

CHINESE  
DICTIONARIES:  
THREE MILLENNIA  
(FROM 1046 BC TO AD 1999)

中国辞典3000年

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We, as authors, are naturally responsible for any errors and mistakes that may still remain in the book. We would greatly appreciate our readers' comments and suggestions. Please feel free to email us at [hmyong818@hotmail.com](mailto:hmyong818@hotmail.com) or write to us at Guangdong University of Business Studies, 21 Chisha Road, Guangzhou 510320, Guangdong Province, China.

## FOREWORD

While preparing a presentation to the Barcelona 2008 Congress of the European Association for Lexicography, which involved taking stock of its 25-year development since its foundation at Exeter, I could not help reflecting on the need for more research on all aspects of the theory and practice of dictionary-making. One of the priorities is our improved knowledge of dictionary history, not just in our part of the world, but everywhere.

The book by Heming Yong, Jing Peng, Bing Tian and Xiangming Zhang fills this gap, offering a comprehensive chronological account of Chinese lexicography. Given the long period of 3000 years, the large territory, the diverse cultural and linguistic traditions and the wide range of reference works covered, this is an ambitious task which the authors manage to accomplish as a result of a long-term joint research project, combining diachronic explorations with new studies of dictionary compilation and use.

We are presented with an objective first-hand description of the history of the most representative lexicographic works from the remote past to the beginning of the 21st century, covering all major dictionary genres produced not only in Mainland China, but also in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao. More barriers between Chinese and Western lexicography are thus likely to be removed, and new forms of comparative and interactive research in a more global context will become a real possibility.

**Dr. Reinhard R. K. Hartmann, FRSA, FCIL**

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# Chapter 1

## THE DAWNING OF CHINESE LEXICOGRAPHICAL CULTURE AND THE ORIGIN OF CHINESE LEXICOGRAPHY

China is one of the countries that enjoy the longest history of civilization in the world. The Chinese started to compile reading primers, the earliest sources of modern dictionaries, over 3000 years ago, and the first Chinese dictionary appeared around 2200 years ago. However, the systematic and coherent research into the history of Chinese lexicography started only from the last quarter of the 20th century. Little is known about this aspect of Chinese culture not only inside China but outside China as well. "Dictionary-making in China ... was already well advanced some two thousand years ago, but the extent of this achievement was not appreciated by the West for more than a thousand years." (Collison 1982:20)

Traditionally, lexicography has been studied mainly from a single perspective, i. e. the compiler's viewpoint, but the history of lexicography cannot be fully explored without taking into consideration the socio-cultural dimensions of a nation's evolution, as the history of lexicography is closely related to the studies of the language, its writing system and history, to the socio-cultural history of the nation, and to the progression of its civilization. Consequently, this study will follow the diachronic sequence as the main thread of explorations, trace the development of Chinese lexicographical culture from very remote times to the modern era, make sound evaluation of representative works, formulate theoretical generalizations, for the purpose of incorporating all the findings in such

researches within a coherently unified framework. Throughout the study, attention is to be devoted to the interaction between socio-cultural advancement and dictionary production and development, and between socio-cultural demands and dictionary compilation and use so as to bring out the regularities and patterns of dictionary development, discover the mechanisms of dictionary compilation and use, and reveal the cognitive principles regulating dictionary use.

No lexicographic culture of any civilization in the world has developed overnight but evolved and extended over a quite long period, following the same beaten path: from inscribed clay plates (or bamboo slips) to word and character reading primers, from word and character reading primers to wordlists, glossaries, wordbooks and vocabularies, and from glossaries and wordbooks to character dictionaries and word dictionaries, which is a universal pattern for the natural development of lexicographic culture in the world.

For a better and more in-depth understanding of the interactions and the universal pattern, this study will adopt the theory of the dictionary as communication (see Heming Yong [雍和明] 2003; Heming Yong and Jing Peng [彭敬] 2007) as its basis and starting point so that the dictionaries and their development can be examined from a three-way relationship — the dictionary, its compiler and its user. User needs and dictionary development, user research and dictionary use, and dictionary use and language teaching are all to be investigated under and integrated into this unified framework.

We will start from examining the studies in ancient Chinese literature and their motivational influences upon the emergence of ancient Chinese lexicographical culture and works.

### 1.1 THE CHINESE WRITING SYSTEM AND THE THEORY OF “SIX-CATEGORY CHINESE CHARACTERS”

Language emerges, evolves and changes with the development of human



society and the progression of human civilization. The spoken and written forms of language, however, do not evolve simultaneously. Even today, many languages in the world have only spoken forms, rather than having acquired writing systems.

The Chinese writing system is one of the oldest in the world, and there are several theories concerning its creation and creator. Scholars in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) believed that Chinese characters originated from knot tying — the earliest means by which people kept records of significant events in their primitive life. Modern scholars tend to accept that Chinese characters were created by Cang Jie (or Ts'ang Chieh [苍颉, also 仓颉]), a legendary official historian for the Yellow Emperor during the 30th century BC, as the story of Cang Jie's creating characters was noted in *The Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* (《吕氏春秋·君守》) by Lü Buwei (吕不韦, ?–235 BC) and his scholarly followers, in *An Explanatory Dictionary of Chinese Characters* (《说文解字》) by Xu Shen (许慎, c. 58–c. 147), and in some other classic literature.

The Chinese characters evolved from symbols, curves, graphs and sketches on the colored earthenware in late Neolithic Age. The inscriptions curved on tortoise shells and animal bones of the Shang Dynasty (1600 BC–1046 BC), which are called *Jiaguwen* (甲骨文), are the earliest matured Chinese characters discovered so far. A collection has been made of approximately 4600 *Jiaguwen* characters, mostly phonograms.

Since their appearance, Chinese characters have undergone three main phases of evolution in form and structure: from *dazhuan* (大篆, a style of calligraphy with complicated strokes current in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, 1600 BC–256 BC) to *xiaozhuan* (小篆, standing for fewer-stroke seal characters simplified from *dazhuan* by Prime Minister Li Si [李斯], ?–208 BC) of the Qin Dynasty, 221 BC–206 BC); from *xiaozhuan* to official script (隶书, a style of Chinese calligraphy current in the Han Dynasty 206 BC–AD 220); and from official script to regular script (楷书), also known as formal script, which quickly became the general script in the early engraved printing in the Tang Dynasty. Ever since, regular script has remained the standard script for the Chinese