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5 Plurality and the subclassification of Nouns in Classical Chinese

Abstract: This paper provides a survey of the role of the semantic categories 'plural' and 'singular' in an uninflected language like classical Chinese, which does not generally use explicit markers for the plural.

Keywords: syntax, plural, pronoun, noun, word class

1 Introduction

The history of the plural in the Chinese language has been the subject of extensive research in the last century. Most of this research is concerned with the history of plural suffixes such as chái 仏, bēi 了, méi 每, -men 們 as they evolved slowly from the Late Warring States period onwards.

The definition of the plural is by no means trivial: for example míng 至, 'people' refers to more than one person, but whether or not the word has to be read as plural remains a highly sensitive question which fortunately need not concern us in this paper.

To start out with, a few terminological points are important for the methodology in what follows:

1. By the term 'collective' I refer to the kind of plural noun that refers to an enumerable closed set of items, as usually does the term zhù hòu 諸侯 'the feudal lords'. For example, when we call shèng wáng 聖王 'the sage kings' it is considered mostly collective: this is because it tends to refer to a closed enumerable set. If, on the other hand I call xián shèng 賢聖 'the worthy and the sages' plural and not collective, this is because these xián shèng 賢聖 are not considered to constitute a closed enumerable set of any kind.

2. The term 'non-referential' is evidenced in a noun like jūn zǐ 君子 'the gentleman', the non-specifiable reference of which does not allow (and even less invites) the question to which item in this world is being referring.

1 Klaus Kaden (1964) remains the most detailed monograph on the subject. Like most of the rest of the literature it mainly concentrates on the explicit marking of plural nouns with plural markers in the history of the language. But see also in particular Ilijic (2001).
The present paper does not deal with the history of plural suffixes but with the existence in pre-Buddhist classical Chinese of a wide range of nouns with plural meanings that are not recognisable by any plural suffixes. These unmarked semantically plural nouns must be seen in the context of a range of sub-classifications that are essential for a proper description of the classical Chinese language. It is in the nature of things that this paper must remain largely descriptive; there seems to me to be ample reason to emphasise the need to be sure of the philological evidence we are talking about before it makes good methodological sense to launch into abstract theoretical linguistic discussion.

A great deal of attention has been paid to the distinction between plural morphology on the one hand, and the problems around the semantics of plurality on the other.  

The sub-classification of classical Chinese nouns must begin with the establishment of at least the following nominal subcategories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nominal subcategories</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 數/可數</td>
<td>‘count noun’</td>
<td>nc</td>
<td>棵 ‘tree’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 單/實物</td>
<td>‘mass noun’</td>
<td>nm</td>
<td>水 ‘water’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 單/數</td>
<td>‘primarily mass’</td>
<td>nm?</td>
<td>毛 ‘hair/hairs’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 間</td>
<td>‘relational noun’</td>
<td>n(</td>
<td>post-N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 單/實</td>
<td>‘primarily count’</td>
<td>nc?</td>
<td>木 ‘tree/timber’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. 抽/抽象</td>
<td>‘abstract noun’</td>
<td>nab</td>
<td>謂 ‘rectitude’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. 單/複數</td>
<td>‘singularis tantum’</td>
<td>npro@ings</td>
<td>子 ‘I’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. 單/複</td>
<td>‘primarily singular’</td>
<td>NPlings</td>
<td>先王 ‘deceased ruler’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. 複/複數</td>
<td>‘plurale tantum’</td>
<td>NPlur</td>
<td>子女 ‘children’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. 複/單</td>
<td>‘primarily plural’</td>
<td>NPlur?</td>
<td>先王 ‘former kings’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. 間/両體</td>
<td>‘collective’</td>
<td>NPlong</td>
<td>先世 ‘the former sages’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. 間/單</td>
<td>‘primarily collective’</td>
<td>NPlong?</td>
<td>諸侯 ‘feudal lords’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. 複/泛義</td>
<td>‘non-referential’</td>
<td>NPlong</td>
<td>聚子 ‘the gentleman’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In what follows I shall concentrate mainly on the sub-classification of nouns with respect to number, of which I shall discuss a fair number of example expressions.  

I shall begin with some preliminary considerations on the distinction between mass nouns and count nouns, well aware that the plural of mass nouns (three kinds of wine) is quite different from that of count nouns (three bottles).

One of the first things an ancient Chinese child must grasp when learning classical Chinese words to refer to ‘trees’ is that shù 棵 and mù 木, though both referring to trees, differ radically in that shù 棵 always refers to one or more trees, whereas mù 木 very often is a mass noun and refers to the material trees are made of: ‘wood; timber’.

Thus the learner must learn that there are mù 木 木屑 ‘clogs’ but not *shù 木屑 just as there are only mù 木鞋 ‘wooden boots’ and not *shù 木鞋. Again, this is not a matter of some arbitrary idiom a child has to learn by heart. The child is not as insensitive as all our dictionaries continue to be. The child learns that shù 棵 is a count noun nc while mù 木 very often functions as a mass noun nm.

Again, if one assumes, for a moment, that jun zǐ 君子, when it means ‘gentleman’ non-referential and does not normally allow the question ‘who exactly do you mean’ (i.e. is technically NPlong|nonref), then the discussion to whom the word refers in the current phrase:

1. 君子曰 (Zuó zhuan 左傳) 欲 ‘the gentleman will say’

It is not so difficult to answer but grammatically inappropriate in the context. In the philosophical meaning ‘person of superior character, superior person’ the word jun zǐ 君子 is hardly ever a singular referring expression in pre-Han literature, whereas in the meaning ‘person of superior social status’ the reference can occasionally be singular.

The contrast of jun zǐ 君子 ‘person of superior character’ with gông zǐ 公子 ‘prince’ and also with the rarer wâng zǐ 王子 ‘prince’ is so striking because jun zǐ 君子 ‘person of superior character; the gentleman’ is usually non-referential, and gôngzǐ 公子 as well as wâng zî 王子 are hardly ever used non-referentially.

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2 See Wiese (1995) and Wiese (1996). There is also a rich literature on the formal semantics of mass nouns and the plural that can provide helpful parameters of analysis, such as Chierchia, Gennaro (1998) and Eschenbach (1993).


4 Textual examples are tagged in the online version of Thesaurus Linguae Sericæ (url:tls.uni-hd.de).
In other words, one can usually ask to whom the word ㄍongzi 公子 refers to, and one can very rarely ask to whom junzi 君子 concretely refers.

A learner of classical Chinese will have to learn that shengzhe 聖者 ‘the sage’ or renzhe 仁者 ‘the benevolent person’ are not so much plural as nonreferential, and these words always tend to be nonreferential: ‘the sage’, ‘the humane person’ does not invite the question to which individual was specifically identified by such an expression.

It is only in Han times, for example in the work of the poet and lexicographer Yang Xiong 杨雄 (53 BC–AD 18), that the phrase shengren 聖人 came to have the standardised singular reference to Confucius which has remained current since then.

Similarly, when it comes to the verb yue 說 ‘say’, after a nonreferential noun of this sort, as in junzi yue 君子說 ‘the gentleman will comment’ a competent child reading classical Chinese knew that it is not a good idea to ask such questions as ‘exactly when’ the saying occurred. The reading of verbs with nonreferential subjects tends to be tenseless.

The objection that there is no tense in classical Chinese is irrelevant to this particular point: the question ‘when’ is as inappropriate in ancient Chinese as it is in a language with tense. The case in hand demonstrates that the conceptual category TENSE can be present even when it cannot be morphologically marked. The inadmissibility of the question he shi 何時 ‘at what time’ clinches the point just as much as the inadmissibility of a tense marker would.

## 2 Subcategorisation of nouns with respect to number: Singulare

### 2.1 Singulare tantum

I turn now more specifically to the subcategorisation of nouns with respect to number. The feature of being a singulare tantum, i.e. usable only with singular reference, establishes another important category of nouns, like that of the nonreferential nouns. This feature does not attach to words as such, but to words under a given meaning: The second person pseudo-pronoun jun 君 ‘you’, when used alone, is singulare tantum, but the noun jian 君 ‘ruler; rulers’ is not. ‘You-plur’ has to be zhuu jian 諸君 in classical Chinese whereas in Ming dynasty colloquial Chinese ni 你 is often plural, as in ni liangge 你們兩個 which would have to be nimen liangge 你們兩個 in modern Standard Chinese.

The quality of being singulare tantum, like that of being nonreferential, as attached to one word in one meaning, can obviously change. Thus, in OBI inscriptions wang 朕 ‘His Majesty’ is omnipresent. The cases where wang 朕 is plural are marginal and are so few that they can be counted on one hand. Moreover, it is quite possible to claim the word wang 朕 in fact has a different extended meaning on those few occasions where non-Shang kings are referred to by the term wang 朕.

In later times, wang 朕, as in xian wang 先王 ‘the former kings’ was used in the plural. By contrast, wangzhe 王者 ‘a true king’ has neither singular nor plural reference. It remained nonreferential. The question to which actual individual wangzhe 王者 is used to refer is grammatically inappropriate, and logically not to the point, one might even say.

## 3 Subcategorisation of nouns with respect to number: Plurals

### 3.1 Non-referential and typically plural nominal expressions

I now turn to a brief survey of nominal expressions that typically exclude singular interpretation either because they are typically nonreferential or because they are typically plural.

#### 3.1.1 Non-referentiality marked by ren-

Prefixed ren 人 creates non-referential rather than merely indefinite nominals in a wide range of common cases like the following:

- n chen 众 ‘minister’ NP@nonref ren chen 人众 ‘a minister’
- n jian 君 ‘ruler’ NP@nonref ren jian 人君 ‘a ruler of men’
- n zhu 主 ‘ruler’ NP@nonref ren zhu 人主 ‘a ruler of men’
- n fu 妇 ‘wife’ NP@nonref ren fu 人妇 ‘a wife’
- n zi 子 ‘child’ NP@nonref ren zi 人子 ‘a child’
- n nu 妾 ‘slave’ NP@nonref ren nu 人奴 ‘a slave’
- n li 史 ‘employee’ NP@nonref 1. ren li 人史 ‘an employee’
  2. guan li 官史 ‘official’
- n yi 役 ‘corvee’ NP@nonref ren yi 人役 ‘a corvee labourer, labourer’
- n shi 师 ‘teacher’ NP@nonref ren shi 人师 ‘a teacher’
3.1.2 Plurality suggested by preposed guó 國

Prefixed guó 國 has a similar but not identical effect as rén 人 above in a number of instances:

- n chén 臣 ‘minister’  guó chén 國臣  NP@nonref
  ‘the ministers of the state’

- n rén 人 ‘person’  guó rén 國人  NP@nonref
  ‘the (senior) citizens of the state’

- n shì 士 ‘gentleman’  guó shì 國士  NP@nonref
  ‘a state hero; the state heroes; be a state hero; as a state hero’

- n gōng 工 ‘artisan’  versus NP@coll  guó gōng 國工
  ‘skilled artisans of the state’

- n zǐ 子 ‘son’  versus NP@coll  guó zǐ 國子
  in the meaning of ‘relatives of senior ministers etc in the state’

- n lìng 令 ‘ordinance’  versus NP@plur  guó lìng 國令
  ‘ordinances of the state’

- n jūn 君 ‘ruler’  versus NP@nonref  guó jūn 國君
  ‘a ruler of a state’

- n lǎo 老 ‘the old’  NP@coll  guó lǎo 國老
  ‘the distinguished people of great age in the state’

- n sōu 夫 ‘old man’  NP@coll  guó sōu 國叟
  ‘distinguished people of great age in the state’

It remains important to remember that there are neat exceptions to this pattern. Guó wàng 國王 is in fact found at least once in Lùnhéng 諸衡 in the plural referring to kings of barbarian states, and this expression became the standard word in Buddhist texts to refer in the singular to the king of a state in the singular. Thus one must note the significant changes in Buddhist literary Chinese to the pre-Buddhist regularities discussed in the present paper.

3.1.3 Plurality marked by preposed yǒu 有?

Some constructions with preposed yǒu 有 invite a plural default interpretation, while sometimes apparently not excluding a contextually enforced singular interpretation:

- NP@plur  yǒu tǔ 有土  ‘owners of land’ NOT ‘an owner of land’
- NP@plur  yǒu sī 有司  ‘holders of office’
- NP@plur  yǒu gōng 有功  ‘havers of merit’
- NP@plur  yǒu bāng 有邦
  1. ‘rulers’;
  2. ‘countries’
- NP@plur  yǒu zúi 有罪  ‘havers of guilt’
- NP@plur  yǒu dào 有道  ‘havers of the Way’
- NP@plur  wú dào 無道  ‘lackiers of the Way’
- NP@plur  yǒu dé 有德  ‘havers of virtue in general’

3.1.4 Plurality marked by preposed negation

- Non-referential nouns in wú 無:
  - NP@plur  wú yì 無義  ‘those without a just cause’
  - NP@plur  wú chí 無恥  ‘those without shame’
  - NP@plur  wú dào 無道  ‘those without the Way’ as in 伐無道 fá wú dào
    ‘attack those without the Way’
  - NP@plur  wú gǔ 無辜  ‘those without guilt’ as in 殺無辜 shā wú gǔ
    ‘kill those without guilt’
  - NP@plur  wú zúi 無罪  ‘those without crimes’ as in
    不殺無罪 bù shā wú zúi
    ‘not kill people who have no crimes’

- Non-referential nouns in bù 不:
  Non-referential nominals in bù 不 are typically non-referential. Standard examples include the following:
  - NP@nonref  bù gǔ 不幸  ‘the innocent; an innocent person’
  - NP@nonref  bù xiǎo 不肖  ‘the incompetent; an incompetent person’
  - NP@nonref  bù rén 不仁  ‘the cruel; the heartless; a heartless person’

3.2 Unmarked predictably plural subject and agent nominalisation

All the following monosyllabic deverbal nouns must properly be interpreted as exocentric constructions along the lines of n[post-N]@nonref because they involve a lexically retrievable nominal head.
4 Plurality and compound words

Another explicit way of excluding singular reference readings for nouns is the use of compounds. I shall give a sample range of this below.

- n@plur 攜馬 马馬  ‘side horses in a quartet of horses’
- n@plur 二馬 马馬  ‘the two central horses of a quartet of horses’
- n@plur 釘鼓 鼓鼓  ‘bells and drums’

4.1 Spirits: some pluralia tantum

First, consider that the monosyllabic words for ghosts and spirits are open to singular and plural interpretation:

guī 鬼 n 1. ‘ghost’; 2. ‘ghosts’
shén 神 n 1. ‘spirit’; 2. ‘spirits’

Contrarily, the following are collective or non-referentially abstract nouns which can never be used to refer to single spirits, they are pluralia tantum:

- NP@nonref 鬼神 鬼神  ‘ghosts and spirits’
cannot refer to a single sprite of which one is not sure whether it is ghost or spirit.
- NP@nonref 神明 神明  ‘the spirits and the luminous’
- NP@nonref 神聖 神聖  ‘the bright/higher spirits’
- NP@nonref 神祇 神祇  ‘the spirits’
- NP@nonref 神鬼 神鬼  ‘the spirits and ghosts’
4.2 Documents

The case of documents is interesting because it brings out a pervasive analytic problem: How one is to decide whether a compound is additive or merely expository, in technical terms, is whether it constitutes a hendiadys or not:

jing 经 nc ‘classic(s)’
diàn 典 nc ‘revered text(s)’
shū 書 nc ‘document(s)’
jí 籍 n ‘document(s)’
- NP@plur jing diàn 经典 ‘classics’
- NP@plur jing shū 经书 ‘classics’
- NP@plur jing jí 经籍 ‘classics’
- NP@plur diàn jí 典籍 ‘classical documents’
- NP@plur shū qì 書契 ‘written documents’ 書契以来 shūqì yī lái ‘from the invention of documents, since there are documents’

There are cases where such distinctions between plural and singular reference of complex nouns simply have to be learned by heart. The following all regularly have plural reference:

- NP@coll xiān shèng 先聖 ‘the former sages’ and
- NP@coll xiān shèng wáng 先聖王 ‘the former sage kings’

These are special because they are normally used to refer to a closed set. They are thus not ordinary pluralia tantum:

- NP@coll xiān wáng 先王 ‘the former kings’;
  is extremely common and also nearly always plural, referring to a closed set of traditionally listed individuals.

The list may vary, but the ability to list the ‘former kings’ does not. Thus the term must count as a pluralia tantum, with very few exceptions where the context forces a singular reading.

In contrast:
- NP@plur xiān jùn 先君 ‘our deceased ruler’;
  which looks very much the same, and is also very common, but which in an overwhelming majority of cases invites an interpretation in the singular.

It remains important that a very definite context will occasionally impose or enforce reference to a contextually determinate set of rulers.

4.3 Friends: exclusion of singular reference interpretation

In the case of the ancient Chinese terminology for friendship, the facts are particularly interesting. The near-synonym compounds all exclude singular reference interpretation:

- yǒu 友 and péng 朋 can refer to a single friend or colleague.
- qín 親, n@plur ‘friends, close allies’ I have so far not found with such singular reference. All references in TLS are in the plural as are the references for n@plur qín 親, ‘relatives’, which seems to be as plural as NP@plur qín 親成 ‘relatives’.
- péng yǒu 朋友 can occasionally be used with indefinite singular reference, but is never definite, mostly plural or non-referential.
- zhī yīn 知音, gù rén 故人 are often singular and indefinite in reference.

But not so for the following coordinate compounds which tend to refer to closed sets:

- NP@coll xi guī 習故 ‘confidants’
- NP@coll jǐn xǐ 近習 ‘confidants’
- NP@coll dāng rén 黨人 ‘members of the faction’;
- NP@coll zhī yǒu 知友 ‘friends’
- NP@coll péng dāng 朋黨 ‘associates’
- NP@coll jín qín 近親 ‘those close to one’
- NP@coll zuò yǒu 左右 ‘senior officials, senior aides’
- NP@coll gù gōng 郡丞 ‘helpers’ may have some singular uses although I am unable to trace them for the moment.
4.4 Concubines

bi 妾 ‘maid’
qiè 婢 ‘concubine’
- NP@coll bi qiè 婢妾 ‘maids and concubines’

4.5 Sages and Men of Talent

- NP@plur xián cái 贤才 ‘the worthy and talented’
- NP@plur xián shèng 贤聖 ‘the worthy and the sage’
- NP@plur shén shèng 神聖 ‘the divine sages’
- NP@coll shèng wáng 聖王 ’the sage kings’ is mostly collective, but sometimes predicative.

4.6 Guests

Guests and merchants are referred to as groups only by the standard compounds:

bin 宾 ‘honoured guest’
kè 客 ‘foreigner; guest’
- NP@plur bin kè 賓客 ‘(the various) guests, visitors of various kinds’

4.7 Merchants

shāng 商 ‘(itinerant) trader’
gū 貴 ‘(sedentary) merchant’
- NP@plur shāng gū 商賈 ‘traders of all kinds’

4.8 Thieves

tōu 盜 ‘petty thief’
zéi 賊 ‘thief’
- NP@plur tōu zéi 盜賊 ‘thieves of all kinds’

4.9 Troubles

jiàn 源 ‘trouble’
nàn 難 ‘difficulty’
- NP@plur jiàn nàn 源難 ‘difficulties of all kinds’

4.10 Shamans

The monosyllables are singular and the binominal is plural, but in this case for the manifest reason that both sexes are included:

wǔ 巫 ‘female shaman > shaman’
xí 獨 ‘male shaman, sorcerer’
- NP@plur wǔ xí 巫禿 ‘shamans (male or female)’

4.11 Teeth

Even the case of words for teeth and bones follows the expected pattern:

chí 齒 ‘tooth; teeth’
yá 牙 ‘fang; fangs; teeth’
- NP@plur chí yá 齒牙 ‘the teeth (of all kinds)’

4.12 Bones

One is not so sure of the salience in the semantic contrast between the following words for bones to decide for sure whether that distinction is neutralised in the following:

hái 骸 ‘skeleton; bones’
gū 骸 ‘bone; bones’
- NP@plur hái gū 骸殻 ‘the bones’

4.13 Boxes

Boxes and coffers raise a similar problem because the semantic difference between the two is not neat enough to ensure that the two terms are not taken
in this context as synonyms the basic distinction between which is neutralised in this collocation:

Qiè 篮 ‘basket; bamboo box’
Kuì 箱 ‘box’

- NP@plur Qiè kuì 篮 篮 ‘boxes and coffers’

4.14 Garments

yì 衣 ‘garment’
fú 服 ‘formal garment’

- NP@plur yì fú 衣服 ‘garments’
- NP@plur yì shàn 衣衫 ‘garments’
- NP@plur yì qiū 衣裘 ‘garments and cloaks’
- NP@plur yīhè 衣褐 ‘coarse garments’
- NP@plur yìchāng 衣裳 ‘garments, upper and lower’

A host of questions arise in connection with clothes particularly. We need to investigate whether one may go out and buy one rú yì 儒衣 ‘Confucian garb’, or one bù yì 布衣 ‘coarse garment’, and whether one can buy three of such, in classical Chinese. I think one probably can. But our present concern is that you cannot tuō yì fú 脫衣服 ‘take off your garment’ in pre-Buddhist Chinese.

4.15 Buildings and Institutions

gōng 宮 ‘building(s)’
shí 宅 ‘house(s)’
diàn 宮 ‘palace(s)’
lù 廻 ‘home(s)’
shè 舍 ‘simple dwelling(s)’
wū 屋 ‘dwelling(s)’
cāng 廄 ‘large granary of rectangular shape’
qūn 齊 ‘small round granary’
lín 庫 ‘large square granary’
kù 庫 ‘storehouse designed for weapons and the like’

fū 宮 ‘building housing archives as well as other government supplies and precious objects’

One must ask oneself how one decides whether the following are additive or epelexgetic with neutralised semantic contrast:

- NP@plur gōng shì 宮室 ‘buildings’
- NP@plur gōng diàn 宮殿 ‘palaces’
- NP@plur lù shè 廻舍 ‘cottages’
- NP@plur shì wū 宮屋 ‘homes’
- NP@plur diàn wū 宮屋 ‘palatial buildings’
- NP@plur dià shì 賢室 ‘families/homes’
- NP@plur xiàng xù 序序 ‘schools of all kinds’
- NP@plur cāng qūn 廄囷 ‘the granaries of various kinds’
- NP@plur cāng lín 廄庫 ‘the granaries of various kinds’
- NP@plur qūn cāng 廄囷 ‘the granaries of various kinds’
- NP@plur fū kù 宮庫 ‘the storehouses of various kinds, civil and military’
- NP@plur cāng kù 廄庫 ‘the storehouses of various kinds, for food and weapons’

4.16 Laws and Regulations

Even for abstract concepts the pattern is maintained:

fǎ 法 ‘law; the law’
hào 號 ‘legal order’
ing 令 ‘order, legal command’
lǜ 律 ‘ordinance’
dù 度 ‘regulation’

The compounds are all plural in reference, but it is not always clear in which cases we have epelexgetic synonym compounds and where we have additive compounds:

- NP@plur fǎ lìng 法令 ‘legal orders of all kinds’
- NP@plur fǎ dù 法度 ‘laws and regulations’
- NP@plur fǎ lǜ 法律 ‘laws of all kinds’
- NP@plur hào lìng 號令 ‘legal commands of all sorts’
In all such cases there may remain some doubt whether they are to be construed as synonym compounds *hendiadys* or as additive compounds.

The above examples could be multiplied. But they suffice to establish and exemplify a fairly regular pattern of number-related distinctions in classical Chinese that deserve detailed study, and that so far have received little attention in the grammatical literature.

5 A special case of singular nouns: Proper names

5.1 The notion of *singulare tantum* in proper names

The problems surrounding the notion of *singulare tantum* in proper names are special and sometimes complex. For example, the proper name *Yāo 我* is surely a singular referring expression, and yet *shí Yāo 十我* 'even ten Yāo's' is common enough in the literature. The addition of the number changes the meaning of the word and makes the term general 'a person like Yāo'. The non-referential term is different from the plain singular-reference proper name.

One might be inclined to think that *di 你* 'thearch' is also *singulare tantum* but the term clearly develops an extended meaning in such current contexts as *wū di 五帝* 'the Five Thearchs' which in turn never takes an indefinite meaning 'five of the thearch category'. And indeed, at no point does *di 你* seem to mean any such thing as the indefinite 'a thearch'.

6 Pronouns and the categorical distinction between singular and plural

The case of first person pronouns, by contrast with the other cases I have presented so far, has been noticed by many a long time ago. Consider a scribe's or diviner's child in oracle bone times, learning his first-person pronouns:

– *yú 余*, he will have to learn, is always strictly singular and contrasts with another person in the singular.

– *wǒ 予*, he will quickly come to understand, is practically never singular and refers collectively to 'our party, we' as opposed to the 'others' in the plural.

In order to use these two words correctly, the child needs the categorical distinction between singular and plural.

In the following contexts, the child will know that *wǒ 我* would be unacceptable:

2) 祖辛害余。 (*HEJI 174*)
   zu Xin hài yú
   ‘Ancestor Xin is harming me.’

3) 羌甲崇余。 (*HEJI 1803*)
   jiāngjia suì yú
   ‘Jiangjia is sending me misfortune.’

4) 己亥卜王。 (*HEJI 2*)
   jīhài bú wáng
   On jihai (day 36) cracks were made and (divined:)

5) 余曰妇鼠母祝。 (*HM*)
   yú yuè fù shǔ wú zhù
   ‘I should declare: Lady Rat should not offer incantations.’

In Warring States times, a child would know that *wǒ 予* often does make assertive or contrastive self-reference, but that at the same time, the word *wǒ 予* (like the new and unassertive 'light' first person pronoun *wú 予*, and unlike the experiential old *yú 余*) currently has plural reference. In order to learn one's way with pronouns, as a learner of classical Chinese one has to handle the categories of singular versus plural proficiently.

6.1 Second person pronouns

– *qīng 君* and *nǎi 乃/乃* are always npro@sing singular.

– *n@pro.sing jün 君 ‘my lord’ on its own, and n@pro.sing wáng 王 ‘your majesty’ are not pronouns, but nouns that function pronominally. Used without modifiers they have singular reference.

Now, by Han times, the construction *zhū jün 諸君* has become perfectly current and thus creates a situation where *jün 君 ‘you’ is unambiguously singular and *zhū jün 諸君 ‘you gentlemen’ is unambiguously plural.
While 三人 你三人 你 are explicitly non-singular, i.e. *plurale tantum*, in reference, and often, though not always, functions like a pronoun.

### 6.2 Deictic pronouns

When *qi rén 其人* does not have its pregnant idiomatic meaning 'the right (kind of) person', it appears to be regularly *singulare tantum* and seems never translatable as 'these people'.

Consider:

- *NP@sing ci rén 此人 'this person': the person identified is hardly ever plural.*
- *NP@sing si rén 彼人 'such a person' is not plural in pre-Buddhist literature.*

Preposing the deictic *nuò 若* 'this' has regular singular reference, one can obtain *nuò rén 若人 'this man'*. Contrastingly:

- *NP@plur bi rén 彼人 'these people' only very occasionally refers to a single person in pre-Buddhist texts, and it thus differs significantly from *ci rén 此人 in a way that one would not predict. (In Buddhist texts, on the other hand, the reference is indifferently singular or plural.)*

### 7 The problem of individualised mass nouns

Count nouns must be distinguished from collective nouns. Thus we have:

- *nu rén 人* as in:

  (6) 三人共有我師焉。(LY)

    *sàn rén xíng bì yǒu wǒ shī yān*

    'When three persons walk along there is bound to a teacher for me among them’

- *mm@coll mín 民 as in wù mín 五民 'five kinds of people', namely shí 士 'scholars', nòng 农 peasants, shāng 商 'merchants', gōng 工 'craftsmen',

gū 貴 'traders'.

Physically, rén 人 and mín 民 are one and the same thing, and they certainly are increasingly many. The mín 民 have always been especially many, but they are not generally counted by individuals but by kind. (*Wàn mín 萬民 'myriad people' are many more than 10 000, whereas wàn rén 萬人 'ten thousand people' would typically have to be something like that number.)*

Should we analyse mín 民 as a collective plural, *les gens du peuple or collective singular le peuple? One might well want to argue that Chinese is underdetermined with respect to this distinction.*

### 7.1 Some cases of suspected *singulare tantum*

Consider next the case of *guó 國*, the phrase *zhī (or perhaps better: chí) guó 治國 does not translate into 'govern states' but 'govern one's state'.

This is because just as *shēn 身* in *xiù shēn 修身* is understood along the lines of *qi shēn 其身 'his person' or ji shēn 己身 'his own person', so the word *guó 國* in *zhī guó 治國 'govern the state' is understood along the lines of *qi guó 其國 'the relevant state; one's state'. The default interpretation of words like *guó 國* and *shēn 身* is in the singular, although there is nothing to prevent one, by explicit use of words, to impose a plural reading, as in *zhū guó 諸國 'the various states'.

Considering:

- *n@sing shēn 身 'person' itself is *singulare tantum*: this word normally refers to the person of a single human.*

- *NP@sing rén wù 人物 'personality' may seem puzzling, because there clearly could be many such personalities. But in classical Chinese the tendency is for this phrase to have singular reference.*

### 8 Conclusion

*Pluralia tantum, singulare tantum, non-referential nouns, and mass nouns are well known and well described in many languages. The present paper has shown that these categories are entirely relevant for the description of classical Chinese even at a stage of the language when the marking of the plural was extremely marginal in the written language as we know it.*

An important part of this investigation is the discovery that the plural interpretation of classical Chinese, though not marked by suffixes, is nonetheless predictable and regular in many instances. The coherent sets presented in this brief survey could and should surely be expanded to include later evidence than that focussed on in this paper.
As a non-explicit hidden category, plurality plays an important cognitive part in in the acquisition of classical Chinese grammar even before learners of Chinese had to learn to handle their own 'plural suffixes' which were superimposed upon the evolving system described in this paper rather than replacing it.

Abbreviations and conventions

nab  ‘abstract noun’
nb  ‘count noun’
nc  ‘count noun occasionally used as mass noun’
mm  ‘mass noun’
nm?  ‘mass noun occasionally used as a count noun’
@ ‘marker between syntactic category and semantic feature’
n@nonref  ‘non-referential noun’
n@plur  ‘plural noun’
np@sing  ‘singular pronoun’
np@pro.sing  ‘noun with pronominal function, singular’
pl[post-N]  ‘particle modified by a preceding nominal expression that is omitted/understood’
NP@coll  ‘collective complex nominal expression’
NP@coll?  ‘collective complex nominal expression, occasionally used non-collectively’
NP@nonref  ‘non-referential complex nominal expression’
NP@plur  ‘plural complex nominal expression’
NP@plur?  ‘plural complex nominal expression, occasionally used in the singular’
NP@sing  ‘singular complex nominal expression’
NP@sing?  ‘singular complex nominal expression, occasionally used in the plural’

References


5 For a systematic presentation of the notation system of which this is a small part see Harbsmeier (2010).
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