

# Portmanteau Characters in Chinese

DAVID PRAGER BRANNER  
GROVE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING  
CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK

Portmanteau here refers to an unusual type of Chinese character: a composite of two or more graphs for living words, all of which are to be read (in order) to give the meaning of the word represented by the whole character. It is something different from the conventional notion of the “ideograph” or *huìyìzì* 會意字, the juxtaposition of graphs representing ideas or objects that contribute abstractly to the overall meaning of the word represented. I have shown elsewhere that characters are read through a process of recognition rather than decipherment, arguing that “complex pictograph” is a better description of the “motivation” (basis of character structure) of many graphs traditionally considered *huìyì* (Branner 2009). But the portmanteau is a different case. Its components are not abstract; understanding its structure depends on actually reading these components as connected words to form a phrase that defines or denotes the word.

This paper reviews a number of portmanteaux in current use and considers their place in Chinese grammatology. Such characters are of course part of the history of cursive Chinese and seem to have begun to be discussed rather late in the received history of Chinese writing, around the sixth century C.E.; it is doubtful that they could be strictly the same as the *huìyì* mentioned in the first-century *Shuōwén jiězì* 說文解字.

In terms of their structure and their relationship to oral words, portmanteaux embody a conception different from most mainstream characters. Their construction is more self-conscious than other character-types, which suggests that they are a later development. Their relationship to oral words is tenuous and tends to change frequently.

## GRAMMATOLOGICAL MOTIVATION

The portmanteau most widely seen today is 甬, which represents the colloquial modal auxiliary *béng* ‘not to need to’, a contraction of *búyòng* 不用. 甬 is a portmanteau not because it represents a contraction but because it is constructed of the characters for the phrase that defines it: *búyòng*: 不用. Now, the composite structure of the graph and the fact that the word it represents is a modern contraction are both well known.<sup>1</sup> What is less well known today is that the graph 甬 is associated with at least two older readings that have nothing to do with the sound *béng*, even though their meanings are related to the decomposition 不用 ‘not to need’. The tenth-century *Lóngkān shǒujìng* 龍龕手鏡 reads 甬 as 棄, our *qì* ‘to discard’; the sixth-century *Yánshì jiāxùn* 顏氏家訓 says 甬 represents 罷, our *bà* ‘to stop’ ~ ‘to resign’.<sup>2</sup>

*Author’s note:* This paper was read on 14 March, 2009, at the Annual Meeting of the American Oriental Society in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Some of the content is discussed in Branner 2009, a study of the relationship between graphic motivation and literacy in the early period. This paper is dedicated to Victor Mair.

1. The syllable *béng* has no place in the pan-Chinese common phonological system—the conjunction of Mandarin tone 2, a voiceless stop initial, and a nasal ending marks it as a special word that cannot correspond to any syllable in medieval phonology. For that reason it often appears in trick questions on historical phonology exams.

2. *Lóngkān shǒujìng* “音弁 [{{khiH-3cy 止開三去至溪}}]” (1982: 543). The *Yánshì jiāxùn* passage is cited below. In this paper, medieval phonological values are shown using the format described in Branner 2006: a non-reconstructive transcription of the medieval categories, together with Chinese notation for those categories.

This diversity of 甬's readings points up the unusual motivation of portmanteaux. Most Chinese characters are of the familiar “phonogram” (*xíngshēng* 形聲) structure, combining one phonetic and semantic token each. The reading *béng* for 甬 can be called phonologically motivated because it is a contraction of precisely the same two words whose graphs make up the portmanteau. But in the case of the other two readings, we are within the realm of Saussure's *arbitraire du signe*—only convention links *qì* or *bà* to the structure of 甬. And these other two readings are more typical of Chinese portmanteaux generally than *béng* is.

What is the motivation of portmanteau graphs? To answer this, it is illustrative to compare them with a different kind of playfully conceived character: ligatures or single-graph renderings of multi-syllable words. Several of the latter were described in the 1920s by Chén Bódá (1904–1989)—he says he has “collected” them from living usage (Chén 1927: 167):<sup>3</sup>

磬: “讀敕令、治病之符咒上用之 [read *chìlìng* ‘rescript’; used on healing talismans]”

崗: “讀合同、契據上有之 [read *hétóng* ‘contract’; used on deeds]”

糲: “讀米厘、此類之字甚多、算學上用之 [read *mǐlí* ‘centimeter’; there are many graphs of this sort, used in calculation]”<sup>4</sup>

Chén presented these and other examples to defend the coining of the graph 圖 by Doo Ding-U [Dù Dìngyǒu 杜定友] (1898–1967) to write *túshūguǎn* 圖書館 ‘library’ (Doo 1927). This was part of the bubbling pot of ideas out of which the official Chinese character simplification movement later developed. Doo proposed not only 圖 for 圖書館 (“a savings of 13 strokes”), but also 圖 for *túshū* 圖書 ‘books’ alone—圖 missing the bottom stroke—and a cursive form 囿. 圖 caught on in Japan and was popular in China for a while before the Communist Revolution, even making its way into the 1943 revision of Mathews's dictionary, handwritten by Y. R. Chao at the entry for *túshūguǎn* (Mathews 1943: 950, entry #6531). Recently, there has been a tradition that 圖 is to be read *tuān*, a contraction of *túshūguǎn*, but that defeats the whole stated point of Doo's invention—to represent a multi-syllable word by a single, unique character, rather than to abbreviate the word into a single syllable. Technically, 圖 is a kind of abbreviated ligature, but 甬 is not necessarily a ligature at all. That is, when 甬 represents *béng*, it is indeed a ligature, because *béng* really consists of the two words *búyòng*. But that is not the situation with the readings *qì* and *bà* for 甬, where the constituents of a graph represent not the corresponding spoken word but only a definition of a spoken word. Chinese uses a single term for both ligatures and portmanteaux: *héwén* 合文 ‘combined graphs’, but there is this essential difference between the two: the nature of a ligature is to compress two or more words (spoken and written words simultaneously) into the space of a single graph; a portmanteau, however, is a graphic ligature only, and it is not bound to specific words.

Portmanteaux are not part of the classical inventory of character structures. They seem closest to the *huìyì* 會意 ‘assembled meanings’ (“syssemantic” or “ideographic”) structure, although they lack what we usually think of as the abstractness of ideography. As many have observed, the ideograph is an attractive but evanescent notion with few clear-cut examples in real Chinese usage.<sup>5</sup> Portmanteaux differ from notional ideographs—and this is recognized by a number of Chinese sources in traditional times. Lacking explicit phonological motivation, they are constructed based on the meaning of the words (as expressed simultaneously in oral and written form) of which the graph is made up.

Asterisked forms represent Mandarin readings expected based on medieval phonological values, rather than reconstructed medieval readings.

3. Chén is best remembered as a confederate of the Gang of Four, later in life.

4. The ligature 糲 survives in contemporary usage, although in the meaning ‘centimeter’ it is now usual to say *lími* 釐米 (simplified as 厘米), rather than *mǐlí*.

5. See the discussion in Branner 2009.

In addition to their distinctive structure, portmanteaux commonly exhibit two other features. They are often associated (at different times and places) with more than one word or sound. And they often seem to have come late to their modern readings, some of which have no corresponding syllable in medieval phonology. In the long era before standardization of an absolute reading pronunciation, words without a place in medieval phonology could have no undisputed identity in the historical continuum of written Chinese. Another feature of the portmanteaux is that the words they stand for often have competing graphs to represent them, which in the nature of things usually means phonograms. Where portmanteaux are involved, there are persistent problems linking written word to spoken word, because of the lack of phonological motivation. Not surprisingly, a graph that cannot be consistently linked to an oral word tends to lack stability in how it is read at different times.

## LIVING EXAMPLES

The largest modern dictionaries contain hundreds of these forms, most no longer used.<sup>6</sup> Below I offer a tour of seven examples, all of special interest because they are associated with words known today in ordinary spoken Mandarin, after which I consider the question of how far back these graphs can be traced in the received tradition.

Consider another character containing the negative particle *bù* 不: 歪, a portmanteau of *búzhèng* 不正 ‘not straight’. Today, we read it *wāi* ‘crooked, tilted to one side, off-center’, a reading attested since the time of the *Zihù*.<sup>7</sup> The traditional way of writing *wāi* is 𠄎, a phonogram found in the *Shuōwén*.<sup>8</sup> But our contemporary spoken word *wāi* has not been associated explicitly with 𠄎 until recently (in, for example, the eighteenth-century *Kāngxī zìdiǎn*); in the eleventh-century *Guǎngyùn* 廣韻, 𠄎 is assigned the readings *\*huāi ~ \*huā*, neither of which is now attested as a Mandarin word for ‘crooked’.<sup>9</sup> The *Lóngkān shǒujìng* reads 歪 as *\*kuāi*, a syllable that is phonologically possible but in practice unused in modern standard Mandarin.<sup>10</sup>

Another example is 𠄎, a portmanteau of *bùhǎo* 不好 ‘not good’. Today it is standardly read *nāo*, a syllable that may have originated as a contraction and has no equivalent medieval syllable or graph.<sup>11</sup> The *Lóngkān shǒujìng* and *Zihù* read 𠄎 as *\*wài*; the seventeenth-century *Zhèngzì tōng* 正字通 gives *\*huài*.<sup>12</sup> In medieval phonology, this *huài* is not exactly

6. Having said that, I must take it back at once. In the academic world, so-called *súzì* 俗字 ‘vulgar characters’ are a subject of perpetual research by Chinese specialists in the writing system; see Hsü 2008 for a recent study. Scholarly interest has led to the inclusion of these graphs in Unicode and therefore to their being available to almost everyone with a computer. The advent of Unicode and comprehensive fonts of Chinese characters has provided powerful tools to Chinese practitioners of “133t,” the slick and constantly evolving Internet cipher. Chinese versions of 133t, which currently go by the names “*huǒxīngwén* 火星文 [Martian script]” and “*nǎocǎnwén* 腦殘文 [brain damaged script],” often feature bizarre graphs that would have slumbered eternally in old dictionaries had they not been revived and brought into users’ homes by Unicode.

7. *Zihù* “烏乖切 [{wei-2b 蟹合二平皆影}]]” ([1615] 1991: 231B下).

8. It has 立 ‘to stand’ semantic, with *guō* 𠄎/𠄎 ‘earthen cooking pot’ phonetic. 𠄎 appears to be an ancient graph for the common word we now write 鍋; it is, itself, a phonogram, constructed of 𠄎 ‘earthen vessel’ with *kuǎ* 𠄎 phonetic. The graphs 𠄎, 鍋, and 𠄎 are all straightforward representatives of the early Chinese *gēbù* 歌部 rime group, of which the *-ai* final of Mandarin *wāi* is intriguingly reminiscent of Baxter’s 1992 reconstruction for this rime group, *-aj*.

9. *Guǎngyùn* “火媽切 [{hwei-2a 蟹合二平佳曉}]]” ([1008] 1976: 93).

10. *Lóngkān shǒujìng* “苦乖反 [{khwei-2b 蟹合二平皆溪}]]” (1982: 543).

11. Our *nāo*, despite its tone, suggests a contraction with *hǎo* 好 ‘good’ as the source of its ending; the initial *n-* suggests the southern (non-Mandarin) nasal-initial negatives.

12. *Lóngkān shǒujìng* “烏怪反 [{weiH-2b 蟹合二去皆影}]]” ([997 CE] 1985: 543). *Zihù* “烏怪切、歪去聲、不好也 [{weiH-2b 蟹合二去皆影}, which is 歪 in the *qùshēng*; ‘bad’]” ([1615] 1991: 113A下). *Zhèngzì tōng* 正字通: “呼怪切、歪去聲、不好也 [{hweiH-2b 蟹合二去皆曉}, which is 歪 in the *qùshēng*; ‘bad’]” ([1671] 1996: 337A上).

homophonous with our word *huài* for ‘bad’, written 壞, but the same word may well have been intended.<sup>13</sup> Could the *Lóngkān shǒujīng*’s \**wài* also be an attempt to write the same word?

Another common Northern Chinese verb that has no other normal graph is *hāng* ‘to tamp (earth)’, written 夯, apparently a portmanteau of *dàli* 大力 ‘great strength’.<sup>14</sup> 夯 appears in pre-modern sources with meanings that are basically compatible with the definition ‘[to use] great strength’. The seventeenth-century *Zihuì* 字彙 glosses it “大用力、以肩舉物 [to exert great strength; to carry an object on the shoulder]” ([1615] 1991: 99A上), giving it a reading equivalent to modern \**hǎng*, which is tonally different from contemporary pronunciation but at least segmentally the same.<sup>15</sup> 夯 also appears, without a reading, in the twelfth-century *Chánlín bǎoxùn* 禪林寶訓:

自家閨閣中物不肯放下、返累及他人擔夯、無乃太勞乎 (2008: p1020c10–11)

If she is unwilling to abandon the things in her boudoir, she involves other people in carrying them for her—isn’t that being too much trouble to others?

The modern meaning ‘to tamp’, however, is not in evidence.<sup>16</sup>

弄, which is now rare but which was in use within living memory in Shànghǎi, seems to take its motivation from *sān zhī shǒu* 三隻手 ‘three hands’, a slang expression for ‘pick-pocket’. How is 弄 to be read? In its earliest attestation, it is explained as an alternate form for either character (!) in *páshǒu* 扒手 ‘pickpocket’. Apparently it can be read either *shǒu* 手 ‘hand’ or *pá* 扒 (verb for stealing by snatching or pickpocketing). The source for this claim is the 1917 *Qīng bài lèichāo* 清稗類鈔 of Xú Kē 徐珂 (1869–1928):

扒手、乘人之不備而取其隨身之財物也、亦作扒弄 (Xú [1917] 1966 83.84)

*Páshǒu* ‘to pick pockets’: to take what another person has on his person when he is unaware; also written 扒弄.

滬人呼翦絡賊曰弄手、猶言扒手也 (Xú [1917] 1966 83.105)

Shanghai people call a pickpocket ‘弄手’, meaning ‘扒手’.

The graph 𣪠 models the phrase *rùshuǐ* 入水 ‘to enter the water’. In modern usage it is read *cuān* ‘to parboil’, whose phonogrammatic variant may perhaps be 攛, representing the word *cuān* ‘to toss, fling’ (both actions involving quick motions of something held in the hand). The *Zihuì* assigns it a reading \**tūn*, an empty syllable in modern Mandarin, and the gloss “水推物也 [for water to push something].”<sup>17</sup> A competing claim as to the word it represents is modern *qiú* 泅 ‘to swim’, which comes from Zhōu Qūfēi 周去非’s (1135–1189) *Língwài dàidá* 嶺外代答: “音泅、言人在水上也 [read \**qiú*; it means a person upon the water]” (Zhōu 1985: 43–44).

The graph 尖 appears to model the phrase *shàng xiǎo xià dà* 上小下大 ‘small on top and large on the bottom’ or *xiǎo shàng dà* 小上大 ‘small on top of large’, and it has been used for some time to write the word *jiān* ‘pointed’. The tenth-century scholar Xú Kǎi 徐鉉 (920–74)

13. For 壞, the *Guǎngyùn* has “胡怪切 [{ghweiH-2b 蟹合二去怪匣}],” (glossed ‘自破也 [to be ruined]’; [1008] 1976: 386).

14. This word is sometimes associated with the graph 磳, which however is canonically read *hóng*. *Guǎngyùn* “戶公切 [{ghung-1b 通一平東匣}]” ([1008] 1976: 30).

15. *Zihuì* “呼郎切、壑上聲 [read {hangQ-1 宕開一上唐曉}, which is {hak-1 宕開一入鐸曉} in the *shǎng* tone],” indicating that it was not a normal syllable in the medieval phonological system ([1615] 1991: 99A上).

16. A modern commentary on the *Chánlín bǎoxùn* likewise glosses 夯 as 背 ‘to carry on the back’ (*Chánlín bǎoxùn* 1997: 96).

17. *Zihuì* “土懇切、吞上聲 [read {thenQ-1 臻開一上很透}, which is {then-1 臻開一平痕透} in the *shǎng* tone]” ([1615] 1991: 240B下). Again, there is no place for this syllable in the medieval system.

identifies the *Shuōwén*'s graph *shān* 𦏧 'wedge' as "modern 尖."<sup>18</sup> But this equation is dubious because *shān* 𦏧 has a different medieval reading from *jiān* 尖. If the placement of *jiān* 尖 in the rime books is to be trusted, it represents a word also variously written

𦏧 'to pierce, stab; field tool';  
鐵/鋟 'to engrave';  
鋟 'awl'.

These possible doublet graphs are all homophones of *jiān* 尖 in the *Guǎngyùn* or *Jíyùn*, occupying the phonological pigeonhole {tsam-3b 咸三平鹽精}.<sup>19</sup>

The graph 丟 (with a deprecated variant 丢) is explained in the *Zihù* as a portmanteau graph recalling the phrase “*yí qù bù huán* 一去不還 [entirely gone and never to return, or once gone, never to return again]” and a reading \**diū*, which presumably matches the modern word represented by 丢: *diū* 'to throw' ~ 'to discard'; the *Zihù bǔ* gives an alternate reading \**diù*.<sup>20</sup> (Note that no medieval syllable exists corresponding to Mandarin *diū* or *diù* because the initial implies Div. IV, but the only available medieval rime is Div. III; see discussion in Branner 2006: 300.)

Below I summarize the diverse semantic and phonological associations of the seven graphs in modern use discussed here. (The prevalence of *yīnpíng*-readings seems to me fortuitous.)

Graph	Modern word and gloss	Canonical graph for this word	Also equated to	Century when so attested
甬	<i>béng</i> 'not to need to'	—	<i>qì</i> 弃 'to discard'	10th
歪	<i>wāi</i> 'crooked, tilted to one side, off-center'	𡗗	<i>bà</i> 罷 'to stop' ~ 'to resign'	6th
			reading * <i>huāi</i> ~ * <i>huā</i>	11th
𦏧	<i>nāo</i> 'not good'	—	reading * <i>kuāi</i>	10th
			reading * <i>huài</i> (≠ 壞)	17th
夯	<i>hāng</i> 'to tamp (earth)'	—	reading * <i>wài</i>	10th
弄	in <i>páshǒu</i> 'to pick a pocket' ~ 'pickpocket'	扒 or 手	? 'to carry on the back'	12th
			reading * <i>tǔn</i> '“for water to push something”'	17th
𦏧	<i>cuān</i> 'to parboil'	擻 'to toss'?	<i>qiú</i> 泅 'to swim'	12th
尖	<i>jiān</i> 'pointed'	𦏧 'to pierce, stab; field tool'; 鐵/鋟 'to engrave'; 鋟 'awl'	—	—
			reading * <i>diū</i> ~ * <i>diù</i>	17th
丢	<i>diū</i> 'to throw' ~ 'to discard'	—		

18. “此即今俗以小上大為𦏧字 [this is none other than using the modern vulgar form with 小 above 大 to write 𦏧]” (*Shuōwén jiězhì gǔlín* [1932] 1994: 5.717, entry #3648).

19. *Guǎngyùn* “子廉切” ([1008] 1976: 227); *Jíyùn* [1038] 1987: 288, where 尖 is a variant of 鋟.

20. *Zihù* “丁羞切、音兜 [{{tou-3b 流三平尤丁}}]” ([1615] 1991: 25A上); *Zihù bǔ* “又端救切、柳去聲 [{{touH-3b 流三去尤丁}}]” (2B上). Curiously, both of these entries contain “direct readings” that are at variance with the *fǎnqiè* preceding them: 兜 is equivalent to {tou-1} rather than {tou-3b}, and “柳去聲” is equivalent to {louH-3b} (溜 and many other words) rather than {touH-3b}. Neither {tou-3b} nor {touH-3b} is possible in *Guǎngyùn* because initial {t} is generally restricted to Div. I and IV. Although the variant 丢, now standard in the People’s Republic, is deprecated in the *Zihù* (“俗从 丩、非 [vulgarly written with 丩, which is incorrect]”), we can hazard our own portmanteau explanation of it: “*piěqù* 丩 (撇)去 [to toss away].”

Of the hundreds of examples of portmanteaux in the largest modern dictionaries, most are already attested in compendious Míng and Qīng sources; smaller numbers are introduced in late medieval sources like the *Língwài dàidá* and *Lóngkān shǒujīng*. Can we push back to the oldest discussion of character structure we have, in the *Shuōwén*?

There are a few possible candidates. One is *liè* 劣, anciently ‘weak’, apparently a portmanteau of *shǎoli* 少力 ‘little strength’ and not obviously a phonogram (劣 belongs to *yuèbù* 月部 and 力 to *zhìbù* 職部, meaning that they are thought to have had different oral stop codas). Another possibility is *sōng* 嵩 ‘high (said of mountains)’, apparently a portmanteau of *shān gāo* 山高 ‘the mountain is high’. A third is *fěi* ~ *pěi* 朏 ‘the first light of the new moon’, whose form seems to render *yuèchū* 月出 ‘the moon emerges’; perhaps this is the same word as *pò*, written 霸, ‘the first appearance of the new moon’.<sup>21</sup> Our reconstructed *Shuōwén* simply names components and does not specify their relationship or use the expression *huìyì*.<sup>22</sup> But it is striking that the articulate *Shuōwén* preface does not discuss the portmanteau as a type of structure, suggesting that, if productive and recognized, it was not considered important.<sup>23</sup> This seems to me the most important argument against viewing portmanteaux as the same as *huìyì*.

#### COMMENTS FROM HISTORY

What discussions there are generally come from periods later than the *Shuōwén*. In the received tradition proper, it is not until well into the medieval period that we have records of true portmanteaux—pairs of common graphs combined as whole words to make a third graph. A number of often-quoted passages about them appear in *bǐjì* 筆記 ‘notes’ from the twelfth century, giving examples of native characters in use in China’s semi-civilized southern or southwestern fringe areas. Here, for instance, is Zhuāng Chuò 莊綽 (fl. 1126) describing some of the linguistic culture of Guǎngnán 廣南, now the Guǎngdōng-Guǎngxī area:

廣南俚俗多撰字畫、以孛為恩、壘為穩、囊為矮、如此甚眾、又呼舅為官、姑為家、竹輿為逍遙子、女婿作駙馬、皆中州所不敢言、而歲除爆竹、軍民環聚、大呼萬歲、尤可駭者 (Zhuāng 3/16a)

The custom of Guǎngnán is to create extra pen-strokes for characters. They use “father” plus “son” for *ēn* ‘kindness’, “great” plus “sit” for *wěn* ‘stable’, “not” plus “long” for *ǎi* ‘short in height’; such cases are many. They also call the mother’s brother *guān* ‘official’, the father’s sister *jiā* ‘lady of the house’, a bamboo sedan chair *xiāoyáozi* ‘the free and easy’, a son-in-law *fūmǎ* ‘the Emperor’s son-in-law’—all things that one dares not say in the central counties. And they set off firecrackers on lunar New Year’s eve, and soldiers and commoners gather in a circle and shout “Banzai! Ten thousand years!” It is something particularly shocking.

Fàn Chéngdà 范成大 (1126–1193) lists a number of portmanteaux from the Guìlín 桂林 area, which he prefaces this way:

21. *Jíyùn*: “匹陌切 [read {phei-2a 梗二入陌滂}]” ([1038] 1987: 732). There is a parallel structure in the graph *pò* 朏 ‘the sun before it becomes bright’, apparently a portmanteau of *rìchū* 日出 ‘the sun comes out’. But *pò* is not seen in surviving compendia until long after the *Shuōwén*.

22. 劣: “从力少 [belongs to the components ‘strength’ and ‘little’]” (*Shuōwén jiězì gǔlín* [1932] 1994: 10.1356–57, entry #9185). 嵩: “从山从高 [belongs to the component ‘mountain’ and belongs to the component ‘high’]” (*Shuōwén jiězì gǔlín* [1932] 1994: 8.68–69, entry #5878). 朏: “从月出 [belongs to the components ‘moon’ and ‘to come out’]” (*Shuōwén jiězì gǔlín* [1932] 1994: 6.214–16, entry #4291).

23. It was felt in the seventeenth century, if not earlier, that the portmanteau was something different from *huìyì*; the *Zhèngzì tōng* comments under 彘: “范所謂俗字、皆六書所不收 [what Fàn Chéngdà calls vulgar characters are all of the kind that are not included in the Six Scripts]” ([1671] 1996: 337A上).

邊遠俗陋、牒訴券約專用土俗書、桂林諸邑皆然、今姑記臨桂數字、雖甚鄙野、而偏傍亦有依附 (Fàn 1986: 171–72)

The border is remote and its customs are backward. In letters, petitions, vouchers, and contracts, they use local vulgar characters exclusively. All the towns in Guìlín are the same way. Here I record a few Línguì characters. Although they are very provincial, nonetheless the constituent elements have a sound basis.

Fàn is the most famous of the writers on this topic. Zhōu Qūfēi, mentioned above, discusses “*fāngyán* 方言 [regional language]” and “*súzì* 俗字 [vulgar characters]” as part of his *Lǐngwài dàidá* 嶺外代答 (Zhōu 1985: 43–44), and there are other accounts, as well.

But portmanteaux were already well known in the received tradition half a millennium before that. As in the twelfth-century materials, these non-standard graphs are always seen as worth of special mention. The Táng-era female emperor Wǔ Zétiān 武則天 (624–705), for example, is said to have introduced eight of them, including one for her posthumous name of 曩 (our *zhào* 照 ‘to shine on’), motivated by the phrase *míngkōng* 明空 ‘to brighten the void’ (*Jiù Tángshū* 6.115). Considering how many historical portmanteaux are found in later dictionaries in spite of being recognized as “very provincial,” the surprising thing is not their existence but their survival into modern standard usage.

In the received tradition, the earliest extensive discussion of portmanteaux and their cultural context comes from Yán Zhītuī (531–after 591), an advocate of maintaining philosophical rectitude in everyday life. Yán mentions six portmanteaux as part of a fad for incorrect characters that he says began at the end of the Dàtóng 大同 reign period (535–545) of the Liáng dynasty. He says the fad became a serious problem in the South and was exacerbated in the North by a scarcity of books brought about by political chaos:<sup>24</sup>

	晉宋以來 多能書者 故其時俗 遞相染尚	Since the Jin and Sòng, there have been many who could write, and so their habits have spread and been emulated back and forth.
5	所有部帙 楷正可觀 不無俗字 非為大損	In all the books, standard square script is worth looking at. Not that it lacks for vulgar characters, but it is not greatly harmed by them.
	至梁	By the Liáng’s
	天監之間	Tiānjiān era,
10	斯風未變 大同之末 訛替滋生	this trend had not altered, but by the end of the Dàtóng, errors and substitutions were spreading.
	蕭子雲	Xiāo Zǐyún
	改易字體	altered the forms of characters
	邵陵王	and the Shàolíng Prince
	頗行偽字	used many false characters.
15	朝野翕然 以為楷式 畫虎不成 多所傷敗	Both at court and away from court these were taken as standard forms. “Painting a tiger and failing,” <sup>25</sup> many were harmed by this.

24. Yán Zhītuī 1960: 127下-128上.

25. This line recalls a moral precept of Mǎ Yuán 馬援 (14 B.C.E.–49 C.E.) to his nephews, who he feared were prone to frivolity. “効伯高不得、猶為謹勅之士、所謂刻鵠不成尚類鶩者也、效季良不得、陷為天下輕薄子、所謂畫虎不成反類狗者也 [If you fail at imitating Lóng Bógāo, you will still be a prudent official—this is what is meant by ‘if you carve a swan unsuccessfully, it still looks like a duck.’ But if you fail at imitating Dù

- 至為一字  
20 唯見數點  
或妄斟酌  
逐便轉移  
爾後墳籍  
略不可看  
北朝  
25 喪亂之餘  
書迹鄙陋  
加以  
專輒造字  
猥拙  
甚於江南  
乃以  
百念為憂  
30 言反為變  
不用為罷  
追來為歸  
更生為蘇  
先人為老  
35 如此非一  
遍滿經傳  
唯有姚元標  
工於草隸  
留心小學  
後生師之者衆  
洎於齊末  
40 祕書繕寫  
賢於往日  
多矣
- Even when someone writes the character “one” (一),  
all you see is a few dots.  
Some people laid texts out wildly  
and rearranged them as they pleased.  
After that, the tomb-like old texts  
became virtually impossible to look at.  
Under the northern courts,  
after the time of death and chaos,  
handwriting became unsophisticated and low.  
The northerners  
arbitrarily create characters;  
this awkwardness  
is more severe than in the South.  
They use  
“hundred thoughts” (懸) to write “sorrow” (憂);  
“words in rebellion” (訛? 夏?) to write “abnormal situation” (變);  
“not to need” (甬) to write “to put an end to” (罷);  
“chase back here” (隸) to write “render to” (歸);  
“revived” (甦) to write “sober” (蘇);  
“predecessor” (先) to write “old person” (老).  
Such cases are not solitary  
but fill the classics and histories.  
Only Yáo Yuánbiāo,  
skilled at the cursive and clerical styles,<sup>26</sup>  
paid attention to philological correctness.  
Among the young, those who emulated him were a throng.  
Down to the end of the Qí,  
those who keep private records and make fine copies,  
and do so more wisely than in the past,  
are many.

One of the characters Yán mentions, *sū* 甦 (line 33), remained in use until very recently. Yán is clearly telling us that he disapproves of these graphs. As we read his tidily composed blank verse, we must remember that he loves to criticize people for their lack of grounding in philology. Elsewhere I have observed that Yán pooh-poohs the chief evidence we have of a possible typological difference between early and medieval-modern Chinese; every interested student must decide whether that evidence is invalid or whether Yán is so fully invested in his own paradigm that he cannot conceive of an alternative (Branner 2003).<sup>27</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Portmanteaux are not China’s only non-standard graphs. Although they are associated with the fringes of Chinese culture, other varieties of “vulgar” character structure are also known from those fringes. Vietnamese *chữ Nôm* 字喃 script and Written Cantonese script (*Yuèwén*

Jiliáng, you will be thought frivolous by the whole world—this is what is meant by ‘if you draw a tiger unsuccessfully, it actually looks like a dog’]” (*Hòu Hàn shū* 24.845).

26. Retaining *cǎo* 草 for *kǎi* 楷, following Zhōu Fǎgāo.

27. Like Yán, eighteenth-century philological purists also looked askance at portmanteaux, just as they did at variant character readings. The polymath Qián Dàxīn 錢大昕 (1728–1804) wrote, “龍龕手[鏡]、多收鄙俗之字、如...、皆妄誕可笑、大約俗僧所為耳 [The *Lóngkān shǒujìng* has collected many vulgar characters, such as... These are all wild and ludicrous. They were probably created by some vulgar bonze]” (Qián 1957).



粵文) are both based on sound *xíngshēng* principles, meaning that they are restricted to use with specific spoken languages or (if high register) regional accents. One of the regional characters mentioned by Zhōu Qūfēi in the twelfth century seems to be a complex pictograph: 門, which survives today as the standard graph for *shuān* ‘door-bolt’.<sup>28</sup> This word *shuān* has conventional phonogrammatic variants 拴 and 欄, but 門 is the juxtaposition of a horizontal bar (一) with the character for *mén* 門 ‘door, gate’—it is neither portmanteau nor phonogram, nor, for that matter, a ligature.

Portmanteaux seem to have a perpetual hold over the imaginations of literate Chinese people, perhaps because of their contrast with graphs of more conventional structure. Their characteristic features, apart from structure, derive from their lack of phonological motivation. In this respect, they are no different from the notional *huìyìzì*. However, there seem to be very few of them in the *Shuōwén*, and we see no statement in it to convince us that its author is aware of their structure as described here. So it is likely that they became popular in some social context other than the highly formal one that informs the *Shuōwén*—and perhaps at a later date, too. Beyond that difference from *huìyìzì*, portmanteaux are unstable in their function of representing words: they are associated mainly with colloquial words, including some for which no medieval equivalent exists or possibly can exist. If we view them across time, they are prone to representing more than one word in records of different ages.

In the context of China’s high tradition of textual and philological continuity, portmanteaux are the intrusion not of oral language, that darling of the alphabetic cultures, but of a competing native vision of non-phonetic writing.

28. Zhōu 1985: 43–44. On the notion of complex pictographs, see Branner 2009.

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