

# An Analysis of the Sentence Pattern of Preverbal Object in Ancient Chinese

## Taking Interrogative Sentence as an Example

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**Abstract**—In the pre-Qin Dynasty, object preposition is a common syntactic phenomenon in Chinese word order, such as “for you alone to take the responsibilities”, “what do you mean”, and “is there anything wrong”. The paper focuses on the analysis of the object preposition in the sentence pattern of “What is X of V?” in Chinese about the property of “X”, syntactic characteristics of this sentence pattern and its historical evolution.

**Keywords**—object preposition; the sentence pattern of “What is X of V?” in Chinese

### I. INTRODUCTION

The ancient and modern Chinese word order generally puts subject at front and predicate in the rear; verb at front and object in the rear. In pre-Qin Chinese word order, there is a common syntactic phenomenon: object preposition, such as “for you alone to take the responsibilities”, “what do you mean” and “is there anything wrong”. The paper focuses on the analysis of the object preposition in the sentence pattern of “何 X 之 V” (What is X of V? in Chinese). This sentence pattern mainly appears in interrogative sentence. It is a rhetorical question idiom in the pre-Qin period.

### II. WORDS AND PHRASES THAT COULD ACT AS “X”

#### A. X Is A Substantive.

(1) The State of Jin regards us as an adjacent county rather than a country. How come we are not angry about that? (*Zuo Zhuan ·Zhao 19*)

(2) The State of Shu has given me favor. How dare I ally with you? (*Zuo Zhuan ·Zhao 7*)

(3) The King said: “I’m sure to abolish it. Why should I ally with the State of Qi?” (*Zuo Zhuan ·Zhao 13*)

(4) He replied: “just like a child couldn’t find his mother in the half way. How can there be regulation?” (*Book of Rites ·Za Ji*)

(5) What kind of method do you use? (*Chuang-tzu ·Shan Mu*)

In the above examples, “X” is acted as common noun, such as, “country”, “method”, and noun phrase like “regulation”, as well as proper noun “the State of Shu” and “the State of Qi”. It is very common for “X” to serve as noun.

In addition, “X” is a personal pronoun in example (1).

(6) Qing Zheng said: “you bite the hands that feed you. You abolished Jibu and didn’t need my help. Why do you want me to carry you?” (*Guo Yu ·Jin Yu III*)

#### B. X Is A Predicative.

(7) He replied: “as the residence of a gentleman, how can it be so shabby?” (*Analects of Confucius ·Zi Han*)

(8) Could we give up the bad man? (*Lao-tzu*)

(9) We should first betray the State of Jin and send the hostages if there is risk. Isn’t it too late? (*Zuo Zhuan ·Ding 8*)

(10) The feudal princes said they didn’t hear it. They are aimed to escape from the command. How should we forgive them? (*Zuo Zhuan ·Zhao 13*)

(11) If we could still discuss state affairs with the heartless, will a state perish and die easily? (*Mencius ·Li Lou I*)

In the above examples, “X” is acted as adjective, such as, “shabby” and “late”, verb, such as “give up” and “forgive”, and verb phrase, such as, “perish and die”.

In the course of the investigation, the author also found that “X” is mostly a single syllable. Verb is basically a single syllable. In addition, there are 3 examples of interrogative pronouns that is not “何”.

(12) What is good? It is that is beneficial and unharmful to the interests of common people in all aspects. (*Guo Yu ·Chu Yu I*)

(13) If the dragon is awake, you must be eaten. (*Chuang-tzu ·Lie Yukou*)

(14) If a king has no loyal official, the country will perish. (*Han Feizi ·Yangquan*)

### III. THE SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF THE SENTENCE PATTERN OF “WHAT IS X OF V?” IN CHINESE

First, mostly “何 X 之 V” is act as the rear clause of a compound sentence in rhetorical question, such as:

(15) So, there is something that you are not right. What’s wrong with these soldiers? (*Lvshi ChunQiu ·Gui Zhi*)

(16) From of old until in now, customs are different. Which period shall we learn from? (*Strategies of Warring States ·Zhao Er*)

Secondly, within the scope of the study, “何 X 之 有” accounts the largest proportion in the pattern of “何 X 之 V”, and followed by “何 X 之 为”. Except for in “何 X 之 有” and “何 X 之 为”, “X” is a substantive.

Thirdly, except for the verb “有”, it can add auxiliary verbs or adverbs before other verbs, such as, “敢”, “能” and “不”.

(17) The State of Guo has lots of bad behaviors. How could they get land? (*Zuo Zhuan ·Zhuang 32*)

(18) Since the Jiantu Alliance, the State of Song has participated every battle as well as alliance. (*Zuo Zhuan ·Zhao 25*)

Last, at the end of the sentence we could place a modal particle, such as “乎”, “焉” and “矣”.

### IV. THE RELEVANT EXPLANATIONS OF THE SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF “WHAT IS X OF V?” IN CHINESE

“何 X 之 V” is a object preposition sentence using “之” for repeat indication. On the one hand, it not only is the repeat indicating component of prepositioned object, but also a sign to help people confirm syntactic function. It also can adjust the temperament. On the other hand, it has a function of stress.

Ding Bangxin believes that the basic word order of ancient Chinese is SVO. Sometime, object is prepositioned, and the word order becomes SOV. But it is a special order for “stress”.

Shi Yuzhi and Xu Jie think the object preposition in pre-Qin Chinese is a focus expression method. The conversion of word order is a grammatical form of focus expression.

Their angles and methods are different, but one point consistent with the author is that object preposition is a method of stress by the conversion of word order.

In “何 X 之 V”, the occurrence frequency of “何 X 之 有” is the highest, and also is the most popular form. “何 X 之 为” is also frequently used. It may be related to the usage of “有” and “为”.

“有” and “为” are words of frequent use with flexible usage and rich meaning. “有” is a verb if we see it from layout and function, but it is very different from common noun in semantic feature. Ma Jianzhong believes that “有” is “similar to a verb”, and it is used “as a verb but not express actions”. Yang Shuda called it “incomplete internal verb”. Lv Shuxiang has divided verb into four categories: activity, psychological

activity, not-very-active activity and inactive activity. “有” belongs to the inactive activity. Though they have different opinions on grammatical quality of “有”, they basically think “有” is a verb that doesn’t express action. There are two types of meanings: (a) existence, appearance, happened or not happen. (b) have or owe. It is because of the special quality of “有” different from common nouns that make ancients widely use this word with noun, verb, adjective and pronoun.

As one of the most frequently used words with a lot of meanings in ancient Chinese, “为” is a word difficult to grasp its meaning. As it appeared, its use scope and semantic items have been expanded. Originally it means “do”, and later it came out of dozens of meanings. In addition to its extended meanings, many meanings are given because of the different objects in the text. In the Seventh Volume of *Mashi Wentong*, it says: “‘为’ is a hard word in ancient books. *Shi Ci* only tells us the meaning of the entire sentence, and doesn’t explain the meaning of ‘为’”. During the Zhou and Qin Dynasty, “为” seemed to be a true all-purpose verb. It has extremely strong combination power with noun, verb, adjective and etc.

### V. THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF “WHAT IS X OF V?” IN CHINESE

“何 X 之 V” didn’t synchronously generate with “何”. According to the survey of the author, it never appears in *Shang* and *Book of Songs*, presently the earliest pre-Qin classics. In the *Book of Changes*, there are two cases, but it only appears in *Xi Ci*. *Xi Ci* is regarded as works of the Han Dynasty by the academic circle. That is to say, this sentence pattern hasn’t appeared yet in the early Western and Eastern Zhou Dynasties.

About in the late Spring and Autumn Periods, “何 X 之 V” appeared and was frequently used. We could see it in *Analects of Confucius*, *Lao-tzu*, *Mo-tse*, *Guo Yu* and *Zuo Zhuan*.

(19) Our teacher does learn knowledge in many fields, so he doesn’t need a fixed teacher to teach him. (*Analects of Confucius ·Zi Zhang*)

(20) You will have a felony. Why do you ask for blessing? (*Mo-tse ·Gong Meng*)

In the early days of its appearance, the preposition of “何 X” before verb was strictly used. There is only one example it was post-positioned for rhyme (embraced rhyme).

(21) The reason why I have troubles is because I have self-concept and take my own interests as precedence. If I can forget myself and overpass benefits, honor, gains and losses, and even life and death, will I still have so-called troubles? (*Lao-tzu*)

To the middle and late Warring States period, “何 X” as object began to evolve, such as:

(22) I am about to comfort you. How can you come to see me? (*Chuang-tzu ·Xu Wugui*)

(23) If he can do things right, he will not feel hard. If he can do every right, to govern a country is as easy as to get dressed. (*Xunzius ·Wang Ba*)

(24) The State of Qin has given Meng Mao his desired post and paid what they owed. What else does he ask for? (*Lvshi ChunQiu ·Ying Yan*)

(25) The Emperor said: “then do you have any face to see me again?” (*Strategies of Warring States ·Qin Wu*)

In the Western Han Dynasty, the preposition of “何 X” developed quick into postposition. There are 11 preposition examples (besides the three examples from original transcription and one example with some changes) in *Shi Ji* and 6 postposition examples, such as:

(26) He stopped and asked: “are there any changes in Guandong?” Wang Ji replied: “no”. (*Shi Ji ·Biography of Fan Sui and Cai Ze*)

(27) The people in Xuedi will praise your kindness. Is this a good thing? (*Biography of Mr. Mengchang*)

It can be seen that the Western Han Dynasty is a transition period. The postposition of “何 X” was quite universal in people's spoken language.

To the Eastern Han Dynasty, the sentence pattern of “何 X 之 V” was widely used. For example, there are 43 prepositions and 15 postpositions in *Lun Heng*. I think “何 X 之 V” in written language was an antique phenomenon and not the actual language situation in the Western Han Dynasty, which can be seen from the notes of noters in the Han Dynasty.

(28) My majesty, what do you want to ask me? (*Mencius ·Wang Zhang II*)

Zhao Qi noted: why do you ask me?

(29) Who can compete with him? (*Lvshi Chunqiu ·Lun Wei*)

Gao You noted: no one can compete with him.

From the development process, the postposition of “何 X” was basically completed in the Western Han Dynasty and replaced the existence of preposition.

In this sentence pattern it is impossible to appear written language. In the famous works *Shishuo Xinyu*, there are 3 examples of “何 X 之 V” (9 postposition examples).

(30) How can you call him like that? (*Fang Zheng*)

(31) The Emperor said: “it is very natural for one to cry for his dying relative. Why did you call it rule? (*Yan Yu*)

(32) Zhuge Ke smiled and answered: “there are some troubles in Yuzhou. Is there any funny?” (*Pai Diao*)

To sum up, the evolution of “何 X 之 V” was started from the middle and later period of the Warring States. The postposition of “何 X” was developed in the Western Han Dynasty. The evolution was basically ended in the Eastern Han Dynasty.

Note: The data are mainly from the 17 pre-Qin literature classics, including *Shang, Book of Songs, Book of Changes, Guo Yu, Zuo Zhuan, Analects of Confucius, Lao-tzu, Mo-tse, Yili, Rites of Zhou State, Book of Rites, Mencius, Chuang-tzu, Xunzius, Lvshi Chunqiu, Strategies of Warring States* and *Han Feizi*.

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