

A brief review of chinese rock art research

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Abstract. In China, rock art sites are spread all over the country and the rock art's places, representation methods, themes and content are closely connected with the nation's cultural development and changes. In the 21st century, thanks to the fervent promotion of the government, scholars and amateurs, the discovery and research of Chinese rock art have entered a new period. The new discovery of tens of thousands of various rock art such as cupules rock art in Henan, handprints rock art in the southwest, human-faced rock art in Chifeng and other places like Xinjiang or Yunnan bears great significance. Since 2008, exciting new discoveries have brought about a new passion for rock art research. The range of rock art investigation, recording and conservation has been enormously expanded; the development of cultural industry in some regions has demonstrated obvious characteristics; scholars' researches have explored different fields, especially in the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, art history, aboriginal region, region and iconography and semiotics, etc. However, scientific conservation and proper management will be the most urgent mission for Chinese rock art in the new century.

China is one of the countries that boast the most abundant rock art resources in the world. According to the latest statistics collected by Rock Art Research Association of China (RARAC) in 2016, rock art has been discovered in approximately 220 counties of 29 provinces and the total number of rock art sites has exceeded 1,000, including more than 150,000 images (Fig. 1); the number is still rising yearly. As prehistoric cultural heritage, rock art spreads all over ethnic regions and is of astonishing quantity as well as of a wealth of cultural messages, which is regarded as a treasure for studying Chinese cultural history and ethnic history. After about a century's development, the study of Chinese rock art has made phenomenal progress. However, since the natural

and human-caused destruction is becoming more and more severe, the problem on the protection of rock art is being particularly prominent. This article will briefly review the discovery, research development and current research status of Chinese rock art, with special reference to the situation of conservation and application as well as its developing direction.

I. The discovery and research development of chinese rock art

China is the first country to employ characters to record rock art in the world. In the ancient Chinese literature, the earliest record about rock art can be traced

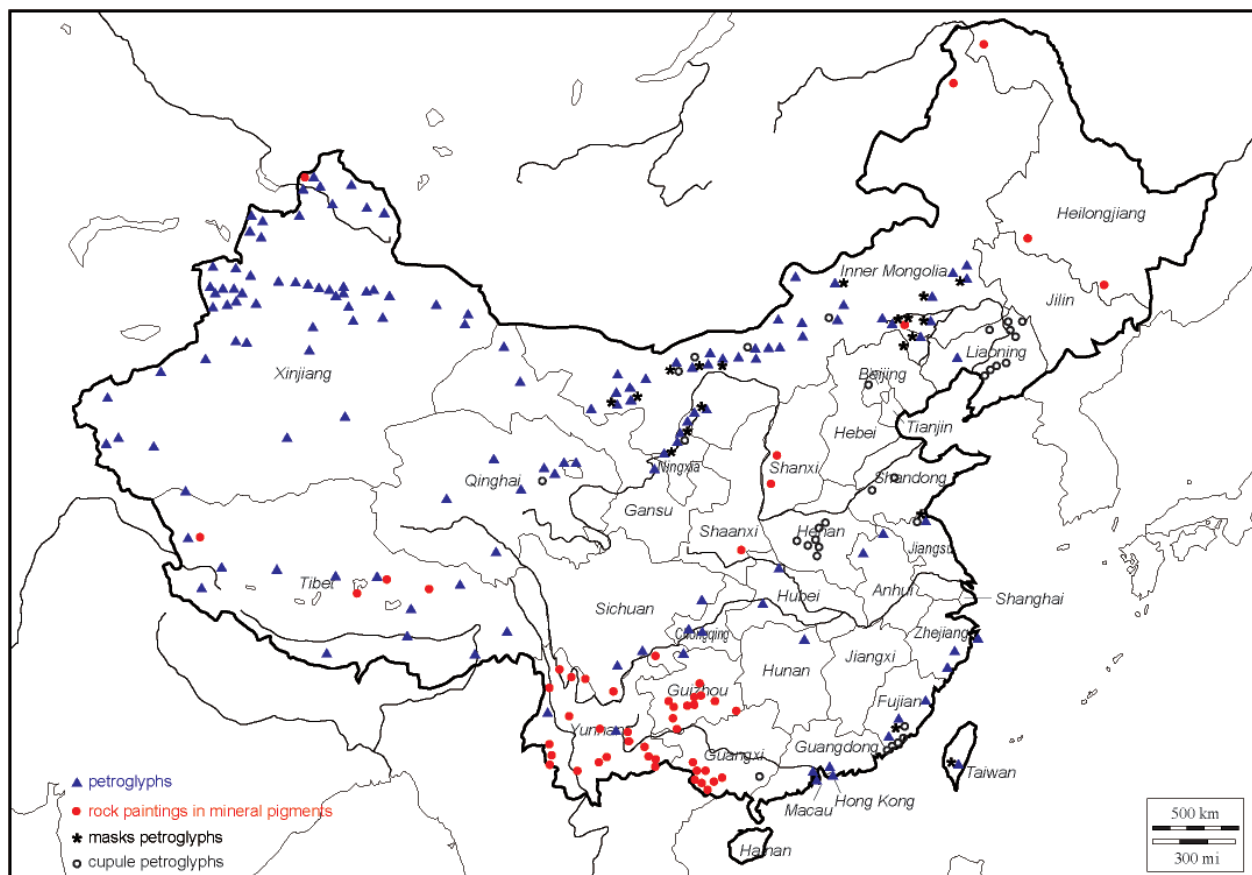


Figure 1. Distribution of chinese rock art. Zhu Lifeng 2016.



back to the book *Hanfeizi* during the Warring States Period (3 B.C.), which was about 2,000 years ago. Later on, dating back to Northern *Wei* Dynasty about 1,500 years ago, there had been over 20 sites of rock art nationwide documented by Li Daoyuan's monograph *Shuijingzhu*. Song Dynasty onwards, ancient books and local records like *Taipingyulan*, *Taipingguangji*, *Yudijisheng*, *Xubowuzhi*, *Yiwenlu*, *Ningmingzhouzhi*, *Xinaxianzhi* had all written down the discovered rock art in respective areas. Yet the formal research of Chinese rock art is supposed to originate from the beginning of the twentieth century. In summary, the research of Chinese rock art during the pre-modern and modern period can be roughly divided into four stages:

The first stage is approximately from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of the 1970s, a stage of preliminary discovery and research. Chinese academia's attention to rock art started from Huang Zhongqin's investigation to Hua'an region's Taixixianzitan's petroglyph in Fujian province in 1915. This investigation together with her "Taixiguwen" published on the *Lingnan University Journal* in 1935 has marked the beginning of Chinese rock art's research in the pre-modern and modern times. Since then, some Chinese and foreign scholars started to discover rock art in places including Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Hong Kong, Yunnan, Heilongjiang, Gansu, Sichuan and to publish investigation reports. However, little attention from nationwide specialists was focused on these discoveries and rudimentary records, with the scientific research of Chinese rock art advancing slowly.

The second stage starts from the 1980s to the mid of 1990s. Thanks to the launch of the Second National Cultural Relics Investigation of China, rock art in provinces like Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai and Tibet was discovered in a large scale, which had aroused fervor for investigating and studying rock art in archaeology domain and related fields. Yet China's extensive discovery of rock art had not drawn enough attention from the world's academia: In the *Distribution Map of World Rock Art* issued by the American journal *Archaeology* in 1983, China was still left blank. It was not until Professor Chen Zhaofu from Minzu University of China (MUC)'s introduction that Chinese rock art was known by the outside (Zhaofu 1991).

The third stage, from mid-1990s to the beginning of 21st, was the nadir of Chinese rock art's research. The shrink of multitudinous discoveries sapped researchers' enthusiasm and gradually, rock art had been a marginalized discipline. But this nadir had helped real researchers of rock art come to treat rock art more calmly and rationally, which theoretically, made full contemplation and preparation for the study of rock art in a new century.

The fourth stage is from the beginning of 21st to the present. Accompanying by the thorough development of the Third National Cultural Relics Investigation of China, Chinese rock art has embraced a new epoch of numerous re-discoveries and with the ardent promotion of the government, scholars and amateurs, the depth and breadth of investigation have been upgraded; meanwhile, recording and protection have also adopted relatively scientific

methods. During this period, more places with rock art have been discovered than the twentieth century, up to 29 provinces which involve Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Inner Mongolia, Beijing, Hebei, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Tibet, Sichuan, Chongqing, Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi, Guangdong, Fujian, Hunan, Hubei, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Anhui, Henan, Shandong, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, etc. Rock art, only absent from five provinces/ cities domestically, covers almost every place of China. Most importantly, rock art has been discovered in Zhongyuan region, where for about a hundred years had been regarded as without rock art, and thus has revised the stereotype that rock art existed only in ethnic regions. Various new discoveries of rock art such as Jinshajiang rock paintings, Xinjiang rock carvings, Henan cupules, human-faced rock art in Ongniud of Inner Mongolia and Daxinanling's rock paintings all enjoy great significance. Scholars have explored extensively in different research spheres and the discovery and research of Chinese rock art have stepped into a brand new prosperous stage (Lifeng 2012).

II. The investigation and practice of Chinese rock art

The investigation and practice of Chinese rock art, whose main practitioners are archaeological professionals in related provinces and regions, include field work and scientific recording. The majority of the newly-discovered rock art is unearthened, investigated and recorded by archaeological professionals in the course of the survey of national cultural relics. Supported by policies and funds, such professionals are able to put investigation and research of rock art into schedule and then into application. They employ archaeological fieldwork as the main approach, take searching and gathering first-hand rock art resources in divided areas as the targeted work and then describe these rock art resources while dating and attempting to establish staged, regionalized and classified archaeological file. At the Meantime, the comparative studies on regions are conducted with a view to figuring out differences among rock art's content, style, etc., trying to find out the corresponding reasons. These years, institutes represented by the Rock Art Research Association of China (RARAC) of Minzu University of China (MUC) have actively collaborated with local archaeological sections to conduct relatively comprehensive investigation and scientific record of latest-discovered rock art sites, which has opened up new prospects in the massive practice of universities and research institutions in China. Only between April and May this year, RARAC has organized respective panels up to 30 persons which consist of undergraduates, masters and doctors to research petroglyphs in the cupules in Fangcheng, Biyang, Yexian and Wugang of Henan Province thoroughly (Huisheng 2012) (Figs 2 & 3).

The field work of Chinese rock art involves seven steps as identification, positioning, measurement, recording, photographing, tracing and rubbing. Its goal is to acquire standard, systematic and scientific resources of rock art, to ensure the scientificity and objectivity of resources and to set up comprehensive identity files of rock art in a wide range of places, which is considered as the fundamental work of rock art research and is the most popular and major way of Chinese rock art research and has played an irreplaceable and fundamental role in sorting Chinese rock art resources systematically.



Figure 2. Investigation of cupules in Fangcheng, Henan.

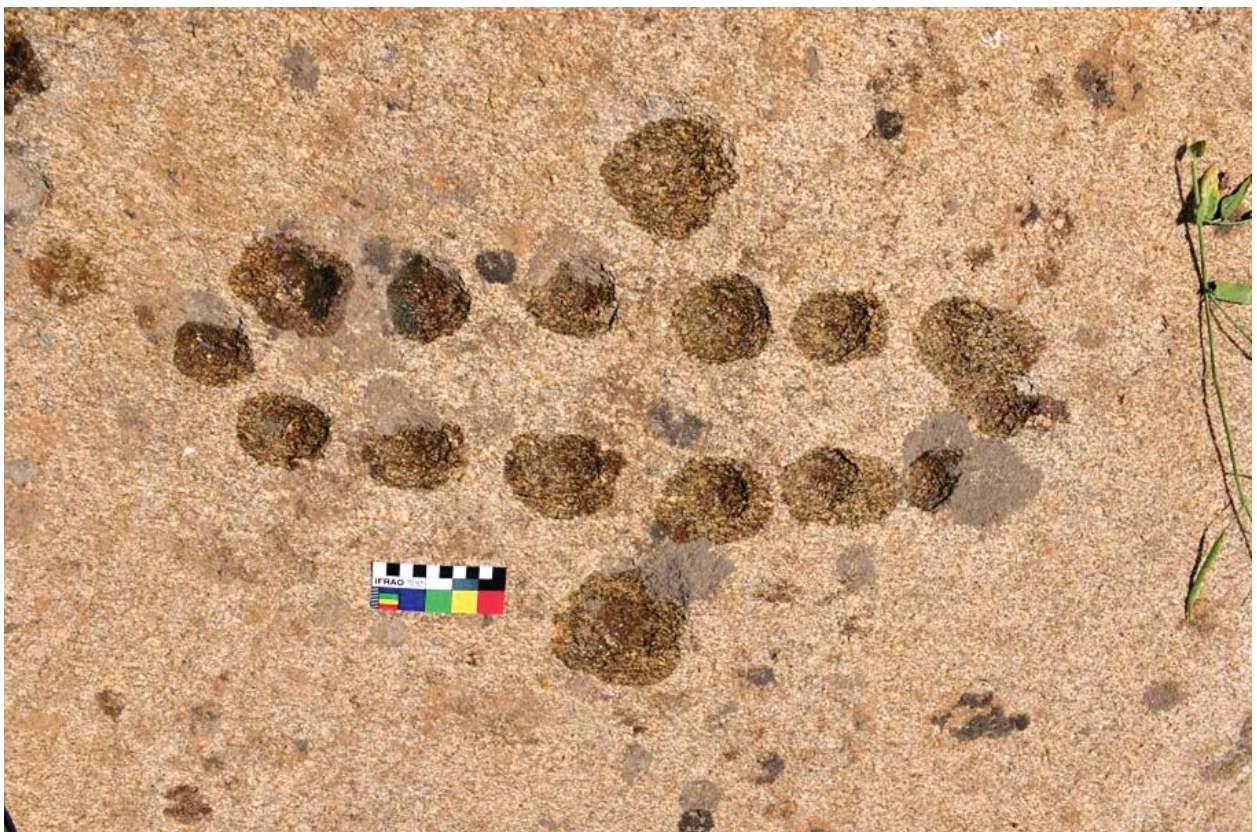


Figure 3. Cupules in Biyang, Henan.



Currently, documentation of both written and video have been the main scientific recording methods popular among the Chinese rock art realm. Written documentation is made up of the rock art site's Chinese name, exclusive number, specific location, GPS coordinate (longitude, latitude, and altitude), direction of the rock art, size of the image, theme and content (animals, humans, tools, patterns, symbols, plants and others), number of images, state of conservation, producing methods (pecking, engraving, painting, and others) and descriptions of natural and human environment surrounding rock art sites. Video documentation includes photos (overall view, close shot, picture of the rock, panorama of image, details), tracing, grid cartography, rubbing, sketching and videoing (2D and 3D).

III. The theoretical study of Chinese rock art

Rock art sites in China recorded ancient tribes' production and life scenes like hunting, sacrifice and warring are inextricably intertwined with the development of ethnic cultures and have great research value in the formation of the unity of pluralistic society of Chinese nation as well as in the communication and dissemination of world civilization. Since the 21st century the theory and method of Chinese rock art research, after the rational reflection of scholars, have demonstrated the trend of diversity, and inclusive and multi-disciplinary research principles have broadened the horizon of the study of rock art. Scholars are no longer contented with the display of materials or discussion of general issues; instead, they are more frequently studying from comprehensive perspectives by virtue of across-disciplines like archaeology, cultural anthropology, ethnology, folklore, history, art, religion studies, mythology, semiotics, geography, physics, chemistry, statistics and so on. Scholars in diverse disciplines and cultural backgrounds will choose different methods and perspectives. Among archaeological methods, there are researches on regionalization and classification of rock art by using archaeological typology, on dating rock art by using technical methods of archaeological chronology; rock art study from an ethnological angle taking advantage of archaeological research results and discipline knowledge, focuses on topics such as aboriginal art, production and living styles, social forms and regional beliefs on the basis of field work; some amateurs concentrate on the discovery of rock art and research of carving methods while others try to interpret meanings of rock art by conjecturing rock art images. The theoretical exploration of rock art is largely focused on "aboriginal thinking mode", "Pan-Shamanism", "language of images and representational system of symbols" respects.

From achievements of theoretical research, Chen Zhaofu (1991) made a systematic introduction to the status quo of discovery and research of Chinese and global rock art in the 1990s; Gai Shanlin (1995) elevated Chinese rock art research to the height of discipline construction, which led to several progresses in scientific recording, description and comprehensive study of regionalized research; Song Yaoliang (1992), linking Chinese rock art with world rock art, made cross-nation research and helped initiate new research thoughts. In recent years, researches of diverse perspectives by more Chinese scholars have rocketed, so does the literature. *Origin of Art* by Emmanuel Anati (2010) has been translated into

Chinese, and RARAC, aiming at introducing more research results of world rock art to Chinese readers, has invested funds and organized professionals to edit and translate "Translation series of Rock Art".

In the new century's re-discovery of rock art, topics associated with artistic styles, themes and content, chronological periodization and cultural meanings will still be the research interest of most people.

In the twentieth century, it was claimed that most Chinese rock art appeared in peripheral ethnic regions or places where ancient ethnic minority groups used to live. According to regional characteristics of rock art in different places, Chinese scholars came to different conclusions and proposed different ways of regional distribution. Chen Zhaofu, Tang Huishen and Song Yaoliang were in favor of dividing into three systems of the North, Southwest and Southeast coastal area; Li Fushun, Li Yongxian, Ban Lan, etc advocated systems of the North and South; Gai Shanlin (1995) proposed quartering of agriculture and forestry region of the Northeast, prairie region of the North, mountainous area of the South and coastal area of the Southeast. At the beginning of the 21st century, Zhang Yasha put up quartering of the northern prairie system, Qinghai-Tibet Plateau system, southwestern mountainous area system and southeastern coastal system. Plus, a large quantity of petroglyphs in the cupules and some rock art of image and symbol have been discovered in Henan Province in central China, which has changed frontier distribution of Chinese rock art and will reconstruct Chinese rock art's mode of regional distribution.

Chinese rock art contains hunting, nomadism, integrated economy, farming, oceanic culture five major types. When it comes to rock art in different regions, scholars have proposed their own classification systems. In 2006, Zhang Yasha, from an iconographic perspective of art discipline, alongside research methods of ethnology, history, religion studies, did a typological study of Tibetan rock art by its content of image, skills of production and artistic characteristics.

As for ethnic belongings of rock art in different places, scholars hold that it was made by indigenous predecessors. Viewpoint of current research is that owners of rock art, at least, can be a dozen of ancient ethnic minorities like Hun, Turk, Xianbei, Donghu, Tibetan, Mongolia, Baiyue, Baipu, Qiang.

For research on chorological periodization, scholars have attempted to study from producing methods, theme and content, styles and types, state of conservation, colors and other respects and to associate with paleontology, paleoanthropology, geology, typology, ethnology, folklore, archaeology of history and geography, aesthetics, religion studies and other various disciplines to make comprehensive comparisons in order to make preliminary assumptions of the date of rock art that has been discovered in different places so far, hoping that practical and scientific conclusions will be acquired. Some scholars define the chronology of early rock art by extinct animals of zooarchaeology. Some scholars make attempt to date rock art as C14, micro-erosion dating, uranium series method, glacial striae in the 4th period. And others date by *Xanthoria elegans* (link) Th. Fr of Lichen (Xihong and Xiangshi 2007). However, the above methods all have considerable errors when deciding the date of rock art. That most rock art's date cannot be accurately measured has, to a large extent, constrained



the deep research of rock art. Due to the existence of this bottleneck, researchers can only make various cultural interpretations, which cannot be proved by scientific data, based on fragmented and regional rock art and thus have become scholars' own monographs and self enjoyment. Therefore, the effective solution to Chinese rock art dating problem is a crucial issue facing Chinese rock art research field.

IV. The conservation and management of rock art

Considering the difficult status quo of rock art research, the conservation and development of rock art are especially important. At present, more and more clues of rock art discovery are emerging in China; at the same time, it is noticed that many rock art sites are confronting with man-made or natural destruction and generally people are aware of the increasing urgency of conservation, for Chinese rock art is faced with an option: use it or lose it. The government has started to offer a vast amount of money and technological support to preserve the rock art: the juxtaposition policy of conservation, development, application and popularizing education are particularly emphasized.

IV.1. The conservation of rock art

In China, the conservation of rock art heritage is being highly regarded from the authority to the populace. There are usually three ways of conservation: The first is investigation and documentation, obtaining detailed information by literary description and video collection; the second is conservation in situ, which adopts approaches like solidification, protection, warning, garrison, telemonitoring or building an origin museum if feasible so as to avoid ecological changes, modern constructions and other man-made damages to rock art; the third is migration protection, suitable for rock art sites that cannot be protected in situ, which have been occupied by urbanization exploitation like construction of reservoir, infrastructure construction.

The conservation work of rock art in General Cliff of Lianyungang in Jiangsu Province, Helanshan in Ningxia Province, Yinshan in Inner Mongolia, Huashan in Guangxi Province has achieved preliminary success, for these places has begun conservation relatively earlier and invested much. At the end of last century, Lianyungang in Jiangsu Province attempted to use great prestressing force anchor rope in the protection of General cliff rock portrait, in order to solidify fracture and deformation caused by exploitation and explosion in coal industry. Bayannur region in Inner Mongolia has employed remote-controlled video devices powered by solar energy to monitor rock sites in remote areas, which have threatened people that stole rock art to a large extent. In 2008, Yinchuan World Rock Art Pavilion in Ningxia Province was established and opened to the public, the first rock art museum built in situ in China. About 2000 square meters of exhibiting area makes the pavilion the largest rock art museum in the world. Since 2009, Guangxi has initiated Huashan rock art conservation project and set out to bond and solidify the cracking rock in Huashan. In addition, due to the construction of reservoir and power station in Yin River Basin in Chifeng Region, Inner Mongolia, Jinsha River Basin in Yunnan Province, Yangtze River Basin in Guizhou

and Sichuan Province, rock art with the construction sites has been relocated in accordance with migration protection.

IV.2. The Management of Rock Art

The issue of rock art management and application has been proposed for only about a couple of years. Rock art, as the representation of cultural and ecological environment in different Chinese places, is the sum of life, customs, concepts, beliefs, skills, art consistently precipitated and accumulated by different ethnic groups' production and life practices in the past hundred or thousand years and is the vivid depiction of life and cultural formats inherited for generations. Unique cultural resources created by predecessors of different ethnic minorities boast rich multiple characteristics and are able to meet the developmental need of contemporary cultural tourism industry and the psychological need of "asking for novelty, difference, delight and knowledge" of tourists. However, blindly catering to and increasing cultural tourism development will undermine ecological environment and original ecological culture is easily subject to deadly deterioration, which may severely restrict the sustainable development of local tourism and culture —those are also what the management of rock art has to face. Therefore, the management of rock art should be carried on from the perspective of cultural holism, which is the historical responsibility of contemporary rock art researchers and demonstrates rock art research's humanistic care to contemporary society's development. During the process of exploiting local rock art, not only do we need to collaborate with archaeological and museological sections to carry out systematic rock art investigation and recording, but sort out materials systematically, publish and popularize them with the help of professional teams and methods. Simultaneously, the awareness of rock art protection of the authority and the populace should be aroused by inter-disciplinary theoretical research and popularization of rock art knowledge; on the basis of good protection of rock art heritage, we need to cooperate with tourism management sections to develop related cultural tourism industry (Chen 2010). These respects call for related sections to establish specialized teams and implement. Only in this way can Chinese abundant rock art heritage be better preserved and effectively exploited in today's society.

The management and research of cultural tourism are mainly from such angles as principles of protection, management and planning, application ways of rock art's visual symbols to elucidate the development concepts of contemporary Chinese rock art's cultural tourism; while some pay attention to the construction of rock art data base, stating that rock art, as cultural heritage, can be developed into a new model of professional inquiry, cultural communication, education popularization and commercial development in the Internet era, championing establishment of virtual museums online and offering a wide array of relatively feasible solutions; others propose that the management of rock art resources should set a new model of "archaeological park". Currently, the above managing model is gradually carried out, with the possibility of advancing Chinese rock art's research and conservation as well as generating instrumental socio-



economic benefits. For example, Helanshan rock art in Ningxia, with the assistance of the autonomous region's tourism bureau's promotion, has tried to combine rock art with tourism and cultural industry. Together with the opening of "Yinchuan World Rock Art Pavilion", they have started to hold Helanshan Rock Art Festival annually, which aims at using rock art as the media to facilitate rock art's research, conservation and management by building a public platform of communicating culture for the government, media and the public's deep understanding of rock art. Huashan rock art in Guangxi province, clustering along the bank of River Zuo, has been specially developed into rock art tourist itinerary, which explores the new model of cultural tourism. RARAC has formed specialized project teams and undertaken the national research project to take the conservation and development policy research of rock art and the data base construction as the focus of its work. Since the management and application of rock art involves commercial models, they call for the further attention and devotion from all sectors of the community and the government.

V. Conclusions

Chinese rock art study, as a disciplined research system, has its own place in Chinese academic circle, which can be attested by the rise of the number of institutions and scholars that are involved in rock art investigation and the breadth and depth of research are upgraded to some extent.

There are new opportunities and challenges ahead of the new century. In the 21st century, as we embrace the pluralism epoch, theoretical research and application research have both been taken to the agenda. With the continual enhancement of Chinese economic power and increase in investment on culture, there have been upsurges in scientific research projects, publications, news and web pages relevant to rock art. However, the unresolved problem of dating is still the main bottleneck of Chinese rock art research. Further, the discrepancy between Chinese culture and its foreign counterparts results in the phenomenon of different academic cognitions. For instance, in China, the English phrase "Rock Art" is also the synonymy of rock & roll, which has affected domestic researchers' online search results and resulted in the wrong notion of rock art during

the process of education popularization.

In the October of 2012, RARAC had a communicate and converse with SA's Rock Art Research Institute in a series; they jointed field work together in Inner Mongolia, planned cooperation on teaching and researches. Meanwhile, RARAC is enthusiastically organized the Session on Chinese Rock Art of 2013 IFRAO Congress in the states and hosted the 2014 IFRAO Congress in Guiyang, China. The good news is that in 15th July of 2016, Guangxi huashan rock art successful become the 49th item of world heritage in China. Looking forward to the future, openness, sharing, communication and development will be absolute trends of rock art research and the discovery and study of Chinese rock art in the new century will surely be an indispensable part of the world rock art value system.

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