# The Lingering Puzzle of *Yán* 焉:

# A Problem of Oral Language in the Chinese Reading Tradition[1]

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## Abstract

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| Graphic motivation of the character 焉 has long been obscure, though the underlying words have been much discussed as contractions. It is proposed that neither of the underlying words is a true contraction, and the most economical explanation given current evidence is that the graph's structure is a purely semantic ligature or "portmanteau." | 長期以來，"焉"字的構字原則雖不甚清楚，但近代學者多認為其所包含的兩個語素（*yān*、*yán*）為合音。本文主張這兩個語素都不是真正的合音。從現有的證據看來，對"焉"字的構造最經濟的解釋是，它純粹是非會意非合音的合文。 |

## Key-words

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|---|---|
| graphic motivation | 構字原則 |
| *yan* 焉 | "焉"字 |
| George A. Kennedy (1901–60) | 金守拙 |
| contraction | 合音 |
| ligature | 合文 |
| "portmanteau" graph | 非會意非合音的合文 |
| Wēnxiàn covenant texts | 溫縣盟書 |

The modern *kǎishū* 楷書 'square script' form of the Classical Chinese particle *yán* 焉 is a strange composite. It seems to consist of of *zhèng* 正 'upright; to rectify' above and the bottom of *wū* 烏 'crow; black; (grammar particle)' or *niǎo* 鳥 'bird', below. The received explanation comes from *Shuōwén*: "焉鳥、黃色、出於江淮" [The *yán* bird. It is yellow. It comes from the Jiāng-Huái region] (*Shuōwén jiězì gǔlín* 4.2478), and adds that this bird is one of several represented by pictographs (rather than phonograms) because they are "honored" (*guì* 貴; the others are *fèng* 朋[鳳] 'the divine bird', *wū* 烏 'crow', *xì* 舄 'magpie', and *yàn* 燕 'swallow', all of which are associated with ancient lore). Over the centuries there have been attempts to identify the *yán* as a bird better known by some other name but Duàn Yùcái 段玉裁 (1735–1815) comments that "今未審何鳥也、自借爲詞助而本義廢矣" [Nowadays we cannot make out what bird it is; after being used as a loan graph for a grammar word, the character lost its original meaning] (ibid.).

When it comes to the forms of characters, bronze inscriptions generally supply the clearest of all the ancient evidence we possess, because they are monumental and not prone to cursive deformations. Unhappily, *yán* is barely attested to date in our large corpus of bronze script, showing up in a single late piece, the "Zhōngshān wáng Cuò (?) fānghú" 中山王䪪方壺, dating apparently from the second half of the fourth century B.C.E:[2]

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2 *Yīn Zhōu jīnwén jíchéng shìwén* 9735. In this paper, graphs from inscriptions are rendered from

 and 
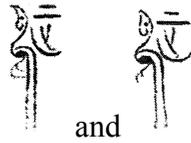
That is no pictograph. It is a compound graph made up of two distinct components: *wū* 烏 (the bird-like pictograph on the left) and something that looks like *zhèng* 正. We can well imagine that modern 焉 derives from these two elements with a few strokes saved; the author of the *Shuōwén* does not discuss this bronze form.

For 正 to have an "extra" line on top (we might normalize it as 㳀) is common on bronzes after the late Western Zhōu; this character is well attested in dates (in *zhēngyuè* 正月 'rectified [i.e., first] lunar month' and related expressions). The double horizontal line is not the "doubling mark" (*chóngwén hào* 重文號, also "ligature mark" *héwén hào* 合文號), used for indicating graphs to be repeated and ligatures; the doubling mark always appears at the lower right of an affected character. In fact, in bronze inscriptions a number of other common graphs often have just such an "extra" line added above a prominent and uncrossed horizontal line. The addition is presumably ornamental (rather than structural or serving as a diacritic); here are two other examples from the same inscription, the "Zhōngshān wáng Cuò (?) fānghú":

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rubbings, rather than from the manual ink copies that are commonly used (without attribution) by many scholars. Although the appearance of a rubbing-graph may be rough, it is usually much closer to what the actual evidence looks like than does a manual copy.

| *form* |  |  |
|---|---|---|
| *presumed standard equivalent* | *tiān* 天 'heaven' | *bù* 不 '(negative particle)': |

In sum, the bronze forms of *yán* 焉 are fully in keeping with its modern *kǎishū* form: a composite of 烏 and 𤴓 (正).

But there is another possible analysis of 焉. George Kennedy (1901–60) famously proposed that *yán* was a "fusion" or contraction of words meaning "*yúshì* 於是" ['at this/that place', 'in relation to this/that', etc.] (Kennedy 1940, 1953a). It seems possible that the graph 焉 is actually a composite of 於 (written 烏) and 之 or 是 (written 止).[3] If so, and if Kennedy's proposal is correct, then 焉 is an example of an oral contraction ("*yúshì*") represented in writing by a ligature (於 + 之/是). It is important to distinguish the idea of a contraction, which is the

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3 The word *yú* 於 'to go; at, *vis-à-vis*' is commonly written with the graph 烏 in inscriptions and sometimes also in received texts. And our modern graph 於 descends from 烏. The element 方 in our modern 於 is a clerical simplification for 烏, unrelated to the series of graphs that contain 㫃 and have to do with banners (*jīngqí* 旌旗, *máo* 旄, *pèi* 斾, etc.). 止 differs slightly from the normal way of writing the normalized cursive graph *zhī* 之 '[third-person direct object]' in bronze inscriptions; it also occurs as a component of *shì* 是 'this' and *zhèng* 正.

joining of oral words, from a ligature, which is the joining of written graphs. It seems clear that

焉 is a ligature; what is not clear is whether it could also represent an oral contraction.

*Yán* 焉 appears a number of times in the *méngcí* 盟辭 'oath texts' or 'covenant texts'

written in ink on stone and excavated at Wēnxiàn 溫縣 in Hénán Province during 1979–82.[4]

Dated tentatively to 497 B.C.E by the excavators, the materials consist of different ancient

versions of the same short text, in diverse hands but all found at the same site. Most of them are

again ligatures or composites of 烏 and 㐱(正), with 烏 sometimes resembling 羽, apparently *yǔ*

'feather' (esp. Hǎo and Zhào 1983 fig. 7):

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Hǎo and Zhào 1983 fig. 5 | ibid., fig. 6 | ibid., fig. 7 | ibid., fig. 8 | ibid., fig. 10 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| ibid., fig. 12 | ibid., fig. 13 | ibid., fig. 14 | ibid., fig. 15 | ibid., fig. 16 |

But two examples support Kennedy's hypothesized contraction-ligature:

4 Hǎo and Zhào 1983. These graphs are reproduced here from modern hand-copies in ink.

| 經 | 經 |
|---|---|
| ibid., fig. 9 | ibid., fig. 18 |

These are plainly composites of 烏(於) and 是 (this observation is due to Adam Smith, p.c., February, 2012). Their exact structure is not identical (one is 烏+是, the other 是+烏) and they are not in the same hand. But assuming them to be more conservative than the others, it would seem that by the time of these documents this explicit form was already being supplanted by a composite of 烏 and 正, whose motivation as the written form of the original contraction may have ceased to be recognized. (It may be that 正 was a cursive abbreviation of 是, but I am not aware of supporting evidence.) Modern 焉 descends from the opaque later variant.

## 2. THE PROBLEM OF THE MISSING PRONOUN

It is well and good to say that the written ligature 焉 corresponds to an oral contraction. But in almost fifty pages of discussion, Kennedy is never able to pin down the second of the two words making up the proposed contraction, and the question is still unresolved today.

In general, Chinese contractions differ in how the second syllable is reduced; sometimes only its initial is retained; for instance:[5]

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5 Old (here "early") Chinese readings are those with an asterisk and come from Baxter 1992; although Baxter has produced newer reconstructions, working together with Laurent Sagart

何不    *gaj pjut 'why not'[6]              →      盍 *gap

叔母    {syuk$_{3b}$ mouQ$_1$} 'wife of father's younger brother'

         {通三入屋書} {流一上厚明}        →     嬸 {syemQ$_3$ 深三上寢書}[7]

and sometimes the initial is dropped or reduced:[8]

之於    *tjɨ ʔja '(possessive particle followed by coverb)'    →    諸 *tja

不可    *pjut khajʔ 'not to be possible'             →     叵 (*phajʔ)

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(Baxter and Sagart 2011), to date his thinking is most fully documented in the 1992 work. Medieval readings are from the *Guǎngyùn* and are transcribed following Branner 2006.

6 Mandarin *bù* does not correspond to the medieval (and therefore the early Chinese) readings of 不; here I supply the early Chinese of *fú* 弗 for 不.

7 The example of 叔母 → 嬸 is rendered in medieval rather than early phonology; 嬸 is a late graph and its *xiéshēng* series is not treated in Baxter 1992.

8 The glottal stop [ʔ] is considered an actual initial in reconstructed early Chinese; it contrasts with smooth ingress, for instance in the case of *hū* 乎 *a.

In the case of Kennedy's proposal for 焉, allowing for either kind of contraction, we have

$$*ʔja \text{ 於} + *tjɨ \text{ 之} \qquad \rightarrow \qquad **ʔjat \text{ or } **ʔjɨ$$

$$\text{or} \qquad *ʔja \text{ 於} + *djeʔ \text{ 是} \qquad \rightarrow \qquad **ʔjaj \text{ (from } **ʔjadj) \text{ or } **ʔjeʔ$$

Any of these is a leap from 焉's expected early Chinese readings *ʔjan and *ɦ(r)jan because the required *-n in 焉 does not appear in the codas **-t or **-j; if our understanding of early phonology is correct, then this is no contraction in the familiar sense.[9] Kennedy thinks (1940: 19)

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9 Further on the possibility of **ʔjaj, the sixth-century *Jīngdiǎn shìwén* 經典釋文 reports a reading "焉音夷" (i.e., *Guǎngyùn* "以脂切" {yi₃c 止開三平脂羊}) for the compound *yánshǐ* 焉 使 in the *Zhōu lǐ* 周禮 (*Jīngdiǎn shìwén* 2001: 135, "*Zhōu lǐ zhèngyì* 周禮正義" 19下.11). This reading (*ljɨj) would indeed give a value ending in *-j, but the initial and vowel are not those of **ʔjaj and we are no closer to a solution. And the reading is based on a misunderstanding: a comment on the line in question in the *Zhōu lǐ*, where Zhèng Sīnóng 鄭司農 (d. C.E. 83) identifies *yánshǐ* 焉使 to mean *Yí shǐ* 夷使 'emissaries of the Yí', implying that 焉 represents the word *yí* 夷 (Zhōu lǐ zhèngyì 2001: "秋官" 38, "行夫" 1641–42). On this basis, the *Jīngdiǎn shìwén*'s source has assigned *Yí*'s reading to 焉. Neither Zhèng Xuán 鄭玄 (C.E. 127–200) nor the Táng commentator Jiǎ Gōngyàn 賈公彥 (*fl.* 638–53) follow this explanation; Zhèng Xuán identifies 焉 to be read as a particle of some kind ("發聲" [the sound is sent off]) and Jiǎ has

that the final of *njan 然 'thus, like this' represents the same elusive pronoun that contributes the *-an ending to *ʔjan/ɦ(r)jan 焉. This pronoun has never been conclusively identified in isolation, however. Jerry Norman (1988: 86) suggests that certain pronouns known in later eras, ěr 爾 (*njajʔ, *njɨjʔ) and nà 那 ([*najs][10]) 'that', could have provided the *-n coda, although they are not attested in the Classical period.[11] Paul Goldin hazards (2003) that the pronoun is none other than *ʔan 安, which is found in place of final 焉 in Guōdiàn 郭店 versions of some known texts. That would be neat; yán 焉 itself sometimes seems to function as a pronoun (depending on

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separated it from 使, making 焉 the last character of the previous phrase, our familiar final particle. Although Zhèng Sīnóng's reading is presumably a misunderstanding, it is interesting that it was still considered legitimate in the sixth century; *Dà cídiăn* and *Hànyŭ dà zìdiăn* both perpetuate this reading, as does *le Grand dictionnaire Ricci*.

10 Baxter's reconstruction of *naj for 那 corresponds to its medieval reading "諾何切" {ne₁ 果 開一平歌泥}, Mandarin *nuó* 'much; lovely', etc. Modern *nà* 'that' does not fit neatly into received phonological categories and is presumably a popular-stratum relic of a different word or at least a word conventionally written with a different graph, just as are *de* 的 '(possessive/attributive particle)' of *zhī* 之 *tjɨ, *bà* 爸 'father' of *fù* 父 *b(r)jaʔ, *bù* 不 'not' of *fú* 弗 *pjut, and so on. In Western scholarship this principle was recognized first in Demiéville 1951, but in China it dates at least to Qián Dàxīn 錢大昕 (1728–1804).

11 *Ěr* 爾 means "that" in medieval language but "you" and "like that" in early Chinese.

how we view the transitivity of the preceding verb, a matter on which opinions vary). But we lack evidence of 安 as a pronoun independent of its alternation with *yán* 焉, and also of its being written as 止 or 是 or something plausibly related to them. One of the unspoken merits of Goldin's idea is that the interchangeability of 焉 and 安 must have been aided by the phonological opacity of both graphs. Loan usage in Chinese appears to follow very loose principles of "functional homophony"; in a writing system where the principle of defectiveness (phonetic laxity) dominates, the less explicit the phonology of a graph, the more effectively it serves as a loan to write a different word with a different pronunciation.

Edwin Pulleyblank circumvents the problem of the unattested pronoun by proposing (1991: 29–34) that the final *\*-n* of 焉 is the relic of a suffix that he identifies with attaining certain states and with anaphora (i.e., implied back-reference to a previously specified noun):

于 *\*w(r)ja* 'to go' → '(aspect particle)'     爰 (*\*wjan*)[12] '(aspect particle, anaphoric)'

語 *\*ng(r)jaʔ* 'to speak'                      言 *\*ngjan* 'to say; word'

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12 *\*wjan* for 爰 does not appear in Baxter 1992 but follows as the homophone of 援. Pulleyblank also relates 于 to 云 *\*wjɨn* '(aspect particle)' → 'to say so', following Graham (1983). Reconstruction tokens remain those of Baxter 1992, not Pulleyblank, for the sake of consistency with the rest of the article.

徒 *da 'bare'                          袒 (*dan*ʔ*)[13] 'to strip oneself naked'

在 *dzɨʔ* 'to be located at'           存 *dzɨn* 'to exist'

依 *ʔjɨj* 'to lean on'                  因 (*ʔjɨn*)[14] 'to rely on, follow along'


He supplements his proposal with material suggesting a parallel *-t* suffix, a meme developed by several hands from an insight of von der Gabelentz (1840–93) and Dīng Shēngshù 丁聲樹 (1909–89).[15] But all this is tenuous; other *-n* suffixes have also been proposed. Axel Schuessler sees two suffixes *-n* and *-an* meaning " 'completeness', or, to put it graphically, … the limit of the field of meaning"; A. C. Graham notes "a remarkable variety of words for circular shape or motion" associated with *-n* endings.[16]

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13 This form does not appear in Baxter 1992 but the reading supplied here is figured from medieval sources and graphic structure.

14 This form does not appear in Baxter 1992 but the reading supplied here is that of 駰 and 姻, following Pulleyblank's argument about the early Chinese rhyme-group of 因.

15 Gabelentz 1881: 449, no. 1213 勿, 552, no. 1222 弗; Dīng 1934–35.

16 Schuessler 1976: 55–7; Graham 1983: 57–8; cf. the résumé of related ideas in Sagart 1999: 135–36.

Suffix *-n turns out to be as phantom-like as Kennedy's pronoun. And that should not surprise us, because derivational morphology remains hypothetical in Chinese of the epoch before the medieval sources.[17] I am frankly undecided on this question, but since morphology is now the dominant model in the field as practiced in Western sinology, I wish to state clearly what I see as the model's high-level weaknesses. First, of itself, the script gives no signs whatever of having been used to write anything other than an isolating language, and we have no evidence of discussion in the native tradition about the problems of writing a derivational language with an isolating script. Second, phonology, on which the internal reconstruction of derivational morphology rests, is documented for Chinese only in its existence as an isolating language; the earliest of the crucial Tibeto-Burman comparative evidence is some thousand years later than the prime early Chinese period. And written Tibetan itself appears to have been constructed with diasystemic principles in mind, so that its distinctness from Chinese evidence as a source of comparative data cannot be assumed out of hand. Third, many reconstructed Chinese morphological affixes are speculations assigned to a stage prior to attested Chinese phonology — starkly, something prior to what can legitimately be termed spoken Chinese. The attractiveness of fabricating a morphologically productive form of Chinese is evident; the necessity is not.

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17 While there are what look like relics of morphological affixation in attested medieval phonology, they are few and we lack evidence that this kind of morphology was ever a productive system. There are certain features found here and there in modern forms of Chinese to which reliquary morphological function has been attributed by some scholars, in support of the morphological theory. I am unpersuaded and my working hypothesis is that these features are cases of sound symbolism. See Branner 2002.

So we do not yet know enough to recover the pronoun responsible for the contraction and ligature underlying *yán* 焉. By the time of the Wēnxiàn covenant texts, when the ligature 烏+是 is being supplanted by 烏+正, one can imagine that any phonetic contraction must no longer have been obvious to some of the people writing the oaths. One might speculate that the form 烏+正 was actually understood as a ligature of 烏(於) and 止(之), with the two horizontal lines above 止 representing 二 *njijs*, as a kind of diacritic to supply the missing *-n* coda: **$ʔjat+n-$ or **$ʔjaj+n- → $**$ʔjan$. Diacritics could reconcile derivational morphology with an isolating script. But this proposal is frankly damned by an utter lack of parallel examples from any stage of written Chinese. It is one more optimistic mirage.

It has been suggested that *yán* 焉 originally had a coda *-r*, a segment used from time to time to explain contact between words with codas *-n* and *-j*; Baxter and Sagart 2011 now use *-r* for this purpose with a portion of the traditional 元 and 文 rhyme groups (normally *-an* and *-ən* otherwise in their system), following a proposal of Sergei Starostin (1953–2005).[18] We can represent the suggestion as

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18 Starostin 1989: 338–43; 2010: 224–27; 2012: 166–68. As a solution to the problem of *yán* as a contraction, the proposal of *-r* emerged in discussion with Adam Smith and Paul Goldin at the Penn-Princeton Phonology/Etymology Workshop, May 26, 2013, University of Pennsylvania. Goldin has earlier suggested (2003: 172n18) an *-r* coda for 安, based on the evidence of a non-Chinese place-name in Chinese transcription.

$$*\Upsilon ja \; 於 + *dje\Upsilon \; 是 \; \rightarrow \; **\Upsilon jadj \; \rightarrow \; **\Upsilon jar \; \text{(which later behaves like} *\Upsilon jan).$$

At the moment this appears to me the best *ad hoc* solution to the problem of 焉 as a contraction, but without parallel examples not is not very persuasive.

Apart from the phonology, there are other kinds of evidence that make it hard to see 焉 as representing a contraction.

### 3. THE PROBLEM OF HOW MANY WORDS *YÁN* REPRESENTS

Above I have been romanizing 焉 as *yán*, its traditional reading in the declarative meaning "at this time" etc.; there is a second reading, *yān*, which has adverbial usage as an interrogative and is now the sole reading in most native dictionaries.[19] The two have coexisted since no later than the early medieval sources:[20]

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19 *Yān* is the only reading given in the *Xiàndài Hànyǔ cídiǎn* (1978, 2002), *Xīnhuá zìdiǎn* (1975, 1998), *Xiàndài Hànyǔ guīfàn cídiǎn* (2004), *Guóyǔ cídiǎn* (2007). The two largest modern dictionaries, *Hànyǔ dà zìdiǎn* and *Hànyǔ dà cídiǎn*, which normally list variant readings in profusion, also omit the Mandarin *yán* reading although they supply its equivalents in *fǎnqiè*.

20 The *Guǎngyùn* has a third reading, 謁言切 {an₃ₐ}, not found in the *Qièyùn* fragments. For 焉

| Modern | *Qièyùn* edition of *Wáng Rénxū* (c. C.E. 705) | Yán Zhītuī (1960: 124; c. C.E. 581) | Early Chinese |
|---|---|---|---|
| *yān* | 於乾切 {an$_{3bx}$} | 若訓何訓安、當音於愆反 [if glossed 'what' or 'how', it should be read {an$_{3bx}$}] | *ʔjan |
| *yán* | 有乾切 {ghan$_{3bx}$} | 若送句及助詞、當音矣愆反 [if it ends a phrase or is used as a 'particle', it should be read {ghan$_{3bx}$}] | *ɦ(r)jan |

As Yán Zhītuī indicates, the readings are generally prescribed for different meanings and contrasting syntactic positions. But in modern times there has been a tendency to deny the distinction and to consider the two a single word. Kennedy writes, "Since we find the character

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the surviving complete edition of the *Qièyùn* has only a single entry, confused by the juxtaposition of two sets of *fǎnqiè* corresponding to our readings {an$_{3bx}$} and {ghan$_{3bx}$} and followed by the gloss "氣已聲" [one's breath ceases its sound] or [the sound of one's breath ceasing], presumably identifying the use of 焉 as a final particle. Lóng Yǔchún (*Qièyùn* 1968: 152–53) argues on the basis of other editions that the *Qièyùn* originally had two readings, the first (our {an$_{3bx}$}) glossed "何" [why] and the second (our {ghan$_{3bx}$}) glossed as above; the "*Wang yi* 王一" manuscript has "語已聲" [one's words cease their sounding] or [the sound of one's breath ceasing].

used in very early literature to stand for both an interrogative and a final particle, it would follow that these were originally pronounced alike" (1940: 196) and argues that the basis of the distinction is "dialect mixture" (1940: 196, 204–5).[21] Baxter finds the *ad hoc* initial he assigns to the *yán* reading rare in the gestalt system of early Chinese phonology and proposes that *yán* arose as a "stressless alternate" to the main reading (1992: 209–10). Pulleyblank thinks *yán* is simply *yān* with its initial truncated due to being an enclitic (2003: 636–37). Granted, the main Classical final particles have voiced initials in the documented tradition:

也    {yaQ₃ 假開三上馬羊}, *ljʌj*

矣    {ghiQ₃d 止開三上止匣}, *jiʔ*

乎    {ghuo₁ 遇一平模匣}, *a*

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21 Dialect differences are sometimes used as a catch-all to explain irregularities, but Kennedy did not normally indulge in that game. In fact, as a speaker of "Tangsic" (the Wú dialect of Tangsi [Tángqī] 塘棲, in the vicinity of Hángzhōu), he was among the first to advocate the use of more conservative, rural dialects in rigorous study of historical phonology. In 1936, a year before being awarded the Doctorate by the University of Berlin, he proposed:

> The dialects best known to westerners have been necessarily those of the coastal cities
> and large centers, where much intermingling of speech forms has taken place. It might
> therefore be expected to prove interesting if the more secluded and isolated dialects were
> examined … . (American Oriental Society 1936: 408; see Kennedy 1952, 1953b)

and the final-particle reading of *yán* 焉 matches them in that respect. Many particles have an unstressed pronunciation in the oral practice of Mandarin and dialect, but examples of such loss of stress actually winding up in the prescriptive rime-book tradition are not documented. In fact, this would be a striking intrusion of a suprasegmental feature into the writing system and its prescribed reading tradition.

But it belies the evidence to claim that *yán* is a mere distraction to be tossed out. For instance, Kennedy's reading of Yán Zhītuī 顏之推 (531 – after 591), saying the difference between *yān* and *yán* is dialectal, is inaccurate. Yán Zhītuī says only that the distinction, while prescribed from the 4th century onward, was being preserved in the South but not the North of his day:

| | |
|---|---|
| 案諸字書 | According to all the dictionaries, |
| 焉者鳥名 | "焉 is the name of a bird; |
| 或云語詞 | some say it is a particle." |
| 皆音於愆反 | and all read it {an₃bx}. |
| 自葛洪要用字苑分焉字音訓… | But from the time of Gě Hóng's [283–343] "Garden of Characters Vital for Use", we have distinguished readings and glosses of 焉… |
| | [examples omitted here] |
| 江南至今 | The south, up to now |
| 行此分別 | observes this distinction — |

| 昭然易曉 | it is luminously clear and easy to understand — |
| 而河北 | while the north |
| 混同一音 | confuses them as a single sound |
| 雖依古讀 | and while [trying to] follow the old readings, |
| 不可行於今也 | it has not been possible to observe them into the present day. |

This should be understood as a regional difference in reading practice, not "dialect". It is a matter of literate tradition, not spoken language.

Moreover, close inspection reveals incongruity in Kennedy's suggestion that the interrogative and declarative uses of this character represent a single word. To say that they are distinguished only by position is to assert that position alone can regularly distinguish an interrogative pronoun from a declarative one. That is not impossible, but it is hard to think of a parallel example elsewhere in Chinese. A more serious objection is that it is not even true that the two readings of 焉 can be distinguished by position alone; there are occasional cases of the declarative meaning (that is, *yán*) being used as a pre-verbal adverb — positionally indistinguishable from interrogative *yān* — meaning 'at this time', for instance:

天子焉始乘舟、薦鮪于寢廟、乃為麥祈實 [At this time the Son of Heaven rides a boat for the first occasion (in the new year). He presents sturgeon at the temple to his sleeping ancestors and then offers a prayer for the barley, that it

should bear grain.] *Lǚshì chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋, 3, "Jìchūn jì 季春紀". (Chén Qíyóu 1984: 121)

Interrogative 焉 is also attested in our received *Lǚshì chūnqiū*. If both the declarative and interrogative words represented by 焉 can appear pre-verbally, it is hard to believe they were not distinguished by sound in some way.

I suppose that if 焉 turns out to be a plausible contraction-ligature, others may turn up after inspection of excavated material, and I can point to a possible candidate here. I mentioned that Baxter considers his reconstruction *\*ɦ(r)jan* for *yán* to be in need of explanation. It is a rare syllable: in medieval phonology it belongs to the *kāikǒu* 開口 category while most words with the same medieval initial, final, and rime are *hékǒu* 合口, generating early Chinese initial *\*wj-* or *\*wrj-* (*\*ɢ<sup>w</sup>-* or *\*ɢ<sup>w</sup>r-* in Baxter and Sagart 2011). Note that if the Wēnxiàn alternate structure 羽 +是 mentioned in Section 1 is taken literally, 羽 contributes a reading {ghuoQ₃c 遇三上麌匣} *\*w(r)jaʔ* to the hypothesized contraction. And if in addition we allow the *\*\*-r → \*-n* coda, we have:

$$\text{*}w(r)ja\text{ʔ} \; 羽 + \text{*}dje\text{ʔ} \; 是 \; \rightarrow \; \text{**}w(r)jadj \; \rightarrow \; \text{**}w(r)jar \; \rightarrow \; \text{*}w(r)jan$$

Now, this *\*w(r)jan* is none other than Baxter's reconstruction of the early particle *yuán* 爰, whose twin meanings "where" and "at this time/place" closely parallel those of the later 焉. One

wonders whether, if 烏+是 and 烏+正 are in fact contraction-ligatures, then 羽+是 could be one, as well. If so, we must consider the etymological relationship between 爰 and 焉 (something beyond the scope of this paper, however).

But in sum, problems remain with Kennedy's view of 焉 as a contraction-ligature. The declarative usage of the graph is plausible as the contraction of *yúshì* 於是 semantically, but phonetically we are forced to propose *ad hoc* reconstructions for both initial and coda (*ʔja + *djeʔ → *ɦ(r)jar). The interrogative usage of the graph is a better match to *yúshì* 於是 on phonological grounds (*ʔja + *djeʔ → *ʔjar; still *ad hoc* in the rime) but semantically the switch to interrogative sense is puzzling. In the absence of other evidence, it is simpler to accept the received tradition that these are different words with different pronunciations.

And perhaps a written ligature need not represent an oral contraction, at all. Is there an alternative to that? Yes: 焉 itself is not implausible as an example of "portmanteau" construction, in which a compound graph is composed of characters writing out the definition of the word it represents — although portmanteaux are not otherwise attested as early as 500 B.C.E. Given the available evidence at the moment, however, that seems the safest conclusion.

Although Kennedy may yet prove to have been right and the distinction between *yán* and *yān* may prove later than the Warring States, it remains with us today, pedigreed back to Gě Hóng in the fourth century. I have mentioned that *yān* is now generally considered the only

reading for 焉. That was not always so — *yán* has been considered the primary reading at times. We can tell because in certain reference works only a single reading is given, and in two important cases the *yán* reading was chosen. Xú Kǎi 徐鍇 (920–74), who reconstructed the *Shuōwén jiězì* in the tenth century, normally selected one pronunciation from the *Tángyùn* 唐韻 for each graph, and for 焉 he chose *yán* (有乾切 {ghan₃ᵦₓ}), rather than *yān*. The *Zhōngyuán yīnyùn* 中原音韻 of 1324 similarly lists only one reading per character and it assigns *yán* to 焉.[22] In some contemporary medium-sized Classical dictionaries *yán* and *yān* continue to coexist. In fact, *yán* survives in the two best Classical dictionaries of their size: *Dà Cídiǎn* (1985: 2849) and Wáng Lì et al. (2000: 657–58). Though it remains a minority reading, it is surely still being spread to new generations of students.

## 4. THE LARGER GRAMMATOLOGICAL CONTEXT

In order to make viable the hypothesis that 焉 is a contraction-ligature, we would be forced to presume that the motivation of the character was lost to mainstream literacy. Some

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22 The *Zhōngyuán yīnyùn* contains no homophones at all, because it prescribes rhyming practice rather than describing a real oral language or prescribing educated reading pronunciation. *Yán*, as a final particle, might be considered to be in rhyming position, but that alone does not explain why the book restricts itself to a single reading per graph. Even the fact that it is intended for use in composing lyrics to be sung — singing obliterating tonal distinctions — does not fully explain this practice, since there are characters for which segmentally different readings coexist.

breaks in continuity are inevitable in any written tradition — we certainly observe this in the existence of spelling pronunciations in the history of English — and all the more so with a script as phonologically opaque and imprecise as China's. Individual breaks in continuity do not of themselves imply discontinuity in the overall tradition of literacy (see discussion of the crypt-phonograph problem in Branner 2011a: 108–17 and 2014). And for characters that are structurally ligatures but represent words other than contractions, there is a clear tendency to breaks of this kind (Branner 2011b: 75). If 焉 does turn out to represent a contraction in some tradition separate from some the mainstream — a possibility supported by the long absence of the graph in our excavated record and early competition (in the covenant texts) with forms where its compound structure was not evident — then a break in the transmission of its historical reading is quite plausible. In that case, it may well be that neither of the medieval readings can direct us clearly to the original word that motivated the graph. We are up against the familiar chasm between sound and writing in Chinese.

But even if 焉 is after all a ligature representing a contraction, it is one of an endangered species today. Ligatures abound in the Warring States excavated materials, but only a meager few are found in modern usage. Casual writing today, as on Internet forums and in text-messaging, certainly makes active use of contractions and other informalities. But they are not normally written with ligatures. Our contemporary character set is static if huge, and so contractions are typically represented by loan graphs — borrowing an existing graph for some recognizable oral contraction, for example, Taiwan Mandarin *jiàng* 醬, apparently 'sauce' but actually the contraction of *zhèyàng* 這樣 'this way; of this sort'. The writing of regional and oral language in

recent centuries has often turned to composite characters when regular forms are not available. But in bookish standard Mandarin these things have become exceptional. Of the few salient ligatures that appear in standard written Chinese today (甭, 歪, 尖, 夯, 氽, etc.; all portmanteaux), only 甭 remains bound to a plausible contraction that also survives in oral language, *béng* 'there is no need to…'.[23] In a script subject to logographic forces, can a ligature correspond forever to an oral contraction and never succumb to fossilization? If 焉 is a ligature, then its semantic and phonological motivation, and even the number of readings it has, is indeterminate. But on balance, the simplest explanation at present is that 焉 has portmanteau structure reflecting the meaning of *yán*, while its use to write *yān* is a case of loan usage.[24]

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23 The numerals 廿, 卅, and 卌, which remain in use on many calendars, are standardly read with fossilized syllables *niàn*, *sà*, and *xì*, no longer corresponding to contractions of living oral words *èrshí*, *sānshí*, and *sìshí* (Branner 2011a: 98n27).

24 It is beyond the scope of this paper to to identify the word underlying interrogative *yān*. It is surely related to the two interrogatives *ān* (*ʔan*) 安 and *wū* (*ʔa*) 惡/烏, both 'how, whither', and the differences among them presumably involves some as-yet unidentified alternation. Although *yān* is saliently much like *ān*, there is at least one case of *yān* corresponding to *wū* 惡 in related texts from the received tradition:

> 禮有三本、天地者性之本也、先祖者類之本也、君師者治之本也、無天地焉生、無先祖焉出、無君師焉治 [There are three foundations of ritual. Heaven and Earth are the foundation of inborn nature; ancestors are the foundation of

In their modern scarcity and phonetic indeterminacy, portmanteaux are much like ligatures. Both are non-standard composite characters of some antiquity but without a strong pedigree in the received canon. Those portmanteaux that have survived into modern standard Chinese writing have all proven unstable phonologically, becoming associated with different words over time. They do not appear in canonical texts or have an obvious phonological structure, either of which would tend to fix them to one morpheme. An example in Branner 2011b is 掱, attested first in Shànghǎi. This 掱 is associated mainly with the syllable *pá* in *páshǒu* 扒手 'pickpocket'. It is constructed as a portmanteau of *sān zhī shǒu* 三隻手 'three hands', a slang word for 'pickpocket'. However, Prof. Qiú Xíguī 裘錫圭 has pointed out to me (personal communication, February, 2012) that the Shanghainese word for "pickpocket" is not

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your kind; the ruler is the foundation of an orderly society. Without Heaven and Earth, how would you come into being? Without your ancestors, how would you go forth? Without the ruler, how would there be order?] (*Dà Dài Lǐ jì* 大戴禮記 1/42, "Lǐ sān běn 禮三本"; Wáng Pìnzhēn 1983: 17).

禮有三本、天地者生之本也、先祖者類之本也、君師者治之本也、無天地惡生、無先祖惡出、無君師惡治 (*Xún zǐ* 荀子 19 "Lǐ lùn 禮論"; Wáng Xiānqiān 1988: 349)

It may of course be that 焉 here is a simple error for *wū* 烏.

*páshǒu* at all. I can confirm that Xǔ and Táo (1997: 297–98) document that word as [tsʻoŋ₃₃ sɤ₅₃], in which the crucial first syllable is a verb meaning 'to stick out, extend; to infringe on' and appearing in various compounds. ([sɤ₅₃] is common Chinese {手} 'hand', just as in *páshǒu*.)[25] But the actual Shanghainese word that inspired 掱 is never mentioned in contemporary Mandarin dictionaries; *páshǒu* has completely unseated it there. One could ask for no better token of the phonetic transience of the portmanteau than the infringement on [tsʻoŋ₃₃ sɤ₅₃] by *páshǒu*.

Chinese characters lend themselves easily to games of semantic decomposition. The way in which they represent the words of spoken language is not simple! Did not the *zǐ* of Chǔ, in the twelfth year of Xuān *gōng* of Lǔ (596 B.C.E) argue against excessive displays of military triumph because "夫文、止戈為武" [Where written graphs are concerned, "putting a stop to the halberds" forms 'martial prowess']?[26] Did not the strongman and poet Cáo Cāo 曹操 (C.E. 155–220) write 合 'together' on his cup of *arak* or *koumiss*, puzzling his aides until the clever Yáng

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25 Prof. Qiú also took issue with my choice of "portmanteau" to describe these characters, observing that Lewis Carroll's examples in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1960: 270–73) are more like Chinese contractions than 掱. But "portmanteau" does not mean contraction in the Chinese sense; Carroll's are meant to combine ideas impressionistically, and take their name from the real portmanteau, a kind of casual traveling bag in which various object may be found jumbled together. I used Carroll's coining in order to suggest the jumbling together of the words of the meaningful phrase that we can unpack from a single character.

26 *Chūnqiū Zuǒ zhuàn zhù* 1987: 744, "Xuān gōng 宣公" 12.2.

Xiū 楊修 (175–219) explained that their lord was inviting them to "人噉一口" [each person take one mouthful]?[27] More even than their absence from canonical texts, it may be the indivisibility and opacity of ligatures like 焉 and 卌 that has led to their failure to propagate as a species.

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27 *Shìshuō xīnyǔ jiàojiān* 1989: 318, "Jiéwù 捷悟" 11.2.

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**Notes to typesetter**:

1. Non-standard graphs are supplied in separate files. I list them below in the order in which they appear in the paper. None appear in the notes.

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| 16. | 𦀟 | 焉_uenshiann_09.png |
| 17. | 𦀲 | 焉_uenshiann_18.png |

2. The parallel prose text, formatted within a table and beginning "案諸字書", may look strange but is in fact correct. Lines 2–3, 7–8, and 10–11 are intended to be indented; the others should be flush with the left margin and should wrap without hanging indent. This format matches the format I have used in other publications.

3. Symbols for which the Doulos font are used are these two:

   a.  ʔ (glottal stop)

   b.  ɨ (barred i)

   c.  ɦ (hook-top h)

   d.  ɢ (small capital g)

   e.  ʷ (raised w)

4. I have put all Chinese characters into the PMingLiU font, which is proprietary. Two of them belong to a high Unicode plane:

   a.  𠁻

   b.  𢆻

5. Note the use of Cyrillic in the bibliography under Starostin (book title and publisher).

[end]