head (Figs. 14, 15). Such subject matter is rare in rock paintings in other parts of the world.
with big bellies or large breasts would ensure success in future hunts; that a scene of fighting would ensure victory in battle; that a scene of herding or even drawings of individual domestic animals would ensure fertility of the herd; and that drawings of female figures

Most of the drawings and scenes probably have religious significance. I agree with those scholars who suggest that ancient people believed that to paint a scene of hunting, or even the figures of individual prey, would ensure success in future hunts; that a scene of fighting would ensure victory in battle; that a scene of herding or even drawings of individual domestic animals would ensure fertility of the herd; and that drawings of female figures

**Dating**

Archaeologists have numerous new methods for determining the date of excavated artifacts, but nothing for rock art. They can date organic artifacts by carbon 14 analysis, pottery by thermoluminescence, timber by dendrochronology, and so on. But some of these techniques can be applied to date the Agar in North Africa, North Asia, and many other places in the world.

Perhaps many of the dances and acrobatics shown in rock paintings are also relevant to certain ceremonies or rituals. Similarly, the images of supernatural beings might have been objects of worship. Furthermore, in many societies possessed grains are associated with various ceremonies, feasts, and rituals. Since scenes of daily activities were probably not frequently depicted in the rock paintings, these scenes of possessing grains might have also represented ceremonial scenes rather than daily activities. A few of the drawings and scenes, however, may still be considered secular. For example, the village scene, mentioned above, was probably a pictorial record of a successful raid on another village.

**Who Painted the Paintings?**

Let us look at more closely the rock paintings. According to Chinese literature, during the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., the kings of the Shan kingdom (Cayunga) were located within the territory of the ancient kingdom called "illusionists" to the Han court at Luoyang in A.D. 120 to present both magic and acrobatics, including juggling. This combination of magic and acrobatics is an ancient tradition, and in China it continues to the present day.

Although there are no more records referring to the "illusionists" of the Shan kingdom, the phrase "Dulu dancing" (Du lu tong Comments) appears in the literature of the Han dynasty (Zhuang Heng, 1st century A.D.) and later. This is an expression referring to acrobatics (Zhao Bangyan 1930). The traditional interpretation of this phrase is that the Dulu were famous for their balancing acts, especially climbing a long pole and doing "Dulu" a term referring to a specific place or a tribe. Although the literal meaning of "Dulu" is problematic, it is certain that the location of Dulu was in the region of present-day eastern Burma (Trang Thienghwa 1936), or in near the Shan kingdom. Therefore, it is not a certain balancing act, as is illustrated in the Cayunga rock paintings.

To briefly summarize the above clues for dating: First, certain motifs and subjects found on the Cayunga rock paintings are similar to those on bronze figures of the Han and earlier periods. Second, some of the Cayunga drawings of acrobatics may be pictorial representations of Shan "illusionists" and of "Dulu" meaning both of which existed during the Han period according to historical records.

Based on the above clues, I suggest that the rock paintings of Cayunga already existed around the begining of the Christian era, about 2000 years ago. Of course, like other rock paintings in the world, the Shan tradition lasted a long time and rock painters continued to produce after the Han period.

**3) Form of Leadership:** Kings ruled the Shan kingdom; however, only the name of one has come down to us—Yong King (Yong Hsun). Under the king were many "small chieftains" with gifts and seals that were regularly used as symbols of title granted by the court. According to Chinese policy, the material used to make the seal and the color of the ribbons responded to differences in rank. At this time, the king was given a golden seal. When the Yong Hsun sent envoys to pay tribute at Luoyang, it is recorded that the Emperor presented the king and his small chieftains with gifts and seals that were regularly used as symbols of title granted by the court. According to Chinese policy, the material used to make the seal and the color of the ribbons responded to differences in rank. At this time, the king was given a golden seal with a purple
The Shan kingdom had paid tribute to the Eastern Han Emperor at least three times, in A.D. 97, 139 and 143. During the tribute mission of A.D. 120, a troop of "illusionists" were brought to the Han court to entertain the Emperor. They performed magic, such as fire-eating, dismembering themselves and exchanging the heads of horses and men, as well as acrobatics such as juggling. The Emperor thoroughly enjoyed these performances and even dismissed an officer who objected to them.

Records also inform us that there was a road between Shan kingdom and Bi Nau (W. Xa), whose location is within present-day Vietnam. In addition, it is interesting to note that the "illusionists" declared themselves to be from Daiqin (大秦). Although Daiqin has always been thought to be the East Roman Empire, there is also a likelihood that it referred to Dholinapatha in ancient India (Peng Cheng Zhan, 1935). Therefore it is evident that communication between the Shan and many neighboring regions existed at that time.

"... many customs shown in the rock paintings are still practiced by non-Han peoples in Yunnan."

There is frequent reference in this article to Daiqin-speaking peoples. That belongs to the Austro-Thai language group. The Daiqin-speaking people can also be subdivided into various ethnic groups such as the Dai people in southern Yunnan, the Shans in northeastern Burma, and the Thais of Thailand. Also found in the Austro-Thai group are the Yao and Miao languages spoken by the Yao and Miao who are represented in Yunnan. Mon-Khmer is one of three subgroups within the Austro-Asiatic language category and is the only subgroup represented in China today. Mon-Khmer speakers are relatively numerous in Yunnan; the Wa are one of only three ethnic groups that speak this language.
as a musical instrument during ceremonies. All of these were customs that still existed in Wai daily life up to the 1960s. Moreover, the paintings of the Wai people, including those on their “large homes,” are similar to the rock paintings both in style and in motif (Fig. 10). The heritage of the ancient ethnic group who created the Canyangan rock paintings appears to have been passed on to the Wai people. Therefore, I would like to suggest that the rock painters of Canyangan belonged to an ancient ethnic group within the Shan kingdom who were the ancestors of the Wai.

Some scholars (Luo Xianglin 1955) equate the population of the ancient Shan kingdom with the present-day Thai. But in my opinion, the ancient Mon-Khmer-speaking group formed a large part of the population of this kingdom.

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