

2nd edition

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# Chinese

A Comprehensive Grammar

Yip Po-Ching and Don Rimmington



# Chinese

## *A Comprehensive Grammar*

*Chinese: A Comprehensive Grammar* is a complete reference guide to Chinese grammar. It presents a fresh and accessible description of the language, concentrating on the real patterns of use in modern Chinese. The Grammar is an essential reference source for the learner and user of Chinese, irrespective of level. It is ideal for use in schools, colleges, universities and adult classes of all types and will remain the standard reference work for years to come. The volume is organized to promote a thorough understanding of Chinese grammar. It offers a stimulating analysis of the complexities of the language and provides full and clear explanations. Throughout, the emphasis is on Chinese as used by present-day native speakers. An extensive index and numbered paragraphs provide readers with easy access to the information they require.

The new edition features a revised and expanded chapter on prosody ('Prosody and Syntax'), as well as four completely new chapters:

- Morphology and Syntax (I), which looks at Chinese word formation
- Morphology and Syntax (II), which explores the interaction between words, expressions and sentences
- Intralingual Transpositions, which reviews the possible conversions between possible sentential constructions
- Interlingual Conversions, which examines the differences between Chinese and English

Yip Po-Ching was Lecturer in Chinese at Leeds University, and Don Rimmington is Emeritus Professor of Chinese, formerly at Leeds University.

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# Chinese

## *A Comprehensive Grammar*

Second edition



**Yip Po-Ching and  
Don Rimmington**

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Any errors are, of course, entirely the responsibility of the authors.

Yip Po-Ching and Don Rimmington  
May 2003

# *Abbreviations*

adj.	adjective
cl.	clause
class.	classical
colloq.	colloquial
cv	coverb
dial.	dialect
dv	dummy verb
fml.	formal
infml.	informal
lit.	literally
mv	modal verb
mw	measure word
n.	noun
neut.	neutral
num.	numeral
obs.	obsolete
p.	predicate
pron.	pronoun
s.	subject
svo	subject-verb-object
vb.	verb
vs.	versus

# Preface to the second edition

The writing of this second edition of *Chinese: A Comprehensive Grammar* has given us the opportunity not only to amend errors in *pinyin* notations but also to introduce a number of new findings.

Following the comments of reviewers, we have rewritten the chapter on Prosody and Syntax and have added four new chapters: Morphology and Syntax I and II, Intralingual Transpositions, and Interlingual Conversions.

In the revised chapter on Prosodic Features of Chinese, we have looked further into this area of grammar, and we hope that we have been able to provide a more developed analysis of the interaction between prosody and syntax in the language.

We have introduced the chapter on Morphology and Syntax (I) in an attempt to make the grammar comprehensive in the sense that it covers Chinese word-formation rules, which are essentially related to syntactic detail.

In Morphology and Syntax (II), which naturally follows from this, we offer a close analysis of the interaction between microsyntax-based lexical constructions (i.e. words, expressions or idioms) and macrosyntactic constructions (i.e. phrases and sentences).

Intralingual Transpositions samples plausible conversions between different sentential constructions within the language. Finally, Interlingual Conversions focuses on the essential syntactic differences between Chinese and English. It is not to be taken as a chapter on translation, though inevitably it does touch on the subject.

Parts of the additional chapters inevitably reiterate some of the grammatical points already made in the book, but we hope that they offer a fresh approach to Chinese syntax.

We owe thanks to many people, but we are most indebted to Andrea Hartill, the senior editor of Routledge, whose enthusiasm for this project and words of encouragement have given us the impetus to complete this revision of the book with its five new chapters. Her assistant Isabelle Cheng has also provided enormous help and support.

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Finally, it goes without saying that any faults and errors are entirely the responsibility of the authors.

YPC and DR  
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# *Introduction*

This book aims to provide a comprehensive grammar of Chinese. It is intended for readers who have some knowledge of the language and are at ease with its written form, whether in traditional characters or romanisation. We have endeavoured to minimise the use of technical expressions, but, where linguistic terms are introduced, we have provided explanations.

We believe that a comprehensive grammar has to be comprehensive in two senses. First, it must highlight the specific characteristics of the language being described and, where appropriate, indicate how they differ from those of other languages. In the case of Chinese, for example, syntactic rules are often seen to be operational in conjunction with semantic, prosodic and discoursal principles. Second, the grammar must be able to cover (and therefore generate) all possible (and acceptable) constructions in the language. We have consequently adopted an eclectic approach and have made reference to a range of grammatical theories in order to achieve what we hope is a multiperspective approach: semantic, pragmatic, stylistic, prosodic, structural, functional, discoursal, transformational and generative. In our view, syntactic generalisations become comprehensive only when they are underpinned by judgements on particular language characteristics that draw on theoretical approaches relevant to those characteristics.

## **The layout of the grammar**

For ease of reference, each chapter provides an independent exposition of a particular grammatical feature and can be consulted by readers wishing to investigate that feature. Footnotes offer cross-references to related issues in other chapters. Lists of language examples are given throughout to illustrate points under discussion, and each example is in Chinese script



and romanisation, with an English translation and, where needed, a literal translation.

The book lays particular stress on functional types of sentence in Chinese, and this has influenced the sequencing of chapters. The non-morphological nature of the language, with the resultant absence of noun and verb inflection, and of general markers for definite and indefinite reference, means that most grammatical features have to be seen in the context of the sentence, or more usefully the sentence type, as a whole. We have identified four basic sentence types and a fifth overriding type, and these are discussed in detail in Chapters 20 and 21. The four basic types are: **narrative** (action-verb based and associated with the completed action marker); **descriptive** (again generally featuring action verbs, but with continuous action markers); **expository** (covering a range of explanatory statements, relating to existence, possession, cognition, experience, etc., with no verbal markers apart from one indicating experience); and **evaluative** (also explanatory statements, but with a more judgemental tone, featuring modal verbs, etc., but with no verbal markers). Narrative and descriptive sentences have a subject–predicate structure, while expository and evaluative sentences are more likely to follow a topic–comment pattern. The endless variability and invention of language mean that this typology will inevitably have loose ends and overlapping dimensions, and the presence or function of sentence elements will sometimes blur the boundaries between types, but nonetheless, we hope that the structure we propose offers some clarification of the complexities of Chinese grammar.

The fifth overriding type we have called *le*-**expository**, because the particle *le* 了 is present at the end of the sentence, and its presence introduces a notion of change or reversal, which the speaker expresses with varying degrees of personal involvement. *Le* can in fact be added to any of the four sentence types identified above, and, as we shall see, it has a significant impact on the meaning of the sentence. *Le*-expository sentences are a highly distinctive feature of the Chinese language, and, because they express some degree of endorsement by a speaker, they are a particular feature of the spoken language.

The layout of the book reflects this typology. The first five chapters deal with noun-related issues; Chapters 6 to 14 discuss elements in narrative and descriptive sentences; Chapters 15 to 19 are more concerned with expository and evaluative sentences; Chapters 20 and 21, as we have said, analyse sentence functional types; the final six chapters cover conjunctions, non-declarative sentences (interrogative and imperative) and other elements at work in sentences (omissions, and prosodic and stylistic features).

The Chinese language, or group of related languages, is spoken by the Hans, who constitute 94 per cent of China's population. One word for the language in Chinese is Hanyu 汉语, the Han language. Different, non-Han languages are spoken by the other 6 per cent of the population, the so-called minority peoples, such as the Mongols and the Tibetans.

The Chinese language is divided into a number of major dialects (with their many sub-dialects). Speakers of different dialects in some cases find each other unintelligible, but dialects are brought together by the fact that they share a common script. This book describes the main and official dialect, which is known by a number of names: Mandarin, modern standard Chinese, or *putonghua* ('common speech'). It is spoken in its various sub-dialect forms by almost three-quarters of the Hans across the northern, central and western regions of the country, but its standard pronunciation and grammar are associated with the Beijing area of north China, though not with Beijing city itself. The other dialects are Wu (spoken in Jiangsu and Zhejiang, including Shanghai), Xiang (in Hunan), Cantonese (in Guangdong), Min (in Fujian), Hakka (in northeast Guangdong and other southern provinces) and Gan (in Jiangxi).

Cantonese, Min and Hakka are widely spoken among overseas Chinese communities. In Taiwan, a form of Min dialect is used, though the official language is Mandarin, brought over by the Nationalists in 1949, and called there *guoyu* ('national language'). Mandarin is also widely used in Singapore, where it is known as *huayu* ('Chinese language'). Elsewhere, Chinese emigrants took their particular dialects with them, and in Britain, for instance, the Chinese people, who are largely from Hong Kong, almost all speak Cantonese.

The Chinese character script existed virtually unchanged for two thousand years until a range of simplified forms began to be introduced by the mainland Chinese government in the 1950s. These simplified characters, which we employ in this book, are used throughout China and increasingly in Chinese communities outside China, though not Taiwan. Chinese has been transcribed into Western alphabetic script through various systems for over one hundred years, and this book makes use of the standard romanisation *pinyin*.

The formal written language of China until the early decades of the twentieth century was Classical Chinese, which, as the vehicle for all publicly acknowledged literature and for official documentation, was at the heart

of the Chinese cultural tradition. However, it had grown remote from spoken Chinese in syntax and lexis, and had a position somewhat akin to medieval Latin in relation to the Romance languages it had spawned. It was left behind by modern written styles, based on spoken Chinese, which have evolved over the last hundred years, but echoes of Classical Chinese remain in contemporary speech and writing, especially in literary and aphoristic registers. This continuing presence of the Classical today will be mentioned at various points in our analysis.

# *Nouns and nominalisations*

Nouns in Chinese are not specifically identified as being nouns except in the case of those with suffixes like 子 *zi*, 儿 *er*,<sup>1</sup> 头 *tou*, etc. They are mainly disyllabic, but there are also quite a number of monosyllabic nouns in everyday vocabulary. Trisyllabic nouns are rare and polysyllabic nouns are even rarer, the latter being often regarded as nominal phrases. Chinese nouns do not under any circumstances inflect for case, gender or number,<sup>2</sup> though an unmarked common noun is normally assumed as being plural, e.g. 书 *shū* ‘books’ rather than ‘book’.

<sup>1</sup> 儿 *er* is essentially a nominal suffix but occasionally is found with other word classes, e.g. the verb 玩儿 *wánr* ‘to play, enjoy oneself’, and with some reduplicated adjectives, e.g. 好好儿 *hǎohǎor* ‘well, good’.

<sup>2</sup> An unmarked common noun is normally assumed as being plural. Also see §1.3 for the specific use of the plural suffix 们 *mén*.

## **I.1 Nouns and categorisation**

Nouns can be assigned to different categories with reference to their grammatical properties. Such categorisation, as we shall see, helps to highlight their usages, and identifies distinctive features relating to the use of measure words, definite and indefinite reference, plurality, etc.

### **I.1.1 Common nouns**

Certain nouns are referable to classes of tangible (and sometimes discrete) entities, categories, events and phenomena in the natural or human world. They are generally known as common nouns and are linguistic labels we attach to ourselves and our surroundings. For example:

诗人	<b>shīrén</b>	poet
山	<b>shān</b>	hill; mountain
商店	<b>shāngdiàn</b>	shop
狗	<b>gǒu</b>	dog
牡丹	<b>mǔdān</b>	peony
鞋	<b>xié</b>	shoe(s)
盐	<b>yán</b>	salt
语言	<b>yǔyán</b>	language
音乐	<b>yīnyuè</b>	music
广告	<b>guǎnggào</b>	advertisement
电影	<b>diànyǐng</b>	film; movie
比赛	<b>bǐsài</b>	contest
战争	<b>zhànzhēng</b>	war
地震	<b>dìzhèn</b>	earthquake

Tangibility is not to be understood only in a macroscopic sense. Some entities may not be visibly observable, but their existence can be verified by means of instruments or by accompanying phenomena.

电	<b>diàn</b>	electricity
细胞	<b>xìbāo</b>	[biology] cell
分子	<b>fēnzǐ</b>	molecule
原子	<b>yuánzǐ</b>	atom

The so-called discreteness, on the other hand, does not necessarily imply separateness. Sometimes, such discreteness may be more pragmatic than real. For instance, 树枝 **shùzhī** ‘branch, twig’ is discrete but not separated from 树干 **shùgàn** ‘tree trunk’, and there is a similar pragmatic distinction between 腿 **tuǐ** ‘leg’ and 脚 **jiǎo** ‘foot’.

However, a most distinctive feature of a Chinese common noun is that some kind of measure word is normally used in conjunction with a number or demonstrative. In some cases, the measure is a classifier (a) and in others it is a universal or standard measure (b),<sup>3</sup> which is generally associated with material nouns:<sup>4</sup>

(a) 一座山	<b>yī zuò shān</b>	a hill; a mountain
两朵花儿	<b>liǎng duǒ huār</b>	two flowers; two blossoms
四家商店	<b>sì jiā shāngdiàn</b>	four shops
五栋房子	<b>wǔ dòng fángzi</b>	five houses
那个人	<b>nèi ge rén</b>	that person
这本书	<b>zhèi běn shū</b>	this book

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 2 for a full discussion of measure words in all their forms.

<sup>4</sup> See §1.1.2 below.

(b) 一滴水	yī dī shuǐ <sup>5</sup> a drop of water
三片面包	sān piàn miànbāo three slices of bread
一杯茶	yī bēi chá a cup of tea
十度电	shí dù diàn ten units of electricity (for billing a consumer)
五公斤米	wǔ gōngjīn mǐ five kilos of rice
二十公升汽油	èrshí gōngshēng qìyóu twenty litres of petrol

<sup>5</sup> The numeral 一 yī ‘one’ changes to a fourth tone when followed by a syllable of first tone, second tone or third tone, e.g. 一滴水 yī dī shuǐ ‘a drop of water’ as in this example, and also 一场雨 yì cháng yǔ ‘a fall of rain’, 一米 yì mǐ ‘one metre’, etc. It changes to a second tone when followed by a syllable with a fourth tone, e.g. 一块玻璃 yí kuài bōli ‘a (thick) piece of glass’ (see next page). However, it remains unchanged when followed by words of any tone when it is part of a cardinal or ordinal number, e.g. 第一天 dìyī tiān ‘the first day’, 二十一天 èrshí yī tiān ‘twenty-one days’, etc. (The tone change rule still applies in 一百 yì bǎi ‘one hundred’, 一千 yì qiān ‘one thousand’, 一万 yí wàn ‘ten thousand’, and 一亿 yí yì ‘one hundred million’.) As this is a rule-governed tonal modification, the *pinyin* annotations in this grammar do not reflect these changes.

### 1.1.2 Material nouns

There are a number of common nouns that may be regarded as **material nouns**. One important feature of these nouns is that, unlike other common nouns, which have their own specific measure words, material nouns must first be grouped, packaged, partitioned or measured in terms of national or international standards before they can be counted. For example:

玻璃	bōli	glass
铁	tiě	iron
水	shuǐ	water
空气	kōngqì	air

They may only be used in connection with grouping, packaging, partitioning or standard measures:

一块玻璃	<b>yī kuài bōli</b> a (thick) piece of glass	(partitioning)
一片铁	<b>yī piàn tiě</b> a (thin) piece of iron	(partitioning)
三瓶牛奶	<b>sān píng niúǎi</b> three bottles of milk	(packaging)
四堆沙	<b>sì duī shā</b> four heaps of sand	(grouping)
两吨铁	<b>liǎng dūn tiě</b> two tons of iron	(standard measure)
一斤盐	<b>yī jīn yán</b> <sup>6</sup> a catty of salt	(Chinese measure)

<sup>6</sup> 斤 *jīn* ‘catty’ is a Chinese measure of weight equivalent to half a kilogram or slightly over a pound.

Material nouns can also be distinguished from other common nouns in two further ways:

- (a) While, as indicators of small or imprecise number or amount, 一些 *yīxiē* ‘some’ and 几 *jǐ* (plus measure) ‘several; a few’ can be used with any common nouns, 一点(儿) *yīdiǎn(r)* ‘a little’ occurs only with material nouns:

一些书	<b>yīxiē shū</b>	some books
几本书	<b>jǐ běn shū</b>	a few books
*一点(儿)书	<b>*yīdiǎn(r) shū</b>	*a little books
一些水	<b>yīxiē shuǐ</b>	some water
几桶水	<b>jǐ tǒng shuǐ</b>	a few buckets/pails of water
一点(儿)水	<b>yīdiǎn(r) shuǐ</b>	a little water

- (b) When suffixed by the particle 的 *de*, a material noun more often indicates composition rather than possession:

铜的	<b>tóng de</b>	(made of) brass
塑料的	<b>sùliào de</b>	(made of) plastic
玻璃的	<b>bōli de</b>	(made of) glass

Compare the following sentences:

这个盒子是塑料的。 **zhèi ge hézi shì sùliào de**  
(lit. this mw box is plastic *de*)

This is a plastic box. (material composition)

这个盒子是爸爸的。zhèi ge hézi shì bàba de  
(lit. this mw box is father de)  
This box belongs to father. (possession)

### 1.1.3 Collective nouns

Another group of Chinese common nouns has an inbuilt notion of plurality. They are known as **collective nouns**, and are usually formed by juxtaposing two hyponyms (a) or by tagging a measure to a noun (b). For example:

(a)	父母	fùmǔ	parents (father and mother)
	夫妇	fūfù	a married couple (husband and wife)
	子女	zǐnǚ	children (sons and daughters)

(Others include: 师生 shīshēng ‘teachers and students’, 亲友 qīnyǒu ‘friends and relatives’, 男女 nánǚ ‘men and women; boys and girls’, 人民 rénmin ‘people (as opposed to government)’, 城乡 chéngxiāng ‘cities and villages’, 院校 yuànxào ‘academic institutions’, 书报 shūbào ‘publications (books and newspapers)’, 文具 wénjù ‘stationery’, 树木 shùmù ‘trees’, 饭菜 fāncài ‘food (cooked rice and dishes for a meal)’, 财产 cáichǎn ‘possessions’, etc.)

(b)	车辆	chēliàng	vehicles
		(一辆车 yī liàng chē	a/one car)
	花朵	huāduǒ	flowers
		(一朵花 yī duǒ huā	a/one flower/blossom)
	马匹	mǎpǐ	horses
		(一匹马 yī pǐ mǎ	a/one horse)

(Others include: 人口 rénkǒu ‘population’, 枪支 qiāngzhī ‘rifles’, 船只 chuánzhī ‘shipping’, 书本 shūběn ‘books’, 纸张 zhǐzhāng ‘paper’, 砖块 zhuānkuài ‘bricks’, 事项 shìxiàng ‘matters’, 布匹 bùpǐ ‘(bolts of) cloth’, 田亩 tiánmǔ ‘cultivated land’, etc.)

A common feature of these collective nouns is that they are not differentiable into individual items by means of numerals and measures. For example:

*两个父母	*liǎng ge fùmǔ	*two parents
*三辆车辆	*sān liàng chēliàng	*three vehicles



The only measure words that may be used with them are those of grouping, location or indeterminate amount. For example:

一对夫妻	<b>yī duì fūqī</b> a couple
一批人马	<b>yī pī rén mǎ</b> a cohort of people (assembled for a particular job)
一桌饭菜	<b>yī zhuō fàn cài</b> a table of food
一些亲朋	<b>yīxiē qīnpéng</b> some relatives and friends

#### 1.1.4 Abstract nouns

A second major set of nouns is generally known as **abstract nouns**. Unlike common nouns, they are non-referrable to concrete objects or entities in the natural or human world. They are rather products of human epistemology, being convenient, summary labels used holistically to refer to complex or sophisticated situations, experiences, processes, qualities or phenomena in diverse areas of human endeavour. For example:

矛盾	<b>máodùn</b>	contradiction
名声	<b>míngshēng</b>	reputation
真理	<b>zhēnlǐ</b>	truth
范围	<b>fànwéi</b>	scope
前景	<b>qiánjǐng</b>	prospect
影响	<b>yǐngxiǎng</b>	influence
印象	<b>yìnxiàng</b>	impression

While common nouns are the basic stock of words sufficient for general purposes, abstract nouns are tools for conceptualisation and argument.

Abstract nouns may also be defined by a numeral/demonstrative and a measure word, but this measure is restricted to either the more general 个 *gè* or a measure word indicating type, e.g. 种 *zhǒng* ‘type, kind, category’ or the indeterminate number/amount measure 一些 *yīxiē* ‘some’ or 一点 *yīdiǎn* ‘a little’. For example:

那个真理	<b>nèi ge zhēnlǐ</b> that truth
一个印象	<b>yī ge yìnxiàng</b> an impression

一种影响	<b>yī zhǒng yǐngxiǎng</b> a certain influence
两种(不同的)情况	<b>liǎng zhǒng (bù tóng de) qíngkuàng</b> two (different) situations
这些矛盾	<b>zhèixiē máodùn</b> these contradictions
一点效果	<b>yīdiǎn xiàoguǒ</b> a little effect

### 1.1.5 Proper nouns

A third important set of nouns is **proper nouns**. They are unique labels used to identify particular individuals, items, places, etc. In other words, proper nouns have unique referents in the universe. For example:

孔子	<b>kǒngzǐ</b>	Confucius
中国	<b>zhōngguó</b>	China
火星	<b>huǒxīng</b>	Mars
佛教	<b>fójiào</b>	Buddhism

Proper nouns do not usually associate themselves with numerals and measure words except in a metaphorical sense. For example:

*三个火星	<b>*sān ge huǒxīng</b>	*three Mars
*两个孔子	<b>*liǎng ge kǒngzǐ</b>	*two Confucius's

but:

另一个孔子	<b>lìng yī ge kǒngzǐ</b>	another Confucius
两个中国	<b>liǎng ge zhōngguó</b>	two Chinas

### 1.1.6 Temporal and spatial nouns

A group of time and location words can be defined as temporal-spatial nouns. These nouns cut right across common, abstract and proper nouns to focus on the notions of time and space. They are, in fact, habitual cognitive linchpins in a speaker's awareness of daily happenings and events, their precedences, consequences and developments, and their venues and associations, and they help to order and rationalise thought processes. Without these temporal and spatial labels, narration would become impossible and argument would be devoid of logic.

**Temporal nouns:**

昨天	zuótiān	yesterday
去年	qùnián	last year
下周	xiàzhōu	next week
每天	měitiān	every day
新石器时代	xīnshíqì shídài	the Neolithic Age

**Spatial nouns:**

中国	zhōngguó	China
北京	běijīng	Beijing
伦敦	lúndūn	London
飞机场	fēijīchǎng	airport
火车站	huǒchēzhàn	railway station

What differentiates this group of nouns from the rest is their normal usage as adverbials with or without the help of the preposition-like coverb 在 *zài* ‘at, in, on, exist’. For example:

他昨天来看我。	tā zuótiān lái kàn wǒ	He came to see me yesterday.
他在中国访问。	tā zài zhōngguó fǎngwèn	He is touring China at the moment.

**1.2 Nouns and reference**

**1.2.1 Definite or indefinite/generic reference**

Proper nouns have unique referents and are therefore always of **definite reference** while abstract and material nouns usually have **indefinite** or **generic reference** when unqualified. Collective nouns, too, are by nature of indefinite reference. With common nouns, however, we are faced with a clear choice between definite and indefinite reference.

In a language without definite or indefinite articles like Chinese, the reference of unmarked nouns is influenced by a number of factors: context, sentence type, the position of the noun in relation to the verb in the sentence, and the nature of the verb itself.<sup>7</sup> When we use the noun 书 *shū* ‘book’, for instance, we have no way of determining whether it means ‘the book(s)’ or ‘books’ in general until we place it in a sentence.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 20 for a full discussion of reference in relation to sentence types.

In a sentence with an action verb, whether transitive or intransitive, all preverbal unmarked nouns (being given information) are of definite reference, whereas all post-verbal unmarked nouns (new information) are generally of indefinite reference. For example:

书已经还了。shū yǐjīng huán le

The book/books has/have already been returned.

我去借书。wǒ qù jiè shū

I am going/went to borrow a book/some books.

孩子回来了。háizi huílái le

The child/children has/have come back.

In some contexts, however, a post-verbal unmarked noun may be part of given information and therefore be of definite reference:

她去照顾孩子。tā qù zhàogù háizi

She went to look after the children.

With an expository verb like 是 shì 'to be', the pre-verbal position may also feature new information. It is therefore not impossible for pre-verbal nouns in expository sentences to acquire indefinite or generic reference as well as definite reference, depending on the context. For example:

书是知识与文化的使者。

shū shì zhīshí yǔ wénhuà de shǐzhě (indefinite/generic reference)

Books are messengers of knowledge and culture.

书是我买的。

shū shì wǒ mǎi de (definite reference) (lit. books are I buy **de**)

I bought the books.

Definite or indefinite reference may, of course, be formally marked by demonstratives or 'numeral + measure word' phrases.

这本书	zhèi běn shū	this book	(definite reference)
那本书	nà běn shū	that book	(definite reference)
一本书	yī běn shū	a book/one book	(indefinite reference)
几本书	jǐ běn shū	a few books	(indefinite reference)
一些书	yīxiē shū	some books	(indefinite reference)

With the help of demonstratives and measure words, a definite-referenced noun may also be used post-verbally:

我看过这本书。wǒ kàn guo zhèi běn shū

I have read this book.

However, an indefinite-referenced noun, despite the fact that it has been specified by a ‘numeral + measure word’ phrase, cannot normally be featured in a pre-action-verb position:<sup>8</sup>

\*一本书放在桌子上。\***yī běn shū fàng zài zhuōzi shàng**  
\*A book was placed on the table.

<sup>8</sup> This, however, happens increasingly in modern translations: e.g. 这时候, 一辆车开来了。zhè shíhòu yī liàng chē kāi lái le ‘At this moment a car drove up’, but it is still felt to be translationese by most Chinese readers.

As a general rule, the shift of an indefinite-referenced noun to a pre-action-verb position will entail the use of the verb 有 yǒu ‘there is/are, to exist, to have’:<sup>9</sup>

有(一)本书放在桌子上。yǒu (yī) běn shū fàng zài zhuōzi shàng<sup>10</sup>  
There was a book on the table.

这时候, 有(一)辆车开来了。  
zhè shíhòu yǒu (yī) liàng chē kāi lái le  
At this moment a car drove up.

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 16: the verb 有 yǒu.

<sup>10</sup> The numeral 一 yī ‘one’ is often omitted for reasons of speech rhythm, particularly when it is used to indicate indefinite reference (i.e. equivalent to the English indefinite article ‘a/an’) rather than the number itself. (See Chapter 26 Prosody and Syntax). It cannot be omitted if the number is to be emphasized (i.e. no more than ‘one’), e.g. 只有一本书放在桌子上。zhǐ yǒu yī běn shū fàng zài zhuōzi shàng ‘There is only one book on the table’. (See the exclusive reference use of 一 yī ‘one’ in the following section. Under such circumstances it can never be omitted.)

### 1.2.2 Exclusive reference

Apart from definite and indefinite/generic reference, **exclusive references** can also be expressed through the use of 一 yī ‘one’<sup>11</sup> plus a measure word or the adjective 什么 shénme ‘any’. Exclusive-referenced nouns are invariably positioned pre-verbally, and are always accompanied by the obligatory use of an adverb 也 yě ‘also’ or 都 dōu ‘all’ in the predicate or comment:

我一本书也没借。wǒ yī běn shū yě méi jiè  
I didn’t borrow a single book.

他什么书都看。tā shénme shū dōu kàn  
He reads any books.

<sup>11</sup> See also §16.1.

### 1.3 Nouns and plurality

**Collective nouns**, as we have seen, possess inbuilt notion of plurality and are therefore not definable by precise numbers (see §1.1.3).

**Proper nouns** derive their singularity or plurality from their corresponding referents.

英国	yīngguó	Britain	(singular)
基督教徒	jīdū jiàotú	Christians	(singular/plural)

With **abstract nouns**, the notion of plurality does not normally arise. If it does, it is in a metaphorical and non-numerical sense. An abstract noun can usually only be made to associate with the numeral 一 yī ‘one’. For example:

一线希望	yī xiàn xīwàng	a gleam of hope
一派胡言	yī pài húyán	a pack of nonsense

It is only with **common nouns** that there is an obvious choice as to whether they are plural or singular, and plurality is generally indicated by a ‘numeral + measure word’ phrase:

五个学生	wǔ ge xuésheng	five students
两只小猫	liǎng zhī xiǎomāo	two kittens
三把刀	sān bǎ dāo	three knives

In addition 一些<sup>12</sup> yīxiē ‘some’, 几 jǐ plus a measure word ‘a few’, and other established adjectives like 许多 xǔduō ‘many’, 不少 bùshǎo ‘quite a few’, etc., can be used:

一些苹果	yīxiē píngguǒ	some apples
几个人	jǐ ge rén	a few people
许多商店	xǔduō shāngdiàn	many shops
不少书	bùshǎo shū	quite a few books

<sup>12</sup> The indeterminate plural measure 些 xiē occurs with the numeral 一 yī and no others. It is also used with the demonstratives 这 zhè and 那 nà to form the plural demonstrative adjectives 这些 zhèxiē ‘these’ and 那些 nàxiē ‘those’ (see §3.2). The 一 yī ‘one’ in 一些 yīxiē ‘some’ may sometimes be omitted.

Similarly, in the case of **material nouns**, plurality is expressed in conjunction with their measures or through rough estimation. For example:

一块布	yī kuài bù	(singular: partitioning)
	a piece of cloth	

两匹布	liǎng pǐ bù	(plural: packaging)
一批布	yī pī bù	(singular: group)
两尺布	liǎng chǐ bù	(plural: standard measures)
一些/一点儿布	yīxiē/yīdiǎnr bù	(rough estimate)
	some cloth	

With **human nouns** there is a standard plural suffix form 们 **men**. Some restrictions, however, apply to its use: it normally relates to people in groups, and therefore regularly occurs as a term of address in gatherings, e.g. 朋友们 **péngyoumen** ‘friends’, 先生们、女士们 **xiānshengmen nǚshìmen** ‘ladies and gentlemen’; it is not used with numbers, e.g. ‘three children’ is therefore 三个孩子 **sān ge hái zi** rather than \*三个孩子们 \***sān ge háizimen**; and when it is present in a sentence, the noun to which it is suffixed is invariably of definite reference:

客人们	kèrenmen	<u>the</u> guests
孩子们	háizimen	<u>the</u> children

It should also be noted that there are a small number of nouns in the language that, whatever their category, cannot be quantified at all (unless metaphorically). They provide some form of overall description: from natural phenomena to social conditions and human traits.<sup>13</sup> For example:

大自然	dàzìrán	nature
天空	tiānkōng	the sky
海洋	hǎiyáng	the ocean
波涛	bōtāo	billows, great waves
潮汐	cháo xī	the morning and evening tides
地势	dì shì	topography, terrain
风水	fēngshuǐ	fengshui, geomancy
烈日	liè rì	the scorching sun
国防	guó fáng	national defence
金融	jīn róng	finance
民意	mín yì	public opinion, the will of the people
行政	xíng zhèng	administration
全局	quán jú	the overall situation
人类	rén lèi	humankind
商业	shāng yè	commerce

<sup>13</sup> The list is not exhaustive.

政治	zhèngzhì	politics
身心	shēnxīn	body and mind
体魄	tǐpò	physical condition
外表	wàibiǎo	physical appearance
心灵	xīnlíng	heart, soul
仪表	yíbiǎo	demeanour
智能	zhìnéng	intelligence
眼界	yǎnjiè	outlook, field of vision
胸怀	xiōnghuái	frame of mind

## 1.4 Nouns and syntactic functions

Nouns, whatever their category, and noun phrases may contract the following syntactic relationships with other word classes in a syntactic construction – phrasal as well as sentential:

### Phrasal:

- (a) as an attributive with or without 的 *de* indicating attribution or possession:

电脑世界	diànnǎo shìjiè
	the computer world
电脑的将来	diànnǎo de jiānglái
	the future of computers

- (b) as a headword modified by an adjectival attributive with or without 的 *de*:

新书	xīn shū	new books
年轻的诗人	niánqīng de shīrén	a young poet
美丽的风景	měilì de fēngjǐng	a beautiful view

- (c) as a headword modified by a ‘numeral + measure word’ phrase:

一个诗人	yī ge shīrén	a poet
两架飞机	liǎng jià fēijī	two aircraft

- (d) as an object governed by a preposition or coverb:

靠墙	kào qiáng	against the wall
沿着大路	yánzhe dàlù	along the road



- (e) as a headword followed by a full or abbreviated postposition:

<u>桌子上边</u>	<b>zhuōzi shàngbian</b>	on the table
<u>桌子上</u>	<b>zhuōzi shàng</b>	on the table

- (f) as items juxtaposed to each other or joined together by conjunctions:

<u>楼上楼下</u>	<b>lóushàng lóuxià</b>	upstairs and downstairs
<u>桌子和椅子</u>	<b>zhuōzi hé yǐzi</b>	tables and chairs

### Sentential:

- (g) as the subject of a sentence:

<u>飞机起飞了。</u>	<b>fēijī qǐfēi le</b>	The plane took off.
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- (h) as the topic of a sentence:

<u>电脑十分有用。</u>	<b>diànnǎo shífēn yǒu yòng</b>	Computers are extremely useful.
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- (i) as a predicative after 是 shì ‘to be’:

<u>这位是诗人。</u>	<b>zhèi wèi shì shīrén</b>	This gentleman/lady is a poet.
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- (j) as a nominal predicate:<sup>14</sup>

<u>今天星期五。</u>	<b>jīntiān xīngqī wǔ</b>	Today is Friday.
<u>小孩今年四岁。</u>	<b>xiǎohái jīnnián sì suì</b>	My child is 4.

<sup>14</sup> A nominal predicate can always be reworded to include the expository verb 是 shì ‘to be’: e.g. 今天是星期五。 jīntiān shì xīngqī wǔ ‘Today is Friday’. Predicates like these are restricted to the predication of time, date, size, weight, length, height, price, age, nationality, birthplace, personal physical or psychological traits, etc. Physical and psychological traits are represented by phrases like 高个儿 gāogèr ‘a tall person’, 急性子 jíxìngzi ‘a person of fiery temper’, etc. For example, 这个人急性子。 zhèi ge rén jíxìngzi. ‘This person is hot-tempered’.

- (k) as the object of a transitive verb:

<u>他很尊敬老师。</u>	<b>tā hěn zūnjìng lǎoshī</b>	He respects teachers very much.
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- (l) as an adverbial:

<u>他昨天回来。</u>	<b>tā zuótiān huílai</b>	He came back yesterday.
<u>他一个人回来。</u>	<b>tā yī ge rén huílai</b>	He came back on his own.

Apart from temporal nouns, which are almost always used as adverbials, there are a very restricted number of nouns that may be sometimes used (with or more often without the adverbial marker 地 *de*) as adverbials. The most common ones are:

表面	<b>biǎomiàn</b>	surface > superficially
部分	<b>bùfen</b>	part > partially
集体	<b>jítǐ</b>	collective > collectively
和平	<b>héping</b>	peace > peacefully
本能	<b>běnnéng</b>	instinct > instinctively
历史	<b>lìshǐ</b>	history > historically
逻辑	<b>luóji</b>	logic > logically

## 1.5 Nouns and semantic fields

Nouns may be compartmentalised into definable categories in terms of meaning. These definable categories are generally known as **semantic fields**. One salient feature of these categories is their established or potential **hyponymic relationship** with one another. For example, a semantic field concerning meteorological phenomena in Chinese may have a superordinate term 气象 *qìxiàng* ‘meteorology’ dominating the following hyponyms:

雨	<b>yǔ</b>	rain
雪	<b>xuě</b>	snow
冰	<b>bīng</b>	ice
雹子	<b>báozi</b>	hailstone
风	<b>fēng</b>	wind
云	<b>yún</b>	cloud
霜	<b>shuāng</b>	frost
露水	<b>lùshuǐ</b>	dew
虹	<b>hóng</b>	rainbow
彩霞	<b>cǎixiá</b>	sunset clouds
雾	<b>wù</b>	fog
烟雾	<b>yānwù</b>	smog
雷	<b>léi</b>	thunder
闪电	<b>shǎndiàn</b>	lightning

These terms may seem different from one another, but in their written form they mostly share the common radical 雨 *yǔ* ‘rain’: 雪 *xuě*, 霜 *shuāng*, 雹 *báo*, 露 *lù*, 霞 *xiá*, 雾 *wù*, 雷 *léi*, and the original, unsimplified versions of 电 *diàn* (電) and 云 *yún* (雲). If we go further and try to retrieve co-hyponyms of, for example, 雨 *yǔ* ‘rain’ or 风 *fēng* ‘wind’ down the

semantic ladder, we will find that most terms are organised with the super-ordinate terms themselves as headwords:

雨 <b>yǔ</b> 'rain':		
大雨	<b>dà yǔ</b>	heavy rain
毛毛雨	<b>máomáo yǔ</b>	drizzle
阵雨	<b>zhèn yǔ</b>	shower
暴风雨	<b>bàofēng yǔ</b>	storm

风 <b>fēng</b> 'wind':		
微风	<b>wēi fēng</b>	breeze
大风	<b>dà fēng</b>	gale
台风	<b>táifēng</b>	typhoon
飓风	<b>jùfēng</b>	hurricane
龙卷风	<b>lóngjuǎnfēng</b>	tornado

In the Chinese lexicon, in fact, hyponymic or co-hyponymic relationships like the above are often realised in terms of a **suffix-like form** shared by the hyponyms or co-hyponyms in the field. For example:

superordinate term:	专家	<b>zhuānjiā</b> specialist; professional
co-hyponyms:	作家	<b>zuòjiā</b> writer
	画家	<b>huàjiā</b> painter
	音乐家	<b>yīnyuèjiā</b> musician
	艺术家	<b>yìshùjiā</b> artist
	探险家	<b>tànxiǎnjiā</b> explorer
	慈善家	<b>císhànjiā</b> philanthropist
superordinate term:	交通工具	<b>jiāotōng gōngjù</b> means of transport
co-hyponyms:	火车	<b>huǒchē</b> train
	电车	<b>diànchē</b> tram; trolley

汽车	<b>qìchē</b> car
缆车	<b>lǎnchē</b> cable car
摩托车	<b>mótuōchē</b> motorcycle
自行车	<b>zìxíngchē</b> bicycle

co-hyponyms of 汽车 **qìchē** 'car':

长途汽车	<b>chángtú qìchē</b> coach
公共汽车	<b>gònggòng qìchē</b> bus
出租汽车 <sup>15</sup>	<b>chūzū qìchē</b> taxi
小汽车	<b>xiǎoqìchē</b> private car
货车	<b>huòchē</b> lorry, truck

<sup>15</sup> Nowadays there is an increasing use of 的士 **díshì** for 'taxi' (in place of 出租汽车 **chūzū qìchē**) in everyday speech, 的士 **díshì** borrows the Cantonese transliteration of 'taxi'. 打的 **dǎdí** means 'to take a taxi'.

Another salient feature of these semantic fields are the sets of **part-and-whole relationships**, which are often expressed in terms of a **prefix-like form** shared by the members of the same field. For example:

车头	<b>chētóu</b>	the front of a car
车身	<b>chēshēn</b>	the body of a car
车尾	<b>chēwěi</b>	the rear of a car
车轮	<b>chēlún</b>	wheel (of a car)
车胎	<b>chētāi</b>	tyre
车闸	<b>chēzhá</b>	brake
车牌	<b>chēpái</b>	number plate
山顶	<b>shāndǐng</b>	peak; summit
山腰	<b>shānyāo</b>	halfway up (a mountain)
山脚	<b>shānjiǎo</b>	foot (of a mountain)
山坡	<b>shānpō</b>	slope
山脊	<b>shānjǐ</b>	ridge
山谷	<b>shāngǔ</b>	ravine; valley
山坞	<b>shānwù</b>	glen; col

鞋底	<b>xiédǐ</b>	sole (of shoe)
鞋跟	<b>xiégēn</b>	heel
鞋帮	<b>xiébāng</b>	upper (of shoe)
鞋带	<b>xiédài</b>	shoelace
花瓣	<b>huābàn</b>	petal
花蕾	<b>huālěi</b>	bud
花蕊	<b>huāruǐ</b>	stamen or pistil
花粉	<b>huāfěn</b>	pollen

Such attributions may often extend to **spatial affinity relationships** in diverse senses. For example,

花盆	<b>huāpén</b>	flower pot
花瓶	<b>huāpíng</b>	flower vase
花篮	<b>huālán</b>	basket of flowers
花园	<b>huāyuán</b>	garden
花匠	<b>huājiàng</b>	gardener

## 1.6 Nominalisations

Nominalisation in Chinese does not usually seek morphological conversions. It is always **context-dependent**. In other words, all nominalisations are contextual nominalisations.

A verb or an adjective may be taken as a noun therefore only in a given context or grammatical framework: for example 广播 **guǎngbō** ‘to broadcast’ in origin is a verb, as in 广播新闻 **guǎngbō xīnwén** ‘to broadcast news’. However, if the order of the two words is reversed, 新闻广播 **xīnwén guǎngbō** will mean ‘news broadcast’, in which the word ‘broadcast’ may be said to have been nominalised according to its headword status in the collocation.

Again, 美 **měi** ‘beautiful’ in 这个菜的味道真美 **zhèi ge cài de wèidào zhēn měi** ‘This dish tastes really delicious’ (lit.: the taste is really beautiful) is undoubtedly an adjective. However, in a context such as the following, it functions as a noun: 外表的美不等于内心的美 **wàibiǎo de měi bù dēngyú nèixīn de měi** ‘Beauty in appearance is not the same as beauty at heart’.

Contextual nominalisation, as we can see, occurs essentially with verbs and adjectives when they are used as grammatical topics or objects. Other word classes are less likely to become nominalised. Here are a few

more examples, in which the verbs 研究 *yánjiū* ‘to study, to research into’, 发现 *fāxiàn* ‘to discover’ and 判断 *pànduàn* ‘to judge’ have been made nouns:

他对这个问题进行了研究。

**tā duì zhèi ge wèntí jìnxíng le yánjiū**

He conducted some research into/made a study of the problem.

他然后根据自己的发现，对这个问题作出了判断。

**tā ránhòu gēnjù zìjǐ de fāxiàn | duì zhèi ge wèntí zuòchū le  
pànduàn**

He then, based on his discovery, made a judgement on the problem.

## Chapter 2

# Numerals and measures

### 2.1 Digits, units and cardinal numbers

There are eleven **digital** notations in Chinese:

零	líng <sup>1</sup>	zero
一	yī	one
二	èr (两 liǎng) <sup>2</sup>	two
三	sān	three
四	sì	four
五	wǔ	five
六	liù	six
七	qī	seven
八	bā	eight
九	jiǔ	nine
十	shí	ten

<sup>1</sup> The digit 零 líng ‘zero’, apart from indicating itself, is used only in ordinals, decimals or numbers larger than 100.

<sup>2</sup> 两 liǎng ‘two’ is used with measures and nouns rather than 二 èr: 两个人 liǎng ge rén ‘two people’, 两点钟 liǎng diǎn zhōng ‘two o’clock’. However, this does not apply to numbers over ten, e.g. 十二个人 shí’ér ge rén ‘twelve people’, 五十二岁 wǔshí èr suì ‘52 years old’. Also, when 两 liǎng itself is used as a measure word meaning ‘tael’ or ‘50 grams’, 二 èr is preferred to avoid a euphonic clash.

**Cardinal** integers or round figures from eleven to ninety-nine are formed by arranging in different sequences the ten digits from one to ten. For example:

twelve	十二	shí’èr
nineteen	十九	shíjiǔ
twenty	二十	èrshí
ninety	九十	jiǔshí
twenty-nine	二十九	èrshí jiǔ
ninety-two	九十二	jiǔshí èr

Numbers above 100 make use of a set of **unitary notations**, some of which are peculiar to Chinese. They are:

百	<b>bǎi</b>	hundred
千	<b>qiān</b>	thousand
万	<b>wàn</b>	ten thousand
亿	<b>yì</b>	hundred million
兆	<b>zhào</b>	million million/trillion

The differences between Chinese and English unitary notations are therefore as follows:

	trillion	billion	hundred million	million	ten thousand	thousand	hundred	ten	one
English	1, 0 0 0, 0 0 0, 0 0 0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chinese	兆	十亿	亿	百万	万	千	百	十	个 <sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 个 *gè*, the most commonly used measure word (see §2.8.2 below), is generally used to represent one-digit numbers (个位数 *gè wèi shù*).

We can see that, compared with English, where beyond a thousand a new unitary notation is introduced every three places, in the Chinese system, a new notation is used every four places beyond ten thousand (万 *wàn*).

Here are some examples demonstrating the conversion:

100	一百 <b>yī bǎi</b>
125	一百二十五 <b>yī bǎi èrshí wǔ</b>
3,236	三千二百三十六 <b>sān qiān èr bǎi sānshí liù</b>
54,321	五万四千三百二十一 <b>wǔ wàn sì qiān sān bǎi èrshí yī</b>
543,217	五十四万三千二百一十七 <b>wǔshí sì wàn sān qiān èr bǎi yīshí qī</b>
1,200,000	一百二十万 <b>yī bǎi èrshí wàn</b>
1,100,000,000	十一亿 <b>shíyī yì</b>



Note that in counting numbers larger than one hundred, 一 yī ‘one’ has to be incorporated before tens as well. Compare:

18	十八	shíbā
118	一百一十八	yī bǎi yīshí bā

零 líng ‘zero’ has to be introduced into a number where one or more consecutive unitary notations are missing. Compare:

1,981	一千九百八十一	yī qiān jiǔ bǎi bāshí yī
1,081	一千零八十一	yī qiān líng bāshí yī
1,001	一千零一	yī qiān líng yī
10,101	一万零一百零一	yī wàn líng yī bǎi líng yī

2.2 Ordinals

Ordinals in Chinese are formed simply by adding the prefix 第 dì to cardinal numbers. For example:

一 yī one	>	第一 dì yī first
五 wǔ five	>	第五 dì wǔ fifth
一百零一 yī bǎi líng yī one hundred and one	>	第一百零一 dì yī bǎi líng yī one hundred and first

Other examples are:

第十一图	dì shíyī tú	Diagram 11
第八表	dì bā biǎo	Chart 8
第二卷	dì èr juàn	Volume 2 (of a set of books)
第十二页	dì shí'èr yè	Page 12

However, not all sequencing in ordinals in English is convertible into corresponding ordinals in Chinese. For example:

Year Two (i.e. the second year)	二年级	èr niánjí
	not:	*二年级
second floor	三楼	sān lóu
	not:	*三楼

If there are any rules that can be followed, it seems that in classification or gradation, 第 dì will normally be dropped:

一等舱	yī děng cāng	first class (on a ship or plane)
二级商品	èr jí shāngpǐn	second-class commodities
三流作品	sān liú zuòpǐn	third-class works (of art or literature)

And if the item is one from an established series,<sup>4</sup> it is customary, too, for 第 *dì* to be left out:

五路车	<b>wǔ lù chē</b>	Bus Route 5, the number 5 bus
六号房	<b>liù hào fáng</b>	Room 6

<sup>4</sup> Books and journals are exceptions, e.g. 第四册 *dì sì cè* ‘Vol. 4’, 第七期 *dì qī qī* ‘Issue No. 7’, because without the ordinal marker 第 *dì*, the phrases may respectively mean: ‘4 volumes (of books)’ and ‘4 issues (of journals)’.

Also, for the sake of succinctness, ordinals are often represented by cardinals following nouns:<sup>5</sup>

图四	<b>tú sì</b>	Diagram 4
表五	<b>biǎo wǔ</b>	Chart 5
例六	<b>lì liù</b>	Example 6
练习七	<b>liànxí qī</b>	Exercise 7
附录三	<b>fùlù sān</b>	Appendix 3

<sup>5</sup> This is more so in written Chinese. In spoken Chinese, cardinals more commonly precede nouns.

## 2.3 Enumeration

Cardinal numbers indicate amounts and ordinal numbers position in a sequence. **Enumeration** is the expression of a number, particularly a large number, for its own sake, e.g. in a telephone directory or on a meter.

Enumeration requires that the numbers be used one after another in a linear succession:

2783697	二七八三六九七
	<b>èr qī bā sān liù jiǔ qī</b>
(0113) 2333463	零一一三三三三四六三
	<b>líng yāo yāo sān èr sān sān sān sì liù sān</b> <sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Note that 一 *yī* ‘one’ can often be expressed orally, particularly over the telephone, as 一 *yāo* ‘one’ to rule out the possibility of its being confused with 七 *qī* ‘seven’.

It is also used to refer to particular years:

2001	二零零一年
	<b>èr líng líng yī nián</b> (lit. two zero zero one year) <sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Please also note the widespread use of Arabic numerals rather than Chinese numerals in modern documentation.

However, centuries and decades are expressed in terms of cardinal numbers:

二十一世纪	èrshí yī shìjì	the twenty-first century
八十年代	bāshí niándài	the (nineteen) eighties

## 2.4 Fractions, percentages and decimals

### 2.4.1 Fractions

Fractions (分数 *fēnshù*) in Chinese are linguistically expressed in the standard way as a **numerator** (分子 *fēnzǐ*) that is a proportion of a **denominator** (分母 *fēnmǔ*). Both the numerator and the denominator are encoded in terms of cardinal numbers, formulaically, as:

denominator + 分之 *fēn zhī* + numerator

For example:

$\frac{1}{2}$	二分之一	èr fēn zhī yī
$\frac{2}{3}$	三分之二	sān fēn zhī èr
$\frac{5}{6}$	六分之五	liù fēn zhī wǔ
$\frac{1}{10}$	十分之一	shí fēn zhī yī

Literally, 二分之一 *èr fēn zhī yī* means ‘one out of two parts’, 三分之二 *sān fēn zhī èr* ‘two parts out of three’, and so on and so forth.

**Improper fractions** (假分数 *jiǎ fēnshù*), where the numerator is bigger than the denominator, are expressed in the same way:

$\frac{6}{5}$	五分之六	wǔ fēn zhī liù
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**Complex fractions** (繁分数 *fán fēnshù*), where the numerator or the denominator itself is a fraction, are expressed in a similar fashion:

$\frac{2/3}{1/2}$	二分之一分之三分之二	èr fēn zhī yī fēn zhī sān fēn zhī èr
	(two thirds over a half)	

**Integers followed by fractions** (带分数 *dài fēnshù*) adopt the following pattern:

cardinal number + 又 *yòu* ‘plus’ + denominator + 分之 *fēn zhī* + numerator

$1\frac{1}{2}$	一又二分之一	yī yòu èr fēn zhī yī
$5\frac{3}{4}$	五又四分之三	wǔ yòu sì fēn zhī sān

### 2.4.2 Percentages

Percentages (百分比 **bǎi fēn bǐ**) as fractions with one hundred as their denominator are expressed in the same way as fractions in Chinese. The only thing to note is that the number ‘hundred’ in the denominator is encoded in the formula as 百 **bǎi** on its own rather than its full form 一百 **yī bǎi**:

64%	百分之六十四	<b>bǎi fēn zhī liùshí sì</b>
101%	百分之一百零一	<b>bǎi fēn zhī yī bǎi líng yī</b>

### 2.4.3 Decimals

Decimals (小数 **xiǎo shù**) have two forms: the number before the decimal point may be read as a cardinal number or as an enumeration with the number after it always an enumeration. For example:

275.63	either	二百七十五点六三
	or	<b>èr bǎi qīshí wǔ diǎn liù sān</b>
		二七五点六三
		<b>èr qī wǔ diǎn liù sān</b>
1038.94	either	一千零三十八点九四
	or	<b>yī qiān líng sānshí bā diǎn jiǔ sì</b>
		一零三八点九四
		<b>yī líng sān bā diǎn jiǔ sì</b>

Note that the decimal point is always expressed as 点 **diǎn** ‘point’.

## 2.5 Imprecise numbers, halves and multiples

### 2.5.1 Imprecise numbers (约数 **yuēshù**)

In this section, we are including juxtaposition (one or two); approximation (about); indeterminate excess (over, more than).

### 2.5.1.1 Juxtaposition

This places two consecutive numbers under ten one after the other in the following kinds of formulation:

一两年	<b>yī liǎng nián</b> one or two years; a year or two
一、二十天	<b>yī èrshí tiān</b> ten to twenty days
一、二/两百人	<b>yī èr/liǎng bǎi rén</b> one to two hundred people
三、四千人	<b>sān sì qiān rén</b> three to four thousand people
七、八万头牛	<b>qī bā wàn tóu niú</b> seventy to eighty thousand cattle
十二、三万只羊	<b>shí'èr sān wàn zhī yáng</b> one hundred and twenty to thirty thousand sheep

but not:

\*六十、七十匹马    \*liùshí qīshí pǐ mǎ    \*sixty to seventy horses

### 2.5.1.2 Approximation

This is expressed in a number of ways:

(a) by placing 大约 **dàyuē** 'approximately' before the number:

大约五十三公斤	<b>dàyuē wǔshí sān gōngjīn</b> around 53 kilos
大约四十来天	<b>dàyuē sishí lái tiān</b> about forty days
大约七十多岁	<b>dàyuē qīshí duō suì</b> about 70 years of age
大约一百人	<b>dàyuē yī bǎi rén</b> around one hundred people
大约三分之一强	<b>dàyuē sān fēn zhī yī qiáng</b> slightly over one-third

Note that 来 **lái** and 多 **duō** are sometimes added after unitary notations such as 十 **shí** 'ten', 百 **bái** 'hundred', etc., to emphasize the approximation.

(b) by putting 左右 **zuǒyòu** 'around, about, more or less' (lit. left-right) after a 'number + measure' phrase, where the associated noun is not usually identified but can be retrieved from the context:

两斤左右	<b>liǎng jīn zuǒyòu</b>	about two catties
三百名左右	<b>sān bǎi míng zuǒyòu</b>	around 300 people <sup>8</sup>

- (c) by adding 来 **lái** to numbers rounded to ten after unitary notations such as 十 **shí** ‘ten’, 百 **bǎi** ‘hundred’ and 千 **qiān** ‘thousand’, etc.:

十来天	<b>shí lái tiān</b>	about ten days
二十来岁	<b>èrshí lái suì</b>	around 20 years old
三百来人	<b>sān bǎi lái rén</b>	around 300 people

- (d) similarly, by adding 把 **bǎ** to the single unitary notations 个 **gè** ‘one’, 百 **bǎi** ‘hundred’, 千 **qiān** ‘thousand’ and 万 **wàn** ‘ten thousand’:

个把星期	<b>gè bǎ xīngqī</b>	around a week
百把人	<b>bǎi bǎ rén</b>	around one hundred people
千把块钱	<b>qiān bǎ kuài qián</b>	around 1,000 <i>yuan</i> <sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> 名 **míng** is a measure for people in lists, e.g. candidates, recruits, team members, etc.

<sup>9</sup> 一元 **yī yuán** ‘one *yuan*’ in Chinese currency may be expressed colloquially as 一块(钱) **yī kuài (qián)** ‘one *yuan*’, 十五元 **shíwǔ yuán** ‘fifteen *yuan*’ as 十五块(钱) **shíwǔ kuài (qián)**, etc.

### 2.5.1.3 Indeterminate excess

This is usually conveyed by adding 多 **duō** ‘many’ to numbers rounded to ten, and this applies to any such number from ten upwards:

十多 <sup>10</sup>	<b>shí duō</b> over ten; more than ten
二十多	<b>èrshí duō</b> twenty and more
一百多年	<b>yī bǎi duō nián</b> over one hundred years
两百多人	<b>liǎng bǎi duō rén</b> more than two hundred people
三千多	<b>sān qiān duō</b> over three thousand
四万多	<b>sì wàn duō</b> more than forty thousand
五亿多	<b>wǔ yì duō</b> over five hundred million

<sup>10</sup> Note that one does not say \*十多 **yī shí duō** on its own, though one has to say 一百多 **yī bǎi duō**, 一千多 **yī qiān duō**, etc.

一百一十多	yī bǎi yīshí duō	over a hundred and ten <sup>11</sup>
两千三百六十多	liǎng qiān sān bǎi liùshí duō	more than 2,360
三万五千六百七十多	sān wàn wǔ qiān liù bǎi qīshí duō	over 35,670

<sup>11</sup> A sequence like this with 多 **duō** is not possible if any of the consecutive unitary notations is missing: \*四千零八十多 \*sì qiān líng bāshí duō \*‘over four thousand and eighty’.

多 **duō** may of course come between two unitary notations when the former qualifies the latter:

十多万	shí duō wàn <sup>12</sup>	over one hundred thousand
二十多万	èrshí duō wàn	more than 200,000
三百多万	sān bǎi duō wàn	over three million
四千五百六十多万	sì qiān wǔ bǎi liùshí duō wàn	more than 45,600,000

<sup>12</sup> If the quantifying unitary notation is 十 **shí**, two possibilities exist. One may say either 十多万 **shí duō wàn** ‘over ten thousand’ or 十万多 **shí wàn duō** ‘ten thousand and more’.

For all the above numbers with 多 **duō**, when the number is associated with a noun or measure and noun, 多 **duō** comes after the number and before the measure or noun:

八十多个人 <sup>13</sup>	bāshí duō ge rén	over 80 people
三百多张纸	sān bǎi duō zhāng zhǐ	over 300 sheets of paper

<sup>13</sup> In more formal styles, the measure word can be omitted with 人 **rén** e.g. 八十多人 **bāshí duō rén**.

多 **duō** can also be used with single-digit numbers up to ten when they occur with standard measures or with temporal nouns, which are de facto measures. In these cases, 多 **duō** comes after the standard measure and before the noun if there is one:

四公升多(汽油)	sì gōngshēn duō (qìyóu)	over 4 litres (of petrol)
六英里多(路)	liù yīnglǐ duō (lù)	over six miles
五年多(时间)	wǔ nián duō (shíjiān)	over five years

两点多(钟)  
三个多月<sup>14</sup>

**liǎng diǎn duō (zhōng)**  
**sān ge duō yuè**

shortly past 2 o'clock  
over three months

<sup>14</sup> The measure word 个 *gè/ge* may be used only in the case of time words such as 钟头 *zhōngtóu* 'hour', 礼拜 *lǐbài* 'week'.

几 *jǐ* 'a few' has a similar function to 多 *duō* with numbers rounded to ten, between ten and ninety, conveying the meaning 'slightly more than'. This holds for larger numbers too, provided the final digit is ten (or a multiple of ten):

十几人

**shí jǐ rén**

slightly more than ten people

五十几岁

**wǔshí jǐ suì**

a little over 50 years of age

九十几天

**jiǔshí jǐ tiān**

over ninety days

三百六十几本

**sān bǎi liùshí jǐ běn**

over 360 copies

几 *jǐ* 'a few' is of course itself an indicator of an imprecise number below ten and is used in the same way as numerals and placed before measure words:

几本书<sup>15</sup>

**jǐ běn shū**

a few books

几个人

**jǐ ge rén**

several people

<sup>15</sup> In the same capacity, 几 *jǐ* may also be used to mean 'how many' when asking about a number below ten: e.g. 几本书? *jǐ běn shū* 'How many books?' (with the speaker presuming a number below ten).

In addition, 强 *qiáng* 'strong' and 弱 *ruò* 'weak' are added to fractions or percentages to mean respectively 'slightly more' or 'slightly less':

三分之一强

**sān fēn zhī yī qiáng**

slightly over one-third

百分之二十弱

**bǎi fēn zhī èrshí ruò**

slightly below 20 per cent

### 2.5.2 Halves

Half is expressed by 半 *bàn*, which, as a numeral, is followed by a measure word:<sup>16</sup>

半个苹果

**bàn ge píngguǒ**

half an apple

半天

**bàn tiān**

half a day

半年

**bàn nián**

half a year/six months

半个月

**bàn ge yuè**

half a month

半(个)小时<sup>17</sup>

**bàn (ge) xiǎoshí**

half an hour

<sup>16</sup> See §2.8 below on measure words.

<sup>17</sup> See §2.11.



However, when it means a half in addition to a number, it is placed after the measure and before the noun, if there is one:

一个半西瓜	<b>yī ge bàn xīguā</b>	one and a half melons
两天半	<b>liǎng tiān bàn</b>	two and a half days
三个半月	<b>sān ge bàn yuè</b>	three and a half months
两个半钟头	<b>liǎng ge bàn zhōngtóu</b>	two and a half hours

### 2.5.3 Multiples

Multiples (倍数 **bèishù**) are expressed by 倍 **bèi** ‘(one) time as much’ linked with the cardinal number that precedes it:

一倍半	<b>yī bèi bàn</b>	one and a half times as much
两倍	<b>liǎng bèi</b>	twice as much
三倍	<b>sān bèi</b>	three times as much
一百倍	<b>yī bǎi bèi</b>	a hundred times as much

Further examples are:

六是三的两倍。 **liù shì sān de liǎng bèi.**  
(lit. six is three's two times) Six is twice as much as three.

Note that the same multiple may be expressed in the form of a comparison:

六比三多一倍。 **liù bǐ sān duō yī bèi.**  
(lit. six compared-with three more one time) Six is twice as much as three.

今年粮食的产量比去年增加了一倍。  
**jīnnián liǎngshí de chǎnliàng bǐ qù nián zēngjiā le yī bèi.**  
(lit. this year grain **de** output compared-with last year increase **le** one time)  
This year's grain output increased to twice as much as last year's.

### 2.5.4 Additionals

Additionals are expressed with the help of 又 **yòu** ‘plus’ or 零 **líng** ‘and’ between the integrals and the additionals. For example,

三小时又一刻 **sān xiǎoshí yòu yī kè** three hours and a quarter  
一个月又两天 **yī ge yuè yòu liǎng tiān** a month and two days  
一又二分之一 **yī yòu èr fēn zhī yī** one and a half  
十二块零五毛 **shí'èr kuài líng wǔ máo** twelve yuan five jiao  
一年零五天 **yī nián líng wǔ tiān** a year and five days  
两岁零三个月 **liǎng suì líng sān ge yuè** two years and three months old

## 2.6 Mathematical symbols and simple arithmetic equations

The mathematical symbols for addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, etc. are expressed in Chinese in the following terms:

+	加	<b>jiā</b>	add, plus
−	減	<b>jiǎn</b>	subtract, minus
×	乘	<b>chéng</b>	multiply
÷	除以	<b>chú yǐ</b>	divided by
=	等于	<b>děngyú</b>	equal/be equal to

$1 + 1 = 2$	一加一等于二	<b>yī jiā yī děngyú èr</b>
$2 - 1 = 1$	二減一等于一	<b>èr jiǎn yī děngyú yī</b>
$3 \times 3 = 9$	三乘三等于九	<b>sān chéng sān děngyú jiǔ</b>
$12 \div 4 = 3$	十二除以四等于三	<b>shí'èr chú yǐ sì děngyú sān</b>

Other common symbols are expressed as:

>	大于	<b>dà yú</b>	bigger than
<	小于	<b>xiǎo yú</b>	smaller than
:	比	<b>bǐ</b>	as compared with/proportionate to
[ ] <sup>4</sup>	四次方	<b>sì cì fāng</b>	to the power of 4, etc.

For example:

$2 : 5$	二比五	<b>èr bǐ wǔ</b>	two as against five
$4^3$	四的三次方	<b>sì de sān cì fāng</b>	the cube of four

## 2.7 The multiplication table

Multiplication tables in Chinese have a rhythm similar to English. When the result is a single digit or a multiple of ten, the word 得 **dé** 'obtain' is added. Otherwise, the pattern consists simply of enumerations followed by cardinal numbers.

二二得四	<b>èr èr   dé sì</b>	Two twos are four.
二四得八	<b>èr sì   dé bā</b>	Two fours are eight.
四五得二十	<b>sì wǔ   dé èrshí</b>	Four fives are twenty.
三七二十一	<b>sān qī   èrshí yī</b>	Three sevens are twenty-one.
六八四十八	<b>liù bā   sìshí bā</b>	Six eights are forty-eight.
九九八十一	<b>jiǔ jiǔ   bāshí yī</b>	Nine nines are eighty one.

## 2.8 Measure words

Chinese, like other languages, has standard measure words relating to distance, weight, volume, etc. or to such universal notions as parts, groups or packages:

一磅蘑菇	<b>yī bàng mógu</b> (mw: 磅 <b>bàng</b> pound in weight)	a pound of mushrooms
一片面包	<b>yī piàn miànbāo</b> (mw: 片 <b>piàn</b> piece; slice)	a slice of bread

However, Chinese is unique in that all nouns, when occurring with a number or demonstrative,<sup>18</sup> generally incorporate a measure, whether or not there is any notion of ‘measuring’:

一本书	<b>yī běn shū</b> (mw: 本 <b>běn</b> copy)	a book
一张桌子	<b>yī zhāng zhuōzi</b> (mw: 张 <b>zhāng</b> spread)	a table

<sup>18</sup> Virtually all the examples we will cite in the following sections will use the numeral 一 *yī* ‘one’. When unstressed 一 *yī* has the meaning ‘a(n)’ and our translations will reflect this.

In what follows, we will therefore distinguish between **standard measure words** and **classifying measure words** (or **classifiers**).

### 2.8.1 Standard measures

Standard measure words express universally accepted concepts of measurement on the one hand and packaging, grouping and partitioning on the other. For example:

#### 2.8.1.1 National or international measures

两里路	<b>liǎng lǐ lù</b>	(a distance of) two <i>lǐ</i> <sup>19</sup>
一英里路	<b>yī yīnglǐ lù</b>	a mile
一品脱啤酒	<b>yī pǐntuō pǐjiǔ</b>	a pint of beer
二十公升汽油	<b>èrshí gōngshēng qìyóu</b>	20 litres of petrol
两公斤苹果	<b>liǎng gōngjīn píngguǒ</b>	2 kilos of apples
三平方米(地毯)	<b>sān píngfāng mǐ (dìtàn)</b>	3 square metres (of carpet)

<sup>19</sup> 里 *lǐ* is a Chinese measure of length or distance, which is equivalent to 500 metres or half a kilometre.

Others include: *length*: 公里 **gōnglǐ** ‘kilometre’, 公尺/米 **gōngchǐ/mǐ** ‘metre’, 公分/厘米 **gōngfēn/límǐ** ‘centimetre’, 码 **mǎ** ‘yard’, 英尺 **yīngchǐ** ‘foot’, 英寸 **yīngcùn** ‘inch’, 尺 **chǐ** ‘Chinese foot’, 寸 **cùn** ‘Chinese inch’; *weight*: 吨 **dūn** ‘ton’, 斤 **jīn** ‘catty’, 两 **liǎng** ‘tael’, 盎司 **àngsī** ‘ounce’, 克 **kè** ‘gram’, 毫克 **háokè** ‘milligram’; *volume*: 加仑 **jiālún** ‘gallon’, 立方米 **lìfāng mǐ** ‘cubic metre’; *area*: 公顷 **gōngqǐng** ‘hectare’, 英亩 **yīngmǔ** ‘acre’, 亩 **mǔ** ‘Chinese acre’<sup>20</sup>; 打 **dǎ** ‘dozen’.

<sup>20</sup> 亩 **mǔ** ‘Chinese acre’ is equal to 1/6 of an acre or 1/15 of a hectare.

### 2.8.1.2 Packaging measures

Packaging measures usually identify the containers concerned:

一包香烟	<b>yī bāo xiāngyān</b>	a packet of cigarettes
一筒饼干	<b>yī tǒng bīnggān</b>	a (tube-shaped) packet of biscuits
一盒巧克力	<b>yī hé qiǎokèlì</b>	a box of chocolate
一瓶酒	<b>yī píng jiǔ</b>	a bottle of wine
一杯咖啡	<b>yī bēi kāfēi</b>	a cup of coffee

Others include: 壶 **hú** ‘(tea) pot’, 罐 **guàn** ‘tin; can’, 锅 **guō** ‘pan; wok’, 碗 **wǎn** ‘bowl’, 盆 **pén** ‘basin’, 盘 **pán** ‘plate’, 碟 **dié** ‘dish; saucer’, 袋 **dài** ‘bag’, 箱 **xiāng** ‘box; suitcase’, 桶 **tǒng** ‘bucket; pail’, 篮 **lán** ‘basket’, 勺 **sháo** ‘spoonful’, 车 **chē** ‘car-load’, 船 **chuán** ‘ship-load’.

### 2.8.1.3 Grouping measures

Small indeterminate numbers or amounts

Some group measures are more precise, while others are less so. The two most common ones in Chinese are 一些 **yīxiē** ‘some’ and 一点儿 **yīdiǎnr** ‘a little’. As we can see, they are used invariably with the numeral 一 **yī** ‘one’:

一些苹果	<b>yīxiē píngguǒ</b>	some apples
一些朋友	<b>yīxiē péngyou</b>	some friends
一点儿牛奶	<b>yīdiǎnr niúnnǎi</b>	a little milk
一点儿希望	<b>yīdiǎnr xīwàng</b>	a bit of hope

As we saw in Chapter 1, while 一些 *yīxiē* ‘some’ occurs with both common and material nouns, 一点儿 *yīdiǎnr* ‘a little’ is used only with material nouns:

一些钱	<b>yīxiē qián</b>	some money
一点儿钱	<b>yīdiǎnr qián</b>	a little money
一些朋友	<b>yīxiē péngyou</b>	some friends
*一点儿朋友	<b>yīdiǎnr péngyou</b>	*a few friends

However, although 一点儿 *yīdiǎnr* ‘a little’ and 一些 *yīxiē* ‘some’ are generally interchangeable when used with material nouns, 一点儿 *yīdiǎnr* ‘a little’ tends to connote a smaller amount, and, as a result, 一些 *yīxiē* ‘some’ never features when scarcity is the focal point:

我一点儿钱也没有。	<b>wǒ yīdiǎnr qián yě méiyǒu</b>	I haven't got a penny.
*我一些钱也没有。	<b>wǒ yīxiē qián yě méiyǒu</b>	*I haven't got a penny.

#### Clusters

Other group measure words can in most cases be used with any numerals. They are applicable either to animate beings or to inanimate objects, but in a few instances they occur with both.

For animate beings:

一班年轻人	<b>yī bān niánqīng rén</b>	a bunch of young people
一队战士	<b>yī duì zhànshì</b>	a file/troop of soldiers
一帮孩子	<b>yī bāng háizi</b>	a group of children
一股土匪	<b>yī gǔ tǔfěi</b>	a gang of bandits
一群羊 <sup>21</sup>	<b>yī qún yáng</b>	a flock of sheep

<sup>21</sup> 群 *qún* ‘crowd; group’ is a cluster measure for all animate beings:

一群牛	<b>yī qún niú</b>	a herd of cows
一群羊	<b>yī qún yáng</b>	a flock of sheep
一群狼	<b>yī qún láng</b>	a pack of wolves
一群鸟	<b>yī qún niǎo</b>	a flight of birds
一群鱼	<b>yī qún yú</b>	a shoal of fish
一群蜜蜂	<b>yī qún mìfēng</b>	a swarm of bees
一群人	<b>yī qún rén</b>	a crowd of people

Others include: 伙 *huǒ* ‘group’ (e.g. students), 批 *pī* ‘batch’, 起 *qǐ* ‘batch’, 拨 *bō* ‘group’.

For inanimate objects:

一束鲜花	yī shù xiānhuā	a bunch of flowers
一串钥匙	yī chuàn yàoshi	a bunch of keys
一挂鞭炮	yī guà biānpào	a string of firecrackers
一沓纸	yī dá zhǐ	a pile of paper
一笔钱	yī bǐ qián	a sum of money
一份报纸	yī fèn bàozhǐ	a newspaper

Others include: 套 **tào** ‘set’ (e.g. stamps), 叠 **dié** ‘pile’ (e.g. books), 排 **pái** ‘row’ (e.g. houses), 嘟噜 **dūlu** ‘cluster’ (e.g. grapes), 丛 **cóng** ‘clump’ (e.g. grass), 簇 **cù** ‘bunch’ (e.g. flowers), 汪 **wāng** ‘pool’ (e.g. water), 剂 **jì** ‘dose’ (e.g. medicine), 绺 **liǔ** ‘lock; skein’ (e.g. hair; thread).

For both animate beings and inanimate objects:

一堆人	yī duī rén	a throng of people
一堆土	yī duī tǔ	a heap of earth
一批人	yī pī rén	a group of people
一批货	yī pī huò	a batch of goods

Others include: 行 **háng** ‘row’, 列 **liè** ‘file’.

Pairs and couples

对 **duì** and 双 **shuāng**, both meaning ‘pair’, are used with nouns, animate and inanimate, that exist in some form of duality:

一对夫妇	yī duì fūfù	a married couple
一对枕头	yī duì zhěntou	a pair of pillows
一对耳环	yī duì ěrhuán	a pair of earrings
一双手	yī shuāng shǒu	a pair of hands
一双眼睛	yī shuāng yǎnjīng	a pair of eyes
两双鞋	liǎng shuāng xié	two pairs of shoes
三双袜子	sān shuāng wàzi	three pairs of socks

(Also for: 手套 **shǒutào** ‘gloves’, 筷子 **kuàizi** chopsticks.)

The difference between 对 **duì** and 双 **shuāng** seems to be that the former emphasises complementarity, while the latter indicates functioning together.

Pairs of things that are physically inseparable, and in English are viewed as ‘pairs’, do not use 对 **duì** or 双 **shuāng** in Chinese. For example:

一条裤子	yī tiáo kùzi	a pair of trousers
一把剪刀	yī bǎ jiǎndāo	a pair of scissors
一副眼镜	yī fù yǎnjìng	a pair of spectacles

## Parts or series

Part is expressed by 一部分(的) *yī bùfen (de)* and series by 一系列(的) *yī xiliè (de)*. Both of these terms may be preceded only by the numeral 一 *yī* 'one' and the particle 的 *de* is optional.

一部分人	<i>yī bùfen rén</i>	a section of the people
一部分工作	<i>yī bùfen gōngzuò</i>	part of the work
一部分时间	<i>yī bùfen shíjiān</i>	part of the time
一系列问题	<i>yī xiliè wèntí</i>	a series of problems
一系列政策	<i>yī xiliè zhèngcè</i>	a whole set of policies

### 2.8.1.4 Partitioning measures

Partitioning measure words, which represent part of a whole, are common in many languages. For example:

一块蛋糕	<i>yī kuài dàngāo</i>	a piece of cake
两片面包	<i>liǎng piàn miànbāo</i>	two slices of bread
一瓣儿蒜	<i>yī bàn'r suàn</i>	a clove of garlic
一截儿木头	<i>yī jiér mùtóu</i>	a chunk of wood
一滴水	<i>yī dī shuǐ</i>	a drop of water

Others include: 节 *jié* 'section' (e.g. railway coaches), 段 *duàn* 'length' (e.g. rope; string).

In the above, we see the partitioning of concrete objects. In fact, this process of partitioning may be applied to less concrete and more abstract things, where the measure is an item or an instance:

一起案子	<i>yī qǐ ànzi</i>	a crime
一项政策	<i>yī xiàng zhèngcè</i>	a policy
一桩事儿	<i>yī zhuāng shìr</i>	a matter
一门课程	<i>yī mén kèchéng</i>	an academic discipline
一宗心事	<i>yī zōng xīnshì</i>	a worrying matter

In a number of cases, this part-whole relationship can be extended to part of a series, concrete or less concrete:

一幕戏	<i>yī mù xì</i>	a scene in a play, opera, etc.
一顿饭	<i>yī dùn fàn</i>	a meal
一届毕业生	<i>yī jiè bìyèsheng</i>	graduates of a particular year
一班飞机	<i>yī bān fēijī</i>	a scheduled flight
一茬麦子	<i>yī chá màizi</i>	a crop of wheat
一期杂志	<i>yī qī zàzhì</i>	an issue of a magazine

Others include: 页 yè ‘page’, 味 wèi ‘ingredient’ (e.g. of (herbal) medicine).

These part-series measure words are in fact often used on their own in an ordinal form, with the associated headword being understood from the context:

第一届	dì yī jiè	the first batch (of graduates)
下一班	xià yī bān	the next (flight, train, etc.)
第二册	dì èr cè	Volume 2
第二版	dì èr bǎn	the second edition
上一期	shàng yī qī	the previous issue
这一代	zhèi yī dài	this generation (of people)
第三幕	dì sān mù	the third act (of a play)
第四组	dì sì zǔ	Group 4
第五批	dì wǔ pī	the fifth batch (of people, goods, etc.)
第六项	dì liù xiàng	the sixth item
第七页	dì qī yè	Page 7

### 2.8.2 *Classifying measures*

The so-called classifying measure words constitute the great majority of measure words in Chinese. They are not measures in the real sense of the word, but indicators of prominent features that can be attached to a particular set or class of nouns. That is why they are sometimes called classifiers by some grammarians. As with standard measures, these classifying measure words must be used when their associated nouns are qualified by numerals or demonstratives. For example, 把 bǎ, which is derived from 把 bǎ ‘handle’, is used as a classifier for things with a handle:

一把刀	yī bǎ dāo	a knife
两把锉	liǎng bǎ cuò	two files/rasps
三把锹	sān bǎ qiāo	three spades
四把扇子	sì bǎ shànzi	four (folding) fans
五把伞	wǔ bǎ sǎn	five umbrellas
六把扫帚	liù bǎ sàozhou	six brooms
七把剑	qī bǎ jiàn	seven swords
八把锯	bā bǎ jù	eight saws
这把斧子	zhèi bǎ fǔzi	this axe
那把茶壶	nèi bǎ cháhu	that teapot



This usage is then extended to everything that can be ‘held by the hand as if by a handle’:

一把尺	yī bǎ chǐ	a ruler (for measuring)
两把梳子	liǎng bǎ shūzi	two combs
三把钥匙	sān bǎ yàoshi	three keys
四把锁	sì bǎ suǒ	four locks
五把椅子	wǔ bǎ yǐzi	five chairs

and then further extended to anything that can be ‘held or scooped up by the handful’:

一把米	yī bǎ mǐ	a handful of rice
一把土	yī bǎ tǔ	a handful of earth
一把花	yī bǎ huā	a bunch of flowers
一把眼泪	yī bǎ yǎnlèi	a flood of tears
一把胡子	yī bǎ húzi	a beard

Metaphorical extensions are also possible:

一把年纪	yī bǎ niánjì	getting on in years (年纪 niánjì age)
一把力气	yī bǎ lìqi	quite strong (力气 lìqi strength)
一把劲儿	yī bǎ jìn	quite an effort

Other classifying measure words in the language are derived and used in a similar fashion. We will now discuss their particular usages in turn.

The most versatile multi-purpose measure word is 个 *gè* (usually unstressed as *ge* in its role as a measure word), which can be associated with most nouns, from human beings to inanimate objects and abstract concepts. For example:

一个人	yī ge rén	a person
一个朋友	yī ge péngyou	a friend
一个手表	yī ge shǒubiǎo	a watch
一个西瓜	yī ge xīguā	a watermelon
一个岛	yī ge dǎo	an island
一个城市	yī ge chéngshì	a city
一个电影	yī ge diànyǐng	a film
一个主意	yī ge zhǔyì	an idea

More often, however, particular sets of nouns that share common characteristics or belong to the same type are linked with more specific measure words. These associations are generally derived from shape, category or related activity. For example:

Long and narrow

一枝笔 yī zhī bǐ a pen

(Also for: 蜡烛 làzhú 'candle', 枪 qiāng 'rifle', 箭 jiàn 'arrow'.)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Nouns associated with 枝 zhī may generally also use 支 zhī, but this does not apply the other way round in that, where 支 zhī is the normal measure for a noun, it cannot be replaced by 枝 zhī.

一支火箭 yī zhī huǒjiàn a rocket

(Also for: 军队 jūnduì 'army or column of troops', 牙膏 yágāo 'tube of toothpaste', 香 xiāng 'joss-stick',<sup>23</sup> 乐曲 yuèqǔ 'musical composition or piece of music'.)

<sup>23</sup> Another measure word for 香 xiāng 'joss-stick' is 炷 zhù, particularly if the joss-stick is burning.

一根针 yī gēn zhēn a needle

(Also for: 线 xiàn 'thread', 弦 xián 'string' (on a violin, etc.), 铁丝 tiěsī 'wire', 头发 tóufa 'hair' (on the head), 毛 máo 'hair' (on the body), 火柴 huóchái 'match' (to light, set fire), 香肠 xiāngcháng 'sausage', 香蕉 xiāngjiāo 'banana', 骨头 gǔtou 'bone', 柱子 zhùzi 'pillar; column', 竹子 zhúzi 'bamboo'.)

一杆枪 yī gǎn qiāng a rifle

(Also for: 称 chēng 'steelyard', 旗子 qízi 'flag'.)

一管毛笔 yī guǎn máobǐ a writing brush

(Also for: 牙膏 yágāo 'tube of toothpaste', 箫 xiāo 'vertical flute', 笛子 dízi 'flute'.)

一条虫 yī tiáo chóng a worm

(Also for: 蛇 shé 'snake', 绳子 shéngzi 'rope', 沟 gōu 'ditch', 河 hé 'river', 街 jiē 'street', 路 lù 'road', 鱼 yú 'fish', 狗 gǒu 'dog', 腿 tuǐ 'leg', 尾巴 wěiba 'tail', 黄瓜 huángguā 'cucumber', 裤子 kùzi 'a pair of trousers', 裙子 qúnzi 'skirt', 被单 bèidān 'blanket', 被子 bèizi 'quilt', 围巾 wéijīn 'scarf', 船 chuán 'boat'.)

一道光 yī dào guāng a ray of light

(Also for: 闪电 shǎndiàn 'lightning', 虹 hóng 'rainbow', 篱笆 líba 'bamboo or twig fence', 河堤 hédi 'dyke', 眉毛 méimáo 'eyebrow', 伤疤 shāngbā 'scar'.)