

The Rock Art Symbols and Spiritual Beliefs of the Lisu Indigenous People in the Lijiang Region of China

Zhang Juan and Pipu Boosabok

Silpakorn University, Thailand

Corresponding Author, Email: zhangjuanqq552023@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper conducts an analysis of rock painting symbols and culture in the Lisu ethnic area of Lijiang, China, with the aim of establishing a theoretical framework for ancient Lisu cosmology and spiritual beliefs. The objective is to promote the inheritance and dissemination of traditional Lisu ethnic culture at a theoretical level. Employing qualitative research methods, the study conducts field surveys, expert interviews, and research on visual culture in art. It investigates the beliefs of young Lisu people and local villagers in Yongsheng, Huaping, Yulong, Ninglang, and other areas, and collects samples from local rock painting sites. The analysis reveals that rock painting symbols in the Lisu area transcend mere artistic expression and have become crucial elements of the ethnic group's religious and cultural beliefs. They form a depiction structure encompassing animals, plants, abstract icons, and early human life. Further analysis of ethnic belief culture corroborates the involvement of these depictions in numerous significant ritual cultures of the Lisu ethnic group. Consequently, rock painting symbols in the Lijiang Lisu area serve as prototypes of ethnic beliefs and expressions of spirituality.

The research results indicate that these rock painting elements hold profound significance in Lisu mythology, religious customs, and social life. They are widely present in contemporary social norms and have become an important part of the spiritual practices of contemporary Lisu ethnic groups, gradually evolving into the cultural essence of the Lisu people. This study reveals the significance of these symbols in Lisu mythology and religious narratives and provides a new perspective on the value and significance of local art in the context of modern society and culture.

Keywords: The Rock Art Symbols; Spiritual Beliefs; The Lisu Indigenous People; The Lijiang Region of China

Introduction

The Lisu ethnic group is a unique minority in Yunnan Province, residing for generations in the confluence area of the Nu River, LanCang River, and JinSha River. Their cultural identity intertwines deeply with the remnants of ancient civilizations in the region. Specifically, along the JinSha River in LiJiang, experts and scholars have discovered a multitude of spiritual drawings left by ancient humans—rock art (Baojiang & HePing Zheng, 1999: 82-87.; Li Gang, 2007: 64-70).

Notably, since 1991, the area in Yulong County alone has revealed rock art covering an area of 465.66 square meters (as of 2004). These rock art sites are mostly situated on the cliffs in the Yulong County region, spanning from Tiger Leaping Gorge to HongMenkou along the JinSha River. Additionally, multiple rock art sites have been found in Lisu settlements, including Dongshaba in Ninglang County, DongLian Village in YuLong County, Hedong Village in YongSheng County, DingWang Village in HuaPing County, among others. Together, these sites contribute to the natural civilization of rock art along the JinSha River (Taçon et al., 2010: 67-86.).

Investigations in Lisu inhabited areas such as YongSheng, HuaPing, YuLong, and NinLlang reveal that rock art is often located on isolated rocks along riverbanks or in the river landscape. These rock art manifestations primarily take two forms: painting and carving, utilizing techniques like painting, line engraving, and positive engraving on the top, facade, and independent smooth rocks inside and outside caves. The thematic range of these rock art pieces extends beyond wildlife, encompassing depictions of human existence, including scenes of early human social activities such as rituals and hunting, serving as spiritual symbols of ancient human expression.

The distinctive feature of these rock art works is the variety of unique figures, including not only humans and animals but also humanoid and spirit patterns. Noteworthy are the representations of "cross-temporal relationships" between the celestial, terrestrial, and human realms, as well as the "graphic expressions" of animals and plants. The style and tones of these works exhibit a realistic approach, infusing the rock art with a primitive and simple sense of natural worship. Thus, these rock art pieces serve as visual "documents," encapsulating the images of early human civilization in the Lijiang region.

The rock art in these regions employs basic techniques combining lines or surfaces, characterized by simple forms and diverse perspectives. The compositions of these rock art pieces are based on the direction of the rock layers, often presenting distinct upper, middle, and lower sections, expressing either surrounded central motifs or overlapping and interwoven boundaries. The facades or tops of these rock art pieces are naturally formed, and no traces of carving into surfaces have been discovered. Interestingly, the drawing locations vary, with unclear positions and different distances from the ground, extending from the top of rocks to the ground. Many locations with graphical representations are marked with multiple carved lines or indentations.

Stone carvings primarily use basic line engraving techniques, such as etching patterns of figures and animals on smooth and flat rocks along the riverbanks. Some carvings are specifically designed to emphasize human activities, with multiple traces of drawings found at many human figure rock art sites. Carved rock art, using the foundational technique of engraved lines, depicts figures of humans and animals on smooth elliptical rocks along

the river, highlighting human activities through simple outlines, emphasizing feature depiction, and serving as symbolic expressions of early human remains.

In the following sections, taking examples from rock art sites such as Dongshan rock art in Yongsheng and Tongda stone carvings in Huaping, we will analyze the common visual cultural symbols representing primitive spiritual beliefs inherent in Lisu traditional culture and rock art patterns.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and categorize key visual symbols depicted in the rock art of the indigenous Lisu people in the Lijiang region of China, including representations of animals, plants, abstract patterns, and human figures.

2. To explore the expressions embedded within these visual symbols and understand their significance in the cultural context of Lisu spiritual beliefs. Examine how the primitive visual symbols in Lisu rock art reflect and express various aspects of Lisu cultural heritage, including spiritual beliefs, rituals, and societal structures.

Literature Review

Since the late 1980s, rock paintings along the Jinsha River have been discovered. Over the past decade, experts and scholars from Diqing, Lijiang, and abroad have conducted more than ten surveys of the rock paintings along the Jinsha River, gradually uncovering numerous ancient rock painting sites while gathering substantial new clues about these paintings. The rock paintings in Lijiang City, including the counties of Gucheng, Yulong, Ninglang, Yongsheng, and Huaping, are mainly concentrated along the banks of the Jinsha River and its tributaries. This area is sparsely populated, with sparse vegetation and exposed rocks, inhabited only by a few bamboo, shrubs, and grasses, and wild animals such as ibexes, roe deer, deer, monkeys, and wild boars roam the valleys. Locals raise goats, yaks, yaks, mules, and horses, and crops mainly include rice, corn, wheat, barley, and buckwheat, with some areas still retaining primitive pastoral traditions. Men enjoy hunting, and most households are equipped with hunting tools such as rifles, crossbows, hunting nets, and hunting dogs. Hunting is also a traditional economic activity, with hunting gods being worshiped as the primary source of income (Li, 2007: 64-70+162+161; Wu, 2015: 69-74). Archaeologists have discovered Neolithic relics since the 1950s in Dadao Hot Spring Village in Yulong County and Pijiang Village in Ninglang County, unearthing a number of lithified fossils, pottery fossils, bone fossils, and mammal fossils. Stone tools such as axes, knives, needles, spinning wheels, and stone balls, as well as pottery with rope patterns, leaf patterns, water ripple patterns, and grid patterns, have been found. The "active period of the Neolithic culture is approximately around 3000 to 4000 years ago..." (Zhang, 2015: 34-38.).

Currently, research on the rock paintings along the Jinsha River in Lijiang has mainly focused on narrative structures, visual functions, and cultural values. Ancient rock paintings were first discovered in Zhongdian County along the Jinsha River in the late 1980s to 1989 (He & Limin, 1996: 26-32). For instance, He Gengyuan has focused on the artistic and ecological analysis of the Jinsha River rock paintings (He Gengyuan, 2016: 9- 13), discussing their discovery, artistic features, and thematic content, emphasizing the urgency of protecting these ancient artworks. He Wenqin further proposed protection strategies against environmental and

human damage, providing profound insights into the cultural and ecological history of the region and revealing the ancient

civilization that once flourished along the banks of the Jinsha River (He Wenqin, 2014). The ancient geographical environment and cultural remains in the Jinsha River Basin are the foundation of the Lisu ancestors' culture, shaping the ancient belief culture of rock art in the Lijiang Lisu area.

Research Methods

1. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the rock art symbols and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous Lisu people in the Lijiang region of China. The qualitative aspect emphasizes ethnographic fieldwork involving participant observation and semi-structured interviews with local Lisu community members, spiritual leaders, and cultural experts. The aim is to understand the contextual significance of rock art symbols and their importance in Lisu spiritual and daily life. Additionally, the study involves collecting and analyzing rock art symbols to identify patterns relevant to specific spiritual beliefs and rituals. Systematic classification, analysis, and interpretation of visual symbols in rock art are conducted to comprehend their forms, styles, and symbolic meanings.

2. Data Sources

The primary data sources for this study include on-site observations of rock art sites, interviews with Lisu community members, and archival materials. Secondary data sources include academic literature on Lisu culture, spiritual beliefs, and rock art studies. Data related to restricted sites and archival materials are obtained through collaboration with local government and cultural departments.

3. Population Scope

The target population for this study consists of the Lisu people residing in the Lijiang region, particularly those closely associated with rock art sites. Participants selected for their in-depth understanding of Lisu spirituality, rock art, and cultural traditions include elders, spiritual leaders, and cultural practitioners. Sample size will be determined based on the saturation point of qualitative data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon.

4. Data Collection

Data collection is conducted in two phases. The first phase involves ethnographic fieldwork, during which researchers engage in participant observation and semi-structured interviews at different rock art sites and Lisu communities. The second phase includes the use of photography, sketching, and descriptive notes to document rock art symbols. Interviews are recorded, transcribed, and translated as necessary, adhering to ethical guidelines to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity.

5. Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis will employ thematic analysis to identify common themes, symbols, and narratives related to Lisu spiritual beliefs and practices. This analysis will involve contrasting patterns and ritual content in rock art symbols. The findings and integration of qualitative analysis will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the significance of rock art in Lisu spiritual culture, providing an effective approach for broader research on indigenous spiritual practices and artistic forms. Through visual culture analysis,

this study not only delves into the deeper cultural aspects of rock art symbols but also further supports insights into Lisu cultural belief trends.

Research framework

Through interdisciplinary research methods in culture and art, this study has constructed a belief framework for rock art within the cultural heritage of the Lisu people (Fig 1). Firstly, academic literature related to rock art in the Jinsha River area was analyzed to understand the current research status and issues regarding Lisu culture, rock art, and religious beliefs. Secondly, fieldwork was conducted, including visits to rock art sites and in-depth interviews with local community members, to gather oral history and cultural heritage information related to rock art. Additionally, based on the collection, extraction, and identification of the most common symbol types in the rock art, a structure of ancient spiritual beliefs among the Lisu people was established.

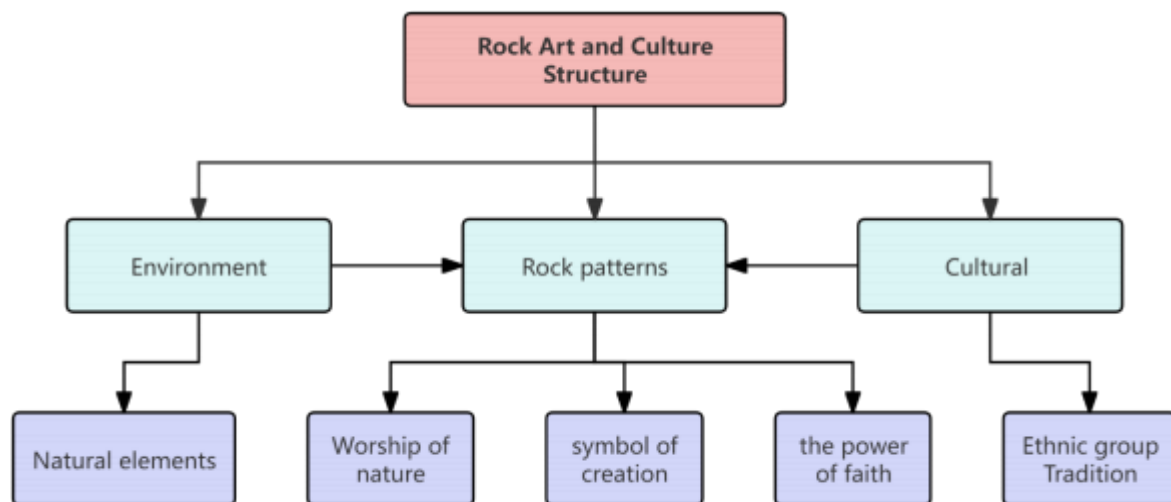


Fig 1: Frame diagram of rock art analysis ; Source: Drawn by author, 2024

Research Results

1. The process of analyzing petroglyph symbols and culture

1.1 Dongshan Village, Yongsheng County - BieLuo Rock Art

The rock art site in Yongsheng County is located in the BieLuo Group of Mazhiwu Village, Hedong Township, Dongshan Village. As of 2012, the area surrounding the rock art is home to approximately 16 households and 62 people, all belonging to the Lisu ethnic group (He Wenqin, 2012). The term "BieLuo" is derived from the Lisu language, also mentioned in the "Shuowen Jiezi," meaning "a place of strange people." According to local legends, the BieLuo Cave is considered the birthplace of the Lisu people in the Hedong, Dongjiang, and Xiangyang areas.

The name implies a place inhabited by people with unique and non-traditional characteristics. In the "Shuowen Jiezi," "strange" is associated with "different," coming from the heart and a sacred sound. In this context, it metaphorically suggests eccentric and unconventional behavior of ancient BieLuo people. Based on the legend of the Lisu origin in

this cave, it can be inferred that ancient Lisu people have deep roots with the ancient BieLuo people.

1.1.1 Basic Information

These rock art paintings are distributed in a belt-like manner in several horizontal caves, forming a continuous distribution in the deep layers of high mountain cliffs. The paintings are rich in these caves, extending for dozens of meters along the cliff faces, with a height of four to five meters. The most densely populated area reaches approximately 20 meters in height. Local Lisu residents refer to these caves as "Anbo Ma" and "Anbo Ran," translated as "Mother of Rock Art" and "Son of Rock Art," respectively.

This nomenclature seems intentional to distinguish the importance or chronological order of these caves, indicating a distinction between primary and secondary. Additionally, some caves show signs of past habitation, possibly remnants of ancient BieLuo people who once lived in these spaces. Some caves bear traces of fire, establishing a tangible connection to the historical residence and activities of the BieLuo community.



Fig 2: BieLuo Rock Art

1.1.1 Basic Information

These rock art paintings are distributed in a belt-like manner in several horizontal caves, forming a continuous distribution in the deep layers of high mountain cliffs. The paintings are rich in these caves, extending for dozens of meters along the cliff faces, with a height of four to five meters. The most densely populated area reaches approximately 20 meters in height. Local Lisu residents refer to these caves as "Anbo Ma" and "Anbo Ran," translated as "Mother of Rock Art" and "Son of Rock Art," respectively.

This nomenclature seems intentional to distinguish the importance or chronological order of these caves, indicating a distinction between primary and secondary. Additionally, some caves show signs of past habitation, possibly remnants of ancient BieLuo people who once lived in these spaces. Some caves bear traces of fire, establishing a tangible connection to the historical residence and activities of the BieLuo community.

The accurate dating of these rock paintings still carries uncertainty. However, information can be gleaned through the analysis of depicted content and style. For instance, from a stylistic perspective, human figures in these rock paintings seem to appear later than depictions of animals and plants. This chronological inference is based on the observation of certain activities depicted, such as hand-holding dances and horse riding. These activities provide crucial evidence regarding the timeline of BieLuo rock art creation. The domestication and use of horses as mounts typically trace back to after 2000 BCE. The presence of horses in these rock paintings suggests that BieLuo rock art was likely created after this period.

In addition, the lower level of the cave known as "Anbo Ma" features a platform with well - organized remnants of stone pillars. According to local villagers, many similar stone pillars are found in the BieLuo village and are considered sacred. These stone pillars are often used for rituals, and it is strictly forbidden to place anything other than food on them. This phenomenon directly illustrates the practical function of BieLuo rock art. Serving as an integral part of the cave, BieLuo rock art goes beyond narrating nomadic life; it elevates to an artistic expression of folk rituals, indicating that the rock art not only reflects the narrative of nomadic life but also serves a utilitarian and religious aesthetic function.

1.1.2 Artistic Features of BieLuo Rock Art

The structure of the cave can be divided into three parts: upper, middle, and lower. The upper layer typically features symbols of the sun, moon, and stars, the middle layer reflects the social activities of ancient people, and the lower layer expresses sorrow and fear. BieLuo rock art represents the subjective construction of cave space by ancient people using unique visual and aesthetic experiences.



Fig 3 BieLuo Rock Art (person) ; Source: Yang Zhigao (2021)

In terms of artistic techniques, BieLuo rock art employs flowing lines to outline and paint scenes of human activities. It emphasizes the external form of objects and the characters' postures, presenting a simple and rustic composition that showcases the unique spiritual world of the ancient BieLuo people. When examining the stylistic patterns of prehistoric rock art in China, almost every style involves the simplification of forms using various linear or curved elements. Details from realistic contours are omitted, and the external outlines are depicted with lines to intuitively present the beauty of the object's form. This stylistic approach, through the artist's abstraction and omission of realistic details, transforms the unreproducible forms of reality into subjectively processed images. These images,

influenced by the emotions of the artist, then become external manifestations of primitive beliefs, depicted using elements such as lines and blocks.

For example, in the rock art image (Fig 2): the ancient people used lines of varying thickness to simplify the form of a bull, depicting its extended and drooping neck and robust body. The external contour lines of the bull are smooth and rhythmic, while the interior contour lines representing the bones and flesh of the bull are filled with color. The artist outlines the external contours of the bull's head and neck and body with lines, then uses extensive coloring within these contours, creating a simple yet vivid and expressive aesthetic. The overall image is simple and rustic, presenting an aesthetic significance that vividly reproduces the visual imagery of the ancient BieLuo people offering sacrifices with a lifelike and vibrant beauty.

Moreover, when examining the composition of BieLuo rock art images, they appear somewhat chaotic and scattered, yet they do not lack primitive expressions of "centrality." In the creation of rock art, the ancient BieLuo people, constrained by the cave's surface, often used special abstract symbols to replace the whole in order to highlight the theme. In some cases, they emphasized specific parts or exaggerated the main subjects to achieve the goal of highlighting the symbolic representation.

"Emphasizing the Large" is a common phenomenon in ancient Chinese murals. It can be observed in the images of tomb owners in Han Dynasty murals and Buddhist figures in Dunhuang murals. In BieLuo rock art, ancient people also employed the technique of "bigger is more beautiful" to express the central focus and the primary status of key figures in the composition. This approach aligns with the traditional Chinese cultural concept of aesthetics. The notion of "bigger is more beautiful" is explained by Mr. Wen Yiduo in his work "Lectures on the Book of Songs and Pan's Commentaries," where he states, "Ancient people considered the largeness of the body as beauty." This is evident in BieLuo rock art, especially in symbols such as celestial bodies, ritual specialists, and the sun. In the rock art of BieLuo, the main figures are often exaggerated in size, and there is typically minimal or no background decoration. For example, in grand ritual scenes, the most important ritual specialists stand out with their tall stature and dynamic postures, often with little or no decorative patterns in the background. Figure 2 exemplifies how the ancient BieLuo people embraced the aesthetic principle of "bigger is more beautiful" in their artistic creation. The aesthetic of "bigger is more beautiful" in BieLuo rock art reflects an awareness of self-power, embodying a self-awakening to strength and a pursuit of the value of life.

In the process of creating and depicting symbols, the ancient BieLuo people developed their own distinctive style, characterized by circular and dotted frameworks, as well as linear forms in the rock art as Figure 3. The rock art totems of the ancient BieLuo people gradually evolved into symbols adopted by surrounding ethnic groups. Totems such as the sun, stars, and moon in the rock art became enduring symbols for neighboring communities, including the totems of the Lisu people. These totems share a common lineage with the rock art symbols created by the ancient BieLuo people.

In addition, ancient people employed the technique of "symbolic representation" to directly express celestial and cosmic elements in the paintings. The patterns are predominantly in white, yellow, and black colors. There are also white handprints and dots on the rock walls. According to local folklore, different patterns represent different meanings. For example, the hand-in-hand figure " " has a clear meaning, indicating a group dance, usually a celebratory dance after a successful ritual. The figure " " expresses the deepening understanding of

ancient ancestors, further extended to represent the spirit of unity and mutual assistance formed by the ancestors of the Lisu people during their long migration. The " " figure represents the necessary path during the ritual process for the ancient people of Bie Luo, forming a "space - time channel" connecting humans and the celestial realm. This spiral ascending route map also signifies the ritual environment of Bie Luo rock paintings, indicating that the worship of celestial beings must take place on the highest geographical location. The symbolic symbols in Bie Luo rock paintings collectively form an expression of the ancient Bie Luo people's way of life and serve as an important basis for studying the local Lisu culture, especially the culture of worship.

1.2 La Gu River Stone Carving in Huaping County

1.2.1 Basic Information

The stone carving is located on a giant stone by the La Gu River in Dingwang Village, Tongda Lisu Township, Huaping County. The entire stone measures 3.4 meters in length, 2.8 meters in width, and 1.4 meters in height, weighing over a hundred tons (Ding Faqiang, 2021). It is situated at the source of the La Gu River.



Fig 4 Laguhe Rock Art



Figure 5 Laguhe Rock Art

In terms of the content of the rock paintings, the La Gu River stone carvings are believed to belong to the early agricultural period. The patterns on the giant stone are artificially carved, featuring mainly figures, flora and fauna, and totemic symbols.

The stone carvings depict scenes of fishing and various aspects of life, showcasing a rich variety of symbol types. From an artistic creation perspective, the La Gu River stone carvings, while sharing similarities with the rock paintings along the Jinsha River and Nu River, are primarily carved using line engraving and relief methods.

1.2.2 Artistic Features of La Gu River Stone Carvings

The La Gu River stone carvings constitute a complete entity, offering the earliest evidence of agriculture, fishing, hunting, and religion among the ancient people of La Gu River. By examining the creative content of the images, we can intuitively perceive the ancient people's ability to transform their lives by interacting with nature.

From the perspective of artistic creation, the ancient people of La Gu River interconnected the natural environment with the supernatural realm. Through mythology and symbolic metaphors, they linked the present with the future and humans with gods. Perhaps, for the ancient people of La Gu River, the content of rain-seeking rituals was all-encompassing and manifested in various aspects related to water resources, such as rituals, fishing, and harvests.

In addition, two main fishing tools appear in the images, as shown in Figures 4 and 5. (Fig 4) is carved using the intaglio technique, with deliberately deep lines on both sides of the figure, likely symbolizing a wooden fish spear. In Figure 5, there is a horizontal long line above, indicating the division of the space above and below the water surface. The curved lines in (Fig 5), connected by four wooden sticks, may represent underwater fishing tools. In the lower right corner of the fishing tools, two snake-like human figures are guided upwards by arrows. Here, there is a clear distinction in structure from the human figures: round faces with hair, no facial features, bodies connected below with rhombus and oval shapes, and a forked fish tail-shaped line at the bottom (Fig 6). This maybe a vivid expression of underwater spirits. These symbolic images play a positive psychological role in rituals and blessings, collectively forming the "ideal ecological system" of the ancient people of La Gu River.

From the structure and quantity of the images, it can be observed that the Lugu River rock carvings were not created in a single instance but rather resulted from long-term collective behavior. In understanding the formation process of rock art images from individual to collective, the changing natural climate and population dynamics may have influenced the Lugu River ancient people to conduct rituals and prayers centered around large stones. The combination of human activities and depictions of animals likely changed with variations in the water resource environment. As people repeatedly sought blessings from nature, the rocks became imbued with a sense of divinity. The different rock art contents were used by the ancient people to symbolize corresponding resources and food. Therefore, it is tentatively suggested that the functionality of the rock carvings is closely linked to water sources. Considering the images resembling human heads with snake bodies, the rock art may be associated with rituals and rain-seeking practices, serving as an ancient religious site for the Lugu River people's ceremonies and rain-seeking activities.



Fig 6 Laguhe Rock Art

The Lugu River rock carvings depict an ecological evolution process in the development of a community and stand as important remnants of water resource culture in the region.

1.3 Dongshaba Rock Paintings Dongshaba is one of the Lisu ethnic villages in Ninglang County, Lijiang. The rock paintings are located in a cave on the mountainside of Jinlongshan in the Yidi Village, locally referred to as "Tong'ge Ku," which translates to the cave for storing books. According to archaeological findings, the content of the cave paintings includes depictions of celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars, as well as scenes related to production and daily life. (Source: Yang Jinbao, Zhao Zehua).

From the perspective of artistic techniques, this rock painting notably emphasizes the expression of celestial bodies and animal forms, as seen in the animal section of Figure 7. The contours of the animal are clear and distinguishable. The central creature facing to the right has long ears, with budding antlers between the ears, likely representing a sheep or deer. The depiction of the animal's body consists of intermittent strokes representing the front and rear torso and fur. This painting actually features overlapping and interwoven animal figures, with visible traces of repeated contour lines. The accuracy of the animal's form, realistic style, and the emphasis on the outer contours of the head, tail, and body are evident. There are also layered colors, straight arrows, fine animal fur details, and realistic outer contours.

In Fig 8, the celestial bodies are composed of dots, circular lines, and a red layer spreading from the center. The background retains the gray-black color of the rock, with predominant yellow hues and red as a secondary color. The number and size of circles express the relative spatial positions of different celestial bodies. The simplistic artistic technique in (Fig 8) differs significantly from (Fig 7). Based on this, it is likely that there are multiple points of rock painting creation in this cave, representing different time periods.

1.4 The Jiangwang rock paintings

The Jiangwang rock paintings in Jiangwang Village, Donglian Village Committee, Mingyin Town, Yulong County, are situated in a natural village where the Lisu people once resided. In the Lisu language, it is called "Digaoma," meaning "large plateau," with the Lisu ethnic group constituting around 50% of the entire village population. The rock paintings at this location are found on the mid-slope rock walls, with a relatively limited quantity. The predominant color used is red, and the primary depictions consist of outlined human figures, with a small amount of painted elements.



Fig 7 Dongshaba Rock Art

Notably, there is a stone platform over 2 meters high on the mid-slope, believed to be an ancient ritual site for the Lisu people. , But it has now been blurred and diluted, and a clearer strategy for cultural preservation is needed.



Fig 8 Abstract Rock Art

Research Findings

1. Identification and Categorization of Visual Symbols

The study successfully identified and categorized key visual symbols portrayed in the rock art of the indigenous Lisu people in the Lijiang region of China. These symbols encompass representations of animals, plants, abstract patterns, and human figures. Through systematic analysis and classification, the research elucidated the diversity and richness of visual symbols present in Lisu rock art, providing insight into their cultural significance.

The research delved into the expressions embedded within these visual symbols, shedding light on their significance in the cultural context of Lisu spiritual beliefs. The rock art predominantly features human figures and depicts grand scenes of ancient activities, including rituals, dances, hunting, animal sacrifices, prayers, and ascension. Specific representations include celestial bodies like the sun, moon, and stars, grass huts, enclosures, characters engaged in hunting, wild buffalo, deer, and numerous unidentified wild animals such as wild sheep, wild boars, and muntjacs. Additionally, there are abstract symbols and patterns, including circles with internal crosses, clusters of small dots, painted and outlined handprints, suns, plants, intersecting straight lines, and curves. Many of these symbols and patterns have undetermined meanings. Recognizable tools depicted in the rock art include bows and arrows, stone tools, and wooden sticks. Picture 1 is a symbolic representation of early nomadic civilizations.

2. Examination of Symbolic Reflections of Lisu Cultural Heritage

Furthermore, the study examined how the primitive visual symbols in Lisu rock art reflect and express various aspects of Lisu cultural heritage. This exploration encompassed spiritual beliefs, rituals, and societal structures, revealing the profound connections between visual symbolism and the broader cultural landscape of the Lisu people. Through comprehensive analysis, the research highlighted the role of rock art as a repository of cultural

knowledge and heritage, enriching our understanding of Lisu cultural identity and heritage preservation efforts (Zuo, 2020: 161- 168.).

Research Conclusions

This study elucidates the diversity of visual symbols and classification methods in Lisu rock art in the Lijiang region. It emphasizes the central role of these symbols in cultural identity and spiritual practices. Depictions of animals and plants are often used to symbolize the forces of nature and spirituality, reflecting the Lisu people's reverence and worship of the natural world. Abstract symbols, such as spirals and geometric shapes, represent concepts related to cosmology or the cycle of life. The use of dots, lines, curves, and geometric elements symbolically expresses the relationship between humans and nature, providing insights into the Lisu people's understanding of the world and their cosmology. Furthermore, depictions of figures in rock art, such as warriors, priests, or hunting scenes, reveal various aspects of Lisu social structure and daily life. As an integral part of Lisu culture, rock art serves as a vital medium for conveying Lisu social customs. At the visual and symbolic levels, these artworks convey a range of complex and richly symbolic patterns, conveying information about the community.

The symbols of the Lisu people are not only diverse but also reflect profound cultural traditions and beliefs. In the rock art of the Lisu people in Lijiang, various symbols serve not only as a medium of artistic expression but also intricately reflect Lisu beliefs and cultural traditions. These symbols are often reflected in Lisu mythology, legends, and religious rituals. Oral cultural narratives of "creation myths" narrate the creation of deities, consistent with the content depicted in the rock art of contemporary Lisu beliefs and cultural rituals (Zhang, 2006). The visual expression of these symbols not only provides us with a means to understand Lisu social structure and belief systems but also reflects the deep-rooted initial religious concepts and culture of the Lisu ancestors' relationship with nature and the universe.

The research findings indicate that the symbolic expression in Lisu rock art is rooted in a unique cultural context, consistent with Sun's interpretation of more widespread cultural meanings in rock art (Sun, 2020). These symbols deeply reflect the worldview and core values of the Lisu people, showcasing the uniqueness and complexity of their culture. Lisu rock art symbols not only document tradition but also reflect the continuity and changes within the culture. Serving as vessels of community history and identity, these artistic works emphasize the importance of art in preserving cultural heritage. Additionally, the study highlights the threat of modern environmental changes to the preservation of rock art, echoing the findings of Huang et al. (Huang, 2019: 62-67). Furthermore, the research demonstrates the potential of rock art in facilitating contemporary cultural inheritance.

Suggestion

Based on a comprehensive analysis of Lisu rock art in the Lijiang region, future research should further advance the cultural study and dissemination of rock art. Employing interdisciplinary approaches that integrate insights from anthropology, art history, environmental studies, and digital humanities can deepen our understanding of the cultural significance of rock art. Utilizing modern virtual technology and other digital media techniques to record and recreate rock art not only fosters awareness of cultural heritage among the younger generation of the Lisu people but also facilitates the broader dissemination of Lisu traditional culture. These studies will further promote the preservation of cultural heritage while enhancing cultural identity and continuity.

References

- Taçon, P. S., Gang, L., Decong, Y., May, S. K., Hong, L., Aubert, M., Xueping, J., Curnoe, D., & Herries, A. I. (2010). Naturalism, nature and questions of style in Jinsha River rock art, northwest Yunnan, China. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*. 20 (1), 67-86. DOI: 10.1017/S0959774310000063
- Bao Jiang & He Pinzheng. (1999). Rock Paintings of Luoji River in Dêqên County, Jinsha River Basin. *Journal of Yunnan University for Nationalities: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition*. 16 (1), 82-87.
- Ding Faqiang. (2021). *Lague River Rock Carvings*, Internal Materials of Huaping County Museum.
- He Gengyuan. (2016). Protection and Research of Jinsha River Rock Paintings: A Case Study of Jinsha River Rock Paintings in Yulong County. *Journal of Lijiang Teachers College*. (2), 9-13.
- He Limin. (1996). Investigation and Research on Hansangke Rock Paintings in Jinsha River Basin. *Journal of Yunnan University for Nationalities: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition*. (4), 26-32.
- He Wenqin. (2012). *Visiting Dongshan Rock Paintings in Yongsheng*.
- He Wenqin. (2014). *Discovery and Discussion of Binzhaluo Rock Paintings in Yongsheng County*, Lijiang City.
- Li Gang. (2007). Preliminary Exploration on Investigation and Protection of Jinsha River Rock Paintings. *Chinese Cultural Forum*. (1), 64-70. Shuowen Jiezi. In.
- Huang, Y. (2019). Guoneiwai yanhua yichanbaohu de xianzhuang yu lujing tanxi [Analysis on the current status and paths of rock art heritage protection at home and abroad]. *Journal of Baise University*, 32 (06), 62-67. <https://doi.org/10.16726/j.cnki.bsx.2019.06.013>
- Li, G. (2007). Jinsha jiang yanhua de kaocha he baohu chutan [A preliminary study on the investigation and protection of Jinshajiang rock paintings]. *Chinese Culture Forum*. (01), 64-70+162+161.
- Sun, Y. (2020). Comparative Study on the Artistic Style of Rock Paintings in Southwest China. *Online*. From <https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27270/d.cnki.gsxa.2020.000294>

- Wu, Y. (2015). Xieshi yu chouxiang: Jinsha jiang yanhua kaoguren zhi [Realism and abstraction: Archaeological understanding of Jinshajiang rock art]. *PopularArcheology*. (02), 69-74.
- Zhang, T. P. J. (2015). Quanqiu shi yu xia yunnan sheng xibei bu diquyanhua de renlei xue yu kaogu xue yanjiu [Anthropological and archaeological research on rock art in northwestern Yunnan Province from a global perspective]. *JournalofArtCollegeofInner MongoliaUniversity*. 12 (01), 34-38.
- Zhang, Z. (2006). *Lisuzujisijing [Lisu Sacrifice Scripture]*.
- Zuo, X. H. Y. (2020). “Nibai gu”: Lisuzu zhi shuyishi de tianye diao cha [“Nun Baigu”: A field investigation of Lisu people’s tree pointing ceremony]. *Religious Studies*. (04), 161- 168.