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1 Chinese as a topic-comment (not topic-prominent and not SVO) language

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Many linguists in China and the West have talked about Chinese as a topic-comment language, that is, a language in which the structure of the clause takes the form of a topic, about which something is to be said, and a comment, which is what is said about the topic, rather than being a language with a subject-predicate structure like that of English. Y. R. Chao (1968), for example, said that all Chinese clauses have topic-comment structure and there are no exceptions. The fact that some of these linguists, e.g. Y. R. Chao (1968) and Lü Shuxiang (1979: 70–73), used the terms “subject” when writing in English, or *zhǔyǔ* when writing in Chinese, for what I will consistently call “topic” has confused some later linguists who did not pay attention to the definition of these terms given in those works, and so assumed that the “subject” referred to was equivalent to what we call “subject” in English. In fact, those authors were simply talking about topic, not grammaticalized subject. This confusion has also led some linguists to refer to Chinese as a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) language,¹ that is, one where word order is determined by or determines the grammatical relations “subject” and “object.” One line of description that differed from both of these views was that of Li and Thompson (1976, 1981: 15–20), who argued that “subject” in Chinese is not equivalent to topic, as, unlike topic, it must have “a direct semantic relationship with the verb as the one that performs the action or exists in the state named by the verb” (1981: 15), but is also not exactly equivalent to “subject” in English, as in Chinese “ ‘subject’ is not a structurally definable notion” (1981: 19). In this view, the clause has a “subject” (defined on semantic rather than grammatical grounds), but there is often a topic (defined as some topical element other than “the one that performs the action or exists in the

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state named by the verb”) that precedes the “subject” as well. Based on this, they developed the idea of dividing languages into two types: “subject-prominent” (e.g. English) and “topic-prominent” (e.g. Chinese). Both types have both “subject” and “topic,” but the prominence of “subject” vs. “topic” differs in the two types. This view has been very influential in discussions of Chinese structure. As can be seen from the quote above, what Li and Thompson called “subject” is in fact the semantic role of actor, and say that there is no grammatically definable subject. In saying that there is no grammatically definable subject, they are agreeing with Chao and Lü, but differ from Chao and Lü in defining subject as agent, whereas Chao and Lü each explicitly said their concepts of subject are not related to semantic role, but are simply topics.

As can be seen from this brief discussion, although all three approaches use the terms “subject” and “topic,” the meaning of those terms differs in each approach.

For a number of years I have been arguing that Chinese is unlike English in terms of the organization of clause structure, as it has not grammaticalized the kind of restricted neutralizations of semantic roles in certain constructions which aid in referent role identification and tracking that characterize what we call “subject” in English (LaPolla 1988a, 1988b, 1990, 1993; Van Valin and LaPolla 1997, Ch. 6; LaPolla and Poa 2006),² essentially supporting the view of Y. R. Chao and Lü Shuxiang. I have argued that the structure of the clause is instead based on the pragmatic relations of topical vs. focal material, with topical material preceding the verb, and focal material following the verb (LaPolla 1995; LaPolla and Poa 2005, 2006).³ In this view, topic is not something unusual and separate from “the one that performs the action or exists in the state named by the verb”; it is not defined in any semantic terms; it is simply what the comment is about. There has been much discussion in the literature about the nature of topics and their different types (see, for example, Chafe 1976; Lambrecht 1994). In this chapter, I am using the framework of Lambrecht (1994). I will not consider locational or temporal phrases that are not directly what the comment is about to be topics, as they simply set the scene.

Taking an insight from Shen (2006), I would like to argue here that since the view of Chinese clause structure as simply topic and comment, with no grammaticalized categories we might call “subject” or “direct object,” can explain all of the clause patterns found in Chinese, assuming any other analysis that posits categories for which there is no need or justification would violate the application of the principle that theoretical constructs should not be multiplied beyond necessity (“Occam’s Razor”). In this chapter, I will take a few paragraphs chosen at random from different sources to show how a simple information structure analysis can explain all of the structures used, without the need for the grammaticalized categories of “subject” and “direct object.”

The following paragraph is from the novel *Sān Jiā Xiàng*, by Ouyang Shan (1959: 245) (I will first present examples *in toto* in Chinese characters, then go through the text line by line):

(1)正说着，门外忽然响起了砰砰砰的急急的敲门声。(2)大家的精神都振作了，神经也紧张起来了。(3)两个青年男子跳了下地，周炳也唰地一声站了起来。(4)周金对大家说：(5)“不要慌张。没有什么可怕的！什么时候都不要忘记自己是革命男子汉！”(6)然后叫周炳去开门，自己站在窗前，仰望着那黑沉沉的天空，慢慢地吸烟。(7)周炳扭亮了神厅电灯，打开了大门，(8)跳进来一个漂亮而壮健，大眼窝，大嘴巴的年轻小伙子，(9)原来是杨承辉。(10)他把雨衣一扔，就冲进神楼底，气急败坏地说：(11)“坏了，坏了！出事儿了！反革命分子动手了！快走把，走把，走把！”

(1) 正说着，门外忽然响起了砰砰砰的急急的敲门声。

zhèng shuō-zhe, mén-wài hūrán xiǎng-qǐ-le

just talk-DUR door-outside suddenly make sound-INCHO-PFV

pēngpēngpēng de jí-jí de qiāo-mén-shēng.

[ONOMA ASSOC urgent-urgent ASSOC knock-door-sound]

Just as (he) was talking, suddenly outside there was the sound of urgent knocking on the door.

In this first sentence a character named Zhou Rong is speaking, when suddenly there is a knock on the door. The way this is expressed is with the verb *xiǎng* “make a sound.” When using this verb, the reference to the thing which makes the sound can appear before or after the verb, depending on whether that thing is topical or not. In the case of (1), the making of the sound of knocking is presented as an event. As discussed in LaPolla (1995) and LaPolla and Poa (2005), events are often presented asthetic statements, that is, statements without topics. To achieve this effect, any referent mentioned must appear in post-verbal position, to avoid it being interpreted as a topic, such as the *yǔ* “rain” in *xià yǔ le* [fall rain CSM] “It has started raining.” In (1) the sound of knocking is not presented as a topic, and so appears post-verbally. In other cases, such as if we were talking about the phone and then wanted to say that it rang, we would say *diànhuà xiǎngle* [telephone make.sound-PFV] “the phone rang,” with the reference to the telephone in topic position. The information structure principle can explain the reason for the structure of (1) and the difference between (1) and other possible structures involving the same verb, whereas the assumption of the grammaticalization of “subject,” topic-prominence, or SVO word order cannot.

(2) 大家的精神都振作了，神经也紧张起来了。

¹ dājiā de jīngshén dōu zhènzuo-le, ² shénjīng yě jǐnzhāng-qǐlái-le.

everyone ASSOC spirit all rouse-CSM nerve also tighten-INCHO-CSM

Everyone roused up, and started to get nervous.

In the first clause of (2) we have a topic, *dàjiā de jīngshén* “everyone’s spirits,” and the comment *dōu zhènzuo-le* “all roused.” This clause is interesting in that the same verb, which is an activity verb, can be used with an actor controlling the spirit as topic, as in *dàjiā yào zhènzuo jīngshén* [everyone want rouse spirit] “Everyone should rouse up,” or *dàjiā yào zhènzuo* (without the mention of spirit), but in (2) it would not be possible to add an actor argument, as the actual actor appears as the possessor of the spirit. This is not a passive clause (Chinese in fact does not have true passive clauses; see LaPolla 1988b, 1990); it is simply a different topic-comment structure, with the spirit(s) as the topic as opposed to having the actor as the topic. In the second clause of (2), there is a topic *shénjīng* “nerves,” and it is understood as having the same possessor as the spirit mentioned in the first clause (i.e. “everyone”). This is followed by the comment that they began to tighten up (i.e. the people began to get nervous—the topic here also could have been “everyone,” but the author chose to contrast everyone’s spirit and nerves as topics in saying the people roused up and got nervous). The verb in this clause is a state verb, but the clause has the sense of an achievement predication with the addition of the change of state marker, and this allows the parallel with the predication of the first clause marked by *yě* “also.”

- (3) 两个青年男子跳了下地，周炳也唰地一声站了起来。

¹ *liǎng-ge qīngnián nánzi tiào-le-xià dì,*
[two-CL youth male] jump-PFV-down ground

² *Zhōu.Bǐng yě shuā-de yī-shēng zhàn-le-qǐlái.*
PN also ONOMA-ADV one-sound stand-PFV-INCHO

Two male youths jumped down to the floor, Zhou Bing also stood up with a swoosh.

In (3) we have a topic in the first clause, two male youths, with the comment that they jumped down to the floor, and this first topic is contrasted with the second topic, Zhou Bing, with the comment that he stood up with a swoosh. The use of *yě* “also” shows that the author is treating the second comment as parallel with the first one, even though it is not the same sort of action (both reflect the coming to attention and nervousness mentioned in the previous two clauses). It will be noticed that the topic in the first clause is represented as if it is an unidentifiable referent. Though it is possible to understand this clause assuming the two men mentioned are unidentifiable, in fact given the larger context of the book we can infer that the two young men referred to are Zhou Jin and Zhou Rong, who had been said to be lying on the beds in the room. This sort of reference probably would only be made in a written genre such as this passage.⁴

- (4) 周金对大家说：“不要慌张。没有什么可怕的！什么时候都不要忘记自己是革命男子汉！”

Zhōu.Jīn duì dājiā shuō:

PN towards everyone say

¹ “*Bù-yào huāngzhāng.* ² *Méi-yǒu shénme kǐpà de!*

NEG-want fluster NEG.PFV-exist what frightening ASSOC

³ *Shénme shíhòu dōu bù-yào wàngjì zìjǐ shì géming nánzihàn!*”

what time all NEG-want forget self COPULA revolution male

Zhou Jin said to everyone: “Don’t panic. There is nothing to be afraid of! (You) should always remember you are revolutionary men!”

In (4) we have a new topic, Zhou Jin, and the comment that he said something to everyone, and then the quote of what he said. There is no reference to anyone he is talking to (other than *zìjǐ* “self”), but we can infer that in the first and third clause of the quote he is talking to and about everyone. The middle clause is an existential clause, where the existent appears after the verb, again because it is not topical, but instead focal. This same sort of clause could instead have a preverbal noun phrase, if that noun phrase represented a topical referent, e.g. *nàxiē huò yǐjīng méi-yǒu-le* [those goods already NEG.PFV-exist-CSM] “Those goods are gone (no longer exist).” Again, the information structure principle can explain this difference, and also show the cognacy of these two clause types, but the assumption of “subject,” “topic-prominence,” or SVO structure, cannot.

- (5) 然后叫周炳去开门，自己站在窗前，仰望着那黑沉沉的天空，慢慢地吸烟。

¹ *Ránhòu jiào Zhōu.Bǐng qù kāi mén,*

after.that tell PN go open door

² *zìjǐ zhàn zài chuāng qián,*

self stand LOC window before

³ *yǎngwàng-zhe nà hēichénchén de tiānkōng,*

look.up.at-DUR [that very.black ASSOC sky]

⁴ *mǎnmǎn de xīyān.*

slow ADV smoke

Then he told Zhou Bing to go open the door, (while) he himself stood in front of the window, looking at the dark sky, slowing smoking.

In (5) we have a topic chain with four parallel clauses all about the same topic, Zhou Jin, who had been mentioned in (4), but is simply assumed in the clauses in (5) (the quoting clause, but not the quoted clauses of (4), is part of the topic chain that includes the clauses in [5]), and there is the comment in the first clause that he told

Zhou Bing to open the door, and a comment in the second clause, that he himself stood in front of the window. In this second clause the word *zìjǐ* “self” appears in apposition to the unstated topic, Zhou Jin. In the third and fourth clauses the same topic is assumed, and two comments are made, that he looked up at the dark sky and slowly smoked, but the comment in the third clause is understood (because of the appearance of *-zhe*, which in this context marks simultaneous action) as modifying the action of the fourth comment, and so the two clauses together are understood as “(he) slowly smoked while looking up at the sky.” This is also understood as happening while he stood in front of the window, so these last three clauses are semantically more tightly related to each other than any is to the first clause. Notice that in the third clause we have the opposite situation of what we saw in (3): here the noun phrase “that black sky” is overtly marked as identifiable, yet appears in focus position, showing that identifiability and topicality are separate statuses.⁵

(6) 周炳扭亮了神厅电灯，打开了大门，

¹ *Zhōu.Bǐng niǔ-liàng-le shén-tīng-diàn-dēng, ² *dǎ-kāi-le dà-mén,*
 PN twist-bright-PFV spirit-hall-electric-light hit-open-PFV big-door
 Zhou Bing turned up the shrine hall light and opened the main door,*

In (6) we have a person who can be understood as an actor as topic of both clauses, and except for the actor not appearing overtly in the second clause (it is assumed to be the same as the first, but this is not an obligatory understanding forced by the grammar the way it is in English cross-clause coreference), they seem like simple SVO clauses. The question is why these clauses are the way they are. Is the reference to Zhou Bing before the verb because he is subject, or because he is topic? Is the reference to the light and the door after the verb because they are objects or because they are focal? The references to the light and the door could come before the verb, but then they would be understood as topics, that is, what the story is about. This part of the story is not about the light and the door, but about Zhou Bing, and so they appear after the verb. As for the initial noun phrase, it seems very much that in the structure NP1 V NP2, where one of the noun phrases can be understood as agent of a transitive clause, that noun phrase must precede the verb. This is probably the reason why Li and Thompson (1981) still had “subject” as part of their description of Chinese (but defined in semantic rather than structural terms), even though they understood the pragmatic influences on word order. In earlier work (e.g. LaPolla 1990), I also said that aside from the information structure principle, there was also a semantic rule that agents of transitive clauses appear before the verb. This was certainly not a syntactic rule, as it is not a matter of NP1 in an NP1 V NP2 always being an agent, as in English, but only said to

hold in clauses where NP1 can be understood as an agent, and does not include the agents of intransitive clauses, so even if there were such a rule, it would not be related to “subject” as a category of all clauses. If it were a syntactic rule related to “subject,” the way it is in English, NP1 in any NP1 V NP2 structure or NP1 V (where the verb is not marked as passive) structure would have to be understood as agent, but this is obviously not the case in Chinese. I later realized this rule does not exist, as Y. R. Chao had said if there exists N1 V N2, it is not necessarily the case that N1 is the agent and N2 the patient: “A corollary to the topic-comment nature of predication is that the direction of action in an action verb in the predicate need not go outward from subject to object. Even in an N-V-N’ sequence, such as 狗咬人 *gǒu yǎo rén* [dog bite man], it is not always certain that the action goes outward from N to N’” (1968: 70, with pinyin replacing Chao’s transcription). Lü Shuxiang (1979: 70–72) also argued against any sort of determination of *zhǔyǔ* (“subject”) on the basis of semantics, and he gives examples such as that in (11), below, as examples of an agent appearing post-verbally. Examples of the type 这锅饭吃了三个人 *zhè guō fàn chī-le sān-ge rén* [this pot rice eat three-CL person] “This pot ate (fed) three people” are also relevant here. Given these examples, we cannot say that in an NP1 V NP2 structure where one noun phrase could be understood as an agent NP1 must be understood as the agent, unless, as some have tried with the last type of example, we say there are really two different verbs involved. For me it is much simpler to assume the null hypothesis, that there is no difference in the verb, but a difference in what appears as topic. This was Lü Shuxiang’s position, and it allows us to explain much more of the grammar of Chinese with a single general principle than to have ad hoc unmotivated explanations for each structure.

(7) 跳进来一个漂亮而壮健、大眼窝、大嘴巴的年轻小伙子，原来是杨承辉。

¹ *tiào-jìn-lái yī-ge piàoliàng ěr zhuāngjiàn,*
jump-enter-come [one-CL beautiful and strapping
dà yǎnwō, dà zǔiba de niánqīng xiǎohuǒzi
big eye.socket big mouth ASSOC young fellow]

² *yuánlái shì Yáng.Chénghuī.*
originally COPULA PN

and a good-looking and strapping young fellow with big eyes and a big mouth jumped into (the room); it was Yang Chenghui.

In the first clause in (7) we have the same verb as in (3), *tiào* “jump,” but unlike in (3), the reference to the one who jumped does not appear before the verb, but after the verb. This is because the utterance is not about the young man that jumped in, i.e. he is not the topic of the utterance, but is presenting an event, the

entrance of this young man. At the same time it is introducing the young man into the discourse, and then he becomes the topic of the following clause, where his name is given.

- (8) 他把雨衣一扔，就冲进神楼底，气急败坏地说：“坏了，坏了！出事儿了！反革命分子动手了！快走吧，走吧，走吧！”

¹ *Tā bǎ yǔyī yī rēng,*
3sg BA raincoat one throw

² *jiù chōng-jìn shén-lóu-dǐ,*
then rush-enter spirit-house-bottom

³ *qìjībàihuài de shuō:*
flustered.and.exasperated ADV say

¹ “*Huài-le,* ² *huài-le!* ³ *Chū shìr le!*
bad-CSM bad-CSM exit affair CSM

⁴ *Fǎngémìngfènzǐ dòng shǒu le!*
reactionaries move hand CSM

⁵ *Kuài zǒu bā,* ⁶ *zǒu bā,* ⁷ *zǒu bā!”*
fast leave HORT leave HORT leave HORT

As soon as he threw aside his raincoat he rushed into the room behind the shrine hall, and in a very flustered and exasperated way said, “Something’s gone terribly wrong! Something’s gone terribly wrong! Something bad’s happened! The reactionaries have taken action! Leave quickly, leave, leave!”

The same referent (the young man) is assumed as the topic of the first three clauses of (8). This is a new topic chain, and so there is reference to him in the first clause with a third person singular pronoun, and the same referent is understood as the topic of the next two clauses (again, not obligatorily, but inferred from context), the last of which introduces a quote. In the first clause of (8) there is a new referent, the raincoat, but it is not introduced and treated as a referent of concern; it appears as if it was already in the scene, as a secondary topic following the auxiliary verb *bǎ*, which gives a sense of disposal of the raincoat. This requires some pragmatic accommodation on the part of the reader, relying on background assumptions that it is raining and so anyone coming in would be wearing a raincoat and need to take it off when they come in. The reference to the raincoat appears in this position in the clause because the action is what is in focus, and so the verb appears in final position (the first, second, and third clauses of [8] are a series of actions by the young man), and mentioning the throwing of the raincoat adds to the sense of urgency of his actions. In other contexts the reference to the raincoat could appear in post-verbal position, but if that structure were used here there would be more

a sense that the raincoat is what is in focus, and we would expect the following clauses to say something about what happened to the raincoat or as a result of throwing the raincoat. In the second clause we again have an action like in the first clause of (7), rushing into a room, and by the same referent, but in this case the rushing into the room is not presented as an event, but as one of a series of actions by the same topic, and so if there were representation of the referent, it would appear in topic position.

In the quoted part of (8), there is no reference to the topic of the first two clauses, but we can understand that it is the general situation that is the topic. In the third clause of the quote, there is no topic; again an event is presented, that something bad happened. The fourth clause of the quote explains what that event was, taking the reactionaries as topic, and saying that they have started to do something (arrest people). Having the reactionaries as topic with the **predication** 动手了 *dòngshǒu-le* “took action” gives the impression the men had been anticipating such an action by the reactionaries (we also know this from the larger context). The last few clauses of the quote are imperatives, urging everyone to run away.

Consider also example (9) (from blog.ytcnc.net/user1/abc0805/archives/2006/2275.html):

- (9) 特别喜欢下雪。喜欢下雪后白茫茫的一片很纯净的感觉。希望今年的第一场雪早点下吧！

¹ *Tèbié xīhuān xià xuě.*
especially like fall snow

² *Xīhuān xià xuě hòu báimángmáng de*
like fall snow after glisteningly.white ASSOC
yī-piàn hěn chúnjìng de gǎnjué.
one-CL very pure ASSOC feeling

¹ *Xīwàng jīnnián de dì-yī-chǎng xuě zǎo diǎn xià bā!*
hope this.year ASSOC ORD-one-CL snow early a.bit fall HORT
(I) especially like snow (lit: “the falling of snow”). (I) like the feeling of purity of the glisteningly white snow after a snowfall. (I) hope this year the first snow (of the season) will fall a bit earlier!

In this example the same noun, *xuě* “snow,” appears after the verb in the first two clauses, but before the verb in the last clause. This is because in the first two clauses “the falling of snow” is presented as an event, and so the reference to snow must follow the verb in order not to be interpreted as a topic, while in the last clause the snow is a topic, and the comment about this topic is that it falls early (in the year).

As discussed at length by Lü Shuxiang (1979: 72–73), in many cases where a clause has representations of two referents, the two representations can appear in either order, with no difference in the interpretation of semantic or grammatical roles. The only difference is which of the two referents is topical and which is focal. Professor Lü gave examples such as those in (10) and (11):

- (10) a. 窗户已经糊了纸
chuānghu yǐjīng hú-le zhǐ
 window already paste-PFV paper
 The window has already been pasted with paper
- b. 纸已经糊了窗户
zhǐ yǐjīng hú-le chuānghu
 paper already paste-PFV window
 The paper has already been pasted on the window
- (11) a. 这个人没有骑过马
zhè-ge rén méi-yǒu qǐ-guò mǎ
 this-CL person NEG.PFV-exist ride-EXP horse
 This person has never ridden a horse
- b. 这匹马没有骑过人
zhè-pǐ mǎ méi-yǒu qǐ-guò rén
 this-CL horse NEG.PFV-exist ride-EXP person
 This horse has never (been) ridden (by) a person

Examine the following natural example (from bulo.cn.yahoo.com/blog/blog_article.php?bname=hungtoyeung&mid=347):

- (12) 虽然一间屋住了十多个人, (13) 一层楼里大铁门内有大约12个屋, (14) 近100人吃喝拉撒, 一年到头拥挤在只有约800平方米的一个空间里, (15) 但他们的情绪从表面上看是很平静和安详的, ……
- (12) 虽然一间屋住了十多个人,
suīrán yī-jiān wū zhù-le shí-duō-ge rén
 although one-CL room live-PFV ten-more-CL person
 Although one room housed more than ten people,

In this example, the initial topic, mentioned in (12), is a room, and the comment about this room is that more than ten people live there. The room is the

topic and the people who live there are within the focus. Although generally topics are specific and identifiable, in this context, the room talked about is not specific, but “a room” of the building in the generic sense. Notice that in Chinese the same verb *zhù* “live” can be used whether the topic is the place lived or the people living in the place (see [16] below), whereas in English two different verbs, *live* vs. *house*, must be used to achieve the same effect. This difference is also due to the difference of topic-comment structure vs. subject-predicate structure.

- (13) 一层楼里大铁门内有大约12个屋,
yī-céng lóu lǐ dà tiě-mén nèi yǒu dàyuē 12 ge wū
 one-floor building within big iron-door inside exist about 12 CL room
 On one floor inside the big iron door were about twelve rooms.

The clause in (13) is an existential clause, stating that on each floor there are about twelve rooms. Here the floor is a locus rather than a topic (it has a scene-setting function, i.e. identification of a time or place).⁶

- (14) 近100人吃喝拉撒，一年到头拥挤在只有约800平方米的一个空间里，
¹ *jìn 100 rén chī-hē-lā-sā,*
 close.to 100 person eat-drink-shit-piss
² *yī-nián dào-tóu yōngǐ*
 one-year arrive-end crowded
zài zhǐ yǒu yuē 800 píngfāng mǐ de yī-ge kōngjiān lǐ,
 LOC only exist about 800 square meters ASSOC one-CL space within
 close to 100 people doing all of their activities all year long crowded into a space
 of only 800 square meters,

The two clauses in (14) express the logical consequence of ten people per room and twelve rooms on one floor: that close to 100 people carry out all their daily activities within a mere 800 square meters of space. In these clauses the people have become the topic, rather than the space, which is now within the focus. All four of these clauses are within the scope of the initial *suīrán* “although.”

- (15) 但他们的情绪从表面上看是很平静和安详的，……
dàn tāmen de qíngxù cóng biǎomiàn shàng kàn
 but 3pl ASSOC mood from surface on look
shì hěn píngjìng hé ānxiáng de, . . .
 COPULA very peaceful and serene NOM
 but their mood was seemingly peaceful and serene.

The last clause, which takes the mood of these people as the topic, is the contrasting statement, that their mood is seemingly peaceful and contented.

We can also contrast the structure of (12) with the following example, the title of a news item on an on-line news service (www.epochtimes.com/b5/5/3/23/n862553.htm, February 19, 2007), where the order of the two noun phrases is the reverse of that in (12):

(16) 中国女工毛里求斯遭遇：近千人住一间屋

¹ Zhōngguó nǚ-gōng Máo-lǐqiú-sī zāo-yù:
Chinese woman-worker Mauritius suffer-meet

² jìn qiān rén zhù yī-jīān wū.
close.to thousand people live one-CL room

Chinese female worker suffers in Mauritius: close to a thousand people live in one room.

Here we see that the people are taken as the topic rather than the room, but other than that the semantics are the same.

We can see from these short passages that there are many instances where the reference to some referent can either precede or follow the verb, and the deciding factor is not whether the referent is “subject” or “direct object,” and not whether it is identifiable (“definite”) or unidentifiable (“indefinite”), but whether it is topical or focal.

This sort of analysis can in fact explain all of the other types of “odd” clauses in Chinese, such as the double topic structure and the “split referent” structure. Another type it can explain easily is the type as in (17) (from *Lián Chéng Jue’* (连城诀), by Jin Yong (金庸), Chapter 6; <http://louisville.edu/journal/weiming/wuxia/lian06.txt>):

(17) 她死了一匹马，便这么哭个不停。

¹ tā sǐ-le yī-pǐ mǎ, ² biàn zhème kū ge bù-zhù.
3sg die-PFV one-CL horse then this.much cry CL NEG-stop

She had a horse die on her, and she cries this much without stopping.

If we assume an SVO or any other “subject”-based analysis of Chinese, we run into serious problems with the type of structure in the first clause of (17), which is quite common in Chinese. If we try to say that “she” is the “subject” and “one horse” is the object, then we must assume that “die” is a transitive verb, or at least has a transitive use. But this goes against what Chinese speakers feel about this sentence. It is not that “she” caused the death of the horse, but that the horse died,

and this has affected her in some way. If we use the topic comment analysis, we can see that “she” is the topic, and “die a horse” is presented as an event. It is the horse that died, but the dying is not presented as a comment about the horse, that it died, but as an event of horse dying, and this event functions as the comment about “she.”

In most discussions of Chinese, the double topic construction, as in (18), and the “split referent” construction, as in (19), are not discussed together, and it is not felt that they are related, but they are in fact explained by the same principle, that topical elements come before the verb and focal elements come after the verb. (Example [18] is from an online diary: http://spaces.huash.com/?111533/action_viewspace_itemid_210107.html, posted January 25, 2007, 22:44:40; (19) is from <http://book.msn.com.cn/n/a/34198/326436.shtml>, both accessed February 23, 2007.)

- (18) 丫头你提了个问题很严重，睡觉前我要想一下，想不出就不睡了，但是现在**我肚子饿**，所以我要先吃点西。

¹ *Yātou nǐ tí-le ge wèntí hěn yánzhòng, ...*
girl 2sg raise-PFV CL question very serious

² *dànshì xiànzài wǒ dùzi è, ³ suǒyǐ wǒ yào xiān chī dōngxī.*
but now **1sg belly hungry** so 1sg want first eat thing

Girl, you've raised a question that is very serious, . . . but now I am (my belly is) hungry, and so I want to eat something first.

- (19) 等他那几个小菜做好的时候，我已经饥肠辘辘了。我埋怨他动作太慢，害**我饿了肚子**，他却好脾气的说，慢工出细活嘛！

. . . *Wǒ máiyuàn tā dòngzuò tài màn, hài wǒ è-le dùzi, . . .*

1sg complain 3sg movement too slow harm **1sg hungry-CSM belly**

. . . I complained that his movements were too slow, (and) caused me to get hungry, . . .

In these two examples, though both involve the expression for saying one is hungry, which involves reference to one's belly, there is a difference in the placement of the reference to “belly.” In (18) it appears in preverbal position as secondary topic in a double-topic structure of the type [topic [topic-comment]_{comment}]. In (19) it appears in post-verbal position. This difference is due to a difference in information structure. In both cases “I” am the main topic about which a comment is being made, and in both cases the other referent is the same, “(my) belly,”⁷ but in (18) the comment about “I” includes a secondary topic, as “I” am saying something about “(my) belly,” that it is hungry, and this statement about “(my) belly” constitutes the comment about “I.” In (19) there is no secondary topic; “I” am not

saying something about “(my) belly.” The referent “(my) belly” is still involved in the comment made about “I,” but in this case the comment takes the form of an event, getting hungry, and as “(my) belly” is not topical, it appears in post-verbal position.

Notice also that in the first clause of (18), rather than saying *tí-le ge yánzhòng de wèntí* [raise-PFV CL serious ASSOC question] “raised a serious question,” with “serious” in a relative clause structure modifying “question,” the author has “serious” as a second predication. This can also be explained with an information structure account. In the relative clause structure, “serious” is treated as part of the same focus as “raise a question,” whereas in (18) “raise a question” is presented in one focus, and the fact that the question is serious is presented as a separate focus, a separate comment on the referent just introduced. That is, it is equivalent to two clauses, where the first introduces a referent and the second makes a comment on it (“raised a question” + “the question is serious”), but it is collapsed into a single structure with two foci (see LaPolla 1995). This sort of construction is most common with an existential verb as the first verb (e.g. *wǒ yǒu ge péngyǒu chū-le chēhuò* [1sg exist CL friend happen-CSM car.accident] “I have a friend who had a car accident”—from www.pcauto.com.cn/playcar/owner_report/rcgs/0410/153172/html).

In this chapter I hope to have shown that an information structure analysis can elegantly explain all of the clause patterns found in these Chinese passages, including many that are problematic for other analyses. As that is the case, there is no need to posit any grammaticalized categories, such as “subject,” to explain the structure of the clause in Chinese. In fact assumption of “SVO”⁸ structure would be problematic given the clause patterns we find in Chinese.