

## The origins of the Chinese writing system: Explorations in linguistic archeology and sociolinguistics

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Based on the discovery of oracle bone inscriptions, there is strong evidence for a mature Chinese writing system and an associated literacy tradition by 12C BC. [Keightley 1989]. These inscriptions were used for mostly divinational and ceremonial purposes and they followed the earlier discovery of pottery marks and even earlier rock carvings. However, 12C BC is often recognized as a watershed mark in the development of the Chinese written language and the long-lasting Chinese Writing System because the earlier archaeological finds could not confirm the Chinese character's active use as a literacy medium. Furthermore, the possible dating of the origin of the Chinese writing system has attracted only scant attention until recently (Demattè 2010), as is the case with the sociolinguistic analysis of the unique Radical system underlying the Chinese characters [Tsou 1981].

We propose to re-examine the internal structure of the Chinese writing system and what light could be shed on its origins. We base our analysis on the 540 radical system, first codified by Xu Sheng about 2 millennia ago, and the subsequently revised 214 radical system 1800 years later during Qing Dynasty. We consider the significance of the strong evidence of social structure such as matriarchy as well as the additional changing saliency in the underlying taxonomy of fauna and flora, including animals such as elephant/mammoth. Furthermore, drawing on more recent archeological finds we propose that the Chinese writing system was well developed long before the appearance of the oral bone inscriptions in 12C BC and very likely prior to the end of matriarchy in China, and examine how the Rebus Principle in written communication has contributed to the maintenance of the morpho-syllabic Chinese Writing for an unprecedented duration.

Paola Demattè., 2010. The Origins of Chinese Writing: the Neolithic Evidence. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, Cambridge University Press: 10 June 2010, pp. 211-228.

Keightley, D.N., 1989. "The Origins of Writing in China: Scripts and cultural contexts", in Wayne, M.S. (ed.), *The Origins of Writing*, University of Nebraska Press, pp.171-202.

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