

COURSE READER for
Classical Chinese Language

文言入门

Wenyan Rumen (Gateway to the Chinese Classics)

古代汉语（文言文）初级读本

Gudai Hanyu (wenyan wen) chuji duben

Lesson 1

Structural Principles

Traditional Chinese grammarians divided words into two categories: “empty” 虛 (*xū*) and “full” 實 (*shí*). “Empty” words are so-called “function words” or “particles.” “Full” or “content” words name a thing, action, or quality. The dividing line between function and content words is not hard and fast; a given character may serve sometimes as an “empty” word and at other times as a “full” word. Examples of “empty” words are *yīn* 因 (because of), *yǐ* 以 (in order to), *yú* 於 (at), *bù* 不 (not), and *yǔ* 與 (and). Examples of “full” words are *wáng* 王 (king), *dì* 地 (earth), *hóng* 紅 (red), *xiǎo* 小 (small), *hǎo* 好 (good), *zǒu* 走 (run), *fēi* 飛 (fly), *qián* 前 (front), and *shàng* 上 (top, go up).

This lesson uses only “full” words.

The simplest structures in *wényán* consist of two concrete (“full”) words juxtaposed. There are four basic ways in which the two words can relate to each other:

1) Modifier → Modified

- 好王 *hǎo wáng* = good king
- 紅花 *hóng huā* = red flower
- 山林 *shān lín* = mountain forest
- 東流 *dōng liú* = eastward flow; flow eastward
- 遠思 *yuǎn sī* = distantly think; think of from afar

2) X and Y (where X and Y are balanced terms)

- 天地 *tiān dì* = heaven and earth
- 父母 *fù mǔ* = father and mother
- 黑白 *hēi bái* = black and white
- 日夜 *rì yè* = day and night
- 日月 *rì yuè* = sun and moon; day and month
- 古今 *gǔ jīn* = ancient and modern

3) Subject → Predicate (or) Topic → Comment

- 我去 *wǒ qù* = I go
- 天黑 *tiān hēi* = the sky grows dark
- 鳥飛 *niǎo fēi* = the (a) bird flies or birds fly
- 馬死 *mǎ sǐ* = (the/a) horse(s) die(s)
- 花紅 *huā hóng* = (the/a) flower(s) is/are red
- 人大 *rén dà* = (the/a) person is large

4) Verb → Object

騎馬	qí mǎ = ride the/a horse
看花	kàn huā = look at flower(s)
食肉	shí ròu = eat meat
畫畫	huà huà = paint a painting
開門	kāi mén = open the gate
見山	jiàn shān = see the mountain(s)

Note that:

1. Number and tense are indefinite unless explicitly specified, or implied by context.
2. The relation between juxtaposed words is determined by the semantic content of the words themselves as well as by the context in which they occur. Often the relation between isolated pairs of words can be ambiguous, e.g.:

月下	yuè xià = under the moon; the moon descends
流水	liú shuǐ = flowing water; cause the water to flow
人生	rén shēng = a person is born; human life
山林	shān lín = mountains and forest; mountain forest

A larger context usually suggests which reading is appropriate.
3. The four relationships presented above can be made explicit by use of particles or other structural devices. Several of these particles will be introduced in subsequent lessons.

Larger word groups follow the same four patterns illustrated above. Their component parts combine to make larger structures:

水鳥 飛	shuǐ niǎo fēi = water-birds fly
月 近人	yuè jìn rén = the moon draws near the person
白頭 人	bái tóu rén = white-haired person
打 落水狗	dǎ luò shuǐ gǒu = beat a dog who has fallen into the water
深入 人心	shēn rù rén xīn = deeply enter people's hearts

Parallelism

One of the most important stylistic devices in *wényán* is the use of parallelism — two phrases with the same grammatical structure juxtaposed to each other. The simplest form is to juxtapose two two-character phrases of the types illustrated above:

一舉兩得 yī jǔ liǎng dé = lit., one action two attainments; “kill two birds with one stone”

敵強我弱 *dí qiáng wǒ ruò* = the enemy is strong and we are weak
天南地北 *tiān nán dì běi* = lit., south of heaven and north of earth; poles apart

Notice that the two parallel phrases often contain pairs of opposites or balanced terms such as 高 and 低, 多 and 少, 日 and 月.

Parallel phrases are common in all kinds of classical texts, including philosophical and historical works as well as poetry, and developing the ability to recognize them will greatly increase one's skill in reading *wényán*. The last two lines in the poem at the end of this lesson are an example of parallelism in poetry.

Set Phrases or “Chengyu” 成語

Both classical and modern Chinese contain hundreds of set phrases, called *chéngyǔ*, which are usually four-character classical phrases, often consisting of two parallel terms. *Chéngyǔ* have a status similar to proverbs in other languages, and are used in both speech and writing to impart a lively or sometimes literary quality, depending on the *chéngyǔ* used. Below are several common *chéngyǔ* used in modern Chinese, derived from the structural principles introduced above.

開門見山 *kāi mén jiàn shān*
lit., open the door and see the mountain;
means “get straight to the point,” “don’t beat around the bush.”

騎虎難下 *qí hǔ nán xià*
lit., (if you) ride a tiger (it is) hard to get off;
means to be involved in something that is hard to get out of.

走馬看花 *zǒu mǎ kàn huā*
lit., look at flowers while on a running horse;
means to give something a cursory glance.

人山人海 *rén shān rén hǎi*
lit., human mountain and human sea,
means a huge crowd of people.

少見多怪 *shǎo jiàn duō guài*
lit., the less one sees the more one wonders
describes an ignorant person who is easy to amaze.

Exercises

1. Give the meanings for each of the following two-character phrases. Explain the structural relation between the two characters in each example, and state which pairs are ambiguous.

- | | |
|--------|--------|
| 1. 三國 | 11. 男女 |
| 2. 日出 | 12. 前後 |
| 3. 作詩 | 13. 下馬 |
| 4. 我知 | 14. 飛鳥 |
| 5. 山高 | 15. 舉頭 |
| 6. 小車 | 16. 山水 |
| 7. 鳥飛 | 17. 中國 |
| 8. 多言 | 18. 看花 |
| 9. 四海 | 19. 上山 |
| 10. 床前 | 20. 王死 |

2. Give the meanings and explain the structures of the following three-character phrases, all of which come from Tang poems.

1. 春山 空
2. 地上 霜
3. 滿 天地
4. 思 故鄉
5. 白雲 飛
6. 望 明月
7. 幾萬 里
8. 天上 月

9. 秋風 生
10. 花木 深
11. 明月 光
12. 出門 看

3. Below is a well-known poem by the Tang poet *Lǐ Bái* 李白 (701-762). The poem consists of four lines of five characters each. Typically, in five-character lines the first two characters have a close syntactic relation to each other, followed by a pause or caesura, and the last three also form a syntactic unit. Note that in Chinese poetry it is not necessary to specify whether the subject is “I” or “he/she.”

夜思

床前 明月光
疑是 地上霜
舉頭 望明月
低頭 思故鄉