

China's rock art discipline: at the crossroads. Reconstruct China's rock art discipline by anthropological theory and approach

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Abstract: Marginalized by the mainstream Archaeology, rock art studies is currently an embarrassing discipline in China. As the cultural heritage produced by the early human, however, rock art possesses research values and realistic significance of paramount importance. In the contemporary context of inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural research, to reflect the disciplinary hedges by integrating the academic perspectives as well as cutting-edge ideas of anthropological holism is conducive to eliminate the superficial mystery of rock art, to restore its authenticity of humanistic spirit, to conduct theoretical and applied research with both feet on the ground, to construct the academic idea of Anthropology of Rock Art and to re-shape the humanistic care which rock art heritage exerts on the contemporary society.

I. Overview of China's scientific research of rock art

By far, distributed in 70 countries across the five continents, more than 150 major rock art areas have been defined, numbering over 75 million figures, with a safe estimation probably totaling as many as 100 million figures throughout the entire world (E. Anati, 2010). As a universal cultural heritage in the world, rock art is the precious treasure our ancestors passed down to us. Only through various analyses as well as studies on rock art, and by decoding the mosaic encompassing human wisdom and spiritual needs, can we progressively interpret the world both material and spiritual at the childhood period of humanity. Being prehistoric cultural heritage distributed in the ethnic regions within China, remains of rock art serve as a documentary of production and life scenes of ancient groups in hunting, sacrificing, and battling, where their unique research value shines through in forming the national characteristics of Chinese nation multi-element integration pattern. Moreover, they are also perceived as an important chapter in the long history of Chinese nation's culture. With its astonishing quantity as well as tremendous cultural messages behind it, China's rock art takes up its position of paramount importance in the system of world rock art, which offers an extraordinary insight into the scientific research of Chinese cultural and ethnic history.

China's investigation and scientific research of rock art has witnessed its one-century development within the modern society (Zhang, 2006). Not until at the beginning of the 20th century with the sporadic discoveries, in particular the fieldwork conducted by Professor Huang Zhongqin of Lin Nan University and his subsequent publication on Southeast China's Hua'an Xianzitan rock art, did the curtain of scientific research of rock art eventually roll up in China. And then the golden era for China's rock art research fell between the 1980s and the middle 1990s, when a host of rock art sites were discovered, with extraordinary academic attention generated. Peaking slightly later, due to a wide range of difficulties, such as dating, China's rock art research was static around 1995, when numerous scholars successively suspended their continued interest in rock art (Zhu, 2013). At the dawn of new millennium, with the initiation of the Third National Cultural Relics Investigation, the scientific research of China's rock art rejuvenates again, taking on a new look, since an enormous quantity of rock art sites, in particular the rock art clusters of cupules distributed in Central China where it was generally perceived as a vast plain with no rock art produced for long, has

been discovered, attracting more special attention of specialists and scholars on rock art research again.

II. Embarrassing situation and development bottleneck of China's rock art discipline

For long, rock art has been always regarded as a comic book with no comments produced by ancestors living in the primitive society. From the perspectives of us their descendants, rock art often appears to get colored with a strong mystery, since no authoritative interpretations convince us. In China, the fact that rock art has been administratively categorized to cultural relics hinges upon its nature of being tangible cultural heritage, which is supposed to be included in the field of archaeology. The major tasks of China's cultural relics investigation and archaeological work is to divide the stages, regions and types, and to carry out in-depth fieldwork and statistical analyses by integrating the related disciplinary knowledge of typology, chronology, stratigraphy, history, philology and so forth. Presently, the research which the Chinese archaeological and cultural relics administrative departments concerned make places primary emphasis upon the investigation, documentation and general protective measures in tangible cultural heritages, whereas interpreting images on rocks breaks away from the academic range of tangible culture, but belongs to that of intangible cultural heritage, which goes far beyond the sole scope of Archaeology discipline. Yet, in China's academia, the scientific research of rock art has been marginalized by the mainstream Archaeology for the difficulties of its dating, with scholars in the circle of archaeology always ignoring theories of Primitive Culture, Origin of Writing System, Shamanism and Reproductive Worship proposed by rock art specialists, and even avoiding the theoretical research on rock art, which has brought the discipline of rock art into an embarrassment.

Widely spread in five continents, rock art has been recognized as an important world cultural heritage by UNESCO. The fact that it saw the golden era of rock art research between 1980s and early 1990s has been recognized by many specialists and amateurs who once conducted research on rock art, nevertheless, the view that they just wander outside the gate of rock art research with a wait-and-see attitude still prevails in China's academia, in particular the circle of Archaeology. Such mainstream consciousness that they hardly acknowledge the previous heat wave of rock art research enables rock art researchers to form a marginalized group who act as monologists, recreating themselves. No wonder

that rock art discipline naturally gets marginalized. The underlying cause of such phenomenon lies in the fact that in the system of China's archaeology, dating serves as the fundamental basis of archaeological research, while the difficulties of rock art dating greatly hamper their academic enthusiasm. Converse to unremitting investigations and studies of rock art in the western circles of Archaeology and Anthropology, such phenomenon hence leads to the slowdown of development of China's rock art research, with a sharp decrease in the number of researchers devoted to scientific research of rock art.

However, in the face of such numerous remains of rock art filled with primitive mystery, if to study them, it is unavoidable to interpret by images, with all sorts of suppositions and assumptions proposed; while if not to study them, it is often regarded as a pity. Mr. Hu Shih, a prominent scholar in the times of the New Culture Movement at the early 20th century, once put forward a famous view pertaining to the academic research, which goes "Bring about assumption boldly while verify it carefully". Actually, Chinese scholars of rock art have already taken their first step of proposing their assumptions, but a large number of problems require to be dealt with in the long march of verifying. In the contemporary context of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research, there is an urgent need to have reflections on the hedges between disciplines by integrating academic perspectives and cutting-edge ideas of anthropological holism, to restore the authenticity of humanistic spirit of rock art as an ancient artistic form by eliminating illusive representation, to conduct theoretical and applied research with both feet on the ground, to construct the academic idea of Rock Art Anthropology, and to re-shape the humanistic care which rock art heritage exerts on the contemporary society.

III. Learning and innovation of disciplinary theory and approach

The close relationship and distinctive differences co-exist between Anthropology and Archaeology (Pan, 1998), with Archaeology's emphasis on testimony on the basis of dating and topology, however, Anthropology's emphasis on culture, holism and case study on the basis of fieldwork and participant observation. Having set human as their research core, both are comparatively independent, but they mutually promote and benefit, with Archaeology requiring Cultural Anthropology's guidelines, however, anthropological research resorting to archaeological discovery and academic achievement (Tian, 2009).

The anthropological research of rock art discipline fixes its eyes on the artistic activities and phenomena of rock art by anthropological theory as well as approach; thinks and elaborates anthropologically through the scientific research on the artistic form of rock art; and further reflects and ameliorates the theory and approach of rock art discipline. With the prevalence of scientism and modernity, perceived as an independent cultural undertakings and academic field, rock art obtains a special sense of mystery by means of its professionalization, and triggers isolation from other fields as well. Therefore, it should first eliminate the mystery of rock art in the course of the scientific research, with its key step to establish aesthetic and pluralistic understanding standing-point towards rock art, and further discover the knowledge

system of Chinese folk and ethnic art in relation to rock art as well as the genuine charm of aesthetic ideas (Wang, 2011).

Since the 21st century, when Chinese archaeologists are still watching outside the gate of rock art research, the theory and approach of anthropological studies have provided favorable experiences from which we can learn to reconstruct China's rock art discipline. With the contemporary anthropological theory and approach finding expressions in the diverse trend (Wang, 2009), its inclusive and interdisciplinary research concept offers convenience for some marginalized disciplines, such as rock art studies, to draw on other disciplines, which is also conducive to broaden their academic perspectives.

For rock art studies, an inter-discipline embracing tangible and intangible cultural heritages, objective discoveries and subjective interpretations are unavoidable. In the range of rock art discipline, anthropology with inclusive academic perspectives probably acts as the most ideal option for the researchers. Facing the ever growing new discoveries of remains of rock art, no amount of difficulty will stop its scientific research from pushing forward. The carrier of rock art heritage is tangible, while its cultural nature and value intangible. In the course of scientific research of rock art, special attention should be focused on supplementing and benefiting each other in Archaeology, Anthropology and even more inter-disciplines.

The first decade of the 21st century has seen the dramatic shift from the conventional interest in non-western culture to that in worldwide cultural heritages in the world anthropological studies. As the deep-going research and development which western scholars have made to cultural heritage, China's academia begins to set its eyes on this field as well. At the meanwhile, with the initiatives of cultural industry construction made by the Chinese authorities, as the frontiers of encompassing tangible and intangible cultural heritage, rock art has been viewed as investigation and research objective within limit, gaining special attention once again. Studying archaeological remains and analyzing their cultural phenomena, archaeologists get the most out of rock art as valid testimony of their arguments, with other Humanities, such as art history, history, focusing their academic attention on rock art studies one after another. With the wide-ranging exchanges and deep-going cooperation with worldwide colleagues dedicated to rock art studies, as an inter-discipline within the contemporary community, rock art discipline appears to be ushering in another new research wave in China.

Investigation, documentation, conservation, research and development comprise the systematic research of rock art discipline. Currently, the development of rock art research still remains in the stages of investigation and documentation of rock art sites in China, for which the state and local Administrations of Cultural Heritage take responsibility as far as the administration of cultural relics is concerned. It is in the course of the National Cultural Relics Investigation conducted by archaeologists that the overwhelming majority of rock art sites has been known, investigated and documented. Whereas, factors of the vast distribution, distant location, high difficulty of conservation as well as comparatively low input-output ratio have contributed to the fact that rock art sites are subjected to severe destruction, with a host of most exquisite figures increasingly disappearing

forever. Few archaeologists get involved in research on rock art's cultural properties from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage. It is in recent years that the proposal of developing rock art resources has been put forward. Presently, preliminary attempts to boost cultural tourism development and to endeavor to inscribe the vernacular rock arts as UNESCO's World Heritage have been underway in some few ethnic regions of Helanshan Mountain in Northwest China's Ningxia and Huashan Mountain in Southwest China's Guangxi. And also the local authorities have kicked off their efforts to implement cultural industry plans with rock art set as the main body in Yinshan Mountain of North China's Inner Mongolia and Jucishan Mountain of Central China's Henan in the hope of promoting the research and conversation of local rock art and producing favorable social and cultural effects.

Theoretically and methodologically, China's rock art discipline is always groping its way forward along the academic track both archaeological and anthropological. On one hand, amongst the archaeological approaches, archeological typology is used to distinguish regions and types of rock art, while archeological chronological techniques are used to date and periodize rock art. And on the other hand, the anthropological research of rock art makes in-depth studies on primitive art, ways of livelihood, social pattern, religious beliefs and so forth on the basis of numerous fieldworks, which resorts to the archeological investigation outcomes and integrates the knowledge of ethnography, semiotics, art history, psychology, religious studies etc. Enormous studies could be summarized and categorized into two major theoretical systems: fertility theory of reproduction worship, and dualism theory of shamanism. Theoretical approaches and research paradigms in ethnographic research, religious studies and research of primitive groups which developed earlier in the West is really of great reference significance to China's theoretical research of rock art. From the cultural development, the contemporary art does have profound reflections on the charm of formal language of rock art heritages, which therefore reminds us of the urgent need to review the current situation that the circle of archaeology has a predominant say in the research system of China's rock art discipline. Within the mode of contemporary China's economic, social and cultural development, for China's rock art research, it should fully absorb the frontiers' ideas of contemporary anthropology, sociology, religious studies, psychology, art and even political economics in both fields of tangible culture comprised of material archaeology and conservation of cultural relics and intangible culture comprised of religion, art and ideology, creating and following the development road of academic research with its own characteristics, which seems to be its right direction.

IV. Research theory and approach of rock art discipline

The most fundamental characteristics of anthropological research find expression in fieldwork and participant observation. For rock art discipline, fieldwork acts as the fundamental approach to investigate and document rock art. Rock art has already stopped being produced within the overwhelming majority of contemporary communities worldwide. It thus appears to be mission impossible to participate, observe and study the production process as well as the technical methods,

let alone to explore the motivate of rock art producers and their related social activities by means of direct observation. In the face of the enormous quantity of rock art remains, most of Chinese rock art scholars attempt to have an understanding of primitive ancestors' ways of livelihood, psychological activities and ethnic migration by studying and analyzing figures and producing techniques of rock art.

Most of the current studies of rock art center on the theories of reproduction worship-oriented fertility and shamanism-oriented dualism. Whichever theory or school they hold, every scholar spares no effort to establish a theoretical paradigm, by which their theoretical arguments can be justified. However, the establishment of so-called theoretical paradigms gets absolutely saturated with apparent tendentiousness and theoretical prejudice, which easily produces some non-objective research outcomes. Academic research should be open and inclusive, while paradigms are mainly closed-end. Fixed paradigm induces fixed conclusion, which lacks inclusiveness, leading to the absence of cultural diversity in the research field.

Cultural pluralism and diversity hinges upon culture's nature both chronological and spatial, which has been generally recognized by the academic circle, while differentiation development of cultural heritages is currently getting to become the major component of local development of cultural industry. As an important part of local development of cultural industry, the development direction of rock art lies in the conservation and development as cultural heritage. Under this mainstream trend, the core of rock art's theoretical research requires regulating the rock art discipline, enabling its research steps and approaches much more workable, in a bid to meet the development needs within contemporary society and to boost the deep-going exchanges as well as wide-ranging collaboration with the rest disciplines.

Represented by rock art, the cultural ecological context all over China is that complex whole comprised of life, custom, idea, belief, technique and art which have been continuously precipitated and accumulated in the course of practices of production and life in the past tens of thousands of years, presenting us a vivid depiction that it is collectively produced, shared and inherited from generation to generation. A wealth of cultural resources of unique characteristics and rich diversity produced by ancestors of various ethnic groups in the long history can properly meet the development needs of contemporary cultural tourist industry and the psychological needs of tourists' pursuing the novel, the different, the pleasure as well as the knowledge. It nevertheless exerts multiply influence on the ethnic regions to blindly meet and implement cultural tourist development, where the original culture is bound to be subjected to devastating destruction and even the sustainable development of vernacular tourist industry and culture will be severely hampered, which has become the unavoidable problem we have to face when rock art gets developed as cultural heritage within contemporary society. Consequently, the series of investigation, documentation, conservation, research and development of rock art cannot march forward along the conventional road both archaeological and anthropological any longer, but should be conducted as an integrated whole instead, which serves as the historic mission of contemporary rock art researchers and also puts forward a new project for

them, that is the interdisciplinary research approach honoring the humanistic care of anthropological studies to contemporary social development. For instance, in the course of the vernacular scientific research of rock art, we should not only conduct systematic investigation and documentation of rock art in conjunction with associated archaeological, cultural relics and museum sectors, but also carry out systematic collation and publication promotion by professional teams and means. At the meantime, conservation awareness of the local authorities and the public should be highlighted by interdisciplinary theoretical research and promotion of knowledge concerning rock art. Furthermore, the related cultural tourist industry should get developed by tourist administration departments on the basis of well-protected rock art heritages in a moderate manner. Only through the concerted efforts of all the sectors concerned and well-organized implementation, will China's rich rock art heritages get even better conserved and much more efficiently developed within contemporary society.

V. Conclusion

To sum up, open, inclusive theoretical research and interest in as well as involvement in contemporary cultural industry can avoid researchers' embarrassment of speaking to and entertaining themselves, which is also conducive to find out the path of academic innovation. In a certain sense, the investigation, documentation, conservation, research and development of rock art is of major and realistic significance to the development of contemporary culture, which demands drawing on and innovating interdisciplinary theories and approaches. There is an urgent need to turn the previous rock art studies into Anthropology of Rock Art, where ideas of interdisciplinary research, cross-sector cooperative research and applied development of cultural industry should be established in a bid to provide us with the

guidelines to eliminate the superficial mystery of rock art and to restore its authenticity of humanistic spirit. Only by reflecting and reconstructing the cutting-edge theories of rock art, will this discipline continue in a deep-going and lasting manner.

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