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Are Olmec Scripts Chinese? A Study on the Olmec Iconographic Symbols and Mesoamerican Writing

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Are Olmec Scripts Chinese?
A Study on the Olmec Iconographic Symbols and Mesoamerican Writing

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ABSTRACT

This study is an investigation on four pieces of jade work of the Olmec civilization found at La Venta, Mexico. It argues against identifying the design markings on the jade celts (a type of ax-shaped stonework) as Chinese script, as has been proposed, and it demonstrates that the design motifs found on the celts are identical with those in many works of Olmec art. These motifs are the basic elements used to compose a pictorial mask face. By providing a series of motifs with similar imagery to compare with those on the celts, I demonstrate that the designs on the celts are the remains of a typical Olmec image of a supernatural being with symbolic motifs. Some of these symbolic motifs are Olmec symbols, well known from pictorial images, that developed into a true writing system such as the Cascajal Script; they do not show any resemblance to Chinese characters.

OLMEC AND CHINESE

In his book *Origin of the Olmec Civilization* (Xu 1996), H. Mike Xu announced that he had discovered that certain ancient Olmec glyphs were Chinese writing, and stated that ancient China is the origin of the Olmec civilization in Mesoamerica. His key evidence was his identification of some incised markings on a few Olmec jade works. Some years earlier, a few Chinese scholars had also independently discovered similarities between the Olmec signs and Chinese oracle-bone inscriptions, but their studies, written in Chinese, did not gain much attention in the English-speaking world. In a follow-up study in 1999, Xu gave a detailed comparison of the Olmec signs and Shang oracle bone scripts, and supported his discovery by paralleling more Pan-American signs and Chinese characters. Xu identified the signs on these jade celts as Shang Chinese writing (Fig. 1).

He managed to match almost every single Olmec mark with a Chinese word. More convincingly, Xu even read the markings in their Chinese equivalents as denoting some ancestral oblation and commemoration with the actual names of a few Chinese legendary emperors, a characteristic typical of oracle bone inscriptions, and probably of the Olmec offerings. This discovery seemed to be solid evidence for solving the problem of the origin of the Olmec civilization. Several major national news media,¹ including ABC news, reported this discovery, and *The Atlantic Monthly* (Digital Edition Jan. 2000) also concluded that: "the diffusionists have landed," meaning that the origin of the ancient American civilization is found not in the New World but in the Old.

¹ ABC News: Early Crossings: Scientists Debate Who Sailed to the New World First.

<http://abcnews.go.com/ABC2000/abc2000science/newworld991019.html>

National Geographic News: Ancient Writing Links China and Mesoamerica.

http://www.ngnews.com/news/1999/10/100599/mesochina_6185.asp

The Atlantic Monthly: The Diffusionists Have Landed. <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/01001stengel.htm>

Discover Magazine: Chinatown, 1000 B. C. http://www.discover.com/feb_00/breakchinatown.html

Olmec Motifs:	Shang Writing	Modern Character / English
		卜 Bǔ Divine
		聞 Wén Hear 聽 Tīng Listen faithfully
		禘 Shì Spirit; worship
		糸 Mì Thread; connection
		旬 Xuān Circulation or name of a tribe
		祖 Zǔ Ancestor
		厂 Hǎn Stone structure
		石 Shí Stone
		宮 Guān Temple; building
		丘 Qiū Mound; grave; hillock
		皿 Mǐn Container
		首 Shǒu Head
		俎 Zǔ Sacrificial chopping block
		奠(皿+俎) Diàn Sacrificial worship

Figure 1. M. Xu's Identification for Celt No. 1 of La Venta Offering 4 (Xu's Celt 4; from Xu's website: http://www.chinese.tcu.edu/www_chinese3_tcu_edu.htm). Note: the website cannot be retrieved as of 2017.

PROBLEMS OF THE CHINESE IDENTIFICATION

Doubts, however, arise from the following concerns on the identification of the signs, particularly on the four jade celts found at La Venta Offering-4:

1. The archaeological report describes the jade pieces as re-used objects from some original work, and the incised signs are the ground-off remains of the original. Yet such an important condition is not considered in making the identification, and instead, the markings are treated as complete, independent signs.

2. The remaining signs of the markings are identifiable as some known Olmec motifs that compose picture images, and that do not show resemblance to Chinese characters.
3. The identification fails to draw on more comparative sources for a cross-examination, which shows methodological weakness.
4. The collection of the supporting signs for the identification is too random and uncontrolled, and therefore cannot be used to establish a supporting case.

LA VENTA OFFERING-4 CELTS AND RECONSTRUCTION

The objects with the sign markings are four of six pieces of jade celts grouped with sixteen figurines of people made of jade, serpentine, and granite, discovered at La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, in 1955. The group is called La Venta Offering-4, and the site is dated Middle Formative Period (900–600 B. C.). The group as found was arranged with one figure standing facing the other fifteen figures, with the celts upright behind that one figure. Since their discovery, much attention has been paid to the function and meaning of the entire offering, yet no significant interpretation has been made. While some scholars observed hostility between the single figure and the rest (Miller 1996:29), others saw meditative expressions on them (Tate 1995:58). Many agreed that the celts represented stelae (Gonzalez-Lauck 1996:78) and symbolized the cosmic axis, or in general, the Axis Mundi (Tate 1995:58; Tate and Reilly 1995:225).

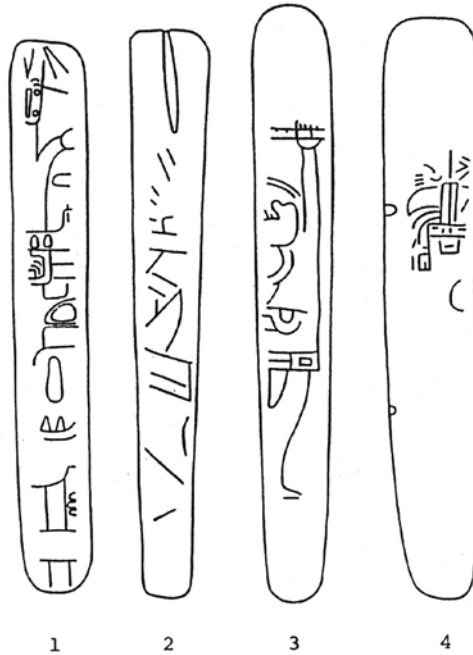


Figure 2. Drawings of the celts from La Venta Offering 4 (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959)

Among the six celts, two are plain and four have the incised markings (Fig. 2); these four pieces appear to be cut from one jade plaque. According to the excavation report (Drucker, Heizer, Squier 1959:156–158):

In point of fact it is highly probable that all four of these celts were actually cut from the same piece of stone. Not only are they similar in color and texture, but all four of the remnants have a design incised upon them prior to the grinding away of their present edges. ... It has proved impossible for us to reconstruct the original design, since so much of it has been ground away in rounding off the edges of the celts. ...

Reading this section of the description, we can immediately eliminate any identification that does not consider the missing parts, since the signs were not made for the offering per se, but were simply the remains of an original work. It is clear that we are dealing with some very incomplete design motifs rather than clearly written signs. This misconception may have come from the same

report when it says: "Celt No. 1 shows some parts of design, which might have formed part of a column of glyphs." Very likely the word *glyph* has led some scholars to attempt glyphic decipherment. Xu's identification is such a case.

The report continues to describe the other three celts:

Celt No. 2, although its design remnants suggest a rather rigid geometric motif, may have contained some sort of an ornamental border along one edge of the original plaque. Celt No. 3 appears to contain part of a human figure, and No. 4, which almost certainly joined No. 3, seems to contain the remnant of a design indicating an elaborate headdress. (ibid.)

In her work on reconstruction of the original design, Maria-Antonieta Cervantes (1969) confirmed the theory of Drucker et al. that Celts No. 3 and No. 4 once joined to make a figure. Following Cervantes, Carolyn Tate has also seen the celts "bearing the incised images of a 'flier' to the otherworld and the earth monster from whom the world tree grows" (1995:58).² And in a 1996 publication on the Olmec (Benson and de la Fuente), Marcia Castro-Leal described the four pieces:

... while two others have a representation of the upper half of a prone personage; the remaining two have the geometric and symbolic designs seen on other Olmec objects: hand, footprints, canine teeth, eyes, and vegetable elements, among others.

With the two commonly agreed-upon pieces No. 3 and 4 put aside, the discussion can go to the other two celts, Celt No. 1 and No. 2. And, since Celt No. 1 is the one on which the most legible markings are found, which Drucker et al. implied carried glyphs, and from which Xu has made his major identification, the focus will be on it.

As Castro-Leal and Tate described, the two celts (mainly Celt No. 1, my note) have some

² However, while her description of the images on the celts may be accurate, her association of the images on them to a shamanistic function and meaning is debatable, because the images were not made for the celts' later usage.

common Olmec motifs, including a few features of a face or of the earth monster, and vegetable elements or the world tree. Similar agreements are made among other scholars. In an essay on the Olmec world tree and Mesoamerican cosmology (1995:105–117), Linda Schele used Kent Reilly's mirror-doubled image of Celt No. 1 as one example of the world tree. And the reconstructed image shows a familiar and typical Olmec mask face with a plant growing out of its head (Fig. 3a). Although the original design may or may not be a complete or frontal image, as in Reilly's view, the fragmentary motifs are clearly part of an image. Interestingly, whereas Xu recognizes the markings as writing symbols, Reilly sees them as elements of a picture image.

In fact, however, most of these markings, although not complete, can be recognized as conventional Olmec design motifs. In Figure 3 and Figure 4, I have paralleled some images that correspond to Reilly's reconstruction and the original drawings of Drucker et al. in the groups of motifs commonly recognized as: vegetation, eye, nostril or nose ornament, and fang or belt ornaments. The images themselves are so distinctive that one can see immediately that the motifs used for the celt design are common and popular in Olmec art, where they represent a typical Olmec image of the earth monster or Maize God.

Further, the motifs on the celt, though pictorial, are identical to some known independent symbols in a well-established Olmec symbolic system, with parallels in Figure 4, and these symbols, as we know to some degree, stand for specific things and concepts. They, even when partially shown as in our case, are very recognizable. Given this, there is no reason to mistake an image with missing parts for something else, for example, to see an incomplete eye or a half nose as a glyphic writing. Even when the most descriptive features, such as an eye or a nose, were used independently to stand for a seed or rainwater (see the interpretation of Fig. 4), the complete eye or nose is depicted. When the symbols are in a complete condition, they do not show any resemblance to Chinese characters. None of the other Mesoamerican hieroglyphs shows that resemblance either. The configurations of the Chinese characters and Mesoamerican symbol/glyphs are totally different. The Mesoamerican ones are made in individual enclosures, and Chinese characters are linear with open ends. But because of the ground-away edges, the remaining fragments on the La Venta celt all look open-ended rather than enclosed. This is probably what led Xu to his mistaken identification of them as Chinese.

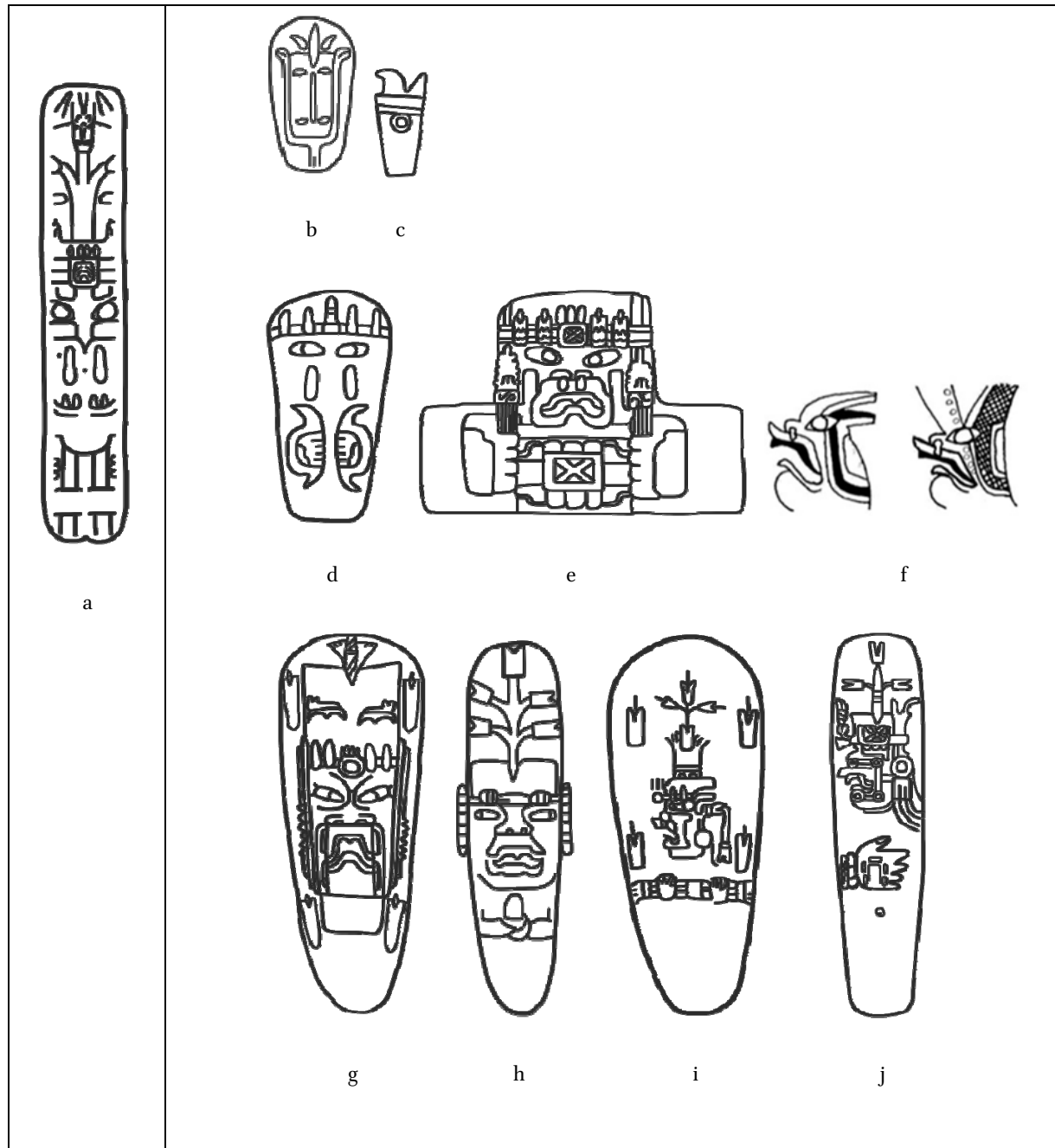


Figure 3. (a) Reilly's Mirror-doubling of Celt No.1 (Schele 1995); (b) Celts from La Venta Offering 1942-C (Drucker 1952); (c) Celt (drawing by H. Zhang after Art Museum, Princeton 1995:catalog 172); (d) Celts from La Venta Offering 1942-C (Drucker 1952); (e) Travertine monolith, Teopancauitla (from Schele 1995); (f) Incision on a ceramic bowl, Tlapacoya (drawing by H. Zhang after a photo in Benson and de la Fuente 1996); (g) (h) (i) Celts from Rio Pesquero (from Schele 1995); (j) Celt, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (from Benson and de la Fuente 1996). Note: All the images in this Figure have been re-drawn digitally by Yuting Zhang.





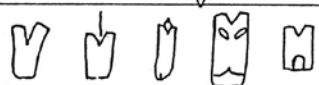






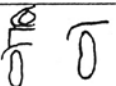
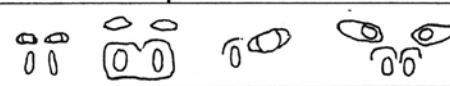


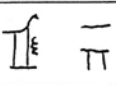

Motif Names	Celt No. 1 Motifs	Symbols & Symbolic Motifs	Possible Meanings
4-dot-and-bar			Four directions or the earth
Vegetation			Maize, germination, the World Tree
Cleft Head or Cleft motif			Germ god, earth monster, or other supernatural beings; a husk for a sprout
Headdress Ornament			Corn symbol (Tate & Reilly 1995:262)
Headband Ornament			Symbol of authority and other symbols(?)
Eye			Pictorial eye for a face; Seed in some cases (Tate & Reilly 1995:230)
Nostril or Nose Ornament, or Other motif			In one case identified as related to water (Castro-Leal 1996:265-266)
Belt Ornament Or Double-Merlon motif			For the double-merlon or double-step motifs: entrance to the underworld (Reilly 1994:131-132); Sign for "green" (Taube 1995:89-91)
Others			

Figure 4. Chart with La Venta Offering-4 Celt-1 symbols and identical Olmec symbols
 (by H. Zhang)

OLMEC SYMBOLS AND THE EARLIEST MESOAMERICAN WRITING

One could argue that even if the signs can be proven to be the elements of a pictorial image, they still could be symbols carrying hidden codes. Such cases are not lacking in Olmec art. The questions, however, are: whether, in our case, they are meaning-bearing symbols and whether these symbols would eventually become glyphs. The first question is already answered by my comparison in Figure 4. Probably most, if not all, of the motifs on the celt design are symbolic and could be used individually. The answer to the second question, to universal delight, has been found in an exciting way.

In 2006, seven Mesoamerican archaeologists and epigraphers together published in *Science* magazine their discovery of an Olmec script on a greenish stone block named the Cascajal Block, claiming that the script "conforms to all expectations of writing" (Rodriguez Martinez et al. 2006: 1612). The block contains sixty-two individual signs that compose a text with a few repeated sequences. The

authors of the Cascajal Block article identify twenty-eight signs out of the sixty-two as unique, and thus were able to make a Cascajal Signary (Figure 5). In my own study³ of the Cascajal script, I found that in the 28-sign Signary, 19 or more, or 68%+ approximately of the signs are found in the Olmec pictorial imagery, where they appear either as a component of an image or as an independent image. This high ratio of pictorial images and their close relationship with more complex images already imply the inspiration, if not the origin, of the oldest Mesoamerican writing, i.e., the Cascajal script. And once again, neither the Cascajal script nor the Olmec imagery resembles in any way any ancient Chinese writing character.

Since the La Venta Offering-4 celt design clearly falls in the category of the pictorial image intertwined with symbolic signs, it remains at most, in my opinion, at the beginning of the development of Olmec symbolic expression as it changed from an iconographic representation to an abstract writing.

³ He Zhang (forthcoming) "An Iconographical Approach to Understanding the Cascajal Scripts" in the Proceedings for the international conference *The Chinese Writing System and Its Dialogue with Sumerian, Egyptian, and Mesoamerican Writing Systems*, Confucius Institute of Rutgers University (CIRU) Publication Series on Chinese Culture.

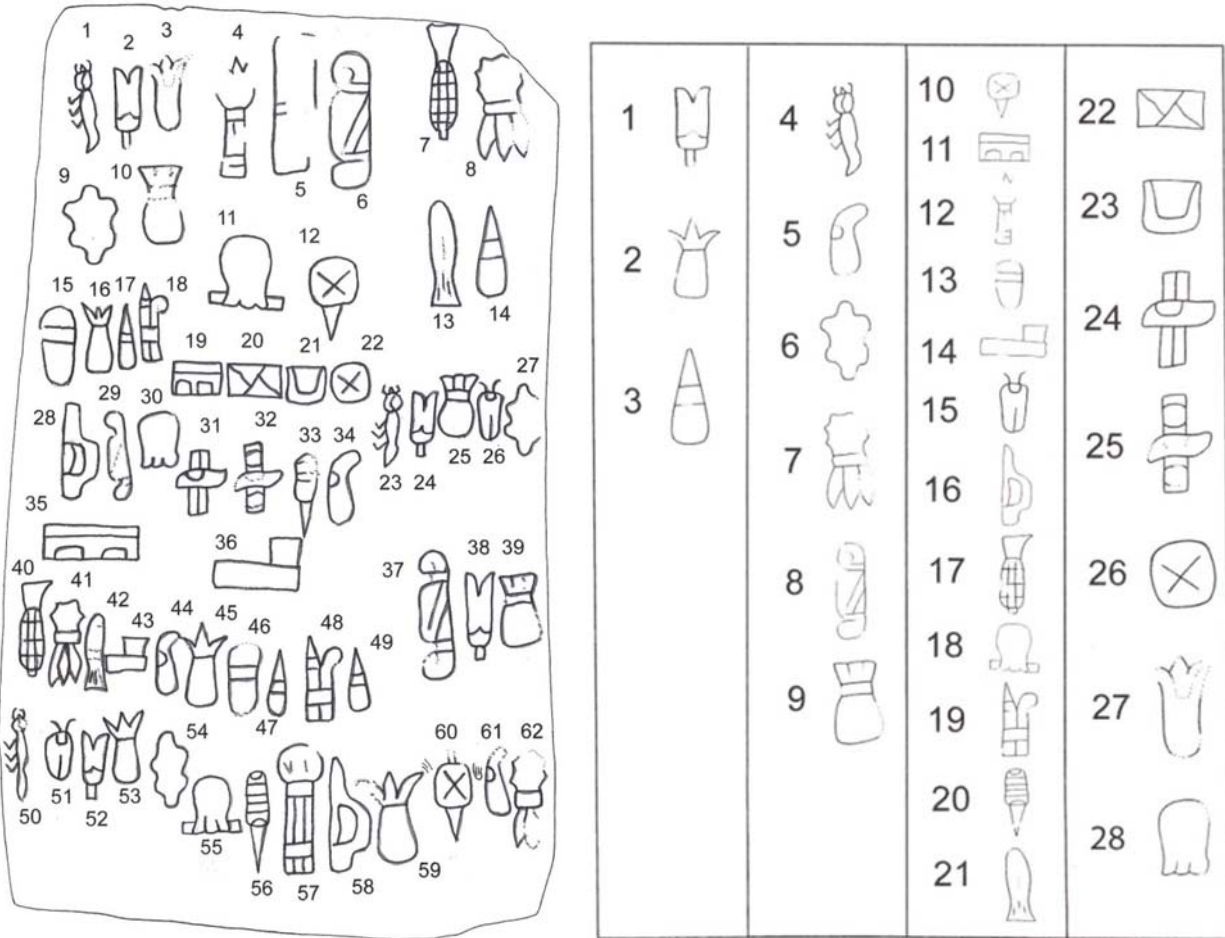


Figure 5. Cascajal Block and Cascajal Signary (Rodriquez Martinez et al. 2006:figure 4 and figure 5).

OTHER MARKINGS AND SIGNS IN THE AMERICAS AND OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD

To support his identification, Xu has collected more glyph-like signs from Central, North, and South America. He has listed more than 50 signs with Chinese parallels (Xu 1999). But these American signs are so isolated that they do not represent a unified writing system or language. His case becomes still less supported when we learn that some number of similar signs is found from elsewhere across the Atlantic Ocean that can also match Xu's American signs. In an ancient writing system, the famous Minoan Linear A, B and Cypriot, I have found about 34 signs that look the same as the ones in Xu's collection (Fig. 6). If I selectively looked for more Pan-American signs, I could find the same quantity

of signs to match the Minoan. But, by simply using Xu's own collection, with a Minoan:American ratio of 34:52⁴, his supportive case can easily be dismissed.

CONCLUSION

There are indeed many similarities between ancient Chinese and Mesoamerican civilizations, too many to be simplistically ignored, and I believe there has been some kind of contact between the two worlds for a very long time. But as to how direct those contacts were, and to what degree they made an impact on the local cultural development, the answers need to wait for more materials to be discovered. Neither diffusionism nor isolationism alone is adequate to describe these complicated cultural phenomena. A genetic theory may render an alternative interpretation, which suggests heredity from some parent cultures in Asia and adaptation to the local environments in the Americas over a long period of time (Grieder 1982). In the case of the Olmec and China, I would propose a filtered influence rather than a direct impact.

The identifying the Olmec signs Chinese is an attempt to make a case of direct relationship between the two civilizations. But its poor examination of the original object and random comparative method fail the attempt. My study has confirmed that the design in question is that of a picture image, not hieroglyphs. Until hard evidence is found, the identification of the Olmec iconographic designs as Chinese characters cannot be established.

⁴ I have used signs 1 to 52 on Xu's list for the ratio, because, up till this point, the signs are individual ones. The rest, his figures 53, 54, 55, and 56, show groups of signs in each. Figure 53 appears to be one set of signs found on one piece of work whose source is not given, and the figures 54, 55, and 56 are the ones from La Venta Offering-4, which I discuss intensively in the main text.

Minoan Script (Linear A, B, & Cypriot)	American Signs	Shang-Zhou Scripts
	1.	(雨)
	2.	(佑)
	3.	(田)
	4.	(生)
	5.	(木)
	6.	(禾)
	7.	(楚)
	8.	(文)
	9.	(中)
	10.	(陪 坎 山)
	11.	(天)
	12.	(水)
	13.	(文)
	14.	(甲)
	15.	(乙)
	16.	(丙)
	17.	(丁)

Fig. 6. Signs from Minoan (by Zhang He), American (Xu 1999), and Chinese (Xu 1999).

Minoan Script (Linear A, B, & Cypriot)	American Signs	Shang-Zhou Scripts
𐀀 𐀁 𐀂	18. 𠄎	(庚) 𠄎 𠄎 𠄎
𐀃 𐀄	19. 𠄏 𠄐	(己) 𠄏 𠄏 𠄏 𠄏 𠄏
𐀅 𐀆	20. 𠄑	(庚) 𠄑 𠄑 𠄑
𐀇 𐀈	21. 𠄒	(辛) 𠄒 𠄒 𠄒
𐀉 𐀊 𐀋	22. 𠄓 𠄔 𠄕	(壬) 𠄓 𠄓 𠄓
𐀌 𐀍	23. 𠄖 𠄗	(癸) 𠄖 𠄖 𠄖 𠄖
𐀎 𐀏	24. 𠄘 𠄙	(子) 𠄘 𠄘 𠄘
𐀐	25. 𠄚	(丑) 𠄚 𠄚 𠄚 𠄚
𐀑	26. 𠄛	(寅) 𠄛 𠄛 𠄛
𐀒	27. 𠄜 𠄝	(卯) 𠄜 𠄜 𠄜
𐀓	28. 𠄞	(辰) 𠄞 𠄞 𠄞
𐀔	29. 𠄟 𠄠	(巳) 𠄟 𠄟 𠄟 𠄟
𐀕	30. 𠄡 𠄢	(午) 𠄡 𠄡 𠄡 𠄡
𐀖 𐀗 𐀘	31. 𠄣	(未) 𠄣 𠄣 𠄣 𠄣
𐀙	32. 𠄤 𠄥 𠄦 𠄧	(申) 𠄤 𠄤 𠄤 𠄤 𠄤
𐀚	33. 𠄨	(戌) 𠄨 𠄨 𠄨
𐀛	34. 𠄩 𠄪 𠄫	(五) 𠄩 𠄩 𠄩 𠄩
𐀜	35. 𠄬	(七) 𠄬 𠄬

Fig. 6. (continued)

Minoan Script
 (Linear A, B, & Cypriot)

American Signs

Shang-Zhou Scripts

	36. 九	(九) 𠂇 𠂈 九
𠂇 𠂈 𠂉	37. 𠂇 𠂈 𠂉 𠂊 𠂋	(日) 𠂇 𠂈 𠂉 𠂊 𠂋 𠂌
	38. 𠂍	(榮) 𠂍
A	39. A 𠂎	(今) A 𠂎
	40. 𠂏 𠂐	(西) 𠂏 𠂐
M	41. 𠂑	(公) 𠂑 𠂒 𠂓
	42. 𠂔 𠂕	(亞) 𠂔 亞 𠂕
T	43. T T	(示) T 𠂖 𠂗
	44. 𠂘 𠂙	(祭) 𠂘 𠂙 𠂚 𠂛
	45. 東 𠂜	(東) 東
𠂝 𠂞	46. 𠂝 𠂞	(羊) 𠂝 𠂞
𠂟	47. 𠂟	(觀) 𠂟 𠂠 𠂡
	48. 夫	(夫) 夫
	49. 𠂢	(泉) 𠂢
	50. 𠂣 𠂤 𠂥 𠂦	(火光) 𠂣 𠂤 𠂥 𠂦

Fig. 6. (continued)

Minoan Script American Signs Shang-Zhou Scripts
 (Linear A, B, & Cypriot)

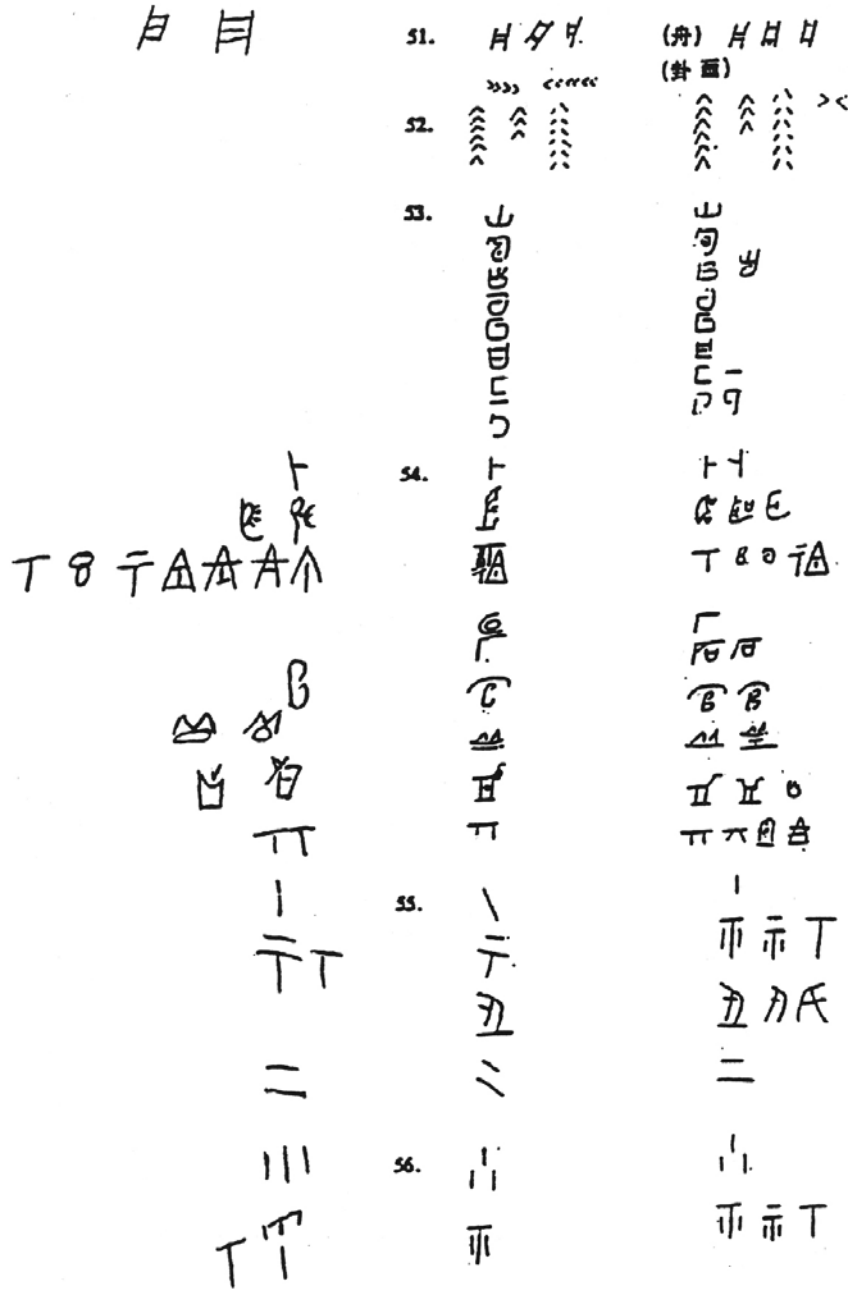


Fig. 6. (continued)

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A Chinese language version of this study was published as "An Analysis of Chinese Oracle Bone Inscriptions and Olmec Iconographic Images" in the *Journal of Chinese Ocean University*, Jan. 2011 ("美洲发现'甲骨文'一案错判剖析 - 兼论奥尔梅克象征图画和符号" 《中国海洋大学学报-社会科学版》 2011 第 1 期). Unfortunately it did not alert English language scholars, and I have found a few serious publications still quoting Xu's identification as evidence. So I am offering an English version here.

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