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Site Selection of Rock Paintings Reflects Cultural Similarities in Early Human Beliefs in Southwest China

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Abstract

Rock paintings, as an ancient and mysterious art form, truly document the changes and evolution of mankind throughout history. These paintings not only showcase human creativity but also influence the intricate relationships between different ethnic groups, offering a unique perspective on the gradual development of human civilization. In southwestern China, rock paintings are plentiful and diverse, and the selection of locations for these artistic expressions is particularly intriguing. Despite the varying living environments and cultural backgrounds of the inhabitants in each region, there is a commonality in the choice of locations. The locations were meticulously chosen, considering both natural conditions and the religious beliefs of the local communities. This thoughtful selection reflects the profound understanding of our ancestors in southwestern China regarding the intricate relationship between humans and nature. It underscores their deep reverence for nature and their belief in the symbiotic relationship between people and their environment. Furthermore, this understanding served as a fundamental motivation for their survival strategies and development, highlighting that rock art is not just a form of artistic expression but also a representation of culture and history.

Keywords

Rock painting in southwest China; Rock painting culture; Cultural evolution

1. Introduction

The rock paintings of Southwest China form a complete cultural complex, embodying the civilization and culture of the ancestors of the Southwest region. While civilization can be spread and accepted outward, culture must be generated by the accumulation of spirit within the group (Qian, 2018). Thus, it is believed that there are reasons for the creation and development of rock paintings in Southwest China, which are molded by the national cultural community.

Southwest rock paintings have the basic characteristics of diversified occurrence and one-dimensional integration. In terms of regional geography, the complex terrain and inconvenient transportation in the southwest region have resulted in the endogenization of the culture of ethnic groups and the creation of a point-centered cultural source; in terms of the material base, the region is rich in plant and animal resources, which makes it suitable for collecting and hunting, thus reducing the dependence on the outside world for material resources and forming a relatively stable cultural form. Rock paintings reflect people's cognition of human-earth relationship and crowd relationship in the region, and they flow in the long river of history with cultural information and genetic code wrapped in the spirit of the abstract field, so that multi-cultural sources in the Southwest region are blended to form an ethnic cultural circle. The article takes rock paintings' sites as the object of study and tries to illustrate the mode of evolution of the Southwest rock paintings in the lineage of one lineage and the diversified symbiosis.

2. Spiritual Characteristics of Rock Painting Sites

Chinese rock paintings are divided into three systems: northern rock paintings, southwestern rock paintings, and southeastern rock paintings, according to their geographic location, production techniques, styles, and subject matter (Xu, 2022). Southwest rock painting system is mainly distributed in Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Sichuan (Wang, Zou, 2021), the time period is mostly from the Stone Age to the Spring and Autumn Period, with obvious endogenous cultural sources of rock paintings are: Guangxi Zuojiang Huashan rock paintings, Yunnan Cangyuan rock paintings, Sichuan Gongxian Bo hanging coffin rock paintings and Guizhou Kaiyang County, such as Painted Horse Cliff rock paintings, etc., Southwest rock paintings of the image performance to the religious activities, the technique of the red color painting.

Under different climatic and geomorphological conditions, the rock paintings in Southwest China show a high degree of consistency in the selection of sites, which reflect the living customs, ritual scenes, and spiritual beliefs of the Southwest China region. Site selection of rock paintings is a rational choice to construct sacred space, and this inspirational thinking of the choice of the main consideration of the three elements, the human mountain field, the painting of the mountain to create momentum, and the human painting space.

2.1 Human Mountain Field

First, the human mountain field reflects the endogenous nature of the external environment. "While primitive human beings always fantasize that they can find the opportunity for man and God to meet, the forefathers of that time had to choose the right place suitable for communication between man and God" (Han, Chen, & Xing, 2017). Primitive rock paintings use high mountain cliffs and grottoes and caves as carriers, embodying man's intercommunicative longing for God. Zhang Zuobang suggests that "the deep-rooted mountain worship is an inevitable manifestation of the racial unconscious of the Southwestern ethnic minorities" (Zhang, 2008). According to Zhang Jiaxin, "In the cognition of the ancestors, "rock" and "mountain" are alive in themselves, and the scenes around the rock paintings, the process of making the rock paintings, and the rituals are regarded as a way of communicating with the rocks or with the gods through the rocks way" (Zhang, 2019). Thus, "the use of mountains as a medium for communicating with heaven and earth is the root cause of rock paintings spreading all over the world" (Han, Chen, & Xing, 2017). As far as Southwest China is concerned, this commonality is reflected in the Huashan rock paintings on Broken Rock Mountain along the Mingjiang River in Ningming County, Guangxi; the Cangyuan rock paintings on Bancao Dashan and Nuoliangshan Valley at an altitude of 2,000 meters within the Wa Autonomous Prefecture in Lincang City, Yunnan Province; the Wushan Rock Painting Group of Wushan Mountain on the Wushan Rock Cliffs of Gukou Town, Longli County, Guizhou Province; and the mountains of Mathangba and Sumawan in the Yibin area of Sichuan Province. Primitive people used the cliffs of high mountains as media to strengthen the divine status of "mountains" through rock painting symbols and made "paintings" of "mountains" to form a whole of life and a field. The "rock painting field" is a visual expression of subjective thinking and emotional art transformed into rational inspiration, realizing the vastness of life of primitive human beings.

2.2 Painting Mountain to Create Momentum

Secondly, the painting of mountains reflects the endogenous cultural characteristics. Rock paintings and mountains are interdependent; "mountains" are sacred because of the existence of "paintings", and "paintings" exist forever because of the shelter of "mountains". The "Painted Mountain" gives the physical space a "potential" pattern with the placement of the shady slopes. In the process of transforming a purely natural object into a controllable spiritual object, the ancients, when choosing a site for their "paintings", carefully and subtly created a potential for the mountain, sheltered the rock paintings, and sought a heavenly pillar for the people. Rock paintings of celestial beings were hidden under rock mansions or between caves, so the upper part of the cliff wall protruded to form 'rock mansions' that could shelter from the sun and the rain. Therefore, "rock painting is a product in a specific natural and humanistic environment. The place where rock paintings are produced is the place where ancient peoples lived and lived. Rock painting place must have three environmental conditions: one is rich in water and grass, suitable for human hunting and grazing; two is easy to make rock paintings of the mountain or continuous rock; three is a relatively open terrain, suitable for human space, easy to rock paintings in a relatively dense place to engage in rituals or witchcraft activities (Wang, 2012). As a result, the abundance of land and water, the succession of rocks, and the livability of the terrain are the coexisting bases for the placing and siting of rock paintings in Southwest China, reflecting the primitive rationality of mankind's wish to grasp nature.

2.3 Human Painting Space

Thirdly, the space of human paintings is an endogenous source of religious beliefs. The origin of rock paintings is deeply rooted in sorcery, which not only refers to the creation of images, but also the profound expression and construction of sacred collective spiritual places. In the eyes of the ancients, rocks, and mountains is the place where life is nurtured and the place where life returns to, therefore, in the witchcraft rituals of primitive society, rocks, and caves have become the sacred places where witchcraft imagery is nurtured. In primitive society, myth and sorcery are intertwined, and the founding fathers themselves are also natural sorcerers, whose myths are woven around the behavioral activities of sorcerers and gods, which are in essence the support of primitive sorcery ritual activities (Wang, 2021). The legend of Yu's birth from a stone, as recorded in The Century of the Emperors, reflects the reproductive significance of stones in the minds of ancient people. As George H. Odell has pointed out in his study of stone tools, stone products with ritual functions were probably used throughout prehistory (Zhang, 2019). The ancient concept of collective worship of procreation and witchcraft. As the basic way of human life, the construction of "space" realizes the unity of heaven, earth, God, and man, transforming the physical world into a spiritual place for human beings (Heidegger, Chen, & Wang, 2006), creating a space that transcends the boundaries of nature and forms a unique "isomorphism" and "reciprocal evidence" with the structure of human perception. The space created crosses the natural boundaries, forming unique "isomorphism" and "mutual evidence" with the structure of human perception (Merleau-Ponty & Jiang, 2006), which gives and strengthens the spiritual connotation it conveys. Therefore, the location of rock paintings not only reflects the ancestors' exploration of multi-dimensional spiritual space, but also fits the traditional philosophical concept of "unity of heaven and mankind", reflecting the wisdom of harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature.

3. Realistic Function of Petroglyph Site Selection

3.1 Display Function

Rock paintings play a significant role in displaying in the southwest region, creating a psychological identity for the sky by giving people a chance to view them. Rock paintings in Southwest China are located around the areas where people live and produce, and the open cliffs and riverbanks become natural display windows. While viewing the rock paintings, the forefathers, through the height of the natural mountains and rivers, made the viewers look up to the rock paintings, which strengthened the sense of reverence, which came from the natural blessing, and the forefathers believed that this was the power of the sky. Scholar Gai Shanlin believes that rock paintings painted in front of the cliffs are mostly open space (such as rock paintings in the Yinshan area), or near the water (such as rock paintings on Mount Huashan), the choice of this geographic location is related to the religious rituals of the time (Zhang, 2019). The open field of view enables a better visual presentation of the rock paintings and facilitates the rendering of the ambiance of the environment and the display of the ritual process. Guangxi Zuojiang Huashan rock paintings are mostly concentrated on the cliffs on both sides of the Zuojiang River and its tributary Ningming River, and the rock paintings are located 50 to 120 meters away from the river surface, which is a high distance and requires looking up from the river surface (Han, 2016), and the opposite side of the river bank of the Huashan rock paintings is where the Luo and Yue ethnic groups live and live, which creates a unique viewpoint of physical sense for people to view and spiritual sense for the sky to view and then strengthens the sacredness of the rock paintings, reflecting the special significance of the location. special significance of the site.

3.2 Protective Role

The role of protection highlights the lofty significance of rock paintings carried by the ancestors, who aspired to establish a mutual shelter and communication with "heaven" through rock paintings. The ancestors thought carefully before painting the rock paintings and carefully selected the geographic locations favorable for the long-term preservation of the rock paintings. On the one hand, they subjectively hoped to protect the rock paintings, and on the other hand, they also prayed that the rock paintings could protect themselves and their descendants and that they could carry the function of communicating with heaven and earth and with man and god. This concept unites the ancestors' reverence and respect for the universe, nature, society, and life, showing their deep cultural beliefs and unique aesthetic pursuits.

People protect rock paintings. The dangerous terrain of Southwest China constitutes a natural barrier, with torrent

corners, high mountain cliffs, and canyon caves. The choice of these special locations reduces the chances of rock paintings being destroyed by human beings, and at the same time, there are often mysterious legends and stories near the rock paintings, which emphasize the divinity of the rock paintings to a certain degree, so that unrelated people stay away from them in order to play a role in protecting them. Guizhou's rock painting site is generally in the rock face or grotto cave to the sun, shelter from the rain, towards the east or southeast of the direction of the face is more open, the rock face is tall and flat, not far from the place where there is water (Sun, 2020); Guangxi's cap Heshan rock paintings are in the rock face in front of the inclination, preservation is more intact, the use of the angle of the mountain to form a shelter from the sun and the rain of the rock building to protect the area, reflecting the wisdom of the ancients; Yunnan Mashubo rock painting point is located in the Dawang Cliffs, rock paintings have undergone Yunnan Ma Su Po rock painting site is located in Dawang Cliff, rock paintings after thousands of years of wind and rain, the main figure of the image and pattern is still clear, also depends on the site selection of the appropriate. Under the rock building, it is sheltered from the wind and ventilated, not subject to direct sunlight but with side lighting, which is conducive to ventilation, dehumidification, and shelter from rain (Han, Chen, & Xing, 2017). This shows that the ancients in the choice of site selection requirements were stringent, painted due to the mountain for, choose the location of rock painting is conducive to the long-term preservation of the painting.

Rock paintings also protect people. The ancestors paid a huge price and energy in the complex and dangerous environment for the painting of rock paintings, their pursuit of artistic value has long been not limited to aesthetic viewing, but also hope that the rock paintings can protect the ancestors themselves. In the rock paintings of Huashan in Zuojiang River, Guangxi, the rock paintings are mostly distributed in the corner area of the river where the current is rapid, and it is also the place where the dark current surges and accidents occur, and the descendants of the clan who pass by in the boat are also seeking the simple shelter from the images under the reflection of the huge paintings, and the earth is under the rock paintings, and it seems to be the heavenly realm on top of the rock paintings. The rock paintings of Huashan in the Zuojiang River build a natural scene full of humanity through the images of the cliffs, the terrace on the opposite bank, and the flowing river.

3.3 Collective Spiritual Beliefs

Ancient people carried the collective memory of the tribe, valuable experience, and unlimited fantasies engraved on the rock wall, but they were building an intellectual dimension across space and time, which not only carries the weight of history but also opens up the infinite boundaries of imagination. Under the background of a strong belief in witchcraft, the place where the rock paintings are located has gradually evolved into the core site of rituals and celebrations, a process that not only highlights the ancestors' initial attempts to construct a spiritual realm but is also a visual manifestation of their exploration of the worldview. Take the rock paintings of Cangyuan in Yunnan Province as an example, these ancient images are regarded as a bridge between reality and fantasy, and the beliefs of the people in the vicinity of the rock paintings remain rock-solid to this day, viewing the mountains and cliffs as a sacred passageway that connects the world with the heavens and the earth. In some cases, the resting place of the deceased was set up on top of the rock paintings in the hope that the spirits would lead them to the other side of the world, a custom that deeply reflects the ancestors' understanding of the cycle of life and death and the order of the universe (Deng, 2001).

The ancestors used religious concepts as the key to understanding the world, and their cognitive system was closely linked to their practical activities, which together shaped their unique way of grasping the world. In the Dahong Rock paintings of Zhenfeng, Guizhou, the ancestors carefully chose the tops of mountains and deep caves as the places for their creations, with the intention of drawing closer to heaven and earth and praying for direct communication with the power of the universe. The rock paintings of Olo Village in Sichuan contain mica minerals, and the bright light of the rocks under the sunlight not only constitutes a splendid natural spectacle but also inadvertently creates a sacred space that is beyond the mundane (Y. S. Zhang, F. C. Zhang, & X. X. Zhang, 2019). This phenomenon profoundly reveals how the water flow, air flow, acoustic and optical effects, and topographical features in the natural field are intertwined with the humanistic consciousness, together shaping a cultural sanctuary with deep spatial and temporal meanings.

4. Conclusion

Rock paintings, as an ancient and simple art form, are like historical mirrors, mapping the evolutionary trajectory and changes of human beings in the vast space and time. In the basic step of site selection for rock paintings, most of the

rock paintings in the Southwest region were painted in high mountains, rivers, and caves, reflecting the commonality of cultural origins. In the endogenous development of the cultures of various ethnic groups, the site selection factor covers the need for the construction of the belief system. In the southwest region, the early ancestors of various ethnic groups crossed the boundaries of time and space to reach a profound consensus. They skillfully utilized the natural geological features of various places and carefully constructed a spiritual world in which heaven, earth, and human beings were in harmony, a world that not only embodied the concept of harmonious symbiosis between human beings and nature but also became the source of primitive wisdom and the support for the foundation of reality for the Chinese philosophical way of thinking. As an important heritage for studying and exploring the process of development and integration of national cultures, rock paintings not only provide a window into the spiritual world of the ancients but also become an important resource for aesthetic viewing and regional development.

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