Duan Yucai’s strategies of character exegesis and their relation to Xu Shen’s twin principles of zhuanzhu/jiajie

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On the opening page of his Shuowen Jiezi zhu, Duan Yucai comments on Xu Shen’s gloss “天顚也”:
“此以同部疊韻爲訓也。凡門聞也，戶護也，尾微也，髮拔也皆此例。凡言元始也，天顚也，丕大也，吏治人者也皆於六書爲轉注而微有差別。This gloss uses rhyme for explanation. In general, cases such as ‘door relates to hear,’ ‘door eave relates to protect,’ ‘tail relates to subtle,’ ‘hair relates to pull out’ all belong to this [rhyming] sort. In terms of the six principles of writing, glosses like ‘origin is explained with beginning,’ ‘heaven rhymes with topmost’ ‘grand is synonymous with big,’ ‘official is the person who governs people’ all belong to the [fifth] principle of zhuanzhu. There is, however, a subtle difference between them.” Six entries later Duan writes: “許氏解字多用轉注。轉注者，互訓也。底云下也。故下云底也。此之謂轉注。全書皆當以此求之。In his explanations of characters Xu Shen often uses the principle of zhuanzhu. To stake a definition, zhuanzhu is mutual explanation. ‘Bottom’ explains ‘down,’ therefore ‘down’ explains ‘bottom,’ this is referred to as zhuanzhu. Xu’s entire book should be probed taking this as a benchmark.”

Now, the six principles of writing, a contested Han framework with a patently ancient pedigree, are outlined in Xu Shen’s own Postscript to Shuowen. In his line by line commentary on the Postscript, Duan quotes his chosen, Jin dynasty explanation of Xu’s last two principles: “異字同義曰轉注異義同字曰叚借 When different characters share the same meaning this is called zhuanzhu; when different meanings are expressed by the same character this is called jiajie.” Duan continues: “趙宋以後言六書者匈衿陝隘不知轉注假借所以包羅詁訓之全（一切訓詁音義）After the Song the scope of the six principles had become narrowly restricted as scholars no longer comprehended that zhuanzhu and jiajie were the means of encompassing all exegesis (on the meaning and pronunciation of ancient terms.)”

I want to draw attention to Duan’s concluding claim that all types of character explanation, and therefore virtually all of Xu’s glosses, are to be classified within either the zhuanzhu or jiajie category. Not only that, Duan is also the rare scholar to explicitly apply the zhuanzhu/jiajie theory as formulated in the Postscript to the actual body of the Shuowen where neither term appears.

In his comment on Xu’s rhymed definition and example pair of zhuanzhu, Duan goes on to highlight the interlocked nature of the two principles: “學者不知轉注，則亦不知假借爲何用矣. Scholars who do not understand the principle of zhuanzhu will also not understand the use of jiajie.” The problem is that once Duan lists various modes of character explanation under the rubric of zhuanzhu, their “subtle difference” looms so large it becomes near impossible to identify their essential, or, prototypical feature. The contrasting aspects of rhyme and mutual explanation picked out in my opening paragraph illustrate some of the difficulty involved in “understanding zhuanzhu.” While Duan Yucai explicitly chooses mutual explanation as the foremost feature of zhuanzhu, he is forced to strain this definition as he confronts glosses of other, particularly the rhyming, kind.

In fact, to get a firmer grasp on Duan’s differentiation between zhuanzhu and jiajie, and thereby to better understand not only Xu Shen’s glosses but also Duan’s indispensable elaboration of them, it may be useful to turn Duan’s last statement around: without comprehending the use of jiajie, one
will not understand zhuanzhu. For the connotations of Xu’s unorthodox use of the sixth principle are self-evidently drawn out by Duan’s comments on Xu’s rhymed definition and example pair of jiajie:

“The definition refers to relying on the aspect of same sound and entrusting it with this [new reality]. Then, in general, each entity lacking a proper character denoting it gets that which it can entrust and thereby ends up with a corresponding term. Like when Han people refer to a county commander as ling or zhang. When a county has more than ten thousand households its commander is called ling (commander). When a county is smaller than ten thousand households its commander is designated zhang (elder). The basic meaning of ling is ‘to issue commands’, the basic meaning of zhang is ‘prolonged and distant’. County ling and county zhang initially lacked their corresponding term but by extending and turning around from the meanings of ‘issue commands’ and ‘prolonged and distant’ the matching characters were made. This is referred to as jiajie.”

Duan Yucai, very much in the spirit of Xu Shen, emphasizes the aspect of meaning extension over the aspect of loan usage that is typically associated with jiajie. Since most Xu Shen’s glosses are concerned primarily with the basic meaning of characters, demonstrating how this basic meaning is extended to cover a wide scope of realities, and vice-versa, how a range of meanings is anchored in one core sense of a word could be regarded Duan’s chief contribution. One is accordingly tempted to render Xu/Duan’s jiajie simply as ‘extension’.

Except that there is another aspect of Xu Shen’s jiajie example pair which has not, to my knowledge, been explicitly picked on by Duan. In the Guangya, possibly under the influence of the Shuowen, ling and zhang are listed under the heading of 君 ruler. This would suggest that Xu Shen’s example of jiajie does not consist of just a pair of characters but also in the relation that obtains between them, just as the gist of zhuanzhu lies in the particular connection between Xu’s examples of 考 and 老. In fact, without ling and zhang being under certain conditions synonymous, it would be impossible to make sense of what Xu Shen meant with his examples of jiajie, for one could not identify which peripheral meaning of each term he had in mind.

If one were to specify the relation between ling and zhang, one could say: In general, jointly speaking ling and zhang may both denote any kind of a commander, separately speaking a commander of a county over ten thousand households is called ling, while the chief of a county of less than ten thousand households is called zhang. This would be to deploy Duan’s widely used formula, a variation of which appears, for example, in his comment on Xu’s entry 祥福也: “凡统言则灾亦謂之祥，析言则善者謂之祥。” Once again here, in order to make sense of Xu’s arcane explanation Duan, possibly unwittingly, models his interpretative strategy on the prototypical example of jiajie.

Substitutability and partial identity/difference of referent, i.e., of meaning (義), emerge as further features of jiajie. The implication of such reasoning for jiajie’s complementary principle is that these attributes are to be excluded from it. What does that leave for zhuanzhu? Given that the principle of jiajie revolves around questions of reference (事物), or the what the given character denotes, I propose that in order to get a handle on the principle of zhuanzhu one better approach it from the point of view of how, or, with which intention (意). The term after all appears in Xu Shen’s definition of this pivotal principle.

But of course, one is dealing with the slippery realm of words, it is not always easy to clearly differentiate between the how and what, between what a word denotes and how it intends. In my
presentation I will duly illustrate the intricacies of differentiating the two principles with several examples from the *Shuowen* coupled with Duan’s commentary.

Nevertheless, I find that grasping the precise nature of the contrast entailed in this twin pair of principles is essential for being able to use the *Shuowen* as a reliable tool in decoding ancient texts, analyzing characters, and understanding modern language. Yet more, given that the *Shuowen* and its author faithfully reflect the specifics of Chinese language, even if one as a teacher of elementary Chinese never mentions the, admittedly complex, work or its contents, effectively conveying its central schema of how to make sense of (written) words will gradually enable the students to logically interweave and build on the foundation they cannot but learn by rote.