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### Heading south for the winter? Here's something to know

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## **NEWS RELEASE**

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Oct. 7, 1999

**Contact:** Jeffrey Gritzner, geography professor, (406) 243-5626.

### **HEADING SOUTH FOR THE WINTER? HERE'S SOMETHING TO KNOW**

#### **MISSOULA--**

Chances are, people planning a trip to Mexico's Yucatan peninsula this winter have chosen the area as much for its Mayan ruins as for its balmy winter weather. Most travelers know about the Mayas and other ancient South American cultures like the Aztecs and Incas from social studies classes in grade school. But ask people who the Olmecs were, and the answer probably will be something like "the who?"

The Olmecs were the mother culture of the Mayas, that's who, and had the first documented high civilization in the Western Hemisphere, appearing about 1300 B.C. in Mesoamerica. They flourished in a region near the Yucatan, but where they came from is still a mystery. No clear history of their development exists -- at least, not in the New World.

Jeffrey Gritzner, a geography professor and ancient-culture sleuth at The University of Montana, thinks he's dug up their roots in the first major documented Chinese dynasty, the Shang. His long-term research into the Olmecs' origins was the basis for a paper he presented in Boston in 1998.

The Shang, Gritzner says, ended sometime between 1047 B.C. and 1332 B.C., about the same time the Olmec civilization appeared in Mesoamerica. That in itself wouldn't be significant, though, were there not so many similarities between the two cultures.

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"There was an incredible similarity in importance of certain artistic conventions," Gritzner says. "Perhaps the most significant linkage is through the similarity of Shang and Olmec glyphs." Glyphs are ideas expressed in symbols. Gritzner says that Chinese academy people can read the glyphs or inscriptions found on Olmec burial items because they're identical with Shang inscriptions.

Artistic similarities appear also in depictions of tigers and jaguars missing the lower jaw and either protecting or devouring children or small human adults. Dogs were domesticated in both worlds, but archaeological finds indicate that the Olmec, like the Shang, had small dogs associated with the temple, likely used as temple guards and sacrificial animals, Gritzner says.

Both cultures attached a high value to jade, worked it in almost identical ways and made comparable objects from it, he says. For example, jade celts -- tools resembling chisels or ax heads, often painted red and interred with the dead -- were common to both cultures.

Other shared traits were a well-developed social hierarchy, similar political organization, ceremonial centers built upon artificial earthen platforms oriented north to south and water-control technologies such as drainage ditches, dikes and pools. Both also developed trade networks covering thousands of miles.

"The trait complexes of the Shang and Olmec -- including artistic traditions, inscriptions, architectural detail, hydraulic works, feline cults, blood sacrifice, jade celts often interred with corpses and specific tools -- are so similar, and the timing is so close, that it is doubtful that there is not a significant connection," Gritzner says.

How did this connection come about? Gritzner thinks that when the Shang dynasty was



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accused of being too ambitious and overthrown by another group, the Zhou, the Shang aristocracy fled by sea to the New World, bringing with them architects and other craftsmen.

"What brought this into focus for me was my study of the history of navigation and seeing that it was so well developed during the Shang dynasty," he says. "There may have been navigation as many as 750,000 years ago, so it shouldn't be surprising that 3,000 years ago there would be water craft capable of making those connections. From the Chinese coast, where the Shang aristocracy was established, they very likely would have ended up, with the counter currents and prevailing winds, in Mesoamerica. The craft would have been something along the lines of early Chinese junks, which could sail into contrary winds, so they weren't dependent upon prevailing winds although, of course, it's a lot easier to sail with prevailing winds."

If the Olmec civilization arose from a Shang migration to the New World, where did it go?

"My guess is that the Olmec aristocracy was overthrown because it became too abusive," Gritzner says. But the culture was not obliterated. It left its stamp in the New World, many aspects of it showing up in the later Mayan civilization.

So travelers to the Yucatan can rightly marvel at the ruins they find there. Even more marvelous, the real roots of those ruins go back further into the past than most people realize.

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**Note:** Three scanned photocopied pictures of Olmec carvings are available via e-mail by calling (406) 243-4750 or (406) 243-4825.

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