Hetu and Luoshu: Retrospect and Prospection

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Keywords: Hetu and Luoshu, Retrospect, Prospection.

Abstract. Hetu and Luoshu, the cultural heritages that reflect ancient Chinese wisdom, are the origins of Heluo culture. The paper will focus on the present study of Hetu and Luoshu and give a prospection of the study trend by combing and analyzing related texts and documentaries.

Hetu and Luoshu, or the Yellow River trigrams and the Luo River trigrams, also the first mystical images in Chinese graphemic culture, are regarded as the origin of Heluo culture and feature prominently in the history of Chinese culture and Chinese thoughts. The Legend of Hetu and Luoshu, which was included in the fourth group of National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2014, is the fountainhead of Chinese nation and witness the long history of Chinese civilization.

A Retrospect of the Study of Hetu and Luoshu in China

Hetu and Luoshu are the origins of Heluo culture, Chinese yin and yang and five elements and reflect ancient Chinese wisdom. Honored as the Rubik’s Cube of the universe, Hetu and Luoshu are also recorded in Chinese Classics such as Shang Shu, The Zhou Book of Change, The Book of Rites and The Analects. However, as a study subject, the loss of the text of Hetu and Luoshu results in the present situation that all commentaries and studies are the furthermore of the original text and bear significant interpretations.

The Study of the Origin of Hetu and Luoshu

The record of Hetu and Luoshu may date back to the first part of The Survey: “As for the Dragon Map out of the Yellow River and the Tortoise Script out of the Luo River, the sages in imitation invented the eight trigrams and the nine-square numerical grid”. Studies in later ages refer to the two images by Chen Tuan of the Song Dynasty. During the times of Zhu Xi, the great master of the South Song Dynasty, scholars recognized the authenticity of Hetu and Luoshu. Modern scholars have been studying their origin.

As early as in 1997, Sun Shuntong put forward in his book Source of Hetu—Annal of Long Ma Fu Tu Temple the following statements: “Hetu is found near Long Ma Fu Tu Temple by the Yellow River in Mengjin County of Luoyang City; the temple is the humanistic ancestor and root of Chinese nation.” In 2006, Wang Yongkuan in his book Hetu and Luoshu Quest summarized several versions on Hetu and Luoshu origin: Luonan County in Shaanxi Province, Luoning County in Henan Province and suburbs along Luoyang City in Henan Province. In 2009, Li Xueqin, Zhao Jinzha and Shi Shangang in their book Heluo Culture and Chinese I-Ching proposed that “Hetu is originated in Mengjin County and Luoshu in Luoning County”.

As a symbol of totem worship, the origin of Hetu and Luoshu should be within the central zone of Heluo culture in central China. Liu Dajun, world renowned I-Ching expert and director of Center for Zhou Yi and Ancient Chinese Philosophy, has remarked on many occasions that Mengjin County is the genuine cradle of the eight trigrams and Chinese culture. Leihe Village in Huimeng Town, Mengjin County, the confluence of the Yellow River, is endowed with the fine spirits of the universe. People built Long Ma Fu Tu Temple there, erected stone tablets and inscribed epigraphs in commemoration of the sages. Geographically, facing on the south the capital city of Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties and the ancient city in Han and Wei Dynasties, this area is only 150 kilometers east to the Yellow Emperor Mausoleum and Peiligang ancient cultural relics and 50 kilometers west to Yangshao cultural relics. It fully deserves one of the cradles of Chinese culture and the title of “the origin of Hetu” in consideration of the meaning of hetu, or the the Yellow River trigrams.

The academic circle hold different opinions towards the origin of Luoshu. Some hold that it is along Luo River in Shaanxi Province, some hold that it is near the confluence of Yi River and Luo River in Gongyi County, and others hold that it is in Luoning County. In 2004, Luoyang Evening published an article The Historical Trace Behind the Legend of the Tortoise Script out of the Luo River, saying that: there remain two stone tablets in Xichangshui Village, Luoning County. The one on the east is in sandy rock, round on top and rectangular in lower part, with recess left on top for inscription. Thousands of years of erosion leads to only a forceful Chinese character “洛”(Luo) left on it in a style similar to that on the tablets of the Wei Dynasty. According to researches, the tablet can date back to Han and Wei dynasties. The western one in limestone was erected by Yongning county magistrate Shen Yu in 1724 of the Qing Dynasty. On it the four great characters “洛出书处”(the tortoise script out of the Luo River) were written by Henan Governor Zhang Han. The two tablets are good evidence of the supposition “Luoning origin”. Furthermore, it is only 80 kilometers from here to Mengjin, the origin of Hetu, and both locations belong to the central zone of Heluo culture. Checking documentaries and geographical features against historic relics, one can confirm that the origin of Luoshu is indeed in Xichangshui Village, Luoning County in the middle reaches of Luo River. Also, this location is called “the place where Luoshu was rewarded to Yu”.

The Study of Image-Decoding of Hetu and Luoshu

The study of image-decoding of Hetu and Luoshu evolved from the saying of auspicious symbols during the pre-Qin times to augural divination and mystical Confucian belief during the Han Dynasty. From the Song and Yuan dynasties onto the Ming and Qing dynasties, the metaphysical meaning-principle school became gradually popular. As early as during the pre-Qin times, Hetu and Luoshu were considered as an auspicious symbol, representing the emperor receiving order from Heaven, and the study revolved around the perspective of auspiciousness. During the Han Dynasty, Hetu and Luoshu were considered not only as an auspicious symbol, but representing the orthodox throne, and the study gradually transformed to deduction and farfetched analogy until the Tang Dynasty. During the Song and Yuan dynasties, with the spreading of Taoist Chen Tuan’s Hetu and Luoshu images, the school of image and numerology and the school of meaning and principles became popular. Scholars such as Chen Tuan and Shao Yong stressed image, numerology and meaning in Hetu and Luoshu; Yang Hui of the Song Dynasty studied and deduced magic square in Luoshu in his Yang Hui Algorithm; Zhou Dunyi, Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao and some others emphasized the meanings and principles of Hetu and Luoshu, while scholars such as Zhu Xi emphasized both.
The study in the Ming Dynasty was mainly in images; in the meantime some scholars voiced their doubts and disagreements. The study in the Qin Dynasty inherited the neo-Confucianism, while there was also reflection, doubt and criticism. In modern and contemporary studies, some scholars found new evidence of the existence of Hetu and Luoshu. Wang Ziguo in Cosmo Biochemistry (Chinese title for Yi minority book Tu Lu Dou Ji) found a detailed explanation of Hetu and Luoshu; the silk book of The Zhou Book of Change excavated at Mawangdui also recorded Hetu and Luoshu. In 1988, Han Yongxian put forward his new idea of the origin and scope of Hetu and Luoshu in an article titled A Probe in to Hetu and Luoshu, rendering that Hetu was a meteorological chart and Luoshu was a positional chart. In 2014, Xu Jinxing, Guo Shaolin and Hu Gengtian co-wrote a book Comment on Heluo Culture and gave their understanding of the images of Hetu and Luoshu. In 2015, for the first time from the unique perspective of image, A Cheng in his book Luoshu and Hetu: An investigation into the Images of Civilization combed the development of ancient Chinese civilization and restored the images and meanings of Hetu and Luoshu in the 2000-year-long legend.

The Study of the Value of Hetu and Luoshu

In mathematics, the greatest achievement of Luoshu is magic square, and this is noted in Yang Hui Algorithm by Yang Hui of the Song Dynasty and An Eclectic Study of the Zhou Book of Change by Li Guangdi of the Qing Dynasty. Jiang Yong of the Qing Dynasty in his Heluo Essence integrated the study of Hetu and Luoshu with decimal base and Pythagorean theorem. In physics, Xue Xueqian made a sensation by illuminating in his book The Zhou Book of Change and Wave-Quantum Physics the idea of square matrix trigrams and its relevant modern natural scientific theories.

In medicine, the ancestors have related human body to Hetu and Luoshu in Su Wen, the first part of Huang Di Nei Jing (The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine), a classic on traditional Chinese medicine. Another classic Ling Shu—Nine Classical Needles focuses on the corresponding numerology and principles among Luoshu nine-square numerical grid, human body and figure. In 1997, Cai Xu in his paper Hetu and Luoshu and Visceral Manifestations suggested that “Hetu and Luoshu are the space-time and image-numerology model that covers natural laws, and the model has a great impact on visceral manifestations in traditional Chinese medicine.” In 2013, Wang Yongfu and Wu Xiuhui in their book The Approaches and Skills of Traditional Chinese Medicine Prescription demonstrated the relationship between the evolution of traditional Chinese medicine and the model of Hetu and Luoshu.

A Retrospect of the Study of Hetu and Luoshu abroad

The study of Hetu and Luoshu abroad focuses on mathematical decoding. In the 16th century, Li Huang, a South Korean scholar, integrated the numbers in Hetu with yin and yang and five elements in his book Enlightenment in Legendary Period and concluded the eight trigrams also derived from Luoshu. In the 17th century, German mathematician Leibniz discovered a binary system implied in the eight trigrams, which inspired his study of the system and paved the way for its widespread application in science and technology. In The Book of Changes-Algebra in the Universe, Jiao Weifang, a contemporary Chinese American scholar, considered Hetu, Luoshu and the eight trigrams as the three bases of traditional Chinese culture, and thus established a mathematical system on them.
As for humanistic studies, Japanese scholar Seika Fujiwara explored into Hetu and Luoshu on the basis of Zhu Xi’s philosophy, repeating the views of Zhu Xi and Li Huang, and he concluded that the study of Hetu and Luoshu had little impact on Zhu Xi’s philosophy. The study of Hetu and Luoshu in the west, also based on Zhu Xi’s philosophy, bore few innovated findings. In the view of some scholars, too much interpretation of two abstract images was in conflict with the earlier mainstream study approaches in the west. Furthermore, without a good command of Chinese culture, one could hardly understand Hetu and Luoshu, which was closely related to Chinese culture. According to other scholars, the study of Hetu and Luoshu was only part of the study of Zhu Xi’s philosophy, and the former had little impact on the latter.

The Limitations of Current Study

Obviously, Hetu and Luoshu reflect the highly sophisticated and abstract thinking of Chinese culture. By analyzing and illuminating specific matter with the abstract philosophy, the arrangements and matching of the numbers in the two images perfectly summarize nature. Hetu and Luoshu unveil the harmonious relationship between man and nature, and the essence and orientation of Chinese culture. Simple in form, Hetu and Luoshu cover a great many aspects such as astronomy and calendar, geography, physical changes, human relationship, ethics and political principles.

With the increasingly frequent contact between China and foreign countries, the limitations of the study of Hetu and Luoshu are self-evident. Researchers can’t reach an agreement and can seldom make a comprehensive and systematic study from the perspective of cultural core. Unfavorable strategies and scarce material for international publicity hinder their overseas identification. Incomplete evaluation system is an obstacle to evaluate the translation effect objectively and that further affects intercultural communication. In order to overcome these limitations, the author suggests the following breakthroughs in future study:

The Theories and Approaches Applied

Hetu and Luoshu have tremendous cultural potential. The images create unique visual effects. The arrangements of numbers indicate order and the relationship between numbers. All these messages conveyed in Hetu and Luoshu epitomize the essence of ancient Chinese culture and reflect ancient Chinese people’s cognition of the objective world.

The form of an image is a symbol. A systematic arrangement of symbols looks intuitive and implicit yet mysterious and undetermined. The messages conveyed by the symbols need to be decoded and reinterpreted, which provides later generation with space for imagination and thinking. Theories on structuralism and semiotics may also provide a new perspective to reinterpretate Hetu and Luoshu. In the 1970s, in his book Structuralism and Semiotics, Terence Hawks commented on the essence and development of the theories of structuralism and semiotics, touching upon the basic problems and principles of the two theories. By relating their concepts and key views to the form and scope of Hetu and Luoshu, one can find that Hetu and Luoshu typify structuralist and semiotic characteristics.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Roman Jakobson, the representative formalism scholar in Soviet Union said, every message consists of symbols; therefore, semiotics, as it is called, is a science of symbols, penetrating into the general principles as the basis of all semiotic structures as well as their applications in messages, and exploring the peculiarity of diverse semiotic systems and messages transmitted by various kinds of symbols.

Apparently, Hetu and Luoshu are a unique semiotic system with its own semiotic structure.
The major concern for structuralism and semiotics is to study the connotations of the symbols and the principles behind the structure in Hetu and Luoshu and to further the study of the applications of the messages. The messages the codes in Hetu and Luoshu carry might previously be used for divination or as a map. Afterwards, the sages and philosophers extended the meaning of the symbols to explain other puzzles, changing the previous codes to others. With the further study of Hetu and Luoshu, the original codes can be transformed into new systems and codes in new fields.

Scope for Study

Traditionally, the study of Hetu and Luoshu mainly focuses on the their origin, decoding of the symbols and their values. Little attention is paid to the penetration into their cultural connotations, let alone a thorough and systematic study from the perspective of cultural core. A long history of several thousand years witnesses the evolution of a unique value system of Chinese civilization. The excellent traditional Chinese culture has already been the gene of Chinese nation and rooted deep in the hearts of Chinese people, unconsciously influencing Chinese way of thinking and act.

As the first documentary for the nation and society governance, Hetu and Luoshu are rich in political thoughts. The Treatise on the Five Elements in The Chronicles of the Han Dynasty recorded that Yu harnessed the flood and was rewarded Luoshu, against which the Great Plan was therefore set. Hetu and Luoshu for the first time put forward the macroscopic problems and principles related to nation governance and the idea of governing the nation in accordance with law as well as virtue. Philosophically, Hetu and Luoshu reflect the achievements of the ancestors in noetic science and philosophic principles. The way of thinking by means of image-numerology in Hetu and Luoshu highlights figurative thinking in the ancient east, through which ancient people accurately explored the nature in aspects of astronomy and meteorology, and invented complicated instruments (such as armillary sphere). According to Records of the Historian, under the impact of Hetu and Luoshu, numerous masters of divination methods, with proficiency in astronomy, calendar, five elements and so on, became philosophers, statesmen or militarists later. The relationship between folk divination methods, ultimate laws, Hetu and Luoshu, and The Zhou Book of Changes is relevant to the Chinese thinking of harmonious relationship between man and nature embodied in Hetu and Luoshu.

Study Significance

Culture is the blood of a nation and the spiritual homeland to the people. To become a truly great power, strong cultural soft power is a necessary condition, and cultural soft power relies on cultural awareness and cultural self-confidence. As an important component of cultural strategy, the international publicity of Chinese culture is the foundation to build cultural self-confidence, a major way of cultural and intercultural communication and the bridgehead in cultural competition and it reflects a nation’s cultural vitality.

The extensive and profound knowledge in Hetu and Luoshu leaves a far-reaching influence in Chinese culture. The international publicity of Hetu and Luoshu is like a travel of Chinese culture. After phases of cultural conservativeness, cultural shock and cultural identification, the international publicity becomes more significant: the translators can strengthen their confidence in the excellent national culture and their respect for other nations’ unique cultural characteristics; the translated versions can interpret the profound connotation, sophisticated thinking and dignified spirit of traditional Chinese culture; the translation activities can realize the inner unity of carrying forward excellent traditional culture and developing current culture, integrate traditional Chinese culture into world culture, and realize its overseas identification.
In the process of international publicity, translators should improve their foreign languages and cultural awareness and study Chinese culture, and then they can faithfully convey the meaning, style and sophistication of Chinese culture, make the concepts and connotations of Chinese culture understood and appreciated to foreign readers, and accomplish an objective interpretation of classic Chinese culture.

A Prospection of the Study of Hetu and Luoshu

Throughout world culture history, the great ideological achievements in the start-up period of a civilized society can always nurture new creations and motivate spiritual growth during human historical and cultural development. To study Hetu and Luoshu, one should start from a new perspective and derive thoughts and moral essence from excellent traditional Chinese culture. By fully understanding and elucidate its values such as advocating benevolence, keeping people-oriented, ensuring integrity, supporting justice, sustaining harmony and seeking common ground, one can make creative and innovative accomplishments. The future study of Hetu and Luoshu can start from the following perspectives:

Determining the Origin

With Hetu and Luoshu as its origin, the Chinese civilization has a long history with many historical documentaries. When studying these data, modern scholars should analyze them objectively and inherit critically. The study of Hetu and Luoshu should pick up the new discoveries from all disciplines, analyze the nature and illuminating the evidence, and investigate its origin and evolution thoroughly and systematically.

Enriching the Culture

Cultural keywords and cultural core values have the same characteristics. To reveal the special meanings of different words for a particular culture, one must probe into their pragmatic function in real contexts. In terms of Hetu and Luoshu, the way of yin and yang expresses Chinese philosophy of life, and embodies the close relationship between nature, space and time, yin and yang. The culture of man and nature, embodied in images with odd and even numbers arranged at random, reflects traditional Chinese theory of induction between man and nature. The rule of harmony is evolved in the process when the Chinese nation reaches self-cultivation, family harmony, state governing and world peace, tries to be flexible, and learns and applies. It embodies Chinese spirit and is identified as a unique national symbol.

Intercultural Communication

Cultural communication first means the overseas travel of the classics. The phases of cultural conservativeness, cultural shock and cultural identification witness the competition between the source text as a subject and the alien culture, essentially a discourse practice struggling for power. Taking advantage of Hetu and Luoshu’s universal value, scholars may promote the publicity of Heluo culture into the west through cultural complementation. By evaluating translation effect, scholars may explore the cultural mentality behind cultural translation. Through mutual interpretation of Chinese and western culture, scholars may integrate traditional Chinese culture into world culture, break the traditional thinking limitation, and achieve harmony and innovation.
Conclusion

With Luoyang as the center, Heluo area is the cradle and distributing center of Chinese culture. As the origin of Chinese culture, Heluo culture creates splendid Hetu and Luoshu. And as the root of Heluo culture, Hetu and Luoshu are the wisdom of the ancestors. To widely promote Chinese culture, one should study, learn and inherit its root culture: Heluo culture. A thorough study of Hetu and Luoshu may help understand the evolution of Chinese nation, Chinese national character, beliefs and orientation of social life, and help clarify the deep historical roots of cultural communication, cultural psychology and spiritual orientation. By combing related historical records of Hetu and Luoshu, and objectively understanding and interpreting its culture symbol, one may examine himself objectively and strengthen his cultural self-confidence. From the perspective of intercultural communication, the study of the international publicity of Hetu and Luoshu can help their identification as a cultural symbol, and promote excellent national culture and the construction of Chinese cultural soft power.

Reference