

# “Power” in *Shangjun shu*: A Linguistic Perspective

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*Shangjun shu*, a text that is especially rich in nuanced keywords, coordinates different types of power in significant sequences. Comprehending the philosophy of the text therefore requires comprehending the semantics and etymologies of these keywords. The present article is not a comprehensive discussion of power in *Shangjun shu* but affords a glimpse of the value of historical linguistics for a deeper understanding of philosophy and conceptual history.

*Shangjun shu* 商君書 (The writings of Lord Shang) is a useful source for an exercise in conceptual history because it coordinates different types of power in significant sequences. Comprehending the philosophy of the text therefore requires comprehending the semantics and etymologies of the relevant keywords, but previous publications have not always satisfactorily conveyed the nuances.

Major tenets of *Shangjun shu* are obscured if the following series is translated as a jumble of loose synonyms:

刑生力，力生疆，疆生威，威生惠，惠生於力。

Penal law engenders productive capacity; productive capacity engenders strength; strength engenders awesomeness; awesomeness engenders grace; grace is [thus] born of productive capacity (*Shangjun shu* 1.4.32, “Quqiang” 去疆).<sup>1</sup>

This must have been something of a slogan, because it appears in two variants elsewhere in the corpus:<sup>2</sup>

刑生力，力生疆，疆生威，威生德，德生於刑。

Penal law engenders productive capacity; productive capacity engenders strength; strength engenders awesomeness; awesomeness engenders power; power is [thus] born of penal law (*Shangjun shu* 1.5.38, “Shuomin” 說民).

力生疆，疆生威，威生德，德生於力。

Productive capacity engenders strength; strength engenders awesomeness; awesomeness engenders power; power is [thus] born of productive capacity (*Shangjun shu* 3.13.82, “Jinling” 靳令).

The translations of all these keywords will be defended below. For now, suffice it to observe the consistent claim that the higher *niveaux* of power, such as “strength”

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<sup>1</sup> All translations in this chapter are my own. Citations from *Shangjun shu* are from Jiang (1986). I am indebted to Paul Fahr, Yuri Pines, Christian Schwermann, and Adam Smith for helpful comments while I was drafting this piece.

<sup>2</sup> On the interrelations among chapters 4, 5, 13 (and 20), see Pines (2017: 44–45).

(*qiang* 疆) and “awesomeness” (*wei* 威), depend on productive capacity (*li* 力), and a suitable penal law (*xing* 刑) is the first step to achieving it.

Other passages in *Shangjun shu* that do not repeat the above formula also coordinate different words for power, for instance:

國用其二，舍其一，必疆；令用三者，威必王。

If the state makes use of but two of these, discarding one, it will certainly become strong; if the leader uses all three, he will be awesome and will certainly become King (*Shangjun shu* 1.4.32, “Quqiang”).

The reference is to three enumerated desiderata: “assailing [seditious] officials, assailing [rivals’] productive capacity, and assailing enemies” (*gong guan, gong li, gong di* 攻官，攻力，攻敵; *Shangjun shu* 1.4.31). *Wang* 王 is a verb meaning “to be the King.” Sometimes it is rendered along the lines of “to be the True King, True Monarch,” etc., but such phrases work best when the connotations are moral. For example, in *Mencius* 4A.9, the *wangzhe* 王者 is the one who is universally acclaimed as King because of his moral charisma, as opposed to some tyrant who merely calls himself “king.” This statement in *Shangjun shu*, by contrast, is amoral: instead of contenting himself with being the lord of some duchy or marquisate, a leader who is able to achieve all three goals will transform himself into the next king of the known world. He does not need to be an ostentatious do-gooder.<sup>3</sup>

*Wang* is thus the highest stage of power in *Shangjun shu*, attainable by at most one man at a time, and only after years of plotting and fortifying. It is preceded, as we shall see more clearly below, by *wei* 威, “awesomeness,” a word that is associated with other words for “power” in yet more passages:

權制獨斷於君則威。

When [bureaucratic] authority and administration are determined exclusively by the ruler, he will inspire awe (*Shangjun shu* 3.14.82, “Xiuquan” 修權).

兵至疆，威。

When the army is at peak strength, it will inspire awe (*Shangjun shu* 5.20.123, “Ruomin” 弱民).

人主奪威勢。

The ruler’s awesomeness and power will [thereby] be wrested from him (*Shangjun shu* 5.16.145, “Dingfen” 定分).

The remainder of this study will be devoted to examining the etymology and usage of the most important words for “power” in *Shangjun shu*.

<sup>3</sup> Compare *Shangjun shu* (4.18.110, “Huace” 畫策): 凡人主德行非出人也, “The ruler never exceeds others in virtuous conduct.” On the amoralism of this philosophy, see, generally, Graham (1989: 267–92).

*Qiang* 強 / 彊 (\*N-kaŋ)<sup>4</sup>

*Qiang* is by far the most common word for “power.” Its basic meanings are “strong, to be strong, to coerce”; in *Shangjun shu* it can also mean “strong” in a geo-political sense: strong in relation to one’s neighbors. *Gang* 剛 (\*kʰaŋ), “hard, firm,” is undoubtedly cognate.<sup>5</sup> There are many other likely cognates in Old Chinese:

<i>gang</i>	鋼 (*C.kʰaŋ),	“steel”
<i>geng</i>	梗 (*kʰraŋʔ),	“stiff, resistant, recalcitrant”
<i>hang</i>	行 (*[g]ʰaŋ),	“vigorous”
<i>qing</i>	勍 (*N-kraŋ),	“strong”
<i>jing</i>	競 (*C-kraŋʔ-s),	“to exert oneself” <sup>6</sup>

The following possible cognates are less certain, but not to be ignored:

<i>heng</i>	衡 (*[g]ʰraŋ),	“steelyard” <sup>7</sup>
<i>jing</i>	鯨 (*[g]raŋ),	“whale” (< “mighty fish”?)
<i>jing</i>	京 (*[k]raŋ),	“capital city” (< “grand construction”?)

If *heng* 衡 is cognate, the idea is probably that a steelyard is firm (like *gang* 鋼): it does not droop when weights are added to it; it does not sag; etc. (The same is implied by the “steel” in the English word “steelyard.”) I am not certain that *heng* belongs to the same etymon, but the steelyard is praised in *Shangjun shu* for its accurate and dispassionate indication of weight, as we shall see in the discussion of *quan* 權, below.

To return to *qiang* 彊 and more straightforward cognates: though normally prosaic in its diction, *Shangjun shu* artfully juxtaposes *qiang* 彊 and *geng* 梗 in one passage, taking advantage of the assonance:

彊梗者，有常刑而不赦。

For those who are refractory and recalcitrant, let there be sure punishments with no amnesty (*Shangjun shu* 4.17.105, “Shangxing” 賞刑).

*Qianggeng* 彊梗, “refractory and recalcitrant,” is \*N-kaŋ-kʰraŋʔ in Old Chinese—reminiscent of the euphonious reduplicatives (*diezi* 疊字) that are familiar from the *Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) and other early texts, such as bell inscriptions.<sup>8</sup> This is also a

<sup>4</sup> All reconstructed Old Chinese forms are based on the system in Baxter/Sagart (2014).

<sup>5</sup> *Gang* 剛 is phonologically identical to *gang* 綱 (\*kʰaŋ), “guideline, skein.” Schuessler (2007: 250) distinguishes them, however.

<sup>6</sup> *Jing* in this sense can be compared to *mianqiang* 勉強 (perhaps more familiar as *benkyō* in Sino-Japanese), “to exert oneself, to study.”

<sup>7</sup> Also, perhaps, *heng* 橫 (\*C.gʷraŋ), “crossbar,” but I cannot offer any explanation for the labio-velar (\*gʷ-).

<sup>8</sup> On this phenomenon, see, for instance, Smith (2015: 258–85); also Shaughnessy (1997: 181) and Kern (2009: 167).

conspicuous instance where *qiang* is pejorative in *Shangjun shu*.

*Qiang* is typically used with reference to the state, as in the tirelessly repeated locution *qiang guo* 疆國, “to strengthen the state.” *Guo qiang* is common too, for instance:

多力則國疆。

When productive capacity is ample, the state will be strong (*Shangjun shu* 1.3.20, “Nongzhan” 農戰).

Compare:

國力搏 [=專]<sup>9</sup> 者疆。

When the state’s productive capacity is consolidated, it is strong (*Shangjun shu* 1.3.22, “Nongzhan”).

*Qiang bing* 疆兵, “to strengthen the army,” is common as well, and a “strong” army is defined as follows:

戰事兵用曰疆。

When the army is usable in warlike affairs,<sup>10</sup> it is called “strong” (*Shangjun shu* 1.4.28, “Quqiang,” and 5.20.124, “Ruomin”).

Enemy states can be “strong” as well:

人君不能服疆敵破大國也。

The ruler<sup>11</sup> can neither subdue a strong enemy nor crush a great state (*Shangjun shu* 1.3.25, “Nongzhan”).

Lastly, *qiang*, though usually a geopolitical term, can also refer to “strong men” and “strongmen”:

弱使疆憐。

The infirm will induce pity in the strong (*Shangjun shu* 3.12.75, “Bingshou” 兵守).

<sup>9</sup> Following the commentary of Yan Kejun 嚴可均 (1762–1843).

<sup>10</sup> On the basis of the next clause in “Quqiang” (戰亂兵息而國削, “When military [affairs] are disorderly, the troops are lax and the state loses territory”), which is not perfectly parallel, Yu Chang 于鬯 (ca. 1862–1919) glossed *shi* 事 as *zhi* 治, “orderly.” See Zhang (2012: 1.4.59, n. 13). This interpretation of *shi* is rare and its only purpose would be to make the sentence more parallel. See the collected glosses on *shi* in Zong (2003: 52–54).

<sup>11</sup> Literally, *renjun* 人君 means “the lord of others” (as opposed to *renchen* 人臣, “a minister to someone else”). In practice, it is simply an epithet for the ruler. I have discarded the translation “lord of men,” which I have used in the past, because it is markedly sexist in twenty-first-century English, whereas *renjun* has no such connotation.

Keep the wounded out of sight of your spirited warriors! And avoid at all costs the following disastrous situation:

君弱而臣彊。

The ruler is weak, the ministers strong (*Shangjun shu* 5.25.137, “Shenfa” 慎法).

### *Li* 力 (\*k.rək)

The basic meaning of *li* is “physical strength, force, energy,” but in *Shangjun shu* the effective meaning is usually “productive capacity” (that is, the production derived from the people’s physical strength). This sense is akin to that of Modern Mandarin *lijiang* 力量. Possible cognates of *li* are difficult to analyze because of the instability of \*-r-, but the following all seem to share the notion of coercion:<sup>12</sup>

<i>chi</i> 敕	(* (m-)ŋək),	“to order, to decree”
<i>le</i> 勒	(* [r]ʰək),	“bridle”
<i>xie</i> 械	(* [m-k]ʰrək-s),	“fetters, weapon, instrument”
<i>bi</i> 逼	(* pɾək < *p-rək ?),	“to compel, to oppress”

In *Shangjun shu*, *li* is often associated with *qiang*, as we have seen. Typically, the logic is “When the people’s productive capacity is abundant, the state will be strong,” for instance:

民不偷營則多力，多力則國彊。

If the people do not engage in mischief and scheming,<sup>13</sup> they will have ample productive capacity; if they have ample productive capacity, the state will be strong (*Shangjun shu* 1.3.20, “Nongzhan”).

Thus *guoli* 國力, the state’s productive capacity, is not the same as *guoqiang* 國彊, the state’s geopolitical strength (though of course the two are correlated):

國力搏 [=專] 者彊。

When the state’s productive capacity is consolidated, it is strong (*Shangjun shu* 1.3.22, “Nongzhan”).

*Li* can also refer to the productive capacity of the soil:

夫治國者能盡地力……

When the one who governs the state can maximize the productive capacity of its soil [...] (*Shangjun shu* 2.6.45, “Suandi” 算地).

<sup>12</sup> Schuessler (2007: 351) suggests *lai* 來 (\*mə.rʰək), “to come”; hence another possible cognate is *lai* 賚 (\*[r]ʰək-s), “to consign, to bestow” (which he does not consider). *Se* 齋/穡 (\*s.rək), “to reap,” might belong to this group too. Semantically, however, the connections are far from clear.

<sup>13</sup> Following the commentary of Jiang Lihong 蔣禮鴻 for *ying* 營.

The need to survey and then systematically exploit the state's resources was a major theme in Warring States political philosophy (Chao 2003: 527–650).

In the sense of “forcibly, coercively,” *li* is not very different from *qiang*:<sup>14</sup>

民務勝而力征。

The people, devoting themselves to surpassing one another, attacked each other by force (*Shangjun shu* 2.7.51, “Kaisai” 開塞).

While the above uses are all closely linked to the basic meaning of “physical force” and the derived sense of “productive capacity,” *li* can also refer more abstractly to the state's administrative power:

故聖人之治也，多禁以止能，任力以窮詐。

Thus, in ruling the state, the Sage employs manifold prohibitions to quash their ability [to rebel] and relies on [the state's administrative] power to curtail deception (*Shangjun shu* 2.6.48, “Suandi”).

任其力，不任其德。

[The enlightened ruler] relies on [administrative] power, not virtue (*Shangjun shu* 3.9.66, “Cuofa” 錯法).

Clearly, these examples do not refer to the ruler's *physical* strength.

### *Shi* 勢 (\*ŋet-s)

Recent research has established that *shi* is derived from *she* 設 (\*ŋet), “to set up.”<sup>15</sup> *Shi* thus means “circumstances, setting, configuration,” and, in *Shangjun shu* (and related texts), “power derived from one's position.”<sup>16</sup> If the ruler has wisely strengthened his state by consolidating its productive capacity and staffing a meritocratic bureaucracy, the power that he holds by sitting atop this apparatus is his *shi*:

夫治國舍勢而任說說，則身修而功寡。

In ruling the state, if you discard your positional power and rely on the propositions of persuaders, you might be personally cultivated, but your achievements will be scant (*Shangjun shu* 2.6.46, “Suandi”).

<sup>14</sup> For *qiang* in the sense of “coercively,” consider *qiangjian* 強姦, “forcible fornication,” the closest traditional Chinese concept to rape.

<sup>15</sup> Baxter/Sagart (2014: 29–30); they do not indicate that Schuessler (2007: 570–71) discussed this pair as well. Even earlier, Qiu (1994: 10–11; 1998: 39–46) pointed out that the near-homophone *yi* 彳/藝 (\*ŋet-s) could be used to write *she* 設 in paleographical literature.

<sup>16</sup> For a general study of *shi*, see Jullien (1992).

久處利勢，必王。

One who enduringly puts himself in a position of profit and power will surely become the King (*Shangjun shu* 5.20.123, “Ruomin”).

*Shi* can also refer to physical constitution:

麗麗巨巨 [=麒麟騶駟]<sup>17</sup>，日走千里，有必走之勢也。

A unicorn or [the thoroughbred] Lu'er can run a thousand *li* in one day because their constitution is such that they must run (*Shangjun shu* 4.18.112–13, “Huace” 畫策).

Effective governance consists of the proper policies combined with the power to carry them out:

故先王不恃其疆而恃其勢，不恃其信而恃其數。

Thus the Former Kings relied not on strength, but on positional power; they relied not on trust, but on protocols (or perhaps ‘statistics’)<sup>18</sup> (*Shangjun shu* 5.24.132, “Jinshi” 禁使).

But *shi* does not always mean “power” in *Shangjun shu*; sometimes it still bears its basic sense of “circumstances, preconditions, situation”:

三代異勢。

Circumstances under the Three Dynasties were all different (*Shangjun shu* 2.7.54, “Kaisai”).

行三者有二勢：……

There are two preconditions to carrying out these three [stages to victory]: [...] (*Shangjun shu* 3.11.71, “Liben” 立本).

此其勢正使汙吏有資而成其姦險，小人有資而施其巧詐。

Such a situation is precisely what permits corrupt officials to acquire resources to realize their seditious threats, petty men to exercise their crafty deceptions (*Shangjun shu* 5.25.137, “Shenfa”).

### *Quan* 權 (\*[g]<sup>w</sup>rar)

Analyzing *quan* is difficult because it is uncertain whether the initial consonant was a velar (\*g-) or uvular (\*G-). If the former, then the most plausible cognate is *guan* 官 (\*k<sup>w</sup>ar), “office, officer,” i.e., someone who has been invested with authority; if the latter, one would have to consider *guan* 觀 (\*C.q<sup>w</sup>ar), “to inspect.” Regardless, the etymon of *quan* is “to weigh using a steelyard,” whence the derived senses of

<sup>17</sup> Following the commentary of Yan Kejun, but the phrase is undoubtedly garbled.

<sup>18</sup> For the semantic range of *shu* 數, see Goldin (2024: 90–93).

“to weigh one thing against another” (to borrow A.C. Graham’s pellucid definition)<sup>19</sup> and, more generally, “authority, influence, sway.” Notably, *Shangjun shu* does not use *quan* in the moralistic sense of “disregarding an otherwise binding norm when exigent circumstances warrant”<sup>20</sup> (e.g., *Mencius* 4A.17).

“Weighing by means of a steelyard” is a well attested image, for instance:

聖人審權以操柄。

The Sage examines the steelyard in order to grasp the handles (*Shangjun shu* 2.6.46, “Suandi”).

稱而取重，權而索利。

When weighing, [the people] choose whatever is heaviest; when using a steelyard, they seek profit (*Shangjun shu* 2.6.48, “Suandi”).

先王懸權衡。

The Former Kings suspended steelyards for weighing (*Shangjun shu* 3.14.83, “Xiuquan”).

“Grasping the handles” (*caobing* 操柄) is a transparent metaphor (both in *Shangjun shu* and in other texts) for securing one’s grip on power. Thus, if the ruler gains an exclusive hold on the handles (*zhuan qi bing* 專其柄),<sup>21</sup> his supremacy will be uncontested.

*Quan* can also mean “influence,” the consequential weight that can tip the scales:

無以外權爵任與官，……

[If you] do not delegate rank or office on the basis of foreign influence [...] (*Shangjun shu* 1.2.7, “Kenling” 墾令).

Note the perfect rhyme (and indeed near-homophony) of *quan* 權 (\*[g]<sup>w</sup>rar) and *guan* 官 (\*k<sup>w</sup>ar) in the above example.

Peddling influence is predictably excoriated:

下賣權，非忠臣也。

One who peddles influence among inferiors is not a loyal minister (*Shangjun shu* 1.3.21, “Nongzhan”).

<sup>19</sup> Graham (1978: 184); see also Needham/Wang/Robinson (1962: 22): *quan* “means essentially the weight of a steelyard, but occasionally by implication the steelyard itself, and later more commonly came to be used as a verb, to weigh.” The fullest study of *quan* in English is Vankeerberghen (2005); see also Defoort (2015).

<sup>20</sup> This was my definition in Goldin (2005: 19).

<sup>21</sup> *Shangjun shu* (2.6.50, “Suandi”). In *Han Feizi* 韓非子, the “two handles” (*erbing* 二柄) refer to rewards and punishments, which the ruler must always keep firmly within his grasp. See Chen (2000: 2.7.120–21, “Erbing”); also Goldin (2020: 207–9). Note that *bing* 柄 (\*[p]raŋʔ-s), “handle,” and *bing* 秉 (\*praŋʔ), “to hold,” are patently cognate.



姦臣鬻權以約祿。

Treacherous ministers peddle influence in order to secure lucre (*Shangjun shu* 3.14.85, “Xiuquan”).

Often, a more general rendering, such as “power” or “authority,” is required:

國不農，則與諸侯爭權，不能自持也。

If the state is not engaged in agriculture, it cannot be self-sustaining in its power struggles with other territorial lords (*Shangjun shu* 1.3.24, “Nongzhan”).

故君子操權一政以立術。

Hence, when a noble man wields authority, he unifies government in order to establish procedures (*Shangjun shu* 2.6.50, “Suandi”).

秉權而立。

[The ruler] establishes himself by seizing power (*Shangjun shu* 3.8.61, “Yiyan” 壹言).

The ruler must never allow anyone to usurp his authority by acting in his name:

權者，君之所獨制也。

Authority is what the lord administers solely (*Shangjun shu* 3.14.82, “Xiuquan”).

### *Wei* 威 (\*ʔuj)

The word *wei* might be onomatopoeic (imitative of a gasp of terror). In its diverse senses, it always retains the connotation of “awesome, dreadful, terrible.” As mentioned above, it is conceived in *Shangjun shu* as the last stage before *wang*, kingship.

Two cognates are obvious:

*wei* 畏 (\*ʔuj-s), “fear, terror”

*wei* 威 (\*ʔruj), “lofty” (< “awe-inspiring”)

In addition, *gui* 鬼 (\*kujʔ < \*k-ʔujʔ), “ghost, demon, spook,” with a nominalizing \*k- prefix, seems likely.<sup>22</sup>

“Inspiring awe” is almost always the right sense for *wei* 威 in *Shangjun shu*.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See Baxter/Sagart (2014: 151). *Wei* 畏 and *gui* 鬼 are related palaeographically as well: *wei* appears to be a pictograph of a demon brandishing a rod. See, for instance, Yu/Yao (1996: §0323). Semantically (and palaeographically), *wei* 巍 (\*N-q<sup>h</sup>uj), *wei* 魏 (\*N-q<sup>h</sup>uj-s), and *hui* 癘 (\*q<sup>h</sup>uj-s), all meaning “high, majestic,” seem close, but the initial uvulars would be hard to explain. (*Hui* can also mean “disease,” perhaps of the kind spread by demons.) Not all of the many words written with the 鬼 component are cognate.

<sup>23</sup> In the context of *Xunzi* 荀子, Eric L. Hutton (2024: 183–85), cautions against the translation “awe” for *wei*.

故能為威者王。

Thus one who is able to inspire awe will become the King (*Shangjun shu* 1.4.31, “Quqiang”).

刑威，民死上。

When punishments inspire awe, the people will die for their superiors (*Shangjun shu* 2.5.37, “Shuomin” 說民).

故以刑治則民威，民威則無姦。

Thus, if you discipline them by means of punishments, the people will be awed; when they are awed, there is no treachery<sup>24</sup> (*Shangjun shu* 2.7.56, “Kaisai”).

Intimidating the people to the point that they do not even dare to contemplate treachery is efficient because an overreliance on naked force will eventually exhaust the state, as all repressive regimes have discovered. Any enduring government must attain what political scientists sometimes call the “cooperation” of the governed.<sup>25</sup>

### De 德 (\*tʰək)

*De*, the last term to be considered here, offered fertile ground for the authors of *Shangjun shu* to satirize moralists. Since the Bronze Age, one of the most prolific senses of *de* has been “virtue” (Nivison 1996: 17–30), the righteous and conspicuous conduct of a Sage King who has received Heaven’s Mandate (*tianming* 天命).<sup>26</sup> Sometimes *de* is rendered as “charisma,”<sup>27</sup> a choice evidently inspired by Max Weber (1864–1920), but this can be misleading. Fundamentally, it has always meant “power”; phonologically, it is *identical to*, not merely cognate with, *de* 得 (\*tʰək), “to obtain.”<sup>28</sup> *Zhi* 職 (\*tək), “official duty, official capacity,” is an A/B syllable doublet<sup>29</sup> and might well be cognate. *De* is possibly derived from *zhi* 之 (\*tə), “to go,” and thus possibly cognate with *zhi* 志 (\*tə-s or \*tə-k-s), “will, aspiration.” *De* (construed as \*tʰək) is the power to get where you need to go, the power to fulfill your aspirations.

<sup>24</sup> “Skulduggery” (which originally meant “adultery” but is now closer to “villainy”) would be a fine translation for *jian* 姦 in the last example, if only the register were more appropriate.

<sup>25</sup> On this aspect of Qin governance, see the study by Sanft (2014: 8–9), which builds on the theoretical work of Axelrod (2006).

<sup>26</sup> On this concept, see, for instance, Luo (2012), Deng (2011: 30–48), and Kominami (1992).

<sup>27</sup> For instance, Graham (1989: 13); more recently, Ivanhoe (2000: xiii). Weber himself applied his concept of charisma in Weber (1951: esp. 30–42) but did not link it exclusively to *de*.

<sup>28</sup> Consider Huang (2014: A.5.75, “Huanliu” 環流): 所謂德者，能得人者也，“What is called ‘power’ is being able to obtain people.”

<sup>29</sup> For this concept, see, for instance, Smith (2018).

*Shangjun shu* frequently disparages “virtue,” as in several examples from the “Kaisai” (Clearing Obstructions) chapter:

力征諸侯者退德。

One who launches forceful expeditions against [other] lords dispenses with virtue (*Shangjun shu* 2.7.53).

故效於古者先德而治。

Thus, those who imitate the past rule by prioritizing virtue (*Shangjun shu* 2.7.56).

Sometimes the idea is that virtue was appropriate to bygone eras, but not the present one:

播笏作為樂，以申其德。

[In those days, officials] would secure their ceremonial tablets within their girdles and create music in order to exhibit their virtue (*Shangjun shu* 4.17.100, “Shangxing”).

The most mordant uses of *de* mock Confucian diction and take advantage of its two senses, “power” and “virtue,” for instance:

此吾以殺刑之反於德而義合於暴也。

This is how, by executing and punishing [the deviant], I return to virtue, whereas [what is called] righteousness is tantamount to cruelty (*Shangjun shu* 2.7.57, “Kaisai”).<sup>30</sup>

Mencians may prate about “righteousness” (*yi* 義), but pardoning criminals is, in the long run, cruel to the populace. With his cold heart and iron fist, the ruler of *Shangjun shu* proves himself to be the truly virtuous one:

德明教行，則能以民之有為己用矣。

When your *de* is clear and your instructions implemented, you can appropriate the people’s possessions for your own use (*Shangjun shu* 3.9.64, “Cuofa”).

The implied argument is that Confucians have forgotten what the very word means. Speaking of “virtue” without power is not just logically nonsensical; it is also linguistically absurd. A Confucian might be tempted to read *de ming* 德明 as “when your virtue is clear,” but any realist knows that it must mean “when your power is clear.” One might wish that the authors of *Shangjun shu* had presented a realist reconceptualization of the archaic phrase “royal virtue” (*wangde* 王德)<sup>31</sup> as “royal

<sup>30</sup> My understanding of this sentence is in line with Gao (1974: 79).

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, the Shi Zai *ding* 師鬮鼎 inscription: 惟余小子肇淑先王德, “Thus I, the Little One, have always purified myself with the virtue of the Former Kings” (*Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 1984: §2830). The various connotations of the phrase *wangde* are explored in a text with vastly greater literary appeal than *Shangjun shu*: *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 by Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–1896) (Guo 1961: 5A.12.411, “Tiandi” 天地).

power,” but the literary appeal of this text is limited—one of many reasons, surely, why it was disparaged for centuries.

What I have tried to offer in the foregoing pages is not a comprehensive discussion of power in *Shangjun shu*—let alone in classical Chinese sources generally—but a glimpse of the value of historical linguistics for a deeper understanding of philosophy and conceptual history. I am optimistic that, as such methods of inquiry emerge from their unjustifiable neglect in Chinese studies, they will yield important new insights.

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