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 会意字, 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 Shuòwén jiězì 説文解字.

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 甭, which represents the colloquial modal auxiliary bèng ‘not to need to’, a contraction of búyòng 不用. 甭 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. What is less well known today is that the graph 甭 is associated with at least two older readings that have nothing to do with the sound bèng, even though their meanings are related to the decomposition 不用 ‘not to need’. The tenth-century Lóngkān shǒujìng 龍龕手鏡 reads 甭 as 棄, our qì ‘to discard’; the sixth-century Yánshì jiāxùn 頓氏家訓 says 甭 represents 罷, our bà ‘to stop’ ~ ‘to resign’.

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 bèng 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 “音弃”[khIHI-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 甭’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 甭 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 甭. 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):

1. “讀敕令、治病之符咒上用之 [read chìlìng ‘rescript’; used on healing talismans]”
2. “讀合同、契據上有之 [read hétóng ‘contract’; used on deeds]”
3. “讀米厘、此類之字甚多、算學上用之 [read mǐlǐ ‘centimeter’; there are many graphs of this sort, used in calculation]”

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 圖. 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 甭 is not necessarily a ligature at all. That is, when 甭 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 甭, 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. 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 糒 survives in contemporary usage, although in the meaning ‘centimeter’ it is now usual to say lǐmǐ 釐米 (simplified as 厘米), rather than mǐlǐ.
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. 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 不 歹, a portmanteau of búzhèng 不'not straight'. Today, we read it wāi 'crooked, tilted to one side, off-center', a reading attested since the time of the Zìhuì.7 The traditional way of writing wāi is 歹, a phonogram found in the Shuōwén.8 But our contemporary spoken word wāi has not been associated explicitly with 歹 until recently (in, for example, the eighteenth-century Kāngxī zìdiǎn); in the eleventh-century Guǎngyùn 廣韻, 歹 is assigned the readings *huài ~ *huā, neither of which is now attested as a Mandarin word for ‘crooked’.9 The Lóngkān shǒujìng reads 嬢 as *kuài, a syllable that is phonologically possible but in practice unused in modern standard Mandarin.10

Another example is 嬢, a portmanteau of búhǎo 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.11 The Lóngkān shǒujìng and Zìhuì read 嬢 as *wài; the seventeenth-century Zhèngzì tōng 正字通 gives *huāi.12 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 “I33t,” the slick and constantly evolving Internet cipher. Chinese versions of I33t, which currently go by the names “huāoxīngwén 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.


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


10. Lóngkān shǒujìng “苦乖反 {{[khwei-2b 禽合二平皆溪]}}” ([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.

homophonous with our word **huài** for ‘bad’, written 坏, but the same word may well have been intended. Could the **Lóngkān shǒujìng**’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 **dàlì** 大力 ‘great strength’. **夯** appears in pre-modern sources with meanings that are basically compatible with the definition ‘to use great strength’. The seventeenth-century **Zìhuì** 汉彙 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. **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. **掱**, 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 ‘pickpocket’. How is **掱** 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):

鴛人呼竊賊曰掱手，猶言扒手也 (Xú [1917] 1966 83.105)

Shanghai people call a pickpocket ‘掱手’, meaning ‘抓手’.

The graph **汆** 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 **Zìhuì** 汉彙 assigns it a reading *tǔn*, an empty syllable in modern Mandarin, and the gloss “水推物也 [for water to push something].” A competing claim as to the word it represents is modern **qiú** 泳 ‘to swim’, which comes from Zhōu Qùfēi 周去非 (1135–1189) **Lǐngwài 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** 穿 ‘pointed’. The tenth-century scholar Xú Kǎi 徐鎬 (920–74)
identifies the Shuōwén’s graph shān 櫼 ‘wedge’ as “modern 尖.” But this equation is dubious because shān 櫼 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

㦰 ‘to pierce, stab; field tool’;
鑯/鉋 ‘to engrave’;
鉋 ‘awl’.

These possible doublet graphs are all homophones of jiān 尖 in the Guǎngyùn or Ji’yùn, occupying the phonological pigeonhole {tsam-3b 咸三平盐精}. 19

The graph 丟 (with a deprecated variant 丢) is explained in the Zìhuì as a portmanteau graph recalling the phrase “yí qù bùhuán 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 Zhihuì bù gives an alternate reading *diù. 20 (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 yìn píng-readings seems to me fortuitous.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graph</th>
<th>Modern word and gloss</th>
<th>Canonical graph for this word</th>
<th>Also equated to</th>
<th>Century when so attested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>避</td>
<td>bèng ‘not to need to’</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>qì 弃 ‘to discard’</td>
<td>10th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>歪</td>
<td>wāi ‘crooked, tilted to one side, off-center’</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>bà 罷 ‘to stop’ ~ ‘to resign’</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>儀</td>
<td>nāo ‘not good’</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>*huài ~ *huà</td>
<td>11th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>泠</td>
<td>dān ‘to tamp (earth)’</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>reading *wài</td>
<td>10th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>鈊</td>
<td>in pāshǒu ‘to pick a pocket’ ~ ‘pickpocket’</td>
<td>扒 or 手</td>
<td>reading *tǔn ~ “for water to push something”</td>
<td>17th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>汤</td>
<td>cuān ‘to parboil’</td>
<td>擇 ‘to toss’?</td>
<td>qìu 漕 ‘to swim’</td>
<td>12th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>尖</td>
<td>jiān ‘pointed’</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>*diū ~ *diù</td>
<td>17th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18. “此即今俗以小大為櫼字 [this is none other than using the modern vulgar form with 小 above 大 to write 櫼]” (Shuōwén jiězì gǔlín [1932] 1994: 5.717, entry #3648).
20. Zìhuì “丁羞切, 音兜” ([1615] 1991: 25A上); Zìhuì bǔ “又端救切, 柳去聲” (2B上). Curiously, both of these entries contain “direct readings” that are at variance with the fǎn qiè preceding them: 钃 is equivalent to {tou-1} rather than {tou-3b}, and “柳去聲” is equivalent to {touH-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 丟, now standard in the People’s Republic, is deprecated in the Zhihuì (“俗从丿、非 [vulgarly written with 丿, which is incorrect]”), we can hazard our own portmanteau explanation of it: “piěqù 丿 (撇) 去 [to toss away].”
Of the hundreds of examples of portmanteaux in the largest modern dictionaries, most are already attested in compendious Ming and Qing sources; smaller numbers are introduced in late medieval sources like the Lǐngwài dàidá and Lóngkān shǒujìng. 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 shǎolì 少力 ‘little strength’ and not obviously a phonogram (劣 belongs to yuèbù 月部 and 力 to zhībù 畀部, meaning that they are thought to have had different oral stop codas). Another possibility is sōng 隆 ‘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’. Our reconstructed Shuōwén simply names components and does not specify their relationship or use the expression huìyì. 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. 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 笔记 ‘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 莊绰 (fl. 1126) describing some of the linguistic culture of Guǎngnán 廣南, now the Guǎngdōng-Guǎngxī area:

"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 ěi ‘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 fùmǎ ‘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 Guǐlín 桂林 area, which he prefaces this way:


23. It was felt in the seventeenth century, if not earlier, that the portmanteau was something different from huìyì; the Zhēngzì tōng comments under 劣: “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).
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 Guilin are the same way. Here I record a few Lingüí characters. Although they are very provincial, nonetheless the constituent elements have a sound basis.

Fan is the most famous of the writers on this topic. Zhou Qufei, mentioned above, discusses “fángyán 方言 [regional language]” and “súzì 俗字 [vulgar characters]” as part of his Lingwài dàidá 嵩外代答 (Zhou 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 Tang-era female emperor Wǔ Zetian 武则天 (624–705), for example, is said to have introduced eight of them, including one for her posthumous name of 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: 24


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, “效伯高不得，猶為謹勑之士。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 unsuccessfullsy, it still looks like a duck.’ But if you fail at imitating Dù
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” (叐) to write “sorrow” (憂);
“words in rebellion” (讞) to write “abnormal situation” (變);
“not to need” (乀) to write “to put an end to” (罷);
“chase back here” (𨣱) to write “to render to” (歸);
“revived” (甦) to write “sober” (蘇);
“predecessor” (𧣠) 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, retained
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,
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). 27

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

Jiǔliáng, 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).
Portmanteau Characters in Chinese (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 Qùfēi in the twelfth century seems to be a complex pictograph: 閂，which survives today as the standard graph for shuān ‘door-bolt’.

This word shuān has conventional phonogrammatic variants 拴 and 樛，but 閈 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.


REFERENCES


