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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.¹ Most of this research is concerned with the history of plural suffixes such as *chái* 儻, *bèi* 輩, *mèi* 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 *mín* 民 '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 *zhū hóu* 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 Iljic (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.²

The sub-classification of classical Chinese nouns³ must begin with the establishment of at least the following nominal subcategories:

Table 4: Nominal subcategories of classical Chinese nouns

Nominal subcategories	Definition	Abbreviation	Example
1. 數/可數	'count noun'	<i>nc</i>	樹 'tree'
2. 質/質物	'mass noun'	<i>nm</i>	水 'water'
3. 質/數	'primarily mass'	<i>nm?</i>	毛 'hair/hairs'
4. 關	'relational noun'	<i>n[post-N]</i>	身 'one's (own) body'
5. 數/質	'primarily count'	<i>nc?</i>	木 'tree/timber'
6. 抽/抽象	'abstract noun'	<i>nab</i>	義 'rectitude'
7. 單/單數	' <i>singulare tantum</i> '	<i>npro@sing</i>	子 'I'
8. 單/複	'primarily singular'	<i>NP@sing?</i>	先君 'deceased ruler'
9. 複/複數	' <i>plurale tantum</i> '	<i>NP@plur</i>	子女 'children'
10. 複/單	'primarily plural'	<i>NP@plur?</i>	先王 'former kings'
11. 群/群體	'collective'	<i>NP@coll</i>	先聖 'the former sages'
12. 群/單	'primarily collective'	<i>NP@coll?</i>	諸侯 'feudal lords'
13. 泛/泛指	'non-referential'	<i>NP@nonref</i>	君子 'the gentleman'

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).

³ The most detailed magisterial traditional treatment of classical Chinese grammar remains Zhou Fagao (1993). For a representative treatment of nouns in Chinese grammars see He Leshi and Yang Bojun (1992: 80–93), Yi Mengchun (1992: 106–113) and Li Zuofeng (1993: 172–213) and Yang Bojun (1998: 14–24) are more detailed. None of these books touch upon the problems of the non-referential nouns and the unmarked plural that are at issue in this paper.

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.⁴

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* 樹 and *mù* 木, though both referring to trees, differ radically in that *shù* 樹 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 jī* 木屐 'clogs' but not **shù jī* 樹屐 just as there are only *mù jī* 木雞 'wooden cocks' and not **shù jī* 樹雞. 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* 樹 is a count noun *nc* while *mù* 木 very often functions as a mass noun *nm*.

Again, if one assumes, for a moment, that *jūn 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 *NP@nonref*), then the discussion to whom the word refers in the current phrase:

- (1) 君子曰 (*Zuò zhuàn* 左傳)
jūn zǐ yuē
 '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 *jūn 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 *jūn zǐ* 君子 'person of superior character' with *gōng zǐ* 公子 'prince' and also with the rarer *wáng zǐ* 王子 'prince' is so striking because *jūn zǐ* 君子 'person of superior character; the gentleman' is usually non-referential, and *gōng zǐ* 公子 as well as *wáng zǐ* 王子 are hardly ever used non-referentially.

⁴ Textual examples are tagged in the online version of *Thesaurus Linguae Serricae* (url.tlis.uni-hd.de).

In other words, one can usually ask to whom the word *gōngzǐ* 公子 refers to, and one can very rarely ask to whom *jūn zǐ* 君子 concretely refers.

A learner of classical Chinese will have to learn that *shèng zhě* 聖者 ‘the sage’ or *rén zhě* 仁者 ‘the benevolent person’ are not so much plural as non-referential, and these words always tend to be non-referential: ‘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 楊雄 (53 BC–AD 18), that the phrase *shèng rén* 聖人 came to have the standardised singular reference to Confucius which has remained current since then.

Similarly, when it comes to the verb *yuē* 曰 ‘say’, after a non-referential noun of this sort, as in *jūn zǐ yuē* 君子曰 ‘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 *hé shí* 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: Singulars

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 non-referential nouns. This feature does not attach to words as such, but to words under a given meaning: The second person pseudo-pronoun *jūn* 君 ‘you’, when used alone, is *singulare tantum*, but the noun *jūn* 君 ‘ruler; rulers’ is not. ‘You-plur’ has to be *zhū jūn* 諸君 in classical Chinese whereas in Ming dynasty colloquial Chinese *nǐ* 你 is often plural, as in *nǐ liǎngge* 你兩個 which would have to be *nǐmen liǎngge* 你們兩個 in modern Standard Chinese.

The quality of being *singulare tantum*, like that of being non-referential, as attached to one word in one meaning, can obviously change. Thus, in OBI

inscriptions *wáng* 王 ‘His Majesty’ is omnipresent. The cases where *wáng* 王 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 *wáng* 王 in fact has a different extended meaning on those few occasions where non-Shang kings are referred to by the term *wáng* 王.

In later times, *wáng* 王, as in *xiān wáng* 先王 ‘the former kings’ was used in the plural. By contrast, *wáng zhě* 王者 ‘a true king’ has neither singular nor plural reference. It remained non-referential. The question to which actual individual *wáng zhě* 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 non-referential or because they are typically plural.

3.1.1 Non-referentiality marked by *rén-* 人-

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

– <i>n chén</i> 臣	‘minister’	<i>NP@nonref</i>	<i>rén chén</i> 人臣	‘a minister’
– <i>n jūn</i> 君	‘ruler’	<i>NP@nonref</i>	<i>rén jūn</i> 人君	‘a ruler of men’
– <i>n zhǔ</i> 主	‘ruler’	<i>NP@nonref</i>	<i>rén zhǔ</i> 人主	‘a ruler of men’
– <i>n fù</i> 婦	‘wife’	<i>NP@nonref</i>	<i>rén fù</i> 人婦	‘a wife’
– <i>n zǐ</i> 子	‘child’	<i>NP@nonref</i>	<i>rén zǐ</i> 人子	‘a child’
– <i>n nú</i> 奴	‘slave’	<i>NP@nonref</i>	<i>rén nú</i> 人奴	‘a slave’
– <i>n lì</i> 吏	‘employee’	<i>NP@nonref</i>	1. <i>rén lì</i> 人吏	‘an employee’
			2. <i>guān lì</i> 官吏	‘official’
– <i>n yì</i> 役	‘corvée’	<i>NP@nonref</i>	<i>rén yì</i> 人役	‘a corvée labourer, labourer’
– <i>n shī</i> 師	‘teacher’	<i>NP@nonref</i>	<i>rén shī</i> 人師	‘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* 叟 ‘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 wáng* 國王 is in fact found at least once in *Lùnhéng* 論衡 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 zuì* 有罪 ‘havers of guilt’
- *NP@plur* *yǒu dào* 有道 ‘havers of the Way’
- *NP@plur* *wú dào* 無道 ‘lackers 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 chǐ* 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 gū* 無辜 ‘those without guilt’ as in 殺無辜 *shā wú gū*
‘kill those without guilt’
- *NP@plur* *wú zuì* 無罪 ‘those without crimes’ as in
不殺無罪 *bù shā wú zuì*
‘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 gū* 不辜 ‘the innocent; an innocent person’
- *NP@nonref* *bù xiào* 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.

- *n@plur* rén 仁 ‘the good persons; good persons’
 – *n@nonref* rún 惇 ‘the earnest’
 – *n@nonref* què 慤 ‘the sincere’
 – *n@nonref* chūn 純 ‘the pure’
 – *n@nonref* xìn 信 ‘the trusty’
 – *n@nonref* nìng 佞 ‘skilful talkers’
 – *n@nonref* chí 侈 ‘the extravagant’
 – *n@nonref* gōng 公 ‘the public-spirited’
 – *n@nonref* sī 私 ‘the selfish’
 – *n@nonref* sù 俗 ‘the vulgar’
 – *n@nonref* xián 賢 ‘the worthy’
 – *n@nonref* xiōng 凶 ‘the wicked’
 – *n@nonref* è 惡 1. ‘the bad’
 2. ‘bad deeds’
 – *n@nonref* Zuì 罪 ‘the guilty; convicted culprits’
 – *n@nonref* Fá 罰 ‘those who have been fined/punished’
 – *n@nonref* Lì 力 ‘the powerful’
 – *n@nonref* Zhòng 重 ‘political heavyweights’
 – *n@nonref* Jiǎn 儉 ‘the thrifty; the frugal’
 – *n@nonref* Yǒng 勇 ‘the courageous’
 – *n@nonref* Bèi (sic!) 北 ‘those who flee, the fugitives’
 – *n@nonref* Fú 服 ‘the submissive’; ‘those who have surrendered’
 – *n@nonref* dù 妒 ‘the jealous’
 – *n@nonref* zhì 知/智 ‘the wise’
 – *n@nonref* jiàn 健 ‘the vigorous/energetic’
 – *n@nonref* pí (sic!) 罷 ‘the exhausted’
 – *n@nonref* xīn 新 ‘newcomers’
 – *n@nonref* jiù 舊 ‘old ones (tools) also: ‘old acquaintances’
 – *n@nonref* shēng 生 ‘the living’
 – *n@nonref* sǐ 死 ‘the dead’
 – *n@nonref* huǐ 毀 ‘slanderers’
 – *n@nonref* yù 譽 ‘panderers’

- *n@nonref* sì 駟 ‘quartet of horses’
 – *n@nonref* jīn 金 ‘metal musical instruments’
 – *n@nonref* shí 石 ‘stone musical instruments’
 – *n@nonref* sī 絲 ‘string musical instruments’
 – *n@nonref* zhú 竹 ‘bamboo musical instruments’

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* cān fēi 駢駢 ‘side horses in a quartet of horses’
 – *n@plur* fú mǎ 服馬 ‘the two central horses of a quartet of horses’
 – *n@plur* zhōng gǔ 鐘鼓 ‘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:

- guǐ 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* guǐ shén 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* shén míng 神明 ‘the spirits and the luminous’
 – *NP@nonref* míng shén 明神 ‘the bright/higher spirits’
 – *NP@nonref* shén qī 神祇 ‘the spirits’
 – *NP@nonref* shén guǐ 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 epexegetic, in technical terms, is whether it constitutes a *hendiatys* or not:

<i>jīng</i>	<i>nc</i>	'classic(s)'
經典	<i>nc</i>	'revered text(s)'
書	<i>nc</i>	'document(s)'
籍	<i>n</i>	'document(s)'
—	<i>NP@plur</i>	<i>jīng diǎn</i> 經典 'classics'
—	<i>NP@plur</i>	<i>jīng shū</i> 經書 'classics'
—	<i>NP@plur</i>	<i>jīng jī</i> 籍 'classics'
—	<i>NP@plur</i>	<i>diǎn jí</i> 典籍 'classical documents'
—	<i>NP@plur</i>	<i>shū qì</i> 書契 'written documents' 書契以來 <i>shūqì yǐ lái</i>
		'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 *plurale tantum*, with very few exceptions where the context forces a singular reading.

In contrast:

- *NP@plur* *xiān jūn* 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.
- *qīn* 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* *qīn* 親 'relatives', which seems to be as plural as *NP@plur* *qīn qī* 親戚 '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* *xí gù* 習故 'confidants'
- *NP@coll* *jìn xī* 近習 'confidants'
- *NP@coll* *dǎng rén* 黨人 'members of the faction',
- *NP@coll* *zhī yǒu* 知友 'friends'
- *NP@coll* *péng dǎng* 朋黨 'associates'
- *NP@coll* *jìn qīn* 近親 'those close to one'
- *NP@coll* *zuǒ yòu* 左右 'senior officials, senior aides'
- *NP@coll* *gǔ gōng* 股肱 'helpers' may have some singular uses although I am unable to trace them for the moment.

4.4 Concubines

- bì* 婢 'maid'
qiè 妾 'concubine'
 – NP@coll *bì qiè* 婢妾 'maids and concubines'

4.5 Sages and Men of Talent

- NP@plur *xián cái* 賢才 'the worthy and talented'
 – NP@plur *xián shèng* 賢聖 '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:

- bīn* 賓 'honoured guest'
kè 客 'foreigner; guest'
 – NP@plur *bīn kè* 賓客 '(the various) guests, visitors of various kinds'

4.7 Merchants

- shāng* 商 '(itinerant) trader'
gǔ 賈 '(sedentary) merchant'
 – NP@plur *shāng gǔ* 商賈 'traders of all kinds'

4.8 Thieves

- tōu* 偷 'petty thief'
zéi 賊 'thief'
 – NP@plur *tōu zéi* 偷賊 'thieves of all kinds'

4.9 Troubles

- jiān* 艱 'trouble'
nàn 難 'difficulty'
 – NP@plur *jiān nàn* 艱難 '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:

- wū* 巫 'female shaman > shaman'
xí 覡 'male shaman, sorcerer'
 – NP@plur *wū xí* 巫覡 'shamans (male or female)'

4.11 Teeth

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

- chǐ* 齒 'tooth; teeth'
yá 牙 'fang; fangs; teeth'
 – NP@plur *chǐ 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'
gǔ 骨 'bone; bones'
 – NP@plur *hái gǔ* 骸骨 '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 these two terms are not taken

in this context as synonyms the basic distinction between which is neutralised in this collocation:

- Qiè 篋 'basket; bamboo box'
 Kù 匱 'box'
 — NP@plur Qiè kù 篋匱 'boxes and coffers'

4.14 Garments

- yī 衣 'garment'
 fú 服 'formal garment'
 — NP@plur yī fú 衣服 'garments'
 — NP@plur yī shàn 衣衫 'garments'
 — NP@plur yī qiū 裘衣 'garments and cloaks'
 — NP@plur yī hè 衣褐 'coarse garments'
 — NP@plur yī cháng 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 yī* 儒衣 'Confucian garb', or one *bù yī* 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 yī fú* 脫衣服 'take off your garment' in pre-Buddhist Chinese.

4.15 Buildings and Institutions

- gōng 宮 'building(s)'
 shì 室 'house(s)'
 diàn 殿 'palace(s)'
 lú 廬 'home(s)'
 shě 舍 'simple dwelling(s)'
 wū 屋 'dwelling(s)'
 cāng 倉 'large granary of rectangular shape'
 qūn 圜 'small round granary'
 lín 廩 'large square granary'
 kù 庫 'storehouse designed for weapons and the like'

fǔ 府 '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 epexegetic with neutralised semantic contrast:

- NP@plur gōng shì 宮室 'buildings'
 — NP@plur gōng diàn 宮殿 'palaces'
 — NP@plur lú shè 廬舍 'cottages'
 — NP@plur shì wū 室屋 'homes'
 — NP@plur diàn wū 殿屋 'palatial buildings'
 — NP@plur jiā shì 家室 'families/homes'
 — NP@plur xiáng xù 庠序 'schools of all kinds'
 — NP@plur cāng qūn 倉圜 'the granaries of various kinds'
 — NP@plur cāng lín 倉廩 'the granaries of various kinds'
 — NP@plur qūn cāng 圜倉 'the granaries of various kinds'
 — NP@plur fǔ kù 府庫 'the storehouses of various kinds, civil and military'
 — NP@plur cāng kù 倉庫 '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'
 lìng 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 epexegetic 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 *hendiatys* 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 *Yáo* 堯 is surely a singular referring expression, and yet *shí Yáo* 十堯 'even ten Yáo'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 Yáo'. The non-referential term is different from the plain singular-reference proper name.

One might be inclined to think that *dì* 帝 'thearch' is also *singulare tantum* but the term clearly develops an extended meaning in such current contexts as *wǔ dì* 五帝 'the Five Thearchs' which in turn never takes an indefinite meaning 'five of the thearch category'. And indeed, at no point does *dì* 帝 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* 我, 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 Xīm hài yú

'Ancestor Xin is harming me.'

- (3) 光甲崇余。(HEJI 1803)

jiāngjiǎ sù yú

'Jiangjia is sending me misfortune.'

- (4) 己亥卜王。(HEJI 2)

jǐhài bù wáng

On jihai (day 36) cracks were made and (divined):

- (5) 余曰婦鼠毋祝。(HJM)

yú yuē fù shǔ wú zhù

'I should declare: Lady Rat should not offer incantations.'

In Warring States times, a child would know that *wǒ* 我 often does make assertive or contrastive self-reference, but that at the same time, the word *wǒ* 我 (like the new and unassertive 'light' first person pronoun *wú* 吾, 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* 卿 and *nǎi* 乃/迺 are always *npro@sing* singular.

– *n@pro.sing jūn* 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 jūn* 諸君 has become perfectly current and thus creates a situation where *jūn* 君 'you' is unambiguously singular and *zhū jūn* 諸君 'you gentlemen' is unambiguously plural.

While 二三子 *èr-sān-zǐ* 'you young people' is explicitly non-singular, i.e. *plurale tantum*, in reference, and often, though not always, functions like a pronoun.

6.2 Deictic pronouns

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

Consider:

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

Proposing the deictic *ruò* 若 'this' has regular singular reference, one can obtain *ruò rén* 若人 'this man'.

Contrastingly:

- *NP@plur bǐ rén* 彼人 'these people' only very occasionally refers to a single person in pre-Buddhist texts, and it thus differs significantly from *cǐ 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:

- *nc rén* 人 as in:

(6) 三人行必有我師焉。(LY)

sān rén xíng bì yǒu wǒ shī yān

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

- *nm@coll mín* 民 as in *wú mín* 五民 'five kinds of people', namely *shū* 士 'scholars', *nóng* 農 peasants, *shāng* 商 'merchants', *gōng* 工 'craftsmen', *gù* 賈 '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 mǎn* 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 *singularia tantum*

Consider next the case of *guó* 國: the phrase *zhì* (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 *xiū shēn* 修身 'his own person', so the word lines of *qí shēn* 其身 'his person' or *jī shēn* 己身 'his own person', so the word *guó* 國 in *zhì guó* 治國 'govern the state' is understood along the lines of *qí 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 *singular 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, *singularia 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 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 conventions⁵

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

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

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