

Lesson 5

Negatives

bù 不, fú 弗, *fēi* 非, wú 無, wèi 未, wù 勿, *wú* 毋, mò 莫

Negatives/ bù 不

- ▶ Negatives in Classical Chinese fall into two broad groups:
 1. Negatives used in verbal sentences
 2. Negatives used in nominal sentences
 3. Those with initial p/f and those with initial m/w.
- ▶ Negatives in verbal sentences (bù 不, fú 弗, wú 無, wèi 未, wù 勿)
- ▶ **bù 不** is used as the general negation for verbal sentences; it is placed immediately before the verb it negates

Examples:

王不言 wáng bù yán 'The king does not speak'

孔子不來 Kǒngzǐ bù lái 'Confucius does not come/will not come'



bù 不

- ▶ bù 不 is also used to negate stative verbs

Example:

人不少 *rén bù shǎo* ‘the people are not few’

山不高 *shān bù gāo* ‘the mountain is not high’

- ▶ A frequently encountered combination is *bu de er* 不得而 + verb, an idiomatic phrase similar in meaning to *bu neng* 不能 + verb: ‘not be able to ...’

臣不得而為也 *chén bù dé ér wéi yě* ‘I cannot do [this]’



bù 不: rules of usage

- ▶ Special rules apply when sentences with object pronouns (wú 吾, zhī 之 etc.) are negated by bù 不:

- ▶ the object pronoun is sometimes placed between bù 不 and the verb it negates. E.g.

不吾敬 bù wú jìng '[he] does not respect me'

不我衣 bù wǒ yī '[they] don't dress me'

- ▶ Very often, however, the object pronoun is omitted altogether, especially when the context is clear. E.g.

王不見。wáng bù jiàn 'The king did not receive [him]' instead of 王不見之 wáng bù jiàn zhī

一聞人之過，終身不忘。yī wén rén zhī guò, zhōng shēn bù wàng
'once [he] had heard about another man's faults, he would not forget them all his life'



fú 弗 ‘not it’

- ▶ *fú* 弗 is by many grammarians understood to be a fusion of *bú zhī* 不之, possibly the result of the inversion of verb and object pronoun after *bu* 不. E.g.
 - ▶ 我識之 *wǒ shí zhī* ‘I know him’
 - ▶ 我不之識 → 我弗識 ‘I do not know him’
 - the pronoun object is always implied in 弗
- ▶ another interpretation as to what distinguishes *fú* 弗 from 不 regards 弗 as negative causative (*bù shǐ* 不使) ‘to let not happen’, ‘to prevent from happening’, ‘to refuse to do’. E.g.
 - ▶ 吾弗敬子矣 *wú fú jìng zǐ yǐ* ‘I refuse to respect you, Sir’



Wèi 未

- ▶ Wèi 未 is a verbal negation meaning ‘not yet’ or ‘never’.
- ▶ Note: The object pronoun 之 is not omitted; there regularly occurs an inversion of verb and object pronoun with this negation. E.g.

天下未之聞也 tiān xià wèi zhī wén yě

‘The world have never/not yet heard about it’

天下未之有也 tiān xià wèi zhī yǒu yě

‘There was never such a thing in the world’



Fēi 非 ‘it is not so that’

- ▶ *Fēi* 非 might be a contraction of *bu* 不 and the (preclassical) copula *wéi* 唯 ‘to be’ → it is thus used as a negation of nominal sentences

A B *yě* 也 ‘A is B’ (positive)

A 非 B (*yě* 也) ‘A is not B’ (negative)

白馬非馬 *bái mǎ fēi mǎ*

‘A white horse is not a horse’

非吾徒也 *fēi wú tú yě*

‘[He] is not my follower!’

池非不深也 *chí fēi bù shēn yě*

‘It is not so that the pond is not deep’



fēi 非

- ▶ Yet *fēi* 非 is frequently found in a preverbal or sentence-initial position and then acts as a sentential or clausal negative, meaning ‘It is not the case that...’, or ‘It is not as if...’.

悲在心也非在手也 *bēi zài xīn yě fēi zài shǒu yě*
‘Grief is in the mind; it is not as if it was in the hand’

- ▶ In sentence-initial or preverbal position, *fēi* 非 can also have a conditional meaning: ‘if not’, ‘unless’, ‘were it not for’.

非吳喪越，越必喪吳 *fēi Wú sāng Yuè, Yuè bì sāng Wú*
‘If it is not Wu that ruins Yue, Yue is sure to ruin Wu’

非聖人，莫之能為 *fēi shéng rén mò zhī néng wéi*
‘If not a sage, nobody can do it’



Wú 無

- ▶ 無 / 无 means ‘to have not’ or ‘there is no’ or ‘it does not happen that’
- ▶ 無 is the opposite of yǒu 有, ‘to have’, ‘there is’, ‘there exists’

Examples:

越國無君 *Yuè guó wú jūn*

‘The state of Yue was without a ruler.’

民無常處 *mín wú cháng chù*

‘The people have no constant abode.’

無父無君，是禽獸也 *wú fù wú jūn shì qín shòu yě*

‘To acknowledge (lit. ‘have’) neither father nor ruler, this is to be in the state of beasts.’



Wú 毋

- ▶ The characters 毋 and 無 were probably already homophonous in the late Zhou period (4-3rd c. B.C.) but seem to have represented different words initially.
- ▶ Wu 毋 has a prohibitive meaning, 'do not':

毋怠荒 *wú dài huāng* 'Don't be lazy!'

毋妄言 *wú wàng yán* 'Do not talk carelessly!'

毋失時 *wú shī shí* 'Don't lose time!'

Note:

毋 is similar to *búyào* 不要 in modern Chinese.

毋 is often written 無



wù 勿

- ▶ wù 勿 is a prohibitive negation, i.e. a negative imperative: ‘do not’
- ▶ wù 勿 is a fusion of wú 毋 + 之
- ▶ Some scholars (Gassmann 1997: 258-59) interpret 勿 in analogy to fú 弗 as a negative causative form, hence ‘do not let’ or ‘refuse to!’

Examples:

勿聽 wù tīng ‘do not listen to it’ (Remember to translate the implied 之 ‘it’)

王請勿疑 wáng qǐng wù yí ‘[I] beg your, my King, do not doubt it.’ or “[I] beg your, my King, do not let this make you doubtful.’



莫 mò

- ▶ 莫 mò is a **negative distributive** (no part of...), ‘none’, ‘in no case’
- ▶ 莫 is the opposite of *huò* 或, ‘someone’, ‘in some cases’, ‘sometimes’

Examples:

莫能止之 *mò néng zhǐ zhī* ‘no one was able to stop it’

莫不欲之 *mò néng yù zhī* ‘there was none who did not desire it’

莫大 *mò dà* ‘none is bigger’ → ‘the greatest’



Hanfeizi 韓非子, chapter 15.

1. 楚人有鬻盾與矛者，譽之曰：「吾盾之堅，物莫能陷也。」
2. 又譽其矛曰：「吾矛之利，於物無不陷也。」
3. 或曰：「以子之矛陷子之楯，何如？」
4. 其人弗能應也。
5. 夫不可陷之盾與無不陷之矛，不可同世而立。

1. *Chǔ rén yǒu yù dùn yǔ máo zhě, yù zhī yuē wú dùn zhī jiān, mò néng xiàn yě.*
2. *yòu yù qí máo yuē wú máo zhī lì, yú wù wú bù xiàn yě.*
3. *huò yuē yǐ zǐ zhī máo xiàn zǐ zhī dùn, hé rú?*
4. *qí rén fú néng yīng yě.*
5. *fū bù kě xiàn zhī dùn yǔ wú bù xiàn zhī máo bù kě tóng shì ér lì.*

