

PRE-COLUMBIANA

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Twentieth-Anniversary Quintuple Issue: More on American Epigraphy

More Chinese-style glyphs in the desert West

Comments on the Michigan Relics

Myth-busting about Sequoyah and Cherokee writing

Transoceanic contacts in fiction:

 Antarctic and Iberian "Atlantises"

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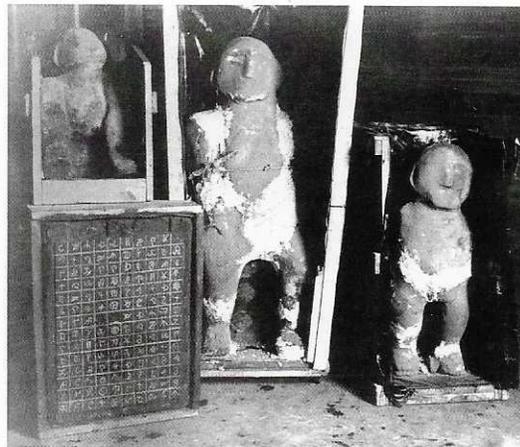
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For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate error so long as reason is left free to combat it.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1819, at the founding of the University of Virginia

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ANCIENT CHINESE ROCK WRITING IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: DEFINING THE LUNAR MONTH

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Abstract. In this study, a unique set of petroglyphs located in the Mojave Desert of southeastern California is analyzed and deciphered as Chinese writing. Together, these images are interpretable as being an ancient astronomical message defining the monthly lunar cycle as the sum of three 10-day periods. Along with other evidence, epigraphic and statistical analysis of these images leads compellingly to the conclusion that literate Chinese individuals were present in western North America approximately 2,500 years ago, and that some of the three-ring concentric-circle rock art motifs found in the American Southwest – as well as around the world – may represent the set of three ten-day weeks employed in ancient times to describe a lunar month. Curiously, long ago both the Chinese and certain Native American groups embraced such a calendric system. Collectively, this set of archaic petroglyphs implies an early Chinese transpacific transfer of intellectual property.

Resumen: En este estudio, se analiza y descifra un conjunto único de petroglifos ubicados en el desierto de Mojave, en el sureste de California, como escritura antigua china. Juntas estas imágenes son interpretables como un antiguo mensaje astronómico que define el ciclo lunar mensual como la suma de tres períodos de diez días. Junto con otra evidencia, el análisis epigráfico y estadístico de estas imágenes lleva a la conclusión convincente de que los individuos “alfabetizados” chinos estaban presentes en el oeste de América del Norte hace aproximadamente 2,500 años, y que algunos de los motivos de arte rupestre de círculo concéntrico de tres anillos encontrados en el suroeste de los Estados Unidos, así como en todo el mundo, puede representar el conjunto de tres semanas de diez días empleadas en la antigüedad para describir un mes lunar. Curiosamente, hace mucho tiempo, tanto los chinos como ciertos grupos de nativos americanos adoptaron un sistema de este tipo. Colectivamente, este conjunto de petroglifos arcaicos evidencia una temprana transferencia transpacífica china de propiedad intelectual.

INDICATIONS OF EARLY TRANSPACIFIC CONTACT

For over 250 years, the possibility of an early transpacific interaction between Asian and North American populations has been debated (Fingerhut 2002; Jett 2017). As early as the middle of the eighteenth century, this notion was set forth by the renowned French scholar Joseph de Guignes (1761), as he reflected upon the mounting secondary evidence suggesting such an event. Within the following century, the writings of Alexander von Humboldt (1814), Charles Leland (1875), and Edward

Vining (1885) gave voice to the likelihood of early transpacific crossings, based on both historical and nautical data. More recently, genetic and other analyses of animal and plant species have provided conclusive scientific evidence for the early movement of both people and biologicals across the Pacific (Sorenson and Johannessen 2013).

Recently, examples of long-extinct styles of Chinese writing have been identified here and there, pecked upon cliffs and boulders of western North America, attesting to early transpacific-interaction events (Ruskamp 2013, 2015-2017). Importantly, these ancient writings have been conclusively shown to be true antique artifacts and not modern fabrications. And, after loss of knowledge of the most ancient forms of Chinese script appearing in these recordings following the fall of the Shang dynasty in 1046 B.C., these records remained forgotten, overlooked, unstudied – and uneffaced – for millennia. Knowledge of this ancient writing system was recovered only beginning in A.D. 1899, near Anyang, China. Significantly, the levels or repatination evident on the relevant American marks – located at multiple separate sites up to 700 miles apart – leaves no doubt that these inscriptions are considerably older than the mere 120 years since rediscovery of Shang writing and therefore cannot be the product of a counterfeiter.

One particularly striking argument suggestive of an early transpacific intellectual exchange is the fact that both certain ancient Native American and Asiatic peoples utilized three weekly ten-day periods to mark the moon's monthly revolution around the earth (Zeilik 1985, 1986: S8). Additionally, ten-day weeks were also employed in ancient Egypt (as well as, briefly, during the French Revolution). However, there is a dearth of physical evidence for a lunar-calendrical paradigm having been transmitted from one population to another rather than having independently developed on either side of the ocean. This has left the phenomenon as little more than a curious historical sidebar.

DEFINING THE LUNAR MONTH

In late 2015, personnel of a research study being conducted in the Mojave Desert of southeastern California came upon a previously overlooked large boulder embellished with two ancient petroglyphs identifiable as Chinese script (Figure 1). These markings occur in a small San Bernardino County canyon that is embellished with a plethora of petroglyphs readable as archaic Chinese characters along with what appear to be a number of Native American motifs that were also pecked into the

hard-basalt rock surfaces.



Figure 1.

The California ancient Chinese style signs, defining a lunar month

Ancient Chinese writings typically read from top to bottom and from right to left. Employing this convention to understand the symbols on this boulder reveals that the first two of these images are well-understood ancient Chinese logographs. However, deciphering the implied meaning of the third image upon this boulder - a set of three concentric circles - is problematic, because this is a common rock-art pattern found at sites around the world. When viewed as stand-alone items, concentric circles are typically very difficult to interpret with certainty, although they often have solar associations. Fortunately, in this instance the tri-partite circular symbol was intentionally placed below two clearly readable Chinese signs, providing an opportunity to illuminate its meaning, including its lunar aspects.

The ancient author commenced his message toward the top of this boulder by pecking into the surface an illustration (pictogram) in the

approximate form of a D, the symbol employed by the early Chinese for their word *yuè* ‘moon, month’ (Houston 2004:255). Although similar symbols representing the moon are still in everyday use, viewed in the context of this singular set of signs, and with a readable ancient Chinese character inscribed below it, this D-like symbol may be understood as the first word of a longer informative statement.

Beneath the symbol for ‘moon’, the author placed another readable Chinese logogram, the archaic symbol for *shí*, ‘period of time’ (Figure 2). Importantly, the multiple components of this character are helpful for its decipherment as *shí*, a compound symbol composed of three sub-elements. The sign begins at the top with the symbol for ‘a plant’ (Ma 2019), which is underscored by a single horizontal line representing ‘the ground’. To the right of these two depictions, the ancient author drew a divided subrectangle, which is the Chinese sign for ‘sun’, *rì* (Song, personal communication 2019). Viewed collectively, these three pictograms form the unique Archaic Chinese ideogram *shì* ‘a period of time’ (Chen, personal communication 2019).



Figure 2. A. Petroglyphs forming the symbol *shí*. B. Image from Wilder & Ingram 1922

As noted above, images of the moon and patterns of three concentric circles such as are executed on this boulder are common rock-art designs. However, here the ancient author’s intentional placement of the readable multi-element Chinese script symbol of *shí* between these two symbols provides a literary context for interpreting this set of images. Importantly,

the ancient Chinese symbol *shí* has a complex form that is not otherwise known to have been employed outside of China, so both the source and the age of this character are communicated by its unique design.

Worldwide, rock-art enthusiasts have experienced great difficulty in explaining the exact meaning(s) of patterns of concentric circles. For instance, in *Rock Art Symbols of the Greater Southwest* concentric circles are unhelpfully defined only descriptively, as just that, “concentric circles” (Patterson 1992:23). Other authors in the field of petroglyphs have offered unverified signification for these circular patterns. The latter have been described as “visual stimuli associated with altered states of consciousness” (Hedges 1981: 1); footprints of the Hopi god Maasaw (Stephen 1940: 7-8); or reflections of the ability of a shaman to travel between the upper and middle worlds (Edberg 1985: 91). Unfortunately, whether any such interpretations provide true insight into the meaning of any given concentric-circle pattern (as are frequently encountered in rock art) is problematic.

The readability of the two ancient Chinese characters located above the three concentric circles pecked into this boulder provide a contextual setting for interpreting the pattern, at least in this instance. Learning the meaning of the three-ring motif at this site could prove useful for interpreting similar images at other locations, especially in the American Southwest. With the moon above and the symbol *shí* positioned between the moon and the depiction, lower down, of three concentric circles, the meaning of the entire message can be logically and productively analyzed (Figure 3).

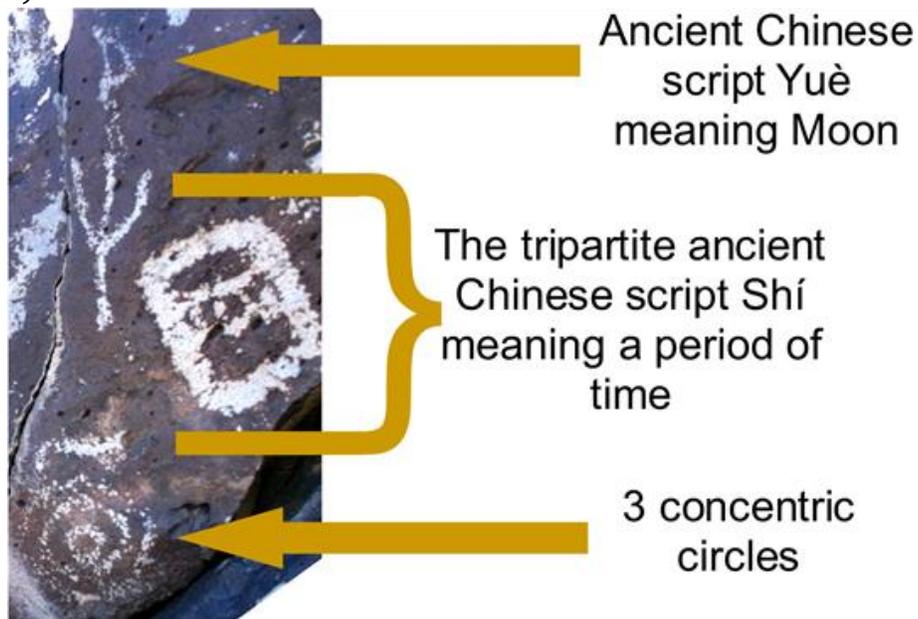


Figure 3. The inscription analyzed.

Beginning with the symbol of the moon, and then reading downward, the first two ancient Chinese characters in this message form the sequence *yuè shì*, which may be translated as ‘Moon, period of time’. Continuing to read below this defining phrase, as Chinese is read from top to bottom, the three concentric circles located below *yuè* and *shì* remind us of the three ten-day weekly cycles employed for keeping time in ancient China and, importantly, in portions of pre-Columbian America. Therefore, the complete message preserved by these rock writings appears to inform us that ‘(The) Moon’s period of time (is) three cycles’. To state this more clearly, ‘the lunar month is composed of three [ten-day] periods’.

DISCUSSION

To correctly decipher and interpret ancient Chinese writing, it is important to note that prior to the Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.) the forms of the logographs used in writing were unregulated (Norman 1988). Lacking standardization, authors often wrote in their own individual styles – much as, today, our personal handwritings reflect our unique individual proclivities, preferences, and cultural backgrounds.. The widely acclaimed sinologist David N. Keightley noted that “One of the major difficulties in deciphering early inscriptions derives precisely from this ‘looseness’ . . .” (quoted in Senner 1989). Hence, variation in symbols was common in early Chinese writing (Galambos 2006).

The characters present in this particular instance are not laid out exactly as if execute by a professional scribe. Note, however, that generating written symbols on a rock surface and in a desert wilderness is a substantially different process than that involved in creating the bulk of the early Chinese written record. Pecking the patterns of signs into hard rock, often basalt, involved applying different tools, techniques, and expenditures of energy than those required for applying a brush to paper, inscribing a symbol upon a bone, or casting an image into a bronze vessel. While the representative logograms preserved in ancient Chinese lexicons were assembled from the styles of writing employed by scholars of a bygone era, the rock writings analyzed in this study were created by individuals of unknown levels of literacy and upon a different medium. Consequently, some divergences among the styles of the ancient Chinese characters created in these different settings are to be anticipated.

Importantly, following the fall of China’s Shang dynasty in 1046 B.C. the forms and meanings of oracle-bone signs – such as the *shì* figure

described above – fell into disuse and obscurity. Ultimately, these forms disappeared from human memory, remaining forgotten until examples of these symbols were rediscovered near Anyang, China, in A.D. 1899, with decipherment following.

The shared elements of such a unique (and now-long-extinct) system of writing in two very widely separated places implies that at an early date, prior to or shortly following the demise of the Shang, a significant transpacific intellectual conveyance of the particulars of this style of writing occurred, for no system of writing has ever been - or could be – independently reinvented (Houston 2004). Significantly, the use of such a uniquely datable style of writing in the American rock art record provides a platform for assessing the ages of petroglyphs independently of the rock’s surface characteristics, including many of Native American authorship.

As noted above, it is significant that both the ancient Chinese and certain Native Americans employed sets of three ten-day weeks as a lunar metric and that both of these peoples inscribed rocks in western North America. One must ask why a literate ancient Chinese explorer in America would bother to invest the time and energy required to mark, on a remote rock, a record of what was a widely understood and accepted Chinese system of time measurement – unless it was to preserve the most important details as part of an intellectual exchange? Accordingly, perhaps some of the Chinese-style symbols on western American rocks were executed later, by Native Americans rather than by Chinese visitors themselves (Ruskamp 2013, 2015-2017).

However, if the presumed literate Asiatic individual who recorded, on stone, the description of the Chinese ten-day-week calendrical system as described above had introduced this measurement to the Native people that he was among, then providing a written record of it for future reference would be most beneficial to the latter, assuming that the meaning of the signs were also conveyed. Assuredly, this set of readable unique ancient Chinese glyphs speaks to the operation of one or more Chinese persons being present in the ancient American West, preserving, as it seems to, a “rock-solid” record of an important transpacific intellectual transfer, at a time when the ancient style of scripts that comprise this message were still in use in the Far East, i.e., no later than 2,200 years ago.

CONCLUSIONS

Multiple world-renowned historians and epigraphers of Chinese writing have independently communicated to me their confirmation of each of the Chinese-script petroglyphs discussed in the larger study's being an identifiable form of an ancient Chinese symbol. Additionally, the statistical probability for the independent creation of each of the glyphs included in this study has been calculated to be less than 5 percent in each instance; for most of the signs, this value is less than 0.1 percent (see Ruskamp 2013). Cumulatively, the chance of independently engraving rocks at scattered sites with these readable ancient-Chinese-style logographs – in some cases, as clusters exhibiting the appropriate syntax from a bygone era – is essentially zero. Augmenting these statistical values, the degree of surface repatination observed upon the overall study's various Chinese-script petroglyphs has been assessed as reflecting substantial age (Medrano 2013; Jett 2015-2017).

This article has detailed a proposed decipherment of an ancient petroglyph panel in southeastern California that, in Chinese, appears clearly to describe the period of a lunar month. Along with the larger study's discovery of an ancient Bronze-era Chinese poem inscribed upon a cliff along northeastern Arizona's Little Colorado River and the unique scripts and syntax employed to record an equally ancient traditional Chinese sacrificial message in northern New Mexico's Petroglyph National Monument, the present investigation appears to confirm that transpacific theories previously set forth by such scholars as Alexander von Humboldt (1814), Nancy Yaw Davis (2001), Carl Johannessen (Sorenson and Johannessen 2013), Joseph Needham (and Liu 1985), Stephen C. Jett (1971, 1983, 2017), and others are more than just plausible.

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