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A Study of the Sheep Totem Worship Phenomenon in the Rock Carvings of Northern China

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Abstract

Petroglyphs are a precious heritage of human civilization, an artistic treasure created by humans in ancient times. These ancient rock artworks preserve the memory of ancient mankind and show the origin and development of human civilization. Petroglyphs are breathtaking with their unique art forms and rich content, and the existence of sheep totem petroglyphs enriches our understanding of ancient civilization. Many totems depict lifelike images of sheep and can be seen in petroglyphs in northern China. These petroglyphs demonstrate the strong connection between early humans and sheep. The existence of sheep totems is not only a record of the lifestyle of early northern humans but also a reflection of their spiritual world. Through these symbols, one can feel the mysterious relationship between early humans and sheep and their worship of and reverence for sheep.

Key Words

Northern rock art, sheep totem, totem worship

Introduction

In northern China, sheep totem worship is an ancient and unique belief system. Since ancient times, people in the northern region have worshipped and relied on sheep, which has been deeply rooted in their culture and way of life. The depictions of sheep totem worship in the rock carvings in the northern region are precious historical relics that record the ancient worship of and dependence on sheep. These petroglyphs are not only artistic expressions but also witnesses to the culture and beliefs of the northern region. Through these petroglyphs, we can gain a deeper understanding of the lifestyle, belief system, and cultural traditions of the ancient people of the northern region. This culture has evolved throughout history, shaping their way of life, belief systems, and values. More than works of art, these petroglyphs are a strong testament to the close connection between humans and sheep, and they provide us with a window into early human life, allowing us to better understand and appreciate the importance of sheep culture. The goat totem in petroglyphs also has a significant cultural meaning, as seen from its geographical distribution in various parts of China.

China's petroglyphs distribution area is very broad, "from the coast of the sea in the east, west to the Kunlun Mountains, north to the Daxing'anling Mountains, south of the south bank of the Zuojiang River," the petroglyphs nearly 1,000, the total number of close to 10,000, ranking first in the world. Among them, China's northern rock carvings, mainly found in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Gansu, and other places with rock carvings of animals as the main theme, have a painting style that is also more realistic. These rock carvings are the works of hunting and nomadic people in the grassland area of northern China,[1] and they are famous for their unique artistic style and rich cultural connotations. The rock carvings of Daxing'anling in Inner Mongolia show the harmonious symbiotic relationship between early humans and nature, the rock carvings of Yinshan depict the life scenes and social activities of early humans, and the rock carvings of Ulanchab present a wide variety of animal and plant motifs. The expression and classification of sheep petroglyphs show diversified characteristics, and different images of sheep have distinct symbolism: representing different aspects of early man's worship

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of sheep, recording the close bond between early man and sheep, and demonstrating lifestyles and cultural traditions. The detailed and varied depictions enrich our understanding and appreciation of sheep totems, making these petroglyphs more vivid and interesting.

1. Totems and Totem Worship in Northern China

Totems connect people with the groups to which they belong, emphasizing the sense of belonging and the power of unity. These totemic petroglyphs highlight the passion and yearning for life of people in primitive societies, express their concern for sustenance and clan continuity, and show their reverence and admiration for the natural world.[2] People believe that the animals or natural elements associated with totems have mystical powers that protect and guide them in their lives. Totem worship shows diversity across cultures; in some cultures people use specific animals as totems, such as wolves, bears, and eagles, believing that they represent courage, strength, or wisdom. In other cultures, people use natural elements such as plants, rivers, and mountains as totems to express their reverence for and reliance on nature. People in an uncivilized state may have considered animal traits such as superiority in strength, courage, or cunning to be entirely natural, and were happy to place in them the kind of human-like souls that could survive the death of the body and retain their former harmful or beneficial natures. Later on, this concept converged with the idea of an animal or materialized god who sees, hears, and acts even at a distance, and with whom the spirits associated with the flesh retain their potency after the death of the flesh. The three forms of animal worship are the direct worship of animals, the indirect worship of them as object gods among whom God manifests his hand, and the worship of them as totems or incarnations of the ancestors of the tribe.[3] "Take Guizhou Miao Hundred Birds Clothes as an example, it is the extremely high worship of the ancestors of the Miao tribe—butterflies and migratory birds—with its exquisite embroidery skills and the Miao people worship birds, fish, butterflies, dragons, and other totems into one and embodied in the clothes."[4] Through the worship of totems, people pass on and promote the wisdom and traditions of their ancestors, and maintain community cohesion and cultural identity. However, modern society has gradually watered down the form of totem worship, and its influence still exists.

Rock carvings in China can be categorized into three main systems: northern rock carvings, southwestern rock carvings, and southeastern rock carvings, based on differences in geographic location, production techniques, styles, forms, and content themes. The northern rock carvings discussed in this paper are mainly located in the provinces of Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Ningxia, as well as in the regions of Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang. In the northern rock carvings, common animal images include sheep, horses, deer, wolves, tigers, bears and birds.[5] Among them, images of sheep are the most frequent subject in rock carvings, a phenomenon that may be inextricably linked to the way of life on which early humans in the northern region depended for their survival. The northern region shares similarities with totem worship in other regions and cultures, but is also unique. By studying sheep totem worship in rock carvings in the northern region, we can better understand the changes and development of totem worship in different regions and cultures, as well as its impact on the lives and beliefs of early humans.

2. Totem Worship of Sheep in Rock Carvings in Northern China

Animal images presented in the petroglyphs are the product of the hunter-gatherer's realistic depiction of local animal species, and their characteristics and habits as well as numbers and movements. These images not only serve as technical guidance and cognitive education but also highlight the observations and understanding by the ancestors about the way various living things exist in the natural ecosystem. These images not only provided technical instruction and educated the primitive communities in their pastoral and hunting production, but also served as objects for witchcraft in the fertility rituals. At the same time, these petroglyphs also reflect their worship of animals.

As one of the most common subjects in the Northern rock art system, sheep totems have attracted attention with their unique images and symbolism. These petroglyphs depict a wide variety of sheep images, including different movements such as standing, running, and grazing (figure 1), vividly demonstrating early man's ability to observe and depict sheep. Since among all animal petroglyphs the number of motifs relating to sheep is the largest and the forms of variation are the richest, it can be assumed that sheep occupied a very important position in the social life of that time and people's emotional dependence on sheep prompted them to frequently carve sheep petroglyphs.

The sheep totems shown in the various petroglyphs have various images and features. Initially, sheep totems were presented in realistic images, using single lines to outline the horns, body, and limbs of the sheep, emphasizing its stoutness and might. Subsequently, the

totem gradually evolved into a form with only horns and the body of the sheep, but no limbs. Eventually, it was simplified to a symbol with only horns, which became a symbol of the sheep and a totem. Rock art depicting a large horns pan sheep located in Xinjiang Nilek Poor Kok (figure 2) shows that the sheep bodyparts are slightly thicker rough lines; the body is a straight line with the neck and body connected to it; the head is low; head to the left; the horns are bent backward in a spiral with a longer curved degree that is larger; there are two legs; there is a short tail bent backward under the abdomen; and there is male genitalia.[6] Sheep, as a reproductive animal, symbolizes the continuity of the family and the prosperity of future generations. This depiction in the sheep totem associates the attributes of the sheep with fertility and reproduction, fecundity, and prosperity, which are believed to be interpenetrating and attributed to divine control. This depiction expresses the quest for vitality and fertility and represents a prayer for family and social prosperity. Rock sheep can climb and jump on mountain cliffs and ranges and prefer to live in groups. Rock sheep exhibit a strong reproductive capability, usually mating during the annual winter rut from December to January. As with other similar goat populations, male rock sheep display the behavior of competing for mates. Amazingly, less than ten days after birth rock sheep kids have developed the skill and ability to climb steep rock faces. The rock sheep's remarkable rock-climbing ability is regarded by humans as a desirable and special skill, and as such has become an object of admiration and veneration.[7]

Primitive human cultures instinctively captured the typical features and forms of things. They were influenced by the belief in the "spirit of all things," which they regarded as the seat of mystical power. In addition to the overall image of the sheep mentioned earlier, the head of the sheep is often depicted in detail in petroglyphs, especially the horns. This meticulous depiction shows special attention to the horns of the sheep, probably because primitive humans believed that the horns of the sheep had special symbolic meanings and mystical powers. These horns may take on a curved, coiled, or backward-bending form, highlighting the sheep's features and personality with regular, symbolic lines. The shape of the horns allows for a clear distinction between different types of sheep. Sheep usually possess double horns that bend upward into an arc form (figure 3), while pan sheep show their characteristic coiled horns in spirals, especially as these coiled horns are deliberately enlarged and exaggerated. The use of spiral lines to enhance the expression makes the sense of rotation, circulation and order more prominent, which is equivalent to adding value and enhancing the effect of power, reflecting a state of careful design and rational layout in the visual presentation.[7] The Beishan sheep horn (figure 4) shows the upward momentum with curves and is decorated with short straight lines with even spacing to show the ring of the horn, presenting a sense of rhythm (figure 5).

Sheep totems in petroglyphs are often combined with other elements, such as figures (figure 6), animals and symbols. In headdresses or statues with faces, the image of the sheep is often used to depict the five features. Re-





Figure 1. *Sheep Atlas*, Yinchuan Museum, http://xhslink.com/i5YI3y.

Figure 2. *Big Horned Sheep*, Poor Kok Petroglyphs, Goukou Rock No. 4, from *Xinjiang Nilek Poor Kok Petroglyphs Research*.



Figure 3. Rock Sheep in the Folding Mountains of Alashan Left Banner, Collection of Alxa Museum, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/FMkvPRSAKojz5w-DyW50ag.



Figure 4. Durat rock carvings in the Altay region, from *Interpretation of Images of Wild Animals in Xinjiang rock carvings*.



Figure 5. Rock carvings in the Altay region, from *Interpretation of Images of Wild Animals in Xinjiang Rock Carvings*.

garding the northern nomads who worshipped sheep to the highest degree, the Qiang were described in the literature as follows: "The Qiang regarded sheep as human beings, human beings as similar to sheep, and when the two were merged into one, they constituted the 'real' Qiang." In ancient times, when people worshipped the sheep totem and worked to create a sheep totem god, they first embedded the image of a sheep into the facial contours. Subsequently, in the process of creation and use, the characteristics of the sheep were refined and generalized into a sheep's head in the foreground. Once a consensus was reached, this expression was systematically popularized. Thus, some of the facial features look like they possess a resemblance to a real sheep but are not the same.[8] These combinations reflect early humans' knowledge and understanding of the association between sheep and other things, demonstrating the importance of sheep in early cultures.

When the sheep is used as a totem in petroglyphs, the emotion carries a certain religious component. For this reason, the image of the sheep appears in many depictions of rituals and sex cult scenes. The petroglyph in figure 7 ostensibly shows an everyday hunting scene, yet in reality it implies the witchcraft operation of fertility worship. The arrow is seen as extended male genitalia, and when the bow and arrow strike the reproductive part of the animal's hindquarters, human and animal reproductive forces come into contact, and these forces can penetrate and sense each other. Surrounding the main image are also images of large animals with small animals under their bellies, as well as several images of sheep. These images, together with two groups of shooting images, constitute the reproductive significance of the fertility cult.[9] The sheep, one of the most common totems in rock carvings, is considered a sacred animal. It represents abundance, prosperity and fertility, and signifies the early human's worship of the natural world and the life force.

3. The Connection between the Sheep Totem and the Lifestyle and Cultural Traditions of Early Mankind

Through domestication, humans have established a reliable food chain relationship with sheep. This also provided the basis for the transformation of the biological sheep into the sociological realm. It is on this basis that an interesting phenomenon—sheep culture—was formed, which represents the result of the interaction of matter and consciousness.[10] The development of sheep farming is closely related to both agricultural production and the lives of people in different places. Mutton and milk are important, and nutritious, foods



Figure 6. Helankou Goat Totem Petroglyphs, http://xhslink.com/OIEK3y.

in people's lives, and wool and sheepskin are high-quality clothing materials. Therefore, in the long history of human development, as long as people were raising sheep the issue of food and clothing sources was solved. The use of sheep in early human life also included agriculture. Sheep can provide fertilizer to help improve the quality

of soil and promote the growth of crops. This was crucial to early man's agricultural production and food supply. Also, sheep played an important role in early human traffic and transportation. People could utilize sheep as load-bearing animals to help them carry goods and supplies. Due to their high endurance and adaptability, they were able to work in different terrains and environments, which was convenient and efficient. The versatility of sheep made them an integral part of early human societies, contributing to economic prosperity and development. As a result, the sheep totem was seen as a symbol of abundance and prosperity in early societies, inspiring worship of, and gratitude for, natural resources.

In the petroglyphs of the Helan Mountains, scholars have found many motifs depicting domesticated sheep, as well as information about sheep-related culture and witchcraft. In primitive religions, sheep were entrusted with the sacred duty of leading human souls in their ascension to heaven, and in the process they became the objects of worship for the ancient ancestors. Petroglyph researcher He Jide discovered a huge stone called the Embracing Stone in Helankou; the stone is engraved with thirty-one sphinxes and a sheep, as well as a pattern that forms a six-ring heavy circle. According to his interpretation, the sheep symbolizes the six rings that lead the souls of the thirty-one ancestors to their resting place. He supports his view through the presence of concentric circles in the ceremonial cards used by Australian Aboriginal tribes to store ancestral spirits and believes that the meaning of the Helankou's symbol is similar to that of a bead spirit card, which represents reverence and worship of the ancestors. The Western Xia inscription of the human face on Helankou's north slope is also a human face found in sheep totem worship.[11] Sheep are regarded as a symbol of bravery, resilience, and tenacity. They usually live in harsh environments and face various challenges and difficulties. Using sheep as a totem inspires courage and resilience within people, enabling them to face difficulties and overcome challenges. Also, sheep are herd animals, and they have the qualities of unity and cooperation in a group. Using a sheep as a totem may emphasize the importance of community or group, encouraging people to stick together, support and protect each other. This social connection and sense of community may give people bravery and courage, as they know they are not alone and can rely on others for support. As part of the natural world, sheep represent vitality and the power of nature. They demonstrate the ability to adapt to the environment and survive, as well as the cycles and changes in nature. Using sheep as totems may evoke a connection with nature and give people a sense of being connected to the natural world. This connection and identification with the power of nature could give people bravery and confidence. The *Shan Hai Jing* (Classic of the Mountains and Seas) and the *Nan Shan Jing* (Classic of the Southern Mountains) recorded a strange and monstrous creature known as the Shoulder Pool. This creature was shaped like a sheep and was fearless when people wore sheep's horns, sheep's teeth, wool, Capricorn bones, and other associated items. Therefore, it can be concluded that early human religious beliefs regarded the lamb totem as an important symbol and



Figure 7. Ulaanbulaksi petroglyphs in Hami city, from *Xinjiang Rock Carvings of Reproductive Worship Picture Language*.



Figure 8. *Four-goat Bronze Square Zun*, Shang, National Museum of China, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/P9cPdBRri0KpiBo790_mhA.

had a profound influence on religious rituals and belief systems.

In summary, the sheep totem played an important role in the cultural traditions of early mankind and had a profound impact on the social, economic, and religious spheres. Through the symbolism of abundance and prosperity, the sheep totem inspired worship and gratitude for natural resources and had an important position and influence in early human cultural traditions.

4. Social and Cultural Significance of Sheep Totem Worship

Sheep totem worship, as a shared belief and value, contributes to the establishment of strong ties among community members, leading to the establishment of mutual trust and cooperation and enhancing the cohesion of the community. In addition, sheep totem worship provides individuals with a sense of belonging and identity. Since sheep group together, three or four sheep are often drawn in oracle bones to indicate a group of

sheep. Later, people created another form of the Chinese character Qun (群). Because sheep have the habit of flocking together, it can give people a feeling that it's easy to get along with each other. Therefore, Qun has become a moral standard in traditional Chinese ethics and morals and a symbol for distinguishing between a small person and a gentleman. Confucius said, "A gentleman is a group but not a party." That is to say, a gentleman is a member of a group but not a member of a private party. By worshipping the sheep totem, individuals can fit in with the collective identity and values of the community and thus gain a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging makes individuals feel accepted and recognized, enhancing their loyalty and participation in the community. Sheep totem worship also strengthens community cohesion through shared rituals and celebrations. Community members participate in sheep totem-related rituals and celebrations to celebrate and commemorate the importance of the sheep totem.

Sheep totem worship is closely related to the social structure and organization of northern China, reflecting economic development and social hierarchy and facilitating interaction and communication between communities. As an important agricultural and pastoral resource, sheep played a key role in the economic development of northern societies. People worshipped sheep totems not only out of reverence for sheep resources but also as a kind of recognition and pursuit of the agricultural and pastoral lifestyle. Secondly, sheep totem worship also reflected the social hierarchy and organizational structure. In early northern society, sheep were a precious symbol of wealth and power, and they became the symbol of social elites and rulers. Sheep totem worship consolidated social hierarchies and organizational structures through the worship and rituals of sheep. "The Four Sheep Square Zun is not only an important ceremonial vessel of the pre-Qin period but also a model of bronze art, showing the superb casting technology of the time, and a treasure of art with rich connotations (figure 8). It shows the people's love for sheep in the pre-Qin period and the ancient ancestors' worship of sheep totem on the bronze vessel, which was made into a bronze vessel to replace a live sheep as an offering to the gods in ancient times. This symbolism signifies the good wishes for the prosperity of domestic animals and as a way to ask for blessings from the gods."[12] In addition, sheep totem worship promotes interaction and communication between communities. By worshipping the sheep totem, people establish common values and cultural identity and strengthen community connection and cooperation.

Sheep totem worship has had a profound impact on the cultural identity of northern China. As an important agricultural and pastoral resource in the northern region, sheep are seen as a symbol of abundance and fertility, and thus sheep totem worship has become an expression of reverence for nature and life. This worship is not only the worship of the sheep itself but also the recognition of the agricultural and pastoral way of life in the northern region. Through art forms, such as pictographs, petroglyphs, and artifact carvings, sheep totem worship carries on the cultural memory and traditional values of the northern region. This worship is also perpetuated in communities and families, becoming an important element of people's identity and social cohesion. In addition, sheep totem worship has facilitated exchanges and cooperation among different groups in the northern region, resulting in a common cultural identity.

5. Conclusion

Due to its unique geographic and ecological environment, the northern region of China is home to many sheep petroglyphs. In these petroglyphs, sheep totem worship has attracted much attention, as they are widespread and have profound symbolic meanings and religious beliefs. The importance of sheep in early human life is self-evident and is closely related to community cohesion and cultural identity. Therefore, it is crucial to understand and appreciate the importance of sheep totem worship and its value for rock carvings in northern China.

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羊圖騰崇拜現象在中國北方岩畫中的研究

楊宇清

摘　要：岩畫是人類文明史上的珍貴遺產，是遠古時代人類創造的藝術瑰寶。這些古老的石刻藝術作品，保存了人類遠古時代的記憶，展現了人類文明的起源和發展。岩畫以其獨特的藝術形式和豐富的內容，令人歎為觀止。羊圖騰岩畫的存在豐富了我們對古代文明的瞭解。在北方的岩畫中，可以看到大量栩栩如生的羊圖騰形象。這些岩畫展示了早期人類與羊之間的緊密聯繫。羊圖騰的存在不僅僅是對早期北方人類生活方式的記錄，更是對他們精神世界的反映。通過這些符號，可以感受到早期人類與羊之間的神秘關係，以及他們對羊的崇拜和敬畏。

關鍵詞：北方岩畫；羊圖騰；圖騰崇拜