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## **A Study on Rock Paintings in the Yinshan Mountains from the Perspective of Peirce's Semiotics**

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**Abstract.** The Yinshan rock painting is an extremely important one. A large number of rock paintings in this mountain range record the nomadic life of ancient ancestors and express their emotional beliefs. They show the self feelings of the ancestors by using symbolic figures, animals, celestial bodies, signs and other ways, reflecting the living conditions of the ancestors of various nationalities who once lived in the Yinshan Mountain area. As a “meaningful form” left over from ancient times, the Yinshan rock paintings are signs of human communication of cultural information. Therefore, it is very objective and meaningful to interpret the Yinshan rock paintings from the perspective of semiotics. Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, is an interpretation of meaning, representamen, interpretant. Based on the analysis of Peirce's definition of signs and the relationship between signs and objects, this paper interprets the Yinshan rock paintings from the perspective of semiotics, explores its rich connotation, and understands the life, belief and historical development of Mongolian ancestors.

**Keywords.** Rock paintings; Peirce's Semiotics; interpretation

### **Introduction**





The Yinshan Mountains, stretching thousands of miles, lie in the central and southern part of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. With a vast of grassland in the north and south, the summer climate is warm and moist, and the vegetation is prosperous and fertile. In history, many nomadic minorities in the north had lived there, such as Xiongnu, Beidi, Xianbei, Turk, Dangxiang, Mongolian and other nationalities worked and lived here one after another. They formed the Mongolian nationality together and accumulated and created the splendid Mongolian traditional culture in the process of production and life. A large number of rock paintings in this mountain range record the nomadic life of ancient ancestors and express their emotional beliefs. They show the feelings of the ancestors by using symbolic figures, animals, celestial bodies, signs and other ways, reflecting the living conditions of the ancestors of various nationalities who once lived in the Yinshan Mountain area.






As a “meaningful form” left over from ancient times, the Yinshan rock paintings are signs of human communication of cultural information. Therefore, it is very objective and meaningful to interpret the Yinshan rock paintings from the perspective of semiotics. The core value of the Yinshan rock paintings is to record the history and civilization of the ancestors. As










a carrier of human culture, its symbolic characteristics are obvious. In the patterns of the Yinshan rock paintings, animal patterns, plant patterns, totem patterns and story patterns are often the result of the ancestors' natural worship, totem worship, myth consciousness and social consciousness. The signs of the Yinshan rock paintings are of great significance to the formation of northern nomadic characters, historical research and primitive religious thoughts.



### **Classification and Interpretation of Rock Paintings**

According to rock art expert Gai Shanlin(1936-2020)'s classification of rock paintings based on its cultural connotation, the Yinshan rock paintings can be divided into animal signs, fertility signs, clan and tribal signs, literal signs, celestial signs, orientation signs, primitive digital signs and aesthetic signs and so on.

**Animal signs.** Animal signs account for the largest proportion in the Yinshan rock paintings. There are two types of abstract animal signs: the first is between abstract and concrete like “”, “”. This kind of signs can see the nature of animal sign, that is to say, the animal it represents can be judged by the image. The other is the signs like “”, “”. This kind of signs has been highly symbolized and abstracted. It is difficult to find the animal prototype represented by the signs, that is to say, it is impossible to find the object image that the painter relies on. It can be seen that the use of animal signs to represent the noumenon and the part of animals to represent all animals are inseparable from the original thinking mode of the painter.

**Fertility signs.** Fertility signs reflect the long-term popular worship of reproduction in ancient society. The direct depiction of male genitalia and female genitalia and the reproduction worship expressed by icon signs appear many times in the Yinshan rock paintings”. It is generally believed that the view of fertility in nature is expressed and worshipped by the shape of male and female genitals. The male genitalia worship in the Yinshan rock paintings is shown in the way that the painter uses the image expression technique as shown in the figure “”. On the basis of male genitalia realism, they also exaggerate the divinity of the mysterious functional parts in reproduction activities through the facial form. For example the sign “”, signs of bow and arrow, “”, “”, and “”. On the other hand, the binary opposition thinking mode in Shaman culture is also reflected in it, and this kind of thinking is the main thinking mode of the whole primitive society.

**Clan, tribe mark.** Archaeological data have proved that the imprinted signs originated in ancient society. To engrave the mark of one's own clan and tribe on animals and rock paintings is the sign of the realm before the creation and use of characters. Especially for the nomadic people on the grassland, the imprint is very important, and has continued to today. As in the signs of the Yinshan rock paintings “、、、、、、、、”, they have been stamped on livestock as marks of belonging, which reflects the distribution, change and ownership of clans and tribes. In the later class society, the mark signs were extended to property, war, flag, and even the slaves owned by slave owners.

**Written signs.** It is hard to imagine that abstract written signs have been produced as early as ancient times. In the Yinshan rock paintings, written signs appear, which should be related to the characters of northern nomadic people. A large number of signs in the Yinshan rock paintings can be interpreted as “signs recording events”, such as “ ”. From the left of the picture is a spirit with a mask as the carrier, and the sign after it should be the text of praying to the spirit. Most of the written signs appear in the form of complex. To understand its meaning, we must connect the whole picture, even with the surrounding environment, with other rock rock paintings around the text sign complex. At the same time, in order to understand

the mystery of written signs, we can also observe the similarities and differences between the rock paintings and the local minority characters.

**Celestial signs.** The sign of “卍” in Yinshan area and the Swastika in Badain Jaran Desert are related to the sun. Of course, as “one of the oldest ornaments in the world”, the swastika has been mentioned in the previous article for its representation on special parts. In addition, the figure is more used to symbolize the radiant sun. The figure is created by the sign “☼” originally, then the sign was gradually simplified into a cross, the ancients emphasized the circular motion of the sun by bending the four rays in the same direction. In the Yinshan rock paintings, there are also wheel shaped signs representing the sun, such as: “☼ ☼ ☼”. A large number of sun shaped signs appear in rock paintings and unearthed cultural relics all over the world, which shows that the sun worship was widespread in the primitive culture of the ancestors. In the Yinshan rock paintings there are also pairs of human faces of the sun and the moon. Men are Yang and women are Yin. The sun represents male gods and the moon represents female gods.

**Location signs.** In the Yinshan rock paintings, the cross pattern and its variants based on the cross pattern are as follows “\* ⊗ ⊕”. It also has the function of expressing direction. The sign “⊗” can also be seen in father Ding Gaotianchen, San Shi pan, and Songyoujun Tian Ding1 There is a saying in “Shuo Wen2”: “田”3, is Chen. Tree and Valley constitute “田”, which is like four mouths; the cross in the middle of the Chinese character --- “田”, stands for the system of Qianmo4. In Chinese traditional culture, the north and the south are called Qian and the East and West are called Mo. The cross “十” in Chinese character “田” or “⊗” comes from four basic directions: East, South, West and North. It also reflects the relationship between the Rock paintings signs and the early characters from another aspect.

**Original digital signs.** Sign “|||” is the digital sign of the Yinshan rock paintings. Sign “|||” and “≡” are the ancient pottery inscriptions unearthed in Lintong and Bengbu5. It can be seen that these signs, horizontal or vertical, in Yinshan rock paintings, are indeed primitive digital signs. The discovery and identification of primitive digital rock paintings show that as early as ancient times, nomadic people in northern China had the concept of number and applied it to social life. However, the concept of number used by primitive people is relatively simple and the amount of number is small. For example, the number five is in the form of two, two and one.

### **Icon — Index — Symbol in the Yinshan Rock Paintings**

Peirce’s theory of signs, or semiotics, is an interpretation of meaning, representation and interpretant. By analyzing the definition of Peirce’s signs, Peirce’s signs are composed of three interrelated parts: sign, object and interpretant. According to the relationship between signs and objects, signs can be further divided into icon, index and symbol, which was put forward by Peirce in his early discussion on the theory of signs from 1867 to 1868, which can be traced back to his paper in 1867 On A New List of Categories (W2:48-58). This section mainly discusses and analyzes the information function of icon, index and symbol in rock paintings, as well as the signs’ meaning produced by the combination of a series of icons and indexes.

<sup>1</sup> Names of Ancient Chinese cultural relics

<sup>2</sup> Shuo Wen is the first book to systematically analyze the Chinese characters and study the source of characters in China.

<sup>3</sup> It is a Chinese character and is pronounced “tian”, which means farmland.

<sup>4</sup> It is a Chinese word, which means crisscross footpaths between fields.

<sup>5</sup> These are two Chinese place names.

. As Peirce says, icon is a sign that displays its objects through similarity or iconicity. A picture is an icon of the object it depicts, while a map is an icon of a particular place. The meaning of icon mainly lies in its connotation, because its nature or attribute is similar to that of the object it refers to. The essence of such signs is visual correlation, that is, the similarity between signs and objects. An index is a sign that indicates its object in a causal way. Smoke is an index of fire, and symptoms are an index of disease. The meaning of the index lies in its meaning, because the basic nature of the index is to indicate the meaning of the object by making the interpreter pay attention to the object, such as pointing a direction with a finger or knocking on a door. The relationship between such signs and objects does not lie in the similarity of vision, but is dynamic and indicative. A symbol or representation, which refers to its object not so much because of any similarity or analogy with it, nor because it is associated with general characters which that object happens to possess, as because it is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand. Symbol is a sign itself, "because it is used and understood as such" (CP 2.307). It has the pragmatic meaning of Peirce, that is, it carries the intention and purpose of the user. Therefore, to understand how the interpreter habitually interprets a sign, the speaker can use the sign to produce a specific effect in the interpreter's interpretation of thinking process.

Among nearly ten kinds of signs, in the Yinshan rock paintings, the symbolic visual expression of these five themes is usually the real concrete icon, such as human, animal, architecture, tools and objects. The index is the concrete object of existence, such as the sun, the moon, some kinds of animals, shed, iron pick and so on. Index itself is also a sign, which has the function of transmitting information. Symbols are some repeated or combined signs, such as geometric figures and graphic characters, including arrow, spear, circle, spiral, footprints, radial disk, points and lines, etc. This kind of signs may have different meanings, only through the combination of these signs and the picture situation, the meaning determined during the exploration period is explored.

Rock paintings usually present different shapes and postures in human visual system. According to the similarity of visual signs and natural objects in shape, the Yinshan rock paintings may be divided into concrete form and abstract form. The rock paintings based on the shape (index) of natural things are called physical icons. It is the direct manifestation of the patterning and simplification of natural objects. These signs are derived from the concrete existing images, and retain the local characteristics of the original images or summarize the outline features of the original images, so they are easy to understand. Some of the abstract signs in the Yinshan rock paintings are highly summarized and refined in the form of natural objects, while others are separated from the basic visible forms of natural objects. They are only shaped according to some basic formal factors or social conventions, laws and the characteristics of clan and tribal culture. For example, among animal signs in the Yinshan rock paintings, there are more concrete signs than abstract ones. Abstract animal signs are sometimes based on the visual recognition of animal signs relying on the image; however, for most of the abstract signs, it's no longer to find the existence image that the painter relies on, because the painter highly symbolizes and abstracts the original visible existence concrete image in the context of certain culture, customs, conventions and laws. It is very difficult to interpret its meanings. This kind of abstract animal signs, which integrate social conventions and customs, can exist alone, but most of them coexist in the same picture with the concrete icon, forming a group of sign combinations, so that they can infer and identify the abstract signs in rock paintings from the concrete animal signs.

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