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A functional study of event-existentials in Modern Chinese

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Abstract

It is held that existentials in Chinese express the existence of things rather than events. We propose the term *event-existential*, in contrast to thing-existentials, to capture those clauses whose existents are obviously events. These include the so-called pseudo-existentials, clauses with the possessor as subject and the possessed as object, (dis)appearance existentials, etc. Though the two types of existentials are both composed of “NG_L ^ VG ^ NG”, the syntax is different. In thing-existentials, the clause-final NG constitutes the existent, whose existence is expressed through the configuration of the three elements as such. In event-existentials, the configuration of “VG ^ NG” expresses the event, whose existence is then asserted through its alignment with the clause-initial NG_L. Apart from existence, event-existentials show the semantic features of eventuality, impersonality, and ergativity. The two types of existentials form a continuum, each occupying a pole and relating to the other through different degrees of thingness/eventuality, i.e., different degrees of prominence of the clause-final NG and the clause-middle VG and of the integration of the two.

Keywords: Existentials; Things; Events; Impersonality; Ergativity

About the term of *existential*

The term *existential* in Chinese is first put forward by Lü (1943). He defines the existential in terms of meaning, which is quite different from what is meant by the term today. Later on, Lü (1946) redefines existentials as clauses expressing the meaning of existence and (dis)appearance. Since the 1950s, the existential as a special syntactic construction has been much discussed, with new insights appearing from time to time. The frequently addressed topics include its definition, scope and classification, the semantic and syntactic features of the three components of the existential, i.e., the locative nominal group (NG_L), the verbal group (VG), and the nominal group (NG) in that order. In recent years, new observations are made with the application of generative linguistics, functional linguistics, and cognitive linguistics to the study of the construction.

This study reviews the discussion on the scope and classification of existentials and proposes the term of *event-existential*, in contrast to *thing-existential*. The former captures a few constructions that are related to the latter; the two types of existentials are alike but different. We will try to bring out the semantic and functional features of event-existentials by drawing on Systemic Functional Grammar.

Lei (1993) holds that both meaning and structure should be taken into consideration when classifying and defining the scope of the existential. On the one hand, not all clauses expressing existence can be taken as existentials^a:

- (1) *Zhuōzi-shàng yǒu yì-běn shū.*
desk-on have one-CLS book
“There is a book on the table.”
- (2) *Zhāng Sān zài bàngōngshì.*
Zhang San at office
“Zhang San is in the office.”

(1) is an existential whereas (2) is not, though they both convey the meaning of existence. On the other hand, some constructions may share some syntactic features with the existential, but they should not be regarded as such:

- (3) *Tái-shàng chàng-zhe xī.*
stage-on sing-PRG opera
“On the stage, people are singing opera.”

Lei (1993) lists three conditions for a clause to be called an existential: 1) Semantically, it asserts the existence of something, that is, there exists something (New) in someplace (Given). 2) Syntactically, it observes the sequence of “NG_L ^ VG ^ NG”. And 3) the VG can be replaced by *yǒu*. Shao *et al.* (2009: 146) consider the existential as a special construction in Modern Chinese and they agree that both semantic and syntactic considerations are necessary in defining the existential. Zhang (2009: 243) recognizes the pragmatic characteristics in addition to the semantic and syntactic ones. That is, the existential typically functions to introduce a new entity into the discourse, which will be elaborated on in the text that follows.

Chen (1957) proposes the term *(dis)appearance existentials*:

- (4) *Xiàozhǎng bàngōngzhuō-shàng chūxiàn-le yì-běn hòu-hòude měilide cidiǎn.*
principal desk-on appear-PEF one-CLS thick-RED beautiful
dictionary “There appeared a beautiful thick dictionary on the principal’s desk.”
- (5) *Gébi diàn-lǐ zǒu-le yì-bāng kè.*
next door shop-in leave-PEF one-CLS customer
“A group of customers left the shop next door.”

Chen (1957) explains that such clauses resemble existentials: they both can be analyzed into the three elements of “NG_L ^ VG ^ NG”. Notionally, appearance and disappearance are the beginning and the end of existence respectively. Therefore, they can be taken as existentials in that they assert the existence of something instead of representing actions or behaviours. Song (2007) distinguishes existential clauses from clauses of (dis)appearance, both of which can be subsumed under the term *cúnxiànjù* (clauses of existence and (dis)appearance).

We think that it is implausible to take clauses of disappearance (e.g., (5)) as a kind of existential, though they share some syntactic features with existentials. For one thing,

disappearance and existence are simply different meanings. The communicative intent of the existential is to assert existence, which is presupposed in clauses of disappearance. To say that existence can be asserted through disappearance is to put the cart before the horse. For another, pragmatically, such clauses are not used to introduce new entities into the discourse, as existentials typically do. A simple examination of the construction (e.g.,*sǐle yīgèrén*. (死了一个人, “a person died in ...”) in the Corpus of Modern Chinese, Centre for Chinese Linguistics, PKU shows that none of the tokens yielded serves the function of introducing new entities into the discourse. This shows that it is questionable to take clauses of disappearance as a subtype of existential.

Another much addressed and controversial issue concerns the distinction between dynamic and static existentials and the so-called pseudo-existentials. Fan (1963) regards such clauses as (3) and *Chuāngwài piāozhe dàxiǔ* (“It’s snowing heavily outside the window.”) as dynamic. She observes that “the verbs in these clauses can be preceded by such progressive markers as *zhèng* or *zài*, to denote ongoing processes”. In the same vein, Song (2007: 16) defines dynamic and static existentials according to whether the verb in the clause expresses a state, an action, or an ongoing process. But the notion of dynamic existentials is controversial. Fan (1963), Zhang (1982), Li (1986), and Dai (1988) think that (3) is a dynamic existential; whereas Zhu (1980) and Lei (1993) object to including such clauses into existentials merely on the grounds of syntactic similarities; without taking semantics into consideration. Song (1988, 2007) shows how (6) and (7) are different:

- | | | | |
|-----|--|----------------|---------------------|
| (6) | <i>Táishàng</i> | <i>zuò-zhe</i> | <i>zhǔxítuán</i> . |
| | Stage-on | sit-PRG | presiding committee |
| | “There is the presiding committee sitting on the stage.” | | |
| | | | |
| (7) | <i>Wàimiàn</i> | <i>pǎo-zhe</i> | <i>qìchē</i> . |
| | outside | run-PRG | car |
| | “There are cars running outside.” | | |

According to Song, the VGs in (6) (*zuòzhe*) and (7) (*pǎozhe*) denote a state and a dynamic action, thus rendering the existentials static and dynamic respectively. He further explicates that (6) and (7) are different from (3); the former belong to existentials while the latter does not. Lu (1997: 24–26) shows how (3) and (6) are different in structure and in semantics through transformational analysis and he attributes the differences to the semantic structure of the verb. Thus, it is realized that, though (3) is syntactically similar to the existential, it is not an existential. Song (1988) coins the term *pseudo-existential* to refer to it. But this term just shows that they are not real existentials; it does not tell us the defining characteristics (either semantic or syntactic) of the clause, neither does it explicate how it is related to the existential.

Another type of related clause is the one with the possessor as subject and the possessed as object (PSPO clause) (Guo 1990), as exemplified by:

- | | | | |
|-----|----------------------------|--------------|----------------|
| (8) | <i>Wáng Miǎn</i> | <i>sǐ-le</i> | <i>fùqīn</i> . |
| | Wang Mian | die-PEF | father |
| | “Wang Mian’s father died.” | | |

Li (1987) has noticed the similarities between (8) and the existential. After a diachronic survey, Shi (2007) comes to the conclusion that (8) derives from the existential,

to which it still belongs. Lin (2008: 76) observes that *Wáng Miǎn* in (8) is the locative subject, rather than experiencer of the event. Therefore it is not essentially different from the existential. Li (2009) puts forward the term *occurrence clause* to cover both clauses of (dis)appearance and PSPO clauses. It means that “some event occurs in some place”. Ren (2009) probes into the similarities between the semantic categories of “possession” and “existence and appearance” and the relatedness between existentials and such clauses as (8) by drawing on the theory of construction grammar. Zhang (2012) posits that clauses such as (8) and existentials exhibit a kind of isomerism as a result of the semantic extension of the verbs in question. They share common features in word order, in the argument structure of the verb, and in semantics. These are believed to be semantically and functionally motivated. But the relatedness of the two constructions and the motivations behind need be further investigated.

In the literature, a commonly held opinion is that the verb in the existential can be replaced by the typical existential verb *yǒu* (Fan 1963, Lei 1993, Song 2007: 99–100). But when this happens, the meaning may be radically changed, though the resulting clause remains grammatically acceptable. Compare (9) and (10):

- (9) *Chuán-lǐ diǎn-zhe yì-zhǎn yóudēng.*
boat-in light-PRG one-CLS oil lamp
“There is an oil lamp on in the boat.”
- (10) *Chuán-lǐ yǒu yì-zhǎn yóudēng.*
boat-in have one-CLS oil lamp
“There is an oil lamp in the boat.”

Though the existence of the oil lamp is expressed in both (9) and (10), it is asserted in the latter and entailed or even presupposed in the former. (9) asserts the oil lamp’s state of being lighted. This is more evident in (11):

- (11) *Tā é’tóu-shàng gǔndòng-zhe yì-kē-kē hànzhū.*
He forehead-on roll-PRG one-CLS-RED bead of sweat
“Beads of sweat are rolling down his forehead.”

(11) asserts the rolling of beads of sweat, rather than the existence of them.

With regard to such controversies and problems in the literature, we put forward the term *event-existential*. In what follows, we will discuss the scope of event existentials, their functional/semantic features, and the continuous relationship between thing- and event- existentials.

The scope of event-existentials

Lyons (1977: 442–445) distinguishes three types of entities: first-order, second-order, and third-order entities. Generally speaking, first-order entities are physical objects such as animals, people, plants, artifacts, e.g., *dog*, *woman*, *tulip*, and *car*. The ontological statuses of these entities are relatively stable from a perceptual point of view. They exist in three-dimensional space, at any point in time, and they are publicly observable. Second-order entities are events, processes/activities, and states; they are what are referred to as “states of affairs”. These entities are located in time and are said to occur/take place. Third-order entities are abstract; they are outside both space and time. These include facts, concepts, ideas, possibilities, and propositions (Lyons 1977: 442ff, Vendler 1967/2002: 242, 244, 246, Dik 1997: 136).

We adopt the term *events* from Vendler (1997/2002) and Peterson (1997: 7, 81) to refer to *second-order entities* in Lyons' terms and *states of affairs* in Dik's (1997) terms. This is a cover term including actions, activities, situations, conditions, processes, etc., which can be predicated by such verbs as *occur*, *last*, *begin*, *end*, *cause*, etc. (Peterson 1997: 92).

In Chinese, existentials not only assert the existence of things, but also that of events. However, it is taken for granted that they are only to express the existence of things. On the other hand, there are those clause patterns that are formally similar to the existential, but the existents in them are not things but events. The so-called pseudo-existentials (e.g., (3)) are cases in point.

There are three authors who have discussed event-existentials, though the terms they employ are different. Lin (2008: 74–76) finds that the following two clauses are different:

- (12) *Qíáng-shàng yǒu yì-fú huà.*
wall-on have one-CLS picture
“There is a picture on the wall.”
- (13) *Zhāng Sān jiā fāshēng-le yì-qǐ móushā 'àn.*
Zhang San's house occur-PEF one-CLS murder
“A murder occurred in Zhang San's house.”

(12) is an existential clause, whereas (13) is an occurrence clause, which expresses the occurrence of an event. According to Lin, *yǒu* and *fāshēng* are both light verbs and they both take locative nominals as subjects. In existentials, the locative element denotes the place where something exists. But in occurrence clause, it does not necessarily refer to the setting where the event in question occurs, e.g.:

- (14) *Wǒmen cūnzǐ-lǐ chén-le liǎng-sōu chuán.*
we village-in sink- PEF two-CLS boat
“Two boats from our village sank.”

Lin (2008: 76) notes that the above example expresses that the event of the sinking of two boats occurred and that *wǒmen cūnzǐlǐ* (“our village”) is not the place where the sinking occurred; it denotes the entity affected by the event. He (Lin 2008: 76) thinks that (8) is a clause of occurrence, with *Wáng Miǎn* as the locative subject. But Lin (2008) is an exclusive study of the locative subject in Chinese. He only mentions occurrence clauses in passing.

Li (2009) throws doubt on plausibility of clauses of disappearance as a sub-type of existentials, for she finds they seldom occur in actual texts. Even with those few examples, it can hardly be said that they express the disappearance of something:

- (15) *Dì-shàng suì-le yí-gè wǎn.*
ground-on smash- PEF one-CLS bowl
“A bowl was smashed on the ground.”
- (16) *Lù-biān fān-le yí-liàng chē.*
road-side overturn-PEF one-CLS car
“A car was overturned on the roadside.”

Li's (2009) investigation shows that such clauses are not employed to convey the meaning of “there (dis)appears something in someplace”, but to assert the occurrence

of certain events. Occurrence includes the meaning of (dis)appearance, but it is not restricted to it. Li suggests the term *clause of occurrence* in contrast to clause of existence. The former includes such clauses as (3) and (8), and parts of traditional existentials. However, she does not formally define the term, neither does she explicate its domain or how it is related to traditional existentials. What's more, though the term occurrence caters for the meaning of "VG ^ NG", it does not take into consideration the whole construction (see (22)). We hold that different configurations convey different meanings, and that the clause initial NG_L is obligatory for the whole clause to be called an event-existential.

In English, there is not such a distinction between thing- and event- existentials; the same construction (i.e., *there*-existential) can be used to assert the existence of both types of entities (Halliday 2004: 256):

- (17) In the caves around the base of Ayers Rock, there are *aboriginal paintings that tell the legends of this*
- (18) In Bihar, *there was no comparable political campaign.*
- (19) *There was confusion, shouting and breaking of chairs.*

Of the above three examples, (17) expresses the existence of things (i.e., *aboriginal paintings that tell the legends of this ancient people*), and (18) and (19) that of events (i.e., *comparable political campaign* and *confusion, shouting and breaking of chairs* respectively). Halliday (2004: 258) writes: "In principle, there can 'exist' any kind of phenomenon that can be construed as a 'thing': person, object, institution, abstraction, but also any action and event..." In English actions and events can be nominalized as things. But this is not available in Chinese, where existence of second-order entities has to be conveyed through processes. Compare:

- (20) *Wū-lǐ zài kāihuì.*
room-in at have meeting
"There is a meeting going on in the room."
- (21) There is a meeting going on in the room.

Event-existentials resemble thing-existentials in having the following syntactic configuration:

- (22) locative nominal group (NG_L) ^ verb group (VG) ^ nominal group (NG)

Semantically, the former expresses occurrence of events or existence of states. The prototypical process for thing-existentials is *yǒu* and that for event-existentials is *fāshēng* (Tao 2001: 151). The probe for thing-existentials is: *What is there* (in NG_L)? That for event-existentials is: *What is happening there* (in NG_L)?

The examples discussed above, including (5), (8), (9), (13), (14), (15), (16), and (20), are all event-existentials. Some of them are considered thing-existentials, others PSPO clauses, still others dynamic existentials or clauses of (dis)appearance in previous studies. We will show how each of them fit into event-existentials.

We begin with so-called pseudo-existentials. These are exemplified by (3) and (20). Since they look like thing-existentials (both share the structure of (22)), they are often treated as such (Song 2007: 98). But they are not. Fan (1963) brings out their difference

through *yǒu* replacement (cf. Zhu 1980: 64, Lu 1997: 24–26), which can be applied to thing-existentials:

- (23a) *Chuáng-shàng tǎng-zhe yí-gè rén.*
bed-on lie-PRG one-CLS person
“There is a person lying in the bed.”
- (23b) *Chuáng-shàng yǒu yí-gè rén.*
bed-on have one-CLS person
“There is a person in the bed.”
- (23c) *(Yǒu) yí-gè rén zài chuáng-shàng tǎng-zhe.*
have one-CLS person at bed-on lie-PRG
“There is a person lying in the bed.”

But this cannot be applied to event-existentials, e.g.,

- (3a) *Tái-shàng chàng-zhe xī.*
(3b) **Tái-shàng yǒu xī.*
(3c) **(Yǒu) xī zài táishàng chàng-zhe.*

The *yǒu*-replacement test is valid in showing that clauses such as (3) are not real existentials. Along this line of analysis, we cannot help but ask: What are pseudo-existentials, if they are not genuine existentials (i.e., thing-existentials)? How do we explain the differences between them? The concept of event-existentials can help answer these questions. The existentials in event-existentials are not things, but events. (3) is not to assert the existence of *xī*, but the happening of the performance or the singing of it. Both types of existentials express existence by virtue of the configuration of the initial NG_L and the two following elements, though the latter are different in meaning (see the next section).

Second, PSPO clauses are also event-existentials. Apart from (8) and (14), (24) is another example.

- (24) *Xiào Zhǎng lái-le kèrén.*
Xiao Zhang come-PEF guest
“Some guest came to visit Xiao Zhang.”

As we reviewed in the preceding section, some scholars notice that such clauses are related to existentials; they even believe that they belong to existentials. However, it is evident that (8), (14), and (24) are not to assert the existence of *fùqīn*, *liǎngsōu chuán*, and *kèrén*. Rather they express the meanings that the events of “father died”, “two boats sank”, and “guest came to visit” occur to *Wáng Miǎn*, *cūnzi*, and *Xiào Zhǎng* respectively. On the other hand, *Wáng Miǎn* and *fùqīn*, *cūnzi* and *liǎngsōu chuán*, and *Xiào Zhǎng* and *kèrén* stand in a relationship of possessor and possessed respectively. Cross-linguistically, possession is not inherently different from location. To be specific, possessors are locative. They may take such case forms as locative, adessive, or prepositions and locative words; these are locative in nature (Lyons 1967, Clark 1978: 118, Freeze 1992, Zeitoun et al. 1999, Baron & Herslund 2001, Abdoulaye 2006, Peeters et al. 2006, Wang and Zhou 2012, Wang and Xu 2013). This explains the relatedness of existentials and PSPO clauses:

In both constructions, the clause-initial NG is locative, and they both express existence, with the existent being things in the former, and events in the latter.

Similarly, clauses of disappearance (e.g., (5)) are event-existentials, for the simple reason that they express existence/occurrence of events rather than things. Finally, it should be pointed out that, as the above discussion suggests, thing existentials do not constitute a homogeneous category. Those existentials whose processes are realized by verbal groups other than *yǒu* denote the occurrence/existence of event to some extent. Thing-existentials and event-existentials form a continuum. This is what we will elaborate on in the following two sections.

Functional analysis of event-existentials

As we have shown, thing- and event- existentials share the structure of (22), and they both express existential meaning by virtue of the configuration of the clause-initial NG_L and the following VG and NG. Their major semantic difference lies with the existent. In thing-existentials, the existent is realized by the clause final NG. But the realization of the event meaning needs some explication.

As we have shown above, (5), (8), and (20) are not to assert the existence of *kèrén*, *fùqīn*, and *huì* respectively. These realize the event meaning *zǒule kèrén* (“guest left”), *sǐle fùqīn* (“father died”), and *kāihuì* (“have a meeting”) when configured with the VGs in question. This is even more explicit in (20), where *huì* is not a thing by nature. Its function is to realize the event meaning of “have a meeting” when combined with the verb *kāi*. The event functions as the existent in event-existentials.

The nucleus of an event is the process realized by the VG. It is indispensable to the event. This explains why the VG in event-existentials can neither be omitted nor replaced by *yǒu* (see section “The scope of event-existentials”) ^b. Furthermore, in some cases the clause-middle VG and clause-final NG are so closely integrated that they cannot be separated from one another and form one word in the language, e.g., *chàngxi* in (3) and *kāihuì* in (20).

Tables 1 and 2 show the differences between the two types of existentials.

As is shown in Table 1, thing-existentials can be analyzed into three semantic elements: Location ^ Process ^ Existent. They are realized by NG_L, VG, and NG (denoting the thing) respectively. With event-existentials, the analysis is of two levels as is shown in Table 2. At the first level, the clause is a configuration of “Location ^ Existent”, realized by the NG_L and the Event in that order. At the second level, the Event is further analyzed into “Process ^ Range” by virtue of the fact *chàngzhe* and *xì* are highly integrated and the latter is not so much a participant of the process as a refinement and specification of it (Halliday 2004: 295) ^c. That is to say, the Process and the Range do not play any direct role in the whole clause; they function by constituting the Event. The latter configures with the Location in the clause (cf. Yutaka 2001).

To express the existence of an event in a location, two semantic elements must be present: an event and a location. The former is expressed by “VG ^ NG”, and the latter NG_L. The configuration of “NG_L ^ Event” expresses the meaning of “there exists/occurs

Table 1 Structural analysis of thing-existentials: Example (12)

<i>Qióngshàng</i>	<i>yǒu</i>	<i>yí fú huà</i>
Location: NG _L	Process: VG	Existent: NG (Thing)

Table 2 Structural analysis of event-existentials: Example (3)

<i>Táishàng</i>	<i>chàngzhe</i>	<i>xì</i>
Location: NG _L	Process: VG Existent: Event	Range: NG

some event in some place”. In this light, event-existentials are genuine existentials rather than pseudo ones.

Another semantic feature of event-existentials is impersonality. This feature distinguishes event-existentials as a type of uncanonical clause from canonical ones. The latter is exemplified by:

- (25) *Zhāng Sān* *zài* *tái-shàng* *chàng xì*.
 Zhang San at stage-on sing opera
 “Zhang San is singing opera on the stage.”

In canonical clauses, the actor occupies the clause-initial position and it functions as the subject as in (25). In event-existentials, the actor is deleted or demoted to some less salient positions than the subject (Yamamoto 2006, Afonso 2008, Siewierska 2008). For example, in (3) and (8), the Actor (i.e., the singer) and the Behaver (i.e., *fùqīn*) are omitted and demoted to the end of the clause respectively. As a result, they take on an impersonal feature. In terms of transitivity, only one participant is allowed in event existentials. If the process is transitive, the actor is omitted and the only participant is the Range as in (3). If the process is intransitive, the only participant (e.g., Behaver in (8)) is demoted to the clause-final position.

There are also such event-existentials where there is not any direct participant; the process alone realizes the event as in (20), in which *kāihuì* (“have a meeting”) is a VG realizing the process. This analysis can also be applied to (3), for *chàngxì* (“sing opera”) can be taken as a VG realizing the process. This proves our point that the VG and the NG in event-existential are highly integrated such that they form a verbal group. Event-existentials are different from canonical clauses. They are not so concerned with the transitive relationship between participants as with occurrence and existence of states of affairs. The message they convey is not *who does what to whom* but *what happened* (Davidse 1992, 1998; Halliday 2004: 284–285). The syntactic choice and configuration help impersonalize the event, which seems to happen by itself, without being instigated by any agent. Thus impersonalization and the meaning of existence and occurrence are in tune with each other.

The discussion so far points to the third semantic feature of event-existentials, i.e., ergativity (cf. Wu 2006: 129–131). According to Halliday (1968: 182), transitivity and ergativity are two complementary systems suited to construing different aspects of meaning (cf. Lü 1987, Dixon 1994, Davidse 1998). Different languages may prefer the one over the other. Accordingly transitivity analysis and ergativity analysis are to be employed to bring out the respective semantic resources behind (Davidse 1992: 132, 1998). When we apply transitivity analysis to (25) and ergativity analysis to (3), we have Tables 3 and 4.

Transitivity analysis fits well with (25), which contains both the obligatory elements of a behavioral clause and which constitutes an answer to the probe: *What is Zhang San doing on the stage?*. If we analyze (3) in terms of transitivity, the result will be

Table 3 Transitivity analysis: Example (25)

<i>Zhāng Sān</i>	<i>zài táishàng</i>	<i>chàngxì</i>
Behaver	Circumstance	Process: Behaviour

clumsy, for the obligatory element of the Behaver is absent. Therefore it cannot be taken as an appropriate answer to the probe. On the other hand, ergativity analysis of (3) makes explicit its communicative intent. It caters to the probe: *What is happening on the stage?* (Davidse 1992, 1998; Dixon 1994: 214–215).

Halliday (2004: 284–285) notes that

“Happening” means that the actualization of the process is represented as being self-engendered, whereas ‘doing’ means that the actualization of the process is represented as being caused by a participant that is external to the combination of Process + Medium. This external cause is the Agent.

In the transitivity model, the nucleus is “Agent ^ Process”; the process may or may not extend to another participant, that is, the Goal, so that there are transitive and intransitive clauses. In the ergativity model, “Process ^ Medium” forms the nucleus (Halliday 1994: 163). Ergativity interpretation of event-existentials spells out the functional configuration of different elements within it, so that the event is represented as happening by itself.

As has been clarified, the only direct participant of the process in event-existentials is either the actor (if the process is intransitive), or the goal (if the process is transitive), or other roles depending on the type of process involved. These are all called Medium in ergative analysis; they are entities through the medium of which the process comes into existence (Halliday 1994: 163). Thus, (5) can be analyzed as Table 5.

Yībāng kè is the Medium through which the event of leaving takes place. The Medium is the only essential elements for the process to be able to take place. Thus, *yìběn hòuhòude měilide cídiǎn* in (4), *yībāng kè* in (5), *zhǔxítuán* in (6), *qìchē* in (7), *fùqīn* in (8), *yìzhǎn yóudēng* in (9), *yìkēkē hànzū* in (11), *liǎngsōu chuán* in (14), *yíge wǎn* in (15), *yíliàng chē* in (16) and *kèrén* in (24) are all Mediums.

The other participant involved in event-existentials is Range. This is the participant role that specifies the range or scope of the process (Halliday 1994: 146). The Range in event-existentials is not an entity; it defines the process (ibid.). For example, in *kāihuì* in (20), *huì* (“meeting”) is the Range. This is not an entity; there is no such thing as meeting other than the acting of having (*kāi*) it. The process and the range are integrated (and are realized by one lexical item), they collectively express the same event. Thus Halliday calls it “process Range” (cf. Halliday 1994: 146–147). We propose the analysis of “Process/Range” (i.e., the Process conflates with the Range) if they are realized as one lexical item and are unanalyzable. Examples (3) and (20) are cases in point. Table 6 is the analysis of (3).

Table 4 Ergativity analysis: Example (3)

<i>Táishàng</i>	<i>chàngzhe</i>	<i>xì</i>
Location	Process	Range

Table 5 Ergativity analysis: Medium

<i>Gébi diǎnlǐ</i>	<i>zǒule</i>	<i>yībāng kè</i>
Location	Process	Medium

For those examples where the Range is more elaborated and is realized as a separated lexical item, the analysis of “Process ^ Range” will be more appropriate. This applies with Examples (13) (Table 7).

The NG_L in event-existentials, can be analyzed as Setting Subjects (Langacker 1991: 345–348): they are pseudo-participants with a functional affinity to circumstances. Experientially, it denotes the Location; its function is to locate the event denoted by “Process ^ Medium/Range”, with regard to some location expressed by itself.

According to Halliday (2004: 287), “in a more abstract sense, every process is structured in the same way, on the basis of just one variable. This variable relates to the source of the process: what it is that brings it about. The question at issue is: Is the process brought about from within, or from outside?” With respect to this variable, he recognizes two types of clause in terms of ergativity, i.e., ergative and non-ergative clauses. In the former the source is explicated, while in the latter it is not (cf. Davidse 1998: 102–105). Thus, non-ergative clauses are employed to express happenings, especially when the cause is not clear. Event-existentials are non-ergatives; the cause of the event (i.e., agent/instigator) is suppressed, so that what is presented is the happening, rather than what causes it to happen. This explains why there is only one direct participant in event-existentials, or even there is no participant at all: Only the process or process and medium/range are present for expressing the event. The whole clause communicates the existence of the event through the configuration of “Location ^ Event”.

Continuous relationship between the two types of existentials

The term event-existential is proposed in contrast to that of thing-existential. This does not mean that the two types of existentials are discrete categories with a clear-cut borderline between them. Rather, they form a continuum, each occupying a pole. Within each category, the members are not homogeneous. They contain different sub-categories, showing different degrees of eventuality and thingness. For example, there are static and dynamic existentials within thing-existentials. Song (2007: 59) finds it hard to decide whether such clauses as the following should be subsumed under the one or the other without being arbitrary:

- (26) *Dēngjìzhàn ménkǒu pái-zhe cháng-chángde duì.*
Register station doorway queue-PRG long-RED line
“There is a long queue at the doorway of the register station.”

This heterogeneous feature also holds true for event-existentials, which, as we have discussed, comprise different subtypes, i.e., pseudo-existentials, clauses of (dis)appearance, PSPO clauses. They fade into the other pole towards thing-existentials. The continuous

Table 6 Process conflating with Range: Example (3)

<i>Táishàng</i>	<i>chàngzhèxi</i>
Location	Process/Range

Table 7 Analyzable Process and Range: Exmaple (13)

<i>Zhāng Sānjiā</i>	<i>fāshēngle</i>	<i>yìqǐ móushā'àn</i>
Location	Process	Range

relationship between the two types of existentials is evidenced in the following clause, which can be read as either (see the following discussion):

- (27) *Shān-shàng jià-zhe pào.*
Mountain-on mount-PRG cannon
“There are cannons mounted on the mountain.”/“Cannons are being mounted on the mountain.”

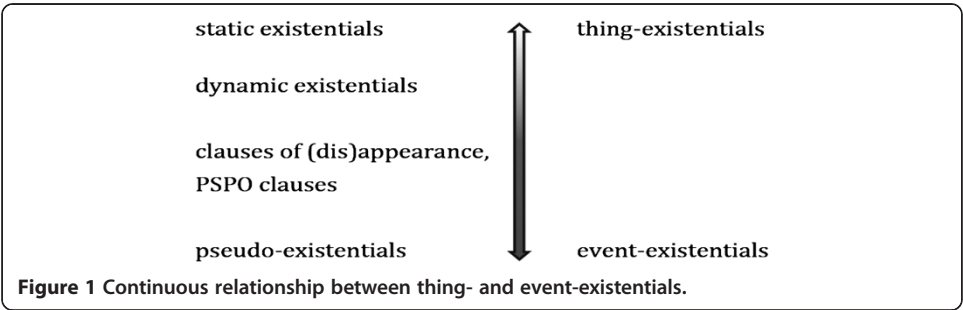
In the remainder of this section, we will elaborate on the continuous relationship by locating different types of thing- and event-existentials along the continuum. At the pole of thing-existentials are static existentials, which gradually give way to dynamic existentials, clauses of (dis)appearance, and PSPO clauses, until reaching the other pole, that of event-existentials, typically represented by pseudo-existentials (Figure 1).

This continuum can be seen as diminuendo-crescendo from thingness to eventuality or vice versa, depending on from which end one starts. Typical thing-existentials exclusively express the existence of things. The clause-middle process is realized by the verbs *yǒu* and *shì* (e.g., (10)). These are light verbs (Huang 1998, Lin 2008: 74–76). They are non-salient and usually do not take aspect or tense markers; their main function is to link the location to the existent. The clause final NG, which realizes the existent, is comparatively salient. It often takes numerals and classifiers as premodifiers. Shen (1995) calls such NGs bounded (cf. Yutaka 2001). This sub-type of existentials carries the strongest thingness.

There are other static existentials whose processes are realized by VGs other than *yǒu* and *shì*, e.g.,

- (28) *Qíáng-shàng guà-zhe yì-fú huà.*
wall-on hang-PRG one-CLS picture
“There is a picture hanging on the wall.”

Apart from expressing existence, such existentials also indicate the means of existence (e.g., *guàzhe* in (28)). The VG takes such aspect markers as *zhe* and *le*. The whole clause takes on some eventuality.



Eventuality increases in dynamic existentials, in which the existential meaning fades into presupposition, and dynamicity rises into assertion.

- (29) *Qiūfēng-zhōng yáoyè-zhe duǒ-duǒ yějú.*
autumn wind-in sway-PRG CLS-RED wild chrysanthemums
“There are chrysanthemum blossoms swaying in the autumn wind.”

Example (29) expresses not so much that “there are wild chrysanthemum blossoms in the autumn wind” as that “chrysanthemum blossoms are swaying in the autumn wind”. The process is obviously dynamic. It does not only take the aspect markers *-zhe* and *-le*, but also can be premodified by *zhèng* and *zhèngzài*^d. On the other hand, the clause-final NG often does not take numerals and classifiers as premodifiers. All these show that, compared with static existentials, dynamic existentials are losing thingness and gaining eventuality (Song 2007: 49–57)^e.

Eventuality is even more evident in clauses of (dis)appearance (e.g., (4) and (5)). As the term *(dis)appearance* suggests, its primary experiential function is not to assert existence, but (dis)appearance, though the former might be its presupposition or entailment^f. (Dis)appearance is eventual by nature. The VG often takes the perfective marker *-le*. This shows the strong bounded nature of the process, and the prominence of the event denoted by the process (Shen 1995, 2004). This also holds for PSPO clauses. In general, it can be said clauses of (dis)appearance and PSPO clauses exhibit stronger eventuality and weaker thingness than dynamic existentials.

Eventuality is the strongest and thingness is the weakest in pseudo-existentials (e.g., (3) and (20)). The VG and the NG are closely integrated with each other, and they collectively express events instead of things. As is with dynamic existentials, the VG is highly dynamic and prominent in that it can be premodified by *zhèng* and *zhèngzài* and it takes the perfective marker *-zhe*. Correspondingly, the clause-final NG is unbounded and non-salient in that it does not take numerals and classifiers as premodifiers (Wu 2006: 89). Here, as in all other cases, the diminuendo-crescendo of the two kinds of prominence is in perfect trading-off and cooperation.

As we have suggested above, the continuous relationship between the two types of existentials also finds expression in the degree of integration between the clause-middle VG and the clause-final NG. In *yǒu/shì*-existentials, the verb is semantically non-salient; it only functions to link the clause-initial NG_L and the clause-final NG. But the link is loose in that lengthy premodifiers can be inserted before the NG (Song 2007: 12, 79). It is only true with such existentials that the clause-middle *yǒu/shì* can be omitted, without radically changing the meaning. In other static and dynamic existentials, the VG and the NG are more closely integrated. In many cases, the NG is a bare noun so that the VG and NG are juxtaposed next to each other, without any element in between. Compared with static existentials, dynamic ones have a more integrated configuration of “VG ^ NG”. And it is less likely for there to be any insertion (Song 2007: 71).

In pseudo-existentials, the two are mostly closely integrated so much so that they sometimes form a single word or an idiomatic expression as in (3) and (20). This is the only subtype that does not allow any insertion of numeral and classifier between the VG and the NG in order for the clause to be grammatical (Fan 1963: 395, Wu 2006: 89):

- (30a) *Shuǐlóngtóu-lǐ dī-zhe shuǐ.*
water tap-in drip-PRG water
“There is water dripping from the water tap.”
- (30b) **Shuǐlóngtóu-lǐ dī-zhe yìxiē shuǐ.*
water tap-in drip-PRG some water
“There is some water dripping from the water tap.”
- (31a) *Wàimiàn xià-zhe yǔ.*
outside fall-PRG rain
“It is raining outside.”
- (31b) **Wàimiàn xià-zhe yì-chǎng yǔ.*
outside fall-PRG one-CLS rain
“A rainfall is raining outside.”

Shen (1995) also notes that the NG disallows any numeral-classifier as premodifier. He takes (27) as representing a dynamic activity, i.e., the action of mounting cannons is taking place on the mountain, rather than the static existence of some cannons on the mountain. *Pào* is the Range of the Process *jià*. Thus (27b) is ungrammatical.

- (27b) **Shān-shàng jià-zhe liǎng-mén pào.*
mountain-on mount two-CLS cannon
“Two cannons are being mounted on the mountain.”

On the other hand, if the NG takes numeral-classifier as premodifier, the NG will become bounded and much more prominent. Thus, the link between the VG and the NG becomes relatively loose and thingness will increase, as shown in the following two examples:

- (32a) *Shōuyīnjī-lǐ bōfàng-zhe gēxīng yīnyuè.*
radio-in broadcast-PRG singer music
“On the radio, some singer’s music is being played.”
- (32b) *Shōuyīnjī-lǐ bōfàng-zhe yí-duàn fēicháng liúxíngde gēxīng yīnyuè.*
radio-in broadcast-PRG one-CLS very popular singer music
“There is a piece of music by a very popular singer being played on the radio.”

Wu (2006: 45) notes that the VG and the NG in pseudo-existentials form integrated words or word groups, while those in dynamic existentials stand in a verb-object relationship to one another. In functional linguistic terms, the former are “Process ^ Range”, while the latter are “Process ^ Medium”. The former constitutes a closer integration, both serving the function of expressing the process (Halliday 1994: 146).

In general, the continuous relationship between the two types of existentials lies in the trading-off between thingness and eventuality. The prominence of the one means the obscurity of the others, and vice versa. The prominence and obscurity are the fullest at the two poles.

Conclusion

The existential in Chinese is a much-addressed topic because of its particular syntactic and semantic features. Since the 1950s many achievements have been made in the definition, scope clarification, and classification of this construction. There are new insights appearing from time to time. These include the distinction between dynamic and static, genuine and pseudo-existentials, and the metaphorical extension on typical existentials. But there also exist some problems. For example, in discussing the semantics, previous literature does not distinguish the cases where existence is the asserted meaning from those where it is the presupposition or the entailment. A clause should not be taken as an existential because it presupposes the existence of some entity, for such a presupposition is present in most clauses other than those where existence is asserted. Another often-ignored distinction is that the existent in the existential may be either a thing or an event.

In order to account for a group of clause patterns which are closely related to the existential, but which are not its typical members, we put forward a new term, event-existential, in contrast to thing-existential. The former includes the so-called pseudo-existentials, PSPO clauses, dynamic existentials, and (dis)appearance existentials. They all express existence of events, rather than things. The two types of existentials share the structure of “ $NG_L \wedge VG \wedge NG$ ”, though the semantic configurations are different: In event-existentials, the VG and NG express the event, whose existence is expressed through its configuration with the clause-initial NG_L . Therefore, event-existentials show the semantic features of existentiality and eventuality.

There is only one direct participant in event-existentials; this is either the actor if the process is intransitive or the goal or range if the process is transitive. With the instigator of the event omitted or demoted to the end of the clause, the subject function is left to the NG_L . This renders the clause impersonal.

Another feature of event-existentials is ergativity. Functionally they can be analyzed into “ $Location \wedge Process \wedge Medium/Range$ ”. This fits well with the ergative pattern.

These four semantic features are coordinated and unified within the same clause. It expresses the existence of events (not things), rather than the transitive relation of *who does what to whom*. Finally, there is not a clear-cut borderline between the two types of existentials. Rather, they form a continuum. The continuity finds expression in the diminuendo-crescendo of thingness or eventuality, the prominence of the process or the clause-final medium/range, and the degree to which the two are integrated.

Endnotes

^aList of abbreviations: CLS = classifier, PEF = perfective, PRG = progressive, RED = Reduplication.

^bIf we change (8) into *WángMiǎn yǒu fùqīn*. (“Wang Mian has a father.”), by replacing *sīle* with *yǒu*, the meaning of (8) will be drastically changed, with presupposed meaning being brought to the forefront and becoming the asserted meaning.

^cApart from Range, there is another function that the NG may realize, i.e., Medium. (See the following discussion.)

^dAccording to Chen (1999), scope of *-zhe* and *zài* are different, though they both express progressive aspect. *-Zhe* is restricted to the verb itself; it indicates a homogeneous, continuous and repetitive situation. Whereas the progressive meaning of *zài*

exerts over the entire VG; it expresses an ongoing activity and it is highly dynamic (cf. Fan 2007: 91).

^eAccording to Song (2007: 71), most of the NGs in static existentials usually take numeral-classifier premodifiers; but the majority of the NGs (65%) in dynamic existentials do not take such premodifiers.

^fThe existential meaning is the entailed meaning of clauses of appearance. For example, (4) entails the existence of *yìběn hòuhòude měilide cídiǎn*. It is the presupposed meaning of clauses of disappearance. For example, (5) presupposes the existence of *yìbāng kè*. (See Note b.)

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contribution

YW is responsible for most of the ideas in the research, including the term of *event-existential*, its scope, and the semantic and functional features. YZ collected and suggested most of the examples, proposed the continuous relation between the two kinds of existentials. Both authors participated in drafting the manuscript and both read and approved the final manuscript.

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