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TIME AND LANDSCAPE AT THE BEGINNING OF CHINESE WRITING

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ABSTRACT


Writing was independently invented at least four times in human history: Sumerian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese and Olmec Mayan hieroglyphs, all logographic at the time of their invention. Strong archeological evidence supported the dating of the origin of Sumerian and Egyptian writing to 3200 BCE and Olmec Mayan writing to 650 BCE. The earliest known Chinese writing is *Jiǎgǔwén* 甲骨文 (OBI, oracle bone inscriptions) of late Shang dynasty (*ca.* 1300–1046 BCE). As OBI is fully mature, the origin of Chinese would have to be dated much earlier. Taking advantage of the continuity of logographic Chinese, we have developed a model to show that Chinese writing should have occurred around or before 2100 BCE. This estimate is consistent with three lines of archaeological findings. Considering the wide distribution of *táowén* 陶文 (pottery marks) in all Neolithic sites in China during the third millennium BCE we further proposed a “funnel model” to illustrate the landscape at the beginning of Chinese writing and how it evolved into a stable writing system.

KEYWORDS

Pristine writings Oracle bone inscription Pottery marks Funnel model

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汉字起源的时空背景

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摘要

人类文明历史产生过四种独立发明的自源文字。考古证据将苏美和古埃及文字的起源定点在公元前 3200 年左右。汉字最早的考古证据是殷墟出土的甲骨刻辞，时当公元前 1300 年左右。甲骨文是成熟的文字系统，与两周金文差异不大，所以汉字起源应当远早于商代。本文检视苏美、埃及文字起源的关键考古证据，并论述在缺乏直接考古证据的情况下可以利用出土的甲骨文材料，新石器遗址的陶文资料，及汉字构型连续性所建立的数学模式间接推演汉字起源时间。依据这三种方式笔者推测汉字应该存在于公元前 2100 年之前。其时大汶口文化及良渚文化已出现类似埃及法老王鸟徽的陶符。由分子生物学可知，细胞体蛋白质初生后经过“漏斗型模式”的竞争过程才折叠成具备功能的三维或四维稳定结构。同样，新石器时代中国大地可能有许多原始初文，经过类似蛋白质折叠的“漏斗型竞争模式”，最后由稳定性高的汉字前身胜出而发展成为商代甲骨文字。

关键词

自源文字 甲骨文 陶文 漏斗型模式