

PAINTED CLIFFS, DIVERGENT HERITAGE-MAKING: A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE COMPARISON OF HUASHAN (CHINA) AND PHA TAEM (THAILAND) ROCK ART

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to compare the Zuojiang Huashan rock art of Guangxi, China, and the Pha Taem rock art of Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand, in terms of (1) motif systems and painting techniques, (2) the “cliff-by-the-river” landscape grammar, and (3) the processes through which each has become a heritage resource and the positions assigned to local communities. The study employed a qualitative documentary research design guided by cultural landscape theory and the concept of authorized heritage discourse (AHD). Sixteen documents that directly describe or compare the two sites were selected through explicit inclusion criteria, coded with a deductive coding frame derived from the three objectives, and compared in a cross-case matrix. The two sites share a red-ochre medium and river-cliff setting but differ markedly. Huashan’s imagery is organised around hierarchical scenes of frontal crouching figures and bronze drums, fixed by a lime-and-blood binder, whereas Pha Taem’s documented imagery consists of riverine fauna such as catfish and elephants together with human figures. Huashan forms an expansive ceremonial landscape along the Zuojiang and Mingjiang rivers, while Pha Taem is a single frontier cliff above the Mekong. Huashan has been consolidated within a World Heritage and state-led AHD, whereas documentation of Pha Taem shows a national-park and tourism framework in which a UNESCO Global Geopark bid for the Ubon Ratchathani area follows a geological rather than a cultural pathway. The study contributes a “shared medium, divergent regimes” model, which shows that formal similarity between rock-art sites does not predict similarity in how they are made into heritage.

Keywords : Cultural landscape , Heritage-making , Rock art , Authorized heritage discourse , Huashan , Pha Taem

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INTRODUCTION

The Zuojiang Huashan rock art in Guangxi, China, was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2016 as a cultural landscape of 38 rock-art sites (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2016), while the Pha Taem rock art in Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand, is painted on cliff faces overlooking the Mekong River and gives its name to a national park (Tan, 2014). Rock art in Southeast Asia has been less thoroughly studied than that of Europe or Australia (Taçon et al., 2014), but recent work has advanced knowledge: archaeometric analysis has shown that the Huashan pigment was bound with a lime-and-blood mortar (Wu et al., 2026), newly recorded Lao sites suggest a shared regional visual vocabulary (Tan et al., 2026), and Li and Wang (2024) compared Huashan with the Thai Pha Taem in terms of environment, subject matter and technique, noting that comparative studies of Thai and Chinese rock art remain scarce.

These studies examine dating, materials, style and formal resemblance. What remains insufficiently explored is how the two cliffs have been turned into heritage: which institutions authorize their meaning, through which instruments, and how local communities are positioned. No study has compared the sites from this perspective or read the Chinese literature on Huashan alongside Thai scholarship on Isan identity. This is the research gap addressed here.

The sites form a productive contrast: both are red-ochre river-cliff traditions in borderland regions, the Zhuang homeland of southwestern China and the Lao-speaking Isan region of Thailand, yet one is a World Heritage property and the other lies within a national park. Because the two corpora are not contemporaneous and no transmission between them has been demonstrated, the study is designed as a parallel comparison rather than an argument for common origin. The researcher visited Huashan in 2025; this visit provided general familiarity with the setting but was not used as research data.

The study uses a qualitative documentary design in which 16 documents were analysed through content analysis and cross-case comparison, guided by cultural landscape theory and authorized heritage discourse. This article presents the research objectives, the literature review and conceptual framework, the research methodology, the results organised by objective and the discussion, followed by the conclusion, knowledge contribution and recommendations.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims:

1. To compare the motif systems and painting techniques of the Huashan and the Thai Pha Taem rock art.
2. To examine the “cliff-by-the-river” landscape grammar shared by the two sites and what it reveals about their ritual ecologies.

3. To analyse how each site has been transformed from a ritual landscape into a heritage resource and the position of local communities in that process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What previous studies have established

Regional syntheses establish the broad tradition to which both sites belong. At least 200 rock-art sites are documented in Thailand, the vast majority painted in monochrome red (Tan, 2014), and the earliest regional motifs, hand stencils and naturalistic animals, are of late Pleistocene age (Taçon et al., 2014). A Lao site also named Pha Taem must be distinguished from the Thai one (Tan, 2018). Site-specific studies of Huashan cover its chronology and authorship by the Luoyue, ancestors of the Zhuang, between the Warring States and Eastern Han periods (Zhu, 2019), its iconography of frontal crouching figures and bronze drums (China.org.cn, 2022), and its binder chemistry (Wu et al., 2026). Studies of the Thai Pha Taem are fewer and mainly descriptive: syntheses record its setting and motifs (Srisuchat, 2013; Tan, 2014), and tourism research identifies a need for sustainable, community-based tourism development at Pha Taem and the neighbouring Sam Phan Bok (Chantana, 2020). Comparative work has addressed formal similarity (Li & Wang, 2024) and regional stylistic connections (Tan et al., 2026). In synthesis, the literature explains what the paintings are and how they relate stylistically, but not how and by whom they are made meaningful as heritage today.

Heritage-making, sacred landscape and community

Rock-art sites in mainland Southeast Asia are often embedded in sacred landscapes (Tan & Taçon, 2014). A study of three other sites in northeastern Thailand, Khao Chan Ngam, Wat Phra Phuttabat Buaban and Phu Phra Bat, shows that rock-art places can function as religious sites today, where local stories rather than archaeological interpretation shape their meaning (Tan et al., 2016); Srisuchat (2013) similarly notes that local folk tales shape how people in Thailand perceive rock art. Heritage in the region is also shaped by identity politics: Isan regionalism grew out of the region's Lao-speaking majority and national integration (Keyes, 1967), and Isan identity has been re-articulated in recent decades (McCargo & Hongladarom, 2004). Recent Thai studies show Isan cultural forms moving between village settings and new media (Khota, 2026), Isan visual heritage used as a creative-economy resource (Chang, 2025; Yanpisit, 2024), and digital storytelling helping communities communicate their heritage (Siriwong, 2026); these insights have not yet been applied to prehistoric rock art.

Conceptual framework

Cultural landscape theory treats landscapes as the combined work of nature and humankind whose values may be associative and spiritual as well as material (Taylor & Lennon, 2011). It frames Objectives 1 and 2 by directing attention to the relationship between pigment, cliff, river and community, here called a landscape grammar. The concept of authorized

heritage discourse (AHD) holds that expert and state institutions define heritage value, typically privileging monumentality, scientific expertise and national narratives, while positioning communities as recipients rather than authors of meaning (Smith, 2006). It frames Objective 3. Separately, cultural landscape theory explains why the two cliffs look and sit alike but not why their heritage trajectories differ, while AHD analysis is usually applied to single sites in one state; combined, they separate the level at which the sites converge (medium and landscape) from the level at which they diverge (institutions and narratives). This study addresses the identified knowledge gap by applying this combined framework to both sites, moving the comparison beyond formal resemblance and bringing Chinese and Thai scholarship into dialogue.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design based on documentary research and a structured two-case comparison.

Research Area: (1) the Zuojiang Huashan Rock Art Cultural Landscape, Chongzuo, Guangxi, China; and (2) the Pha Taem rock art in Pha Taem National Park, Khong Chiam District, Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand.

Research Materials: Two groups of sources are distinguished. *Research data* are documents that directly describe or compare the two sites; they were coded and form the basis of the results (Table 1). *Contextual and theoretical literature* (Smith, 2006; Taylor & Lennon, 2011; Tan et al., 2026; and the other regional and Isan studies reviewed above) was used to frame the analysis and interpret the results but was not coded. Documents were included as research data if they (1) directly concern Huashan or the Thai Pha Taem, or compare them; (2) were issued by a peer-reviewed publication, a government or intergovernmental body, or an established news organisation; and (3) are traceable through a DOI or stable URL. Blogs, user-generated content, encyclopaedia entries, documents on the Lao Pha Taem and untraceable sources were excluded. Sixteen documents met the criteria.

Table 1 Research data (n = 16) by category and objective

Category	Documents	Objectives
Heritage decision	UNESCO World Heritage Committee (2016)	1, 2, 3
Archaeological and archaeometric studies	Wu et al. (2026); Srisuchat (2013); Tan (2014)	1, 2
Comparative study	Li and Wang (2024)	1
Tourism study	Chantana (2020)	3
Government records	National Cultural Heritage Administration [NCHA] (2026); Thailand Tourism Directory (n.d.)	1, 3

Category	Documents	Objectives
News reports	China.org.cn (2022); China Radio International (2018); Guangxi China.com (2023); Zhu (2019); Kuta (2026); Xinhua (2025); Tian and Chen (2026); Batsuwan (2026)	1, 2, 3

Source: Compiled by the researcher. Huashan is covered by 10 documents, Pha Taem by 5, and both sites by 1 (Li & Wang, 2024).

Credibility of Sources: Each document was assessed by source type, author or issuing body, date and traceability. Peer-reviewed and official documents were treated as primary evidence; news reports were used mainly for dated events such as legislation, rankings and policy decisions and were cross-checked where possible. All bibliographic details were verified against the original publications.

Research Instrument: A documentary coding form recorded, for each document, the objective addressed, a relevant excerpt, an initial code and a theme. Its deductive categories were motifs, composition, pigment and scale (Objective 1); substrate, siting and ritual associations (Objective 2); and institutions, legal and policy instruments, dominant narratives and community roles (Objective 3).

Data Collection: Sources were searched in Google Scholar, ThaiJo, CNKI, Wanfang, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre website, and official government and news websites, using English, Chinese and Thai terms for “Huashan rock art”, “Zuojiang”, “Pha Taem” and “rock art”. After duplicates were removed, titles and abstracts were screened against the criteria and eligible full texts were read. The final search was completed in September 2026, and all sources were re-checked in October 2026. The researcher’s 2025 visit to Huashan was contextual experience only; no field observations were recorded or used as data.

Data Analysis: Qualitative content analysis proceeded in four steps. First, each document was coded with the coding form. Second, codes were grouped into themes within each case (for example, “hierarchical composition” and “bronze drum” into the theme “ceremonial order”). Third, the themes of the two cases were compared objective by objective in a cross-case matrix (Table 3). Fourth, the matrix was interpreted through the conceptual framework. Table 2 gives examples of the coding. To keep evidence and interpretation distinct, each results section first reports what the documents state and then gives the researcher’s interpretation. Trustworthiness was supported by triangulation across source types, an audit trail of coding decisions, and citing dates and archaeometric findings as reported. The study involved no human participants; ethics approval was therefore not required.

Table 2 Examples of the coding procedure

Document (objective)	Excerpt	Code	Theme
China.org.cn (2022) (Obj. 1)	“a giant leader standing at the center ... smaller figures beating bronze drums, paddling canoes”	Hierarchical composition; bronze drum	Ceremonial order
Tan (2014) (Obj. 1, 2)	“cliff faces overlooking the Mekong river ... catfish, elephants and anthropomorphized figures”	Riverine fauna; river-facing siting	Riverine register
China.org.cn (2022) (Obj. 2)	“30-90 meters above the Zuojiang River”; “rituals and sacrifices are performed”	River-facing siting; ritual use	Water-anchored ritual ecology
NCHA (2026) (Obj. 3)	2018 regulation; all 38 sites listed as national key protection units; 5A status in 2024	Legal instrument; state ranking	Consolidated authorization
Batsuwan (2026) (Obj. 3)	Cabinet backs a UNESCO Global Geopark bid for Ubon Ratchathani	Geological designation	Dispersed authorization

Source: Compiled by the researcher from the coding form.

RESULTS

Results for Objective 1: Motif systems and painting techniques

Documentary evidence. At Huashan, each group of figures is described as consisting of “a giant leader standing at the center”, sometimes standing on a frog-like beast, surrounded by smaller figures “beating bronze drums, paddling canoes, or gathering by the riverside” (China.org.cn, 2022). The paintings were fixed to the limestone with a lime-based mortar containing animal and human blood (Wu et al., 2026); the authors’ further suggestion that some blood came from childbirth has been questioned by other scientists (Kuta, 2026). At Pha Taem, the largest painted cliff faces “contain depictions of catfish, elephants and anthropomorphized figures” (Tan, 2014), and Srisuchat (2013) describes “a row of objects like fish traps placed near handprints, fish and wavy lines depicting a fishing scene” at Pha Taem Khong Chiam. Srisuchat (2013) notes that Thai rock-art pigments were generally mixed with natural binders such as resin or animal tallow, but no archaeometric study of the Pha Taem pigment comparable to that of Wu et al. (2026) was found. The Pha Taem paintings have not been directly dated: Srisuchat (2013) states that Thai rock-art sites are generally undated and that a 1987 excavation at Pha Taem yielded historic-period material unrelated to the paintings, while the Thai government tourism directory gives a popular estimate of about 3,000–4,000 years (Thailand Tourism Directory, n.d.).

Interpretation. The medium is shared, but the content differs: Huashan's scenes are hierarchical and organised around the bronze drum, emblem of a regional ritual order, whereas Pha Taem's imagery centres on Mekong fauna and fishing equipment.

Results for Objective 2: The “cliff-by-the-river” landscape grammar

Documentary evidence. Huashan comprises 38 inscribed sites on steep cliffs “some 30-90 meters above the Zuojiang River and its tributary, the Mingjiang” (China.org.cn, 2022; UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2016), distributed along about 105 km of the two rivers within a basin where 89 rock-art sites are known (Guangxi China.com, 2023). China.org.cn (2022) also reports that “the painted mountains are revered by local people and rituals and sacrifices are performed”. Local legends about the origin of the paintings are also recorded (Zhu, 2019). Pha Taem is located on cliff faces overlooking the Mekong River (Tan, 2014), which here forms the border between Thailand and Laos. No document examined records local beliefs specific to Pha Taem; at the national level, Srisuchat (2013) reports that villagers living near rock-art sites in Thailand often believe the paintings were made by spirits and use the sites for ritual.

Interpretation. Both sites join paint, cliff and water, and both belong to a landscape in which rock art is associated with belief, documented locally at Huashan and only at the national level for Pha Taem. The scale differs: Huashan is a chain of painted cliffs forming an expansive ceremonial landscape, whereas Pha Taem is a single cliff at a national frontier.

Results for Objective 3: Heritage regimes and community

Documentary evidence. After inscription in 2016, Chongzuo adopted the Regulations on the Protection of the Zuojiang Huashan Rock Art Cultural Landscape, in force from 15 July 2018 (China Radio International, 2018). All 38 sites have been listed as national key cultural-relics protection units, conservation is supported by drone patrols, AI-based deterioration warning and three-dimensional digital replication, and the scenic area became a national 5A-level tourist attraction in December 2024 (National Cultural Heritage Administration [NCHA], 2026). The same official account frames the site as rooted in Luoyue culture and as a driver of tourism, rural revitalisation and local income (NCHA, 2026), and state media present Huashan to domestic and international audiences (Tian & Chen, 2026; Xinhua, 2025). For Pha Taem, the documents show that the site lies in the national park that bears its name, designated on 31 December 1991 (Tan, 2014; Thailand Tourism Directory, n.d.); tourism research in the Pha Taem and Sam Phan Bok communities that identifies a need for sustainable tourism development and closer coordination with the public sector (Chantana, 2020); and a 2026 cabinet decision to support a UNESCO Global Geopark application for the Ubon Ratchathani area (Batsuwan, 2026). No document found describes a cultural-heritage nomination for the Pha Taem paintings.

Interpretation. At Huashan, documented local reverence (China.org.cn, 2022) coexists with a dense framework of law, ranking, technology and official narrative that defines the site's

value. At Pha Taem, the documented frameworks are those of a national park, tourism and a geological designation, and the cultural significance of the paintings is not the organising principle of any of them. These findings concern how documents position communities, not how communities themselves experience the sites. Table 3 summarises the results.

Table 3 Cross-case comparison by research objective

Aspect	Zuojiang Huashan (China)	Pha Taem (Thailand)
Obj. 1: Motifs	Central leaders, crouching figures, bronze drums, canoes; hierarchical scenes	Catfish, elephants, human figures; fish traps and handprints
Obj. 1: Technique and date	Hematite with lime-and-blood binder; Warring States to Eastern Han	Red ochre; no archaeometric study; not directly dated
Obj. 2: Setting	38 sites on cliffs 30–90 m above two rivers	Cliff faces above the Mekong border
Obj. 2: Grammar	Expansive ceremonial landscape	Single frontier cliff
Obj. 3: Regime	World Heritage in 2016; 2018 regulation; national protection; 5A status in 2024	National park; tourism; provincial geopark bid in 2026
Obj. 3: Position of community	Documented reverence; official Luoyue narrative and rural revitalisation	Beliefs documented only nationally; need for sustainable tourism and public-sector coordination

Source: Compiled by the researcher from the documents in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

The results for Objective 1 confirm the formal similarity reported by Li and Wang (2024) at the level of medium, but they qualify it at the level of content. They are consistent with Tan et al. (2026), who identify a regional vocabulary in which animal imagery and handprints recur; Pha Taem fits this vocabulary, whereas the crouching figure and the bronze drum are specific to Huashan. This difference may reflect different social organisation: Huashan belongs to the bronze-drum culture of the Warring States to Eastern Han periods (Zhu, 2019), whereas Pha Taem shows no bronze-drum imagery. Chronology may also play a role, but only tentatively, because Pha Taem has not been directly dated; the popular estimate of 3,000–4,000 years (Thailand Tourism Directory, n.d.) is not based on chronometric analysis (Srisuchat, 2013). The argument for parallel development rather than diffusion therefore rests mainly on the absence of any demonstrated transmission chain and on the divergence in content, not on the age difference.

The results for Objective 2 support the view of cultural landscapes as combined works of nature and humankind with associative values (Taylor & Lennon, 2011) and the argument that rock art in the region is best understood within sacred landscapes (Tan & Taçon, 2014). They extend these perspectives by showing that one landscape grammar can operate at different scales. The evidence for local belief is, however, uneven: at Huashan it comes from news reports (China.org.cn, 2022; Zhu, 2019), whereas for Pha Taem only national-level observations are available (Srisuchat, 2013). Studies of living rock-art places in northeastern Thailand concern other sites (Tan et al., 2016) and cannot be transferred directly to Pha Taem; documenting local beliefs at Pha Taem is a task for fieldwork.

The results for Objective 3 are consistent with Smith's (2006) account of the AHD. Huashan displays its typical features: monumental and scientific value, state legislation and ranking, and a national ancestral narrative in which villagers appear mainly as custodians and beneficiaries. Pha Taem only partly fits this model. The frameworks documented there, a national park, tourism and a geological UNESCO bid, do not take the cultural significance of the paintings as their organising principle. This result challenges the assumption that World Heritage inscription is the natural endpoint of rock-art heritage-making and suggests a spectrum between consolidated and dispersed authorization. Research elsewhere in Thailand points to possible implications that require site-specific testing: national-park visitors at Chae Son, in Lampang, are partly motivated by cultural learning (Buasap et al., 2026), and digital storytelling has helped a Thai heritage community communicate its own history (Siriwong, 2026). Whether similar dynamics apply at Pha Taem cannot be determined from the documents. More generally, documentary research has clear limits: the documents reflect their authors' and institutions' perspectives, are more numerous for Huashan than for Pha Taem, and cannot reveal local beliefs or participation directly.

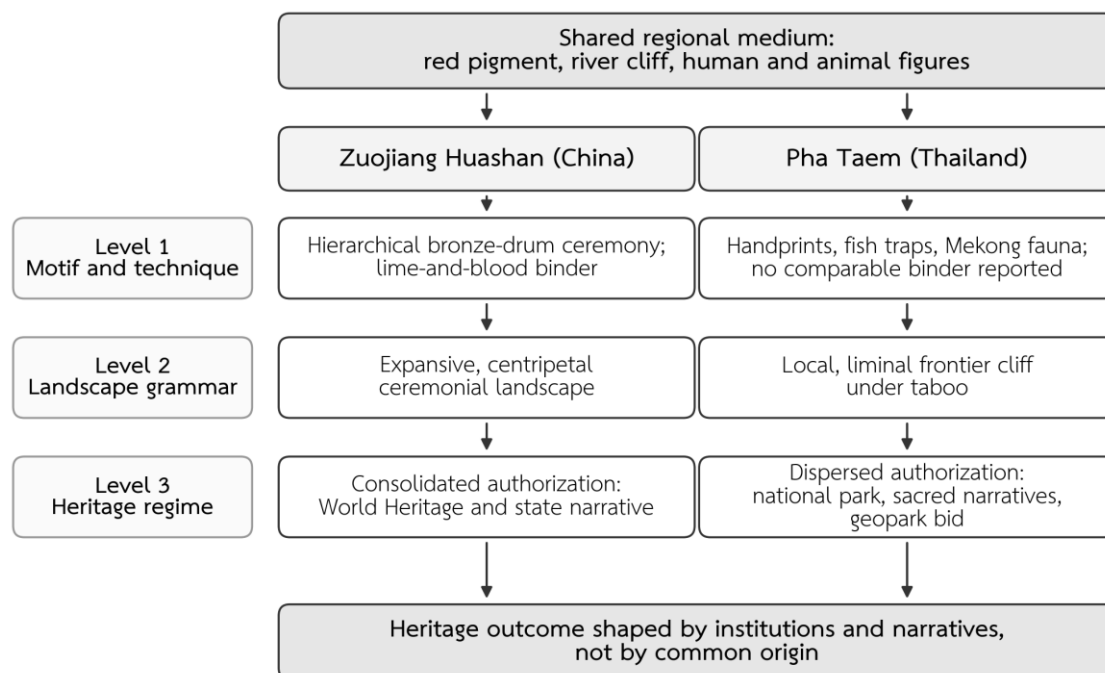
CONCLUSION AND KNOWLEDGE CONTRIBUTION

Regarding Objective 1, both sites use red pigment on river cliffs, but Huashan depicts a hierarchical, bronze-drum-centred order and Pha Taem riverine fauna and human figures. Regarding Objective 2, both join paint, cliff and river, at the scale of a ceremonial landscape at Huashan and of a single frontier cliff at Pha Taem. Regarding Objective 3, Huashan has been consolidated within a World Heritage and state-led AHD, whereas the documented frameworks at Pha Taem are a national park, tourism and a geological designation. The evidence does not support common origin.

The theoretical contribution is the “shared medium, divergent regimes” model (Figure 1). It has three components: (1) the regional medium, the shared repertoire of pigment, cliff and figurative imagery; (2) the landscape grammar, the way a community relates paint, cliff and river at a particular scale; and (3) the heritage regime, the institutions and narratives that

authorize meaning today. The model differs from stylistic and diffusion-oriented approaches, which compare sites mainly at the first level (Li & Wang, 2024; Tan et al., 2026), by showing that similarity at the first level does not predict similarity at the second or third. It also extends the AHD concept (Smith, 2006) from single sites to cross-border comparison, identifying a spectrum between consolidated authorization, as at Huashan, and dispersed authorization, as at Pha Taem.

Figure 1 The “shared medium, divergent regimes” model



Source: Developed by the researcher from the results of this study.

In practical and policy terms, the findings suggest that community perspectives deserve a larger place in interpretation at both sites and that the cultural significance of the Pha Taem paintings should be made explicit in national-park and geopark planning. The main limitation is the reliance on unevenly available documents that do not capture community voices directly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Practical Recommendations: Interpretation at Pha Taem should be developed with local communities so that any local meanings of the paintings can be presented alongside archaeological information, and interpretation at Huashan should include contributions from Zhuang villagers, for example through digital storytelling.

2. Policy Recommendations: Thai agencies preparing the Ubon Ratchathani UNESCO Global Geopark application should state how the Pha Taem paintings will be protected and

interpreted as cultural heritage, and Thai and Chinese heritage authorities could exchange expertise on cliff-weathering monitoring and digital documentation.

3. Recommendations for Future Research: Future studies should collect community perspectives through interviews and fieldwork at both sites, carry out archaeometric analysis of the Pha Taem pigments, and examine how the geopark designation, if granted, affects the interpretation of the paintings.

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