1 The basic formation of a Chinese sentence

A Chinese sentence can typically be classified as either a subject–predicate construction or a non-subject–predicate construction. Another structure generally referred to as the ‘topic–comment’ structure is also common in Chinese.

1.1 The subject

The following are some of the key grammatical features of the subject in a Chinese sentence.

(a) Definite subjects

The subject of a sentence is generally of a definite nature; i.e. it is a specific entity that is known to both the speaker and the listener.

☞ See Chapter 3 for more information on the definiteness of nouns.

Yesterday Teacher Wang came to my house.

(Zuo tiān Wáng láoshi lái wǒ jiā.

Yesterday Teacher Wang came to my house.

(Improper: (Wáng is indefinite.)

Correct: Zuótiān wǒ jiā lái le yí ge kèrén.

Yesterday a guest came to my house.

☞ See 20.8 for word-order rules.

(b) Non-definite, generic subjects

An entity of non-definite nature that is generic in meaning can also serve as the subject.

Bòcài hěn yǒu yìngyǎng.

Spinach is nutritious.

Xióngmāo zhēn kě’ài.

Pandas are really cute.

(c) What can be a subject?

Words and phrases that function as nouns, pronouns, proper nouns, numerals, adjectives or verbs can serve as the subject.
(d) Sentential subjects

A complete sentence can serve as the subject without any particular marker. It should be noted that a comma can be used after a sentential subject, especially when the subject is long.

在中国，丈夫做家务，是一件很平常的事。 (丈夫做家务 is the subject.)

Zài Zhōngguó, zhàngfù zuò jīwù, shì yì jiàn hěn píngcháng de shì.

In China, husbands doing housework is a very common thing.

Expletive ‘it’ in English has no counterpart in Chinese. This means that a sentence with a sentential subject may have different word orders in English and Chinese.

儿子不听她的话，让她很难过。

Erzi bù tīng tāde huà, ràng tā hěn nán guò.

It saddens her (= makes her sad) that her son does not listen to her.

In English, a sentential subject is frequently introduced by the phrase ‘(the fact) that . . .’. Note that such a phrase is not used in Chinese. The phrase ‘the fact that’ does not have a counterpart in Chinese.

王先生喜欢李小姐不表示李小姐也喜欢王先生。

Wáng xiānshēng xǐhuān Lǐ xiǎojīu bù biǎoshì Lǐ xiǎojīu yě xǐhuān Wáng xiānshēng.

The fact that Mr Wang likes Miss Li does not mean that Miss Li likes Mr Wang, too.

(e) Subjects in passive sentences

The subject is not always the performer of the action; it is sometimes the receiver of the action.

See 22.3 for unmarked passive.

我的车修好了。 (车 does not perform the action of 修.)

Wǒde chē xiū hǎo le.

My car has been fixed.

1.2 The predicate

The predicate in a Chinese sentence can be any of the following:

(a) Simple verbs, compound verbs or verbal phrases

It should be noted that a sentence with a simple verb as its predicate rarely appears without at least one other element, such as a particle or a time phrase. When it does appear without another element, it is usually in context.

(Situation: Wang is throwing a party. Li and Zhang are talking about it.)

李：你们去吗？

Lǐ: Nǐmen qù ma?

张：我去；我女朋友不去。

Zhāng: Wǒ qù; wǒ nǚ péngyǒu bù qù.

Li: Are you (plural) going?

Zhang: I am going; my girlfriend is not.
The basic formation of a Chinese sentence

妈吗：昨天的晚会，你跟妹妹表演了什么节目？
Māma: Zuòtīān de wǎnhuì nǐ gèn měimei biǎoyǎn le shénme jiémù?
儿子：我 唱歌，她 跳舞。 (唱歌 and 跳舞 are both compound verbs.)
Erzǐ: Wǒ chànggē, tā tiǎowǔ.
Mother: What did you and your younger sister perform at yesterday’s evening party?
Son: I sang; she danced.

我喜欢李小姐：李小姐不喜欢我。 (喜欢李小姐 and 不喜欢我 are verbal phrases.)
Wǒ xǐhuān Lǐ xiǎojiăi; Lǐ xiǎojiăi bù xǐhuān wǒ.
I like Miss Li; Miss Li does not like me.

(b) Adjectives

It should be noted that  is not used in this case.

In a simple positive descriptive statement, a degree adverb or a complement of degree should be used. When the degree adverb  is used, it does not literally mean ‘very’, but is only used to fulfi  l this basic grammar requirement.

我爸爸在大使馆工作，他很忙。 (Do not say 他忙 or 他是忙;  很 does not have a literal meaning of 'very' in this sentence.)
Wǒ bàba zài dàshīguǎn gōngzuò, tā hěn máng.
My father works at the embassy. He is busy.

我累得要命。 (要命 is a complement of degree; therefore, there is no degree adverb before 累.)
Wǒ lèi de yàomíng.
I am extremely tired. (= I am tired to death.)

When the adjective appears alone, a comparison is implied.

我有弟弟，也有妹妹。弟弟大，妹妹小。
Wǒ yǒu dìdì, yě yǒu měimei. Dìdì dà, měimei xiǎo.
I have a younger brother and I also have a younger sister. My younger brother is older (than my younger sister).

王：你们学校，男老师 多还是女老师 多？
Wáng: Nǐmen xuéxiào, nán lǎoshī duō háishì nǚ lǎoshī duō?
丁：女老师 多。
Dīng: Nǚ lǎoshī duō.
Wang: At your school, are there more male teachers or more female teachers?
Ding: There are more female teachers.

Some adjectives are not associated with a matter of degree but are used to indicate a fact. The predicate in such a sentence is 是 + adjective + 的.

See 19.11 for more information.

这件大衣是 蓝的。
Zhè jiàn dàyī shì lán de.
This coat is blue. (This is to indicate a fact.)

这件大衣 很好看.
Zhè jiàn dàyī hěn hǎokàn.
This coat is pretty. (This is to indicate an opinion.)

王老师是 男的 还是 女的？ (男 and 女 are adjectives, and it is improper to refer to individuals as  男人 or 女人.)
Wáng láoshi shì nán de hái shì nǚ de?
Is Teacher Wang a man or a woman?

(c) Nouns
Such a predicate is frequently used to indicate age, time, day, date, year, amount of money, etc. It should be noted that such a sentence is usually a simple positive statement or a question with an interrogative pronoun.

Wáng xiànshèng sānshí wǔ suì, Wáng tì tài sānshí (sui).
Mr Wang is 35 years old; Mrs Wang is 30.

What time is it now?
Xiànzài jǐ diǎn?

How much is this book?
Zhè běn shū duōshǎo qián?

In a negative sentence or an affirmative–negative question, a noun alone cannot be the predicate. A verb must be used; thus the predicate would be a verbal phrase.

Wáng: Jīntiān shì bù shì xīngqī sān?
Wang: Is today Wednesday?

Zhang: Jīntiān bù shì xīngqī sān, shì xīngqī sì.
Zhang: Today isn’t Wednesday; it’s Thursday.

(d) Complete sentences
This is an example of the topic–comment structure, in which the subject is considered the topic, and the complete sentence is the comment. A topic can have more than one comment.

See 1.4.

王先生 心脏不好，血压也很高。
Wáng xiānshèng xīnzàng bù hǎo, xuèyā yě hěn gāo.

Subject Predicate: 心脏不好 and 血压很高 are complete sentences.
(Topic) (Two comments)
Mr Wang’s heart is not good and his blood pressure is also high.

1.3 Non-subject–predicate constructions
A non-subject–predicate construction is a sentence whose initial constituent is not the subject but is the predicate, or a sentence whose constituent is neither a clear-cut subject nor a predicate. The following are typical non-subject–predicate constructions.

(a) Subjectless sentences
A subjectless sentence starts with a verbal phrase, although the verbal phrase can be preceded by a time phrase or a location.

See Chapter 20 for more on subjectless sentences.
(b) Imperative sentences
An imperative sentence is used to give orders and commands or make strong suggestions and requests, etc. The subject 你 or 你们 is implied.
☞ See Chapter 7 for more on imperative sentences.

(c) Elliptical sentences
An elliptical sentence is typically used when the context is clear and the meaning can be understood without both the subject and the predicate being present.

The subject of a sentence is omitted when it is the same as the subject of the previous sentence.

Ding: 你的车是蓝色的还是绿色的?
李：蓝色的。（Both the subject 我的车 and the verb 是 are omitted.）

Lì: Lánshè de.
Dìng: Is your car blue or green?
Lì: Blue.

The predicate of a sentence can be omitted if what is omitted is clear in meaning.

Zhāng: 谁自愿来唱个歌?
Wáng: Wǒ!
Zhāng: Who wants to volunteer to sing a song?
Wáng: Me! (I volunteer.)

1.4 The topic–comment structure
The Chinese language is viewed by many as topic prominent. The topic must be a noun or noun phrase that is definite and has been mentioned in the conversation or is pre-existent in the context.

(a) When the comment is a complete sentence
Usually the comment is a complete sentence used to elaborate on the topic.

Zhè jià fànguǎn, fúwù hěn hǎo.

Topic Comment (服务很好 is a complete sentence.)
Service at this restaurant is good.

(b) When the comment is another topic–comment structure
Sometimes, a comment itself can be a topic–comment structure. There is frequently a comma between the topic and the comment.

(Situation: Wang knew that Zhang had taken two tests yesterday, and Wang wanted to find out how Zhang had done in the tests.)
Wang: How did you do in yesterday’s tests?
Zhang: Of the two tests, I did fine in the Chinese one, and I did poorly in the English one.

1.5 Basic Chinese word order

(a) Subject + verb + object

Subject + verb + object (S + V + O) is generally considered the basic word order in a Chinese sentence of the subject–predicate construction. However, many variations exist, most notably the 把 structure.

☞ See Chapter 21 for the 把 structure.

Zhè běn shū, wǒ kàn guo le.  
这本书，我看过了。  
O S V  
Pre-posed object  Topic  Comment

I have read this book.

In the O + S + V sentence, a comma may be, and frequently is, used after the object.

Zhang: Have you finished reading those two novels?
Li: I have finished reading the English one; I have not started the Chinese one yet.
Do not pre-pose a non-definite object.

我认识一个中国学生。（一个中国学生 is non-definite; it cannot be pre-posed.）

Wǒ rènshì yí ge Zhōngguó xuéshēng.
I know a Chinese student.

(Situation: Zhang and Wang are looking at a photograph. Zhang points at two people in the photo and asks Wang a question. Wang points at each of them when answering.)

张：你认识这两个人吗? (or 这两个人，你认识吗?)

Zhāng: Nǐ rènshì zhè liǎng ge rén ma?

王：这个(,)我不认识。这个(,)我不认识。

Wáng: Zhè ge(,) wǒ bù rènshì; zhè ge(,) wǒ bù rènshì.

Zhang: Do you know these two people?
Wang: I know this one; I don’t know this one.

Although an object may be definite, it is not usually pre-posed if it is not pre-existent in the context.

张：昨天你在小王的生日舞会上，看见了哪些人?

Zhāng: Zuótiān nǐ zài Xiǎo Wáng de shēnghuì wǔhuì shàng, kànjiàn le nǐ xiǎo rén?

李：我看见了小丁跟小陈。 (Improper: 小丁跟小陈，我看见了。)

Lǐ: Wǒ kànjiàn le Xiǎo Dīng gèn Xiǎo Chén.

Zhang: Whom did you see at Xiao Wang’s birthday party yesterday?
Li: I saw Xiao Ding and Xiao Chen. (Although Xiao Ding and Xiao Chen can be considered definite, they should not be pre-posed because they are not pre-existent in the context.)

张：昨天你看小丁跟小陈没有?

Zhāng: Zuótiān nǐ kànjiàn Xiǎo Dīng gèn Xiǎo Chén méiyǒu?

李：小丁，我看见了; 小陈，我没有看见。

Lǐ: Xiǎo Dīng, wǒ kànjiàn le; Xiǎo Chén, wǒ méiyǒu kànjiàn.

Zhang: Did you see Xiao Ding or Xiao Chen yesterday?
Li: I saw Xiao Ding; I didn’t see Xiao Chen. (Ding and Chen have been mentioned by Zhang; therefore, they can be pre-posed by Li.)

When the adverb 都 is used with a verb (都 + V) to refer to the object, object pre-position is no longer an option but a must.

这两个人，我都不认识。 (Incorrect: 我都不认识这两个人。)

Zhè liǎng ge rén, wǒ dōu bù rènshì.
I don’t know either of these two people.

李：你喜欢喝茶还是(喜欢喝)咖啡?

Lǐ: Nǐ xǐhuān hē chá háishi (xǐhuān hē) kāfēi?

丁： (茶跟咖啡,)我都喜欢。 (Incorrect: 我都喜欢茶跟咖啡。)

Dīng: (Chá gèn kāfēi,) wǒ dōu xǐhuān.

Li: Do you like to drink tea or coffee?
Ding: I like both (tea and coffee).

When 都 is used to refer to the subject, object pre-position becomes optional.

我和我妹妹都认识那个人。 (= 那个人，我和我妹妹都认识。)

Wǒ hé wǒ měimei dōu rènshì nà ge rén.
Both my younger sister and I know that person.
(c) Placement of prepositional phrases

A prepositional phrase (preposition + object) usually appears before the verb. ‘Prepositional phrase + verb’ is the verbal phrase of the sentence.

☞ See Chapter 6 for more on prepositions.

In English, a prepositional phrase typically appears after the verb.

１⃣

张：你爸爸在哪儿工作？(在哪儿是 the prepositional phrase; 在哪儿工作 is the verbal phrase.)

Zhāng: Nǐ baba zài nǎr gōngzuò?

李：他现在没有工作；他在家写书。（在家 is the prepositional phrase; 在家写书 is the verbal phrase.)

Li: Tā xiànzài méiyǒu gōngzuò; tā zài jiā xiě shū.

ZHANG: Where does your father work?

LI: He does not have a job now; he is writing a book at home.

我去花店为我女朋友买了一束花。

Wǒ qù huādiàn wèi wǒ nǐ péngyǒu mǎi le yī shù huā.

I went to the flower shop to buy a bunch of flowers for my girlfriend.

(d) Placement of time phrases

A time phrase (indicating when an action takes/took place) can appear at the beginning of the sentence or before the verbal phrase although the connotations might be slightly different. 几点 (jǐ diǎn: ‘what time’) is an exception; it is unusual for 几点 to appear at the beginning of the sentence.

Yesterday evening 小明在家写信。(= 小明昨天晚上在家写信.)

Zuòtiān wǔwànshàng Xiǎomíng zài jiā xiě xìn.

Xiaoming was writing letters at home yesterday evening.

(Incorrect: 小明在家昨天晚上写信。(在家写信 is the verbal phrase.))

你几点要去上课？(Unusual: 几点你要去上课？)

Nǐ jǐ diǎn yào qù shàng kè?

What time are you going to class?

(e) Placement of adverbs

Adverbs appear before the verbal phrase or the adjective.

When more than one adverb is used in a sentence, the order in which these adverbs appear is based on the general rule that the modifiers precede the word being modified.

我觉得这个电影也很好看。

Wǒ juédé zhè ge diànyīng yě hěn hǎokàn.

I think that this movie was also good. (Possibility: One person, more than one movie.)

我也觉得这个电影很好看。

Wǒ yě juédé zhè ge diànyīng hěn hǎokàn.

I also think that this movie was good. (Possibility: One movie, more than one person.)

In rare cases when several common adverbs appear in one sentence, the following is the most acceptable word order (although note that this is not the only acceptable order):

也 + 都 + 常 (常) + 只 + 一起 (常 and 只 can be switched depending on the actual situation.)
Teacher Wang: All my students are smart.

Teacher Li: All my students are also smart.

Xiàowàng chángcháng zhǐ hē tāng, bù chī fàn.
Xiao Wang often only has soup, but no rice.

Both Xiao Zhang and Xiao Li also often only have soup, but no rice.

Zhang: Wǒ bàimā yě cháng yìqí qù kàn diànyǐng.
Ding: Wǒ bàimā yě cháng yìqí qù kàn diànyǐng.
Zhang: My parents often go to see a movie together.
Ding: My parents also often go to see a movie together.

Negative adverb 不: As a general rule, 不 appears before the word it negates. Therefore, the word order of a negative sentence affects its meaning.

Wǒ bābā māmā dōu bù shì lǎoshī.
Neither of my parents is a teacher.

Compare: 我爸爸妈妈不都是老师。
Wǒ bābā māmā bù dōu shì lǎoshī.
My parents are not both teachers. (One is; the other isn’t.)

Nǐ shēntǐ bù hǎo, bù kěyǐ hē jiǔ.
Your health is not good; you cannot drink (= you are not allowed to drink).

Compare: 你酒量不好，可以不喝酒。
Nǐ jiǔliàng bù hǎo, kěyǐ bù hē jiǔ.
You get drunk easily; you don’t have to drink (= it’s OK if you don’t drink).

Wǒde Fǎwén lǎoshī shì Rìběn rén, tàié Fǎwén bù tài hǎo.
My French teacher is Japanese; his French is not very good (literally: not too good).

Compare: 我的法文老师是日本人，他的法文不太好。
Wǒde Yīngwén lǎoshī shì Zhōngguó rén, tàié Yīngwén hěn bù hǎo.
My English teacher is Chinese; his English is very bad.

Do not place an adverb immediately before a noun/noun phrase, pronoun or proper noun.

English: Both Xiao Wang and Xiao Li are my good friends.
Chinese: 小王和小李 都是我的好朋友。

(X Incorrect: 都小王和小李是我的好朋友。)
(f) Placement of direct objects and indirect objects

Some verbs can take two objects: one is the direct object and the other, the indirect object. The indirect object, which is usually a person, immediately follows the verb. The direct object, which is usually a non-person, follows the indirect object.

Such verbs in Chinese are limited and the most common ones are: 给 (gěi: ‘to give’), 送 (sòng: ‘to give something as a gift’), 借 (jiè: ‘to lend’), 还 (huán: ‘to return something’), 教 (jiāo: ‘to teach’), 问 (wèn: ‘to ask questions’), 告诉 (gàosù: ‘to tell information’), 通知 (tóngzhī: ‘to notify’).

He gave me a bicycle (as a gift).

In English, the indirect object of an action can be expressed with a prepositional phrase using ‘to’ or ‘for’. In Chinese, such an option does not exist.

In a complex sentence, the subordinate clause (the dependent clause) should appear before the main clause (the independent clause).
When the subordinate clause is ……的时候 (when), ……以前 (before) or ……以后 (after), it must always appear before the main clause. In English, the order is flexible.

☞ See Chapter 27 for more information on 以前, 以后 and 时候.

*English: I had a glass of wine when I ate dinner yesterday.
= When I ate dinner yesterday, I had a glass of wine.

*Chinese: 昨天我吃晚饭的时候，喝了一杯酒。
↓ ↓
Subordinate clause Main clause
Zuótiān wǒ chī wǎn fán de shíhòu, hē le yī bēi jiǔ.
(Incorrect: 昨天我喝了一杯酒，吃晚饭的时候。)

When the subordinate clause and the main clause are connected by a conjunctive pair, which indicates the relationship between the two clauses, such as 因为……, 所以……; 虽然……, 但是……; 不但……, 而且……, it is important to recognize the main clause since the first word in the conjunctive pair is sometimes omissible.

☞ See Chapter 29 for more information on conjunctive pairs.

*English: Although the weather is nice, I don’t feel like going out.
= I don’t feel like going out although the weather is nice.

*Chinese: (虽然)今天天气不错, 可是我不想出去。
↓ ↓
Subordinate clause Main clause
(Suīrán) jīntiān tiānqì bùcuò, kěshì wǒ bú xiǎng chūqù.
(Incorrect: 我不想出去，虽然今天天气不错。)

Exercises

Rearrange the words or phrases given to form complete sentences.

**Level 1**

1. Neither Mr Wang nor his girlfriend likes to go to movies.
   不 喜欢 女朋友 看电影 王先生 他 都 跟

2. Mr Ding also teaches English in China.
   中国 英文 丁先生 在 教 也

3. My sons are both studying Chinese in China right now.
   中国 中文 都 学 在 我儿子 现在

4. I often go to the flower shop to buy flowers for my mother.
   妈妈 去 买 花店 我 花 常 为

5. He went to China in March (and) he went to Beijing from Shanghai in June.
   三月 去中国 去北京 六月 他 从上海

**Level 2**

6. It is not a secret that Mr Wang likes Miss Li.
   李小姐 不 王先生 是 喜欢 秘密
7 I always watch TV at home when the weather is bad.

8 The kitchen of this house is too small; also, its price is too expensive.
(topic-comment structure)

9 Not all my friends are Chinese. I also have Japanese friends.

10 Yesterday Xiao Wang lent two books to Miss Li; today she only returned one to him.