A Starry Sky:
The Origins of Cities in Neolithic China

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Abstract

The emergence of cities or large settlements is often regarded as a key marker of civilization. Using a unique dataset on cities (enclosures) in Neolithic China (around 3000 BCE), I analyze the origins of cities by examining the spatial distribution of these enclosures. My findings reveal the existence of several enclosure clusters across China during this period. The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) indicates that these clusters can be classified into two distinct types: concentrated and non-concentrated patterns. I further test these clusters against three major hypotheses on the origins of civilization: the Circumscription Hypothesis, the Hydraulic Hypothesis, and the Neolithic Revolution Hypothesis. The results suggest that different clusters align with different origin mechanisms, indicating that the rise of civilization in Neolithic China followed multiple, region-specific paths. This implies that there was no singular logic behind the origins of civilization; rather, each region followed its own trajectory toward societal development.