

Rock Art Bookshelf

Rock Art in Tibet

Zhang Yasha

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Rock art occurs worldwide and has a deep history. In the West, the earliest written account of rock art dates to the 1620s, and describes engravings discovered by Peter Alfason, a priest in Bohuslän, Sweden. Scientific research on rock art, though, did not begin until the 1870s with the Spanish amateur archaeologist Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola and the discovery of Altamira Cave.

But the earliest written record on rock art anywhere may be in the East, from China. As early as 2,300 years ago, sporadic rock art discoveries were documented in *Han Feizi* in the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.). Only in modern times has scientific research on rock art in China been initiated. This began with Professor Huang Zhongqin of Lin Nan University and his fieldwork and subsequent publication on Hua'an Xianzitan rock art. The 1980s might be described as the golden era for China's rock art research, since this is when many rock art sites were discovered, and extraordinary academic attention was focused on them.

In Tibet, the first investigative report on record is from the early 1900s, by A. H. Francke, a German Tibetologist, and it addresses the rock art of Ladakh. Interest in and discovery of the rock art in Tibet lags that of China, peaking slightly later, between the late 1980s and the middle 1990s. Around 1995, when the wave of new-discoveries was fading nation-wide, Chinese rock art research was static. On a deeper level though, China's rock art scholars were switching to more cool-headed and rational approaches to further advancements.

Professor Zhang Yasha, author of *Rock Art in Tibet*, first obtained her master's degree in art, specializing in the history of Western Fine Art, and then her doctoral degree in history, specializing in the formation of Chinese nations. At present, she is a doctoral supervisor in anthropology at Minzu University of China. Her research interests have focused on the history of fine arts among China's ethnic

groups, the history of primitive art, the history of religious art, and particularly on Tibetan fine arts. Interest in rock art has come into her research since 2000. Based on her educational background and experience, together with the situation of rock art research in China at that time, Professor Zhang initiated research on the rock art in Tibet. Her recent academic monograph, *Rock Art in Tibet*, is the outcome.

Rock art in Tibet occupies an extraordinary place in world rock art studies due to its unique background in geography, history, and ethnicity, as well as religion. From the limited documents currently available, it is now apparent that Tibetan rock art displays characteristics of the nomadic shepherders of north China, but styles from southwestern China as well. This duality vividly reflects Tibet's intricate and peculiar natural environment, mixed with the cultural, historical, ethnic, and religious factors in this region.

This monograph consists of an introduction and ten chapters organized into two sections. In the first section, the author presents an iconographic and stylistic analysis, and summarizes the Tibetan rock art that has been documented so far. Her methodology focuses on iconographical research into the conventional fine arts. In the second section, she presents evidence behind her construction and interpretation of Tibetan history, using an interdisciplinary approach that integrates history, archaeology, ethnology, and religion, and relies on statistical analyses used in sociology.

In the first section, Chapters 1 to 7, the author starts with a representative graphical analysis of the fundamental natural and supernatural characteristics of the animal images depicted in Tibetan rock art, such as yaks, deer, horses, and eagles, and demonstrates the evolution of the *yong-zhong* symbols. These are tree- and pagoda-shaped signs of the early Bön, a pre-Buddhist religious system, and add to our understanding of the early Bön civilization of the plateau. The graphical analysis reflects four types of Tibetan rock art differentiated by their sets of icons and styles (types A, B, C, and D), each predominate in a different period. Having elaborated on the graph characteristics, origins, distributions, and the evolution of the four types, the author turns to the development and characteristics for two main regions in the Tibetan Plateau, West and North Tibet. She maintains that sometime between 3,000 and 1,500 B.P., ancient Qiang-Yi ethnic groups immigrated continuously into North Tibet, also known as Chang-Tang Plateau. As they moved from east to west, they left incredible artistic evidence of their movement



*Tibetan boulder panel depicting various styles.
(Photograph by David Rhode.)*

widely scattered throughout North and West Tibet.

The greatest innovation presented in this monograph is on the pagoda- and bird-shaped signs. The author presents evidence that pagoda-shaped signs in Tibetan rock art served as a cultural marker of the ancient Bön culture on the plateau, thus filling a gap left by the lack of tangible remains of the Bön culture.

In analyzing bird-shaped signs, she pays special attention to the peculiar place that the eagle has in early Tibetan culture, combining it with the sacred bird "*Khyung*" of the *Zhangzhun* tribe, an ancient culture and kingdom of western and northwestern Tibet that predates both Tibetan Buddhism and the Bön culture. (The *Zhangzhung* kingdom is documented in Bön literature.) She maintains that the numerous bird-witch images are evidence that during religious rituals, the Bön witches, like their predecessors of the ancient *Zhangzhung* tribe, dressed up as birds not only to display their marvelous magic, but, more importantly, to be spiritually consistent with the sacred bird "*Khyung*." Thus, the bird-witches are viewed as the avatar of the bird totem culture of the ancient *Zhangzhung* tribe. Furthermore, the author demonstrates with a great number of vivid images that Tibetan rock art has become a material expression of the development of the ancient *Zhangzhung* culture. This opens an important path for decoding the mysterious culture of the ancient *Zhangzhung* tribe, about which there is a severe lack of archaeological information at present.

In the latter section of the monograph (Chapters 8 to 10),
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the origins and the immigration of the Dongnu Kingdom in east Tibet, the Female Kingdom in west Tibet, the ancient *Zhangzhung* Kingdom, and the Supi who conquered the plateau prior to the Tibetan Empire, are examined based on previous rock art research. Synthesizing classical Chinese documentation, the ancient Tibetan scriptures in Dunhuang, as well as newly discovered archaeological remains, the author finally reaches the conclusion that the ancient *Zhangzhung* civilization can be traced to the ancient *Chang-Tang* nomadic sheep-herding culture of northern Tibet, which formed after the Female Kingdom in east Tibet and the Qiang ethnic group in Qianghai converged.

She tries to shake off assumptions made in previous rock art research by paying special attention to the ancient cultures and ethnic immigration during the Chalcolithic period in the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. She combines bilingual Tibetan and Chinese literature, archaeological information, and a thorough analysis to present an innovative interpretation with an original idea. Some topics related to early Tibetan history are clarified. In this book, the author has transformed the documentation of rock art into a systematic record of historical documentation.

This bi-dimensional research method, using pictures as evidence to interpret history, has proven effective. Also in this latter section of the monograph, the author analyses the formation of the Tibetan group, and the pattern of the vernacular culture in the early tribal alliance period. She demonstrates that the ancient civilization of the north Tibetan Plateau is not the variant or spread of an exotic culture, but an inalienable part of China's ancient civilization. This conclusion has triggered heated academic discussion among Tibetologists at home and abroad due to its clear political implications, as well as the rigorous scientific research standards she employed.

Rock Art in Tibet is the first monograph on Tibetan rock art available in China, and is the first synthesis of rock art in Tibet published since the 1980s. It is based on the conventional research methods of art history; its methodology emphasizes graphical and typological analyses. The research in this book on the pagoda- and bird-shaped signs is innovative, as are the classification of the phases and the dating of the Tibetan rock art based on in-depth analysis. At the same time, special attention has been paid to an interdisciplinary approach integrating history, archaeology, ethnology, and religion. The ultimate purpose is to have a better understanding of the true original ancient civilization in the northern Tibetan Plateau. The methodology which Professor Zhang Yasha uses rock art to decode and interpret the region's prehistory is a notable initiative in both Tibetology and academic rock art studies at home and abroad. ❖

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