

The Emergence of *Wh*-indefinites in Chinese

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Modern Chinese is a *wh*-in situ language, as shown in (1a). *Wh*-words in modern Chinese are also commonly known not to be quantificational but rather to function as variables, obtaining their quantificational force from some other element in the clause. As shown in (1b), in the scope of a *yes/no* question particle, they are interpreted as indefinite pronouns. When bound by a marker of negation, they function as negative polarity items, as in (1c).

Examining texts from the Warring States and Han periods, this paper investigates the factors leading to the development of non-interrogative *wh*-constructions like (1b) and (1c). I show that it is not the presence of a trigger (the question particle in (1b) and negation in (1c)), but rather, the fact that the *wh*-word appears in situ which was the crucial factor allowing non-interrogative interpretations of *wh*-words in these early periods.

First, it is important to note that archaic Chinese did have a type of *wh*-fronting. Object *wh*-words had to move to the left of the verb in *wh*-questions, as shown in the first clause in (2). The second clause in (2) shows that non-interrogative objects remained in post-verbal position. (3) shows that *wh*-words could also appear in negative contexts or in the scope of a question particle and retain their interrogative force.

The use of *wh*-words as indefinites is rare in Warring States texts, but there are a few examples, such as (4a). What is important to note is that the *wh*-word does not undergo fronting but rather remains inside the VP. Note also early examples of *wh*-words as negative polarity items in the Han period. Examples like (4b) are quite common, but only in constructions which did not involve *wh*-fronting.

- (1)a. Ni mai le **sheme**?
you buy Asp what
“What did you buy?”
- b. Ni mai le **sheme** *ma*?
you buy Asp what Q
“Did you buy something?”
- c. Wo *mei*-you mai **sheme**.
I not-have buy what
“I did not buy anything.”
- (2) 吾 誰 欺? 欺 天 乎? (論語 • 子罕)
I who deceive deceive Heaven Q
“Who do I deceive? Do I deceive Heaven?”
- (3) 然則 我 何 爲 乎 何 不 爲 乎? (莊子 • 秋水)
then I what do Q what Neg do Q
“Then what should I do? What should I not do?”
- (4)a. 將 [VP 以 誰 任], 我 則 死 之。 (左傳 • 宣 13)
Mod use who responsibility I then die it
“If (you) will use someone for this responsibility, then I will die for it.”
- b. 雖 有 百 秦, 將 無 奈 齊 何。 (史記 70)
even exist 100 Qin Mod Neg do Qi what
“Even if there were 100 Qin, (they) would not be able to do anything to Qi.”