

An Introduction to Literary Chinese

Introduction: Part One

Problems of Reading and Understanding

This textbook presents one approach to learning to read literary Chinese, the pre-eminent language for writing in China for the past two thousand years. I stress that the goal here is *reading*, not translating. It is important to realize from the beginning that literary Chinese is a *language*—a written, conventionalized language—that has its origins in the spoken vernacular of Warring States (403–255 B.C.) China. As in the learning of any language, our final goal is to learn to think in the language itself rather than to be constantly translating into some other tongue. By carefully working through the selections in this book, one can begin to think in literary Chinese as one reads the text, just as when one reads this introduction, one hears English.

Grammar Is Not Enough

Learning to recognize the basic structures of literary Chinese syntax is a relatively easy matter of acquiring experience with the language. Learning the patterns, however, is just the beginning. After one has mastered the technical aspects of grammar presented in this textbook, one meets a new and unusual problem. Literary Chinese is an uninflected language. That is, its verbs are not conjugated and lack endings that indicate tense or person (as in Spanish, *hablo* “I speak,” or *hablabas* “you were speaking”). Its nouns have no case endings to describe their number or function in the sentence (as in Latin, *res* “thing” as

subject; *rerum* “of things”). Instead, as in English, word order largely determines meaning. In English,

John hit Mary.

tells a different story from

Mary hit John.

Many problems arise from the even more complete lack of inflection in literary Chinese. Literary Chinese texts often are syntactically *over-determined*; that is, there may be several perfectly grammatical ways to explain the syntax of a sentence. Skill in reading, then, lies in deciding which alternative is most likely rather than simply whether the alternatives are grammatically possible.

Such judgments of meaning cannot be based on grammar alone. They rely not only on a knowledge of syntax but also on a sense of the larger arguments of the sentence, the paragraph, and the composition as a whole. They also call upon knowledge of the usage of the particular characters in question, in terms of both the author's habits and the contemporary and prior history of the expression. They call, further, upon the text's many intersecting historical contexts and, finally, upon one's own tendencies as a reader—how one wants to push the text, given one's own preconceptions and purposes.

To read literary Chinese, then, one must know more than syntax. Although this textbook begins by focusing on grammar, its approach broadens as the texts get longer and more complex. This chapter, as an introduction, sets out the general issues of reading and meaning that surround even the simplest texts. I present these more abstract issues before introducing the grammar because our approach to the syntax of sentences in any actual text is always circumscribed by the larger processes of understanding.

Parts and Wholes:

The Levels of Structure in Meaning

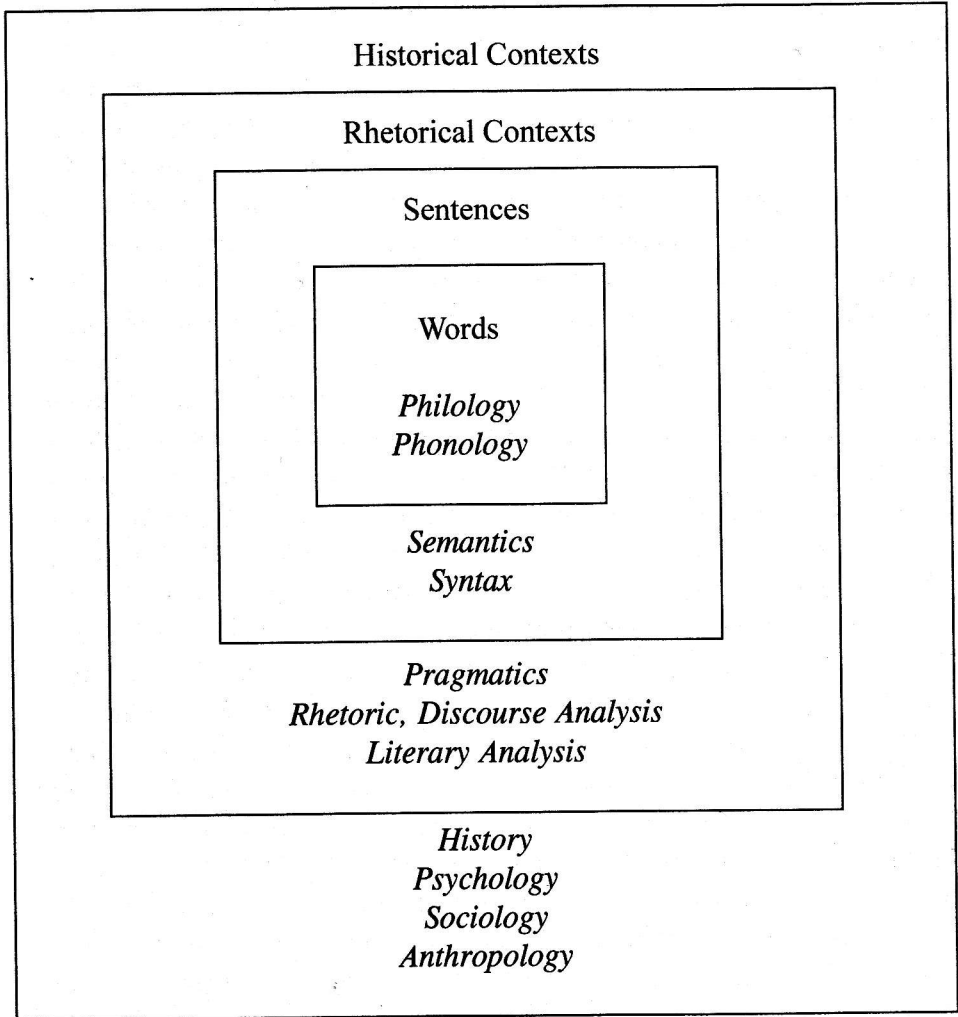
The act of reading is a constant movement between parts and wholes. We understand what a sentence means by putting words together. But we also figure out how to understand the words from their context in the sentence. For example, “parts” can be a noun or a verb, but we

know that “parts” in the first sentence in this paragraph must be a noun because of its position in the phrase “parts and wholes.”

Sometimes one can know the meaning and function of every word in a sentence and still not have the slightest idea what the sentence means. In that case one looks for other clues. The sentence is part of a paragraph: perhaps the organization of the paragraph will help. The paragraph is part of a composition, the composition is part an author’s extant works, the author’s extant works are part of the writings of a particular time, and the writings of a particular time are part of a culture’s evolving textual tradition. We read each group of texts in the context of the larger body of material. But the process works both ways. The parts tell us how to read the whole, just as the whole tells us how to read the parts. So, if one discovers something new or raises a compelling question never asked before, the reinterpretation of a single work may require a rereading of the larger oeuvre. The rereading of a single author may compel the re-evaluation of an era, and revising our understanding of one era may reshape our understanding of an entire tradition. This movement—using parts to construct wholes and using wholes to understand parts—is called the *hermeneutic circle*.

Sometimes we go outside generic traditions. If the sentence refers to historical events, we can seek help from other accounts of the same events or even from physical “things” that were part of the events in question. It may help to know how the doors of the Bastille were set in their hinges or what sort of caulking was used on the boat in which Washington crossed the Delaware, or how exactly they made the wine that Li Bai drank. And sometimes we may begin to suspect that an author is not entirely sane, in which case we can attempt to reconstruct the pathology from the author’s history and writings and all we know of human nature.

In general, we can look at the layers of organization through which we can make sense of a character, sentence, or text as shown in the chart on p. 4.



Some Examples

A few examples will serve to clarify the sorts of issues involved in reading.

Fragment One: "John hit the man with the schnogle."

The syntax of this sentence is ambiguous: does the "schnogle" describe what John used to hit the man, that is:

John hit (the man) with a schnogle.

Or does “schnogle” describe an attribute of John’s victim?

John hit (the man with the schnogle).

How do we decide?

FIRST STRATEGY: CONTEXT

First we read the larger context (the rest of the paragraph), if we have one. Suppose the story is as follows:

Recollections of John

John was always a mischievous child. I remember when I was young, John and I were playing together: we saw two men—obviously a little tipsy—weaving down the street. John scooped up a handful of the newly fallen snow with a wicked grin. Although he aimed at the man with two good legs, *John hit the man with the schnogle.*

On the basis of this story, we would conclude that “schnogle” seems to mean a bad leg. But, suppose the story is:

John was always a mischievous child. I remember when I was young, John and I were playing together: we saw a man—obviously a little tipsy—weaving down the street. John scooped up a handful of the newly fallen snow with a wicked grin. Having found an old sock into which he loaded the tightly packed ball, *John hit the man with the schnogle.*

In this version, a “schnogle” seems to be a sock filled with snow. In both versions of the story, we can be reasonably—but not absolutely—certain of what a “schnogle” is, since our knowledge comes entirely from context. In the end, we are still guessing.

SECOND STRATEGY: VOCABULARY

Another way to determine what the sentence means is to find out the meaning of the key word from dictionaries and other sources of information about the language of the time. Suppose that we find the following entry in *The American Dictionary of Regional Usage*:

In the language of Detroit, a *schnogle* is a sock into which has been placed a snowball. The origin of the word seems to be Yiddish, but we have no further information.

Suppose, however, that by a strange coincidence, we notice the following passage in *I Survived a Detroit Childhood*, by Ralph J. Smallbread:

When I was a child, there was a Mr. Smith on our street whom we teased for having what we called a *schnogle*, or limp, because of a war injury to his leg.

Both sources, the dictionary and the memoir, give good, though contradictory information about schnogles. You make a decision by judging which source is most trustworthy.

Fragment Two: "Mr. Wentworth, I just cut down that zablana bush." "Oh, that's just great."

The question here is not one of grammar but of tone. How are we to take Mr. Wentworth's reply? Is he being ironic about an action he does not appreciate, or is he in fact grateful for the pruning job? Both readings are possible. Much of our reading of texts is based on knowing cultural assumptions about the statements made in texts and about probable attitudes about objects and events that appear in them. Sometimes we cannot be sure of how to read the attitude in the text because its wording is ambiguous. What can we do to resolve this sort of doubt?

STRATEGY THREE: HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION

Suppose in our diligent research on the question, we locate the following item in the *Oakdale Daily News*:

Mr. John Wentworth today went to court to sue his neighbor Peter Farthing for having accidentally cut down his rare Peruvian zablana bush.

We would know for sure how to read the dialogue. But suppose, instead, that we searched through the author's personal papers and found a gardener's invoice:

Axel's Garden on Wheels

Invoice no. 00325

Mr. John Wentworth
34 Via Lobos
Catalina, CA

May 21, 1992

for digging out of one zablena bush:

labor: \$30.00

supplies: 10.00

TOTAL: \$40.00

The invoice makes it clear that the dialogue is between Mr. Wentworth and the gardener and that Mr. Wentworth is indeed sincere in his thanks for the job.

In Summary

This textbook stresses the bare bones of how to read a literary Chinese text. It introduces the grammar and attempts to give enough experience with simple passages to prepare the way for increasingly more difficult texts. Contextual, hermeneutic issues rarely come to the fore in the material to be presented. Nonetheless, as the texts grow more difficult, the emphasis shifts from simply parsing a sentence to deciding which of several grammatically possible readings for a line is most reasonable in the context of the passage as a whole. That is, informed interpretation plays an ever larger role in reading as one becomes more adept. From the very beginning, one should be aware that grammar provides no sure answer—there is nothing mechanical in the reading of literary Chinese—and that one should bring as much information to the act of interpretation as possible.

Introduction: Part Two

A Sketch of Literary Chinese

This chapter outlines a basic set of analytic categories with which to approach texts written in literary Chinese.¹ It is designed to serve both as an initial overview of the textbook—to be read largely as an introduction to the terminology—and as a reference guide as one proceeds deeper into the textbook itself. This overview is admittedly incomplete and specifically focuses on the needs of beginning students. More advanced students, or those seeking greater detail, can consult the references cited in the footnotes and in the bibliography at the end of the chapter.

The topics follow traditional linguistic categories. *Morphology*—the formation of words, their categories, and the features used to mark

1. My approach derives largely from Hugh Stimson, from whom I learned literary Chinese in 1973. His perspective at that time can be found in *55 T'ang Poems* (New Haven: Far Eastern Publications, 1976), a textbook designed to introduce students to poetry written in literary Chinese. For more technical discussions of the details of late Old Chinese, I have found Christoph Harbsmeier's *Aspects of Classical Chinese Syntax*, Scandanavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series, no. 45 (London and Malmö: Curzon Press, 1981), and Edwin G. Pulleyblank's *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1995) extremely useful. For comparison with modern Chinese usage, I have used Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson, *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). I also have consulted Lisa Cheng and James C. T. Huang of the University of California, Irvine. For a more extensive bibliography, see the end of this chapter.

those categories—comes first. Then the chapter introduces some aspects of *phonology*—the patterns of sounds in the language. *Syntax*—the grammatical rules—comes last.

I. Words

In English, we do not usually worry about what a “word” is. We assume that the white space around a group of letters indicates that the group is a word. In reality, of course, the situation is not this simple. When, for example, can we combine words to form another “word”? We write “someone” but not “somecat.” And there are gray areas: how many words is “heavier-than-air”? Moreover, in English, as in most languages, words can be built by adding *affixes*—extra syllables to the beginning of words (*prefixes*), to the end (*suffixes*) and, occasionally, to the middle (an *infix*). Thus we have “play,” “replay,” “playing,” and “scrumdiddlyumptious.”

Although many basic words in modern Mandarin are monosyllabic and written with one character—for example, “come,” “go,” “eat”—so much of the vocabulary involves compounds of two or more characters that it is considered a polysyllabic language. Mandarin, like the other modern dialects, also has its own set of affixes. For example, there are the *aspect*-marking suffixes, *-le* 了, *-guò* 過, and *-zhe* 著, the pluralizing suffix *-men* 們, and the *potential* infix *-de-* 得. However, compared with English and many other languages, modern Chinese in its various dialects has relatively few affixes and is considered an “isolating” language.

A. Literary Chinese has even fewer affixes and, in contrast to modern Mandarin, is basically a *monosyllabic* language.

人	man, men, person, people, human
去	depart, leave, go

There are, however, exceptions, words of two or more characters that cannot be broken down into meaningful single-character units:

芙蓉	lotus
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B. In other cases, two-character compounds work as single words, that is, as indivisible semantic units.

1. *Reduplication*: sometimes repeating a character creates a word whose meanings extend significantly beyond the meaning of the single character:

人 man, person
年 year

人人 all people
年年 year after year

2. *Descriptive binomes*: sometimes instead of a reduplication of a word, an intensifying two-character expression consists of words in which either the initial or the final sound is repeated:

崢嶸 dzæŋ-ɣuæŋ²
參差 ts'im ts'ii
徘徊 buəi-ɣuəi

descriptive of high mountains
descriptive of uneven, scattered
move back and forth > irresolute

3. *Polar Binomes*: sometimes writers use a pair of words (synonyms or opposites) to refer to an entire set of “things” (either objects or actions):

少長	young + old	> people of all ages
動靜	move + be still	> all [one's] activities
草木	grasses + trees	> all vegetation

C. Affixation in literary Chinese is relatively late and tends to be associated with more colloquial styles.³ The major exception are the pluralizing affixes, which were widely used from the Warring States period on. Two common pluralizers are the suffix 等 and the modifier 諸.

2. By convention, Old Chinese romanizations are preceded by an asterisk (*) as a reminder of the provisional nature of the reconstruction. Middle Chinese romanizations are used without such caution. For Middle Chinese, I use the reconstructions in Yú Nǎiyǒng 余迺永, *Hùzhù jiào zhèng Sòng běn Guāngyùn* 互註校正宋本廣韻 (Taipei: Lian Guan, 1975). I have taken my few examples of Old Chinese from Bernard Karlgren's *Grammata Serica Recensa* (Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1957) simply because of its convenience: other studies have significantly updated his initial work, but the details are beyond the scope of this textbook.

3. I leave aside the important question of affixes in Old Chinese. There is good evidence to suggest that words with similar syntactic features shared *phonological* features and that there were syntactically important suffixes and prefixes in the early language. See the discussion in Appendix A, Part II, “Syntax and Phonology in Old Chinese.”

1. *Pluralizers*:

公等	“you all”
諸賢	“all the worthies” ⁴

2. *Aspect Markers and Resultatives*: The sorts of function words we find in modern dialects began to appear in their grammaticalized forms during the Táng dynasty.⁵

II. Pronunciation

The history of Chinese as a spoken language often is roughly divided into three main periods: Old Chinese (商 Shāng and 周 Zhōu to 西漢 Western Hàn), Middle Chinese (東漢 Eastern Hàn to 初唐 Early Táng), and Mandarin (Old Mandarin from 晚唐 Late Táng to 明 Míng, Middle Mandarin from mid-Míng to early 清 Qīng). Scholars have researched the sound systems of Chinese for the earlier periods and have proposed various reconstructions of those languages based on the often limited information they can glean from the written texts.

A. Old Chinese

What we know of the sound of Old Chinese is based largely on an analysis of the rhymes of the *Shī jīng* 詩經, combined with other linguistic data. Among these early data are patterns of phonetic loanwords and comparisons with other languages.

As Chinese scribes developed conventions for writing characters to correspond to spoken words, they used a system of borrowing similar sounding characters and adding a different *radical* to distinguish the new word from the old. For example:

吉 *kiět

4. See Harbsmeier, *Aspects of Classical Chinese Syntax*, pp. 166–75, for a discussion of distinctions in early usage.

5. Cáo Guǎngshùn, for instance, gives the Táng dynasty poetic couplets below as examples of the development of aspect markers (取) and resultatives (得):

待取滿庭蒼翠日，酒尊書案閉門休。
會待路寧歸得去，酒樓漁浦重相期。

See Cáo Guǎngshùn 曹廣順, *Jīndài Hànyǔ zhùcí* 近代漢語助詞 (Beijing: Yuwen, 1995).

佶	*g'iet
髻	*kied

A more difficult series is:

妥	*t'nwâr
綏	*sniwər
諉	*niwər

As the clusters of consonants at the beginning of the words suggest, the sound system for Old Chinese reconstructed by historical phonologists from these data is much more complicated than that of modern Mandarin.

A second sort of additional data used by historical phonologists is comparisons with early Tibetan (for early Old Chinese) and with loanwords from Indo-European languages (for late Old Chinese).⁶ These data, combined with the rather complicated sound system derived from loan-character information, suggest that Old Chinese may have been a *very* different language from even Middle Chinese. For example, it may not have had tones. Instead, it may have had other sorts of morphological characteristics (a final *-s*, or *-χ*, for example) that disappeared as the affixes transformed in a regular manner into a tonal language, Middle Chinese, after the Hàn dynasty.⁷

A toneless Old Chinese may have been different in another important way. If there was a final *-s*, it may have carried specific grammatical information. Like Tibetan, Japanese, and European languages, Old Chinese may have been *inflected*, that is, a language in which the endings or beginnings of words show the case of nouns and the de-

6. For a recent example of the use of Tibetan sources for the reconstruction of early Old Chinese, see Randy J. LaPolla, "Variable Finals in Proto-Sino-Tibetan," 歷史語言研究所集刊 65, no. 1 (March 1994): 131–73. For the use of Indo-European languages in the reconstruction of a Hàn dynasty dialect, see W. South Coblin, "BTD Revisited: A Reconsideration of the Han Buddhist Transcriptional Dialect," 歷史語言研究所集刊 63, no. 4 (Sept. 1993): 867–943.

7. For a good discussion of the issue, see Jerry Norman, *Chinese*, Cambridge Language Surveys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 52–57. For a more technical approach, see, for example, William H. Baxter, *A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology*, Trends in Linguistics Studies and Monographs 64 (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 302–25.

clensions of verbs (*amo*, *amas*, *amat*, etc.). If Old Chinese *was* inflected, then we need to reconstruct the groups of characters that represent the declensions of the same word.⁸ In any case, if the morphological features (sound segments) of words conveyed syntactic information, the Chinese themselves seemed no longer to have been aware of such distinctions by the time of the compilation of the first major dictionary, the *Shuō wén jiě zì* 說文解字, in the Hàn dynasty.

B. Middle Chinese

Our understanding of Middle Chinese is much more complete than our picture of Old Chinese. For one thing, Chinese scholars themselves sought to regularize and codify the accepted pronunciation of words through the production of rhyming dictionaries.⁹

Fǎn qiè

In these dictionaries, scholars used a system of two-character combinations called 反切 *fǎn qiè* to represent the sound of a word. In this approach, the sound of the character in question is found by joining the *initial* sound of the *first* character of the combination with the *final* sound of the *second* character. Thus, for example,

祿 盧谷切

That is:

盧	luo
谷	kuk
祿	l[uo] + [k]uk = luk

8. Axel Schusler has attempted such a reconstruction in *Affixes in Proto-Chinese* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1976), but his work remains controversial. Pulleyblank and others have proposed more modest sets of patterns (see Appendix A).

9. Jerry Norman and W. South Coblin have argued that we have no good reason to accept the simple picture that the rhyming dictionaries present anything like a standard dialect. Moreover, regional dialects have probably existed throughout Chinese history—rather than being later developments—and probably did not derive directly from the northwestern dialect supposedly recorded in the rhyme-books. See Jerry Norman and W. South Coblin, “A New Approach to Chinese Historical Linguistics,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 115, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1995): 576–84.

Tones

Middle Chinese had four tones, but these were different from those of modern Mandarin:

1. 平 Level 2. 上 Rising 3. 去 Falling 4. 入 Entering

Entering-tone words end with a **-p**, **-t**, or **-k**. When one repeats a sound in the four tones (as in modern *mā*, *má*, *mǎ*, *mà*), the entering-tone endings **-p**, **-t**, and **-k** correspond to words ending in **-m**, **-n**, and **-ng**, respectively, in the other three tones (e.g., *lím*, *lǐm*, *līm*, *lip*). When written characters are constructed from a radical + phonetic, we see the same pattern of correspondence. For example:

曠 <i>xuang</i>	廣 <i>kuǎng</i>	曠 <i>k'uàng</i>	擴 <i>yuak</i>
麼 <i>ʔiǎm</i>	魔 <i>ʔiǎm</i>	厭 <i>ʔiǎm</i>	壓 <i>ʔap</i>

To give some idea of the manner in which Middle Chinese pronunciations have been reconstructed, consider the following table of apicals, words beginning with a **t**-, **th**-, or **d** sound.¹⁰ Note the presence of words beginning in **n**- in the table: the two sounds are produced with the tongue at the same place in the mouth. (This is also why the entering-tone **-t** corresponds to **-n** in the other tones.)

10. Jerry Norman explains:

Each of the *shétóu* [apical] sounds corresponds to a distinctive set of *fǎnqiè* upper [first] characters in the *Guāngyùn*. The only way phonetic substance can be given to these categories is by comparing them to actual pronunciations in modern Chinese dialects and in the Sinoxenian dialects of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. [The table] gives the readings of several common characters from each of the *shétóu* initials in several Chinese and Sinoxenian dialects. A glance at the table shows that a large majority of the forms are either dental or alveolar stops and nasals. The initial *ní* may be safely reconstructed as a nasal on the basis of the forms given. The initials *duān* and *tòu* are voiceless dental (or alveolar) stops in all the dialects; with the exception of Kanon, which has merged the two series. The remaining dialects have an unaspirated stop for *duān* and an aspirated stop for *tòu*; it is reasonable to suppose that Middle Chinese possessed the same sort of contrast. The only dialect which clearly distinguishes the initial *dīng* from *duān* and *tòu* is Sūzhōu [Wú] in which *dīng* corresponds to a voiced stop contrasting with the voiceless correspondences for *duā* and *tòu*. Provisionally at least, the initial *dīng* can be considered some kind of voiced dental stop in Middle Chinese.

The chart, except for the Middle Chinese reconstructions, derives from Norman, *Chinese*, pp. 34–35.

*A Few Comparisons in Reconstructing
Middle Chinese: The Apical Group*

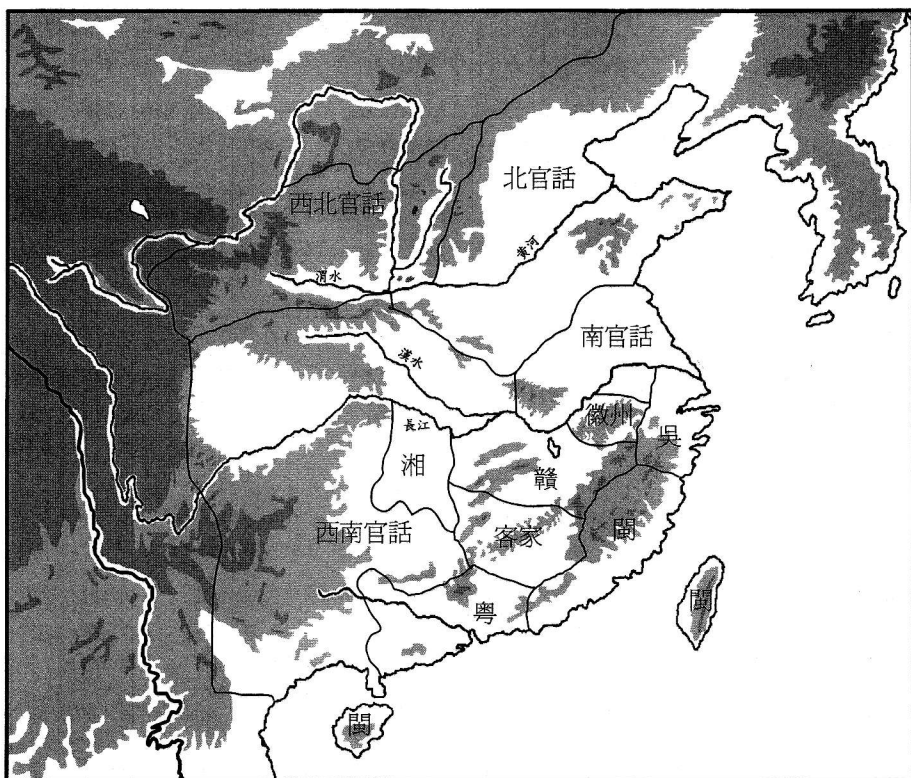
(官話 Mandarin; 吳 Wú; 閩 Mǐnnán; 粵 Cantonese; 越南 Sino-Vietnamese; 高麗 Sino-Korean; 漢音 *Kanon*, one form of Japanese pronunciation of Chinese characters; MC, middle Chinese)

	官話	吳	閩	粵	漢音	越南	高麗	MC
<i>duān</i> 端								
多	tuə	təu	to	to	ta	ʔda	ta	ta
刀	tau	tæ	to	tou	to	ʔdao	to	tau
短	tuan	tø	tuan	tyn	tan	ʔdoan	tān	tuan
<i>tòu</i> 透								
他	t'a	t'ɒ	t'a	t'a	ta	tha	t'a	t'a
天	t'ien	t'il	t'ien	t'in	ten	thien	ch'ŏn	t'iɛn
鐵	t'ie	t'ieʔ	t'iet	t'it	tetsu	thiet	ch'öl	t'iɛt
<i>dīng</i> 定								
弟	ti	di	ti	tai	tei	ʔde	che	diɛi
頭	t'ou	dY	t'ɒ	t'au	tō	ʔdɔu	tu	dɔu
豆	tou	dY	tɔ	tau	tō	ʔdao	tu	dɔu
<i>ní</i> 泥								
內	nei	nE	lui	noi	dai	noi	nae	nuɛi
年	nien	niI	lian	nin	nen	nien	yŏn	niɛn
農	nuŋ	noŋ	loŋ	nuŋ	nō	noŋ	nong	nuong

C. Modern Dialects

There are eight major modern dialects that can be divided into three groups based on the time when the speakers of the dialect split off (see the dialect map):

1. 官話 Mandarin (subdivided into Northern Mandarin, Northwest Mandarin, Southern Mandarin, and Southwest Mandarin)
2. 吳 Wú
 贛 Gàn
 湘 Xiāng
3. 閩 Mǐn
 客家 Kèjiā
 粵 Yuè
 徽州 Huīzhōu



Chinese Dialect Areas

(based on Jerry Norman, *Chinese* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], p. 184)

A Time Line

1800 B.C. Proto-Chinese
1200 B.C. early Old Chinese

甲骨文 (oracle bones)
language of 尚書, 詩經
大篆 (seal-script, 籀)
Austronesian influence(?)¹¹
language of 左傳, 國語

600 B.C. Old Chinese

11. See, for example, Jerry Norman and Mei Tsu-lin, "The Austroasiatics in Ancient South China: Some Lexical Evidence," *Monumenta Serica* 32 (1976): 274–301; and Laurent Sagart, "Chinese and Austronesian: Evidence for a Genetic Relationship," *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 21, no. 1 (1996): 1–62.

300 B.C.	late Old Chinese	language of 孟子, 莊子, 戰國策, etc., Qin unification of script (小篆 and 隸書); written and spoken forms are similar(?)
0 A.D.	early Middle Chinese	significant syntactic and phonological change; written and spoken languages begin to diverge 說文解字 written tones replace final consonants(?)
600 A.D.	Middle Chinese	切韻 written by committee to standardize readings; Mǐn develops as a dialect ¹²
800 A.D.	Old Mandarin	Other southern dialects split off from northern; “modern” aspect markers, resultatives, 把, begin to appear
1000 A.D.		廣韻 written; entering tones start to fuse, then disappear
1200 A.D.		中原音韻 written 1300 A.D.
	Middle Mandarin	central dialects (Wú, Gà, Xiāng)
1600 A.D.	Modern Mandarin	final -m disappears
2000 A.D.		

D. Inflection

In European languages we are used to talking about the case, number, and gender of nouns and the mood, voice, and tense of verbs. The endings of nouns and verbs contain this information, and we call these languages *inflected*. The words of literary Chinese—the individual characters—contain no similar markers to indicate tense and the like. Instead, literary Chinese relies strictly on *word order*—to tell us who did (or is doing, or will be doing) what to whom—and on *function*

12. Mei Zulin and Yang Xiufang's discussion of the stages in the development of the Mǐn dialect may serve as a model for future analyses of the origins and development of the various southern dialects. See Méi Zúlín 梅祖麟 and Yáng Xiùfāng 楊秀芳, “Jíge Mǐnnányǔ yǔfǎ chéngfèn de shíjiān céngcì” [The temporal strata of several components of the grammar of the Mǐnnán dialect] 〈幾個閩語語法成份的時間層次〉, 歷史語言研究所集刊66, no. 1 (March 1995): 1–21.

words (also called *particles*) to convey all the other types of information we derive from word endings in Western languages.

III. The Syntax of Literary Chinese

A. A Preliminary Discussion of Strategy

The version of grammar presented in this textbook has two major goals. First, it provides a flexible framework for approaching literary Chinese. Second, using the syntactic categories discussed below, it attempts to break students of habits of reading appropriate to modern English and modern Chinese that are not helpful—or are even misleading—in the reading of literary Chinese.

The version of syntax presented in this textbook will disappoint linguists for several reasons. First, by “literary Chinese,” I mean the standard written language of pre-modern China and *not* the spoken language—Late Old Chinese—from which it derives. Late Old Chinese is a transitional language with features remaining from an earlier period and with intriguing variations that suggest regional dialects. Writers of literary Chinese in the later tradition recognized the idiosyncracies of Warring States and early Han prose and imitated them to give their styles an “ancient” feel, but I suspect that the syntactic logic behind Warring States texts had long since been lost. Thus I shall not dwell on the syntactic features of Late Old Chinese itself but only on those aspects of literary Chinese that remained largely constant throughout the written tradition.

Another reason that the syntactic analysis presented here diverges from a fully adequate account is that I try to adhere to the principle of “make no unnecessary distinctions.” I include only those syntactic elements for which literary Chinese itself has function words that explicitly indicate the syntax in cases of ambiguity or rhetorical emphasis. I try to be true to the syntactic relations marked by those function words. For example, I do not use the category “preposition” because literary Chinese has no set of words that behaves sufficiently closely to how prepositions behave in English for this to be a useful category. The two closest candidates—coverbs and locative objects—behave according to rules appropriate for verbs and objects, respectively (see

below). In contrast, modern Mandarin *does* have prepositions: for instance, one can say both

跟著他回家

and

跟他回家

but not

*由著這條路回家¹³

That is, in modern Mandarin not all coverbs are alike. Some are more grammaticalized—reduced from a verb to the status of a function word—than others, and usage clearly distinguishes them. The most grammaticalized have indeed become prepositions, whereas the newer coverbs, like 跟, are still in some middle state. The distinctions in usage of coverbs in literary Chinese do not appear strong enough to warrant the introduction of a grammatical term to mark the difference. I use a similar approach to other syntactic categories that are shared by both modern Chinese and English but that are better treated as special cases of broader categories within literary Chinese. (See Appendix A for a discussion of the question of *complements*, in particular.)

B. Parts of Speech: Nouns and Verbs

On the whole, one can rely on dictionaries to determine “what part of speech” a character is. Nonetheless, words in literary Chinese shift word-classes sufficiently easily that the word’s *actual function* in any particular sentence should take precedence over its *usual* classification. How, then, does one know when syntax demands a particular word class? There are a few rather safe rules:

1. Nouns are negated by 非, 無
Verbs are negated by 未, 不, 勿, 莫

Note, however, that *direct objects* are occasionally placed *between* the negating function word and the verb itself:

歲不吾與 The years do not give us [respite].

13. By convention, ungrammatical sentences are marked with an asterisk (*).

莫之知 None knew it.

未之信也 He did not yet believe it.

2. The character 所 is used to represent the direct or locative objects of verbs, as in

吾食之 I eat it.

吾所食 That which I eat. . .

That which follows the 所 must be a *verbal* expression.

3. The character 之 is often used to mark explicit *subordination* (see below, section C.4). Placing 之 between the subject and verb of a complete sentence turns that sentence into a *nominal* phrase:

神來 The spirits come.

神之來 The coming of the spirits. . .

4. Similarly, when a *verbal* phrase appears within the *topic* of an explicit topic-comment construction A B 也 (see below, section C.1), it becomes *nominalized*:

不私其父，非孝子也 [One who] is not partial to his father is not a filial son.

5. Almost every word we think of as an adjective in English—"tall," "short," "red," "green"—can serve as a *stative verb*, a verb describing the state of some object:

嵩山高 Mount Sōng *is tall*.

6. Finally, some verbs that ordinarily are *intransitive*, that is, they have no direct object, will occasionally be used *with* a direct object. The effect of this syntax is to make the verb *causative*:

敬神鬼而遠之 Respect the spirits but keep them at a distance [cause them to be distant]

Sometimes this "causing" is of a more abstract nature, where "causing X to become Y" means to "put X in category Y," as in

叟不遠千里 Elder Sir, you do not *consider* a thousand *lǐ* too far.

C. Grammatical Relations

There are only five types of grammatical relationships: *topic-comment*, *verb-object*, *coordination*, *subordination*, and *number complement*. And “elements”—whether words, phrases, or entire sentences—“that stand in grammatical relationship to each other are always *adjacent*.”¹⁴ This rule that the two halves of a syntactic unit are always next to each other strongly affects our understanding of literary Chinese syntax. In particular, it shifts our focus from the linear sequence of individual words to a more complex view of their role in the construction of the sets of relationships that determine the actual syntax of the sentence. How a top-down, sentence-oriented analysis of syntax works in practice is the substance of this book. The following section introduces the five types of grammatical relationships that are the basic tools of our analysis.

1. Topic-Comment

Literary Chinese, like all other languages, can be described as having sentences of the form:

Subject + Predicate

However, the concept of “subject” in more recent linguistic theories is an abstract entity that can perhaps be most simply described as the “external argument” for the predicate. That is, “subject” is an element of syntactic structure rather than our usual notion of the “subject” as filling the thematic role of “agent,” the person or thing that carries out the action of a verb.¹⁵ For example, in

John bought the book.

“John” is both the *subject* (the external argument to “bought the book”) and the *agent* (the person who bought the book). In the passive construction

14. Stimson, *55 T'ang Poems*, p. 9.

15. Randy J. LaPolla argues that by current linguistic theory, modern Mandarin has neither “subjects” nor even “direct objects.” See Randy J. LaPolla, “Arguments Against ‘Subject’ and ‘Direct Object’ as Viable Concepts in Chinese,” *歷史語言研究所集刊* 63, no. 4 (Sept. 1993): 759–813.

The book was bought by John.

“Book” is now the *subject*, but its thematic role is the *patient* (the object that receives the action of “bought”).

In subsequent discussions, I refer to “the simplest form” of a sentence, by which I mean an “original” version in which the *subject*, the *topic*, and the *agent* all coincide. The *topic-comment* structure used as the basis for analysis in fact derives from the more fundamental concepts of subject and predicate. But in practice since *topic-comment* proves more useful and flexible for describing the actual organization of sentences in literary Chinese, I use it rather than *subject-predicate*. (For more on this question, see the discussion in Appendix A.)

The topic-comment structure used in this textbook is a mixture of three separate categories used in the discussion of texts. First, a “topic,” by itself, is what a sentence “is about,” and the comment is what the sentence says about the topic. Second, sentences in literary Chinese—as in English and modern Chinese—have two *focal points*, at the beginning and at the end. The “theme” is the element at the front of the sentence, and an element that has been brought to the front to receive focus has been *thematized*. The third descriptive category blended into the terms “topic” and “comment” is that of “old information/new information.” That is, the topic *usually* corresponds to the *old information*, and the comment is *new information*.¹⁶ These three separate meanings largely coincide in practice, except for the rare rhetorical inversion. To summarize:

16. These categories are somewhat fuzzy, and *topic-comment* as used in the textbook is correspondingly broad. For example, the usual test to identify a “topic” (in the stricter usage) is to ask, “If this sentence is the answer to a question, what would that question be?” Yet

China is a very ancient culture.

could be the answer to two different questions:

- (1) What is a very ancient culture?
- (2) Why is China interesting?

As an answer to (1), the topic (strictly conceived) is “is a very ancient culture,” which is the “old information,” and the comment (and new information) is “China.” In contrast, as the answer to (2), “China” becomes both the topic and the old information, and “is a very ancient culture” becomes the comment and the new material. I am indebted to the discussion in Keith Brown and Jim Miller, *Syntax: A Linguistic*

Topic	Comment
what the sentence is about	what is said about the topic
the (usually unstressed)	focal point at the end of
beginning	sentence
old information	new information

a. The simplest type of topic-comment construction is a *nominal sentence* that identifies one noun with another:

慎道趙人 Shèn Dào was a man from Zhào.

詩者志之所之也 Poetry is where the resolve goes.

The second example makes the topic-comment structure explicit through the use of the function words 者 and 也, but these markers are not *required*.

Nominal sentences in the form **A B 也** usually state that **A** is a *type* of **B**, or that **A** is of the category **B**. That is, since there were many people from Zhào, the statement does not *uniquely* define Shèn Dào, but at least we know that he fits the category “man of Zhào.” Similarly, resolve usually leads to action, and thus there are many places where it might “go,” but the above sentence states that poetry is one such place, one member of the set.

Pulleyblank points out that sentences of the form **A 猶 B 也** should also be viewed as nominal sentences since they are a form of a statement of identity: **A** is *of an analogous type* to **B**.¹⁷

性猶湍水也 The nature is like quickly flowing water.

b. One common use of the topic-comment structure is to move the time or location to the beginning of the sentence to set the scene for the event to be described:

丁酉祿山陷東京 On the Dīngyǒu day Ān Lùshān captured the Eastern Capital.

If the topic and the comment were reversed, the effect would be to stress the day, as if the date were in question or part of some reckoning:

Introduction to Sentence Structure, 2nd ed. (Hammersmith, Eng.: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 343–68.

17. See Pulleyblank, *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar*, pp. 18–19.

祿山陷東京者丁酉也 It was on the Dīngyǒu day that Ān Lùshān captured the Eastern Capital.

c. The transformation of the “normal” order of a sentence to change the element that is being stressed is called *topicalization*. This process of shifting parts of the sentence to the topic position in order to *de-emphasize* them is a major tool of literary Chinese rhetoric and an important element in the creation of complex sentences. Consider the following famous sentence from *Zhuāng Zǐ*:

臣之所好者道也 (i) What I, your servant, like is the Way.

which is a transformation of a “base” sentence:

臣好道 (ii) I, your servant, like the Way.

It is unclear in (ii) what the central point of the sentence is: is the speaker stressing that *he* in particular likes the Way, or that, contrary to previous evidence, he really *likes* the Way, or that, finally, *what* he likes is the Way. In sentence (i), both the “I” and the “like” have been moved to the topic, and the speaker reduces what he wants to stress to one word, 道, the Way. He likes *the* Way.

Consider a second example, and notice in particular that the topicalized element here is *not* the subject:

先生，不知何許人也 (iii) The Master’s place of origin is not known.

This sentence can be more clumsily but more accurately translated as “As for the Master, he is a man of whom we do not know his place of origin.” Approximately the same information is conveyed by the non-topicalized sentence,

不知先生爲何許人 (iv)

By moving 先生 to the beginning of the sentence as a topic, the writer emphasizes in particular the information or lack of it. As noted above, in sentence (iii), the topic is neither the *subject* nor the *agent* for the main verb of the sentence. Always remember: *topics are not the same as subjects*.

d. Topicalization is one aspect of a broader type of movement of

parts of a sentence to the front called *exposure*. Sometimes, the movement is for rhetorical emphasis, as in

善哉問也 What a *good* question!

Sometimes, the point is to mark a contrast:

冷風則小和，飄風則大和 The *breeze* is the small harmonizing, and the *whirlwind* the great harmonizing.

Note that 則 is here an explicit marker of topic-comment rather than simply the sign of an “if . . . , then” sentence.

Sometimes, especially if the topic is a long phrase, it is marked off as a unit, then resumed with a 是, “. . . , as for this, ...”¹⁸

既不能令，又不受令，是絕物也 Not being able to command and also not accepting command, this is a “cut-off thing.”

e. Many sorts of relations that are expressed in English as subordinate clauses are structured in literary Chinese as topic-comment relations. The most common are *conditional expressions*: “if . . . , then” or “when . . . , then”:

王如知此，則無望民之多於鄰國也 If you, the King, know this, then do not expect [your] populace to become greater than [that of] the neighboring countries

2. Verb-Object

Although *verb-object* seems a familiar category, literary Chinese syntax includes some verb-object relationships that are treated quite differently from those we encounter in English.

a. Locative Objects

Time and place information that is expressed through prepositional phrases in English is the *object of a verb* in literary Chinese:¹⁹

先生居山林 The Master lives [in] the mountain forest.

18. For a detailed discussion of exposure, see Pulleyblank, *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar*, pp. 69–75.

19. For a more detailed explanation of why locative expressions are treated as objects, see the discussion of complements in Appendix A.

Because the subject of an embedded sentence becomes bound to both verbs, it is called the *pivot*. This type of “subject raising” occurs only with a small group of verbs called *pivot verbs*.

iii. Auxiliary Verbs

應歸 ought to return

能歸 can return

Some verbs (必, 肯, 須, etc.), usually expressing *modality* (that is, the probability, desirability, or possibility of an event) are called auxiliary verbs. They require a second verb (the direct object of the first), which becomes the main verb.²⁰ These main verbs, moreover, cannot have a different topic from the auxiliary:

漁夫能歸 the fisherman can return

but not:

*能漁夫歸 ~~can cause the fisherman to return~~

c. Indirect Objects

Like both modern Mandarin and English, literary Chinese has verbs that take an *indirect object-direct object* construction.

爲之君 [The sage] made rulers for them (i.o).

俗謂之小人 The populace call him (i.o.) a small person.

3. Coordinate Relationships

In a *coordinate relationship* the two elements are of the same type and stand as equals. The units may be nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs, or larger groupings of phrases or even sentences:

Nouns: 仲由、冉求可謂大臣與 Can Zhòngyóu and Rǎnqiú be called great officials?

Verbs: 君子不憂不懼 The noble man is neither worried nor alarmed.

20. Lin Jo-wang and Jane Chih-chen Tang argue that even in modern Mandarin auxiliary verbs serve as the verb (head) in a verb phrase and thus differ from auxiliaries in English. See Lin Jo-wang and Jane Chih-chen Tang, “Modals as Verbs in Chinese: A GB Perspective,” 歷史語言研究所集刊 66, no. 1 (March 1995): 53–105.

Sentences: 君子懷德。小人懷土。 The noble man cherishes virtue; the small man cherishes [his] land.

a. Sometimes grammatical function words make the coordinate relationship explicit:

Nouns: 唯我與爾有是夫。 Is it not that you **and** I alone share this?

Verbs: 富且貴焉恥也。 I would be ashamed to be wealthy **and** esteemed under these [circumstances].

Verbs: 王笑而不言。 The king smiled **but** did not speak.

b. Sometimes coordination defines *alternative* possibilities, and in English translation, an “or” is required:

安危在晷刻 Safety or danger were in the moment.

Sometimes the character 或 or 將 is used to make the presentation of alternatives explicit:

守令或開門出迎或棄城竄匿 Some of the magistrates opened the gates and went out to greet [him], some abandoned the city walls and fled into hiding.

c. Very often when two verbs stand in coordinate relation, the first action becomes the *antecedent condition* for the possibility of the second action. This implied connection can be translated as “in order to” or “with the result that.” Thus:

咸來問訊 They all came [in order to] enquire [of him].

恥之逃隱 He was ashamed of it [with the result that he] fled and hid.

d. Sometimes, in order to stress the causal relationship between coordinate verbs, authors will use 以 to mark their coordination:

脩身以俟之 He cultivates his person to await it [whatever comes].

Originally, 以 in such cases perhaps represented the fusion of 以之, “and using this, . . .” where “this” refers back the first verb. (See section 3.e below.)

e. The function word 而 between coordinate verbal expressions has a rhetorical effect analogous to 則 as an explicit marker of exposed nouns: by moving one verb group further to the front, it serves as a point of focus that highlights the question of the actual relationship between the two groups. In a sentence like

王笑而不言。 The king smiled [and? but?] did not speak.

we must ask ourselves what in fact is implied. Did the king consider his smile sufficient? Was the king using a smile to hide his embarrassed silence? Was Mèng Zǐ expecting speech, so that the 而 registers his dismay? Or is the 而 simply used to fill out a four-character rhythm?

f. A special class of coordinate verbal expressions is the *coverb*. As the language developed, some very common verb-object phrases came to be used regularly as the first verb phrase of a coordinate verb pair (thus suggesting antecedent condition) and lost their independent status. They came to be seen as bound to, and auxiliary to the second verb of the pair. For example:

與汝遊 wander with you

方以類聚 types [of creatures] gather by their categories

The verb of the verb-object pair (here, the 與 and the 以) is called a *coverb*. In other situations, both verbs, 與 “to give, (and by extension) to accompany” and 以 “to grasp,” attain full verbal status. They speak of action on their own. As coverbs, however, they simply describe an antecedent condition.

g. Some types of coordinate verb constructions in literary Chinese express relations that are treated in English as subordinate clauses. One major group is time constructions: “After . . . , then . . . ,” “When . . . , then . . . ,” etc:

既得人爵而棄其天爵，則惑之甚者也。 Having obtained man's ennoblement, to then reject Heaven's ennoblement is [an act] of extreme confusion.

h. Another major group of coordinate verb constructions treated differently from English are *concessives*, “Even though . . .,” “Even if not . . .,” etc.:²¹

雖直而不病 Even though he is direct, he is not faulted.

4. Subordinate Relations

The first element modifies the second. The second element, to which the first is attached, is called the *head*. Thus:

青草 green (modifier) + grass (head)

There are many different types of grass—blue grass, sere grass, dense grass, short grass—and “green grass” delimits one particular subgroup of all possible grasses.

In subordinate relations—as in coordinate—the elements can be nouns, verbs, or longer phrases, but since the first element modifies the second, it functions grammatically as an English adjective or adverb.

a. The marker for explicit subordination to a noun is the character 之. Consider the two meanings for

草青 (1) The grass is green. (2) the green of the grass (or “the greening of the grass”)

That is, the two words could be either (1) a sentence or (2) a modifier-head noun phrase. But the syntax of

草之青 (3) the green(ing) of the grass

is clear. In this reading, 之 has been inserted between the topic and verb comment pair of sentence (1). The result is to turn the *verbal* sentence into a *nominal* phrase (that is, the verb becomes its noun counterpart that describes either an action—*turning* green—or a state, *being* green.)

b. One commonly used character for marking modification of verbs is 然, which is equivalent to 如是 (“like this”):

泠然善也 In a 泠 (light and wonderful) manner, it was good.

21. For Pulleyblank’s discussion, see *Outline of Classical Chinese Syntax*, pp. 156–58.

c. As noted above, the characters 上, 下, 前, 後, 中, and 間 are nouns. Therefore in phrases these characters are often the *head*, modified by what comes before them, rather than the other way around. In

山前 [the place] in front of the mountain

“Mountain” *modifies* “[the place] in front.” Similarly, the sentence

草上之風必偃 > (((草)之上)之風) Topic (必偃) Comment

can be translated awkwardly but in keeping with the sense of the original Chinese as “[As for] the wind (of the above part (of the grass)), [the grass] must bend [to it].” What one sees when reading 上, 下, 前, 後, 中, and 間 is a *place*, that is, a noun.

5. Number Complements

One final type of relationship between syntactic units is the use of a *number* + *measure* after the noun or verb:

閑居三月 He lived at ease [to the extent of] three months.

遣大夫二人 He sent two ministers.

In these sentences, the *number* + *measure* constructions do not modify the words to which they are attached because they do not actually restrict the domain of reference for those words. Rather, they simply add further information. Compare the following:

有士二人 There were noblemen [to the extent of] two men.

此二士之節 This was the virtue of the two noblemen.

The usual rule is that elements in a sentence that are moved closer to the front of a sentence are de-emphasized, but here we have the opposite. In the first sentence, the 二人 is not crucial to the identity of the noblemen; it merely gives us incidental information. In contrast, when 二 (without the measure 人) modifies 士 in the second sentence, the information is no longer incidental: the sentence points to the “virtue” of *two* specific noblemen. The importance of this difference is perhaps difficult to see, but examples in the texts should help clarify the usage. In any case, this relationship is common and easily identifiable, and poses no particular problems.

III. Sentences

This brief sketch of the components of literary Chinese as a language is not an arbitrary taxonomy. Although the preceding account of the grammar is by no means complete, it is, I hope, sufficient to provide a certain perspective on the syntax of literary Chinese and a set of tools for its analysis. The four relations—topic-comment, verb-object, coordination, and subordination—offer a way to approach and make sense of even the most complex sentences. A syntactic analysis based on this handful of relations is *sentence-oriented* rather than word-oriented. The sentence as a whole, rather than the individual words, is the basic unit of analysis. Sentences are divided into subunits related to one another in one of the four ways described above, and these subunits can be further divided into elements that also relate to one another in one of four ways. The final elements are, of course, the individual characters themselves. After one has sorted out the basic questions—What is the topic? What is the verb? What modifies what?—even convoluted sentences begin to fall into place. Or if they do not, then one can at least state quite precisely wherein the ambiguities lie.

IV. Suggestions for Further Reading

The following list of books and articles is intended to point to some of the major works in the history of the modern study of the linguistics of Old Chinese as well as give the student a sense of the current approaches and issues in the field both in English and in Chinese.

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Part One

Texts to Introduce Basic Grammar

Lesson 1

Nominal and Verbal Sentences

The most basic structure of literary Chinese to be studied in this textbook is the *topic-comment* sentence. Sentences can be extremely complicated, with elaborate noun phrases and elegant coordinate clauses. Yet, no matter how daunting the text, one can always begin the analysis with the basic questions: "What is the topic? What is being said about the topic?"

Topics and Comments

The **topic**, as the name suggests, is *what you want to write about*, and the **comment** is *what it is that you want to say* about the topic. The comment is *new information*; it is usually the stressed element in the sentence. Every sentence has a comment, but it does not necessarily have an *explicit* topic. If the topic is missing, one always needs to ask oneself what is being talked about. Topics often switch in mid-paragraph or even mid-sentence without an explicit indication that the topic has changed.

Literary Chinese has two types of comments and two corresponding types sentences: the **nominal** and the **verbal**. In terms of syntax, the distinction is quite simple:

- A nominal sentence has a noun phrase as its comment.
- A verbal sentence has a verb phrase as its comment.

Nominal Sentences

Nominal sentences are fundamentally **statements of identity**. The sentence **A, B 也** asserts that **A** is a type of **B**:

宋，小國也 *Sòng is a small state.*

仲子，齊之世家也 [*Chén*] *Zhòngzǐ is of an eminent clan of Qí.*

物之不齊，物之情也 *Things being unequal is their nature.*

無父無君，是禽獸也 [*One*] *without a father and without a ruler—this is a wild animal.*

In these identity statements, the second category—the noun phrase in the comment—tends to be more general than the first category—the noun phrase in the topic. There are many small states: *Sòng* is one of them. *Qí* has many men from clans with a tradition of service to the state: *Chén Zhòngzǐ* is one of them. “Things” have many aspects to their nature, and inequality is one of them. These assertions of identity place an object (the topic) into a larger context and situate it.

Simple identity statements, however, constitute only a small fraction of all nominal sentences. The comment in a nominal sentence is frequently **verb + 也**. Verbs serving as topics are nominalized, since topics are nouns. As nouns, they refer to a repeating action or a specific event. When verbs serve as nominal comments, they refer to a general category of action that defines the identity of the topic:

上好禮則民易使也 *If the ruler delights in ritual, then the populace is tractable.*

That is, “tractable” (more literally, “easy to direct”) is a general situation that typifies the populace.

王之不王，不爲也 *Your Majesty's not ruling as a true king is a case of not trying.*

Here, the “not ruling as a true king” is defined as an instance of the more general category of “not trying.”

Writers often extend the **verb + 也** construction that provides categories to describe actions and use it to **offer an explanation** for an action:

桀紂之失天下也，失其民也。失其民者，失其心也。 Jié and Zhòu's losing the realm was **a matter of losing the populace**. Losing the populace was **a matter of losing their hearts and minds**.

Since neither modern Chinese nor modern English has a structure similar to the explanatory **verb + 也** nominal sentence, it is not easy to grasp when one first encounters it. However, because the structure is an important feature of literary Chinese, it reappears throughout this textbook. Repeated encounters will help clarify its nuances.

Verbal Sentences

Verbal sentences are the familiar type: they are those in which the comment has a verb. Beginning students of literary Chinese, however, often have problems recognizing verbs. Transitive and intransitive verbs present few difficulties, but **stative verbs** do not behave in the same way they do in modern Mandarin, and they are entirely lacking in English.

As the name suggests, a stative verb in the comment describes a continuing state of the topic:

嵩山高 Mount Sōng **is high**.

德不孤 The virtuous **are not alone**.

風雨瀟瀟 The wind and rain **are chill and forlorn**.

Stative verbs can also mark a *transition* into a state or an *intensification* of a state:

哀情多 Sorrowful feelings **grow ever more**.

去爾日遙遠 [My] separating from you is daily more distant.

On occasion a noun can be forced to serve as a verb, but just as the *persisting of a state* of a “thing” is a form of action, so too asserting, acquiring, or simply *maintaining an identity* can be a form of action:

齊景公問政於孔子。孔子對曰君君臣臣父父子子。公曰善哉，信如君不君，臣不臣，父不父，子不子，雖有粟，吾得而食諸。 Duke Jǐng of Qí asked Confucius about governing. Confucius replied, “The ruler **acts as the ruler**, and the minister **acts as minister**; the father **acts as the**

father, and the son acts as a son.” The duke replied, “Wonderful! Truly, if the ruler **does not act as the ruler**, the minister **not act as minister**, father **not act as father**, and son **not act as son**, even though there is grain, will I get to eat it?

Identity here is not innate; it is a matter of performance, of doing what the identity demands.

These variations on the verbal sentence are luckily rather rare. Most of the time, the classical idea of “action” corresponds with our own. Still, we need to be aware that literary Chinese embodies perspectives on identity and experience that are in some ways profoundly different from those of the modern world. To blur the categories of the classical texts into our own would be to miss most of the fun and the challenge.

Text 1: 困學(論語 16.9)

1. 孔子曰，生而知之者，上也。
2. 學而知之者，次也。
3. 困而學之，又次也。
4. 困而不學，民斯爲下矣。

Text 2: 馬不進也(論語 6.15)

1. 子曰，孟之反不伐。
2. 奔而殿，將入門，策其馬，
3. 曰，非敢後也，馬不進也。

Vocabulary

困	<i>kùn</i> (v), to be blocked, oppressed, in difficulties	學	<i>xué</i> (v), to learn
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論語	<i>Lún yǔ</i> , the <i>Analects</i> , the sayings of Confucius recorded by his disciples. The numbers 16.9 are to be read the “ninth passage in the sixteenth book.”	斯	<i>sī</i> (n), this > (fw: “this being so, then/thus . . .”)
		爲	<i>wéi</i> (v), to act > to become > to be reckoned as
		下	<i>xià</i> (n), the bottom
孔子	Kǒng Zǐ, “Master Kǒng,” i.e., Confucius (ca. 551–479 B.C.)	矣	<i>yǐ</i> (fw: sentence-final marker of change of state)
子	<i>Zǐ</i> (n), “master,” a polite form of address	馬	<i>mǎ</i> (n), horse
生	<i>shēng</i> (v), to be born	進	<i>jìn</i> (v), to advance
而	<i>ér</i> (fw: marker of verb coordination)	曰	<i>yue</i> (v), to say
知	<i>zhī</i> (v), to know	孟之反	Mèng Zhǐfǎn, an official in the state of Lǔ
之	<i>zhī</i> (n), him, her, it, them	*伐	<i>fā</i> (v), (here) to boast, claim unearned merit
者	<i>zhě</i> (a bound-form abstract noun that requires a modifier)	奔	<i>bēn</i> (v), to run > to flee > to be routed (said of an army)
上	<i>shàng</i> (n), the top	殿	<i>diàn</i> (n), the rear guard (that protects a withdrawing army) > (v) to serve in the rear guard
也	<i>yě</i> (fw: phrase-final, marker of nominal phrases)	將	<i>jiāng</i> (adv), to be about to
次	<i>cì</i> (n), place > specified place > next in specified order	入	<i>rù</i> (v), to enter
又	<i>yòu</i> (adv), again	門	<i>mén</i> (n), two-leafed gate
不	<i>bù</i> (adv), not	策	<i>cè</i> (n), horse-whip > (v) to whip
民	<i>mín</i> (n), the populace		

其	<i>qí</i> (adj), his, her, its, their	敢	<i>gǎn</i> (av), to dare to
非	<i>fēi</i> (fw: marker of negation for nominal sentences)	後	<i>hòu</i> (n), the rear > (v) to be at or move to the rear

Notes

1. 生而知之 The two verbs 生 and 知 are *coordinate*, and the 生 serves as a strong **antecedent condition** for the 知: “Knowing it *simply under the condition of* having been born” is best. The other three sets of verbs all follow the same pattern in which the first verb in each pair **sets the condition** under which the second verb occurs:

學而知之 to learn *and then* know it
 困而學之 to be perplexed *and then* learn it
 困而不學 to be perplexed *but then* not learn

2. 生而知之者 The character 者 simply indicates a “thing,” often to be treated as a general category. It is a **bound form**; that is, it cannot appear by itself and must always be modified by either a noun or verb. The verb phrase that modifies it here specifies what sort of thing: a “being born and knowing it” thing. Such an entity can be *a person* who is born knowing it, or it can refer to the *state* of being born and knowing it. Since a person may be born knowing one thing but not another, the phrase here is best taken as the state.

3. 上 In general, position words like 上, 後, and 中 are **nouns**: “the place on top,” “the place behind,” “the place in the middle,” and so on.

4. 生而知之者，上也 This is a nominal sentence that makes a **categorical judgment**. That is, it says the topic—生而知之者—belongs in the category 上, “the highest.” The next two lines repeat this pattern:

學而知之者，次也 to learn and then know it *is the next rank*
 困而學之，又次也 to be perplexed and then learn it *is again the next*

5. 民斯爲下 The character 斯 usually means “this.” The sentence here, however, illustrates an important extension. 斯 comes to serve as **a marker of exposure**: it highlights the (normally) unstressed topic as a focal point in the sentence. At the same time, 斯 also retains some of its meaning as “this” by continuing to refer back to an earlier reference: “. . . , this being the case/for this reason/under these circumstances” In this sentence, the “this” refers to the “being perplexed but not learning.”

6. 爲 is a difficult word. It can mean either “to enact,” that is, to be something by virtue of one’s actions, or, “to be deemed,” to be taken by others to be something. Both possibilities work here.

7. 矣 is also a difficult word. Its usual role is as a **perfective** marker, the marker of a completed change of state. Sometimes, as in this sentence, however, it serves as an emphatic marker with a sense of finality: “That’s it completely!”

8. 非敢後也，馬不進也 This pair of nominal clauses provides an answer to the implied question, “What was the matter? Why were you the last person back?” Mèng’s first comment explains what was *not* the matter: “It isn’t the case that I dared to remain at the rear.” The second comment finishes Mèng’s elegantly modest (and untrue) explanation: “[The problem] was that my horse wouldn’t advance.” Mèng uses nominal constructions to lay out **the facts of the matter** and to declare the meaning of the action (his lagging behind) seen as an event, a “thing” with a definite shape (a beginning, a middle, and an end).

It is perhaps worthwhile to note that in 馬不進也, the structure is *not*

馬 (Topic) + [不進] 也 (不進 as verb phrase nominalized by 也)

but

[Arriving last] (Implied Topic) + [馬不進] 也 (whole verbal sentence as comment)

The statement is not about the horse but about Mèng’s action.

Exercises

1. Pattern Completion: Please complete the following sentences. For each one, explain what is the new information. (That is, what sort of question does the statement answer?)

吾父之名，_____也。

吾母之名，_____也。

_____, 吾生日也。

_____, 唐代詩人也。

2. Answer the following questions: Note: 與 = *yǔ*, “and,” 孰 = *shú*, “which?” For other expressions, please use a dictionary.

Example: Question: 生而知之與學而知之，孰上也。

Answer: 生而知之，上也。

養狗與養貓，孰上也。

學習與遊樂，孰上也。

道教與儒禮，孰上也。

處家與出仕，孰上也。