

Copula clauses and verbless clauses in Mandarin Chinese*

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1. Introduction

- Mandarin is an official language in China, Taiwan and Singapore.
- It is called *P t nghuà*, (meaning 'the common language') in China, *guóyǔ* (the national language) in Taiwan, and *huáyǔ* (Chinese language) in Singapore.
- It is spoken in an area of China which covers a large area from the north-east to the south-west.
- It has about 900 million speakers.
- Mandarin belongs to the Sinitic family of the Sino-Tibetan stock.

2. Typological profile

- Mandarin is generally a monosyllabic, verb-medial, isolating language.
- It has no inflectional morphology, and only dependent marking morphology, i.e., genitive marking.
- Its constituent order is not constrained by grammatical relations, but constrained by pragmatics.
- Basically, it is a topic-comment language.
- It has some derivational morphology.
- Nouns: Nouns can be modified by numeral-classifier phrases, personal pronouns, demonstrative pronoun plus classifier phrases, and adjectives.
 - They have little nominal morphology and may be used as the head of an NP.
 - Nouns can modify other nouns, and an NP can occur as the complement of a copula clause.
 - Some nouns may be reduplicated to express a distributive meaning.
- Verbs: Verbs can take negative marking, aspect marking, and modal auxiliaries.
 - Verbs can be classified into transitive and intransitive.
 - Intransitive includes action verbs and stative verbs.
 - They may be modified by adverbs except for degree adverbs.
 - Verbs may also be reduplicated to indicate tentative aspect.
 - Serial verb constructions are common.
- Adjectives: Adjectives can be predicates without the use of the copula.
 - They can also modify the head of NPs either directly in pre-head position or in a pre-head relative clause.
 - Adjectives can be reduplicated, which indicates intensification.
 - They also may be modified by degree adverbs.
- Mandarin has both copula clauses and verbless clauses. Verbless clauses are the variants of

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the copula clauses.

3. Copula clauses

There is one copula in modern Mandarin, *shì*. When *shì* occurs in copula clauses, it must have two arguments, the copula subject (CS) and the copula complement (CC). The canonical structure of the copula clause is as in Figure 1.

Figure1. *Basic structure of the copula clause*

copula subject (CS)	copula (COP)	copula complement (CC)
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Apart from the copula *shì*, there are some copula-like verbs which take two arguments functioning in the same way as a copula subject and a copula complement.

3.1. Identity

The copula *shì* usually occurs in identity constructions.

- (1) *t shì l osh .*
 3sg COP teacher
 'He is a teacher.'
- (2) *w shì (y)-ge xuésheng.*
 1sg COP one-CL student
 'I am a student.'
- (3) *n shì Gu ngzh u rén ma?*
 you COP Canton person QUES
 'Are you Cantonese?'

In questions the copula *shì* may co-occur with negative *bù*, either in a tag-question, as in (4), or as the main predicate, as in (5).

- (4) *n shì Gu ngzh u rén, shì bú shì?*
 2sg COP Canton people COP NEG COP
 'Are you Cantonese, aren't you?'
- (5) *n shì bú shì Gu ngzh u rén?*
 2sg COP NEG COP Canton people
 'Are you Cantonese, or not?'

Apart from *shì*, there are two other verbs, i.e. *xìng* 'to be surnamed (lit: belongs to a family clan)', as in (6), and *shǔ* 'to belong to' which also expresses a relational meaning to encode an identity sense in (7):

- (6) *t xìng shénme? t xìng Chén.*
 3sg surnamed what 3sg suramed Chen
 'What is his surname? His surname is Chen.'

- (7) *n sh shénme? w sh yáng.*
 2sg belong to what 1sg belong to sheep
 'When were you born? [lit: what do you belong to? (meaning: what is your lunar year?)] I was born in sheep year (Chinese lunar year).'

There is a bound morpheme *chéng* 'to become' which combines with *biàn-*, *-wéi*, *-le* as *biànchéng*, *chéngwéi*, or *chéngle* 'to become' to indicate change of identity:

- (8) *k d u biànchéng le q ngw .*
 tadpole become CSM frog
 'The tadpoles became frogs.'
- (9) *t ji ng chéngwéi y -míng ji àosh .*
 3sg future become one-CL teacher
 'S/he will become a teacher in the future.'
- (10) *w dìdì chéngle/chéngwéi y -míng h o xuésheng.*
 1sg younger brother become one-CL good student
 'My younger brother became a good student.'

3.2. Equation

The copula *shì* may also occur in equational constructions:

- (11) *t shì w (de) ji jie.*
 3sg COP 1sg GEN elder-sister
 'She is my elder sister.'
- (12) *nà-ge shì n (de) dìdì ma?*
 that-CL COP 2sg GEN younger-brother QUES
 'Is that your younger brother?'
- (13) *nà-xi shì t de sh .*
 that-PL COP 3sg GEN book
 'Those are his books.'

The copula *shì* may occur with wh-question words (such as *shuí* 'who', *shénme* 'what', *n r* 'where') in clauses which encode equations:

- (14) *t shì shuí/shéi?*
 3sg COP who
 'Who is s/he?'
- (15) *shuí/shéi shì wáng xi nsheng?*
 who COP Wang Mister
 'Who is Mr. Wang?'

- (16) *zhè shì shénme?*
 this COP what
 'What is this?'
- (17) *shénme shì péngyou, shénme shì dírén?*
 what COP friend what COP enemy
 'What is a friend, and what is an enemy?'
- (18) *zhè shì nǎr?*
 this COP where
 'Where is this?'
- (19) *zhè shì shénme dìfāng?*
 this COP what place
 'Which place is this?'

The copula subject and copula complement are unmarked, but the copula subject may be a topic, and in some cases, can take a topic marker. The copula subject or copula complement may be a phrase nominalized by *de*. The word order can vary depending on the topicality of the referents involved. In (20a) the book is the topic, in (20b) what he bought is the topic, in (20c) the book is again the topic, but appears as an afterthought, and in (20d) what he bought is again the topic, but occurs as an afterthought. The examples in (21a-d) follow the same pattern.

- (20) a. *zhè-b n [sh] shì t m i de.*
 this-CL book COP 3sg buy NOM
 'This book was bought by him (not by someone else).'
- b. *[t m i de] shì zhè-b n sh .*
 3sg buy NOM COP this-CL book
 'What he bought was this book.'
- c. *shì t m i de, zhè-b n [sh] .*
 COP 3sg buy NOM this-CL book
 'It is him who bought this book.'
- d. *shì zhè-b n sh , [t m i de].*
 COP this-CL book 3sg buy NOM
 'What he bought was this book.'
- (21) a. *w [didi] shì lái kàn w de.*
 1sg younger-brother COP come see me NOM
 'My brother is coming / came to see me (not do something else).'
- b. *[lái kàn w de] shì w didi.*
 come see 1sg NOM COP 1sg younger-brother

'The one who is coming / came to see me is my younger-brother.'

- c. *shì w dīdī, [lái kàn w de].*
 COP 1sg younger-brother come see 1sg NOM
 'It is my brother who is coming / came to see me.'

- d. *shì lái kàn w de, w [dīdī].*
 COP come see 1sg NOM 1sg younger-brother
 'The one who is coming/came to see me is my younger-brother.'

There is another verb, *d ngyú* 'to equal' which may be used in equational constructions without the copula. It usually occurs in calculations:

- (22) *s n jī w d ngyú b .*
 three plus five equal eight
 'Three plus five equals/is eight.'

- (23) *li ng-ge w shí d ngyú y bái.*
 two-CL fifty equal one hundred
 'Two fifties equal one hundred.'

2.3. Naming

In general, the verb *jìào* 'to be called' is used for naming:

- (24) *t jiào shénme míngzi?*
 3sg call what name
 'What is his name?'

- (25) *t jiào Lisi*
 3sg call Lisi
 'His name is Lisi.'

In some contexts the copula *shì* may substitute for *jìào*, as in (26) and (27):

- (26) [*jī o w men y ngy de l osh*] *jiào Charles.*
 teach 1pl English GEN teacher call Charles
 'The teacher who teaches us English is called Charles.'

- (27) [*jī o w men y ngy de l osh*] *shì Charles.*
 teach 1pl English GEN teacher COP Charles
 'The teacher who teaches us English is Charles.'

3.4. Attribution

Attribution is usually performed by the use of adjectives. Adjectives in Mandarin are a subclass of intransitive verbs. Adjectives may always be used as predicates without the copula, and an adjective may usually be modified by a degree adverb, such as *h n* 'very', *h o* 'very', *zh n* 'really',

xi ngd ng 'fairly', *f icháng* 'extremely', as in (28)-(29).

(28) *zhè-k shù h n g o.*
 this-CL tree very tall
 'This tree is very tall.'

(29) *t de li n h o hóng.*
 3sg GEN face very red
 'Her face is very red (She blushes in shame).'

In some cases, a noun modified by the intensification adverb *h n* 'very' can be used as an attribute:

(30) *t h n sh rén.*
 3sg very poet
 'He is just like a poet.'

(31) *t h n gé mìng.*
 3sg very revolution
 'He is just like a revolutionist.'

In Mandarin there is a verb *biàn* 'to become' which expresses a change of state. It is usually used in attribution where there has been a change of state:

(32) *j nti n ti nqi biàn qíng l e.*
 today weather become clear CSM
 'The weather became clear today.'

(33) *w de pí f biàn h i l e.*
 1sg GEN skin become dark CSM
 'My skin became darker.'

There is another verb *xiàng* 'to seems like, take after' to encode the relational similarity which is also used in attribution:

(34) *zhè-b n sh (h n) xiàng w de.*
 this-CL book very like 1sg GEN
 'This book seems (very) like mine.'

(35) *t (h n) xiàng t m qín.*
 3sg very take after 3sg mother
 'She (really) takes after her mother.'

3.5. Existential

The copula *shì* can also appear in existential constructions in which the copula subjects are locational phrases:

- (36) *dàochù shì l j .*
 everywhere COP rubbish
 'There is rubbish everywhere.'
- (37) *m n jī d u shì rén.*
 full street all COP people
 'The street is full of people.'
- (38) *yóujú duìmiàn shì sh di àn.*
 post office across COP bookshop
 'Across from the post office is a bookshop.'

There is one existential verb *y u* which is used in existential constructions. The CS of existence is usually locational preposition phrase:

- (39) *shù-shàng y u (y)-zh ní a.*
 tree-on exist one-CL bird
 'There is a bird on the tree.'
- (40) *b ngxi ng l y u shu gu .*
 refrigerator inside exist fruit
 'There is fruit in the refrigerator.'

3.6. Possessive

The copula *shì* may occur in possessive constructions, as in (41). The verb *sh yú'* to belong to' (which is a merger of the verb *sh* with the preposition *yú*) also may encode possession, as in (42):

- (41) *nà-j i àn j i ákè shì t de.*
 that-CL jacket COP 3sg GEN
 'That jacket is hers.'
- (42) *zhè-b n sh sh yú w de.*
 this-CL book belong to 1sg GEN
 'This book belongs to me (I own this book).'

In Mandarin the possessive construction involves the same verb, *y u*, as in the existential construction. The difference between the possessive and the existential is that the initial element in the existential is actually a PP, not an NP, whereas in the possessive the first element is an NP, not a locative PP.

- (43) *w y u li ng-ge dìdì.*
 1sg have two-CL younger-brother
 'I have two younger brothers.'

- (44) *t y u h ndu y yánxué de sh .*
 3sg have many linguistics GEN book
 'S/He has many linguistics books.'

When the complement of the possessive is an abstract noun, it encodes an attributive:

- (45) *Wáng xī nsheng h n y u zh shí.*
 Wang Mister very have knowledge
 'Mr. Wang is very intellectual.'

- (46) *t h n y u zh jiàn.*
 3sg very have know one's own mind
 'S/he really knows her/his own mind.'

3.7. Dative

A nominalized CC which includes the verb *g i* 'to give', or the prepositions *duì* 'to', and *wèi* 'for' may encode a dative sense:

- (47) *zhè-jiàn jiákè shì g i t de.*
 this-CL jacket COP give 3sg NOM
 'This jacket is for him.'

3.8. Emphatic/Focus marker

The copula construction '*shì*...*de*' can occur in emphatic constructions (the equivalent of the cleft-constructions in English). It emphasizes time, place, manner, and purpose. (48)-(55)

focus on time:

- (48) *t shì qùnián lái de.*
 3sg COP last year come NOM
 'He came last year.'
- (49) *zhè-b n sh w shì zuóti n m i de.*
 this-CL book 1sg COP yesterday buy NOM
 'This book I bought yesterday.'

focus on place:

- (50) *w shì Běijīng lái de.*
 1sg COP Beijing come NOM
 'I came from Beijing.'
- (51) *t shì M ' rbén ch sh ng de.*
 3sg COP Melbourne born NOM
 'S/He was born in Melbourne.'

focus on manner:

(52) *zhè-ge shì yòng d zìj d de.*
 this-CL COP with typewriter type NOM
 'This is typed with a typewriter.'

(53) *t shì zuò hu ch lái de.*
 3sg COP sit train come NOM
 'S/He came to here by train.'

focus on purpose:

(54) *t shì lái zhèr xuéxí (de).*
 3sg COP come here study NOM
 'S/He came to here to study'

(55) *w shì lái zh o q ngzuò (de).*
 1sg COP come look for work NOM
 'I came to look for a job.'

In contrastive constructions, the copula *shì* can be omitted:

(56) *zhè-b n (shì) w de sh , nà-b n n de.*
 this-CL COP 1sg GEN book that-CL 2sg GEN
 'This is my book, that is your (book).'

(57) *zhè-ji àn ji ákè n de, nà-ji àn t de.*
 this-CL jacket 2sg GEN that-CL 1sg GEN
 'This jacket is yours, that one is hers.'

The copula *shì* can occur between two verbs or two adjectives, indicating concessive answer to a question or disagreement:

(58) *t (l n) shì l n, búguò h n c ngmíng.*
 3sg lazy COP lazy but very smart
 'Although he is lazy, he is very smart.'

(59) *zhè-ji àn ji ákè w (x hu n) shì x hu n,*
 this-CL jacket 1sg like COP like
búguò xi ùzi tài cháng l e.
 but sleeve too long CSM
 'I like this jacket, but its sleeves are too long.'

The functions of the copula and copula-like verbs are given in Table 1.

Table 1. *Functions of copula and copula-like verbs*

	identity	equation	naming	attribution	existential	possessive	dative
<i>shì</i> 'to be'	√	√			√	√	√
<i>bì ànchéng</i> 'to become'	√						
<i>chéngwéi</i> 'to become'	√						
<i>chénglè</i> 'to become'	√						
<i>d'ngyú</i> 'to equal'		√					
<i>jìào</i> 'to call'			√				
<i>xìng</i> 'to be surnamed'	√						
<i>shǔ</i> 'to belong to'	√						
<i>bì àn</i> 'to change'				√			

3.9. Negation of the copula

In Mandarin there are two negative markers, one is *bù*, which is placed before stative, habitual, and general situation verbs in non-perfective structures, and the other is *méi*, which precedes *bì àn*, *bì ànchéng*, *chéngwéi*, *chénglè* action verbs in perfective constructions. *méi* also modifies the possessive/existential verb *y u*, as in Table 2:

Table 2. Negation of copula and copula-like verbs

	non-perfective negative 'bù'	perfective negative 'méi'
<i>shì</i> 'to be'	√	
<i>bì ànchéng</i> 'to become'		√
<i>chéngwéi</i> 'to become'		√
<i>chénglè</i> 'to become'		√
<i>d'ngyú</i> 'to equal'	√	
<i>jìào</i> 'to call'	√	
<i>xìng</i> 'to be surnamed'	√	
<i>shǔ</i> 'to belong to'	√	
<i>bì àn</i> 'to change'	√	√
<i>xíàng</i> 'to look like'	√	
<i>y u</i> 'have'		√

Table 2 shows that stative verbs and action verbs are in complementary distribution except for the possessive verb *y u*, which may not follow the negative *bù*, and *bì àn*, which may be modified by either *bù* or *méi*. However, there is a difference in meaning. When negative *bù* modifies *bì àn*, it indicates that the item in question retains its original characteristics, and would not change, as in (60). If negative *méi* modifies *bì àn*, it means the property of the CS did not change/has not changed, as in (61):

(60) *zhè-jìàn jǐákè bú biàn sè.*
 this-CL jacket NEG change colour
 'This jacket would not change colour.'

(61) *zhè-jìàn jǐákè méi (y u) biàn sè.*
 this-CL jacket NEG change colour
 'This jacket didn't change/hasn't changed colour (it might have changed)

colour, but this time it didn't change).'

4. Verbless clauses

In Mandarin, nouns specifying ages, dates, weights, prices, and personal characteristics can appear in predicate position without the copula. The basic structure of the verbless clause is as in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Basic structure of the verbless clause

verbless clause subject	verbless clause complement	(dates, weights, prices, personal characteristics, ages)
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4.1. Date as verbless clause complement (VCC)

- (62) *j nti n j -hào? (j nti n) shíliù -hào.*
 today how much -CL today sixteen -CL
 'What day is it today? It is the sixteenth.'

4.2. Age as VCC:

- (63) *t j nnián du sh o -sui? (j nni n t) ji shí-sui l e.*
 3sg this year how many-CL this year 3sg ninety-CL CSM
 'How old is s/he this year? S/He is 90 years old this year.'

4.3. Weight as VCC:

- (64) *zhè-tiáo yú du sh o-j n? (zhè-tiáo yú) li ng-j n du .*
 this-CL fish how much-CL (this-CL fish) two-CL more
 'How much does this fish weigh? It weighs more than two catty (1 kg).'

4.4. Price as VCC:

- (65) *zhè-b n sh y b i -kuài /-yuán.*
 this-CL book one hundred -CL
 'This book is one hundred dollars.'

4.0. The origin of the copula

Although in Old Chinese there were copulas, in most cases, copulas were not used, as in (66)-(67).

- (66) *Zhòngní rì yuè y .*
 Zhongni sun moon ASSERT
 'Zhongni (is) the sun and the moon.' (Lun Yu, Zi Zhang, Feng 1993: 278)

- (67) *b zhàngf y w zhàngf y .*
 3sg man ASSERT 1sg man ASSERT

'He is a man, I am (also) a man.' (Mencius, 3a, Dobson 1974: 807)

The origin of the copula in Chinese was very early, before the Chunqiu period (770 B.C-476 B.C). In Old Chinese, there were three copulas, i.e., *wéi* (维/惟), *wéi* (为), and *shì* (是) (Yang & He 1992, Feng 1993).

wéi (维/惟) was the earliest one to be used as a copula, as in (68).

- (68) *w* *m* *wéi* *j* .
 1sg horse COP colt
 'My horses are young colts.' (Shi Jing, XiaoYa, Dobson 1974: 772)

The original meanings of *wéi* (为) are *zuòwéi* 'to act as', *chéngwéi* 'to become, turn into', as in (69). This *wéi* started to be used as a copula after the Chunqiu period and before the Han dynasty (206 B.C-220 A.D), as in (70)-(71):

- (69) *Qí* *qí* *wéi* *Chén* *shì* *y* !
 Qi will become Chen surname ASSERT
 '(The kingdom of) Qi will become ones who are surnamed Chen!
 (Zuo Zhuan, Zhao Gong, Yang 1992: 708)

- (70) *Ji éni* *yu* *z* *wéi* *shuí?* *yu* *wéi* *Zhòngyóu*.
 Jieni say you COP who say COP Zhongyou
 Jieni asked: 'Who are you?' Zhongyou answered: '(I) am Zhongyou.'
 (Lun Yu, Wei Zi, Ci Hai 1988: 89)

- (71) *Ch* *wéi* *J ng* *mán*.
 Chu COP Jing barbarian
 '(The kingdom) of Chu is the Jing barbarians.' (Guo Yu, Jin Yu 8,
 Yang 1992: 709)

shì, however, developed into a copula later than *wéi* (维/惟), and *wéi* (为). It was originally used as a demonstrative pronoun, as in (72).

- (72) *shì* *n i* *rénshù* *y* .
 this POS-PRT humane ASSERT
 'This (act) really was a humane device.' (Mencius, Liang Huiwang, Dobson 1974: 531)

In (73) *shì* is a demonstrative pronoun which is used as subject in co-reference with the topicalized NP *fù yú guì*. (Feng 1993)

- (73) [*fù yú guì*] *shì* [PAUSE] [*rén zh su yù*] *y*
 wealth and nobility this people GEN thing want ASSERT
 TOPIC SUBJECT PREDICATE
 'Wealth and nobility, these (are) the things everybody longs for.'
 (Lun Yu, Feng 1993: 289)

In Old Chinese between the NP₁ slot and NP₂ slot, there was a pivot slot which was occupied by a number of different words, such as *y* (伊), *y* (繫), *ji* (即), *ni* (乃), *fi* (非), as in (74)-(75). This led to the demonstrative pronoun *shi* being reanalyzed as a copula, as in (76). This happened about the time of the Han dynasty (206 B.C)-(220 A.D). (Li & Thompson 1977, Yang & He 1992, Feng 1993, Herforth 2002).

	NP ₁ slot	Pivot slot	NP ₂ slot	
(74)	<i>c</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>lù</i>	<i>y</i> .
	this	POS-PRT	deer	ASSERT
	'This is a deer.'			(Shi Ji, 87, Dobson 1974: 531)
(75)	<i>z</i>	<i>fi</i>	<i>w</i> .	
	2sg	NEG	1sg	
	'You, Sir, are not me.'			(Zhuang Zi, 17, Dobson 1974: 259)
(76)	[<i>fù yú guì</i>]	<i>shi</i>	<i>rén zhì su yù</i>	<i>y</i> .
	wealth and nobility	COP	people GEN thing want	ASSERT
	'Wealth and nobility are the things everybody longs for.'			
(77)	<i>yú</i>	<i>shi</i>	<i>su jià fùrén zhì fù</i>	<i>y</i> .
	1sg	COP	that marry woman GEN father	ASSERT
	'I am the father of that married woman.' (Lun Heng 100 A.D, Li 1977: 426)			

As the above examples show, in Old Chinese there was more than one copula. The copula *shi* competed with other copulas for a long time, but as time went by, *shi* gradually substituted for the other copulas. Yang & He (1992: 722-23) counted the use of copula *shi* in the book "*Shishu x ny*" (written sometime between 420 and 479 A.D). They found that less than 30% of the time *shi* was used as a demonstrative pronoun, less than 2% as an adjective, and more than 68% as a copula. Among all of the copula clauses, *shi* occurred more than 70% of the time. Copula clauses were less than 50% among the indicative clauses. This means that Chinese went from having several copulas to one copula about the time of the Wei (220-65 A.D) and Jin (265-420 A.D) periods. From the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D) on, however, copula clauses are much more frequent than verbless clauses.

Abbreviations:

ASSERT	Assertive particle	NOM	Nominalizer
CL	Classifier	PL	Plural marker
COP	Copula	POS	Positive
CSM	Change of state marker	PRT	Particle
GEN	Genitive marker	QUES	Question marker
NEG	Negative marker		

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