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REVIEW ARTICLE

BOOK REVIEW: "HELAN MOUNTAIN ROCK ART: A HUNDRED THEMES"¹

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ABSTRACT

Since the discovery of the Helan Mountain rock art, a vast number of papers and monographs have been published on its investigation, research, conservation, and development. However, most existing works have focused narrowly on field surveys, specific rock art sites, or particular thematic categories, while others primarily serve as popular science introductions. A comprehensive, systematic study synthesizing the rock art's broader cultural, historical, and archaeological significance has remained lacking.

The book *Helan Mountain Rock Art: A Hundred Themes* (Helanshan Yanhua Bai Ti), authored by He Jide and edited by Ding Yufang, addresses this gap by presenting a structured examination through 100 key questions. It systematically covers four major aspects: fundamental knowledge of rock art, academic research methodologies, conservation practices, and sustainable tourism development. Beyond its role as a popular science resource, this volume serves as an essential introductory guide for professionals engaged in rock art preservation and research, significantly contributing to the dissemination and advancement of rock art studies.

KEYWORDS

Helan Mountain Rock Art: A Hundred Themes (Helanshan Yanhua Bai Ti); research and conservation; cultural heritage dissemination and promotion

Rock art, as precious historical and cultural heritage, constitutes crucial material for comprehending early human societies—their modes of production, spiritual beliefs, and the developmental transmission of civilization. Professor Huang Zhongqin's 1915 investigation of the Xianzitan petroglyphs along the Taixi Creek in Hua'an, Fujian Province marked the beginning of modern rock art studies in China. Subsequently, rock art discoveries proliferated across the country, particularly post-1949. These findings have stimulated escalating scholarly and public interest, yielding numerous publications encompassing field surveys, conservation research and tourism development. These collective efforts have established a robust foundation for both the development of rock art preservation and the disciplinary formation of rock art studies in China.

The rock art of Helan Mountain holds an important position in both Chinese and global rock art studies. Over the years, significant achievements have been made in its institutional management, scenic area development, field investigations, data compilation, research advancement, and cultural creative product development. Academic

circles have conducted extensive research on Helan Mountain rock art. Pioneering scholars such as Xu Cheng, Wei Zhong, and Li Xiangshi were among the first in China to undertake conservation studies. Their published works, including *Rock Art of Helan Mountain* and *Rock Art of Helan Mountain and Beishan Mountain*, provide relatively documentation of these cultural artifacts. The monograph *Rock Art of Helan Mountain and World Cultural Heritage* by Xie Yujie and Shu Xihong represents the earliest domestic exploration of the site's potential for UNESCO World Heritage nomination. The publication of *Rock Art of Helan Mountain* by the Northwest Second Nationalities College (now North Minzu University) further garnered international attention within rock art research communities. Additionally, the Helan Mountain Rock Art Administration of Yinchuan City has compiled and published numerous works on conservation research. While these publications have remarkable advanced research and preservation efforts. However, this work's specialized academic approach limits its suitability for popular science propaganda or ideal as introductory reading for beginners.

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Although over a decade has passed since its publication, *Helan Mountain Rock Art: A Hundred Themes* remains one of China's most all-sided studies of this cultural heritage. The volume bears the calligraphic title by master artist HAN Meilin, accompanied by his inscribed dedication “功德天品” (Gōngdé Tiānpǐn, “Virtuous Heavenly Work”). The work features a general preface by WU Zhongli, scholarly introduction by CHEN Zhaofu, and contains CHEN Yuning's prologue essay Lao He and the Rock Art (Laohe Yu Yanhua). This substantial 500,000-character monograph, illustrated with nearly 300 figures, provides access to Helan Mountain's ancient rock art through four integrated dimensions: fundamental knowledge of rock art, academic research, conservation, and rock painting tourism development. This work opens a window to the ancient rock art of Helan Mountain for the fields of rock art studies, historiography, and broader readership groups. It not only provides interpretation and explanation of Helan Mountain rock art, but more importantly achieves inheritance and innovation of its profound historical and cultural connotations.

1. POPULARIZATION OF FUNDAMENTAL ROCK ART KNOWLEDGE

Rock art studies is a comprehensive, interdisciplinary field. For beginners or those newly encountering rock art, foundational knowledge—such as the concept, discovery, dating, creators, classification, quantity, production methods, themes and content, field investigations, research theories, disciplinary development, and distribution areas—is essential and must be mastered. However, China currently lacks a rock art monograph or textbook that synthesizes these fundamental concepts. Instead, a wealth of basic rock art information is scattered across articles and works by different authors from various periods. Due to differences in the eras of these publications and the varying research focuses of their authors, discrepancies in foundational rock art knowledge often arise. This fragmentation makes it inconvenient for beginners and readers to consult and apply these concepts, definitions, and data, often leading to misunderstandings.

The dissemination of fundamental rock art knowledge permeates the entirety of *Helan Mountain Rock Art: A Hundred Themes*. The first section, titled “Basic Knowledge of Rock Art”, includes the concept of rock art, its mediums, forms of expression, world rock art, the distribution of Chinese rock art, the earliest recorded rock art in Europe, European cave art, historical records of rock art in China, modern investigations of Chinese rock art, contemporary discoveries and studies of rock art, as well as rock art sites designated as national key cultural heritage protection units. This overview is not a superficial discussion. Rather, it incorporates the author's insights and gains from years of rock art research. It summarizes, refines, and condenses a vast amount of rock art knowledge while integrating the research achievements of rock art experts both domestically and internationally. This approach enables readers to gain a broad understanding of the discovery, development, and research context of world rock art and Chinese rock art, thereby enabling readers to acquire fundamental rock art knowledge.

In the remaining sections, the book systematically elaborates on various aspects of rock art, categorized by themes. These include the theories, functions, current research status, dating, production techniques, creators, themes, content, identification and naming of rock art, as well as the distribution, characteristics, and challenges facing Helan Mountain rock art—such as natural and human-induced damage, methods of protection, documentation techniques, cultural relics around the Helankou area, and natural landscapes. The text also analyzes and corrects errors found in previous studies of Helan Mountain rock art. This approach further deepens readers' understanding, recognition, and discernment of rock art knowledge. For scholars just entering the field and preparing to engage in rock art research, this foundational knowledge serves as an essential introduction to the study and preservation of rock art, establishing a crucial knowledge base for their future professional work.

2. INTERPRETATION OF SPECIALIZED ROCK ART KNOWLEDGE

The “Rock Art Research” section in *Helan Mountain Rock Art: A Hundred Themes* consists of seventy questions. As the core part of the book, it

builds on the “Basic Knowledge of Rock Art” section to offer a more systematic and in-depth study and interpretation of Helan Mountain rock art. The first ten questions provide detailed explanations of rock art studies—including its research subjects and objectives, the functions of rock art, interpretive theories in rock art research, and the current state and prospects of rock art studies in China. They also highlight key events and features, such as the annual meeting of the International Rock Art Committee held in Yinchuan, the Yinchuan World Rock Art Museum, the distribution and characteristics of Helan Mountain rock art, and ancient human cultural sites along the eastern foothills of Helan Mountain. This gives readers a broad understanding of rock art studies, its theories, the global and domestic rock art community, and an overview of Helan Mountain rock art. It lays a solid foundation for the more detailed discussions that follow.

The remaining sixty questions cover nearly the full scope of rock art research. Based on an overview of Helankou's geographical location and ecological environment, a detailed introduction is given to the zoning of rock art at the site, including the specific position of each sector, the quantity, themes, typology, and content of petroglyphs within these zones and the establishment and public opening of the Helan Mountain Rock Art Scenic Area. Beyond Helankou, the book systematically introduces the main distribution areas of Helan Mountain rock art. It explains units like “group” and “panel” used in rock art surveys and statistics, combining them with real-world investigation data. The author even suggests that, despite years of surveys and documentation, many undiscovered rock art sites likely remain in Helan Mountain. On topics like the chronology of rock art, the era of Helan Mountain rock art's creation, and its creators—where academic consensus is still lacking—the book lists existing research findings or makes informed speculations based on domestic and international studies. Additionally, it offers a concise introduction to techniques like using stone scars to create rock art at Helankou, glacial striations, and the phenomenon of superimposition and cutting through in rock art. Drawing on the abundance of human faces, symbols, footprints, plants, and hunting scenes in Helan Mountain rock art, the text explores themes like fertility worship, totemism, male and female worship, and hunting rituals. This sheds light on the connections between rock art, primitive worship, and shamanism to some extent.

The remaining questions focus on a comprehensive study of Helankou rock art. They dive deep into its most iconic elements: human face motifs, the sun god, owl-faced depictions, Xixia inscriptions, human figures, handprints, and symbols like concentric circles, cupules, and crosses, as well as animals such as tigers, deer, cattle, and sheep. In the study of human face rock art, the book systematically presents the interpretations of three experts—Anati, Gai Shanlin, and Chen Zhaofu—on its cultural significance. Through comparative analysis with human face rock art from rock art of the Yinshan and Zhuozishan Mountains, inner Mongolia and Jiangsu's Jiangjunya site in Lianyungang, it considers factors like location, size, compositional complexity, stylistic differences, and frequency of appearance. This leads to a classification of human face rock art into six categories: nature worship, fertility worship, totem worship, deity worship, leader worship, and mask types². Each category is explained in detail. Building on this, the text draws on perspectives from historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and ethnologists worldwide, integrating extensive archaeological and ethnographic data to analyze special types like the “owl face,” “skull,” faceless human faces, one-legged human faces, and the sun god in Helan Mountain rock art. Other types of rock art are also thoroughly examined in the book. This not only highlights the artistic uniqueness of Helankou rock art but also uncovers its deep historical and cultural significance. Readers gain both a holistic view of Helankou rock art and a fuller appreciation of its historical and cultural value. Of course, since the book was published earlier, some rock art data have changed over time. But its flaws don't overshadow its merits.

3. DISCUSSION ON THE PROTECTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF ROCK ART

Rock art, as a form of historical and cultural heritage, presents an apparent paradox between protection and development. Yet, as the first rock art scenic area in China opened to the public, Helan Mountain rock art has, over the years, forged a path that balances both preservation

and utilization. He Jide, the inaugural director of the Yinchuan Helan Mountain Rock Art Management Office, personally witnessed this exploratory process of protection and development. Thus, in the "Rock Art Protection" section, he provides an accessible yet thorough explanation of natural and human-induced damage to rock art, along with corresponding countermeasures. This allows readers to see how rock art, as a historical and cultural heritage, can achieve a harmonious balance—where cultural heritage protection and tourism development complement and advance together.

In the final section of the book, "Rock Art Tourism," He Jide offers an introduction to the origin of the name of Helan Mountain, as well as the historical and cultural sites, natural landscapes, and flora and fauna surrounding the Helankou area. Readers come to understand that beyond the rock art itself, the Helan Mountain Rock Art Scenic Area encompasses other historical relics and natural wonders.

4. CONCLUSION

Helan Mountain Rock Art: A Hundred Themes, as He Jide's posthumous work, was published over a decade ago. Yet, it is precisely the passage

and test of time that increasingly highlight its significance. With concise language, detailed materials, and rich theoretical insights, the book comprehensively presents rock art—this precious cultural heritage left by ancient humans—to its readers. Its explanations of rock art theories and knowledge, its overview of Helan Mountain rock art, and its introduction and exploration of Helankou rock art build a bridge for beginners entering the field of rock art studies. It serves as an introductory work to rock art research and, more importantly, a panoramic rock art monograph that deserves recognition within China's rock art academic community.

ANNOTATION

1. This research is supported by the Ministry of Education of China (MOE) Humanities and Social Sciences Youth Foundation [Grant No. 24YJCZH047], for the project "Image Recognition and Cultural Genealogy of Northern Chinese Rock Art from Digital Humanities Perspective".

2. *Helan Mountain Rock Art: A Hundred Themes*, authored by He Jide, compiled by Ding Yufang, Sunshine Publishing House, August 2012.

