

THE WORLD'S COUNTABILITY

On the Mastery of Divided Reference and the Controversy over the Count/Mass Distinction in Chinese

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Academic discussions of the count/mass distinction in Chinese feature three general problems, upon which this essay critically reflects: 1) Most studies focus either on modern or on classical Chinese thus representing parallel discussions that never intersect; 2) studies on count/mass grammar are often detached from reflections on count/mass semantics, which results in serious theoretical and terminological flaws; 3) approaches to Chinese often crucially depend on observations of English grammar and semantics, as, e.g., many/much vs. few/little patterns, the use of plural inflections, etc., which is seldom justified. The article investigates the relevant discourse on the count/mass issue in classical and modern Chinese and concludes with exploring two distinct areas related to countability: the semantics of singular in contexts in which objects are introduced as referential-indefinite and the semantics of number and countability as revealed in diangu.

KEYWORDS *count/mass semantics, division of reference, bare nouns, referential indefiniteness, individuality, language and ontology, mass noun hypothesis*

INTRODUCTION

Discussions on countability of Chinese nouns, that is, on a firm linguistic distinction between units – either physical objects or abstractions that are perceived as separate discrete entities, can be counted and are conceptualized as count nouns, on the one hand, and masses that cannot be counted other than in portions and are conceptualized in language as mass nouns, on the other – constitute one of the most curious areas of Sinology. According to a wide-spread opinion, Chinese operates only with mass nouns and therefore represents a fundamentally different way of dealing with individuals and kinds than, for example, English, Russian, or French because in this particular language the reality is believed to be reflected and counted only in portions: “two men” as “two portions of man,” “three languages” as “three portions of language,” etc. Among some inevitable implications of this belief is the impossibility of introducing individuality or plurality into discourse, since expressing either presupposes countability, a firm association of objects with particular kinds of things. Indeed, if “a language” cannot be thought of as other than “one portion of language,” nor “two languages” as other than “two portions of language,” there is no way to conceive of “two languages” that are different in kind. It seems not too precipitated to interpret such a view of Chinese perception of reality – the world as a universe of masses and portions – as a problem that reaches far beyond the field of linguistics. The following criticism of Yang Xiaomei may serve as an illustration of the issue’s real scope:

A part of a horse, say a horse eye, is not the horse though a drop of water is water. The Chinese also need names/terms for *parts* of an unscattered individual object. A horse eye is part of an individual horse, but given the mass noun hypothesis, “horse eye” would be a mass noun and a horse eye would be a part of horse eyes as a whole scattered in space-time. It may be intelligible to say that an individual horse is a part of the whole of horses scattered in space-time. But it does not seem to make much sense to say that a horse eye is a part of the whole of horse-eye stuff scattered in space-time. One certainly can imagine the eyes of all horses in the past, present, and future, spread all over space. But this would not be a natural and intuitive picture of the language-world relation, and it requires understanding some sophisticated philosophical arguments to understand this part-whole model of the world.¹

The image of horse eyes scattered throughout the world may strike one as surrealist, yet it is reality and not the realm of fantasy which Yang addresses here. Horse-eye stuff and horses scattered in space-time refer the reader to some major ideas of Chad Hansen’s *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (1983) which introduced the controversial mass noun hypothesis concerning the semantics of classical Chinese nouns and still remains in the focus of all relevant discussions. The noun “horse” played a prominent part in this work: It had to demonstrate a feature that, according to Hansen, is shared by all nouns in classical Chinese, that is, the semantics of masshood. The conception that Yang challenges in her essay, and according to which nouns in classical Chinese are not applicable for designating objects as discrete elements of experience, is introduced by Hansen in the following way:

Mass nouns, unlike count nouns, play the same role in sentences that proper names do. This makes it natural to regard the mass nouns as logically singular terms – as names. Thus, in Chinese semantic theory, *ming* ‘name’ is rather like English “word.” It encompasses not only proper names but all nouns and adjectives. Then the question: “Of what is *ma* ‘horse’ the name?” has a natural answer: the mereological set of horses. “Horse-stuff” is thus an object (substance or thing-kind) scattered in space-time.²

In Hansen’s view, the core of the logical structure of Chinese nouns is that they do not rest on any abstract concepts and qualities but rather on the perception of reality as a sum of discontinuous stuffs: Their reference is to be understood only as a specific amount of these stuffs. A word – primarily a noun or an adjective – is said to draw borders between different stuffs, e.g., a horse-stuff (*ma* 馬) and an ox-stuff (*niu* 牛).³ Hansen takes any object as a portion of a particular stuff rather than as an individual within a kind.

It will be the central issue of the present article’s first section to show how influential this theory came to be for discussing nouns in classical Chinese. At the moment, some academic areas should be pointed out that, as Yang clearly suggested, are directly affected by the mass noun hypothesis: psychology (the theory of cognition), philosophy (ontology), and social sciences (the individuality issue.) The wide variety of anthropological implications that necessarily arise in these branches of knowledge in the light of the mass noun hypothesis makes it clear that discussions of it should not be limited to the usual frame of purely linguistic examinations.

¹ Yang Xiaomei 2011, p. 159.

² Hansen 1983, p. 35.

³ Hansen 1983, p. 37.

From a psychological perspective, it is primarily the cognitive capacity to perceive physical objects as discrete units as well as to differentiate between these units and portions of masses that is at stake. In her critical essay, Yang relies on the theory of countability as developed by Willard Quine (1908–2000) in *Word and Object* (1960), a work that ironically also became a source of inspiration for Hansen. Among Quine’s central ideas was the conviction that thinking should attain a certain degree of abstraction in order to make use of count nouns. Quine associates the level of this particular linguistic competence with a corresponding level of cognitive development that manifests itself in a mastery of divided reference.⁴ Unlike in the case of mass nouns, the reference of count nouns is said to be shared, delimited, and therefore countable: A count noun is a shared name for a number of individual objects. Quine takes it as a presupposition for learning count nouns that one is able to see the line dividing the reference of words denoting individual objects as well as the difference between these objects and masses or substances of which they are constituted:

To learn “apple” it is not sufficient to learn how much of what goes on count as apple; we must learn how much counts as *an* apple, and how much as another. Such terms possess built-in modes, however arbitrary, of dividing their reference. The contrast lies in the terms and not in the stuff they name. [...] So called *mass* terms like “water,” “footwear,” and “red” have the semantical property of referring cumulatively: any sum of parts which are water is water. Grammatically they are like singular terms in resisting pluralization and articles.⁵

At the formal level, the cognitive mastery of divided reference manifests itself in the ability to make correct use of the indefinite article and plural. For all subsequent studies on the count/mass issue in classical or modern Chinese, a language with no articles and with no developed plural morphology, this clear formal deficit had to bear influence on the interpretation of a specifically Chinese vision of the world. In Hansen’s theory, it resulted in a picture of reality as a universe of discontinuous stuffs; in Yang’s critique, on the contrary, this deficit was not seen as having any impact on the correlation between language and cognition. Her conviction that the Chinese make the same use of count semantics as the French or English is primarily based on the argument that the count/mass distinction is a quality shared by all languages: “Count nouns are general terms and are indispensable in a natural language.”⁶

Among some key assertions that can be interpreted as a reproach of the mass noun hypothesis and simultaneously as a defense of Chinese is Yang’s view that Hansen’s theory heavily undermines the cognitive abilities of Chinese children.⁷ This critique of Hansen is quite in line with Quine’s ideas, as Quine understands the category of mass nouns in general as an archaic one, representing early steps in a child’s development, in contrast to the ability for abstraction that follows later and results in the use of count nouns. For example, in Quine’s view, the word “mama”

⁴ “Divided Reference,” in: Quine 1960, pp. 90 – 95.

⁵ Quine 1960, p. 91.

⁶ Yang Xiaomei 2011, p. 158.

⁷ Yang Xiaomei 2011, p. 161: “The claim that count nouns in classical Chinese behave as mass nouns do leads to the denial of the Chinese babies’ ability of abstraction in learning language.”

used by infants does not yet contain count semantics but is a clear case of a mass-noun: “just a history of sporadic encounter, a scattered portion of what goes on.”⁸ Exactly in line with these observations concerning infants’ early development is one of Hansen’s central ideas. He interprets Chinese names for horses, oxen, men, etc. as scattered portions of what goes on and as thus representing a unique ontology that, in the light of Quine’s theory, cannot be understood as other than underdeveloped.

Yang’s doubts about the validity of such an interpretation are quite comprehensible, especially if one considers numerous studies on cognitive development that have been produced under Quine’s influence. Scholars generally consider assigning to quantification a key function for differentiating conceptual units one of his greatest insights. Equally, however, many view his assumption that children, while acquiring linguistic competence, are not guided by ontological categories and rely entirely on categories of language, as rather outdated. A number of studies on cognitive development⁹ have demonstrated that children are able to tell objects from masses even before acquiring a sure command of syntax, and that this ability guides their language learning. Imai and Gentner’s study deserves special attention, as they examined this question in typologically diverse language environments. Having analyzed the linguistic and cognitive behavior of English and Japanese native speakers, they arrived at the following conclusion:

First, there is evidence for the universal use of ontological knowledge in individuation independent of language. That pre-linguistic ontological distinctions influenced patterns of individuation in word extension can be seen in the fact that children in both languages extended complex objects according to shape and distinguished between complex objects and substances in their projections. [...] This distinction informs their word learning. However, the structure of their language influences where and how this distinction is made.¹⁰

The authors observe a universal ontological distinction between individuals and non-individuals both in the perception of reality and in the acquisition of semantics in early childhood. Cognitive scientists have generally considered it a proven fact that the ability to perceive discrete physical objects counts among humanity’s universal characteristics: It is precisely this ability that enables a segmentation of experience which is an indispensable principle of categorization in any human culture.¹¹ Imai’s and Gentner’s study confirmed this conviction. They provided evidence that segmentation of reality and the count/mass distinction are not critically dependent on the mastery of syntax. Although they did not discuss Chinese, it is highly relevant for studying Chinese semantics to bear in mind the differences they observed in typologically diverse languages despite the universal ontology, first of all their discussion of classifiers in Japanese as a means of individuation.¹² Similar scrutiny

⁸ Quine 1960, p. 92.

⁹ For the psychological motivation of the count/mass distinction, among other things, the significance of differentiating between physical objects and masses in the process of language learning, see Soja – Carey – Spelke 1991 and Fei Xu 1997.

¹⁰ Imai – Gentner 1997, pp. 188 – 189.

¹¹ Cf. the study on the universality of the principles of categorization by Rosch – Mervis et al., 1976. On the count-mass distinction as reflecting fundamental basic cognitive processes, see Wisniewski – Lamb – Middleton 2003.

¹² Imai – Gentner 1997, pp. 191 – 192.

of modern Chinese could provide evidence against the established opinion that Chinese classifiers testify to the mass semantics shared by *all* nouns in this language.

If one admits the validity of the mass noun hypothesis for Chinese in spite of all the progresses made in the cognitive sciences, Chinese should be considered a quite extraordinary example in its relation to the world, since it would represent a great impediment for any thinking individual: As a language without count nouns, it could hardly provide practicable means for referring to objects that are perceived as discrete units. Yet it is not only the cognition that should seem troublesome in the light of this theory. Among other issues directly affected by it would also be the heatedly discussed problem of Chinese individuality. In academic studies on China, both “individual” and “individuality” are terms that as a rule automatically meet with critical distancing, which is motivated by the perception of individuality as a specifically Western cultural value. The following quotation may serve as an example:

Defined as an autonomous, self-directing, independent agent who relates to others as no less autonomous agents, such an individual did not exist on the horizon of the reform-minded Chinese elite at the beginning of the last century.¹³

To the best of my knowledge, numerous existing studies that probe into the cultural specifics of Chinese individuality hardly mention the count/mass issue at all. This is all the more peculiar as the mass noun hypothesis could provide clear theoretical support for all those who argue for a cautious use of the term “individuality” in the Chinese context. However, when researchers into Chinese individualism discuss language they usually take it to mean “a discourse” rather than a natural language. This is, e.g., the case with Lydia H. Liu’s essay “Translingual Practice: The Discourse of Individualism between China and the West” and Erica Fox Brindley’s monograph *Individualism in Early China: Human Agency and the Self in Thought and Politics*. Both discuss the applicability of the term “individualism” to China. Liu refers to it as a Western idea with which modern China was confronted and which in the course of the last hundred years had to become a crucial part of different discourses.¹⁴ On her part, Brindley searches for convincing arguments to apply the term productively to studying classical Chinese culture in spite of its Western origin. She accounts for this search in the following words:

To cut off the use of a perfectly good term and analytic device out of allegiance to a presumed original context or a single tradition is to deny concepts their potential to change, adapt to new contexts, and facilitate the translation to other cultures and the past.¹⁵

The present study cannot provide a conclusive answer to the question as to how successfully Brindley applies the term “individualism” to China, yet it deserves to be mentioned that she developed many of her arguments within the frame of a direct critical discussion of Chad Hansen. In her criticism, she refers to Hansen’s “Individualism in Chinese Thought” (1985) which focuses on the idea that classical

¹³ Yan Yunxiang 2000, p. 27.

¹⁴ Liu 1996, pp. 21, 27.

¹⁵ Brindley 2010, p. x.

Chinese culture and – more specifically – Chinese philosophy were unfamiliar with anything that could be understood as individualism.¹⁶ In Brindley’s opinion, one of the imminent consequences of Hansen’s approach would be a conviction that no translation could ever be seen as an effective means of dialogue between cultures.¹⁷ As Brindley herself defends a position that is completely opposite to Hansen’s and does not recognize any unbreachable gulfs in the conceptual equipment between China and the West, her polemics against Hansen are quite plausible. Less plausible, however, is that while discussing Hansen and the broad issue of conceptual differences between cultures she never mentions his mass noun hypothesis. Although the essay of Hansen to which she refers in her critique does not provide any information on the *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (1983), his essay actually reproduces all the central ideas of this monograph, e. g. observations on masshood as a semantic quality shared by all nouns in classical Chinese and fundamental differences between Chinese and English grammars.¹⁸ It would be no exaggeration to say that the essay’s central argument – the absence of individuality in classical Chinese thought – rests entirely on expositions taken from this monograph. In view of Brindley’s interest in individual agency in classical China and her critical discussion of Hansen, the issue of the count/mass distinction should certainly have deserved some consideration.¹⁹

The present article examines investigations of the count/mass issue in classical and modern Mandarin Chinese (hereafter referred to as modern Chinese.) One trait peculiar to them is that in most cases they represent parallel discussions focusing on either classical or modern Chinese and never intersecting: Studies on classical Chinese occasionally mention the modern language situation, but those on modern Chinese say practically nothing about the classical variety. The present article interprets all these parallel discussions as attempts to solve the same theoretical problem. A critical examination of relevant studies will be accompanied by a presentation of those elements of Chinese grammar and semantics that systematically suggest the idea of countability. The article begins with an exposition of the count/mass issue in studies on classical Chinese (Part I) and continues with charting corresponding relevant works on modern Chinese semantics (Part II). The concluding parts explore two distinct areas of linguistics in order to shed new light on countability and the Chinese mental equipment for the mastery of divided reference: Part III introduces the semantics of the singular in contexts in which objects function as eferential-indefinite and, finally, Part IV discusses the semantics of number and countability as revealed in Chinese *diangu* 典故 – idioms that originate in classical sources, continue to be used in their original classical form in modern Chinese, and thus represent a bridge across time, suitable as illustrations of changes and continuities in the history of Chinese language development.

¹⁶ Hansen concludes his essay with the following programmatic words: “[W]e may justifiably generalize that there is no individualism in Chinese philosophy.” (Hansen 1985, p. 54).

¹⁷ Brindley 2010, p. xviii.

¹⁸ Hansen 1985, p. 41.

¹⁹ Brindley’s monograph has received much scholarly attention and it is all the more surprising that the numerous reviews of it make no mention of the count/mass controversy. Cf. Loy 2011, Fischer 2012, Holloway 2012, and Sarkissian 2012.

PART I. ON THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE COUNT/MASS DISTINCTION IN CLASSICAL CHINESE

Chad Hansen drew significant inspiration from a thought experiment in Willard Quine's *Word and Object* that tested the possibilities of a radical translation. Among other things, Quine intended to demonstrate the problem of correctly capturing conceptual extensions in the linguistic behavior of aborigines by civilized linguists. The experiment required that the language of a hitherto untouched people be completely unknown to the observer and that there should be no linguistic manual at his disposal. To illustrate the problem, Quine resorted to the following example: The observing linguist sees a rabbit run by and hears the aborigine pronounce "gavagai" while looking at the rabbit. One of the linguist's first impulses would be to interpret "gavagai" as "rabbit." However, this would be problematic for various reasons. Among other things, "gavagai" could equally well refer to "all and sundry undetached parts of rabbits," "a whole enduring rabbit," "the fusion of all rabbits: that single though discontinuous portion of the spatiotemporal world that consists of rabbits," etc.²⁰ Hansen followed Quine's example and produced a similar experiment with classical Chinese:

Thus, to switch to the favored Chinese example, *ma* 馬 could be in a dictionary as "horse," "horse-stages," "collection-of-horse-parts" [...] Each such radical translation is possible in the sense that it would lead one to use the term correctly in all "ordinary" contexts. However strange it would seem to Sally to think of herself riding on a collection of horse parts, she does indeed do so whenever she rides a horse.²¹

In these words, Hansen ascribes to classical Chinese nouns the conceptual quality of the horse Sally rides, namely, that any noun stands for something conceived of in the same way as any sum of its parts. As Yang Xiaomei recognizes as a necessary implication of his theory, Hansen argues that any part of a horse is the horse just like any drop of water is water. Although Hansen lists "horse" among his various translations of *ma* 馬, he understands it radically differently to the English noun, since in Chinese it does not possess count semantics. Accordingly, *ma* is not an individual of its kind but a dividual, a portion of a homogeneous mass of horses scattered throughout the world. Thus, the hypothesis rests on a refusal to accept the mastery of divided reference for classical China. Hansen's experiment of radical translation results in an ontology of parts and wholes and in noun semantics familiar only with masses. The language cannot capture discrete objects other than as parts of stuffs and the principle of individuation is ruled out from the onset: "Identifying different members of the set is the same as identifying different parts of the same stuff."²²

Hansen's confidence in the correctness of his theory rests primarily on affinities that he observes between classical Chinese and the syntax of mass nouns in English: They do not take pluralization and cannot be preceded by indefinite articles.²³ Another important feature of Chinese syntax is said to be the absence of a "much–

²⁰ Quine 1960, pp. 51 – 52.

²¹ Hansen 1983, p. 141.

²² Hansen 1983, p. 31.

²³ Hansen 1983, p. 32.

many”/“little–few” distinction: Scholars take the fact that *duo* 多 in Chinese can refer to objects which in English are either countable (and go with many/few) or masses (and go with much/little) as a piece of evidence for all Chinese nouns being mass.²⁴ This argumentation is characteristic not only of Hansen’s later works²⁵ but also of a number of authors who accepted his theory. Dan Robins, for example, expresses the following attitude to Hansen’s views: “[T]he mass noun hypothesis offers the best explanation of the behavior of classical Chinese nouns.”²⁶ In spite of his overall positive view, Robins suggests some corrections, e.g., a revision of the interpretation of the count/mass distinction as an opposition of two semantic classes. He instead regards them as semantic functions which classical Chinese nouns – like those in English – occasionally adopt. As in Hansen’s case, Robins strongly orients his argumentation around English. Consider the following example: “In English, this [the division of reference – V.V.] happens whenever the noun is pluralized, and when it occurs directly with numbers, with ‘a’ or ‘an.’”²⁷ In stark contrast to all of the cognitive sciences’ insights, Robins here understands the division of reference as an accidental phenomenon that may be observed in certain contexts. He constantly emphasizes this through expressions such as “occasion,” “occurs,” and “happens,” as in the following passage: “It allows us to say, for example, that on some occasions ‘language’ is a mass noun, but on other occasions it is a count noun.”²⁸ How exactly one should interpret “language” in English as a mass noun he explains as follows:

Many nouns that are associated with principles of individuation do not always divide their reference. [...] For example, the statement that English is a language can be understood only by someone who knows what it is for something to count as *a* language, and this requires her to have mastered a principle of individuation for the noun “language.” But she does not rely on this principle when she interprets the statement that language is rule-governed, since she does not need to know what counts as a single language in order to understand this statement.²⁹

Robins’ explanation is rather controversial as it is entirely based on the observation that a generalizing statement about an object does not require an indefinite article in English. However, it does not necessarily imply that the noun in question automatically becomes a mass noun: the assertion “language is rule-governed” means “any language is rule-governed”: It is true of *any* language and this quantification is only possible if the universal quality of “being rule-governed” is abstracted from all individual languages. Yet, in order to do so, one must follow the principle of individuation, dividing the reference and therefore considering “language” – despite the fact that it can be used without an indefinite article – a count noun. Countability

²⁴ Hansen 1983, p. 33.

²⁵ Cf. the way he introduces grammatical features of English mass nouns to elucidate the mass noun semantics in Chinese: “The ordinary world of Western common sense is a collection of particulars or individual objects. *Water, gold, grass, wood, furniture, and beef* are English mass nouns. We measure them rather than count them [...] Grammatically they resist pluralization and direct numbering. We modify them using *much* and *little* instead of *many* and *few*.” (Hansen 1992, p. 47). Cf. Hansen 1985, p. 41.

²⁶ Robins 2000, p. 148.

²⁷ Robins 2000, p. 149.

²⁸ Robins 2000, p. 151.

²⁹ Robins 2000, p. 149.

appears here among fixed semantical qualities of the word *language* and this is exactly what Robins negates in order to convince his readers that “taken on its own a noun does not count as either a mass noun or as a count noun.”³⁰

Robins negates a firm count/mass distinction in English to prepare the reader for the idea that the same is true of classical Chinese, that depending on context, any Chinese noun can appear as either a mass or a count noun. He illustrates this by the noun *chen* 臣 (minister) in *chen san ren* 臣三人 (ministers three individuals), which he claims functions as a mass noun: Although, Robins argues, it divides its reference, it must be understood as a mass noun because it is used alongside the classifier *ren* (man).³¹ Yet following this logic one should no longer regard the division of reference as a principle that governs the count/mass distinction at all, for it is merely a pluralization of an object (“three individuals”) that is taken as a marker of mass semantics. As most theories of countability (including those by Quine and Hansen) rest upon the conviction that pluralization can only attest to the countability of a given object, it is not easy to see why Robins chooses to speak about mass and count functions at all. Even in cases when plural semantics are suggested by massifiers that refer to huge numbers of individuals (cf. Chinese *ren shan ren hai* 人山人海 // English “a sea of people” // German “ein Meer von Menschen,” etc.), the nouns in question do not lose their count semantics. Robins’ attempt to relativize countability as a firm semantic quality becomes still more controversial when he addresses the issue of bare nouns. Examining the phrase from the *Zhuangzi* 昔者莊周夢為蝴蝶 (“Last night Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly”), he reaches the conclusion that not only countability as a semantic category but semantics in general can be disbanded when interpreting Chinese nouns:

I will leave aside the possibility that Zhuang may have dreamed he was several butterflies, for even if we conclude that he can only have dreamed himself to be a single butterfly, we do not reach this conclusion by dividing the reference of the noun *hudie*. It is not so much the sentence itself that tells us Zhuang dreamt of himself as a single butterfly as it is a conviction that personal identity remains singular even in dreams – common sense, and not semantics. It would be semantics if the sentence were something like 昔者莊周夢為一胡蝶.³²

As understanding of any statement – in whatever language – suggests decisions in favor of some particular meaning and is therefore necessarily embedded in semantics, the common sense which Robins opposes to it here can be interpreted in only one way: It is close to nonsense. This complicated train of thought is rooted in a refusal to recognize the countability of nouns in a language that does not mark number semantics in the way English does. Once again, parallels with English are lurking in the background of Robins’ denial that *hudie* divides its reference at the lexicon level: He argues that the reference would be divided only if the noun were supplied with a quantification, such as *yi* 一 (one/an). This observation displays how strongly he relies on English syntax in analyzing classical Chinese. The structure of the phrase he takes from the *Zhuangzi* is a typical case of referential indefiniteness: An object (*hudie*) is introduced for the first time into discourse as existent

³⁰ Robins 2000, p. 154.

³¹ Robins 2000, p. 157.

³² Robins 2000, pp. 172f.

and English grammar in such cases requires the use of an indefinite article *a/n*, which historically developed from the numeral one (cf. Robins's translation: "he was a butterfly"). For Part Three of this article, I will focus on the referential indefiniteness in Chinese. Studying it makes clear how close modern Chinese actually is to the corresponding patterns of modern English: as in English, it makes regular use of the number one (*yi*) before an object that is introduced as a referential indefinite. Yet in classical Chinese this was not so and the absence of explicit markers of number is automatically interpreted by Robins as enough evidence to negate the division of reference. He is not alone in supposing that bare nouns in Chinese – either classical or modern – neither possess number semantics nor participate in the division of reference.³³ However, as far as I know, in discarding the category of countability nobody else went so far as to oppose semantics to common sense.

Although many of the key ideas Robins suggests may strike one as obviously controversial, the essay was in general positively received. The collection of essays *Comparative Philosophy without Borders* (2016) is, e.g., introduced by a work that sets out by expressing serious doubts about the existence of any ontological backing to the count/mass distinction. It refers to Robins to validate the following assertion: "In some languages, like Chinese, any noun can be used as a mass noun."³⁴ In a comparative study on philosophy, Lin Ma and Jan van Brakel³⁵ also refer their readers to Robins' authority on the count/mass distinction in classical Chinese; in his "Language and Ontology in Early Chinese Thought" (2007), Chris Fraser assigns a prominent role to discussing the merits of Robins' work. Fraser also aims to confirm the mass noun hypothesis with his essay since, in Fraser's words, "most instances of Classical Chinese nouns indeed function as mass nouns."³⁶ The word "function" is a direct tribute to Robins. In order to provide further evidence that countability is not a matter of lexicon but rather one of occasional contextual functions, Fraser resorts to the following examples:

The noun *ren* 人 "people" in *ren neng hong dao, fei dao hong ren* 人能弘道，非道弘人 (People can broaden the way, it's not that the way broadens people) functions as a mass noun. But the same noun in *san ren xing bi you wo shi yan* 三人行必有我师焉 (Among three people walking, there is surely one who can serve as my teacher) functions as a count noun.³⁷

The direct connection of the numeral *san* (three) with the noun *ren* (man) would indeed need no extra commentary as testifying to the countability of *ren* in the second example. Yet it is not as evident that *ren* in the first example is mass. Nowhere does Fraser provide any explanation why he understands the noun *ren* in these examples as illustrating a difference in terms of countability: As in the *hudie* passage in Robins's exposition, the first of the two phrases contains a bare noun and it is probably again an explicit quantification which Fraser misses here for regarding the

³³ For more details concerning the semantics of bare nouns in Chinese, see Part IV of the present study.

³⁴ Tillemans 2016, p. 35.

³⁵ Ma – van Brakel 2016, p. 147: "According to Robins, all classical Chinese nouns function most commonly as mass nouns"; p. 338: "If a noun (and its context) divides its reference, it is a count noun on that occasion."

³⁶ Fraser 2007, p. 420.

³⁷ Fraser 2007, p. 424.

noun as a count one. However, this argument would be as little convincing as the negation of *hudie*'s division of reference. Regardless of one's preferred number interpretation, whether plural (people)³⁸ or singular (man), countability remains unaffected: Even in the plural, *ren* does not suggest the meaning of "a mass of man" scattered through the universe or the total amount of "a mass of man," but – following the division of reference – refers rather to a total number of individuals within a kind. Consider still another example by which Fraser wishes to illustrate the occasional character of count/mass functions:

Like the English noun "water", *shui* can be used as a mass noun to denote any or all water, no matter what its form. Thus it invokes no formal criteria. But in Classical Chinese, *shui* can be counted: *er shui* 二水 (two rivers, two floods, two flows of water.) Association with a formal criterion, then, is neither necessary nor sufficient for a noun to function as a count noun.³⁹

This particular example makes it clear to what extent Fraser mistrusts the existence of fixed word meanings at the lexicon level. These doubts might be dispelled by considering that *shui* in Chinese has more than one distinct meaning, one of them being a mass noun (water as substance) and another a count noun (water as a water body), which is a typical case of polysemy.

One of Fraser's principle aims in discussing the flexibility of the count/mass functions is to shed light on the relation between language and ontology. For a proper understanding, he considers it necessary to correct Hansen's theory in one particular point, namely, by paying attention to the fact that although most occurrences of Chinese nouns are mass nouns, it has nothing to do with the way how their reference is construed:

As I will show, this [count/mass – V. V.] distinction has no consequences at all for how we construe the referents of mass nouns. Therefore, the fact that most occurrences of Classical Chinese nouns are mass nouns tells us nothing about how classical Chinese philosophers thought about the world.⁴⁰

In other words, the relationship between language and reality must be regarded as one in which language makes use of mass noun functions even when it refers to discrete objects. Yet if this suggestion were true, language would become a great impediment for thinking, for, in order to represent physical objects, it should continuously be engaged in overcoming the mass function which – at least for classical Chinese – is said to be predominant in noun semantics. Fraser does not explain how exactly the referents – especially in perceiving basic distinct objects – are construed when nouns occur in a mass function. The fact that, while proposing this complex vision of the language-vs.-world relation, he repeatedly refers it to the first person "we"⁴¹ suggests that the construction of referents independently of the count/mass

³⁸ Note that in English, "people" is a special form of plural reserved for humans, cf. similar count noun plural forms in German ("Leute"), French ("les gens"), Russian ("люди"). In contrast, "la gente" ("people") in Italian is a mass noun used only in the singular: Unlike the Chinese *ren* (man/people), it does not – and cannot – divide its reference.

³⁹ Fraser 2007, p. 427.

⁴⁰ Fraser 2007, pp. 424f.

⁴¹ Cf. Fraser 2007, p. 428: "[T]he mere fact that a noun functions as a mass noun has no consequences *whatsoever* for how we conceive of the things referred to by that noun."

distinction may apply to English as well. If this is indeed what Fraser means, his theory should appear a good deal more radical than the ontology of stuffs in the original mass-noun hypothesis, which Hansen reserved for China in contrast to the rest of the world.

Christoph Harbsmeier, meanwhile, demonstrates quite a different approach to Hansen. Reading Hansen's monograph against the grain, he argues that classical Chinese contains definite regular syntactic patterns that clearly display the semantics of count, mass, or generic⁴² nouns. Rather than being accidental contextual functions, their distinction should be understood as a fixed opposition of lexical meanings that he repeatedly emphasizes, e.g., by saying: "It is perfectly true that *qi* 氣 illustrates very well the usefulness of the mass noun analysis. But this is because *qi*, in sharp and clear contrast to the count noun *ma* 馬 is not a count noun."⁴³ He suggests the following method to analyze it:

Let us try to identify provisionally some of the diagnostic syntactic environments that might bring out into the open any grammatical distinction that might exist between count nouns, generic nouns, and mass nouns.⁴⁴

Unlike Hansen, who discusses English quantifiers such as "many/much" to interpret the semantics of *duo* 多 and *shao* 少 in Chinese, Harbsmeier draws on indigenously Chinese quantifications. This is a definite asset of his analysis, which shows that classical Chinese includes a variety of other quantifiers alongside *duo/shao*, such as *shu* 數 (a number of), *ge* 各 (each), *jian* 兼 (each of the objects), and *mei* 每 (every), that can refer only to count nouns and never to masses.⁴⁵ One must also pay close attention to his discussion of semantic differences between count and mass nouns in cases that display similar syntactic patterns, e.g., when a mass noun is directly preceded by a numeral, as in *san jiu* 三酒 (three kinds of wine), *wu rou* 五肉 (five kinds of flesh), or *wu qi* 五氣 (the five kinds of ether).⁴⁶ In such cases, as Harbsmeier observes, the nouns in question must be interpreted as counting sorts/kinds rather than individual objects. Harbsmeier focuses on the count/mass distinction in syntax and is less concerned with theories of semantics. On various occasions, scholars have sharply criticized this lack of interest in speculative questions. Unsurprisingly, most of the criticisms came from the defenders of the mass noun hypothesis. Hansen blamed Harbsmeier for confusing syntax and semantics⁴⁷ and Fraser referred to both Harbsmeier and Hansen in his critique that

its key weakness is that Harbsmeier does not question Hansen's assumption that noun syntax tends to determine how thinkers construe the referents of nouns. In-

⁴² Generic nouns (e.g., *min* 民 "people") are introduced as follows: "Unlike count nouns, generic nouns are never modified by *shu* 數 'a number of'. Like count nouns, but unlike mass nouns, generic nouns can be modified by *qun* 群 'the whole flock/crowd/lot of', *zhu* 诸 'the various', *zhong* 众 'all the many' etc" (Harbsmeier 1991, p. 55).

⁴³ Harbsmeier 1991, p. 58.

⁴⁴ Harbsmeier 1991, p. 51.

⁴⁵ Harbsmeier 1991, p. 52.

⁴⁶ Harbsmeier 1991, p. 52.

⁴⁷ Hansen 1992, p. 48.

stead, he accepts this assumption and attempts to show that Chinese nouns are not mass nouns after all.⁴⁸

As mentioned above, in marked contrast to Hansen,⁴⁹ Harbsmeier examines Chinese language material on its own terms. And like it was the case with Quine's trendsetting theory of countability in which the importance of English syntax and morphology was interpreted as revealing in terms of English semantics and of the construction of referents in English, Harbsmeier equally well recognizes the theoretical value of correlations between syntax and semantics in classical Chinese. He thus avoids the dangers of imposing structures of other languages upon it.⁵⁰ Fraser may thus be barking up the wrong tree in his above critique. Harbsmeier's investigation provides insights precisely into those questions that Fraser's study leaves unanswered, the most important of them being the construction of referents of count and mass nouns. Yet some of Harbsmeier's observations concerning countability deserve specification. For example, while discussing the semantics of *ren* 人 (man), he develops an interpretation that seems at odds with his observations on count/mass semantics. Although he admits *ren*'s countability, in some possible syntactic environments he prefers to interpret it as a mass noun:

I suppose one should be able to say *i chhê jên* 一車人 'a cartload of people' or the like [...] If I found such a case, I would be inclined to insist that this syntactic frame converts the count noun into a mass noun.⁵¹

He leaves open why *ren* should no longer divide its reference in this particular case. From the point of view of the whole controversy over countability in classical Chinese, this passage deserves special attention because it features prominently in Robins' critique against Harbsmeier. Robins takes it as proving his conviction that there is no fixed count/mass distinction at the lexicon level:

When a noun occurs with a classifier, it divides its reference according to a principle of individuation that is associated with the classifier, and not one associated with the noun.⁵²

Like Harbsmeier in the last quote, Robins provides no logical explanation of this semantical dependency of a noun on its classifiers. Presumably, both assume that in cases like *yi che ren* (cf. *ren shan ren hai*) nouns stop dividing their reference, which is by no means self-evident and would need further specification. Yet the key

⁴⁸ Fraser 2007, p. 436.

⁴⁹ Cf. Hansen 1983, p. 33.

⁵⁰ Scholars discussing Chinese clearly overestimate the theoretical value of some patterns of English grammar, e.g. that of "many/much." They often ignore that the corresponding patterns are missing not only in Chinese, but also in a number of Indo-European languages. Consider, e.g., "veel water" ("much water") vs. "veel mensen" ("many people"), "weinig water" ("little water") vs. "weinig mensen" ("few people") in Dutch; "много воды" ("much water") vs. "много людей" ("many people") in Russian, "beaucoup d'eau" ("much water") vs. "beaucoup de gens" ("many people") in French, etc. That no formal difference is made here between count and mass nouns cannot be interpreted as in any way suggestive of the semantics in, e.g., Chinese. Yet they are important for studies of countability in Dutch, Russian, and French as evidence against the universal validity of the "many/much" pattern.

⁵¹ Harbsmeier 1998, p. 318.

⁵² Robins 2000, p. 157.

point in Robins' critique of Harbsmeier instead refers to the meaning of the term "individuation" and to the relationship between individual and kind. As mentioned above, such questions were not among Harbsmeier's chief concerns and the few passages in which he touches upon this subject do little to clarify the issue. Consider the following example:

One can imagine a language structured in such a way that it treats physical objects as the English rather than the French 'information' treats information. If Classical Chinese were such a language then we should treat the Classical Chinese *yi ren* 一人 ONE MAN as 'one of mankind' or *san ma* 三马 THREE HORSE as 'three of horse-kind' even when there is no measure word (like *pi* 'horse-like item of') between *san* and *ma*. One would thus treat *ren* and *ma* as mass nouns of the same order as *shi* 食 'food' and *shui* 水 'water'.⁵³

In these words, Harbsmeier seeks to reproduce a critical sketch of Hansen's theory. As in his reflections on counting mass nouns that must be understood as kinds when directly preceded by numerals (*san jiu*, *wu rou*, etc.), he once again aims at providing a clear differentiation of count and mass semantics. However, in the last quote, the term "kind" refers only to mass nouns and as soon as it is linked with a count noun ("man" as "one of mankind," "horse" as "one of horse-kind"), the nouns in question are supposed to convert automatically into mass. With these observations, he intends to correct some of Hansen's errors. Yet the problem is that in order to be counted – in whatever language with a count/mass distinction – individuals are supposed to be related to particular kinds: The phrase "I saw a book" does actually mean "I saw one of book-kind" or "I saw an object that displays all the qualities associated with the kind of objects known as 'books.'" Such associations are essential for counting individuals, and therefore the examples by which Harbsmeier wishes to correct Hansen ("one of mankind" for "a man," etc.) have little to do with the mass noun hypothesis. Hansen's theory refers to something quite different, namely, to the idea that all nouns in classical Chinese are conceived of as referring to portions of stuffs and that the principle of individuation is not applicable to this language. In his critique of Harbsmeier, Robins tries to correct an erroneous interpretation of the relationship between individual and kind. Ironically, however, his corrections took a quite unpredictable course and he primarily intended to show that semantic differences in counting mass nouns (in cases such as *san jiu* or *wu rou*.) and individuals (e.g., *san ma*) analyzed by Harbsmeier are not important after all.⁵⁴ To support this idea, Robins comes up with the following statement:

Nouns that divide their reference into individuals can often also divide their reference into kinds.⁵⁵

He illustrates this idea with examples like "The article discusses five *beetles*" and "The cougar is a *cat*."⁵⁶ Their rhetorical effect may rest on the fact that both "beetles" and "a cat," which in English are count nouns, in these particular sentences refer to kinds. The same is true of the examples Harbsmeier provides for the process

⁵³ Harbsmeier 1991, p. 51.

⁵⁴ Robins 2000, p. 162: "[T]his distinction is not important."

⁵⁵ Robins 2000, p. 163.

⁵⁶ Robins 2000, p. 163.

of counting mass nouns, when, e.g., *san jiu* (three wines) refers to three kinds of wine, or to three individual abstractions. However, the crucial point that Robins ignores and rather corroborates the importance of the conceptual difference between *san jiu* (three kinds of wine) and *san ma* (three horses) is not the possibility of thinking of the referents of both count and mass nouns as individual abstract kinds, but rather the perception of differences in their quantification in empirical experience: *San ma*, e.g., can refer not only to three abstracted kinds of horses from the more general species of “horse,” but also to three individual specimens of this kind, whereas *san jiu* cannot be individuated other than as abstractions. The quantification of *jiu* in reality – in contrast to *ma* – requires the use of some additional semantic units, like *san ping*, *san wan*, etc., *jiu*. It is only by means of these additional quantifiers that a mass noun can overcome its formlessness in order to be counted, whereas *ma* carries in itself all information that is needed for relating an individual to a particular kind as well as for directly evoking an image of its form.

Summing up, the relationship between individual and kind may be considered the core of all debates on the count/mass distinction in classical Chinese. This is also true of studies that do not raise this issue explicitly. For example, if one looks back on the essay by Yang Xiaomei who lays great stress on the necessity to differentiate between “horse eyes” and “horses” in classical Chinese, it would have been helpful for its argument to reflect upon how exactly both are conceptualized as individuals and as kinds. Since both can be individuated, both can safely be regarded as count nouns. The difference between them is not a quantitative one referring to parts and wholes – not the idea that a horse eye is part of a horse or part of a whole of horse eyes scattered through the universe – but rather their association with two different kinds of things. As far as I know, no other theorist has captured the essence of this problem better than Edward J. Lowe (1950–2014) did in the following words:

Both dividuals and individuals may have parts, but the parts of dividuals are further dividuals and need not be unified in any way. In contrast, a composite individual – one that has proper parts – must have parts that are integrated according to some principle that is characteristic of individuals of its kind. For example, an animal, such as a tiger, is a composite individual of such a kind that it must have organic parts that are spatially and causally connected so as to enable them to function in the right sort of way to sustain the life of the individual animal that they compose. Typically, the parts of a composite individual of a given kind are individuals of various other kinds – as, for example, the parts of a tiger include such things as its heart, eyes, stomach, legs, and so forth.⁵⁷

Among the advocates of the mass noun hypothesis introduced in this section, none has shown the least evidence for the fact that the same principle of differentiating between individuals and dividuals is not also applicable to classical Chinese.

PART II. DISPUTES OVER COUNTABILITY IN MODERN CHINESE

“There is man all over the floor.” This phrase containing arguably as surrealistic a picture as that of the previously discussed horse eyes scattered throughout the world could be taken as symbolic for the debates on the count/mass distinction in modern Chinese. It originates from an essay by the American linguist Francis J. Pelletier

⁵⁷ Lowe 2015, p. 55.

and concludes an experiment that similarly to that of the “gavagai” has proven extremely attractive for linguistic circles and deserves to be cited at length:

Can all words that one is tempted to call count nouns be given a mass sense? A “thought experiment” like the following might be described in order to persuade one that it is possible to do so. [...] Consider a machine, the “universal grinder.” This machine is rather like a meat grinder in that one introduces something into one end, the grinder chops and grinds it up into a homogeneous mass and spews it onto the floor from its other end. The difference between the universal grinder and a meat grinder is that the universal grinder’s machinery allows it to chop up any object no matter how large, no matter how small, no matter how soft, no matter how hard. [...] Take an object corresponding to any (apparent) count noun he wishes (e.g., ‘man’), put the object in one end of the grinder and ask what is on the floor (answer: ‘There is man all over the floor’).⁵⁸

At the formal level, the conversion of man into a mass is achieved by omitting the indefinite article. Numerous studies have tackled English’s particular flexibility in the count/mass semantics when compared to other languages.⁵⁹ Yet even in English, the construction Pelletier’s machine produces seems hardly as natural as he believes it to be. One has to strain one’s fantasy in order to imagine a situation which it would fit, e.g., an act of butchery, a massacre that makes (a) man/men become unrecognizable other than as a mass scattered all over the floor. However bizarre such a situation would appear, it perfectly serves Pelletier’s primary aim: to demonstrate that reality has nothing to do with the count/mass distinction, that it would be a mistake to believe in any fixed count/mass meanings or to seek correlations between these meanings and reality. In principle not very different to Robins’ and Fraser’s assertions concerning semantics in classical Chinese, Pelletier here sees it as a matter of contextually dependent occurrences of a word either as a count or as a mass noun.

The “universal” quality assigned to the grinder refers to linguistic objects: In the eyes of its discoverer, nothing in a language could ever resist its destructive force. In a later study,⁶⁰ Pelletier extended the universality idea to embrace all natural languages and this time utilized the grinder to illustrate that in classifier languages – as in their Indo-European counterparts – countability occurs in certain contexts due to some particular grammatical devices. The only difference Pelletier observes is that classifier languages do not have obligatory number marking and arguably do not have a singular/plural contrast for nouns at all, a lack for which the classifiers compensate.⁶¹ Although there is a certain difference between his view concerning particular contexts in which Chinese nouns can take on count meanings and the largely accepted mass noun hypothesis, his theory deserved being called symbolic for the whole discussion of countability in modern Mandarin: It makes a clear approach to assessing the exact relationship between language and reality, which most studies on Chinese semantics leave implicit. This approach is best illustrated by the following words:

⁵⁸ Pelletier 1975, p. 456.

⁵⁹ Cf. Anna Wierzbicka’s 1985 influential essay on this subject.

⁶⁰ Pelletier 2012, pp. 9–26.

⁶¹ Pelletier 1975, pp. 23f.

I [...] would like to challenge the semantic approach's claim that there is some deep ontological backing to the distinction between + MASS and + COUNT, and challenge the internalist view that there is some deep conceptual backing to the distinction.⁶²

Most studies advocating the mass noun hypothesis for modern Chinese⁶³ avoid the term “ontology” and limit themselves to discussing the linguistic behavior of its nouns: Compared with Indo-European languages, this behavior is often perceived as strange, as no Chinese noun can be linked to a numeral directly. Researchers usually regard this peculiarity as sufficient evidence for interpreting all its nouns as mass. And since this interpretation automatically results in detaching nouns from reality – which in spite of all linguistic peculiarities persistently continues to confront man not only with masses and stuffs but also with discrete individual objects – these studies can be regarded as confirming the view that there is no ontological backing to the count/mass distinction in Chinese (as in any other language for Pelletier). The same seems to be true of the psychology issue: Since, for all I know, these studies never question differences in how speakers of modern Chinese perceive individual objects and masses, they also implicitly suggest that there is no “internalist backing” to the count/mass distinction.

Yet not all studies leave the issue implicit. Among recent publications, an essay by Jing and Schaeffer⁶⁴ deserves special attention, one in which they directly address Pelletier's views and seek to confirm their validity by providing new statistical data on the countability of bare nouns. As mentioned above, Pelletier ascribed the quality of count/mass to the use of particular classifiers rather than to the nouns themselves. Jing and Schaeffer examined this by asking 83 native speakers of Chinese to which group (count or mass) they would tend to assign a particular bare noun. The problem of their analysis is that the terms “count” and “mass” are taken as synonymous with what they call “number-based” and “volume-based” contexts. Following their use of terms, a count noun, or a number-based context, is the case if a noun is preceded by a sortal classifier (e.g., *ben* 本 in *yi ben shu* 一本書 [one book] and mass semantics, or volume-based contexts, are displayed when a noun is preceded by a massifier (e.g., *shi gongjin shu* 十公斤書 [ten kilograms of books]). As the noun *shu* can be accompanied either by a sortal classifier or by a massifier, Jing and Schaeffer interpret this as illustrating the flexibility of count/mass semantics.⁶⁵ In the end, the authors reach the following conclusion:

⁶² Pelletier 1975, p. 17.

⁶³ The following words by William Boltz (1985, p. 309), may serve as a typical example of discussing the mass noun hypothesis for modern Chinese as something self-evident: “The Mass Noun Hypothesis is in itself neither especially novel nor particularly controversial; it has long been recognized as valid for modern Chinese.” Among studies which rest on observations of the strange behavior of Chinese nouns are those provided by Niina Zhang and Susan Rothstein. Both follow the same argumentation: “[I]t is undeniable that no noun in Chinese may combine with a numeral directly in a numeral expression. [...] Therefore, all nouns in the language have the feature [-Numerable]. This means that no noun in the language is a count noun.” (Zhang 2013, p. 29). Cf. Rothstein 2010, p. 348: “Some languages, such as Chinese, have only nouns that behave as mass expressions,” and Rothstein 2017, p. 89: “In Mandarin Chinese, all nouns show the grammatical properties of mass nouns, and none can be directly counted. As illustrated in: ‘liang ge pingguo’ (‘two CL apple – two apples.’).”

⁶⁴ Jing – Schaeffer 2018.

⁶⁵ Jing – Schaeffer 2018, p. 3.

Results provide the strongest psycho-linguistic evidence for Pelletier's (2012) claim that Mandarin nouns are semantically both count and mass at the lexical level, and receive a number-based or a volume-based interpretation when syntactically appearing with a count or a mass classifier, respectively. In the absence of any classifiers, i.e., syntactic cues for the mass-noun distinction, Mandarin nouns are ambiguous between a number-based and a volume-based interpretation [...].⁶⁶

However confident the authors may be about these conclusions, they rest on a similar misunderstanding as interpreting *ren* (man) as mass in cases like *yi che ren* (a cartload of people). It is not only in Chinese but also in many Indo-European languages that count nouns can naturally be placed in volume-based contexts, e.g. in German: *eine Packung Pralinen*; in Italian: *un sacco di cose*; and in English: *a pond of tears*, etc. In these examples, the countability is marked by plural inflections. Chinese does not necessarily mark the plural. Yet the lack of plural markers is insufficient proof that in volume-based contexts count nouns are no longer conceived of as dividing their reference and automatically convert into masses.

Confusing the count/mass opposition with that of number/volume contexts can occasionally also be observed in studies challenging Pelletier's theory. Two essays by Cheng and Sybesma⁶⁷ deserve mentioning in this respect. Contrary to Pelletier, the authors make a case for the existence of a cognitive difference between nouns that represent countable and mass units, a difference they argue that is as clear in Chinese as, e.g., in English:

Just like some nouns in languages like English, some nouns in Chinese are inherently semantically partitioned into discrete units (i.e., count nouns), and others are not (i.e., mass nouns). Let us say that this cognitive reality is represented in the *semantics* of the noun in all these languages [...].⁶⁸

However, in contrast to English or other languages that formally mark the count/mass distinction, Chinese is said to express this difference in its grammar in a different way:

[T]he cognitive difference between things in the world that present themselves in naturally countable units and those which do not (which, of course, is *semantically* encoded in the noun) is grammatically encoded in Chinese, not at the level of the NP (noun phrase), as is the case in Indo-European languages, but at the level of CIP (classifier phrase). Because it is the classifier which determines whether we are dealing with individual elements, or whether, in the case of a massifier, even in the presence of a measure, we are still left with a mass, we may say that in Chinese the mass-count distinction is grammatically encoded at the classifier level.⁶⁹

Due to their opinion regarding the ontological and psychological equality of noun semantics in Chinese and English, Cheng and Sybesma's works represent quite a special case within the relevant discourse. Yet paradoxically it is the same peculiar behavior of Chinese nouns that forced most discussants to acknowledge their lack of any backing in reality which features as the central argument in Cheng and

⁶⁶ Jing – Schaeffer 2018, p. 20.

⁶⁷ Cheng – Sybesma 1998; Cheng – Sybesma 1999.

⁶⁸ Cheng – Sybesma 1999, p. 516.

⁶⁹ Cheng – Sybesma 1998, p. 403.

Sybesma's essays: Exactly like it is presented, e.g., by Jing and Schaeffer, they make the semantics of Chinese nouns appear in a strong dependency to classifiers. Their examples can demonstrate just how confusing the examination of these grammatical properties proved to be. In both essays, the authors introduce the countability issue with the constructions *san bang (de) rou* 三磅的肉 ("three pounds of meat") and *liang xiang (de) shu* 两箱的书 ("two boxes of books"). They intend both to illustrate a grammatical pattern said to be characteristic only of mass nouns.⁷⁰ The authors refer to the use of the modifier *de* 的 put between a classifier and a noun, which is impossible with sortal classifiers. Despite their conviction that the semantics of countness/massness are inherently peculiar to nouns in Chinese, they follow the same argumentation as Jing and Schaeffer, with similar observations. Whereas the example with *rou* (meat) can be understood as exemplifying massness, this cannot be asserted for *shu* (book). The confusion results from illustrations corresponding to what Jing and Schaeffer call "volume-based" contexts: Here, it is the quantifier *xiang* 箱 (box) that introduces the volume-based context. However, this is as little convincing an illustration of massness as *shi gongjin shu* 十公斤书 (ten kilograms of books). A mass noun is not created by imagining books in boxes or people in masses. Massness is rather a quality peculiar to individuals: Each portion of a mass *x* is identical with any other portion of the same mass. In the *liang xiang de shu*, books are counted by boxes, yet each can still be represented as an individual object and counted by means of the sortal *ben* 本.

Although Cheng and Sybesma have revised their original views of the role classifiers play in the nominal semantics,⁷¹ this revision had little impact on the development of the relevant discourse. In contrast, the essays from 1998 and 1999 received much scholarly attention and their reception may demonstrate how this discourse has progressed in recent years. For example, Jing and Schaeffer took them to task for interpreting Chinese countability as a stable category.⁷² The point is quite plausible as the examples provided by Cheng and Sybesma failed to demonstrate this. Equally plausible seems the critique by the British linguist Hagit Borer who denies any ontological backing to the count/mass distinction and interprets it instead as a purely linguistic structure. The following passage may partly clarify on what arguments Borer's criticism is based:

If indeed nouns are lexically listed as count or mass, *book*, it would seem, is count, already suggesting that the distinction at stake is not an ontological one, and thus, if lexically encoded, is arbitrary rather than lexico-semantically determined.⁷³

As already mentioned, the choice of *liang xiang de shu* as an example of mass semantics can be regarded as the weak point in Cheng and Sybesma's essays. Borer recognized this and skillfully employed her insight in favor of a mass noun hypothesis that is probably the most radical of all. In her view, semantics never reveal any backing in reality. Yet unlike Pelletier, she does not suggest that the count/mass

⁷⁰ Cheng – Sybesma 1998, p. 387; 1999, p. 515.

⁷¹ Cheng – Doetjes – Sybesma 2008, p. 61: "In particular the claim that in Mandarin or, more generally, Chinese, nouns are only individuated when a classifier is present is wrong."

⁷² Jing – Schaeffer 2018, p. 20.

⁷³ Borer 2005, p. 99.

distinction is flexible, but rather that the mass noun hypothesis should be recognized as valid for all languages:

I will adopt the assumption that all nouns in Chinese are mass [...] Rather, all nouns, in all languages are mass, and are in need of being portioned out, in some sense, before they can interact with the ‘count’ system. This portioning-out function, accomplished in languages like Chinese through the projection of classifiers, is accomplished in languages like English by the plural inflection, as well as by the indefinite article.⁷⁴

The expression “portioning-out” is by no means accidental: Every individual as well as every collective of individuals, every noun either in the singular or the plural, are presented here as products of mental portioning-out, a process that is believed to be exclusively related to language structures. Within this radical act of discarding reality from language, classifiers came to be seen as a welcome demonstration of the ways in which the portioning-out can effectively be carried out. Borer backed her assumption with the authority of Richard Sharvy (1942–1988),⁷⁵ who half a century before had expressed similar ideas. He suggested that, e.g., the expression *yi ke pingguo* 一顆蘋果 (one apple) be best translated into English not as “an apple” but as “a ball of apple,”⁷⁶ that is, explicitly as a portion of mass, which he corroborated with the following observations:

[D]ictionaries that translate ‘niu’ as ‘ox’, or ‘tiao’ as ‘ticket’ are misleading, since the words ‘ox’ and ‘ticket’ in English seem to carry ‘a principle of individuation’, i.e., a measure, as part of their meaning. But ‘niu’, ‘piao’ and all Mandarin nouns lack such a built-in measure.⁷⁷

The purely formalistic methodology that both Borer and Sharvy apply is clearly reflected in their studies’ titles: *In Name Only* suggests a refusal of ontology, as does Sharvy’s title’s open proclamation of metaphysical implications. Except for Cheng and Sybesma, who advocated a view of semantics that is firmly rooted in reality and functions as lexically encoded, all other theorists of Chinese countability discussed above agree in one particular point, namely, that the subject has nothing whatever to do with speculations on the relationship between language and the world.

Quite an unusual position is represented in this respect by Gennaro Chierchia, a prominent Italian linguist who has been engaged in discussing Chinese semantics for decades. He focuses precisely on ontological questions and he regards the mass noun hypothesis for modern Chinese as valid and as reflecting a peculiar kind of thinking. Pivotal to Chierchia’s theory is the behavior of nouns in classifier languages, that is, the necessity of using classifiers for counting:

[In classifier languages – V.V.], numerals will not be able to combine directly with nouns: a classifier will be necessary to individuate an appropriate counting

⁷⁴ Borer 2005, p. 93.

⁷⁵ Borer 2005, p. 88.

⁷⁶ Sharvy 1978, p. 362.

⁷⁷ Sharvy 1978, p. 355.

level. So in such a language we won't be able to say things like 'two boys'. We will have to say 'two portions of boy', or some such thing [...]⁷⁸

In contrast to Borer, the term “portions” in Chierchia’s use is not reducible to language structures. It represents the only possible way to perceive reality and, only secondarily, the way to reflect on it by means of language. Chierchia believes that the Chinese perception of the world does not differentiate between objects and masses, so that all phenomena are experienced in it as portions. This theory displays affinities with views on nominal semantics in classical Chinese as to in what ways the term “kind” is used as a synonym for mass. The following passage may serve as an illustration:

The noun *zhuōzi* “table” is a name for the table-kind. We can turn it into a predicate $\pi(zhuōzi)$. However, *liǎng* cannot apply directly to it, because $\pi(zhuōzi)$ is mass. *Liǎng(\pi(zhuōzi))* is ungrammatical for the same reason that *three furnitures* is. A classifier, in the case at hand *zhāng*, is needed to individuate a level suitable to counting. [...] Common nouns are in a way assimilated to proper names in Chinese type languages. They are names of kinds.⁷⁹

These words evoke more or less the same picture as Hansen’s interpretation of *ma* in classical Chinese as “[h]orse-stuff, a thing-kind scattered in space-time.”⁸⁰ As *zhuōzi* is believed to refer to a kind, it becomes unnecessary to raise questions concerning the relation between individuals and kinds. Therefore, Chierchia does not question, e.g., what the exact translation of “furniture” would be in Chinese or what principle governs the mutual relationship of the concepts *jiājū* (furniture) and *zhuōzi* (table.) In this theory, *zhuōzi* cannot be conceived other than as a portion, that is, as a piece of a mass/kind that Chinese denominates with exactly the same word. Later, under the influence of Cheng’s and Sybesma’s 1998 essay, he presented a somewhat moderated version of this theory, paying attention to the fact that a count/mass distinction actually exists in Chinese grammar (*sic*):

For example, insertion of the particle *de* (which indicates, roughly, modification) is possible after classifiers that go with mass nouns, but not after count classifiers:

a. *san ben de shu three CL-de book	b. san bang de shu three pound-de book ‘three pounds of books’ or ‘three pound book’ ⁸¹
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In other words, it is the same confusion with the semantics of *shu* (books) that Borer used in her critique of Cheng and Sybesma for proving the arbitrary nature of the count/mass distinction in Chinese which makes Chierchia revise his views. Yet however moderate his new interpretation may appear, he reflects on the count/mass distinction primarily not as a matter of semantics but as one of grammar, and the

⁷⁸ Chierchia 1998b, p. 354.

⁷⁹ Chierchia 1998a, p. 93.

⁸⁰ Hansen 1983, p. 35.

⁸¹ Chierchia 2010, p. 107.

focus is once again put on the use of classifiers. As a result of these reflections appears yet another observation – that Chinese nouns probably do not display any singular/plural contrast at all:

Classifier languages do not have obligatory number marking on nouns and, in fact, it is controversial whether the singular/plural contrast is at all attested.⁸²

As in most other theories discussed above, Chierchia's analysis of Chinese ontology and language centers around the interpretation of classifiers. That this particular linguistic device does not by necessity impede reflections on objects as discrete units in the perception of reality shall become the main thesis of the next section.

PART III. REFERENTIAL INDEFINITENESS AS AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO THE COUNTABILITY OF CHINESE NOUNS

Chierchia's last quote demonstrated a rather controversial view of the plural/singular semantics in Chinese. By saying that the very existence of this distinction is debatable, he touches upon an aspect of linguistics that may be quite clear at first sight: Chinese does not necessarily mark the semantics of number. In a study dedicated to this obvious morphological deficit, Andreas Guder showed that modern Chinese actually uses a great variety of formal means to express plurality: e.g., duality, totality, indefinite plurality, or the partitive. His contribution also addresses some related intercultural issues and draws on Chinese as an instructive figure for the West which tends to overemphasize the significance of the singular:

Ausgehend von der Existenz des grammatischen Singulars denke ich daher, dass, wer die Wurzeln von Individualität und Pluralismus in unseren abendländischen Gesellschaften hinterfragen will, den Einfluss unseres den Singular und damit das Individuum in den Vordergrund stellenden flektierenden Sprachsystems als einen der zahllosen Bausteine unserer abendländischen geistesgeschichtlichen Entwicklung zu betrachten hat.⁸³

Yet in linguistics, one can approach the issue of individuality not only by critically distancing oneself from some predominant trends in Western academia and by turning one's attention exclusively to the expressions of plurality, but also by more closely investigating the singular in Chinese. As Quine said about the acquisition of count nouns in English: "To learn 'apple' [...] we must learn how much counts as *an* apple, and how much as another."⁸⁴ Here, the singularity of "apple" is suggested by the indefinite article and it is the semantics of this particular marker on which I will focus in this section.

Multiple authors have contrasted the absence of an indefinite article in Chinese with English. Hansen introduced his hypothesis with the observation that Chinese nouns behave differently to English count nouns which "can be directly preceded by the articles *a* or *an*."⁸⁵ Borer presented, on her part, two alternative models of structural portioning-out: She opposed a classifier model to that with the indefinite

⁸² Chierchia 2010, p. 107.

⁸³ Guder 2005, p. 268.

⁸⁴ Quine 1960, p. 91.

⁸⁵ Hansen 1983, p. 32.

article.⁸⁶ Jing and Schaeffer also laid great stress on the absence of articles in Chinese: “Thus, the use of an indefinite article or plural morphology cannot [*sic*] be a syntactic case [in Chinese – V.V.] to distinguish count from mass nouns.”⁸⁷ In all these works, contrastive observations are accompanied by analyzing classifiers as the great particularity of Chinese nominal semantics. In general, classifiers receive two basic interpretations: The first, advocated by scholars such as Hansen, Borer, and Sharvy, rests on the assumption that every classifier serves as a means of portioning out. Theorists advocating this approach tend to set Chinese into opposition to languages with indefinite articles. Representatives of the alternative way point out one prominent group of classifiers used only before names of individual objects and indicating their stable associations with particular kinds of things. These classifiers cannot be conceived other than as means of individuation, which at times is also reflected in scholarly terms referring to them – Zhao Yuanren 趙元任 (1892 – 1982) listed them as “individual measurers” and defined them as follows:

Classifiers, or individual measurers, have also been called numeratives or numerary adjuncts (NA), because a numeral cannot directly modify a noun except in *wenyan* (一馬 *yi ma* [...] instead of 一匹馬 *yi-pi ma* ‘a horse’) but must be followed by an interposed classifier according to the shape, kind, or some other property associated with the noun. Each individual noun has its proper classifier: 一棵樹 *yi-ke shu* ‘a tree’, 兩把刀 *liang-ba dao* ‘two knives’, 三頭牛 *san-tou niu* ‘three head of cattle’ [...].⁸⁸

This interpretation suggests something quite different than portioning out: Individual measurers refer rather to countable objects and signal that they are only applicable to nouns that are conceived as count nouns at the lexicon level. This interpretation is also defended by scholars such as Mou Bo, who referred to them by the telling term “individualization indicators,”⁸⁹ and more recently by Marshall D. Willman.⁹⁰

I share this second approach in the present study. As indicators of what particular kind of things an object is related with, individual measurers can be regarded as clear semantical markers of countability. And if this really is the case, contrasting Chinese with languages that employ indefinite articles as markers of the same semantic quality would appear redundant. This thesis has yet to be examined in detail and so, in what follows, I engage in a comparative investigation by drawing on a regular pattern from modern Chinese that corresponds exactly to one of the most typical situations in which the indefinite article is used in English. Linguists generally know this pattern as one of “referential indefiniteness,” referring to constructions in which an object is introduced into discourse for the first time as existent, e.g., in phrases like “I saw a cat” or “he is reading a book.” Special attention should be paid to one particular phenomenon from the history of English, namely, that the indefinite article is generally believed to have developed from the numeral one and

⁸⁶ Borer 2005, p. 93.

⁸⁷ Jing – Schaeffer 2018, p. 2: “Nouns are both mass and count: evidence from unclassified nouns in adult and child Mandarin Chinese.”

⁸⁸ Zhao Yuanren 1970, pp. 585-588.

⁸⁹ Mou Bo 1999, p. 53.

⁹⁰ Willman 2018.

that referential indefiniteness is considered to represent one of the initial stages at which the meanings of “one” and “a/n” merged.

As early as 1924, Otto Jespersen (1860–1943) pointed out the grammaticalization of the numeral one in English.⁹¹ In 1970, an influential study by David M. Perlmutter was published that centrally discussed the direct historical development of the indefinite article a/n from the numeral one.⁹² A number of further works followed suit, probing into similar processes in other languages.⁹³ Among investigators of the historical semantics of “one” in English, Talmy Givón deserves special mention: He provided a diachronic sketch of its development from marking referential indefiniteness to later stages when it came to be applied both to referential and non-referential objects.⁹⁴ Before turning to the issue of some corresponding developments in the history of Chinese, it would be reasonable to raise a speculative question concerning the applicability of this particular numeral to marking referential-indefinite objects. Givón’s essay contains the following reflections:

When a new referential argument is introduced for the first time into discourse, the speaker obviously *does not* expect the hearer to identify it by its unique reference. Rather the speaker first identifies it to the hearer by its *generic/connnotative properties*, as *one member out of the many within the type*. [...] The numeral ‘one’ – rather than other numerals – is uniquely fitting to perform such a complex, contradictory task. First, like all qualifiers it implies existence/referentiality. But further, in *contrastive* use it implies also ‘one out of many’, ‘one out of the group’ or ‘one out of the type’.⁹⁵

In other words, this very early stage of the grammaticalization is interpreted as following a principle of dialectics between the singularity of a unit that is introduced into discourse (the individual) and a plural continuum (type/kind) to which this unit is related. In the first part of the present study, I argued that the relation of individual and kind is pivotal to the countability issue in Chinese. Therefore, the theoretical reflections Givón provides deserve much attention. In order to examine whether a similar relation can be observed in Chinese and whether it is justified to oppose it to languages with indefinite articles, a comparison is needed that would display how exactly referential indefiniteness is expressed in Chinese and in English. For this comparison, I shall resort to some Chinese translations of Lewis Carroll’s (1832 – 1898) *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as a fruitful source of information.

Towards the end of Chapter IV, Alice hides behind a great thistle in order to protect herself from a huge puppy: “Alice dodged behind a great thistle, to keep herself from being run over.”⁹⁶ The first Chinese translation prepared by Zhao Yuanren in 1921 provides the following version of this phrase: 阿丽思就连忙躲在一大株蒲公英后头 (“At once, Alice dodged behind a huge dandelion”).⁹⁷ Here, the indefinite article is rendered by the numeral *yi* 一 (one.) A classifier (*zhu* 株) and an adjective (*da* 大 great) are inserted between this numeral and the object to which it refers.

⁹¹ Jespersen 1992 [1924], pp. 113-114

⁹² Perlmutter 1970.

⁹³ E.g., Birkenmaier 1976, Gorishneva 2016.

⁹⁴ Givón 1981, p. 48.

⁹⁵ Givón 1981, p. 52.

⁹⁶ Carroll 1965, pp. 46 – 47.

⁹⁷ Zhao Yuanren 1988, p. 51.

The classifier determines to what class of things the object is related, that is, in this case, a class of trees and plants. Consider some other Chinese renditions of the phrase:

Chen Fu'an: 阿丽思躲到一棵大蓟后面 (“Alice dodged behind a [lit.: one] great thistle(tree)”)⁹⁸

Ma Teng: 爱丽丝急忙躲进一排树丛后面 (“Alice hastily dodged behind a [lit.: one] grove of bushes”)⁹⁹

Guan Shaochun and Zhao Mingfei: 爱丽丝急忙躲进一排蓟树丛后面 (“Alice hastily dodged behind a [lit.: one] grove of thistle bushes”)¹⁰⁰

Zhu Hao: 爱丽丝赶忙躲到一株巨大的蓟草后面 (“Alice hastily dodged behind a [lit.: one] huge thistle blade”)¹⁰¹

Zhu Hongguo: 艾丽丝闪到蓟树丛后面 (“Alice dodged hastily behind [a] thistle bush[es]”)¹⁰²

The versions agree in one particular aspect, namely, that with the exception of the last one which refrains from marking number semantics, all contain the formal marker *yi* (one). Its function is more than just an indication of number and displays the same features as the English indefinite article: Neither in the Chinese nor in the original English text can *yi* (“a[n]”) be modified by such further qualifiers as, e.g., *zhi* 只 (“only one thistle”) or 正好 *zhenghao* (“exactly one thistle”) or be semantically opposed to other numbers. *Yi* functions as a marker of referential indefiniteness precisely like “a” does in the original. As such, it marks the existence of an individual object that is introduced into discourse and its relation to a definite class of things. The fact that, except for Zhu Hongguo, all the others reproduce exactly the same grammatical pattern allows for the assumption that the choice of *yi* does not arise from the translators’ linguistic originality. It is rather the language itself that prescribes an almost automatic usage of this device in similar contexts. Comparing the Chinese versions with some translations of the phrase into Japanese, one may get an impression of equally automatic choices, yet on the basis of completely contrary evidence: None of the versions I know uses *ichi* 一 (one) or any other device to mark either singularity or referential indefiniteness:

Tada Kōzō: 大きな蓟のうしろに身をかわしました (“(Alice) dodged behind (a) great thistle(s).”)¹⁰³

Shōno Kōkichi: 大きなアザミのうしろにひらりと身をかわしました (“[Alice] dodged swiftly behind [a] great thistle[s]”)¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Chen Fu'an 1981, p. 59.

⁹⁹ Ma Teng 2016, p. 36.

¹⁰⁰ Guan – Zhao 1981, p. 35.

¹⁰¹ Zhu Hao 2016, p. 57.

¹⁰² Zhu Hongguo 1987, p. 42.

¹⁰³ Tada Kōzō 1975, p. 54.

¹⁰⁴ Shōno Kōkichi 1971, p. 64.

Seriu Hajime: 大きなアザミのかげにかくれました (“[Alice] hid away in the shadow of [a] great thistle[s]”).¹⁰⁵

Ishii Mutsumi: 大きなアザミのかげに隠れた (“[Alice] hid away in the shadow of [a] great thistle[s]”).¹⁰⁶

Waki Akiko: 大きなアザミのかげにさっと隠れました ([Alice] hid quickly away in the shadow of a great thistle[s]).¹⁰⁷

The absence of any marker of referential indefiniteness in these versions causes ambiguity in terms of the number semantics: The object may equally correctly be interpreted either in the singular or in the plural. This grammatical pattern, which is as characteristic of Japanese as the use of *yi* (one) in similar cases is of Chinese, allows for the conclusion that the grammaticalization of the numeral “one” into a marker of referential indefiniteness is not a universal development, although it can be observed in a variety of languages that are typologically wide apart. On the other hand, the comparison of Chinese and Japanese renditions illustrates what differences some languages that are usually addressed as structurally close (e. g., as “classifier languages”) may actually display.

A close examination of Chinese translations demonstrates how much the grammaticalization of *yi* has progressed to mark referential indefiniteness.¹⁰⁸ Thus, language steadily reflects the dialectics that Givón observed, and this has important consequences for the count/mass issue. Consider, for example, Zhao Yuanren’s above translation in which he translates the object as *yi da zhu pugongying* 一大株蒲公英 (one great dandelion): In order to understand it, one must first relate the object to a large class of things associated with the classifier *zhu* (trees, flowers) and then, narrowing the conceptual focus, relate the same object to a particular group of plants known as *pugongying*. Rephrasing Quine, to know what *yi zhu pugongying* is in Chinese, one not only needs to know how much of something counts as “an” object pertaining to the large class of trees and plants and how much as another, but simultaneously how much counts as “an” object from a far smaller group of things known as *pugongying* and how much as another. Thus, countability may be interpreted here not just as formally marked as it is in English, but even as doubly so, that is, by two different syntactic and semantic means: the *yi* which refers to the object as a referential-indefinite one and by the individual measurer *zhu*. Against a highly probable objection from the advocates of the mass noun theory that the classifier must be interpreted as a device of portioning-out, I would argue that *zhu* does not evoke the idea of a portion and that it is completely irrelevant in the given case that dandelions can theoretically also be imagined as mass, e.g., in a jar with dande-

¹⁰⁵ Seriu Hajime 1979, p. 80.

¹⁰⁶ Ishii Mutsumi 2008, p. 33.

¹⁰⁷ Waki Akiko 1998, p. 57.

¹⁰⁸ Consider some further illustrations: Carroll 1965, p. 11: “The Rabbit took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket.” (Zhao Yuanren 1988, p. 5: 兔子当真在它背心袋里摸出一只代表 (*yi zhi daibiao* – one watch); Carroll, p. 13: “She took down a jar from one of the shelves as she passed.” (Zhao Yuanren, p. 7: 她经过一个架子的时候就伸手把一个小瓶子拿了出来 (*yi ge xiao pingzi* – one small bottle); Carroll, p. 24: “I’ll stay down here till I’m somebody else.” (Zhao Yuanren, p. 21: 我就还在这儿底下呆着, 等我是了一个别人再看 (*yi ge bie ren* – one different person).

lion jam or as flowers blooming in a dandelion field. Zhao's use of *zhu* suggests not these pictures, but rather the relation of an individual object to a definite class of things.

The formal constitution of referential indefiniteness in classical Chinese represents quite a different issue. I touched upon this subject in the first section, when analyzing Dan Robins' study on countability: Robins believes that *hudie*'s division of reference in 昔者莊周夢為胡蝶 (“Last night Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly”) could be regarded as proven only if it were preceded by a qualifier, of which he gives the example *yi* (*wei yi hudie* 為一胡蝶). Robins's reflection about inserting this particular word is not accidental, since it corresponds exactly to the natural formal constitution of referential indefiniteness in modern English and Chinese. Yet this was not the case in classical Chinese. *Yi*'s development from a purely numeric marker to one of referential indefiniteness was the result of a long historical process and is similar to the use of individual measurers, which was not obligatory in Chinese before approximately the Yuan dynasty.¹⁰⁹ The conductors of relevant discussions have, as a rule, ignored this fact; I will therefore present some examples that may shed light on both the formal organization of referential indefiniteness and the use of classifiers in classical Chinese.

The classifier *zhu* 株 in Zhao's rendition, which might be translated as “a (dandelion) tree,” can be found in exactly the same meaning in classical Chinese. For example, Chen Shou's 陳壽 (233–297) *San guo zhi* 三國志 (*Records of the Three Kingdoms*), “Zhuge Liang *zhuan*” 諸葛亮傳 (“The Biography of Zhuge Liang”) contains the following detail about the years Zhuge Liang (181 – 234) spent in Chengdu: 成都有桑八百株，薄田十五頃，子弟衣食，自有餘饒¹¹⁰ (“In Chengdu, we had eight hundred mulberry trees and fifteen *qing* land. That's why our children surely had plenty to wear and eat”). In this phrase, *zhu* is used for counting trees. As for the use of *yi* (one) to refer to indefinite objects, it can also be traced in classical texts. Yet there are some substantial differences between such instances and the above-discussed use of it as a marker of referential indefiniteness in modern Chinese: First, classical Chinese requires no classifier to link it with a noun; second, it is the original, purely numeric meaning that dominates its semantics. The following examples from the *Mengzi* 孟子 may illustrate this: *er bu zu yi ju yi yu* 而不足以舉一羽¹¹¹ (“not enough strength to lift [even] one feather”), *zhong ri er bu huo yi qin* 終日而不獲一禽¹¹² (“During the whole day [they] did not get one [single]

¹⁰⁹ For the history of classifiers in Chinese, see, among others, Peyraube 1991 and Gurevič 2008, esp. pp. 74 – 78. Among various interpretations of the classifiers' development, the arguably most controversial ones are those by Hansen 1992 and Willman 2018. While Hansen (p. 49) argues that the mass/stuff ontology of classical China may have had a direct impact on the standardization of classifiers as markers of masshood, Willman (pp. 171f.) discusses this development as due to the natural selection and progress in Chinese language and thought: “[C]hildren today growing up in linguistic environments in which Chinese is spoken are learning Chinese more rapidly, but not because they are smarter. It is because over the past several millennia, Chinese itself, through its classical variants and into its modern forms, has adapted itself more efficaciously to the neurobiological mechanisms children have been utilizing to learn it.”

¹¹⁰ Chen Shou 1973, p. 927.

¹¹¹ Zhu Xi 2008, p. 206.

¹¹² Zhu Xi 2008, p. 264.

bird”), *yue rang yi ji* 月攘一雞¹¹³ (“taking [only] one fowl a month”), *li bu neng sheng yi pi chu* 力不能胜一匹雏¹¹⁴ (“not strong enough to lift a duckling”), *ji qi wen yi shan yan, jian yi shan xing* 及其聞一善言，見一善行¹¹⁵ (“Whenever he heard a good word or saw a good action”). In all these phrases, *yi* serves to emphasize the quantity of an object, and even though in each case one can translate it with the indefinite article, only in the last example may one interpret the numeric semantics as merging with indefiniteness (as any/whatever good word). In all the other examples, indefiniteness is not relevant for the discussed subject: *yi* (one) in “one (single) feather,” “(only) a duckling,” and “(only) one fowl” refers exclusively to the quantity of described objects.

In terms of indefiniteness, one episode¹¹⁶ from Chapter I of *Mengzi* may appear especially illuminating: King Xuan 宣 of Qi 齊 sees **an ox**¹¹⁷ being lead along the hall (*you qian niu er guo tang xia zhe* 有牽牛而過堂下者). Hearing that the ox is to be sacrificed, he orders that it be exchanged for **a sheep** (*yi yang yi zhi* 以羊易之). He explains that this order is not motivated by greed, emphasizing this by the question: *Wu he ai yi niu?* 吾何愛一牛? (“How should I begrudge **an ox**?”) The real motive is rather his inability to bear the ox’s fear-stricken expression – that is why it has to be exchanged for a sheep (*gu yi yang yi zhi ye* 故以羊易之也). Of all the indefinite objects in these passages, only one is used alongside *yi* 一, and here again it serves to underscore numeric semantics. James Legge (1815–1897) may have had similar considerations in mind when he rendered this occurrence of *yi* not with the indefinite article but with the numeral one: “How should I grudge one ox?”¹¹⁸ As for the rest of the indefinite objects, the text contains no markers of number or indefiniteness. And crucially, in the above examples, no classifier is inserted between *yi* and the nouns: *yi yu* 一羽 (one feather), *yi qin* 一禽 (one bird), *yi pichu*¹¹⁹ 一匹雏 (one duckling), *yi shan yan* 一善言 (one good word), *yi niu* 一牛 (one ox). The purely formal constitution of directly linking numerals with nouns seems sufficient to regard countability as a firm category of classical Chinese lexicon and grammar. This formal marker fell out of use with time, yet this does not mean that somewhere at the beginning of the Yuan dynasty – either due to the Mongol invasion or for some other reason – the Chinese lost their focus of vision and all of a sudden began to perceive all physical objects as portions of masses. Rather, it signifies that patterns of marking countability underwent significant transformations, of which the grammaticalization of *yi* and the normative use of individual measurers may be considered the most prominent.

¹¹³ Zhu Xi 2008, p. 270.

¹¹⁴ Zhu Xi 2008, p. 339.

¹¹⁵ Zhu Xi 2008, p. 353.

¹¹⁶ Zhu Xi 2008, “Liang Hui wang zhangju shang” 梁惠王章句上 (“King Hui of Liang” I.7), pp. 207f.

¹¹⁷ Bold type added, V. V.

¹¹⁸ Legge 1960b, p. 140. Cf. Pulleyblank 1995, p. 59: “Why should I begrudge one ox?”

¹¹⁹ *Pichu* is a not to be understood as a [CI-N], but rather as a determining-determined construction, meaning “duckling” (lit.: a duck nestling).

PART IV. COUNT/MASS SEMANTICS OF BARE NOUNS: THE LOGIC OF COUNTABILITY AS REVEALED IN *DIANGU* 典故

Chengyus 成語 constitute a very special group within the modern Chinese lexicon: Most of them originate from classical texts and preserve their classical form in the contemporary language. Their frequent and correct use testifies to the speaker's high educational level. Yet knowledge of the exact contexts in which these idioms were initially produced is still more appreciated. In this section, I analyze allusions to such original classical contexts, known as *diangu* 典故, as well as some modern Chinese translations and commentaries in order to reflect upon the problem of the count/mass distinction from a diachronic perspective.

Obvious evidence of countability is demonstrated by *diangu* in which a numeral is directly linked with a noun, as, e.g., in the idiom *yi ri qian li* 一日千里 (at a tremendous pace, literally: one thousand *li* a day), which alludes to the following passage from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子: 騏驎驪, 一日而馳千里 (“Fine horses Qiji and Hualiu galloped a thousand *li* in one day”¹²⁰) To address the possible objection that *yi ri* 一日 is better understood as a portion of continuously flowing time, another *diangu* alluding to the *Shijing* 詩經 (The Book of Odes) may illustrate how irregularly the progress of time could actually be perceived: In the ode “Cai ge” 采葛 (“Gathering Dolichos”), the separation of two people in love is described by: *yi ri bu jian, ru san qiu xi* 一日不見, 如三秋兮¹²¹ (“One day without meeting is like three autumns”). These words, like those of the corresponding modern idiom *yi ri san qiu* 一日三秋, show how independent the perception of time could occasionally be of any objective concepts of its continuously even flow. This ode presents every day as individual and different to any normal or happy days. A similar perception of individuality is revealed in an idiom referring to Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (ca. 145–86 BC) *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian): *yi zi qian jin* 一字千金 (one character is worth one thousand coins of gold), an expression by which Sima Qian addresses the *Lü shi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals), a work compiled by Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (ca. 300 –ca. 236 BC.) The passage from which the idiom *yi zi qian jin* originated reads as follows:

布咸陽市門，懸千金其上，延諸侯游士賓客，有能增損一字者予千金。¹²²

The script was displayed before the gates of Xianyang and one thousand golden coins were appended to it with the notice that whoever among wandering scholars and guests of the *zhuhou* managed to add to this work or to cancel from it one single character would be given one thousand coins of gold.

In the *diangu*, *yi* (one) refers to the noun *zi* 字 (character) that is perceived as unique, never seen or heard of before. The semantics of uniqueness that the numeral *yi* suggests in various idioms can be moderated or completely neutralized as, for example, in the expression alluding to the words *yi shi* 一事 (one thing) from Bai Juyi's 白居易 (772–846) poem “Chu ye ji Weizhi” 除夜寄微之 (“Sent to Yuan

¹²⁰ *Zhuangzi* 1999, p. 270.

¹²¹ Legge 1960a, p. 120.

¹²² Kametarō Takigawa 1955, vol. 8, p. 3884.

Weizhi (i.e., Yuan Zhen 元稹 [779–831]) on New Year’s Eve”):¹²³ *yi shi*, meaning “any completed thing”; or in *yi ye* 一葉 (one leaf) from the Han-dynasty classic *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (The Masters of Huainan),¹²⁴ meaning “one single leaf.” Yet even if nothing in these two examples suggests uniqueness, *yi* still introduces the corresponding nouns as individuals and therefore as countable.

In contrast, countability may be considered less obvious when nouns are accompanied by no qualifiers. Jing and Schaeffer pointed out how problematic the interpretation of such occurrences may prove, arguing that modern Chinese bare nouns display no clear semantics of count or mass. On his part, Dan Robins assumed that the bare noun *hudie* (butterfly) from the *Zhuangzi* does not divide its reference and cannot be interpreted as a count noun at the lexicon level. And Mou Bo arrived at the conclusion that all Chinese nouns must be regarded as collective ones:

Chinese nouns have no plural forms and even nouns in modern Chinese have no plural forms, at least in the sense of ‘plural forms’ in Indo-European languages. [...] a Chinese noun, when standing alone, typically denotes a whole of many things or a whole of much stuff rather than one individual.¹²⁵

Yet the absence of plural inflections does not necessarily suggest either plural semantics or the neutralization of the count/mass distinction. To demonstrate this, I would like to draw on some *diangu* containing bare nouns. I will base this examination on the following idea: As a semantic category, countability should be regarded as evident when it is logically impossible to perceive the respective objects as mass, that is, as nouns that do not divide their reference. I will take the impossibility of such alternative interpretations as testifying to a clear count/mass distinction in Chinese semantics. In addition, I will pay special attention to the singular/plural contrast.

1. *Hua she tian zu* 畫蛇添足 (adding feet to a snake)

Zhan guo ce 戰國策 (The Strategies of the Warring States), a collection of anecdotes believed to have been compiled by Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BC), contains the following episode:

楚有祠者，賜其舍人卮酒。舍人相謂曰：「數人飲之不足，一人飲之有餘。請畫地為蛇，先成者飲酒。」一人蛇先成，引酒且飲之，乃左手持卮，右手畫蛇，曰：「吾能為之足。」未成，一人之蛇成，奪其卮曰：「蛇固無足，子安能為之足？」遂飲其酒。為蛇足者，終亡其酒。¹²⁶

In the state of Chu, there was a man who after completing a worship ceremony offered to his attendants a cup of wine. The attendants said to themselves: “This

¹²³ 鬢毛不覺白氍毹，一事無成百不堪 (The hair on my temples is suddenly all white, how can I bear the fact that I haven’t completed one single thing [in my life]?) Gu Xuexie 1979, p. 505. This verse gave origin to the idiom *yi shi wu cheng* 一事無成 (to achieve nothing).

¹²⁴ 見一葉落而知歲之將暮 (It is enough to see one falling leaf to understand that the year is approaching its end.). He Ning 1998, Chapter 16 “Shui shan xun” 說山訓 (A Mountain of Admonitions), p. 1158. These words gave origin to the expression *yi ye zhi qiu* 一葉知秋 (seeing one single leaf is enough to know about the autumn’s advent).

¹²⁵ Mou Bo 1999, p. 49.

¹²⁶ Wang – Yu 1992, p. 261.

wine is not enough for more than one man to drink, but it will be plenty for one [of us]. Let us draw a snake on the ground. The one who completes [his drawing] first will drink the wine.” One man was the first to complete [his] snake, he stretched out his hand and wanted to drink the wine, yet holding the cup in his left hand, his right hand continued drawing. He said: “I will add feet to it.” Before he finished doing this, another man’s snake had been completed. He seized the cup, saying: “Surely snakes don’t have any feet, how could you add feet to yours?” After these words he drank up the wine, and the man who had added feet to his snake lost the wine for good.

The words *hua di wei she*, *xian cheng zhe yin jiu* 畫地為蛇, 先成者飲酒 refer to a rule to which all competitors must adhere. These competitors must interpret *she* (snake) as a count noun, since they complete their drawings by reproducing an object with a form peculiar to snakes. The competition also requires that all of them be able to recognize this form in order to determine the winner. They can understand neither *she* nor the pronominal phrase *xian cheng zhe* (the one who is first to complete) as a portion of mass or as plural: Each competitor has to draw one snake, not two or more. Thus, one may regard both the semantics of count and of number here not as the result of a free interpretation, but as prescribed by the rules of the game. If an alternative reading of plural were possible, e.g., of *hua di wei she* as “to draw snakes on the ground,” the verb *cheng* (to complete) in *xian cheng zhe* and the whole episode would become nonsensical. The fact that in its later occurrences – e.g., *she gu wu zu* 蛇固無足 – one may equally correctly interpret *she* as either plural or singular suggests only that number semantics of bare nouns are not always as explicit as they are in this episode’s first case. Yet to formulate the rule, one must strictly determine the number semantics. The perception of this logical necessity is also reflected in modern renditions, e.g., in Wang Tianming’s manual on *chengyu*, in which he translated *hua di wei she* as *zai di shang hua yi tiao she* 在地上画一条蛇¹²⁷: *She* is accompanied by the numeral *yi* and by the classifier *tiao*. It is therefore marked both as singular and as a referential indefinite.¹²⁸ Although one cannot rule out that some speakers of Chinese may interpret both objects in the plural (e.g., “adding feet to snakes”), knowledge of the original context will result in a preference for the singular. In his bilingual edition, Wang also suggests this through the number semantics of the English rendition: “adding feet to a snake.”¹²⁹

2. *Shou zhu dai tu* 守株待兔 (Watching the Tree to Get a Hare/Hares)

In his compilation *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, Master Han Fei 韓非 (ca. 280–233 BC) included the following illuminating story:

宋人有耕田者，田中有株，兔走觸株，折頸而死；因釋其耒而守株，冀復得兔，兔不可復得，而身為宋國笑。今欲以先王之政，治當世之民，皆守株之類也。¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Wang Tianming 1991, p. 212.

¹²⁸ The same rendition is given in Nan Shan 1991, p. 34.

¹²⁹ Wang Tianming 1991, p. 212.

¹³⁰ Wang Xianshen 1998, Chapter “Wu Du” 五蠹 (“The Five Vermin”), pp. 442f.

In the state of Sung, there was a man who tilled a field with a tree-trunk in the middle of it. A hare, while running fast, rushed against the trunk, broke its neck, and died. Thereupon the man cast his plough aside and kept watching the trunk, hoping to get an/other hare/s. Yet he never caught an/other hare/s and was ridiculed by the people of Sung. Now let's suppose somebody would wish to govern the people of the present age with the policies of the early kings, he would be doing exactly the same as that man who kept watching the trunk.¹³¹

The story reproduces an act of unprecedented stupidity which – due to its uniqueness – the compiler regards as worth recording to enlighten the world. Its wisdom rests on the countability of two objects: 1) the pronominal phrase *you geng tian zhe* 有耕田者 – there was *one* (notoriously stupid) man tilling the field; and 2) *zhu* – a tree-trunk. The man's stupidity manifests itself in his associating *one* particular tree-trunk with hares that he might harvest in future. Whereas the number semantics of *tu* 兔 in *ji fu de tu* 冀復得兔 (hoping to get an/other hare[s] again) allow both for a singular and a plural reading, this is not true of *zhu* 株 (trunk): A plural reading would rob the story of its sense, wherefore the singular is as fundamentally meaningful for the anecdote's instruction as the plural semantics of *min* 民 (people) in its concluding phrase.

In Wang Tianming's modern Chinese rendition, countability of indefinite singular objects is formally marked by the use of the classifier *ge* 个 in *you ge nongfu zheng zai tian li geng di* 有个农夫正在田里耕地¹³² ("There was one farmer who was tilling a field") and by the numeral *yi* (one) accompanied by the classifier *zhi* 只在 *huran yi zhi ye tuzi pao guo lai* 忽然一只野兔子跑过来¹³³ ("suddenly a wild hare came running [from the field]").¹³⁴ Later on in the story, when the noun *tu* (hare/hares) reappears in *ji fu de tu*, Wang explicitly renders it as plural, which is suggested by the semantical environment of *tu*; the verb *jian* 拣 (to gather); as well as the adverb *bu duan de* 不断地 (incessantly): 如果能不断地拣死兔子, 日子就好过了¹³⁵ ("If I could gather dead hares without a stop, that would be a wonderful life!") In terms of countability, this rendition does not differ markedly from the classical original. It is only the semantics of number which are different: Wang makes the plural explicit, whereas the original allows for both a plural and a singular reading.¹³⁶

3. *Mai du huan zhu* 買櫝還珠 (Buying the Casket and Returning the Pearl)

Other than in the above idioms, in which the context clearly revealed the number semantics of *she* (snake) and *zhu* (trunk), *mai du huan zhu* alludes to a situation with no definite number semantics: Both *du* 櫝 and *zhu* 珠 can be understood as a singular or as a plural. Thus, examining this *diangu* can prove fruitful for clarifying the countability issue (the opposition of count and mass) in the absence of any defi-

¹³¹ Translated by Liao Wenkui 1939–1959, vol. II, p. 276.

¹³² Wang Tianming 1991, p. 139.

¹³³ Wang Tianming 1991, p. 139.

¹³⁴ Cf. the use of the measurer *ge* 个 and the numeral *yi* 一 (one) in Nan Shan 1991, p. 72.

¹³⁵ Wang Tianming 1991, p. 139.

¹³⁶ Cf. the German translation by Mögling 1984, p. 545, who interprets the object as a singular: "Daraufhin legte der Mann seinen Hakenpflug beiseite und hütete den Stumpf in der Hoffnung, noch einmal einen Hasen zu fangen."

nite cues to number semantics (the singular/plural contrast.) This idiom refers again to a story from the *Hanfeizi*:

楚人有賣其珠於鄭者，為木蘭之櫃，薰以桂椒，綴以珠玉，飾以玫瑰，輯以羽翠。鄭人買其櫃而還其珠。此可謂善賣櫃矣，未可謂善鬻珠也。¹³⁷

A man from Chu was selling his pearl(s) in the state of Zheng, he made (a) casket(s) from magnolia wood, perfumed it (them) with cinnamon and aromatic pepper, decorated it (them) with precious stones, stitched it (them) with roses and green jade. A man/people of Zheng bought the casket(s) but returned the pearl(s) to him. This can be called being good at selling (a) casket(s) and yet not being good at selling (a) pearl(s).

Modern Chinese readings of this story tend to make explicit the number semantics, e. g. Wang Tianming who interprets the nouns as singular: 一个楚国人得到了一颗很宝贵的珍珠。[...] 他决定做一个可以配得上珍珠的木盒¹³⁸ (Cf. Engl.: “A man of Chu once got a very precious pearl [...] he decided to construct a very beautiful casket to match it.”¹³⁹) In the Chinese version, singular semantics is made clear by the numeral *yi* (one) and the classifier *ge*, in English - by the indefinite article and the singular inflection of the nouns. Concerning both countability and number semantics, it is revealing what kind of moral Wang formulates for the story making the seller of pearls pronounce in the end:

唉，如果大家都象这个买珠的人，只注意外貌表面，忽略了核心实质；那么，可怜的珍珠阿，只怕你怎么也不可能比埋没尘埃更好的命运呢！¹⁴⁰ (Cf. the English translation: “Well, if all are like the buyer, attending only to a thing’s appearance to the neglect of its essential, then, my poor pearl, you could have no better destiny than exposing yourself before swine!”¹⁴¹)

The seller addresses his pearl with the singular pronoun *ni* 你 (you) and expresses his sorrow about the pearl’s being (literally) “covered with dust” (*maimo chen’ai* 埋没尘埃). Thus, Wang does not limit himself to formally marking countability and number, but makes individuality appear as the story’s central message, evoking the idea of individuality as opposed to an obscure mass of ignorance. A clear perception of the count/mass distinction is therefore central to both oppositions: of the images (a pearl [count] vs. dust [mass]) and of the abstractions (individual vs. mass). In light of this reading, the count/mass distinction cannot be seen as reducible to language structures, as Borer’s and Sharvy’s theories suggested, but rather represents a way in which both language and thought directly participate in ontological problematics.

Similarly, Kuang Peihua and Liu Jun address the spiritual state of a world that refuses to accept the pearl as “a metaphor of the loss of what is fundamental and the preference for unsubstantial things.”¹⁴² And according to Ai Lin and Shen Tongheng, the pictures of “a small exquisite casket” and “a most precious pearl” are

¹³⁷ Wang Xianshen 1998, p. 266.

¹³⁸ Wang Tianming 1991, p. 119.

¹³⁹ Wang Tianming 1991, p. 118.

¹⁴⁰ Wang Tianming 1991, p. 121.

¹⁴¹ Wang Tianming 1991, p. 120.

¹⁴² Kuang – Liu 2000, p. 474: 比喻将最根本的舍弃了，而取了不是根本的东西。

to be understood as abstractions that emphasize the value of the individual: The casket is said to stand for “superficial beauty” (*biaomian de huali* 表面的华丽), and the pearl for reality (*shiji* 实际) itself, which gets lost in obscurity.¹⁴³

4. *Yu gong yi shan* 愚公移山 (The Old Foolish Man Removes the Mountains)

The episode from the *Liezi* 列子 (The Book of Master Lie, 450–375 BC) from which this idiom originates begins with a direct indication of the number and size of the mountains standing in the way of a reportedly foolish man (*Yu gong* 愚公): 太行、王屋二山，方七百里，高萬仞¹⁴⁴ (“Two mountains – Taihang and Wangwu – were seven hundred *li* wide and ten thousand *ren* high”). Taihang and Wangwu are names of two unique phenomena of nature. Had they been conceived of as portions of masses, the individuation by means of toponyms would not have been possible. Although the context makes the number semantics explicit, it is again not the context that determines countability: The noun *shan* is as clearly a count noun at the lexical level as the noun *mountain* in English or *Berg* in German, rather than an accidental function that the noun happens to demonstrate on this particular occasion.

The noun *shan* deserves special attention, as one of its meanings is that of a massifier. Similarly to many other languages, it can be used in this meaning both with mass (cf. Chin. *bingshan* 冰山, Germ. “Eisberg”, Russ. “гора льда”) and – mostly figuratively – with count nouns, as, e.g., in the title from the *Huainanzi* “Shui shan xun” 說山訓 (“A Mountain of Admonitions”) or in the idiom *ren shan ren hai* 人山人海. As mentioned above, in similar situations a massifier does not affect the countability of the nouns it accompanies. Although *shan* is not used to mean a massifier in the *Liezi* episode, some of the old man’s reflections are highly illuminating in terms of the conceptualization of objects as either distinct units or mass, as, e.g., in the following words:

虽我之死，有子存焉；子又生孫，孫又生子；子又有子，子又有孫；子子孫孫，無窮匱也，而山不加增，何苦而不平？¹⁴⁵

Although I shall die one day, my sons will remain. The sons will bear grand-sons and these will bear yet other sons and grand-sons. All these sons and grand-sons will be past all counting. As the mountains cannot grow [lit. gain, increase their substance], how can they not disappear one day?

The old man’s confidence in his superiority rests on the conviction that even after his death the action that he has initiated will be continued by an infinite number of his children and grandchildren, whereas the mountains lack any power to withstand the challenge. According to this logic, the mountains cannot grow (*shan bu jia zeng*): They are unable to gain substance of which they consist. A modern Chinese translation makes this relationship between count (*shan*) and mass (substance, *tushi*

¹⁴³ Ai – Shen 1990, p. 564. For an alternative interpretation of both *du* and *zhu* as plural, see Liao Wenkui 1939–1959, vol. II, p. 33.

¹⁴⁴ Wang Qiangheng 1993, “Tang wen” 湯問 (The Questions of Tang), p. 131.

¹⁴⁵ Wang Qiangheng 1993, p. 133.

土石 – lit.: earth and stones) still more explicit: 而山不会增加土石¹⁴⁶ (“The mountains cannot collect earth and stones”). Therefore they are sure to disappear one day, to lose their form, to reduce their original mass to nothing. It is by virtue of these words that the old man’s enterprise proves successful: They impress the god (*di* 帝) and he orders that the mountains be removed. The episode shows again the significance Chinese thinkers attributed to the count/mass distinction not simply at the level of language structures but as an idea triggering the development of the whole plot. In this case, it is a reflection upon this very distinction between infinite individuals (the man’s descendants/count), finite individuals (*shan*/count), and substance (mass) that provides the old man with means ultimately proving his apparent stupidity to be a manifestation of wisdom.

5. *Jing di zhi wa* 井底之蛙 (The Frog in the Well)

If in the previous *diangu* mountains appeared as finite individuals that are unable to control their mass, in the story to which this idiom alludes, it is a sea which, on the contrary, is assigned the qualities of an eternal individual: Its infinity is related to the capacity to withstand time and lose no portion of its mass even under the most critical circumstances. This story originates from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and centers around contrasting habitats whose protagonists are introduced as a frog from the well (*kan jing zhi wa* 埳井之蛙) and a tortoise from the Eastern Sea (*Donghai zhi bie* 東海之鱉.) In the following words, the tortoise praises the sea’s greatness to contrast with the narrowness of the frog’s well:

夫千里之遠，不足以舉其大；千仞之高，不足以極其深。禹之時，十年九潦，而水弗為加益；湯之時，八年七旱，而崖不為加損。夫不為頃久推移，不以多少進退者，此亦東海之大樂也。¹⁴⁷

The distance of a thousand *li* is not enough to demonstrate how great it is. The height of a thousand *ren* is not enough to measure its depth. In the times of Yu, floods lasted nine years out of ten, and the amount of its water did not increase. In the times of Tang, droughts lasted seven years out of eight, and its shores did not diminish. It does not change with the course of time; it neither advances nor retreats. That is the happiness of the Eastern Sea.

The count/mass distinction is central to the conceptualization of both *hai* 海 (sea) and *jing* 井 (well) as individuals, whereas *shui* 水 (water) is equally clearly conceived as mass. Although one of the meanings of *shui* is that of a count noun referring to water bodies, it is not this meaning which is activated in the above quotation. Here, *shui* refers to the complete amount of substance within the Sea. It is praised for its ability to be the master over its own mass, an idea that the authors could hardly have brought forward had they lacked consciousness of a count/mass distinction.

In all the classical sources discussed above, countability may be regarded as a semantic category that in every particular case makes a story appear as a logical sequence of events. Different to the singular/plural contrast that, in the absence of qualifiers, is not always distinct and often allows for alternative interpretations of

¹⁴⁶ Wang Qiangheng 1993, p. 134.

¹⁴⁷ *Zhuangzi* 1999, p. 277.

number semantics, the count/mass distinction is considerably more tangible: both in situations when discrete objects/masses are referred to by bare nouns, and in cases that directly link nouns with numerals and thus provide additional formal evidence for the division of reference in Chinese.

CONCLUSION

The *Mengzi* provides its readers with the following definition of human greatness: 大人者，不失其赤子之心者也¹⁴⁸ (“A great man is the one who does not lose the heart of a child”). Due to the vagueness of the singular/plural contrast illustrated by various examples in the present study, the phrase allows for different interpretations of its nouns’ number semantics and may also be rendered, e.g., as follows: “A great man is the one who does not lose the hearts of his children.” Whatever rendering one regards as better suiting Mencius’s sense, his words will clearly demonstrate that in his eyes and contrary to the view of the advocates of the mass noun hypothesis, the difference between a great man and a petty person (*xiaoren* 小人) – in itself quite a prominent topic in Chinese philosophy – cannot be understood as a result of portioning-out, e.g., as big and small portions of man. Rather, the perception of this difference concerns the ability to tell individuals from masses and represents one of the vital inspirations for Chinese thought, both in the classical period and in modern times.

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¹⁴⁸ Zhu Xi 2008, p. 292.

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