

# Improper subjects: Towards a philosophical grammar of existence predicates in Classical Chinese

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Both Aristotelian logic and modern predicate logic require a subject of which a predicate can be asserted. Thus, impersonal sentences without logical or even grammatical subjects have invited much philosophical and linguistic discussion since antiquity. This paper is a first step towards analyzing impersonal constructions of Classical Chinese, comparing them with those known from contemporary and ancient Indo-European languages. For this purpose it distinguishes four types of subjectless sentences: (1) absence of logical subject (in Chinese without the presence of a grammatical dummy subject), (2) lexicalised omission of a lexically determinate subject, (3) lexicalized omission of contextually determinate subject and (4) absence of a specific subject, equivalent to a zero non-referential generic pronoun ‘one’, ‘you’. The paper focuses especially on different kinds of feature placing predicates (type (1)), looking at transitive and intransitive meteorological verbs, verbs for states of the world or society, as well as existence predicates, examining in detail the linguistic, logical and cognitive implications of classical Chinese using sentences without grammatical subjects as opposed to the use of a dummy grammatical subject such as German ‘es’ or English ‘it’.

Key words: impersonal constructions, subjectless predication, language and logic, Ancient Greek, Classical Chinese grammar

## 1. Introduction

Frédéric Lambert from Bordeaux has presented a truly fascinating magisterial account of the interpretation of impersonal verbs in classical Greek in which he has drawn my attention to the ways in which even a comedian like Aristophanes played around with the intractable problems of subjectless meteorological verbs.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Frédéric Lambert 2009 refers to a passage from *The Clouds* which I translate in my own way from the Greek below:

### Strepsiades:

ὁ Ζεὺς δ' ἡμῖν, φέρε πρὸς τῆς γῆς,  
οὐλύμπιος οὐ θεὸς ἔστιν;

Come on for us now, and the earth be our witness: is not  
Zeus, the Olympian, a god, then?

### Socrates:

ποῖος Ζεὺς; οὐ μὴ ληρήσεις; οὐδ'  
ἔστι Ζεὺς.

What kind of Zeus are we talking about? Don't you give  
me this kind o' crap! In any case: he doesn't exist!

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on impersonal constructions in the classical languages and elsewhere is rich. Particularly useful are Abraham & Leiss (2006); Chocheyras (1985); Comrie (1977); Cuzzolin & Napoli (2009); Desbordes (1991); Ernout (1909); Jacobi (1985); Lambert (2010); Maillard (1991); Ogura (1986); Pieroni (2000); Pinkster (1992); [and](#) Seriot & Berrendonner (2000).

**Strepsiades:**

τί λέγεις σύ;

What are you talking about?

ἀλλὰ τίς ὕει; τουτί γάρ ἔμοιγ'  
ἀπόφηναι πρότον ἀπάντων.

Who the hell do you imagine is raining then, eh? Why don't you let me know before you go on to anything else!

**Socrates:**

(370) αὐται δῆπου: μεγάλοις δέ σ'  
ἐγὼ σημείους αὐτὸ διδάξω.

All right, then! As you say! With overwhelming proofs I shall teach you this lesson, for sure.

φέρει ποῦ γάρ πάποτ' ἄνευ  
Νεφελῶν ὕοντ' ἤδη τεθέασαι;

Come on then: where have you ever seen him rain in this world without clouds, eh?

καίτοι χρῆν αἰθρίας ὕειν αὐτόν,  
ταύτας δ' ἀποδημεῖν.

And yet, you see, he ought to be raining along while these clouds are off and away.

**Strepsiades:**

νῆ τὸν Απόλλω τουτό γέ τοι δὴ τῶ  
νῦν λόγῳ εὖ προσέφυσας:

By Apollo, you've made your point by your present speech.

καίτοι πρότερον τὸν Δῖ ἀληθῶς  
ῶμην διὰ κοσκίνου οὐρεῖν.

And yet a moment ago I was convinced that Zeus himself was pissing through some sieve when it rained.

ἀλλ' ὅστις ὁ βροντῶν ἐστι φράσον:  
τουτό με ποιεῖ τετρεμαίνειν.

Let's have it, then: tell us who does the thundering. That scares the shit out of me.

**Socrates:**

(375) αὐται βροντῶσι  
κυλινδόμεναι.

These thunders just thunder as they roll along, that's all!

**Strepsiades:**

τῶ τρόπῳ ὃ πάντα σὺ τολμῶν;

What way do you mean, brazen as you are?

**Socrates:**

ὅταν ἐμπλησθῶσ' ὕδατος πολλοῦ  
κἀναγκασθῶσι φέρεσθαι,

Consisting of lots of water they cannot help being carried along, those Clouds.

κατακρημνόμεναι πλήρεις ὄμβρου  
δι' ἀνάγκην, εἶτα βαρεῖαι

And when replete with rain

εἰς ἀλλήλας ἐμπίπτουσαι ῥήγνυνται  
καὶ παταγοῦσιν.

these Clouds bang into each other thus making that terrific noise.

**Strepsiades:**

ὁ δ' ἀναγκάζων ἐστὶ τίς αὐτάς, οὐχ  
ὁ Ζεὺς, ὥστε φέρεσθαι;

But ah! Who is it, if not Zeus, that forces them to be carried along, eh?

**Socrates:**

(380) ἥκιστ' ἀλλ' αἰθέριος Δῖνος.

Not him in the least! The aetherial whirl!

**Strepsiades:**

Δῖνος; τουτί μ' ἐλελήθειν,  
ὁ Ζεὺς οὐκ ὄν, ἀλλ' ἀντ' αὐτοῦ  
Δῖνος νυνὶ βασιλεύων.

Oh damn! It never occurred to me  
that Zeus being non-existing, that Whirl now reigns  
supreme!

ἀτὰρ οὐδέν πω περὶ τοῦ πατάγου  
καὶ τῆς βροντῆς μ' ἐδίδαζας.

That's all very well, but you haven't breathed a word  
about that noise and thunder!

**Socrates:**

οὐκ ἤκουσάς μου τὰς Νεφέλας  
ὑδατος μεστὰς ὅτι φημί

Didn't you hear me? The clouds, being full of water,

ἐμπιπτούσας εἰς ἀλλήλας παταγεῖν  
διὰ τὴν πυκνότητα;

knock against each other, and they make this noise  
because they are so solid with water.

**Strepsiades:**

(385) φέρε τουτὶ τῷ χρηὶ πιστεύειν;

Oh, come on! Who would believe any of this?

**Socrates:**

ἀπὸ σαντοῦ ἴγώ σε διδάξω.

Very well: Let me teach you through self-observation,  
then!

ἤδη ζωμοῦ Παναθηναίοις  
ἐμπλησθεῖς εἴτ' ἐταράχθης

At the big Panathenaic Festival, stuffed with that broth,  
haven't you felt disturbed?

τὴν γαστέρα, καὶ κλόνος ἐξαίφνης  
αὐτὴν διεκορκορύγησεν;

In your tummy I mean, that inward turmoil rumbling its  
way out as a fart?

**Strepsiades:**

νῆ τὸν Ἀπόλλω καὶ δεινὰ ποιεῖ γ'  
εὐθύς μοι, καὶ τετάρακται

By God, you have a point! That broth has a terrific effect!

χῶσπερ βροντῆ τὸ ζωμίδιον  
παταγεῖ καὶ δεινὰ κέκραγεν:

Like the thunder it races through your belly doesn't it, and  
makes a terrific din!

(390) ἀτρέμας πρῶτον παππάξ  
παπάξ, κάπειτ' ἐπάγει  
παπαπαπάξ,

It sets out mildly, papax papax, then goes papapappax,

χῶταν χέξω, κομιδῆ βροντῆ  
παπαπαπάξ ὅσπερ ἐκεῖναι.

and finally, as I shit it out, it thunders forth indeed.  
Gently, though, with care. Just like those Clouds.

The spirit of this irreverent dialogue is entirely alien to ancient Chinese literary conventions. And yet, it seems to me, that the content is directly relevant to some fundamental issues concerning the nature of Chinese philosophical thought and Chinese historical syntax.<sup>2</sup>

As the comedian Aristophanes was delicately and irreverently aware, subjectless sentences are something of a well-known logical teaser, just the kind the ancient Greek sophists would have liked to discuss. According to Aristotelian logic, and indeed modern predicate logic in general, one can only assert propositions which attribute a predicate to a subject, propositions

<sup>2</sup> [See](#) Cikoski (1981); Freundlich (1988); [and](#) Li and Thompson (eds. 1976).

Mis en forme : Anglais (États Unis)

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Mis en forme : Anglais (États Unis)

which assert that a predicate ~~to~~ holds of a subject. Now the scandal is that even a proposition like *It is raining*, with its grammatical subject “it” is capable of being asserted, while it is in no way obvious that it has a logical subject.

Ancient Greek grammarians focussed on impersonal constructions like the ancient Greek *dei* ‘one must; one should’ which do not invite the specification of a logical subject. Latin grammarians have indeed discussed impersonal subjectless constructions in elaborate detail. The great logician Peter Abaelard (1079 - 1142) has devoted ~~a great deal of~~ much careful, analytic attention to the logical construal of impersonal sentences in his important commentary on Aristotle’s *Peri hermeneias* (*De Interpretatione*).

Klaus Jacobi has published on the web a masterful philosophical interpretation of Abaelard’s logical reflections on the subject in his commentary on *De Interpretatione*.

## 2. Subjectless predication or feature-placing predicates

In this brief contribution I wish to combine ~~the~~ philological and ~~the~~ logical methods to consider the case of subjectless predication or feature-placing predicates in the terminology of my philosophical master Peter F. Strawson in classical Chinese.<sup>3</sup>

Subjectlessness in classical Chinese poses a great number of entertaining problems of grammatical analysis that go beyond what is current in Latin and Greek.

In the context of syntactic analysis in my *Thesaurus Linguae Sericae* I distinguish between four importantly different types of absence of a subject:

1. **V0**  
Absence of a **logical** subject.  
Example: ‘It is raining.’
2. **V[0]**  
Lexicalised omission of a **lexically determinate** subject.  
Example: ‘[I] Thank you!’
3. **V(0)**  
Lexicalised omission of a **contextually determinate** subject.  
Example: ‘(It is) OK!’
4. **VØ**  
Absence of a specific subject which can be read as the presence, in Chinese, of the zero non-referential generic pronoun **Ø**, translatable as ‘one; you’.

Mis en forme : Police :Non Gras

In a comparable vein, I also distinguish between three types of ~~omitted~~ object omissions:

<sup>3</sup> The philosophical literature on the subject includes Jacobi (1985); Moore (1936); Myhill (1997); Pears (1967); Pears & Thomson (1963); Strawson (1974); and Williams (1981).

1. **Vi**  
Absence of a logical object.  
as in Example: 'He *sleeps* [NOT an understood cognate object: a sleep.]'
2. **Vt[oN]**  
Idiomatic omission of lexically determinate object.  
Example: as in 'He *drinks* [(excessive amounts of) alcohol].'
3. **Vt(oN)**  
Idiomatic omission of a contextually determinate object.  
Example: as in 'I *agree* (with whatever is contextually determinate).'

In the present paper, I shall also concentrate on a few simple cases of omitted subjects.

We properly understand the 'it' in *it is raining* when we remain completely uncommitted as to what, if anything, this word refers to in the given context. Cases of this sort are not simple. Take the French interjection *chouette*; there may be no overt subject here, but it stands to reason that what occasions this interjection is also the logical subject of the predicate *chouette*.

Mis en forme : Police :Non Italique

In ~~*Thank you!*~~, on the other hand, one only understands the phrase properly if one construes the performative verb as having a logical subject, that subject being the speaker using the phrase ~~*Thank you!*~~. (It remains an open question in what sense *hereby* may be said to be "understood"-understood" in a phrase like ~~*Thank-thank you!*~~).

The identity of the omitted subject of ~~*Thank you!*~~ may be said to be determinate from the context. But there is a very neat lexicalised rule according to which the subject is retrieved: it is the internalised lexicon and not the context which tells us that the subject of *thank* is the current user of this word.

~~*Things ease*~~ seems significantly though not radically different in the case of ~~*OK!*~~. All the lexicon tells us in this case with this phrase is that we must look in the context for a suitable, logical subject, and that if we do not find such a suitable logical subject in the context one there we ~~*shall will*~~ be deemed to not ~~*to*~~ have understood the utterance ~~*OK!*~~, although Although, of course, while having failed to grasp its pragmatic force in the given context, we may well be deemed to have understood the lexical force of the expression ~~*OK!*~~, while having failed to grasp its pragmatic force in the given context.

In classical Chinese there is good reason to try to distinguish between these three types of subject absences lessness for all subjectless words as used in a given context: We shall see that there is a surprisingly wide range of feature-placing predicates of the type **V0**, ~~*that*~~ there is a fairly limited range of verbal expressions with idiomatically omitted lexically predictable verbs **V[0]**, and there is, of course, a disconcerting tendency of verbal expressions **V(0)** to occur where modern Chinese as well as other modern languages would encourage the explicit specification of the subject involved.

It has only occurred to me very recently that there is in Chinese a fourth type of verbal expression with an idiomatically omitted subject, as in *rù xiāng suí sú* 入鄉隨俗 (~~*rù xiāng suí*~~

~~st~~) where it would seem unidiomatic if not ungrammatical to write any explicit subject, and where it sounds curiously misleading to speak of any particular lexical item that is omitted, but where it is entirely wrong to construe 入鄉 and 隨俗 in any of the senses mentioned so far.

There is a logical subject for both 入鄉 and 隨俗. Indeed, both verbal expressions have to be construed as having the same subject for the overall expression to be understood. And the Chinese is uncommitted as to whether the phrase is descriptive or imperative.

隨俗 is probably imperative, as is suggested in the English *When in Rome do as the Romans do* (with its interesting xiē hòu yǔ 歇後語 (~~xiē hòu yǔ~~) variant *When in Rome...*) suggests. To specify the logical subject of this phrase as being the second person pronoun *you* commits an uncommitted phrase to a specificity of reference which is alien to it.

One might suspect that wWhat is omitted here is what one might suspect of being what in modern Mandarin, might come out as the idiomatically generic nǐ 你-~~nǐ~~, and in French as *on* - and in English as the generic pronoun *you*, (and not as the second person pronoun). One might simply say that the French *on* comes out as zero Ø in Chinese. And yet such an interpretation seems to commit the Chinese where in fact it is uncommitted.

Mis en forme : Police :Non Italique

Contrast *it is your turn*, and also the Chinese zhuǎn dào nǐ le 轉到你了 (~~zhuǎn dào nǐ le~~) / lún dào nǐ le 輪到你了 (~~lún dào nǐ le~~) TURN TO YOU. There is no sense in which one needs to retrieve any grammatical subject in order to understand the phrase. And note that we say hai méi yǒu zhuǎn dào nǐ le 還沒有轉到你了 (~~hai méi yǒu zhuǎn dào nǐ le~~).

LY 1.1 xué ér shí xí zhī 學而時習之 (~~xué ér shí xí zhī~~) brings out the immense problems of specifying subjects for Chinese verbs very neatly: how must we construe the subject structure of the verbal expressions 學 and 習之?

The following possibilities present themselves for the analysis of this phrase:

1. **V(0)**

It is 'we' who study and then exercise something, and isour exercise that is such a delight?

2. **VØ**

The statement is general about "one": 'If one studies...'

3. **V0**

The statement is indeed abstracting without from subjects: 'To study..., is not that a pleasure?'

**Commentaire [C1]:** These sentences are a bit unclear. Please confirm that the corrections remain true to the author's original meaning.

The reading **V[0]** does seem excluded: 學 and 習 cannot plausibly be taken to be lexically subcategorised for idiomatic use with a certain subject.

Traditional Chinese philology has thrived in blessed indifference to alternatives like those I have lined up here. TAnd the fact is that Confucius is clearly uncommitted as to the distinctions

we make. The phrase we are concerned with is underdetermined with respect to the distinctions we shall always try in vain to impose on it.

The theoretically important question that arises, then, is this: is this semantically under-committed and underdetermined grammatical style with regard to the distinctions above pervasive to the classical Chinese language, or is it that classical Chinese does lexicalise these distinctions where they are deemed relevant?

This is an empirical question which depends entirely on the discovery of lexical entries which either are subcategorised themselves for specified omitted subjects of the type I have outlined, or which subcategorise other verbs they are in construction with.

I shall begin by considering verbs without logical subjects. Three types of these must be carefully held apart:

1. Feature-placing with dummy grammatical subject present, as in ‘*It* is raining!’ (contrast the following Chinese phrases which have neither a logical nor a dummy subject: *yǔ* 雨 ‘it is raining’, *xià yǔ* 下雨 ‘it is raining’, and *yǔ xué* 雨雪 ‘it is raining snow > it is snowing’ in Chinese which have neither a logical nor a dummy subject.).
2. Feature-placing without dummy grammatical subject, as in ‘*Damn!*’ *Zāo gāo le* 糟糕了!
3. Subjectless grammatical construal of an action as a feature occurring, in a feature-placing subjectless sentence, as in ‘*Hier wird geschlafen.*’ (This is where the sleeping goes on-).<sup>4</sup>

Compare the impersonal *il s’agit d’argent*, ‘money is the question’ and the German *es geht um’s liebe Geld*. The radical defocussing of the subjects *il* and *es* comes out when one tries to ask *qu’est ce qui s’agit d’argent?* or *was geht da um’s Geld?*, *Was ist es, das da um’s Geld geht*. In fact, it turns out that in this radical defocussing the subject is irretrievable, and cannot be asked unaskable-for. The term “defocussing” becomes logically misleading: the subject is no longer only defocussed, it is absent.

There are degrees of defocussing, and there are also degrees of the kind of conviction with which one states that the subject is absent.

<sup>4</sup> ‘*Hier wird von ihnen/einem/mir/Euch geschlafen.*’ (‘here is slept by you’) are all unacceptable. And yet, there is no doubt that the sleeping is construed as the sleeping by someone. The sleepers are defocussed, that is all. Cases of this sort need to be discussed together with such constructions as the German *es klopft (an der Tür)* ‘There is knocking (on the door).’ and *mir graust es* which translates only uncomfortably into ‘I feel unsettled’ because the German construes the matter logically subjectlessly, with a dummy grammatical subject, and with the affected “logical” subject in the dative. Consider also *Es grünt so grün, wenn Berlins Blüten blühen*: ‘It greens so greenly when the flowers of Berlin are in flower.’ There is no doubt that in this case there is something that is green, but what is happening here is presented first in a subjectless poetic mode, and only thereafter something else is referred to in subject-predicate terms, with an undefocussed subject.

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Mis en forme : Police :Non Italique

Mis en forme : Anglais (États Unis)

What happens in the notorious German impersonal passives is a systematic defocussing not only of agents but of all subjects. And when this defocussing becomes not only systematic but radical then what we seem to have is the subjectless construal of situations that do involve subjects. And it is important to realise that in the case of the German *es klopft* the knocking may be an event without an agent, and even without even a subject that does the knocking: the knocking may be conceived like thunder, “‘impersonally’”.

In classical Chinese it does not in fact rain “‘cats and dogs’”, but the transitive use of the 雨 is worth recording.

Let me begin with a late example:

- (1) *Lùnhéng* 論衡, ed. TLS LH 19.6.10  
雨粟陳、蔡 ‘If it had rained grain in Chén and Cài...’

One notes that it was not a case of ‘Chén and Cài being grain-rainy’.

In 624 it rained bees in Sòng:

- (2) *Chūnqiū* 春秋, ed. TLS CQ 6.3.5.1  
雨蜂於宋 ‘It rained bees in the state of Sòng.’
- (3) *Zhànguó cè* 戰國策, ed. TLS ZGC 11.1.3  
雨血沾衣 ‘It was raining blood, which soaked the clothes.’

What soaked the clothes was not an understood subject of 雨.

- (4) *Chūnqiū* 春秋, ed. TLS CQ 2.8.5  
雨雪 ‘It was raining snow.’
- (5) *Chūnqiū* 春秋, ed. TLS CQ 5.10.7  
大雨雪 ‘There was great snowfall.’
- (6) *Lùnhéng* 論衡, ed. TLS LH 18.6.4; 18.6.7  
雨穀 ‘It was raining grain.’

Contrast the possibility of the subject Heaven:

- (7) *Lùnhéng* 論衡, ed. TLS LH 19.12.12  
天雨穀 ‘Heaven raining grain.’
- (8) *Lǚshìchūnqiū* 呂氏春秋, ed. TLS LS 2.1.1.2  
雨水 ‘It was raining water.’ (!)

In what follows I shall consider a series of apparently subjectless intransitive predicative expressions in Chinese. Many of these seem to have no semantic parallel in Greek. Related to the meteorological subjectless verbs is the case of *bīng* 冰:

- (9) *Mòzi* 墨子, ed. TLS MO 19.4.2  
 夏冰                    ‘~~when~~-When there is ice in summer...’

The verbal interpretation of *bīng* 冰 here is unaffected by the fact that the negation involves the nominal construction *wú bīng* 無冰, as in:

- (10) *Chūnqiū* 春秋, ed. TLS CQ 8.1.3.1  
 無冰。                    ‘There was no ice.’
- (11) *Chūnqiū* 春秋, ed. TLS CQ 9.28.1.1  
 二十有八年春,        ‘In the spring of the 28th year  
 無冰。                    there was no ice.’  
 NOT: “The spring of the 28th year was ice-free.”

*Shuǐ* 水 ‘flood’ is current in the same kind of impersonal meaning:

- (12) *Chūnqiū* 春秋, ed. TLS CQ 2.1.4  
 秋, 大水。            ‘In autumn there were great floods.’ is not to be interpreted as  
                                  ‘the autumn was highly watery.’
- (13) Oracle bone inscriptions, ed. TLS HEJI 33354  
 其水                    ‘There will be a flood.’  
 不水                    ‘There won’t be a flood.’

The *Annals* of the state of Lǔ 魯 provide a host of examples, sometimes so short that they invite the objection that they may be written in a telegraphic Chinese. Nonetheless, non-telegraphic cases do exist:

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- (14) *Chūnqiū* 春秋, ed. TLS CQ 3.20.2  
 夏,                    ‘In summer,  
 齊大災。            **there was a great disaster from fire in Qi.**
- (15) *Zuǒzhuàn* 左傳, ed. TLS ZUO 18.10.3.1  
 夏五月,            ‘In summer, in the fifth month,  
 火始昏見。        the Huǒ star made its first appearance at dusk.  
 丙子,                On Bīngzǐ  
 風。                    **there was wind.**
- (16) *Zuǒzhuàn* 左傳, ed. TLS ZUO 5.15.4.3  
 晉饑                    ‘In Jin **there was famine.**’  
                                  NOT: ‘Jin was famished.’

Consider now the following familiar opening of a book of the *Analects*.

- (17) *Analects*, ed. TLS LY 13.1  
 子曰：「如有王者，    The Master said: ‘If there arises a true king  
 必世而後仁。」        then **a generation has to pass before there is Goodness.**’

If we take *shì* 世 to be subjectlessly verbal here, both the presence of *bì* 必 ‘necessarily’ and of *érhòu* 而後 are explained. One might still wonder whether we might take the word 世 differently, as a denominal adverb. The question then arises what such a decision would logically entail. From a logical point of view the notion of an adverb is so ill-defined that it provides very little information.

*Rén* 仁 seems used as an impersonal verb meaning ‘goodness/humaneness prevails’.

(18) *Analects*, ed. TLS LY 16.5

蓋均無貧，	‘Presumably, when there is even-handedness <b>there is no poverty,</b>
和無寡，	when there is harmony <b>there is no dearth,</b>
安無傾。	when there is peace <b>there is no toppling of leadership.</b> ’

Or take this passage from Mencius in which it is not necessarily right to supply a grammatical subject:

(19) *Mencius*, ed. TLS MENG 2.1.2.25

治亦進，	‘If <b>there is good order</b> (in one’s state) then <del>to</del> take office,
亂亦進，	if <b>there is disorder</b> (in one’s state) then likewise <del>to</del> take office,
伊尹也。	that was Yī Yīn.’

**Commentaire [C2]:** check translation here which is not very idiomatic out of context

The logically decisive question is whether it makes any logical difference to construe 治 and 亂 as abstract topics here “as for there being good order”. For the logical interpretation of these topics would lead us back to the very verbal construction we were trying to avoid by the assumption of a grammatical topic.

~~The~~ *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 is full of fine pieces of feature-placing.

(20) *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子, ed. TLS ZHUANG 14.1.4

天有六極五常，	‘Heaven has Six Extremes and Five Constants.
帝王順之則治，	When the Sovereigns and Kings follow these <b>there is good order,</b>
逆之則凶。	and when they go against it <b>there will be inauspicious disaster.</b> ’

~~So is, obviously~~ [Examples of feature places can also be found in](#) *Hánfēizǐ* 韓非子.

(21) *Hánfēizǐ* 韓非子, ed. TLS HF 51.1.7

是廢常上賢，	‘Thus when disregarding regular practise one honours moral talent
則亂；	then <b>there will be political chaos,</b>
舍法任智，	and when setting aside the law one employs the competent,
則危。	then <b>there will be political danger.</b>
故曰：	Therefore it is said:
上法而不上賢。	One should honour the law more than moral talent.’



above that it actually becomes quite plausible to [also](#) take ~~also~~ this verb *yōu* 憂 in an impersonal way.

The *Shiji* 史記 provides a precious example involving the pest:

(29) *Shiji* 史記, ed. TLS SJ 6.2.3

天下疫。

‘There was [thea](#) pest everywhere.’

NOT, I think: ‘All under Heaven was pestilential.’

### 3. The grammatical construal of existence predicates

Alain Peyraube became famous for asking necessary questions [such as](#): “‘Where exactly does the object go in the sentence?’” My teacher Angus Graham, on the other hand, always insisted: ‘Wait a minute: what exactly is the subject?’ Take the ubiquitous phrase *yǒu zhī* 有之, which means something like “‘There is such a thing/person?’” or more idiomatically ‘True enough!’ Where’s the Chinese subject? If it is not there, what subject is omitted? If no subject is omitted and 之 must be taken to be that subject, why does that subject take the form of a grammaticalised and specialised *object* pronoun? ~~WIndeed:~~ what is going on here, logically, structurally, and grammatically?

(30) Analects, ed. TLS LY 4.6.1

蓋有之矣，我未之見也。

‘Perhaps there is such a person, but I have never seen such a person.’

之 recurs as an object.

(31) Mencius, ed. TLS MENG 1.2.3.1

齊宣王問曰： King Xuān of Qí asked:

「交鄰國有道乎？」 ‘As for cultivating good relations with the neighbouring states, is there any method (of doing it)?’

孟子對曰：「有」。 Mencius answered (politely): ‘Yes, there is.’

The question now is whether what is omitted in the reply 有 is the subject or the object of that verb.

“*There is*” is as opaque as *Il y en a*. We need to know who or what *il* refers to, and what the logical structure is that the *There is* encodes idiomatically. Immanuel Kant famously insisted that ‘exist’ is not a predicate. But grammatically there is no doubt that in “‘unicorns exist.’”, *exist* looks and functions very much like a grammatical predicate. Logically, the claim is that the set of unicorns in the universe of discourse is not empty. So, then. If we take our inspiration from Aristophanes, we might go on to write a play about who does the 有-ing in classical Chinese.

Suppose now that 有 places as a feature what follows it, thus creating what works semantically like a feature-placing (existential) predicate. *There are ghosts* is then a systematically misleading expression, whereas the German *es spukt* 'there are ghosts' conveys the same idea in the manner closer to the one that I am attributing to the Chinese. Thus the existence of ghosts is expressed in German in the impersonal manner that existence is predicated in Chinese.

Then *Sòng yǒu guǐ* 宋有鬼 would not say 'Song contains ghosts', but 'In Song *spukt es*'. This sentence, then, places an occurrence-feature somewhat in a French style of *il y a*, in which no one can sensibly ask what *il* is taken to refer to. Chinese uses the Chinese verb for *avoir*, and not any copula, as one does in English, and no concept of "giving" as in the German *es gibt*, literally 'it gives' or in the very interesting Russian passive *imeetsja* 'is being had' used to express existence.

*Avoir* is transitive, and the thing that is said to exist comes as the object of that verb, in French. And the subject of existential *avoir* is exactly the same as in *il pleut*; it is a dummy subject. It is the kind of subject that flies in the face of Angus Graham when he asks "Wait a minute: where exactly is the subject?" just as the *it* does in *it is raining*. And one notes that this sort of use of *it* is easily extended to the use of the subject in other words: *It never rains but pours*.

The logical subjectlessness then of *It rains cats and dogs* is like the subjectlessness of *il y a beaucoup de monde*. Classical Chinese does not use logically misleading expressions like dummy subjects; it does not do so when it places meteorological features in the physical world like rain, and or many, many other features. And it does not. Nor does it do so when it places features in the universe of discourse by the transitive subjectless verb *yǒu* 有. The question then that French and Chinese (and Russian: *imeetsja*) pose in common is why a subjectless verb for TO HAVE is used to place features in the universe of discourse. The logical motivation that suggests itself is this: for a feature to be placed it must be contained in the domain one might call the universe of discourse. Indeed, logically speaking, to exist is always "to be in", "to be contained in" a domain, that domain being unspecified and in the abstract case of existence radically unspecifiable. The modern Chinese *cúnzài* 存在 brings this out. The seemingly intransitive expression *cúnzài* 存在 delicately suggests an unsayable object that is dimly understood.

Thus *yǒu* 有 might be said to place a feature on some ontological map much as *yǔ* 雨 places a feature on a physical map. Generally, one asks of *yǔ* 雨 what *it* was raining, and usually the answer is *yǔshuǐ* 雨水. Similarly of *yǒu* 有 one asks, curiously, "qu'est-ce qu'il y a ...?", and not "qu'est-ce qu'a ...?". The French brings out the feature of placement in the use of "y" just as English automatically brings it out in *there*, whereas in Russian *imeetsja* and in the dialectal German *es hat* this placement features is missing.

*Lùnhéng* 論衡, ed. TLS LH 9.11.3 *cháng yǒu shén guài* 常有神怪 ‘there constantly are supernatural and strange features’ works like *dà yǔ hēi xuě* 大雨黑雪 ‘It greatly rained dark snow’: one asks of such verb phrases ~~one asks~~ not “‘-what?’” but “‘-where?’”.

Just as we understand *yǔ xuě* 雨血 ‘it rained blood’ without asking whether the raining is “by Jove” or “by Heaven”, so we should understand *yǒu guǐ* 有鬼 ‘there are ghosts’ without asking who does the having/containing as if it said ‘it contains > manifests ghosts/ghosting’. Idiomatic English translation is not much help. What we need is not translation but structural deciphering, to use a splendidly untranslatable Chinese expression for our purpose, we need *pòyì* 破譯.

There is a verb *Aristotelizein* in Greek, meaning ‘to do an Aristotle’. What I am suggesting here, light-heartedly, is that to say *Aristotle exists* might in some languages might work a little like saying *aristotelizetai* ‘it Aristotles (somewhere)’. For ‘Plato existed’ one could then use the form *peplatōnizeto* ‘it has Platoed (somewhere)’ of the existing verb *platōnizesthai*. ‘There will be popes’ might be unpacked to become ‘It will pope (somewhere, some time)’ for a language like Chinese. And to consider this possibility is neither to pledge allegiance to Benjamin Whorf nor to claim that existence predicates must be construed like this from the point of view of some feature-placing logic. Nor is it a way of saying that the world of existing objects was, to the Chinese, like a world of disembodied wafting odours or atmospheres manifesting themselves in places. We are just quietly considering whether some current existence statements might not be structurally isomorphic with those statements that are so common in classical Chinese, which involve **logical** subjectlessness in transitive verbs.

*Spirits don’t exist* sounds as if it refers to spirits and goes on to claim that these do not exist. It is a systematically misleading expression because it first refers to something and then claims that there never was anything to refer to. This is a much rehearsed point. The classical *wú shén* 無神 ‘...there are no spirits’ (LNZ 1.7.7), when read as I propose, will raise no such logical problem because one can read its logic right off the surface structure as ‘it never contains > manifests spirits (anywhere)’.

*Socrates existed* similarly, will then have to be diagnosed as a systematically misleading expression. *On the mountain there was a holy man* must count as a logically opaque expression. And the classical Chinese *shān shàng yǒu shén rén yān* 山上有神人焉 ‘On the mountain it contains > manifests a holy man-’ might turn out to be a logically less misleading and less opaque expression.

Consider the modern Chinese word *nào* 鬧: *Sòngguó nàole jīhuang* 宋國鬧了饑荒 must be construed impersonally as ‘in Sòng there was a famine-’. *Suǒmǎliyǎ nàole hǎidào* 索馬利雅鬧了海盜 is impersonal ‘in Somalia there were robbers’, and the phrase is structurally different from *Suǒmǎliyǎ nàbiān hǎidào duō* 索馬利雅那邊海盜多 or *hǎidào zài Suǒmǎliyǎ nàoluàn* 海盜在索馬利雅鬧亂.

#### 4. Conclusion

Some of the classical Chinese evidence might be taken to suggest to us a natural folk logic of the cognitive system of existence as feature-placings ~~that-which~~ are NOT construed as predications of anything, and ~~therefore~~ NOT, ~~therefore~~, really predicates after all, ~~just~~ as Kant ~~has~~ famously maintained ~~a~~-long ~~time~~-ago as a general philosophical point. The varied ethnography of folk logic ~~which-that~~ I advocate, which looks systematically for culture-specific differences and nuances, is subtly different from the study of some presumed biologically general “natural logic” applicable everywhere. As an ethnographer of folk logic one is, for example, quite ready to contemplate the possibility that there is nothing splendidly systematic ~~and-or~~ successful about construals of existence in human language ~~and t-~~ That different languages tinker differently with their systems to accommodate tricky notions like that of existence. Maybe existence, grammatically *as well as* existentially, is one of those many areas of conceptual tinkering where we just have to say: *on se débrouille*. Perhaps it is this process of structural and conceptual tinkering that increases what Wilhelm von Humboldt felicitously focussed on as *die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus* ‘the structural diversity of human language’.

Clearly, man is born with a biologically innate and universal ability for learning what are superficially observed ~~to be~~ very different languages. There are some general principles ~~which that~~ man applies, and there are many widely varying and highly structured local conventions which man is biologically ready to learn. But ~~thirdly beyond that~~, there are ~~also~~ areas of language which constitute articulatory dilemmas where what seems to be at work ~~are-is~~ not systematically structured local conventions, but ~~rather~~ linguistic *bricolage*, *Bastellei*, ~~or~~ structural tinkering.

Need ~~I say that less to say~~, I ~~obviously~~ have **not** solved the vastly complex philosophical problems around existence as a predicate, as it were, by a single sinological and philological sleight of hand. My modest purpose in this paper has been ~~no more than simply~~ to try to tease out some of the ethnography of certain logical sensibilities that might be inherent in classical Chinese ways of trying to construe existence linguistically. ~~That is all~~. Professional logicians and ~~professionalist~~ philosophers of language may safely dismiss all of this as what it is: merely analytical ethnography of logical sensibilities, not real philosophy ~~-P~~ philological day-dreaming. The complex logical problems surrounding statements of existence will indeed never be solved by any facile philological or sinological sleight of hand. But the patient ethnography of logical sensibilities remains a sublime pleasure, ~~and will continue to be so~~ at least as long as it tries to deal with ~~something one is tempted to break into~~ ~~what in~~ French ~~isn~~ called *la*

| *logique vécue*. Long live Alain Peyraube, who has enabled and inspired so many of us to ~~to~~ practise *la linguistique vécue*.

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