



## ROCK ART IN ONGNIUD BANNER AND ITS CREATORS

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**ABSTRACT** - Rock art remains newly discovered in Ongniud Banner, Inner Mongolia, which is a crucial area in the spread of the Chinese mask, have profound academic research value. Based on the results of the investigation of the following four rock art sites, Baimiaozi Mountain, Heitou Mountain, Maoniuhai Mountain and Jianyan Mountain, this paper analyses the first-hand data such as local masks, geometric symbols, cupules, animals and the ecological environment. It provides a detailed description of the field investigation of these four sites, and it tries to use interdisciplinary comprehensive comparisons to do preliminary analyses on the subjects, fabrication methods, periodisation, regionalisation and classification from semiotics, typology, ethnology and other disciplines. It reveals that rock art consists of important historical data and materials about local ethnic groups. The creation process of rock art with quite different styles distributed in adjacent places continued for thousands of years, and there has been more than one ethnic group living and reproducing on this land. They had different beliefs and means of livelihood, but all of them invariably chose masks as the subject of expression. Differently from other rock art in the regions where the mask is found, creators of rock art in Ongniud Banner convey more personalisation in recording or offering sacrifices to gods or ancestors.

**RIASSUNTO** - I resti di arte rupestre recentemente scoperti nella Bandiera di Ongniud, nella Mongolia Interna, dove si verificò una svolta nella diffusione della maschera cinese, hanno un grande valore per la ricerca accademica. Basandosi sui risultati delle indagini svolte in quattro siti di arte rupestre – monte Baimiaozi, monte Heitou, monte Maoniuhai e monte Jianyan – questo intervento analizza dati di prima mano, come ad esempio la maschera locale, i simboli geometrici, le coppelle, la fauna, l'ecosistema, ecc. Offre una descrizione dettagliata del campo di ricerca in questione riguardo ai quattro siti di arte rupestre considerati, e tenta di utilizzare un metodo di “completa comparazione interdisciplinare” per le analisi preliminari di soggetti, tecniche di produzione, periodizzazione, regionalizzazione e classificazione a partire dalla semiologia, tipologia, etnologia e da ulteriori punti di vista. Tale intervento rivela come l'arte rupestre fornisca dati e materiali storici importanti per comprendere lo sviluppo dello spirito dei gruppi etnici locali. Il processo di creazione dell'arte rupestre, caratterizzato da stili piuttosto diversi distribuiti in aree adiacenti, ha attraversato i millenni, e più di un gruppo etnico ha vissuto e si è ingrandito in questa regione. Tali gruppi hanno avuto diverse credenze e mezzi di sostentamento, ma tutti hanno scelto allo stesso modo la maschera come soggetto della propria espressione. A differenza di altri siti di arte rupestre nella regione dove si sono diffuse le maschere, i creatori dell'arte rupestre della Bandiera di Ongniud comunicano un maggior grado di personalizzazione nel processo di registrazione e di offerte sacrificali agli dei o agli antenati.

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### PREFACE

Rock art in Ongniud Banner is an important cultural resource for prehistoric art in Chifeng. Since 2007, a great amount of rock art remains have been discovered in Chifeng, Inner Mongolia, which attracts the attention of academic circles. Some rock art sites in Ongniud Banner were discovered early on and some new findings were made later. In 2011 and 2012, the writer carried out archeological field investigation into rock art in Ongniud Banner and obtained important material on rock art. It is the first large-scale and systematic investigation and arrangement of rock art in Ongniud Banner.

This paper arranges the first-hand data about such rock art sites as Baimiaozi Mountain, Dahei Mountain, Maoniuhai Mountain and Jianyan Mountain in order by districts, periods and types, tries to connect the contents, methods of creation, styles and other characteristics to the livelihood of ancient ethnic groups, and uses the interdisciplinary study method to explain the data about ancient culture. Rock art in Ongniud Banner provides a glimpse of several ethnic groups with different means of livelihood which migrated, lived and created arts in this area, and it shows that each ethnic group has its own beliefs and expressions at different times and living environments.

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## 1 BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ROCK ART IN ONGNIUD BANNER

### 1.1 Geographical Position of Ongniud Banner and its Cultural Characteristics

Ongniud Banner is located in central Chifen City, northeast of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the mountainous intersection region between the southwest of Greater Khingan and the north of Qilaotu, and the west edge of the sands in Khorchin. It has an area of 11,800 square km and has a temperate zone continental monsoonal climate. Its topography is high in the west and low in the east, with altitudes between more than 2000 m and over 200 m. There are middle-mountain terraces in the west of Ongniud Banner, low hilly ground in the centre and a plain consisting of sandy belts in the east. Tributaries of the West Liao River, the Xar Moron River and the Laoha River encircle this long and narrow area, meadow and sand dunes interlace in the central part, and the unique geographical environment provides complex living conditions for people to multiply and live on this land at different times, forming their livelihoods with a combination of farming, animal husbandry and fishing. Donghu people, Hsiung-nu, Xianbei, Turk, Khitan, Nuchen, Mongolian and other peoples successively lived and multiplied in this area, dotted about with a large number of cultural remains from the Neolithic period, the Bronze Age and so on.

### 1.2 Investigation into Rock Art Sites in Ongniud Banner

Rock art in Ongniud Banner is an art carved by artists, which is mostly distributed in the following four rock art sites with 81 places, 115 panels and 389 single images registered (see Fig. 1).

#### *Baimiaozi Mountain*

Baimiaozi Mountain is a rock belt with an area of 25,000 sq m (500 m long and 50 m wide) (see Fig. 3). GPS coordinates are located at 119°21'39.5" East longitude, 43°08'50.2" North latitude and 534 m above sea level. We found and registered rock art distributed in 11 places with 14 panels and 59 single images, including 28 masks, 22 cupules, 3 symbols and 6 characters. The concentration of rock art is at a rock called the Huge Potato Stone, which is like a huge sweet potato, on its flat face towards the southeast densely covered with 15 masks of different forms, the largest mask among them very obvious because it is carved with thick and deep lines. There are 19 cupules at the top of the rock arranged in what are referred to as astrological aspects (see Fig. 4).

#### *Jianyan Mountain*

A huge rock located beside a road at the foot of Jianyan Mountain is 5.5 m long, 3.6 m wide and 2 m high. On it we found six recognizable rock art pictures carved deep with wide lines, all of which are masks with two eyes consisting of concentric circles. GPS coordinates are located at 118°58'25.0" East longitude, 43°04'24.8" North latitude and 626 m above sea level. Rocks around the rock art in the mountains have been quarried, so the environment is devastated, which is difficult for the preservation of rock art.

#### *Dahei Mountain*

Dahei Mountain consists of a series of gentle slopes. The relative elevation of Dahei Mountain is about 70 m. The area below the mountainside is eroded by sand; most of the area above is covered by crushed stones, and there are dark brown rocks of different sizes scattered near the top of the mountain (see Fig. 6). Rock art is engraved at the top or at the side towards the summit of the rocks, which are scattered at the middle or top of the three mountains nearby with an area about 200,000 sq m. GPS coordinates are located at 119°33'06.6" East longitude, 42°49'05.8" North latitude and 705 m above sea level. We found and registered rock art distributed in 42 places with 59 panels and 256 single images, including 6 masks, 230 symbols, 17 characters and 3 animals. Most of the rock art here is chiselled by beating to form dots with shallow gouge marks. The magnetic field in this mountain is so great that the compass cannot work properly here. Wu Jiakai, a local scholar of rock art, thinks that the contents of rock art here and the abnormal phenomena of the magnetic field in this place are related to the fact that a meteorite landed here (Jiakai 2008).

#### *Maoniuhain Mountain*

The relative elevation of Maoniuhain Mountain is less than 100 m. The area round it is comparatively wide. The mountain is narrow and long, and its ridge lies towards south and north. There are black rock art belts at the top of the ridge of the slope in the south. Black and terraced cliffs and the special colour dominated by brown sandstone, are very spectacular. Rock art concentrates upon the black ore belt about 200 m long and 100 m wide, which covers an area of 20,000 sq m. GPS coordinates are located at 119°40'35.0" East longitude, 42°51'47.0" North latitude and 591 m above sea level. We found, measured and registered rock art distributed

in 27 places with 38 panels and 68 single images, including 21 masks, 42 symbols, 4 characters and 1 animal. The subjects of the rock art are dominated by circular symbols and connected lines. The methods of chiselling are similar to the rock art in Dahei Mountain. Due to exposure to the sun, wind erosion, plant growth and other factors, the rocks have cracked seriously. Most of the rocks are damaged and broken, so they are full of cracks. The rock art has been destroyed so badly that most of it are unrecognizable. Images are distributed densely here, and the remnant images can be seen everywhere. We could not produce whole statistics on the rock art because of this damage. We can imagine the spectacular scene of mountain images during its creative prime.

Table 1. Information table of rock art sites in Ongniud Banner

Rock art sites	Amount of panels	Amount of images	Major images	Associated images	Methods of creation	Features
Baimiaozi-Mountain	14	59	Masks	Cupules, characters, symbols	Chiselling, repeated grinding	Big images, wide and deep lines
Jianyan-Mountain	4	6	Masks	Concentric circles	Chiselling, repeated grinding	Big images, wide and deep lines
DaheiMountain	59	256	Symbols	Masks, human figures, animals	Chiselling by beating to form dots, grinding and cutting	Small images, thin lines with shallow chiselling traces, overlap between images
Maoniu-haiMountain	38	68	Symbols, Masks	Human figures, animals	Chiselling by beating to form dots, grinding and cutting	Small images, thin lines with shallow chiselling traces, overlap between images

2. PRELIMINARY EXPLORATION OF ROCK ART IN ONGNIUD BANNER

2.1 Subjects and contents of rock art

The main content of rock art in Ongniud Banner are masks and symbols like human beings, and ancillary and associated images including circles, concentric circles, cupules, short lines and animals. While masks prevail in the rock art of Baimiaozi Mountain and Jianyan Mountain, where they share a similar style, with deep chiselling and thick lines accompanied by cupules, symbols prevail at Dahei Mountain and Maoniuhai Mountain, where low relief lines formed by dot chiselling are predominantly found. In the rock art of Dahei Mountain and Maoniuhai Mountain, round symbols and lines predominate, together with masks which are represented by cross-and star-like symbols decorating ears of masks or by tops of masks wearing head ornaments, demonstrating noticeable differences both in style and rock materials compared with the rock art on Baimiaozi Mountain. The following relatively clear images are selected from the survey data to describe for easy recognition and further study.

Table 2. Major images of masks in Baimiaozi Mountain

				
2012NWbmzY01-①	2012NWbmzY01-②	2012NWbmzY01-③	2012NWbmzY01-④	2012NWbmzY02
				
2012NWbmzY03	2012NWbmzY06-①	2012NWbmzY06-②	2012NWbmzY08-②	2012NWbmzY09

Table 3. Major images of masks in Jianyan Mountain

		
2012NWjysY01	2012NWjysY02	2012NWjysY03



Table 4. Major images of rock art in Dahei Mountain

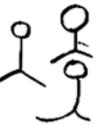
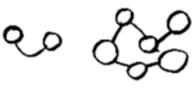
Masks				
No.	2012NWhtsY09	2012NWhtsY10-①	2012NWhtsY11-①	2012NWhtsY22
Symbols like human figures				
No.	2012NWhtsY10-②	2012NWhtsY11-②	2012NWhtsY26-③	2012NWhtsY30
Animals				
No.	2012NWhtsY23	2012NWhtsY24	2012NWhtsY26-①	
Aspect astrology symbols				
No.	2012NWhtsY06	2012NWhtsY20	2012NWhtsY21-②	2012NWhtsY31

Table 5. Major images of masks in Maoniuhai Mountain

Masks				
No.	2012NWmnhY03	2012NWmnhY09	2012NWmnhY12	2012NWmnhY13
Human-like masks				
No.	2012NWmnhY05	2012NWmnhY10	2012NWmnhY14-①	2012NWmnhY22

### Masks

As shown in the above charts, all of the four rock art sites have masks. And masks in Baimiaozi Mountain and Jianyan Mountain have simple and refined lines but incomplete organs, prominent eyes with a serious expression and obvious deification, such as Fig. No. 01 rock art ① in Baimiaozi Mountain (see Fig. 8) and No. 01 rock art in Jianyan Mountain, where eyes in concentric circles dominate the rock art. In accordance with the theory of Song Yaoliang, concentric circles as the associated symbols of masks have three possibilities: sun worship, reproduction worship and celestial body worship (Yaoliang 1992).

Rock art in Maoniuhai Mountain and Dahei Mountain is more vivid, with definite contours and clear facial organs, and includes combined subjects that enrich the contents, such as images: No. 2012NWmnhY03- ① and No. 2012NWhtsY11- ① (see Fig. 9), both of which have rhombic contours, ears and heads decorated with four-cornered stars, some people called water chestnuts (Jiacai 2008), jaws with obvious fins, shallow chiselling, unique forms, humorous expressions and a strong and intense life flavor, which can be understood as personalized creatures in the form of fish (Xiaoneng 2008). In Chinese traditional concepts, scales of fish and patterns of plants symbolize reproduction worship. This kind of rock art express explicitly and definitely the means of livelihood and totemism. There are large areas of masks, as the Saint Icon Wall in the Yin Mountains in Inner Mongolia and Helan Mountain in Ningxia, which indicates that most of the masks occurred in the places where people held religious ceremonies, because they had ancestor worship and tribe worship. Only one

rock had petroglyphs in Jianyan Mountain. Rock art in Baimiaozi Mountain concentrates on a rock belt and mainly concentrates on the Huge Potato Stone, consistent with the function of the Saint Icon Wall. The most prominent characteristic of masks in Baimiaozi Mountain and Jianyan Mountain is circular eyes rather than the radiance of the sun, which is slightly different from masks with the sun god in the Yin Mountain and Helan Mountain. Even though a few of them are similar to the radiance of the sun, the rays are mainly down. The rays are more like personalized beards or teeth. It shows that rock art here consists of a kind of god masks of ethnic groups but more personalized. Thus it seems that ethnic groups worshipped ancestors and imagined gods together.

### *Cupules*

On the top surface of the Huge Potato Stone in Baimiaozi Mountain, there is a linear array of 19 cupules of different sizes (Fig. 10), similar to the cupules group on the Saint Icon Wall at the Gerl Aobao Valley of the Yin Mountains and ancient aspect astrology at the General Cliff, Lianyungang (Wei 2008). As associated symbols of masks, cupules are always regarded as an expression of aspect astrology (Yaoliang 1992); but some people think cupules represent the vulva, and are thus an expression of reproduction worship (Hongli 2012).

### *Symbols*

Symbols dominate rock art in Dahei Mountain and Maoniuhai Mountain. The typical picture is a symbol like human beings, the structure of which is composed of three parts, a circle on the top, a vertical bar in the centre, with beside the vertical bar, a short line like an arm in some images; at the bottom of the vertical bar there are two oblique lines, forming an image which looks like a person who is walking. Some of these images represent an individual person, and some represent two or more persons. It seems that these images are used for describing certain events or scenes connected with life. Some dynamic images can make people feel a joyful atmosphere in dance or ceremonies. Some images are a continuous type (Fig. 11), that is, circles and lines connected repeatedly and freely, without any particular definite direction, but there is a certain sense of order in that kind of combination. Some locals thought that these images were astrological maps or prehistoric characters called aspect astrology symbols.

### *Animal Rock Art*

Only four images of animal rock art were found in Ongniud Banner. Three of them are in the middle of the southern hillside of Dahei Mountain, and another in Maoniuhai Mountain. We initially judged the animals as a snake and three deer. It is noteworthy that in no.24, deer rock art in Dahei Mountain, the neck of the deer is intertwined with ropes. It seems that it is a domesticated or captured prey. It can provide reference for the study of ages of rock art.

## *2.2 Methods of Rock Art Creation*

There are mainly three methods of creating rock art in Ongniud Banner.

Chiselled and ground deeply, which can be seen in the rock art in Baimiaozi Mountain and Jianyan Mountain. Rock art in these two sites has wide and deep lines. The images are relatively big without specially detailed expression. From the extent of smoothness at the verges, we can judge that this kind of rock art was chiselled by stone tools, then ground repeatedly (see Fig.12). The width of its contour is always about 2–3 cm, the deepest line reaching 2 cm. Most of the images on the Huge Potato Stone are not clear now; only no.1 image is distinct from far away. Maybe that is because the original ancestors had ground it many times in sacrificial ceremonies (see Fig.4).

Chiselled by beating to form dots. The rock art created by this method can be found in Dahei Mountain and Maoniuhai Mountain. The width of its contour is 6–8 mm. The rock art consists of numerous dense dots. The diameter of each dot is about 2–3 mm, and the dots' shapes are uniform. Such tiny marks are likely to be completed by metal tools.

Ground and cut shallowly. The rock art created by this method can be found in Dahei Mountain and Maoniuhai Mountain, i.e. based on the dots chiselled by beating, ground and cut in shallow lines and concave surfaces to make the contour clearer. Most of the symbols and some comparatively complete masks and animals were created by this method (see Fig.13).



In general, the method of chiselling by beating to form dots and grinding is relatively casual and coarse, compared with the method of deeply chiselling and grinding.

### *2.3 The Study of Rock Art in Ongniud Banner by Zones, Periods and Types*

The subjects and methods of creation of rock art in Ongniud Banner can be roughly divided into two zones (north and south), three periods (early, middle and late) and three types (masks with circular eyes, compound masks and geometric symbols). All of them have unique styles, characters and conditions for creating, thus they can be differentiated clearly.

#### *Rock Art in the Northern Region*

Baimiaozi Mountain and Jianyan Mountain are located in the northern region of the rock art group of Ongniud Banner, which is densely covered with Neolithic sites. The creative methods of rock art in the northern region are similar, dominated by masks chiselled deeply with thick lines, abstract expressions of eyes made of concentric circles, obvious symbolic features, which can be called the masks with circular eyes. This kind of rock art is chiselled and ground by stone tools, without the traces made by metal tools, so we can judge that the latest time for its creation should be the Late Neolithic Period, equal to the periods from Xiaohexi, Xinglongwa, Zhaobaogouto to the Hong Shan culture, dating back to approximately 8,500–5,000 years ago, which is the early stage of Ongniud rock art. That stage coincided with the prime of the Holocene warm period when the original farming culture developed in favorable ecological circumstances and peaked in the period of the Hong Shan culture (Yongjie 2007).

#### *Rock Art in the Southern Region*

Maoniuhai Mountain and Dahei Mountain are located in the southern region of the rock art group of Ongniud Banner, where there are remains from the Neolithic period to the Yuan Dynasty. The widely use of chiselling by beating to make dots indicates this kind of rock art belongs to the Bronze Age or the Iron Age. In addition, based on overlapping relationships existing in the rock art, the Bronze Age or the Iron Age can be divided into two stages, early and late.

The masks with earrings and headwear are the most unique kind of mask that have been found in China, showing clearly the five organs of sense and with contours, and the rhombic face which seems to be the unique mark of an ethnic group; the decorative parts of the masks boast obvious features, most of which are cross-shaped stars, fins and fishtails. They do not have direct connection with the northern Masks with Circular Eyes, thus they can be called Composite Masks. Southern masks are created by chiselling by beating to make dots and grinding and cutting shallowly. The colour of the traces of chiselling is consistent with that of other parts of the surface of the rock, which indicates the masks were created long ago. These masks were obviously created by metal tools, but fins and cross-shaped stars (water chestnuts shape) dominate the images; people used fish and aquatic plants as totems and lived by fishing, hunting and gathering at that time, which indicates a decline in farming culture. That decline coincided with the event of 4,800 years ago, West Liao river basin having consecutively dropped in temperature for 600 years (Yongjie 2007). During that time the climate worsened, remains lessened, and desertification occurred due to long-time extensive agricultural reclamation (Yuqin 2002). It is very possible that before the beginning of the Lower Xiajiadian culture, there was an ethnic group whose main mean of livelihood was fishing, hunting and gathering in this region. Therefore, masks with fins are reserved in a small sphere. This kind of mask was created in the Stone and Bronze Age or the early Bronze Age (approximately equal to the stage of the Xiaohexi culture, the medium stage of Ongniud rock art).

Some relatively new marks of grinding and cutting appeared in the southern rock art, so we can judge that it was created later than in the northern region. These symbols like human beings and aspect astrology symbols composed of circles and ligatures can be classified as the Geometric Symbol type which belongs to the late stage of Ongniud Banner. In this period, reindeer were the main animal as the associated image, vaguely revealing that animal husbandry economy dominated people's livelihoods. Therefore, the upper boundary of creating this kind of rock art may be after the Upper Xiajiadian culture, during which animal husbandry sprang up. At that time, the climate was inclining towards cool and cold, and dry farming was gradually replaced by animal husbandry that could adapt to the cold and dry climate. It is very possible that this kind of rock art was created by the nomads.

The contents of rock art in Dahei Mountain and Maoniuhai Mountain overlapped each other, but they have different styles, contents and methods of creation, thus the authors of these two kinds of rock art are likely to not belong to a continuation of the same ethnic group.

## 3. CONCLUSION

In general, the motivation of rock art creation expressed by the early, middle and later periods of the development of Ongniud rock art group not only has the godhead significance of ethnic identity and totemism, but also contains the connotation of reproduction worship and religious ceremonies (Guanglin 2004). While rock art creators of the early period worship ancestors, the moon, the sun and the stars, which leans towards the godhead, creators of the middle and late periods pay more attention to themselves, and their ancestor worship, nature worship and reproduction worship become personalized. Whether it is majesty or joy, godhead or personification, fine or coarse, all of them represent the cultural history of the original ethnic group in Chifeng, Inner Mongolia, which indicates that cultural development here is rooted in the ancient culture of the Chinese northern grassland, which fused together such composite economies as animal husbandry, hunting, fishing and farming (Tianming 2012). They also have significant cultural value.

As for the rules of development of the original art, though there is no definite conclusion whether the rules progress from simple to complex or the contrary, there are some universal rules. Usually, at the initial stage of rock art, the creators were not professional. And most of the rock art is the free expression of natural things or emotions, so the rock art has various techniques of expression; creators did not pay much attention to site selection; images of rock art are coarse and lack unity and most of the rock art consists of realistic depiction of images. With the development of primitive religion, when creators were wizards and professional craftsmen, the ways of expression and contents of rock art changed to trends of modelling and the abstract. The types of rock art became unitary. Creators had to select the sites that met the requirements of religious worship: for instance, it is easy to produce the phenomenon of the Saint Icon Wall phenomenon. With the change and combination of the means of livelihood such as hunting, farming, animal husbandry and gathering, population increase, and the differentiation and integration of clan, the ethnic group's totem worship began to diversify, and the expression of image transformed from a single element such as human figures, animals, plants and nature to dual or multi-elements, thereby generating composite images.

Masks in Ongniud Banner were in the intersection which Song Yaoliang called the three transmission belts of masks. The abstract and model of masks show that this kind of rock art belongs to a relatively mature form of expression. The masks with a long history and mature full development indicate that they are not at the starting point of spreading masks. But we cannot determine whether there is continuity in its independent and full development in this area at present. We can get more information by a comprehensive analysis of all transmission belts of masks.

This article is a preliminary study based on fieldwork research. Considering that the study of prehistoric tribal art belongs to social sciences rather than natural sciences, the conclusions are open and not closed. I hope that this article can provide first-hand material for further study through these investigative data and the preliminary study, and explore and find more possibilities for primitive tribal rock art. As Professor Anati said: "All theories which attempt to determine that the art only has one motive are wrong." (Anati 2007). A lot of rock art is already damaged and has become unclear, or more illegible after being carved again; thus some images may not be recognized correctly and may mislead readers. Therefore, the scholars who want to verify accurately should visit the field site to do investigations.

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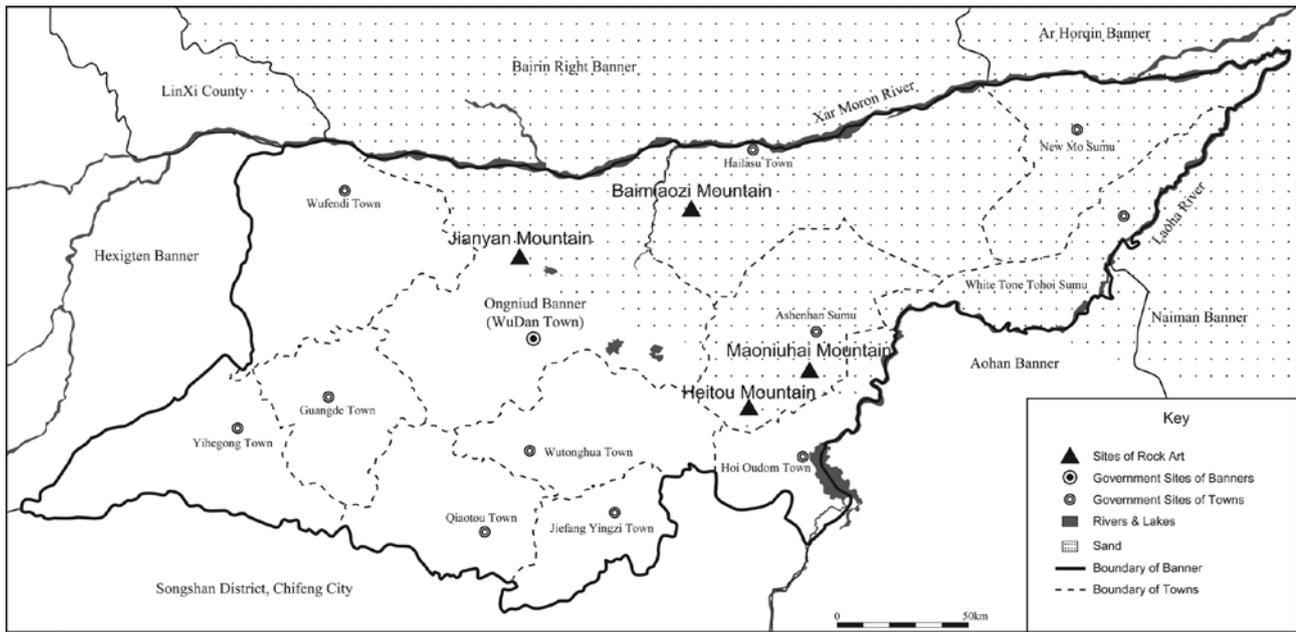


Fig. 1. Distribution Map of Ongniud Rock Art Sites



Fig. 2. Remains near ruins of Ongniud rock art



Fig. 3. Baimiaozi rock art site



Fig. 4. Huge Potato Rock in Baimiaozi Mountain rock art site



Fig. 5. rock art site in Jianyan Mountain



Fig. 6. rock art site in Dahei Mountain



Figure 7. rock art site in Maoniuhai Mountain



Fig. 8. No.Y01-① rock art in Baimiaozi Mountain



Fig. 9. No.11-① rock art in Dahei Mountain

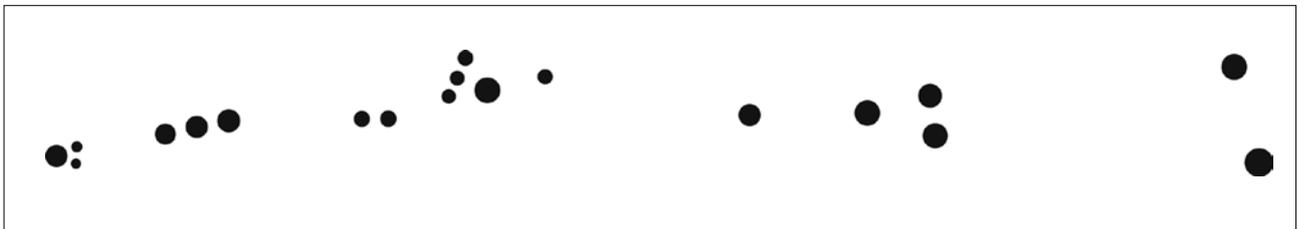


Fig. 10. Cupules on Huge Potato Rock



Fig. 11. No22 rock art in Dahei Mountain



Fig. 12. Cut Tools were Collected at Baimiaozi by Wu Jiakai



Fig. 13. No. 9 rock art in Maoniuhai Mountain

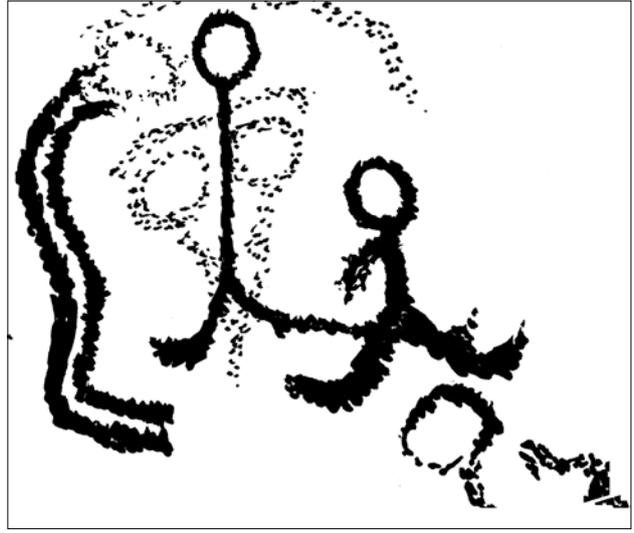


Figure 14. No.26 rock art in Dahei Mountain