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Note: Conference foreword

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International Conference on Dongba Culture: Visual Communication and Semiotic Perspectives

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The research question addresses the possible link between mesolithic cave paintings recently located in the remote Tiger Leaping Gorge, Yunnan Province, China and the local 4500 image, pictograph alphabet of the Dongba Minority People who inhabit the province. The question is addressed through a drawing practitioner's perspective.

The pictograph language, uniquely, is still practiced today through a range of activities including ritual to the central focus of the practicing artists. The region possess mesolithic drawing which are located in the along the Jinsha River [a primary tributary of the Yangtze] and span a distance of almost 200 kms. These sites, which are in remote locations have only recently become the focus of academic study and preservation. Often very hard to access sites located on the side of high cliffs - archaeological investigations are occurring to document these artefacts and substantial outputs are yet to be published. Consequently, the area remains under researched. In addition, Government supported access is very unusual and highly restrictive.

This project has gained access to one site in Tiger Leaping Gorge [TLG], which is thought to be the deepest natural gorge in the world located at an elevation of 15000 feet. In October 2012, a team led by the PI, Middleton, gained access to the site supported by the Chinese Government and in collaboration with the Communications University of China in Beijing. The 23-team

members that entered this location were selected for their creative skills, and archaeologists joined the group from the Institute for Chinese Cultural Studies in Lijiang, Yunnan, China to ensure ethical protocols were observed. An ITV documentary crew who recorded the experiences producing a narrative of the team's exploits also accompanied the team. From an established archaeological perspective, the TLG site is considered to be of lower value than sites elsewhere, because many of the images have been corrupted due to rock face erosion - put simply, the images are now incomplete. However, Middleton believes these images are of high value due to the use of different forms of visual language [to other sites] characterised by drawings produced with high fluidity depicting landscape, humans and objects as well as animals. Other sites are restricted to animal reference. An added issue is that the site is likely to be flooded to make way for hydroelectric dams that are being built in the area. Consequently the site will be lost.

The enquiry draws upon the skills and knowledge of the creative practitioners to provide a different understanding of how and why these drawings were produced. This work is advancing through deductive and analytical drawings and photographic techniques which seek to hypothesise the missing elements. Based upon transcribed conversation with the minority Naxi People their leaders who populate the area and practice the pictograph language, Middleton seeks to explore potential links between the cave drawings and the pictograph alphabet. Hey Limin, a celebrated Dongba Leader believes a link exists and it is articulated through narratives across the Dongba generations. However, concrete evidence, which one may expect to find in shared shape and form, are difficult to identify.

The enquiry seeks to establish the links between the cave paintings and the Dongba pictograph and beyond to how a visual language has contributed to the development of a culture. The corpus of the visual culture embraces ceremonies, rituals, artefacts, manuscripts and the region's contemporary practicing artists. This investigation takes a practitioners perspective in an attempt to decode the outputs of the corpus through the explorations of its visual language.



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