

2.7 Location and existence

In English, location is expressed with the same verb as identity (or category): the verb ‘to be’ (is, am, are, etc.). Chinese, however, uses entirely different verbs. Identity is signaled by shì; location, by zài ‘be at’:

| | | |
|-----|------------------|-------------------|
| ID | Tā shì xuésheng. | She’s a student. |
| LOC | Tā zài Běijīng. | She’s in Beijing. |

2.7.1 Some Chinese place names

China is called Zhōngguó, often given the literal gloss of ‘middle kingdom’, a name which goes back to the time when it designated the ruling principality among the many that owed it fealty. The Chinese are then Zhōngguó rén ‘Chinese-people’.

Administrative units of the People’s Republic include provinces (省 shěng), prefectures (地 dì), counties (县 xiàn), townships (乡 xiāng) and villages (村 cūn). Of these, the county (xiàn) is the unit with the longest historical continuity, dating back some 2500 years. In modern mainland China the highest, or provincial level contains 33 divisions: 22 provinces (with Taiwan considered a 23rd), 5 autonomous regions, 4 municipalities, which are cities ruled by the central government (Běijīng, Shànghǎi, Tiānjīn and Chóngqìng), and 2 special autonomous districts (Hong Kong [Xiāng Gǎng] and Macau [Àomén]).

Taiwan, which administers the island of Táiwān, the Pescadores Islands (Pēnghú), as well as 13 small, scattered offshore islands, has a slightly different administrative structure. It has two centrally administered cities, Taipei (Táiběi) and the south-western city of Kaohsiung (Gāoxióng).

The chart below lists important cities. They can be located in terms of their province (using the verb zài), or in terms of their proximity to another place (using the lí pattern that follows in §2.7.2).

| <i>Quadrant</i> | <i>The city of:</i> | <i>is in</i> | <i>the province (shěng) of:</i> |
|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|
| NW | Xīníng | zài | Qīnghǎi <shěng>. |
| NW | Wūlǔmùqí | | Xīnjiāng. |
| N | Hūhéhàotè | | *Nèiménggǔ. |
| NE | Shěnyáng | | Liáoníng. |
| NE | Chángchūn | | Jílín. |
| NE | Hā’ěrbīn | | Hēilóngjiāng. |
| W | Lāsà | | *Xīzàng. |
| C | Xī’ān | | Shǎnxī. |
| E | Nánjīng | | Jiāngsū . |

| | | |
|----|-----------|------------|
| E | Guǎngzhōu | Guǎngdōng. |
| SW | Guilín | *Guǎngxī. |
| SW | Chéngdū | Sìchuān. |
| SW | Kūnmíng | Yúnnán. |

Notes

- a) Nèiménggǔ ‘Inner Mongolia’, Xīzàng ‘Tibet’ and Guǎngxī are autonomous regions, zìzhìqū.
- b) Shěnyáng was formerly called by its Manchu name, Mukden.
- c) The names of two provinces are distinguished only by tone: Shānxī ‘mountains-west’ (which is west of the province of Shāndōng ‘mountains-east’), and Shǎnxī (‘pass-west’), sometimes romanized as ‘Shaanxi’ or ‘Shenhsi’ to distinguish it, which is west again of Shānxī.

2.7.2 Proximity

Relative proximity of one place to another can be expressed by a construction that involves the word lí ‘[away] from’, and the SVs jìn ‘be close’ and yuǎn ‘be far’. Notice the difference in word order from English.

| Place-1 | lí place-2 | proximity |
|----------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Běijīng | lí Guǎngzhōu | hěn yuǎn / hěn jìn. |
| <i>Beijing</i> | <i>from Canton</i> | <i>very far / close.</i> |

Usage

| | |
|--|--|
| Tiānjīn lí Běijīng bǐjiào jìn. | Tiānjīn’s quite close to Beijing. |
| Xī’ān zài Shǎnxī, lí Běijīng bǐjiào yuǎn. | Xi’an’s in Shanxi, quite far from Beijing. |
| Xīníng lí Chéngdū hěn jìn ma? <i>Bú jìn; Xīníng lí Lánzhōu hěn jìn.</i> | Is Xining near Chengdu? <i>No, it’s not; it’s close to Lanzhou.</i> |
| Xī’ān lí Běijīng hěn yuǎn, dànshì Xīníng gèng yuǎn. | Xi’an is far from Běijīng, but Xining is even farther. |



Figure by MIT OCW.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/thumb/c/c9/China_administrative.png/

2.7.3 Zài 'be+at'

In certain contexts, zài may appear without a [following] object, typically when it means 'be at home', or as a euphemism for 'be alive': tā bú zài 'he's not at home' or 'he's passed away' (the latter meaning more often with le, bú zài le, since that is likely to be news). Otherwise, zài is followed by words or phrases that are locations. But just what constitutes a location is not always obvious. Place names are locations as the examples in §2.7.1 show. So are the locational pronouns:

| | | |
|------------|----------------------------|---------|
| <u>zài</u> | <u>zhèr</u> ~ <u>zhèlǐ</u> | 'here' |
| | <u>nàr</u> ~ <u>nàlǐ</u> | 'there' |
| | <u>nǎr</u> ~ <u>nǎlǐ</u> | 'where' |

Otherwise, most nouns need to be followed by one of a number of position words, such as shàng 'on' or lǐ 'in', before they can be locations and thereby act as objects to zài:

| | | |
|------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| <u>zài</u> | <u>fēijī shàng</u> | on the plane |
| <u>zài</u> | <u>shūbāo lǐ</u> | in [my] bookbag |

However, some common words for places do not always require following position words like shàng or lǐ. Sometimes additional position words are optional; sometimes they add a slight nuance of difference.

| | | |
|-----|--------------|------------------|
| zài | jiā <lǐ> | at home |
| | cāntīng <lǐ> | in the cafeteria |
| | jīchǎng | at the airport |

Before pronouns can act as objects of zài, they need support from one of the locational pronouns, such as zhèr ~ zhèlǐ: zài wǒ zhèr, literally ‘at me here’; zài tā nàr ‘at her there’. English actually expresses the notion more naturally with the verb ‘have’:

| | |
|--|--|
| Qǐngwèn, jīntiān de bào zài nǎr ~ nǎlǐ? <i>Zài wǒ zhèr ~ zhèlǐ.</i> Xíngli ne? <i>Xíngli zài tā nàr.</i> | Excuse me, where’s today’s paper? <i>I have it.</i> And the luggage? <i>He has the luggage.</i> |
|--|--|

2.7.4 Zài as a main verb; zài as a co-verb

Zài may be used as a main verb (as in §2.7.1 and below), but it can also introduce a location and appear prior to another verb, in which case it is called a co-verb in Chinese grammatical tradition (CV).

a) Examples of zài as a main verb

| | |
|--|--|
| Qǐngwèn, Mǎ lǎoshī zài ma? <i>Mǎ lǎoshī xiànzài zài Yúnnán.</i> | Excuse me, is Prof. Ma here? <i>Prof. Ma is currently in Yunnan.</i> |
| Yàoshi zài nǎr? <i>Zài nàr. / Zài tā nàr.</i> | Where are the keys? <i>[They]’re over there. / She has [them].</i> |
| Nánjīng lí Héféi bú tài yuǎn, kěshì Nánjīng zài Jiāngsū, Héféi zài Ānhuī. Wǒ de hùzhào zài nǐ nàr ma? <i>Bú zài wǒ zhèr!</i> | Nanjing’s not far from Hefei, but Nanjing’s in Jiangsu, [and] Hefei’s in Anhui. Do you have my passport? <i>I don’t have [it].</i> |
| Nǐ de xíngli zài nǎr? <i>Hái zài fēijī shàng.</i> | Where are your bags? <i>[They]’re still on the airplane.</i> |

b) Zài as a co-verb

Co-verbs are like verbs in allowing direct modification by adverbs, but they frequently correspond to prepositions in English.

| | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Xuésheng zhǒngshì zài cāntīng chīfàn. | Students always eat in the cafeteria. |
|--|---------------------------------------|

Wǒmen zài fēijī shàng shuìjiào le. We slept on the plane.

Zài jiā lǐ chīfàn bǐjiào hǎo. It's better to eat at home.

In such cases, the *zài*-phrase expresses the location of an action. Later, you will see that *zài*-phrases also follow certain verbs (where *zài* is usually untoned): shēng zai Běijīng ‘born in Beijing’.

2.7.5 The verb *yǒu* ‘have’

The verb *yǒu*, with an ‘irregular’ negative *méiyǒu* or simply *méi*, was encountered in the previous unit as the negative counterpart of *le* with action verbs: Chīfàn le méiyǒu? Used alone, as a main verb, it conveys possession and existence:

| | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Possession</i> | Wǒ yǒu sān ge hùzhào. | I have 3 passports. |
| | Wǒ méiyǒu sǎn. | I don't have an umbrella. |
| | Xuéshēng dōu yǒu zìdiǎn. | The students all have dictionaries. |
| <i>Existence</i> | Wǒ méiyǒu xíngli. | I don't have any baggage. |
| | Nánjīng méiyǒu dìtiě. | There's no underground railway in Nanjing. |
| | Chēzi lǐ yǒu yīfu, yě yǒu shūbāo. | There are clothes and bookbags in the car. |

Summary

| | | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|--|---------------------------|---|
| <i>Identity; category</i> | (bù) shì | Nà shì jīntiān de bào. Tā shì lǎoshī. | is | That's today's paper. She's a teacher. |
| <i>Location</i> | (bù) zài | Chéngdū zài Sìchuān. | is (in etc.) | Chengdu's in Sichuan. |
| <i>Existence</i> | (méi)you | Xī'ān méiyǒu jīchǎng. | [there] is /are | There's no airport in Xi'an. |
| <i>Possession</i> | (méi)you | Wǒ méiyǒu hùzhào. | have | I don't have a passport. |
| <i>Proximity</i> | lí... (bù) jìn / (bù) yuǎn | Tiānjīn lí Běijīng bù yuǎn. | is close to / is far from | Tianjin's close to Beijing. |

Exercise 5.

Render the following short exchanges in idiomatic Chinese. [Hint: Chinese would probably not make use of the verb yǒu 'have' in the A and C -dialogues.]

| | Jiǎ | Yī |
|----|---|--|
| A. | -Where's the paper please? -No, today's. -You had it earlier. | -Yesterday's? -Sorry, I don't have it. -But I don't have it now. |
| B. | -Have you eaten yet? -Oh, you've already eaten! -Is your dorm far from here? | -I have. -Yes, in the dorm. -It's kind of far. |
| C. | -Whose bookbag? -Is it Lǐ Dān's? -Is it 'young' Liú's? -Then it's Sūn Hào's. | -Not mine, I don't have a bookbag. -No, I have Li Dan's. -No, he's not up yet. -Is it? |

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