



# Investigation on the Development of the Lexical Meaning of *Shang*

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**Abstract.** The word 商 (pronounced *Shang*) appeared in the Chinese language very early, and has been long used as a basic word. This paper analyzes and sorts out the original literature and Chinese corpora, aiming to clarify the original meaning and historical development of the word *Shang*. Due to the controversies, this paper analyzes and organizes the original meaning of *Shang* based on literature review. According to the research results, three interpretations about the original meaning of *Shang* are more reliable at present: artifacts, totems and stars. After further investigating the extension trend of *Shang*, the development of the word *Shang* can be divided into two phases: In the first phase, it refers to the *Shang* Dynasty and the business operated by the people of the *Shang* Dynasty; Later, it was used as a morpheme in the vocabulary expressing measurements. Based on this usage, the word *Shang* began to express discussion therefrom. In conclusion, the meaning of the word *Shang* has expanded, and gradually abstracted, and the meaning of the word is becoming more and more stable.

**Keywords:** Shang · Original meaning · Extended meaning · Lexical meaning development

## 1 Introduction

As one of the most common Chinese characters, *Shang* has always been the focus of research. With the development of the times, the meaning of *Shang* is constantly changing, to which more and more attention has been paid by the academic community. There are a lot of relevant studies that this research can be referred to. However, despite numerous studies, the interpretation of the original meaning of *Shang* has always been a difficult problem in today's academic community. This word first appeared in the oracle bone inscriptions of the *Shang* Dynasty, referring to the *Shang* Dynasty. Text notes and word explanations interpret *Shang* as “From the outside to the inside. Cong Zhang, Sheng sheng”, Xu Shen believes that the word *Shang* infers the internal situation from the outside. From the perspective of glyph, *Shang* adopts the character 商 as the radical

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part, and the character 章 without the component of 早 as the phonetic part, Duan Yucai also mentioned in The notes of Text notes and word explanations: “From the outside to the inside, Zhang Zhu said *Shang*.”, but it did not explain the inside and outside of the word *Shang*.

By referring to relevant ancient books and literature, this paper first discusses the original meaning of *Shang*. Subsequently, based on the various controversies about the original meaning of the word *Shang* and to fill the research gap, this paper summarizes two basic understandings of *Shang* in academic community. Further, the authors explore the development of the meaning of the word *Shang*. Finally, the paper reviews and analyzes the meanings of *Shang* in different words and sentences, its development as well as its new usage.

## 2 Discussion on the Original Meaning of *Shang*

Through reviewing literature, there are three reliable hypotheses about the original meaning of the word *Shang*, namely artifacts, totems and stars.

The first hypothesis is sacrificial vessel. Oracle bone inscriptions mostly record sacrifices, and the *Shang* shape is similar to artifacts, therefore, it is believed that *Shang* refers to the vessel related to sacrifice. Kang Yin interprets *Shang* as ritual vessel [1]. In *Ancient Chinese Characters and Styles* (1990), Li Leyi believed that *Shang* was the original word of 赏 (also pronounced *Shang*, means the act of giving gifts by superiors. Chinese emperors often give gifts at sacrifices), because the shape of the oracle bone inscriptions was similar to the shape of ritual vessels [2]. In Sun Zuoyun (2003), it is pointed out that, the upper part of the word *Shang* in the oracle inscriptions looks like a phoenix coronet, while the lower part of looks like a long handle inserted into the ground. Therefore, this word may refer to the totem pole symbolizing the Phoenix family [3]. It can be seen that the shape of *Shang* in oracle bone inscriptions is similar to that of ritual vessels. Therefore, the original meanings of *Shang* referring to artifacts is relatively reliable, because the *Shang* Dynasty used the symbol of the ritual vessels as the state name.

The second hypothesis is the totem of *Shang* Dynasty or *Shang* tribe, namely, xuan-niao bird, whose literal meaning is black bird. As early as in the poetry *Xuanniao Bird* from *the Book of Odes*, the third part in *the Book of Poetry*, it was told that:

“The Heaven commanded the black bird, to descend the mortal world, and the *Shang* Dynasty started.”

It is believed that during the *Shang* Dynasty, the emperor of heaven issued the order to shenyan (a legendary swallow), so Qi (name of a person) established the *Shang* Dynasty and came to the mortal world. Shen Zhonghe (2006) also explained that the upper part of the triangle of the word *Shang* is a bird, that is the pictograph of 燕 (pronounced yan, means the bird swallow), and the lower part of the symbol is the mound, which means the place where the Xuanniao bird landed, and the country of the *Shang* Dynasty is the country where the xuanniao bird sheltered [4]. Wang Guanfeng (2019) mentioned in her article in the second volume of *Continued Dialect* that a kind of yellow bird called canggeng or *Shanggeng*. Moreover, Lv Xiang explained the word *Shang* yang in the work *Wenxuan* as a bird that causes rain. (The name of a legendary bird. It often bends



Fig. 1. The word *Shang* in the oracle inscriptions

one foot to dance before a heavy rain.). All these evidences suggest the word *Shang* is related to birds [5]. Ge Zhiyi (2006) pointed out that in early human society, the formation of central authority was to deify leaders with the help of supernatural beliefs to make people obey [6]. From this it can be seen that ancient regimes were often combined with religious theocracy. *Shang* Dynasty also used their totem, xuanniao bird as a means of regime. Hence, it is reasonable to name their country after their totem. Therefore, the original meaning of the word *Shang* refers to the totem is also reliable.

The third hypothesis is the constellations. As shown in Fig. 1, Shen Zude believes that the word *Shang* in the existing oracle bone inscriptions is in the shape of Xin (薪) on the table, symbolizing “fire”, among them, there are three stars in the first district of Oriental Canglong, in ancient times, they were also collectively referred to as “*Shang* Xing” and “Big Fire”, therefore, some scholars believed that the initial meaning of the word *Shang* in Chinese characters is the star name [7]. *Shang* Chengzuo also expressed similar opinions in the classification and interpretation of Yin Ruins characters. He pointed out that in ancient China, there was a tribe with *Shang* Xing as its totem, they sacrificed to *Shang* Xing and called themselves *Shang* tribe [8].

In summary, it can be learned that the academic community has the following consensus of *Shang*: Firstly, *Shang* is a pictograph, but there are differences on the specific reference; Secondly, the definition of *Shang* as a country name is based on its original meaning. However, no matter what the original meaning of *Shang* is, it is widely believed that this word referred to the *Shang* tribe, when first appeared in the Chinese language.

### 3 The Evolution of the Meaning of *Shang*

#### 3.1 Extension Based on Original Meaning

Although the original meaning of *Shang* has not been clearly determined, but it is generally believed in the academic circle that the word *Shang* in the *Shang* Dynasty was derived from the original meaning of *Shang*. The earliest meaning of *Shang* also refers to the *Shang* tribe. Records of the Historian- Annals of Yin recorded the history: When Qi grew up, he was successful in assisting Yu to control the flood, and the Emperor Shun, directing Qi, said that the people are wanting in affection for one another, and do not observe the five orders of relationship. You, as the Minister of Instruction, should reverently inculcate the lessons of duty belonging to those five orders, but do so with gentleness. He held in fief the principality of *Shang*, and was given the surname of Zi [9]. After defeating Xia Jie, *Shang* established the second dynasty of China, the status of the word *Shang* was also elevated to the name of the dynasty. This meaning is also the

most common meaning of the word *Shang* in ancient times, according to the statistics of online corpus, in ancient times, the most common meaning of *Shang* was "the name of the country", that is, yin *Shang*, accounting for 58.33% [10].

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, due to the continuous progress of palace rites and music, the concept of "five tones" began to form, as a representative five-tone theory, "gong *Shang* jue zhi yu" (namely, Do Re Mi Sol La. There are no Fa and Ti in the ancient Chinese music), often appears in the writings of musicians, historians and literati, and sometimes refer to musical instruments or music, by this time, *Shang* had become one of the five tones. Volume 37 of *The Book of Rites*: "Gong represents the rulers, *Shang* represents the ruled, jue represents the people, zhi represents matters, and yu represents the objects." [11]. It named the scale with the dynasty name and called it as a reference to ruled, it means that the *Shang* Dynasty bowed to the Zhou Dynasty, to show the high status of the Zhou Dynasty.

In the same period, *Shang* began to be used as a nonword element to refer to place names and surnames. Qi was sealed in *Shang*, the *Shang* land and the *Shang* tribe were both called *Shang* at that time, and local people also take *Shang* as their surname. After the fall of the *Shang* Dynasty, the cities near the old capital were still named after the word *Shang*. According to the records of *Shangzhou-Shangluo County* in Volume 4 of *Include Local Chronicles*: "*Shangluo County*, 80 miles east of *Shangzhou*, was originally a *Shang* town, an ancient *Shang* state, and was enfeoffed by Emperor Ku's son Xie." [12]. Geographically, it is located in today's Shaanxi province. Moreover, the capitals of the later dynasties are all closed to the *Shang* land. As shown of Fig. 2, the Tang Dynasty took Chang'an (now Xi'an, the capital city of today's Shaanxi province) and the Northern Song Dynasty took Bianliang (now Kaifeng, the city in today's Henan province) as their capitals. The meaning of *Shang* as a place name has also been widely used and spread, for example, *Shangqiu*, *Shangcheng*, *Shangluo* and other places in later generations.

According to Zuo Zhuan-Chengong, the Zhou Dynasty defeated the *Shang* Dynasty and allowed the vassals to hold fiefdoms. After the Zhou Dynasty replaced the *Shang* Dynasty, as the remnants of the previous dynasty, the people from the former *Shang* Dynasty lost their land and had a lower social status than the other citizens. Thus, they had to engage in the trade of commodity exchange. *Book of Documents-Prohibition Order of Alcoholic Beverage* records that Zhou Gong ordered the people from *Shang* to run business and support their relatives with filial piety. Later, the word *Shang ren* (means the people of *Shang*, pronounced the same as merchants in Chinese) was used to refer to the exiled *Shang* ancestors (Mencius-Lianghuiwang*Shang* is recorded that: "All the merchants want to store their goods in the king's market"). "Commercial" metonymy extends the business of *Shang* people (Yi-Fu said that: "Merchants and travelers are not allowed to pass"). Afterwards, the name of the people of *Shang* began to represent the merchants. Hence, the meaning of *Shang* as an exchange of labor products is also formed. As a result, many new words consist of the morpheme *Shang* developed, such as *Shang ren* (merchants), *Shang gu* (official businessmen). The meaning has stabilized quickly since its appearance, and has long existed as a common word or morpheme in the Chinese vocabulary system.



Fig. 2. The Map of China in Tang and Song Dynasties

### 3.2 Extension Based on Extended Meaning

Before the Qin Dynasty, the word *Shang* had only the above meanings. Whereas, during the Han Dynasty, the social pattern changed because of the great unification (In 221 BC, the Qin Dynasty unified the country and established a centralized system of power, also known as the great unification), the word *Shang* has gradually extended to new meanings.

Due to the further development of commodity exchange and the unification of the Qin Dynasty in regulating weights and measures, business, as the industry that most often uses weights and measures, the business industry played an important role in the development of measurement [13]. As a result, the meaning of the word *Shang* also began to gradually tilt towards measurement, which was widely used at that time, and also became the original meaning of the extension of *Shang* in the Middle Ages. In *Guangyashuzheng*, it is explained that: “*Shang* means measure.” [14]. In the mathematical work *The Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art*, written in the Eastern Han Dynasty, “*Shang Gong*” means to measure the volume and calculate engineering labor. All of the above literature prove that *Shang* has been used in the sense of measurement since at least the Eastern Han Dynasty. Later, *Han History·Annals of Emperor Ai*: “The degree of Louke is 120” note: “In the past, it was a hundred hours of day and night, but now it has increased by

twenty.”, and *Zhengzitong-Koubu*: “*Shang* is the place where the arrow is carved.”, the word *Shang* is further extended to the scale of arrows. The rate of arrows is a hundred, an arrow is one hundred degrees, each degree is equal, the *Shang* is equivalent to dividing an arrow by a hundred, and the final length of one degree. Later, based on the scale of arrows, the word *Shang* was also extended to the result of division in arithmetic.

At the same time, based on the measurement meaning, the word *Shang* as an idiom also derives from the partial compound word “discuss”, both *Shang* and *liang* have the meaning of measure, meaning to discuss with each other. The meaning of *Shang* appears to be discussed first in Wei and Jin Dynasties, The Northern History appeared in the Wei and Jin Dynasties said that: “When considering the two ways, discussing the gains and losses, the feelings of the officials should not be submissive.”, it can be seen that the word “discuss” had a similar meaning to “deliberate” at that time, meaning to measure the gains and losses. In the 25th volume, *Etiquette Annals of the Book of the Old Tang Dynasty* states that lots of ministers *Shangjiao* (discuss) the present and the past, it shows a new meaning of *Shang* [15]. The *Shang* in this case also has a tendency to discuss meaning. During the same period, the highest administrative organ of the Tang Dynasty, the Chancery, had an official document named *Shangliangzhuang* to adjudicate government affairs, through the relevant departments to discuss the national government affairs beyond the scope of the legal order format [16]. In the word *Shangliangzhuang*, *Shang* functioned as a morpheme. Later, the emergence of the Chinese word *Shangliang* (means discuss) suggests that *Shang* has the new meaning of discuss.

It can be seen that *Shang* has been widely used in the context of discussion, compared with other meanings at the same time, this meaning is still relatively small, but due to the development of Chinese disyllabic, as a disyllabic word, the word *Shangliang* is more and more widely used. Accordingly, the meaning of *Shang* as discussion tends to be fixed, and extends to contain negotiate and other meanings.

Based on the above analysis, the development of the word *Shang* can be divided into two periods: Before Qin and Han Dynasties, it referred to the *Shang* Dynasty and the business operated by the *Shang* people, namely, commerce. These meanings existed for the longest time and occupied a large proportion in the Chinese corpus with the morpheme *Shang* at that time. After Qin and Han Dynasties, due to the development of commerce and the great unification, the measurement system was perfected, leading to the appearance of the word *Shang* with the meaning of measurement. Afterwards, based on the meaning of measurement, the meaning of discussion is further appeared. Compared with the previous period, the meaning of *Shang* has been expanded and gradually abstracted. Thus, it has stabilized in the Chinese lexical system as an idiomatic element under the trend of diphthongization of Chinese.

## 4 Conclusion

The study of *Shang* has been a top priority since ancient times. Through reading and sorting out many ancient books and literature materials, this paper summarized the original meaning of *Shang* and discussed the development of the it. Conclusions are drawn as follows:

Firstly, the academic community basically believes that *Shang* is a pictograph, but there are differences in the specific meaning of the word *Shang*. Some studies believe

that the original meaning of *Shang* is related to sacrifices. Most researchers agree that the national name *Shang* is based on the original meaning of *Shang*. Secondly, the meaning of *Shang* has the following derivatives: one of the five tones, place names, business, measurement and other meanings. Thirdly, the development of its meaning can be divided into two periods: Initially, it refers to the *Shang* Dynasty and commerce, and then it has the meaning of measurement and derives the meaning of discussion. In summary, the development of the meaning of *Shang* presents a trend of expansion and abstraction.

This study is conducive to the analysis of the specific meaning and cultural meaning of *Shang*. At the same time, the research hopes to be beneficial to the in-depth excavation of the word *Shang* and the business culture behind it.

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