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The oldest Hoabinhian technocomplex in Asia (43.5 ka) at Xiaodong rockshelter, Yunnan Province, southwest China



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ABSTRACT

The Hoabinhian is the most representative technocomplex in Southeast Asian prehistory for the later hunter–gatherer period. As a mainland technology based exclusively on seasonal tropical environments, this core-tool culture was previously defined in northern Vietnam in 1932 and characterized originally by its large, flat and long, largely unifacial cobble tools associated with tropical forest fauna. The recent discoveries and dates obtained at Xiaodong rockshelter in Yunnan Province (southwest China) allow us to discuss the origin and the homeland of this singular Asian technocomplex which spread to Southeast Asia during the end of the Late Upper Pleistocene. Here we present the first Chinese Hoabinhian lithic implements in their stratigraphic and chronological context within a rockshelter site, and we address the question of the dispersal of modern humans from South China to Southeast Asia.

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1. Introduction

Xiaodong is a very large rockshelter in Yunnan Province, southwest China, 40 km from the border with Burma (Fig. 1). It is situated near the village of Nongke, Mengsheng town (Cangyuan County, Lincang Prefecture, Yunnan Province) at an elevation of 1195 m above sea level and lies within a small valley 15 m above the Hemeng River. The rockshelter consists of a large overhang within Permian limestone and is approximately 60 × 45 m large (Figs. 2 and 3).

The name Xiaodong translates as “saltpetre cave”. This mineral was dug from the site by the local villagers from the 1950s and used for explosive materials and in the iron and steel manufacturing process. Bat guano is also present in the deposits and was dug for fertiliser. The site was discovered during a survey for cultural relics

in 1981 by a joint team from the Yunnan Provincial Museum and the Lincang Institute of Cultural Relics when artefacts from the disturbed deposits were first collected. In 2004, Xueping Ji visited the site again, and with a larger sample of artefacts, he recognized the importance of the typological and technological information in the collection, which had not previously been reported (Zhang, 1991; Ji et al., 2006). In January 2007, Ji visited the site again with Kathleen Kuman and Ronald John Clarke and collected more artefacts and some fossils from the surface and disturbed deposits. A trench was dug for this visit by the Lincang Institute of Cultural Relics to determine if in situ deposits remained. A considerable depth of undisturbed deposits was confirmed in this trench, which had not reached the base of the sequence. In order to confirm the base of the cultural layers and collect more dating materials, Ji dug again in the test trench in February 2015. Finds included two core-axes from the bottom layer (Fig. 4). Due to a layer of large cobbles, the base of the deposits was still not reached, but more charcoal for AMS dating was collected. Although the surface of the site is heavily obscured by a mat of creepers and other vegetation and plant debris, the sheer size of the shelter indicates that substantial deposits remain to be excavated. Fragments of charcoal exposed in the

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Geographical Position of Xiaodong Site

Fig. 1. The geographic location of the Xiaodong rockshelter site in Yunnan Province, south China.

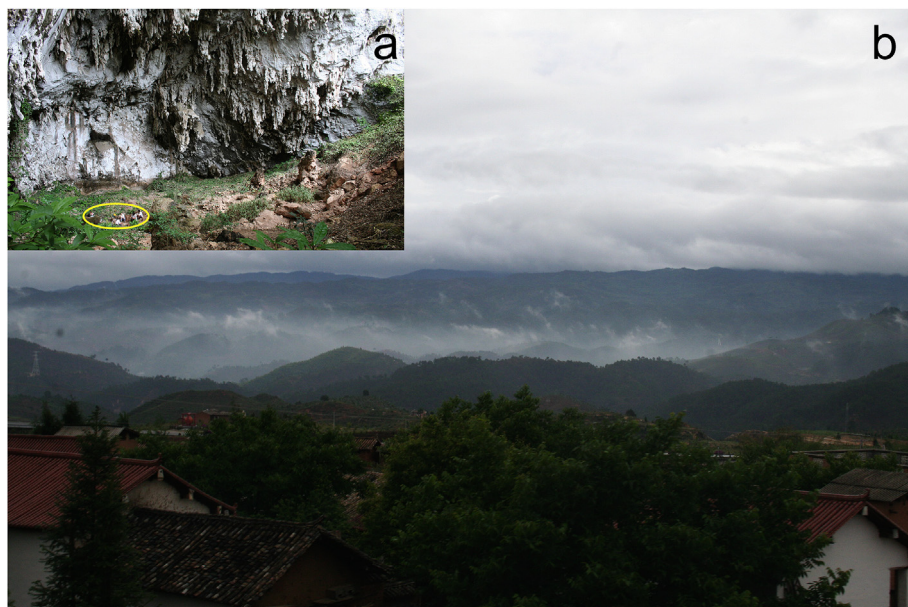


Fig. 2. a) the large rockshelter in Permian limestone; yellow circle shows sitting excavators for scale; b) a view of the hilly karst landscape typical of the region. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

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