

TA KE ROCK PAINTING IN YUAN JIANG COUNTY, YUNNAN PROVINCE

by Yang Yao You*

Translated and expanded by MALINEE GUMPERAYARNNONT

An ancient rock painting was discovered at Ta Ke Village, Yuan Jiang County, Yunnan Province during December 1985. The Cultural Relic Bureau of Yunnan, the Cultural Bureau of Yu Xi Region and the Cultural Center of Yuan Jiang County jointly surveyed the site in January and March of 1986 with a view towards conservation of the sites.

The Ta Ke rock painting is located one kilometre to the northeast of Ta Ke Village (also called Longchi Village) at the foot of Shijiuhu Cliff. The cliff runs north to south with 27 degrees orientation eastward. Its elevation is 1,532 metres above sea level. The entire complex is 19.5 metres long and more than 2 metres above the ground. The highest painting is 15 metres above. The upper part of the cliff broadens out and the front of the cliff has double terracing. Because vegetation has been destroyed, the body of the cliff is exposed and has cracks in certain places. A number of the paintings are defaced due to the peeling off of rock layers, having been covered over by lava flows or some other reasons. At present only 94 pictures remain, among them are: depictions of 62 human figures, 10 animals, and 22 miscellaneous subjects including symbolic pictures. The

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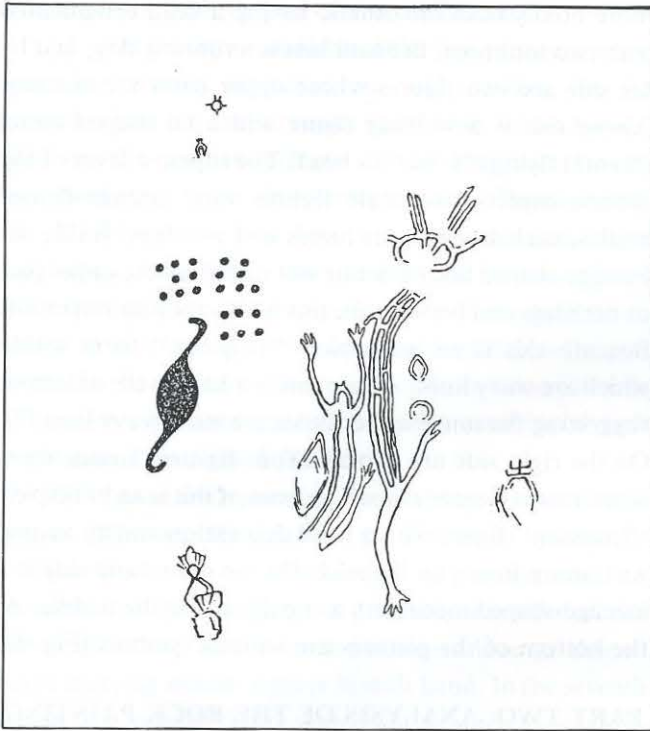
rock painting is painted in a reddish brown and red color, presumably by using ground hematite mixed with animal blood and other materials to make the pigments. Although the painting technique is primitive the simple outlines and patterns were skillfully executed. The depictions of human figures do not show the "five organs." Many bodies are simply drawn in geometric forms. The various designs which decorate the bodies and appendages of the figures indicate status distinctions. The lines are terse, natural and simple.

The finding of the Ta Ke rock painting follows other important discoveries of rock painting sites which include Cang Yuan, Geng Ma, Nu Jiang, Lu Nan, Qui Pei, Mile, Xi Chou and Ma Li Po, and others. It is the twenty-second rock painting complex so far found in Yunnan. The Ta Ke rock painting is the most primitive rock painting yet in the Yuan Jiang River Valley.

PART ONE: THE ROCK PAINTING AREA

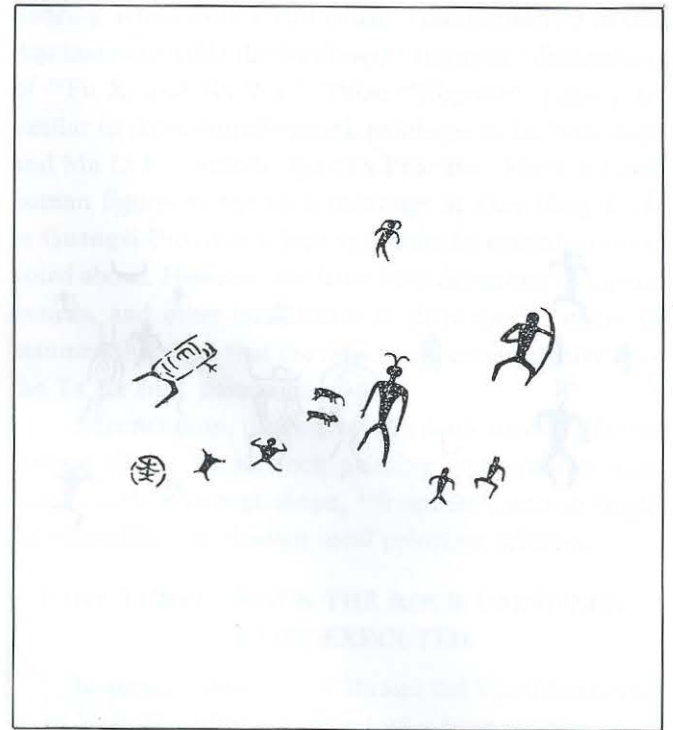
Starting from west to east, the rock painting area can be divided into seven sections as follows:

The first section, the highest part of the picture, is 15 metres above the ground, and some 3 metres wide. This section can be divided into 8 pictures, drawn on three layers of the rock cliff. On the uppermost layer is a picture of the sun, only 5 centimetres in diameter, with five rays. Beneath this is a human figure with a lozenge-shaped body. On the middle layer, to the left side, is a form which bulges in the middle, having a hook on both ends. It is 30 centimetres long and 14 centimetres wide. On the upper part and to



The sketchy picture of figure 1

the right are 21 dots arranged in five rows. On the right side are two lizard-like animals. One is 37 centimetres long and 12 centimetres wide with a triangular head. Its front claws stretch out equally; the rear claws appear to be crawling. Beside the lizard is a lozenge shape. The other lizard is 80 centimetres long and 24 centimetres wide. On its round head are antenna and a mustache; it also appears to be crawling. Beside it is a lozenge shape and a circle. To the left is a snake-like picture or character form [1]. On the lowest layer is a human figure with a lozenge-shaped body to the left. On the head of the figure are six straight lines. On the right side of the picture are indistinct lines forming a lozenge shape which cannot be identified (Fig. 1). The second section is more than 2 metres above ground level; it is five metres wide and contains altogether 11 pictures. Below and to the left is a circle in which is painted two figures resembling the Chinese characters for **ta**, or large, (here perhaps merely being a symbol for **man**). Above this is a large incomplete human figure with a square outline and various lines inside. Below this can be seen two running figures. In the middle of the painting is a standing figure with both arms down; projecting from the round head are two curved lines. To the left are two animals [2] and to the right are two small men. On the upper right is a single figure holding a long bow in his left hand and his



The sketchy picture of figure 2

right arm flexed as if preparing to shoot. On the topmost portion of the painting is a figure with a tilted body apparently wearing a head ornament or headdress [3] (Fig. 2).

The third section is composed of four pictures. At the bottom is a rather large figure with a round head which is adorned with two long feathers as ornaments. Both of its arms hang down and both knees bent. Above his head is an ox horn [4]. On the uppermost part is a figure with a slightly swinging body; on both sides of his head is an ornament. On the left side of the picture is a small figure, arms stretched out horizontally (Fig. 3).

The fourth section is the middle of the rock painting. It is 2 metres above the ground made up of 15 pictures. Below left is a lozenge shape [5]; above this is a figure in a squatting position with arms hanging down. Its body is filled with straight lines; each side of his head has an ornament. Next to this figure are two figures of equal size made up of progressively larger lozenge shapes. One has a round head with a single line head ornament; the other carries a small figure in each hand. Above these two figures is an incomplete figure. To the right of this group are five figures, one with a lozenge form in the middle. To the left of the main figure is a figure with large breasts and appears to be a female. The remaining paintings are of ox horn



The sketchy picture of figure 3 (far left) and figure 4

and snake-like shapes [6] (Fig. 4).

The fifth section is also in the centre of the rock painting. It is the largest part, with 25 pictures altogether, consisting of 19 figures, more than half of which have their hands raised up. The legs of the figures are either straight or stretched out. Among them is a figure with a circular head made up of thick lines. In the middle of the picture is a figure with hands raised up holding a large rope as if in the act of throwing. This apparently depicts a hunting tool called "a flying stone rope". Two figures are below, holding weapons and standing in a fighting stance. On the right side are painted three bodies of "frogmen" decorated with straight lines on their bodies. A lozenge appears as a symbol as well (Fig. 5).

The sixth section, the upper part of the painting, has altogether 10 pictures. On the lowest part is painted a "frogman". His head seems to have a head ornament in lozenge form. On his body are three straight lines; both hands are raised, his knees angle outward. Six figures are painted above including a single running animal. The figures in the upper row hold weapons, some with head or ear ornaments. The remainder of the pictures appear to be the lower extremities of human figures (Fig. 6, 7).

The seventh section, to the extreme right, has altogether 21 pictures. On the left side is a figure of a man shown

more boldly than the others, having a head ornamented with two topknots. Beneath him is a running dog, and by his side are two figures whose upper parts are missing. Above this is a walking figure and a lid-shaped vessel (form?) flying (?) over his head. The topmost layer of the picture depicts two male figures with lozenge-shaped bodies, each having four hands and two legs. Inside the lozenge-shaped body is a ring-dot motif; on the upper part of both legs and between the legs is also the ring-dot motif. Beneath this is an incomplete "frogman" form within which are wavy lines. Above this is a half circle with rays, suggesting the sun. Further down are more wavy lines [7]. On the right side are depicted four figures, among them is one that is lozenge-shaped. In front of this is an incomplete "frogman" figure with a head decoration and an animal with sharp horns on its head. On the right hand side is a lozenge-shaped motif with a circular dot in the middle. At the bottom of the pictures are various symbols (Fig. 8).

PART TWO: ANALYSIS OF THE ROCK PAINTING

The Ta Ke rock paintings are vivid and abundant. The following analysis is an attempt to deal with some of the most important paintings.

1. Below the sun on the highest part of the rock painting is a bulging form, becoming an elliptical circle with the top and bottom forming a hook. This form looks like a melon but it is not. It looks like a snake but it is not. Both ideas can be related to the traditional "Pan Hu" (gourd or calabash) of the southwestern minority peoples such as the Yao, Miao, Dong, Li, and so forth. According to tradition, during the reign of King Wang of antiquity, the spirit in the form of an imperial dog named "Pan Hu" married a princess. She bore four children, from whom descended four clans; the Lan, Lei, Pan and Zhong. They inter-married and their descendants increased eventually becoming the ancestors of the four clans. They each held "Pan Hu" to be their common ancestor. Later the name "Pan Hu" metamorphosed to "Pan Gu", a myth which played an important role in southern China. Besides "Fu Hsi" and "Nu Wa" are the men produced from the bottle gourd which seems to show some relationship with this rock painting.

The subject of the rock painting reflects the origins of mankind, a theme which can also be found in the rock paintings of Cang Yuan, Yunnan Province. There is, for instance, a drawing of the bottle gourd at Man Kan and the double circles of various sizes at Meng Ceng. All, it

seems, refer to the origins of the human race.

2. On the right hand side of the first picture are two lizard-like figures, stretched out and crawling on the ground. These are similar to the lizard body with a human head on the painted pottery of the Yangshao period excavated from Wu Shan County in Kansu Province (See Fig. 9). This is the first time a lizard picture has been discovered in Yunnan. The lizard at Ta Ke has a large body, powerfully and vividly executed. It certainly is an object of worship and may also be a primitive dragon totem. In the middle of the picture only two huge lizards can be seen. They may be totem figures worshipped such as the pair "Fu Xi and Nu Wa".

3. In the rock painting there are altogether twelve figures. They are distinguished by designs in the middle or upper parts of their bodies, suggesting higher status or position. The lozenge shape is probably a symbol of the female sex organ. In the fourth picture is a lozenge-shaped figure carrying smaller figures in each hand. In the seventh picture is a lozenge-figure with a dot between its legs (see Fig. 8). From the particularly beautiful shape and the location of the drawing, it can be interpreted that this picture depicts the worship of the female sex. The lozenge-shaped human body is unique and beautiful. It is found only at Ta Ke and has never been found in other rock paintings in Yunnan.

4. The "frogmen" figures in the rock painting also provide a unique element. The entire painting has 7 frogmen altogether. The linear decorations of their bodies differ, legs stretch out with hands raised in a cheering or

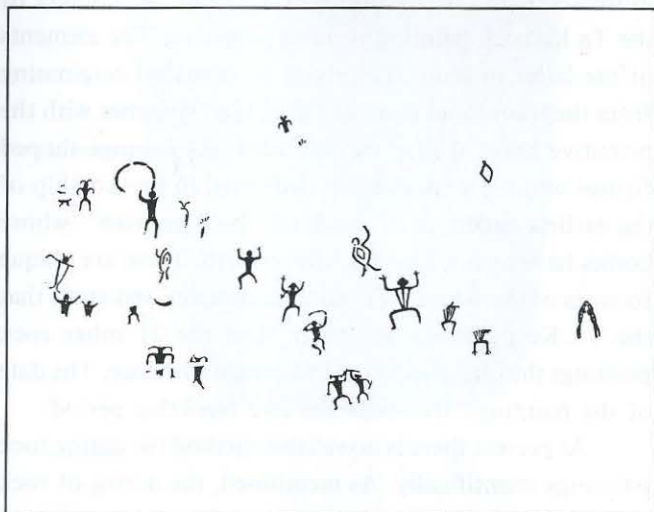
dancing action as in a cult ritual. Traditionally, it is said that there existed in the Southwest "frogmen" descendants of "Fu Xi and Nu Wa". These "frogmen" figures are similar to those found in rock paintings at Lu Nan slope and Ma Li Po, both in Yunnan Province. There are also human figures in the rock paintings at Zuo Jiang River in Guangxi Province which are basically similar to those noted above. However, the latter have depictions of knives, swords, and other implements at their waists. It can be assumed therefore that the latter were executed later than the Ta Ke rock paintings.

In conclusion, the preliminary assessment is that the content of the Ta Ke rock painting concerns totemism figures with a lozenge-shape, "frogmen", and so forth. All these echo the known local primitive religion.

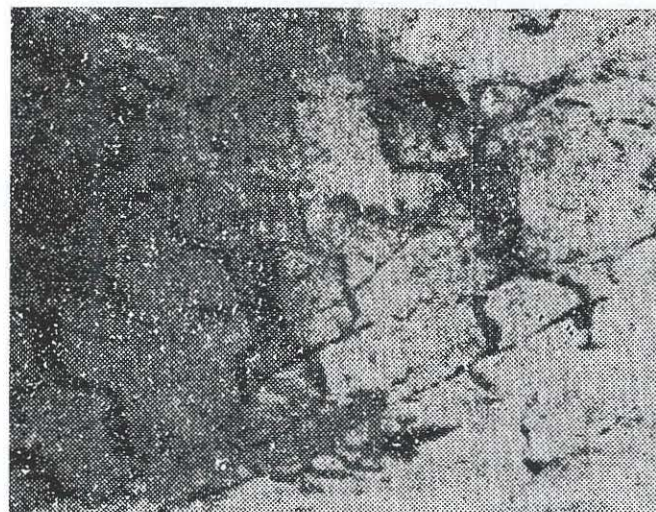
PART THREE: WHEN THE ROCK PAINTINGS WERE EXECUTED

In ancient times, the Bai Bu and Bai Yue tribes settled in the Yuan Jiang River. Cultural relics from this area attest that primitive clan groups lived scattered throughout this region. Some excavated bronzes clearly show influence from Dian Chi although many of the forms and designs on the implements are similar to bronzes from Ma Wen Shan in the western part of Guangxi Province.

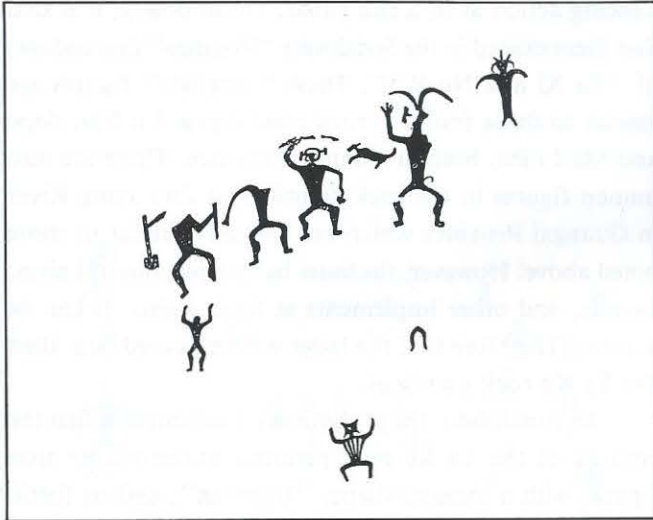
The content, the composition as well as the style of the Ta Ke rock paintings differ from the other regional rock paintings at Nu Jiang, Cang Yuan, Geng Ma, and so forth. The major paintings, such as the depictions of lizards, snakes, and frogs all served as totems among the



The sketchy picture of figure 5



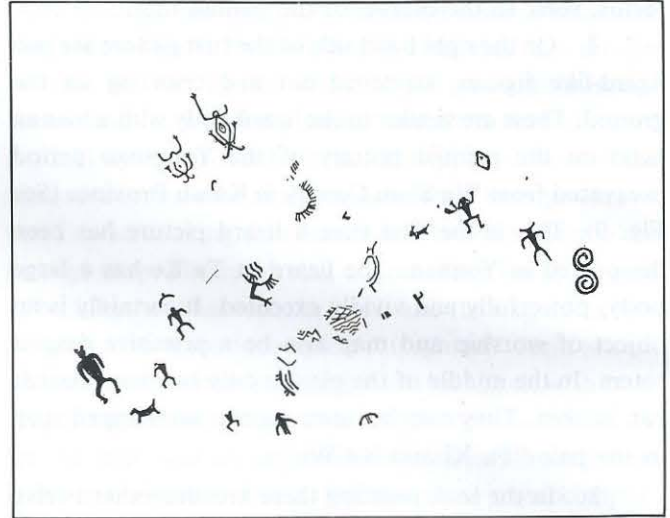
The rock painting of figure 6



The sketchy picture of figure 7

Bai Yue. They were used especially for worship only among the Bai Yue tribe. All of the Ta Ke rock painting features show a strong "national" characteristic indicating a close relationship with the Bai Yue clan.

The Ta Ke rock painting, like other regional rock paintings, was not completed at one time. The sixth painting for example depicts a hunting scene with men holding shovel handles and utensils in their hands. Compared with the other pictures, the color is bright and clear, the lines are sketchy and bold, and the decoration is more complicated. The human figures are also different with their lower limbs drawn out with a strong musculature. This painting should be considered later than the other paintings at Ta Ke. The terrace beneath the rock painting has not been excavated; only charcoal, dust and animal bones have been recovered -- terrace remains left behind from burials. Other historical materials excavated from the Ta Ke area include a Yue battle axe, an ax "fu" and other bronze objects. Recently discovered on the western bank of the Yuan River and Long Shu Dian were remains of bronze and stone implements. Implements excavated include bronze and stone axes, a stone spinning whorl, and other New Stone Age implements which were left behind by the deceased. From the analysis made by Kunming Metallurgical Research Laboratory using an electron microscope, the bronze axes were found to contain 95.21% bronze, 2.0% sulphur. It can also be proved that about 3,000 years ago the water level in the Ta Ka area was once relatively low. A preliminary estimate is that the later period pictures at Ta Ke can be dated to the Bronze Age.



The sketchy picture of figure 8

The content and technique of the early rock paintings are relatively archaic and awkward. Its unique content is evidently for primitive religion. The paintings at Ta Ke differ from the rock paintings at Yunnan Cang Yuan, the Yin Shan Mountain in Inner Mongolia, and other sites which depict daily life and the manufacturing scenes. A Carbon 14 analysis of plant materials found covering parts of the Cang Yuan rock painting and a comparison made with nearby excavated cultural materials, revealed that the early work of Cang Yuan rock painting was executed in the late Neolithic Period. A large rock cliff in the Ma Li Po rock painting complex depicts a god which can be compared with human figures from other rock paintings in the area which also dates to the Neolithic period. A comparison of the Ta Ke rock paintings with the two aforementioned rock paintings shows that the content of the Ta Ke rock painting is more primitive. The elements of the latter include: the origins of mankind originating from the traditional story of "Pan Hu" together with the primitive belief related to the lizard; the lozenge-shaped figures which manifest a cult dedicated to the worship of the earliest ancestors of mankind; the "frogmen" whose bodies have no implements, and so forth. These are unique features of the Ta Ke rock painting complex and attest that the Ta Ke paintings are older than the 21 other rock paintings thus far discovered in Yunnan Province. The date of the paintings are about the late Neolithic period.

At present there is no reliable method for dating rock paintings scientifically. As mentioned, the dating of rock paintings is based on a consideration of the subject matter, comparison with other rock paintings nearby, and the

consideration of associated cultural remains excavated in the area. In order to progress further, new discoveries are necessary.

The discovery of Yuan Jiang Ta Ke provides new materials for further research on rock paintings in Yunnan. It especially helps research on the "Yuan Jiang Culture".



Painted pottery amphora with human face and lizard body. Yangshao Culture, Kansu Province, height 38 cm.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Does not appear in the picture.
2. The upper one with a trunk stretched out; it looks like a tapir.
3. It looks like feathers. These headdresses show the different status of society most of whom wear no headdresses. Anyone wearing a headdress could be the chieftain or the shaman who conducted the religious rites.
4. The ox horn may be regarded as symbol or emblem that signifies the important status of the person: wealth or victory. It is regarded as a totem among the minority groups.
5. It may either be the signification of a magic figure to drive away the evil or signify good fortune.
6. The minority groups in the south and southwest of China traditionally believed that snakes played an important role in agriculture. It is also a symbol of harvest season. The snake's movement could symbolize that the earth will become fertile and fruitful; accordingly, the women will perform a similar rite in the village (see Jessica Rawson 226). This belief can be related to the Ta Ke rock painting which depicts the snake's movement, figures with full chest, and a man with a lozenge form, etc. This painting might be related to the agricultural rite.
7. It can be preliminary assumed that these watery lines signify the environment of this minority group who lived near the Yuan River.

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