

Radicals with Diplomatic Semantics in the Ancient Chinese Dictionary Shuo Wen Jie Zi: Verification of Etymology¹

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Abstract. There are several signs that contain “diplomatic” semantics among the 540 most ancient radicals of Chinese writing, presented in the Shuo Wen Jie Zi dictionary (1st century AD, Han era). Before the dictionary was created, Chinese writing had already existed for several thousand years. Therefore, some researchers (Zou Xiaoli, 2007; Oshanin, 1943) consider that the etymologies of the radicals in Shuo Wen were formulated under the influence of the later eras and are often erroneous. Attempts are made to verify the etymologies of these signs with “diplomatic” semantics by comparing them with the more ancient forms jiaguwen and jinwen, discovered and scientifically described only in the 20th century. Such a comparison and interpretation will reveal the probable correct etymologies of the analysed radicals of the Shuo Wen dictionary and verify them. In addition, the study will shed light on the beginning of diplomacy in ancient China. The article also touches upon the problem of etymological analysis in a language with an ideographic type of writing, which is carried out not at the level of morphology, as in European languages, but at the level of hieroglyphic sign graphics. The problem of semantics and etymology of radicals was considered mainly by Chinese scientists (Zou Xiaoli, 2007; Wang Fengyang, 2011, etc.), while in European linguistics, the problem was studied only fragmentarily (Kondrashevsky, 1982; Karasyova, 2019; Dictionary of Etymologies, 2019). The radicals “with diplomatic” semantics analysed in this article have not been subjected to special study.

The purpose of the present article is to verify the etymology of a number of radicals that contain “diplomatic” semantics in the ancient Chinese dictionary Shuo Wen Jie Zi; consider information about the dictionary, its basic radicals and their semantics; briefly describe the features of etymological analysis in general, and in the Chinese language in particular; and compare the definitions of these radicals in various etymological dictionaries, thus verifying the etymologies presented in the Shuo Wen Jie Zi dictionary.

Keywords: etymology, etymographic analysis, Sho wen jie zi dictionary, radicals, jiaguwen, jinwen

¹ English translation from the Russian text: Khamaeva E.A. (2022). Znaki s diplomaticeskoy semantikoy v drevnekitajskom slovare “Shuo Wen Jie Zi”: verifikaciya etimologii. Filologicheskie nauki v MGIMO [Linguistics & Polyglot Studies]. 8(1). P. 56-69. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2410-2423-2022-1-30-56-69>.

The diplomatic profession is believed to be one of the oldest in the world. This much is evidenced by extant historical documents and the etymology of linguistic units signifying this occupation.

The Russian language has several words denoting persons engaged in this occupation. Principal among these are *diplomat* (diplomat) and *posol/poslannik* (envoy/ambassador). Etymological dictionaries of Russian say that *diplomat* is a word of Latin origin that came to European languages via French in the early 19th century. The French word *diplomate* literally means “having a charter, a diploma” (Semenov, 2003), (Shanskii, 2000), i.e., “governmental powers” (Uspenskii, 2008). *Posol* (*poslannik*) is a word of common Slavic origin formed from the verb “slat,” to send (Fasmer, 2004). This word’s etymology is quite transparent: this is a person one monarch sends to represent their interests in another state.

European languages use the term *ambassador*, defined as (noun.) late 14th c., also *embassador*, “diplomatic emissary of a ruler at the court of another,” from Old French *embassador*, *ambassateur* (envoy), which comes from Provençal or Old Spanish from Latin *ambactus* “a servant, vassal,” from Celtic *amb(i)actos* “a messenger, servant” (from PIE root *ambhi- “around” + *ag- “to drive, draw out or forth, move”)².

In the Chinese traditions, such units as “diplomat” and several others pertaining to this area are even older. We intentionally put the term “diplomat” in quotation marks since for a long time, due to certain cultural and historical reasons, the Shang, Yin, and Zhou dynasties, individual Chinese principalities, and later the centralized Chinese state (the Empire), did not have diplomatic relations with foreign states and tribal unions in the classical sense of this term, much less its current Eurocentric meaning. During this lengthy period, diplomacy meant settling relations between principalities and settling problems in relations with neighbours (this is where the “diplomatic” profession arises in the meaning of a ruler’s counsellor developing a strategy and tactics of foreign relations and carrying out diplomatic missions); establishing contacts with neighbouring states or tribes in order to extend the power of the Son of Heaven to those lands, establishing peace, reaching arrangements, or collecting information (the institution of an “ambassador” emerges as the head of a mission sent to another land); setting up palace protocol regulating visits of rulers and ambassadors of foreign states to offer gifts. This was done as part of conceptualizing the Chinese state as the Middle Empire surrounded by vassal states that must accept the authority of the Son of Heaven and pay tribute to him (this is where the caste of officials in charge of the diplomatic ceremonial emerges) (Barskii, 1996).

In the Chinese traditions, characters with “diplomatic” semantics are already found in the first Old Chinese dictionary *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, and they are defined pre-

² Online etymology dictionary: ambassador. URL: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/ambassador> (accessed: 20.08.2022).

cisely along “diplomatic” lines. They are also part of the so-called 540 buShuo, or semantic radicals, “indexing” graphic elements (Zavialova, 2008: 735), and they formed the foundations of the entire Chinese writing system. This list of buShuo, or radicals, includes such characters as 史, *chronicler, historiographer* (the original form of the character 使, *representative, diplomat*), 封, *seal*, 眀, *raise eyes to the envoy*, 司, *representative in foreign lands*. Since there are only 540 radicals, and those among them that refer to members of a particular profession are few, the presence of several characters connected with the specific meaning “diplomacy” appears curious.

The Old Chinese dictionary *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* is the first Old Chinese systemic etymological work. *Shuowen Jiezi*, or “Discussing Writing and Explaining Characters?” (说文解字) was compiled in 100 AD by Xu Shen (30–124) and was the main source of information about the oldest Chinese writing until the very end of the 19th century (Gotlib, 2007: 4).

This dictionary offers the first ever system of sign placement that Russian linguistics terms the “system of radicals.” All the characters are distributed into 540 sections (bu (Zavialova, 2008)) depending on their bushou (“key,” “semantic radical,” or, literally, “section leader”), the “leading” graphic elements placed at the start of a group (Zavialova, 2008: 735). These 540 signs, which, “as legend has it, were invented by Cang Jie himself” (Martynenko, 2004: 106), a half-mythical creator of Chinese characters, are frequently recognized as the basic signs in Chinese writing.

Russian linguists have studied these 540 radicals in various aspects (Kondrashevskii, 1982), (Karaseva, 2019), (Shishmareva et al., 2019), but semantic and etymological studies have been rather fragmentary.

Following Chinese scholars (Hongyuan, 1993; Fengyang, 2011; Xiaoli, 2007; Yankui, 2008), we may group the dictionary’s 540 bushou into semantic groups. For instance, Wang Hongyuan (Hongyuan, 1993) categorizes Old Chinese signs into the following semantic groups: person, nature, hunting and fishing, craft, life and everyday routine, war and politics, rituals and culture. Wang Fengyang (Fengyang, 2011) classifies the signs into groups with nominative and predicative meanings. Nominative units form 35 sub-groups (time, space, astronomy, terrain, mountains, waters, lands, extractable resources, plants, animals, body/health, diseases, funeral, clothes, house building, transportation, tools/instruments, weapons, utensils, crockery, measuring units, culture, art, ethics/moral norms, social estates, forms of address, army, offices (officialdom), etc.), while predicatives form 14 sub-groups (movements of arms, legs, eyes, mouth, body, etc.).

An analysis of the contents of these groups demonstrates that the oldest primary Chinese signs do not merely describe the life and reality of a person of ancient times, when people were just mastering writing, but represents phenomena inherent in a socio-culturally developed society (such groups as *politics, officialdom, etc.*). On the one hand, this is understandable, since, according to the historiography of Chinese writing, the dictionary was created in a relatively late period: by that time, many written texts in Chinese had already been created. On the other hand, the question begs:

Could this fact have affected the specifics of interpreting the 540 signs, endowing them with more modern meanings rather in the spirit of the Han dynasty, than of the Yin dynasty of the 17th–11th centuries BCE? In particular, the prominent Soviet Sinologist Ilya M. Oshanin noted back in the mid-20th century that *Shuo Wen* frequently presents “so-called ‘re-interpreted old characters’ adjusted to the spirit of the worldview of the ruling classes of a later period” (Oshanin, 1943; Gotlib, 2014).

Archaeological digs carried out in China in the early 20th century revealed the *jiaguwen* and *jinwen* signs that historically preceded the *xiaozhuan* style in which *Shuo Wen* is written. These discoveries allowed for a more reliable etymological analysis based not only on definitions in the *Shuo Wen* dictionary, but on also on comparisons with older written forms.

As of today, the evolution of Chinese characters appears to have transpired in the following manner. The earliest Chinese signs are *jiaguwen*, 甲骨文, or signs on turtle carapaces and animal scapulae (the greater part of the Yin dynasty, 17th–11th centuries BCE). The second group of Old Chinese writing is comprised of *jinwen* bronze inscriptions (also called *zhong ding wen*, 钟鼎文, inscriptions on bells and tripods; the earliest are dated to the Shang Yin era, ca. 13th century BCE). The next period was the heyday of ritual bronze, the Western Zhou era (11th century – 771 BCE). Traditional historiography calls the characters of this period *dazhuan* or *zhouwen*. The crucial period in the evolution of Chinese writing was the time of its unification and reform following the unification of China under the Qing Empire (221–207 BCE). The Qing version of *xiaozhuan* was universally introduced, replacing regional variants. It was preserved on bronze and ceramic vessels, bamboo planks, and coins (Zavialova, 2008: 656).

Etymological analysis in Chinese, therefore, consists in comparing graphic forms of a sign in various historical forms of writing (at the very least, these are *jiaguwen*, *zhuanwen*, *zhuanwen*, or, less frequently, *lishu*, *kaishu*), tracing their evolution, including changes to its constituents and their placing within a character. The analysis also mandatorily includes a quote from the *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* dictionary and a list of existing meanings of a sign with examples from classical texts.

While etymological analysis in European languages involves certain morphological or phonetic reconstruction, etymological analysis in Chinese, whose lexis has both a phonetic form (pronunciation) and a graphic form (a character), is traditionally carried out at the graphic level (Khamaeva, 2018).

There is also a methodology for a phonetic analysis of Chinese words, and it has been fairly well detailed (Starostin, 2012). Nevertheless, the authors of these works themselves agree that examples of early Chinese lexicography largely demonstrated a concern with the graphic form of a word (a character) than with its real meaning. Second, up until the early 20th century, Chinese lexicography was almost entirely focused on describing a monosyllable written down with a character (ibid.: 102).

In this regard, etymology, as the part of linguistics that studies the origins of words, rather studies the origins of written characters, and it should more properly be called “etymography” rather than “etymology.”

As regards the placement of the signs under consideration in the dictionary, they do not form parts of the same section, or *bu*. They have similar semantics, yet within the dictionary, each constitutes an independent radical with different graphic features.

We will consider the character 史 first. It means *history, chronicle, historiographer, chronicler*. Essentially, it is an earlier invariant, or alternative form, of the character 使, *envoy, ambassador, representative*. However, unlike the latter, it is part of the 540 radicals and is older. Dictionary entries frequently consider these two characters to be etymologically related (Yankui, 2008; Wenyu, Yong, 2005).

The *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* dictionary offers the following description of the 史 character: 史, 記事者也。从又持中。中, 正也。³

Shi – *the one writing down actions*. It consists of the grapheme 又 (“right hand”) holding “the middle” (i.e., 中). The middle represents correctness (Karapetians, 2021).

The *Dictionary of Etymologies* (Shishmareva et al., 2019: 109) interprets it as *an official responsible for recording important events, keeping a chronicle, a historiographer*. The character contains the element *hand* (又) holding a *flag, a banner* (中), which together means *historical records kept “in an unbiased and fair manner”*.

A *Dictionary of Chinese Character Form and Meaning* (汉字形义分析字典) has



the 史 character in its *jiaguwen* and *zhuanwen* forms and its description says that 史 is 1) *an official who in the old times was in charge of recording historical events, a chronicler* (古代掌管记载史事的官); 2) The character's form signifies a *hand (in the bottom) holding bamboo writing tablets (简策) or hunting implements (捕猎工具)*.

The commentary also points out that 史 is a court official serving the ruler as a diviner, an astrologer, a chronicler (Xiānzhuo, 1999: 482).

The dictionary's analytical section indicates that the sign 使 consists of the semantic radical 亼, *a person*, and the phonetic radical 史. In *jiaguwen*, the characters 史, 亊 were related (they constitute alternative written forms) and were differentiated later.

Shuo Wen Jie Zi offers the following definition of the character 使: 使, 令也。⁴ 使 is an order.

An *Etymological Dictionary of Chinese Characters* (汉字字源) gives the sign 史 in



its *jiaguwen*, *jinwen*, and *zhuanwen* forms. The analytical article says that the character represents a *hand holding an empty vessel* (手拿空容器). Subsequently, this phrase is interpreted as *coming home after doing some things, the things done remained behind* (干完活回来了, 由此产生事情过去了的含义). The

³ Handian Dictionary (汉典): 史. URL: <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E5%8F%B2> (accessed: 06.07.2021).

⁴ Handian Dictionary (汉典): 使 URL: <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E4%BD%BF> (accessed: 06.07.2021).

article also gives the meaning *an official keeping records of events that took place*. The sign may also be interpreted as *an official whose job does not involve hard work* (Wenyu, Yong, 2005: 44–45).

The Origins of Chinese Characters (汉字形体源流) gives the sign's *jinwen* , *zhuanwen* , and *guwen*  versions.

The sign 史 represents *a hand holding an object*. (王国维, Chinese historian and philologist Wang Guowei (1877–1927) explains the sign 史 as *a hand holding official papers*. He believes that 中 in the upper part of the sign means bamboo tablets used in old times by officials and chroniclers for keeping historical records. 史 is *an official in charge of recording events, a historiographer*. Cang Jie, the half-mythical creator of Chinese writing, is believed to have served as a historiographer (史) to Emperor Huangdi (Hongyuan, 1993: 315).

A Dictionary of the Origins and Development of Chinese Characters (汉字源流字典) describes the evolution of the sign through the principal styles of *jiaguwen* , *jinwen* , and *zhuanwen* . In *jinguwen*, the sign 使 is written as  and represents *a hand holding a bear spear or a ranseur*. In *jinwen*, the sign's form remained the same. In *zhuanwen*, its left part began to feature the element person, thus emphasizing the semantics of a human actor. This resulted in a compound character that was an ideogram and even a phonoideogram. The sign 史 is a graphic variant of the sign 使 and is etymologically related to the characters 使, 事; it means *an order or to direct, send people to carry out tasks, to empower, to send, to appoint* (Yankui, 2008: 651).

Guoxue dashi (国学大師) online dictionary gives the sign 史 in its *jiaguwen* , *jinwen* , *zhuanwen* , *lishu* , and *kaishu*  versions. Throughout its evolution from *jiaguwen* to *zhuanwen*, the sign represents *a hand holding an object* represented with the character 中, and together, they mean *an official*. The dictionary says that the object represented with the sign 中 may be *an old counting implement* historians used during archery competitions. In the *lishu* and *kaishu* versions, the sign was mistakenly given a different shape and lost its original connection with the phenomena it signified⁵.

Vividict (象形字典), an online dictionary of pictograms, interprets the sign 史, shi, in the following way:

⁵ Guoxue Dashi Dictionary (国学大師): 史 URL: <http://www.guoxuedashi.net/zixing/yanbian/2109ft/> (accessed: 10.07.2021).

史 is the original version of the sign 使; the characters 吏 *official*, 事 *business, occupation*, 史 *chronicle, history* have related origins. In *jiaguwen*, the sign 史 looked like

this: and consisted of two elements, flag, banner and hand that together meant *to go on a mission as an ambassador holding in one's hands an accrediting flag and an envoy's seal to carry out peaceful negotiations in a conflict over state borders*.

Today's form of the sign 中, flag, banner is a simplified form of the *jiaguwen* sign

and . In old times, *flag, a banner* served as “documents” of sorts when travelling to foreign lands and could signify a person's nationality. The etymology of the character 中 is a flag, a banner held by two representatives of different kingdoms when

peacefully settling border conflicts. In some *jiaguwen* signs the form of the banner

was simplified into , and consequently, the element came to be written as . In *jinwen*, the form of the sign remained the same as in *jiaguwen*, and was repre-

sented by two variants, and . In *zhuanwen*, the sign also exhibits graphic continuity with its *jinwen* form. In *zhuanwen*, the character 史 was replaced with a

new character, (使), where the previous character , a hand holding a banner, was augmented with the element , a person (人). Therefore, the etymological meaning of the character 使 may be interpreted as *to hold an envoy's accrediting flag in one's hands thereby representing a state; to go on a mission as an ambassador*⁶.

Our analysis of the sign 史 (使) showed that its etymology is heterogeneous. On the one hand, its graphic evolution has been established and recorded in many dictionaries. In particular, virtually every source gives the *jiaguwen* graphic form (only one dictionary believes the sign to have appeared in *jinwen* only), and this means that the time of its creation may vary from the 14th to the 10th century BCE. This fact indirectly confirms the hypothesis that diplomacy is one of the world's oldest activities. On the other hand, we need to keep in mind that the sign mostly signified *an official, a historiographer, a chronicler*, and apparently only later came to be used in the “diplomatic context.” The exact time when the “diplomatic” semantic emerged is difficult to determine, but the oldest verified usages in this particular meaning were found in *Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian (91–109 BCE).

⁶ Vividict Dictionary (象形字典): 使. URL: <https://www.vividict.com/Public/index/page/details/details.html?rid=9719> (accessed: 10.07.2021)

An etymological analysis of the characters 史 (使) also showed that most dictionaries interpret it as a depiction of *a hand holding an object*, generally meaning *an official, a historiographer*. Dictionaries differ on the object depicted in the hand. Some claim that these are *bamboo writing tablets, official documents* where the historiographer official kept his records. Others claim this is *a hunting weapon, a bear spear*. Only one dictionary defined this sign as *a hand (of an envoy) holding an accrediting flag*.

A related sign, 使, is more complex, and it appeared later. Dictionaries claim that the two characters were only differentiated in *zhuanwen* (when the radical “person” appeared). And it was in *zhuanwen* (which was reflected in the *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* dictionary) that the separate semantics of *an order, to order (or carry out an order), to make, to force, to send, a messenger* appears. Therefore, we can say that the “diplomatic” semantics of this character represented in the *Shuo Wen* dictionary was only partially confirmed.

It is also curious that the etymology of the Chinese term “ambassador,” “diplomat” is somewhat similar to the etymology of the words with the same meaning in Russian and several European languages. Even though etymological analysis methods differ for languages with different writing systems, there is some similarity in the respective etymologies, which apparently evidences the universal nature of the human mind and thinking: *a diplomat is an official carrying documents, a seal (carrying a charter, a diploma in Russian and other languages)*, or else it is *an official sent on a mission* (cf. with the word *posol*, *envoy*, in Russian and other languages), or *an official who issues orders or carries them out, who forces, makes comply with his will* (cf. *ambassador* – servant, vassal, official).

At the same time, there are some culture-specific features, too: if the Chinese sign signifies a document, this document is on a medium typical for the Chinese tradition, namely, on bamboo tablets.

Another basic character in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* is the radical 丂, a seal.

丂, 瑞信也。守國者用玉丂, 守都鄙者用角丂, 使山邦者用虎丂, 土邦者用人丂, 澤邦者用

龍丂, 門闢者用符丂, 貨賄用璽丂, 道路用旌丂。象相合之形。⁷

Jie is a sign of trust. Keepers of state use jasper seals; keepers of cities and suburbs use horn seals; those sent to mountain countries use seals with tigers, those sent to countries on the plains use seals with people; those sent to water countries use seals with dragons; those closing the gates use notched seals; those who trade and bribe use seals with seals, those travelling down roads use seals with flags. It is a symbol of a mutual rapprochement (Karapetians, 2021).

The *Dictionary of Etymologies* interprets it as *a seal that the Son of Heaven gave to feudal lords, vassals*. Protectors of state used jade seals, protectors of grandes and

⁷ Handian Dictionary (汉典): 丂. URL: <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E5%8D%A9> (accessed: 12.07.2021)

members of the ruling house used seals made of horn, protectors of mountainous areas use tiger seals, protectors of lands used people's seals, protectors of lakes use dragon seals, protectors of border outposts use accrediting seals, protectors of jewels use imperial seals, protectors of roads use flag seals (Shishmareva et al., 2019: 406).

The Origins of Chinese Characters dictionary presents its evolution in *jiaguwen*

, *jinwen*  , and *zhuanwen*  . The *jiaguwen* sign is a pictogram depicting *a person sitting on his knees*. The *jinwen* and *zhuanwen* form did not change significantly. *Kaishu* developed a graphic variant,  . When used as a semantic radical in compound characters, it may assume the following forms: 巴, 尸.

The definition in *Shuo Wen* says that the sign's form is related to its content. It is unclear when secondary meanings were developed. Its original semantics was *a person sitting on his knees* (Yankui, 2008: 13).

The Origins of Chinese Characters (汉字形体源流) dictionary interprets this sign as *a person sitting on his knees with his hands on his knees*. Since ancient officials wore robes, they had to assume a certain pose when sitting down: they sat on their knees with the lower part of their bodies beneath them and remaining virtually invisible. This sitting posture was widespread in ancient China up until the Tang dynasty, while the Japanese use it still. The characters 印, 港, 邑 contain the semantic radical  .  is a variant of  (Hongyuan, 1993: 5).

The *Guoxue Dashi* (国学大师) dictionary says that the sign first appeared in



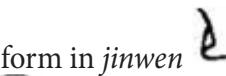
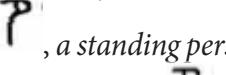
zhuanwen and, accordingly, the dictionary only gives its *zhuanwen* form  . It depicts one of the two parts of an accrediting seal used for verification; it is a pictogram depicting a real *accrediting seal or a part of it*. The sign underwent certain changes, so its original semantic is currently difficult to ascertain  . *Kaishu* preserved its



zhuanwen form⁸.

Vividict (象形字典), a dictionary of pictograms, says that the characters “印”, “尸”, “𠙴” are etymologically related to the sign 人, *person*. Unlike the *Guoxue Dashi* (国学大师), Vividict gives its evolution in all writing styles: *jiaguwen*, *jinwen*, etc. A person in *jiaguwen* is a pictogram representing the figure of *a person bending down when working in a field*. Following a differentiation of these meanings, the *standing person* form in *jiaguwen*  gave way to *a sitting person*  , whose posture expresses

⁸ Guoxue Dashi Dictionary (国学大师):  . URL: <http://www.guoxuedashi.net/zixing/yanbian/2015ik/> (accessed: 12.07.2021)

respect. The sign's form in *jinwen*  is virtually the same as in *jiaguwen*. Some *jinwen* characters depict , *a standing person giving a bow*. *Zhuanwen* combines both *jinwen* variants into a single character .

 therefore, depicts *a person of a lower rank bowing down* when listening to an order from his superior (in ancient times, this posture was dictated by both ritual and etiquette). This sign was rarely used independently, mostly it formed part of more complex characters of the ideographic kind with a broader meaning *person*. Later, it came to mean *a bamboo section*.

The *accrediting seal* semantics suggested in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* was confirmed by only one dictionary. An analysis of its *jiaguwen*, *jinwen*, and *zhuanwen* forms suggests that this sign depicts *a person sitting on his knees* (maybe bowing down). The causes and timeframe of developing the secondary semantics of *accrediting seal* are not entirely clear, but no source provides any information on the matter.

The dictionaries also differ on the time that it emerged. Some (汉字源流字典, Vividict (象形字典) claim it appeared in *jiaguwen*, while others, such as *Guoxue Dashi* (国学大师), claim that it only appeared in *zhuanwen*.

The next character whose definition features the subject of diplomacy is 夏, to *raise one's eyes to the envoy*.

夏, 舉目使人也。从支从目。¹⁰

The *Dictionary of Etymologies* offers the translation *to raise one's eyes to an envoy*. The character contains the elements 支, *to hit*, and 目, *eye* (Shishmareva et al., 2019: 129).

The *Origins of Chinese Characters* (汉字源流字典) dictionary gives this sign in its

   forms. It is a compound ideogram containing the components 支, *a hand holding a needle*, and 目, *eye*, that together mean *treat an eye disease with needles*. The sign's *jinwen* form did not change, and its *zhuanwen* form became regular. In *lishu* and *kaishu*, it assumed the form , which is the original form of the sign 眇.

Shuo Wen Jie Zi gives the definition of to *raise one's eyes to an envoy*. This meaning is secondary. Its original meaning is *to treat an eye disease with needles*. Additionally, the character has several other meanings: 1) slight eye movement, twitching of eyes; 2) to look warily; 3) to raise one's eyes to an envoy.

⁹ Vividict dictionary (象形字典): . URL: <https://www.vividict.com/Public/index/page/details/details.html?rid=11312> (accessed: 07.08.2021)

¹⁰ Handian Dictionary (汉典): 夏 URL: <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%F0%A1%95%A5> (accessed: 07.08.2021)

The semantics of characters containing the radical 夏 is connected with the meaning “to consider, to study, to check” (Yankui, 2008: 838).

Guoxue Dashi (国学大师) gives this character in all styles, but offers no comments on its semantics; the dictionary lists only one meaning, *to raise one's eyes to an envoy*¹¹. Vividict does not contain this character.

The final radical under analysis is 司, *a subject managing outside affairs*.

司, 臣司事於外者。从反后。¹²

A subject managing outside affairs consists of the character 后, upside down. (Karapetians, 2021)

The *Dictionary of Etymologies* gives the following translation: *an official, a vassal serving in foreign lands*. This sign is the reverse of the sign 后 (Semenov, 2003: 403)

The Origins of Chinese Characters (汉字源流字典) gives this sign in its *jiaguwen*

, *jinwen* , and *zhuanwen* forms. It is a compound character of the ideogrammatic kind. In *jiaguwen*, it consists of components *an overturned spoon, ladle, scoop* 匕 and *mouth* 口, together meaning *to bring food to the mouth with a spoon*. It is the original version of the sign 飼, to nurse, to feed. It has the same form in *jinwen*, while its *zhuanwen* form became regular. After *lishu*, it came to be written as 司 in *kaishu*.

This character is the reverse of the character 后. This meaning is secondary. The original meaning is *to take food*.

1) *To take food*. In the tribal system, food was distributed evenly between all members of a tribe. The person in charge of distributing food in a tribe was called 司. Consequently, a second meaning appeared: 2) *to head, to be in charge, to manage; 3) a head, an official* (Yankui, 2008: 201).

The Origins of Chinese Characters (汉字形体源流) dictionary states that in old times, 后 и 司 were the same character. 司 means *heir, descendant, successor*; it is the original version of the sign 翳 and consists of the components *spoon, ladle, scoop* 匕 and *mouth* 口 (Hongyuan, 1993: 229).

A Dictionary of Chinese Character Form and Meaning Analysis (汉字形义分析字典) gives its *jiaguwen* form  . In *jiaguwen*, it is a compound ideogrammatic character consisting of components 人, *person*, and 口, *mouth*, that together mean *a person issuing orders and instructions*.

Shuo Wen says that 司 is the reverse of the sign 后. *Jiaguwen* and *jinwen* contain two graphic forms turned both ways. The sign 司 is found on an ancient bronze Simuwu ding, where it means *ruler, emperor*. In *jinwen*, the combination 司马, *general, head of the military ministry*, could be also written as 后马. The two signs were differenti-

¹¹ Guoxue Dashi Dictionary (国学大师): 夏. URL: <http://www.guoxuedashi.net/zidian/z48537j.html> (accessed: 10.08.2021).

¹² Handian Dictionary (汉典): 司. URL: <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E5%8F%B8> (accessed: 15.07.2021)

ated later: turned left, 司, it came to mean *to head, to manage*, while turned right, 后, it came to mean *monarch, emperor* (Xiānzhuo, 1999: 496).

Guoxue Dashi (国学大师) says that throughout its evolution from *jiaguwen* to *kaishu*, 司 developed successively and contains the components 人, *person* (*person issuing orders and instructions*), and 口 *mouth* (*commander issuing an order*). Shuo Wen mistakenly interprets it as the reverse of the character 后, which probably meant *an official in charge of working the fields*¹³.

According to the Vividict (象形字典) dictionary of pictograms, in *jiaguwen*  it consists of the elements , *insignia of power, tug banner, ceremonial rod, sceptre*, and , *mouth, interrogate*, which together meant *an interrogation at trial*. Its *jinwen* form  is identical to its *jiaguwen* form. Some *jinwen* variants  added the elements , , *hand*, , *silk tied in a knot, tangled* and  (a variant of the  character *hand* in the meaning *to grab with a hand*), which together means *to untangle tangled silk with two hands, to set a court case in order*¹⁴.

The etymology offered in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, a *subject managing outside affairs*, was only partially confirmed. Most sources agree that this character meant *an official issuing or carrying out orders* (汉字形义分析; 国学大师 dictionaries), yet none mentions that this official is *serving in foreign lands*. Dictionaries list various possible areas of occupation for this official: some suggest distributing food in the ancient society, others mention military orders, yet others speak of agriculture, and others refer to court proceedings.

Opinions also differ on the components of 司. Some sources suggest the elements 口, *mouth*, and 勹, *spoon, ladle*, while others suggest 人, *person*, and 口, *mouth*, and still other put forward , *ceremonial rod*, and 口, *mouth*.

A comparative etymological analysis of some semantic radicals in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* possessing common “diplomatic” meanings yielded the following results. Etymological analysis in the Chinese language is characterized by different dictionaries offering sometimes radically different versions of the origins of the same sign. They may be characterized by “an abundance of graphic forms of its elements and their different locations within a given character and they may even have different numbers and sets of elements (Karapetians, 2010: 57). Some see an element as representing *documents*, others a *hunting weapon*, yet others a *ceremonial rod*, and still others a *spoon or a ladle*.

¹³ Guoxue Dashi Dictionary (国学大师): 司. URL: <http://www.guoxuedashi.net/zixing/yanbian/2115fi/> (accessed: 15.08.2021).

¹⁴ Vividict dictionary (象形字典): 司. URL: <https://www.vividict.com/Public/index/page/details/details.html?rid=12030> (accessed: 21.08.2021).

The question of which interpretation should be deemed correct remains open, since identifying etymologies is “a complicated process that does not always produce unequivocal results” (Trubachev, 2004: 123).

This fact can probably be explained by rules and writing units in the most ancient periods of *jiaguwen* and *jinwen* still being shaped, and “the role of a scribe making inscriptions on bones and carapaces was not merely writing down standard characters forming a certain statement; it was also a creative act where the scribe could choose different variants of forming the same character for different purposes and conditions of an inscription” (Sofronov, 2007: 487).

Apparently, the characters *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* interprets as “diplomatic” gained the appropriate semantics later, closer to the time when the dictionary was created (1st century CE, the Han dynasty). Facts suggest that most characters were already present in *jiaguwen*, but they had different semantics either unconnected with “diplomacy” or having only an indirect relation to it. The etymology of just one radical 史 (使) given in just one pictogram dictionary Vividict (象形字典) suggests that already in *jiaguwen*, this character signified *a hand holding an accrediting seal of flag symbolizing an ambassador, an envoy in foreign lands*.

Shuo Wen radicals featuring several units with a common “diplomatic” semantic evidences the importance of this area of activity, since, in compliance with the naming law, the number of linguistic units in a particular area signals its priority in the life of the people. Even more significantly, this is a testimony to this area’s high status since all these characters are among the basic units of Chinese writing where names of other “professions,” for instance, are a rare occurrence.

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Conflicts of interest.

The authors declare the absence of any conflicts of interests.

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