

China discovers primitive, 5,000-year-old writing

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Archaeologists say they have discovered a new form of primitive writing in markings on stoneware excavated from a relic site in eastern China dating about 5,000 years back. The inscriptions are about 1,400 years older than the oldest known written Chinese language and around the same age as the oldest writing in the world.

Chinese scholars are divided on whether the etchings amount to actual [writing](#) or a precursor to words that should be described as [symbols](#), but they say the finding will help shed light on the origins of Chinese language and culture. The oldest current known Chinese writing has been found on [animal bones](#)—known as oracle bones—dating to 3,600 years ago during the Shang dynasty.

The inscriptions have not been reviewed by experts outside of the country, but a group of Chinese scholars on archaeology and ancient writing met last weekend in Zhejiang province to discuss the finding. They agreed that the incisions—found on more than 200 pieces dug out from the Neolithic-era Liangzhu relic site south of Shanghai—are not enough to indicate any developed writing system. But lead archaeologist Xu Xinmin said they include evidence of words on two broken stone-ax pieces.

One of the pieces has six word-like shapes strung together to resemble a short sentence. The pieces are among thousands of fragments of ceramic, stone, jade, wood, ivory and bone excavated from the Liangzhu relic site between 2003 and 2006, Xu said.

"They are different from the symbols we have seen in the past on artifacts," Xu said of the markings. "The shapes and the fact that they are in a sentence-like pattern indicate they are expressions of some meaning."

The six characters are arranged in a line, and three of them resemble the modern Chinese character for human beings. Each shape has two to five strokes.

"If five to six of them are strung together like a sentence, they are no longer symbols but words," said Cao Jinyan, a scholar on ancient writing at Hangzhou-based Zhejiang University. He said the markings should be considered hieroglyphics.

He said there are also stand-alone shapes with more strokes. "If you look at the composition, you will see they are more than symbols," Cao said.

But archaeologist Liu Zhao from Shanghai-based Fudan University warned that there was not sufficient material for any conclusion.

"I don't think they should be considered writing by the strictest definition," Liu said. "We do not have enough material to pin down the stage of those markings in the history of ancient writings."

For now, the Chinese scholars have agreed to call them "primitive writing," a vague term that suggests the Liangzhu markings are somewhere between symbols and words.

The oldest writing in the world is believed to be from Mesopotamia, dating back more than 5,000 years. Chinese characters are believed to be an independent invention.

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