

Holisticity, Discontinuity, Class in Chinese Aspect

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This article brings together research on tense and aspect in Indo-European and in East Asian linguistics. It relies on the concept of aoristicity to unify the two aspectuo-temporal values of the marker GUO in Mandarin Chinese, expressed by the suffix *-guo* (*guo₁*) and the phase complement *guo* (*guo₂*) respectively. GUO is characterized semantically by holisticity, discontinuity, and class meaning. I show that these are aoristic properties. GUO is concerned with neither the event's boundaries nor phases, only with its existence. The event is viewed, not in its internal development, but globally, as something compact, as a single whole. Discontinuity manifests itself as the absence at the reference point of any link or adjacency with the past event (no resultative state). The situation is considered in relation to the class of the past events, as either belonging to it (static location *guo₁*) or becoming a member of it (dynamic location *guo₂*). These features, notably holisticity and discontinuity, account for the special affinity of GUO with recurrence. The unification of the two aspectuo-temporal values derived from the verb *guò* 'to cross, pass' is carried out at a theoretical level. GUO marks in all cases that an event took place : either (*guo₁*) that in the (relative) past there is at least one occurrence of this type of event (e.g., *have eaten shark's fin at least once*) or (*guo₂*) that an expected, i.e., particular, event took place, that is, has entered the class of the past events, is over (e.g., *have eaten the shark's fin, be ready for the next course*). The first reading is generic, the second is specific. This paper greatly advances our understanding of the aoristic properties of GUO in Chinese and of the aoristic aspect in general. It has theoretical and typological implications.

Keywords: aspect, tense, aoristicity, Chinese, Indo-European

1. Introduction

This article discusses the aoristic properties of the suffix *-guo* and the phase complement *guo* in Mandarin Chinese. It offers a comprehensive, descriptively adequate, account of the aoristic aspect in this language. The purpose is threefold: (1) to bridge the gap between research on aspect in Indo-

European and in East Asian (in particular Chinese) linguistics; (2) to show that the aspect marker GUO has aoristic properties; (3) to unify its two values, represented by the suffix *-guo* and the phase complement *guo*. Henceforth, when we need to discriminate between the two aspectuo-temporal values, *guo₁* will indicate the suffix and *guo₂* the phase complement. The capitalized form is used as a cover-term for both.

There is a long tradition within Indo-European linguistics of research on tense and aspect (Goodwin 1889; Brugmann & Delbrück 1913; Meillet 1934, 1958; Maslov 1962; Kurylowicz 1964; Rassudova 1968; Benveniste 1962, 1966, 1974, etc.). More recently, East Asian linguistics has produced interesting findings about aspect in Chinese and some other languages (cf. Xiao & McEnery 2004 for a comprehensive view). Nonetheless, most students of East Asian languages remain ignorant of the achievements of Indo-European linguistics, and vice versa. One of the objectives of this study is to bring together research on aspect in IE and EA linguistics and make it mutually intelligible. It is important for the advancement of the theory of aspect that these two domains communicate with each other.

Aorists and aoristic tenses in various IE languages have been well researched. They are characterized by several distinctive features. Culicoli (1980, 1999) has proposed a theoretical concept of aoristicity defined by the **union** of three properties: holisticity, discontinuity, and class meaning (where holisticity is of paramount importance). According to this definition, GUO (whether the suffix or the phase complement) possesses aoristic properties. These features afford a basis for the unification of the two aspectuo-temporal values.

Intuitively, the grammatical category of aspect concerns the different manners of conceiving the unfolding of an event in time: static, dynamic (at various stages of its development), as a single indivisible whole, etc. For Kruisinga (1931: 221), aspects “express whether the speaker looks upon an action in its entirety, or with special reference to some part.” Comrie (1976: 3) considers that ‘aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation.’ Johnson (1981: 152) defines aspect as ‘reference to one of the temporally distinct phases in the evolution of an event through time.’ Siewerska (1991: 117) and Smith (1997: 6) observe that the same situation can be presented from different temporal perspectives.

Although aspect has something to do with time, it should not be confused with grammatical tenses. The latter locate the event with respect to a specific point in time (chronological reference), ultimately computed relative to the time of the utterance. Comrie thus talks about ‘location in time.’ Tenses appear, accordingly, as objective. Tense and aspect are two distinct categories, which does not preclude the possibility of finding aspect *buried* beneath grammatical tenses.

Nor does aspect coincide with the *Aktionsart*, the traditional concept referring to modes of action, marked lexically in the verb (shades of meaning added by preverbs/prefixes or suffixes/infixes). In Russian, for instance, every verbal form pertains either to the ‘perfective’ or the ‘imperfective’ (Isachenko 1975: 385-418). In Arabic, mode of action and aspect clearly manifest themselves on two separate levels, one lexical, the other paradigmatic (Cohen 1989: 33).

On the other hand, an event is not necessarily compatible with all aspects, it depends on how it is conceived at a semantic level. One must distinguish between what is pre-constructed (semantic properties of events) and what is contributed by aspect markers proper. The nature of the event conditions the compatibility with such-and-such an aspect.¹

Indeed, there exist affinities or a lack of affinity between certain predicates and certain aspect markers, suggesting that semantic structure plays a part in the establishment of aspectual values. This gave rise to typologies of events, since Vendler (1967), passing by Tai (1984) for Chinese, up to Verkuyl (1993) and Smith (1997). Compared to Verkuyl’s dynamic approach, Vendler’s² typology is no doubt too static. It does not take account of the fact that the semantic properties of predicates are, to some extent, susceptible of being modulated and finalized in the situation, hence possible recategorizations as to the type of event. Other more recent approaches set a less rigid border between lexical and syntactic levels. Verkuyl (1989, 1993) tackles aspect in terms of interaction between temporal and atemporal structures (*compositionality*). He has shown that the addition and quantification of arguments affect the type of event. Consider, for example, the quantification of object in Chinese: *kàn shū* <read-book> ‘activity,’ *kàn yī běn shū* <read-one-CL-book> ‘accomplishment.’

Smith (1991, 1997) claims that, since aspect is compositional in nature, the aspectual meaning of a sentence is a synthetic result of “situation aspect” and “viewpoint aspect.” The former, which partially overlaps with the traditional concept of *Aktionsart*, refers to the intrinsic semantic properties of idealized situations whereas the latter reflects the speaker’s choice of a perspec-

¹ For instance, in Chinese, an achievement is incompatible with the progressive *zài* and the durative *-zhe*.

² Vendler distinguishes four categories of events depending on their extension in time (duration), and on whether the terminal point is taken into consideration or not. His classification of English verbs is based, among others, on the compatibility with continuous tenses: 1. States: lacking continuous tenses, no terminal point (no natural end-point), duration (e.g., ‘love,’ ‘have,’ ‘be tall,’ ‘know’); 2. Activities: continuous tenses, no set terminal point (e.g., ‘write,’ ‘walk,’ ‘run,’ ‘drive a car’); 3. Accomplishments: continuous tenses with set terminal point (‘write a letter,’ ‘draw a circle,’ ‘build,’ ‘kill’); 4. Achievements: lacking continuous tenses, instantaneous (‘find,’ ‘lose,’ ‘die,’ ‘reach the summit’). These are abrupt passages into states (zero-extension). Both accomplishments and activities are susceptible of duration. However, while the former are *telic*, the latter are *atelic*.

tive from which she or he presents a situation. *Situation* aspect operates at the semantic level while *viewpoint* aspect operates at the grammatical level. The two interact with each other to determine the aspectual meaning of an utterance. Situation aspect (a cognitive-semantic concept), which corresponds to Verkuyl's atemporal structure, is concerned with verb classes and situation types established on the basis of features such as 'dynamicity,' 'durativity,' and 'telicity.'

In summary, situation aspect (atemporal structure) deals with whatever comes under the heading of 'type of event.' It refers to a variety of pre-constructed events, Smith's (1997: 17) 'idealized situations,' that is, basically to the combinations of semantic features making up different events, before these are really viewed in time, from a certain angle. By contrast, viewpoint aspect (a grammatical concept) refers to various perspectives from which a situation is actually presented. It reflects the speaker's point of view in the given circumstances.

The central issue is one of delimitation of entities in space and time. Does a process/event have natural limits? Does it present itself as a separate entity? If so, how does it respond to temporalization? If not, is it boundable temporally, and how? There is a kind of dialectical relationship between spatial delimitation and temporal delimitation. Spatial (notional) features being more basic (Lyons 1977: 718), "spatial delimitedness always implies temporal boundedness, but the reverse is not true" (Xiao & McEnery 2004: 51). It is therefore important to distinguish between spatial endpoints and temporal endpoints, especially final ones (Van Voorst 1988: 27; Tenny 1994: 26). Telicity is commonly associated with a final spatial endpoint and boundedness with a final temporal endpoint. A process/event that has an inbuilt spatial limit (Greek *telos* 'turning point') is telic, otherwise it is atelic. Accomplishments and achievements are telic, states and activities are atelic.³ If we review the main situation types, we have at one pole "states" and at the opposite pole "achievements," between the two, "activities" and "accomplishments."

States are continuous entities having no natural bounds, they are unlimited, infinite. Achievements are discontinuous entities, they are delimited spatially, punctual, finite. Going from one pole to the other is moving incrementally from the continuous (homogeneous) to the discontinuous (heterogeneous), from the qualitative to the quantitative. A parallel can be drawn with the mass/count distinction in nouns (Mourelatos 1981: 204). Atelic situations (states, activities, and even semelfactives) are comparable to uncount nouns

³ The standard test for discriminating between telic and atelic situations is the co-occurrence with *in-/for-adverbials*. A telic situation is compatible with an *in*-adverbial, an atelic situation is compatible with a *for*-adverbial. Compare 'John wrote a letter *in* an hour.' with 'John wrote letters *for* hours.'

like mass nouns and bare plurals, while telic situations (achievements and accomplishments) are analogous to count nouns. Situations lacking spatial boundaries can be bounded temporally by external devices. In the same manner we discretize mass nouns by using external measures or containers, we discretize situations without natural limits such as activities by means of “temporal containers” (e.g., *for*-adverbials). *John walked for two hours* is in some sense comparable to *two jars of plum jam*. (Two hours of “walking” is on a par with two jars of “plum jam.”) These external measures serve to extract a certain quantity of homogeneous substance (Culioli 1989, 1990; Ilijic 1994).

Situations having no critical point such as states and activities can be segmented freely at the temporal level. The temporal cut is not predetermined semantically (spatially). This relates to the property of uncount nouns known as cumulative or divisive reference (Bach 1986, De Swart 1993). For example, *milk* plus *milk* is still *milk*, part of *running* is still *running*. Count nouns lack this property. The same rules of quantification apply to the nominal and verbal domains.

States have no internal phases and involve no change, they are unlimited notionally. They persist over time unless a dynamic situation occurs to change them. They are stable. That's why, of all situation types, states are the least prone to temporalization. In contrast, dynamic situations (i.e., actions) necessarily involve change over time. They possess the feature of ‘temporariness.’ They are unstable. In order to maintain such an unstable equilibrium over time, some kind of force is required, either agentivity or causality. Comrie (1976: 49) thus observes that, unlike states, dynamic situations necessitate an input of energy to continue.

At this stage, we are still talking about generic properties, that is, dealing with types, since we are considering how various semantic structures behave in time in general. Through addition of elements at different levels and/or combination with other markers, the speaker will be able to modify certain features of the basic structure. In other words, he will be able (to some degree) to recategorize events in terms of type (Dowty 1979: 61; Xiao & McEnery 2004: 77, 80-81, 85 note 11).

Aspect in its traditional acceptation thus presupposes a subjective view of the event, namely the speaker's (narrator's). The terminology used in Slavic languages to refer to aspect is transparent in this regard, *vid* means ‘view,’ formed upon Slavonic *videti* (Russian *videt*) ‘to see’ (Isačenko 1975: 374). It ensues all sorts of issues involving the point of view (cf. *viewpoint*, Smith 1991, 1994, 1997; *perspective*, Comrie 1976; Binnick 1991 etc.) as well as frequent overlapping with modality (Culioli 1980: 183-184). More generally, aspect falls within the province of the so-called *perspective-related phenomena* investigated by Kuno (1987), among others. He has shown that considera-

tions of perspective such as from what or whose point of view the speaker is describing an event or state play a significant role in a number of linguistic phenomena.

Aspect phenomena are therefore complex ones, associated with other domains such as tense, perspective, modality, quantification, etc., not to mention the notional structuring of events. To treat them properly we ought to adopt a holistic approach, as advocated by Dixon (1994: 229) for linguistics in general, so as not to misrepresent the very object of one's study.⁴ What interests us here is viewpoint aspect, in particular, the notion of aoristicity (from Greek *aoristos* 'indefinite' < *a-* 'not' + *horistos* 'limited' < *horizein* 'to bound, limit'). Let me clarify what I mean by "**aoristic aspect**" (aoristicity). This term is used in a technical sense defined by Culoli (1980: 190-191) and Desclès (1980: 220-225). The aoristic aspect is essentially characterized by temporal discontinuity between the event and the reference point and by the manner of viewing the event globally, as something compact, as a single indivisible whole, disregarding the phases of its development. Considering a situation in its entirety involves an external perspective. The term *aoristic* refers to properties, not to a specific tense in a particular language. It should thus not be equated with the aorist of Classical Greek, although the latter undeniably possesses aoristic features. Goodwin (1889: 12,16), cited by Binnick (1991: 164-165), notes that this Greek tense takes its name (*aoristos* 'unlimited') from the fact that it simply describes the occurrence of an action (such as *egrapsa* 'I wrote'), without any of the limitations (*horoi*) relative to its accomplishment, continuation, repetition, etc., characteristic of other grammatical tenses.⁵

Tense and aspect have been thoroughly investigated in Indo-European languages. Among those, Slavic languages have been the main object of studies on aspect. See Kuryłowicz (1964), Forsyth (1970), Comrie (1976: 1-6). Yet Chinese is particularly noteworthy. Like in Slavic and Hamito-Semitic languages (Arabic and Berber, among others), in Chinese, aspect plays a central role. Its aspectual system, the core of which is formed by the suffixes *-le* (completion), *-guo* (experience) and *-zhe* (durative with stative meaning), attracted the attention of researchers for various reasons : since Frei (1941), Jahontov (1957), Sun (1987), Kalousková (1964), W. Wang (1965), Chao (1968), via Teng (1973), Ma (1977), Chen (1979), Li and Thompson (1981), Zhu (1982), Lin (1983), Tsai (1983), Kong (1986), J. Wang (1988), Huang and Davis (1989), up to Fang (1992), Yeh (1996), Li

⁴ "Rather the future development of the discipline requires the development of an integrated theory of language viewed as a holistic phenomenon." (Dixon 1994: 229).

⁵ Brugmann, Delbrück, Meillet, etc., pointed out punctuality, globality (event seen in its totality, without distinction of phases), and irrelevance of duration as characteristic features of the Indo-European aorist.

(1997), Chu (1998), Yang (2001), Xiao and McEnery (2004), Pan and Lee (2004), Ljungkvist (2007), Lin (2007), Wu (2008), and the list is by no means exhaustive. However, despite the accomplished work, the aoristic dimension of the suffix *-guo* has been widely ignored.

From the general linguistics point of view, it is interesting to see how a non-Indo-European aoristic marker such as the suffix *-guo* functions, which, notwithstanding many common points, presents specificities that differentiate it from the aoristic markers of other languages. For instance, the suffix *-guo* shares some aoristic properties with the French *passé simple*, while differing profoundly from it in other respects. Just like the *passé simple*, it implies wholeness and temporal discontinuity but, unlike the former, is incompatible with narrativity, defined in the sense of Dahl (1985: 112-113) as a succession of events in time.⁶ For example: “Clara écrivit la lettre. Mais, le soir, elle se plaignit [...] d'être fatiguée et elle monta dans sa chambre plus tôt qu'à l'ordinaire” (Grevisse 1975: 726). This is impossible with *-guo*. As we shall see below, the latter abolishes any relationship of order, and consequently the linearity of time. On the contrary, it promotes a class acceptation, that is, a relationship of equivalence.

Even among the markers that Dahl (1985: 141) classes in the category of *experientials*,⁷ he observes that the frequency of Chinese *-guo* is twice as high as that of its counterparts in other languages and wonders whether it does not represent a distinct subspecies, if not a distinct category altogether.

What matters with the suffix *-guo* is that at least one occurrence of a certain type of event (one represented by the predicative relationship) took place, without considering the stages of its (internal) progression. *-Guo* thus highlights the existence in time and would for that reason deserve to be called ‘existential aspect’. For his part, Culicoli (1980: 191-192) remarks that there is an obvious relation between the aoristic aspect and the complex operation of quantification/qualification he terms ‘extraction’, on the one hand, and between extraction and predication of existence, on the other.

In Modern Chinese, there exists another aspectuo-temporal marker *guo*, that Chao calls ‘phase complement’, formally distinct from the suffix *-guo*. This marker signals that an expected (i.e., determined) event occurred, and is now over. It places emphasis on the passage among the past events, irrespective of whether the action has been completed or not, whether it has reached some result or not. We encounter again here a familiar aoristic property, already noted in the case of the suffix *-guo*: the event is apprehended globally

⁶ “Quand il s'agit d'actions multiples, le passé simple les présume comme successives; c'est pourquoi il convient particulièrement à la *narration*” (Grevisse 1975: 726).

⁷ “The basic use of EXPER is in sentences in which it is asserted (questioned, denied) that an event of a certain type took place at least once during a certain period up to a certain point in time” (Dahl 1985: 141).

(seen from the outside) as an unanalyzable whole. What remains to be clarified is the relationship between these two aspectuo-temporal values derived from the full verb *guò* ‘to cross, pass,’ that is, the connection between the suffix *-guo* and the phase complement *guo*.

We shall see that they represent the two facets, static and dynamic, of one and the same underlying operation. It consists in first partitioning the class of temporal points established relative to a given reference point into two subdomains, the past and present, and then including (locating) the event in the past period of time. The past is construed as the class of the past events, at once disconnected from the reference point and with each other (the relationship of equivalence), which constitutes another aoristic trait.

Our present state of knowledge may be summarized as follows. *Guo₁* is generally recognized as the experiential aspect (for example, Li & Thompson 1981: 226-232) and *guo₂*, which is seldom mentioned in the literature, as indicating ‘termination’ or ‘completion’ of an action (Comrie 1976: 59 note 2; Henne et al. 1977: 129). The most recent studies draw attention to holisticaity (wholeness), pragmatics, presupposition and terminability. Thus, Xiao and McEnery (2004: 138, 142) characterize GUO₁ in terms of holisticaity plus experientiality, and GUO₂ as expressing completeness of a situation in relation to the specified reference time.

Pan and Lee (2004: 1, 464-465) argue that the purely semantic approach is inadequate and that pragmatics also plays a role in the interpretation of *-guo*. They propose a semantic-pragmatic account to explain the properties of this marker. In particular, they suggest replacing discontinuity and repeatability/reversibility with the new property “change-out-of-state.” They consider that this property, together with the partiality property, adequately describes *-guo*.

Ljungkvist (2007: 193, 232-233) proposes a relevance-theoretic account of *le*, *guo* and *zhe* in Mandarin Chinese. Like Pan and Lee (2004), she stresses the importance of pragmatic factors for the interpretation of these markers. According to her, the latter are contextually constrained. Their exact contribution to an utterance is highly context dependent. In contrast to Pan and Lee’s (2004) view, Lin (2007: 256) defends a pure semantic approach to *guo*. He suggests that the meaning of *guo* consists of two components, one being an assertion and the other being a presupposition. His analysis captures Iljic’s (1990) important insight that that *guo* indicates a ‘non-empty class of occurrences.’

Wu (2008: 1, 30-31) claims that the required condition for the compatibility with experiential *guo* is “terminability.” He argues that discontinuity follows directly from terminability. As for “class meaning” and “recurrence,” they are just one facet of terminability. Likewise, temporal independence and the indefinite past are defeasible inferences from terminability.

2. Remarkable Properties (Discontinuity and Recurrence)

The aspectual system of Chinese is organized around three verbal suffixes: *-le*, *-zhe* and *-guo*. The first one is a perfective, it expressess completion (as well as anteriority of an action relative to another). The second has a stative value and implies concomitance with the reference point (or another action). The third, commonly considered as marking a past experience (experiential aspect), cuts the action or event off from the reference point. The three existential sentences below provide a good illustration of the respective values of these suffixes:

- (1) *Qiáng shàng guà-le yī fú shìjiè dítú.*
wall-on-hang-LE-one-CL-world-map
'A world map has been hung on the wall.'
[Unless otherwise specified, it is still there.]
- (2) *Qiáng shàng guà-zhe yī fú shìjiè dítú.*
wall-on-hang-ZHE-one-CL-world-map
'A world map is hung on the wall.'
- (3) *Qiáng shàng guà-guo yī fú shìjiè dítú.*
wall-on-hang-GUO-one-CL-world-map
'A world map was (had been) hung on the wall.'
[It isn't there any more.]

The experiential *-guo* occupies a central place within the aspectual system of Chinese. Understanding its function will not only allow us to get a better grasp of the (inner) workings of the system of which it is a part, but will also contribute to shedding more light on aspect in general.⁸

Two notions are crucial to the understanding of the behavior of *-guo*: discontinuity (a hiatus between the event and the reference point), on the repercussions of which I return below in more detail, on the one hand ; and re-

⁸ I shall approach this question in the light of Culoli's enunciative theory (1982), especially for its analysis of the operations at work in the making up of an utterance. For our purpose, it will be sufficient to specify that an utterance is the result of the location of a predicative relationship when referred to a system of enunciative coordinates. This complex system includes an origin-situation locator (Sit_0), a locator for the locutionary event (Sit_1), and a locator for the event referred to (Sit_2). Each locator includes two parameters: S for subjects (enunciator, locutor, grammatical subject), and T for the (spatio-) temporal locators (of the utterance origin, of the act of locution, and of the event referred to). This is a minimal system which can be enriched within the framework of predefined rules by constructing other locators. As regards the aspectual values, with which we are more specifically concerned here, they are produced through a complex operation of location of the predicative relationship when referring it to the class of temporal points, which is itself constructed in relation to the spatio-temporal locator of the utterance origin (in the commonest case it coincides with the time of locution).

currence (which manifests itself at the semantic level), on the other.

The suffix *-guo* of Mandarin Chinese normally occurs only with reiterable situations (semantic level). However, Chen (1979) has observed that a verb such as *niánqīng* ‘(to be) young,’ describing a non-recurrent state, can take *-guo*. Although this is an isolated example,⁹ it means nevertheless that the requirement of recurrence is overall too strong. Therefore, without negating the idea of a natural affinity with recurrence, we should redefine the semantic threshold required for the co-occurrence with *-guo*. To this end, we need first to circumscribe the aspectual meaning of the suffix *-guo*. The purpose is twofold: (i) basing oneself on its properties, to isolate the invariant operation of which it is the marker, which will give us a clear understanding of what its compatibility with recurrence depends on; (ii) to specify the semantic conditions which a verb denoting a non-recurrent event has to satisfy in order to occur with *-guo*.

Apart from the value displayed in (3) above, there exists another aspectuo-temporal *guo*, Chao’s (1968) “phase complement” with specific semantic and formal properties. In Chinese the notion of ‘crossing, passing’ is used at four distinct levels of grammaticalization, written by the same character, but formally recognizable (stress, tone, distribution, type of event). These different levels, that all trace back to the notional word *guò* ‘to cross, pass,’ coexist in Modern Chinese. What is more, strictly speaking, this grammatical exploitation of a lexical word does not amount to emptying of the semantic content, but rather to a growing abstraction, accompanied by the loss of prosodic identity (absence of stress and loss of lexical tone). This independently corroborates Sweetser’s (1988, 1990) and Hopper and Traugott’s (1993) conclusions on grammaticalization. In order of increasing abstraction, the following appear :

- 1) an autonomous (full) verb *guò* ‘to cross, pass’ in the spatial or temporal sense, as in: *guò qiáo* ‘cross the bridge,’ *guò nián* ‘spend the New Year,’ *guò-le jǐge yuè* ‘several months passed’;
- 2) a resultative complement (spatial meaning, ‘to move from one place to another, transfer’), attached to another verb : *náguòlái* <take-pass-come> ‘pass something to someone’;
- 3) a phase complement (aspectuo-temporal meaning), attached to another verb: *chīguo fàn* ‘have had one’s meal, it’s over’;

⁹ Here are other examples of this kind:

Nǐ méi xiǎo-guo? Nǐ bù zhīdào háizi xǐ huan chītàng a?
you-NEG-small/young-GUO₁-you-NEG-know-child-like-eat-sweets-FP
'Haven't you ever been young? Don't you know that children like to eat candy?'

Mā, nín jiù méiyóu zuò-guo nǚháizi ma?
mum-you-then-NEG-be-GUO₁-girl-FP
'Mum, haven't you been a girl yourself?' (Dai 1997: 63)

- 4) a verbal suffix (aspectuo-temporal meaning), attached to another verb and completely cliticised: *chīguo Zhōngguó fàn* ‘have eaten Chinese food before.’

The article proceeds as follows. I first analyze the suffix (§2.1), and then look more closely at the phase complement (§2.2). *-Le* and *guo₂* are compared in §2.2.8. The properties of the suffix *-guo* are contrasted with those of the suffix *-le* in §2.3. In §3 and §4, I propound new definitions of *guo₁* and *guo₂* which are neither limited to experience nor misconstrued as past tense, completion or termination. The notion of recurrence (repeatability) is discussed in some detail in §5. In §6, I show that the aspectuo-temporal marker GUO possesses aoristic features and, after comparison, proceed to unify the two values *guo₁* and *guo₂*. The discussion concludes in §7, where I raise further theoretical implications of this analysis.

2.1. The Suffix: Experiential Aspect or Indefinite Past

2.1.1. Current definitions

The verbal suffix *-guo*¹⁰ is taken to be an “experiential completion” marker, an “experiential aspect,” or an “indefinite past” marker. Thus, Rygaloff (1973: 112) defines it as “completion plus past experience.” Li and Thompson (1981: 226-232) as well as Xiao and McEnerly (2004: 144-146) talk about “experiential aspect.” Jahontov (1957: 121) and Chao (1968: 251, 439) categorize it as “indefinite past” (*prošedše neopredelénnoe vremja* and *indefinite past*, respectively), in view of the fact that the action denoted by the verb took place at least once at some indefinite time in the past. Of all the defining characteristics, experientiality is the most frequently quoted one.

These definitions are not satisfactory from a linguistic point of view. *-Guo* is an aspect rather than tense marker, though its presence contributes to establishing the time of the utterance. And though it generally occurs in “past” sentences, it may also appear in a “future” context. Consider the following example quoted by Chao (1968: 312-313):

- (4) *Nǐ gèn tā jiàn-guo jǐ cì jiù shú le.*
 you-PREP-he-see-GUO₁-CL-then-familiar-FP
 ‘After you have met him a few times, you will be better acquainted.’

¹⁰ As a verbal suffix, *-guo* is attached to the verb, however, sometimes it may follow the entire verbal phrase V-O and occur after a noun. For example:

Tā cónglái méi yǒu xiōng jìnlái zhèyàng guānxīn guóshí-guo.
 she-never-NEG-have-think-lately-so-care for-national/state affairs-GUO
 ‘She has never been so concerned about the national affairs as lately.’

(Lao She, quoted by Fang 1992: 460)

As indicated by Chao's (1968: 313 and xxii) phonetic transcription (neutral tone), we are in the presence of the suffix.

-*Guo* does not express completion either. There is no evidence to support such an allegation. It is not assimilable to the suffix -*le*, a genuine mark of completion (which bounds the event/action temporally, i.e., ascribes an endpoint to the action at a temporal level). Unlike -*le*, which implies continuity between the event and the reference point (adjacency), -*guo* induces discontinuity between the event and the point of reference. As for the notion of experience, it is invoked to account for sentences such as:

- (5) *Nǐchī-guo Zhōngguó fàn méi yǒu?*
 you-eat-GUO₁-China-food-NEG-have
 'Have you ever eaten Chinese food (before)?'

In other words, 'Have you ever experienced such an event?' or 'Did it happen to you at least once at some indefinite point in time?' However, the occurrence of *guo* in a sentence such as (20) below *Nǐ chī-guo fàn méi yǒu?* 'Have you had your meal? (Is it over?)' cannot be explained in terms of experientiality. The interpretation 'Have you ever eaten (before)?' would be absurd. This second aspectuo-temporal value, dubbed *guo*₂, is scarcely ever mentioned in linguistic and didactic literature.¹¹ This is all the more regrettable since such examples are far from being rare. The notion of experience is clearly inoperative for *guo*₂ (cf. §2.2.). On examination, one finds that for *guo*₁ it applies only in the case of animate subjects, and not even systematically, as evidenced in (6) to (8):

- (6) *Xīngqītiān nǐ bāng māma zuò-guo nǎ xiē shì ya?*
 Sunday-you-help-mum-do-GUO₁-which-some-affair-FP
 'What did you do on Sunday to help your mum?'

Here the focus is not on the experience of the person but rather on the list of actions s/he did during a given period of time.

- (7) *Wǒ zǎo gēn nǐ shuō-guo.*
 I-early-PREP-you-tell-GUO₁
 'I told you so long ago!'

This sentence is hard to interpret in terms of experience, it says merely that it is not the first time I am telling you, that I have told you before.

¹¹ Among the rare authors who distinguish *guo*₁ and *guo*₂ one finds: Chao (1968), Teng (1973), Henne et al. (1977), Lü (1980), Tsai (1983), Kong (1986), Iljic (1987), Audry-Iljic and Iljic (1989), Fang (1992), Xiao and McEnery (2004).

- (8) *Fābù'ěr shì Fāguó zhùmíng de kēpǔ zuòjiā xiě-guo wénmíng shijiè de Kūnzhóng jì.*
 Fabre-be-France-famous DE-popular science-author-write-GUO₁-renowned-world-DE-insect-record
 ‘Fabre is a famous French popular writer, he wrote *Entomological Memoirs* known throughout the world.’

Example (8) does not emphasize the fact that Fabre has had such an experience, rather it means that the book in question appears among his works. Above all, the notion of experience is downright inadequate for sentences lacking an animate subject:

- (9) *Fāguó hé Měiguó zhījiān cónglái méi fāshēng-guo zhànzhēng.*
 France-and-USA-between-never-NEG-occur-GUO₁-war
 ‘There has never been a war between France and the United States.’
- (10) *Zhè ge dìfang cónglái méi gānjìng-guo.*
 this-CL-place-never-NEG-clean-GUO₁
 ‘This place has never been clean.’

2.1.2. Constraints on the types of events

With the exception of modal verbs, the suffix *-guo* may follow without any restriction all kinds of verbs, whatever the type of event they describe. ‘It can interact with all situation types’ (Xiao and McEnery 2004: 143). For *guo*₂, see §2.2.3. It thus commonly occurs with verbs of action whether durative or instantaneous (punctual), as are, for instance, the resultative verb compounds V₁V₂:

- (11) *Kāihui de shíhou wǒ shuìzháo-guo.*
 hold/attend a meeting-DE-time-I-sleep.attain-GUO₁
 ‘I have fallen asleep during a meeting before.’

It can also suffix verbs other than verbs of action, including adjectival verbs (denoting states or qualities).

- (12) *Nǐ méi lèi-guo ma?*
 you-NEG-tired-GUO₁-FP
 ‘Haven’t you ever been tired?’
- (13) *Wǒ yī bēizi zhī xìngfú-guo yī cì.*
 I-one-lifetime-only-happy-GUO₁-one-CL
 ‘I have been happy only once in my life.’

Sometimes a verb preceded by a modal verb may be suffixed by *-guo*:

- (14) *Éyǔ wǒ huì shuō-guo, kěshì xiànzài wàng-le.*
 Russian-I-HUI-speak-GUO₁-but-now-forget-VS
 'I could once speak Russian, but now I have forgotten it.'

Chao (1968: 668) even quotes an example with the copula *shì* 'to be':

- (15) *Wǒ cónglái méi shì-guo shéi de rén.*
 I-never-NEG-be-GUO₁-who-DE-man
 'I have never been anybody's man.'

The only semantic constraint to which the suffix *-guo* seems to be subject is its incompatibility with non-recurrent events. Because they are irreversible, they are deemed irreconcilable with *-guo*. For example:

- (16) **Tā sǐ-guo.*
 she/he-die-GUO₁
- (17) **Tā shēng-guo.*
 she/he-be born-GUO₁
- (18) **Tā lǎo-guo.*
 she/he-be old-GUO₁

However, Chen (1979: 28-29) challenges the notion of recurrence, which most scholars¹² take as a prerequisite for an event to occur with *-guo*. His argument is grounded on the following fact:

- (19) *Nǐ yě niánqīng-guo.*
 you-also-young-GUO₁
 'You were young once (before).'

He observes that 'being young clearly is not an experience which may recur but *-guo* can be used.'

If the notion of recurrence is relevant –and there are good reasons to believe that it is for the majority of cases – it means nevertheless that it is too restrictive. Is it possible to find a more general criterion which accommodates Chen's counter-example? The answer to this question is yes, provided that

¹² This opinion is put forth in Jahontov (1957: 122), Ma (1977: 23), Li and Thompson (1981: 230), Ilijic (1987: 163), Zhang (1995: 128), Dai (1997: 62), Smith (1997: 268), etc. I still consider it relevant to the events of the 'action' type, but too restrictive for the events of the 'state' type, as Chen (1979) demonstrates.

the issue is no longer put in terms of recurrence but in terms of class constitution. The analysis of this counter-example will enable us to determine more accurately the operation of which *-guo* is the marker (cf. §5).

2.2. The Phase Complement: Passage among the Past Events

According to *Xiàndài hànyǔ bābāi cí* [XHBC] (1980: 216), *guo₂*, Chao's phase complement, marks the termination of the action (*dòngzuò wánbi*). In like manner Fang (1992: 458) employs the term *wánjié* 'to end, be over, finish' to define the grammatical meaning of *guo₂*. Xiao & McEnergy (2004: 139-143) differentiate between the experiential *-guo* (*guo₁*) and the resultative verb complement (RVC) *guo* interpreted in the temporal dimension (*guo₂*). The RVC *guo* is said to denote 'completiveness' or 'completion.' More precisely, it is included among completive RVCs, a closed set of rather grammaticalized items with abstract aspectual meanings (p.162) that basically coincides with Chao's category of phase complement. Note in passing that in Chinese the aspect markers (verbal suffixes) *-le*, *-zhe*, *-guo* are all derived from verb complements, which evolved from full verbs at earlier stages (Li & Shi 1997). The value of the phase complement can be illustrated by the following utterance, used as a common form of greeting by people who meet at mealtimes:

- (20) *Nǐchī guo fàn méi yǒu?*
 you-eat-GUO₂-food-NEG-have
 'Have you had your meal? (Is it over?)'

The interpretation as *guo₁* 'Have you ever eaten?' is ruled out for semantic reasons (the physical and cultural properties of the notion 'to eat'). Moreover, the phase complement *guo* and the suffix *-guo* differ in their suprasegmental features as well as in their distribution.

2.2.1. Prosodic features

Unlike the suffix, which is unstressed and pronounced in the neutral (light) tone, the phase complement may be stressed and may keep its lexical tone (fourth tone, i.e., *guō*). See Chao's (1968: xxii) phonetic transcription ['optional neutral tone'], Comrie (1976: 59, note 2) ['usually with fourth tone'], Henne et al. (1977: 130) ['optional zero stress'], Liu et al. (1983: 233) ['stressed or unstressed'], Xiao and McEnergy (2004: 177, note 63) ['optional 4th tone'].

2.2.2. Suffixation by *-le*

Another fundamental difference is that the phase complement *guo* can be

followed by the suffix *-le*, while the suffix *-guo* cannot. As Chao (1968: 251-252, 450), Comrie (1976: 59, note 2) and Fang (1992: 458, 461) have noted, *guo₂* may be suffixed by *-le*, its behavior being close to that of a resultative complement. See also Mangione (1993: 73-75). XHBC (1980: 216) thus observes that the phase complement *guo* resembles V₂ of a resultative verb compound V₁V₂, except that, unlike genuine resultative verbs, it cannot occur in the potential form. In other words, it is impossible to insert the potential infix *-de-* ‘can’ or *-bu-* ‘cannot’ between the verb and *guo₂*.

- (21) *Wǒ chī guò-le fàn jiù zǒu.*
I-eat-GUO₂-SV[LE]-food-then-go
'I will go as soon as I have finished my dinner.' (Chao 1968: 450)
- (22) *chī guò-le fan le*
eat-GUO₂-VS[LE]-food-FP
'have had one's meal' (Chao 1968: 251)
- (23) *Nǐ chī guò-le yúchì (le) méi yǒu?*
you-eat-GUO₂-VS[LE]-(FP)-NEG-have
'Have you eaten the shark's fin?
(Are you ready for the next course?)' (Chao 1968: 251-52)

Since a verbal suffix cannot in principle be followed by another verbal suffix, this suggests that the phase complement (-*guo₂*) is not one.¹³ Henne et al. (1977: 130) thus argue that the suffixation by *-le* is indicative of the complement *guo*, because ‘there cannot be two consecutive suffixes.’ For his part, Chao (1968: 251, 450) has noted that the complement *guo* can take the perfective suffix *-le*, whereas the suffix *-guo* is incapable of taking another suffix *-le*.

2.2.3. Restrictions on the types of events

Unlike the suffix *-guo*, compatible with almost any type of verb, the phase complement *guo* requires verbs denoting events susceptible of extension in space and hence of duration. These are **durative** verbs or verbs constructed as such in the context, corresponding to *activities* and *accomplishments* in Vendler's (1967) nomenclature (adapted to Chinese by Tai 1984). Indeed, given its semantic features, *guo₂* necessitates that the event has a certain extent and may be closed. In order to pass, i.e., enter the class of the past events,

¹³ Nevertheless, Fang (1992: 464) observes that the durative *-zhe* can exceptionally be followed by the experiential *-guo*. He quotes the following example from Lao She to support his view:

Tā yǐqián bìng méi yǒu zhēnzhèng huó-zhe-guo.
he-before-(not) at all-NEG-have-genuine-live-ZHE-GUO
'He has never been truly alive before.'

the event must be dynamic. The value *guo*₂ is therefore incompatible with stativity. It is excluded with stative verbs, punctual verbs marking an abrupt change (change of state), resultative verbs (attainment of a resulting state), and inchoative or inceptive verbs (entry into a state). Likewise, *guo*₂ seems unacceptable with verbs describing irreversible events such as *lǎo* ‘to grow old’ (cf. Iljic 1987). Xiao and McEnergy (2004: 62, 166, 169) affirm along the same lines that RVCs cannot be affixed to achievement verbs and that an RVC typically takes an action verb as the preceding verb (V₁), generally an activity.

2.2.4. Special affinity with the adverb *gāng*

The adverb *gāng* ‘only a short while ago, just (now)’ invariably selects the value *guo*₂. *Gāng* signals that an event occurred shortly before the moment of speaking or another past event, which in that case constitutes the viewpoint from where the first event is considered. That is, the adverb marks a short interval or distance between the terminal point of an action and the point of reference. Consider the following sequence “question-answer”:

- (24a) *Nǐ xiǎ-le liǎn méi yǒu?*
 you-wash-VS-NEG-have
 ‘Have you washed your face?’
- (24b) *Wǒ gāng xǐ-guo liǎn.*
 I-just-wash-GUO₂-face
 ‘I have just done it. (It’s over.)’

*Guo*₂ highlights, not the notion of experience, but the fact that a particular event which was to happen (its occurrence was expected, cf. “preconstruction”) actually did happen, and is now over. It is the adverb *gāng*, highly compatible with *guo*₂, that steers the interpretation towards this aspectual value.

2.2.5. *Guo*₂ and negation

XHBC (1980: 217) employs the criterion of negation for distinguishing between *guo*₁ and *guo*₂. Unlike the first, the second is not retained in the negated form. Compare:

- guo*₁
- (25) *Chī-guo xiǎomǐ. / Méi chī-guo xiǎomǐ.*
 eat-GUO₁-millet / NEG-eat-GUO₁-millet
 ‘Have eaten millet (before).’ / ‘Have never eaten millet (before).’

guo₂

- (26) *Chīguo fān le. / Hái méi chī ne.*
eat-GUO₂-food-FP / still/yet-NEG-eat-FP
'Have had one's meal. (It's over.)' / 'Haven't had one's meal yet.'

Authors such as Teng (1973: 20), Tsai (1983: 107-108), Fang (1992: 463), Mangione and Li (1993: 72) are in agreement with XHBC. Teng observes: 'Syntactically, the perfective *guo* is obligatorily deleted in negative sentences, while the experiential *guo* is never deleted.'

It appears indeed that, as a general rule, *guo₂* is omitted in the negative form. More precisely, it does not co-occur with the existential negation *méi* (*yǒu*) 'not (have), there is not'. Fang's formulation makes one think of a logical contradiction between the negation *méi* (*yǒu*) and *guo₂*, comparable to the one between *méi* (*yǒu*) and the suffix *-le* (§2.3.1.).

Strictly speaking, *hái méi ... ne* 'have not yet' is not the negation of *guo₂*, but the commonest negative answer to a question in *-guo₂*. When you answer a question you can do it in different ways. In particular, one is not required to reply by using the same grammatical markers as those occurring in the question. The answer can be modulated according to the point one wants to stress.

The correlation between the phase complement *guo* and *hái méi ... ne* is not coincidental. It is reflective of a strong semantic affinity. Both presuppose the existence of the predicative relationship. *Guo₂* indicates that at the point of reference the event represented by the predicative relationship has already entered the class of the past events, whereas *hái méi ... ne* signifies that, although it is not yet included in the class, the speaker thinks or believes that it will be (because of what he knows about the situation). In both cases, the predicative relationship constitutes a preconstruction, it was posited previously.

The alternation of the phase complement and *hái méi ... ne* shows that the value *guo₂* occurs only with an existentially posited and identified predicative relationship. Unlike *guo₁*, which has a generic meaning (an occurrence of a class [at least one]), *guo₂* has a specific meaning (the occurrence in question). Specificity is the distinguishing characteristic of *guo₂*. It should not be understood, however, as referring to an action being directed towards a specific object or goal, but rather as relating to a specific (i.e., identified) temporal occurrence or instance of an event. As pointed out by Xiao and McEnergy (2004: 142), in *Zhāngsān chīguo fān méi yǒu?* <Zhangsan-eat-RVC-meal-NEG-have> 'Has Zhangsan eaten yet?', what the speaker really wants to know is whether Zhangsan has already had a *specific* meal. We are dealing with a determined, in fact, expected, occurrence of "taking one's meal," not of "eating something specific (or a specified amount of something)." This has been clearly

perceived by Mangione and Li (1993: 72, 74), who speak of a *specific* past action/event or a past event that had been *expected to occur*.

2.2.6. Temporal value(s)

The phase complement signals that something happened prior to the point of reference (generally the moment of speaking) or before another event. *Guo*₂, in contrast to *guo*₁, can express the anteriority of one action relative to another, whether past or future.

- (27) *Jīntiān gāng chī.guo wǎnfàn, wàimian chuánlái-le cì’ ēr de xiāngshēng.*
 today-just-eat-GUO₂-supper-outside-transmit-VS-ear-piercing-DE-sound/noise
 ‘Today I had just eaten my supper when I heard a shrill noise coming from the outside.’
 (*Zhōngguó shàonián értóng* 2004, 2: 10)

Unlike the suffix *-guo*, which is fundamentally connected with the past,¹⁴ the phase complement *guo* readily occurs in future sentences (anteriority in the future). For example:

- (28) *Míngtiān zánmen chī.guo zǎofàn jiù qù shàngbān.*
 tomorrow-we(inclusive)-eat-GUO₂-breakfast-then-go-work
 ‘Tomorrow we’ll go to work as soon as we have finished our breakfast.’
 [‘Tomorrow we shall go to work right after breakfast.’] (Fang 1992: 463)

cf. also Xiao and McEnery (2004: 142-143).

2.2.7. Double reading

A sentence with a durative predicate (containing no marker pointing to one specific value), admits of two interpretations out of context, either *guo*₁ or *guo*₂. For example:

- (29) *Wǒ hē.guo jiǔ.*
 I-drink-GUO₁/GUO₂-alcohol
 a) ‘I have drunk alcohol (before).’
 b) ‘I have drunk the alcohol (in my glass).’
 [I am finished, you may take the glass away.]

¹⁴ See, however Chao’s counter-example (ex. 4).

Interestingly enough, in textbooks which do not introduce the two values right away, it is always the co-occurrence with other markers and the choice of one example instead of another that bring about the meaning *guo*₂ (Audry-Iljic and Iljic 1989). The reason why this is so is because there are many ‘slippery’ examples that may easily throw one off track. The action of reading is a case in point. You ask someone if they have read a particular book (if it is one of those they have read):

- (30) *Zhèi běn shū nǐ kàn-guo ma?*
 this-CL-book-you-read-GUO₁-FP
 ‘Have you ever read this book?’

But instead of simply replying:

- (31) a. *Kàn-guo.*
 read-GUO₁
 ‘Yes, I have.’
- b. *Méi kàn-guo.*
 NEG-read-GUO₁
 ‘No, I haven’t.’

they say:

- (32) a. *Kàn.guo le.*
 read-GUO₂-(VS)-FP
 ‘It’s done (already).’
- b. *Hái méi kàn ne.*
 still/yet-NEG-read-FP
 ‘Not yet.’

A shift in meaning may easily occur between the question and the answer, from a static acceptation to a dynamic one (as above), and vice versa. Contrary to what is generally assumed in textbook exercises, such a “drift” is frequent in a free conversation where the speaker is seldom the captive of the pattern set in the question by the interlocutor.

2.2.8. Aspectuo-temporal meaning

Since *guo*₂ is less familiar than *guo*₁, we need to go into some detail in order to ascertain its exact nature and meaning. GUO₂ is not an ordinary resultative verb complement, I agree with Chao (1968), Lü (1980) and Fang (1992) on that point, and it is not a suffix either. It stands somewhere between resul-

tative verb complements (RVCs) and verbal suffixes. It shares some properties with the former and others with the latter.

The phase complement *guo* has evolved a specific aspectuo-temporal meaning. On the evolution chain, starting with the full verb *guò* ‘to pass, cross’, it is more grammaticalized than an RVC, although in view of some of its formal features it remains very close to them (suffixation by *-le*, possibility of accentuation as well as preservation of lexical tone). By contrast, it does not occur in the potential form and, unlike the suffix *-guo*, is incompatible with the existential negation *méiyǒu* (*guo₂* is omitted in the negative form).

However, what most clearly sets it apart is its grammatical meaning. *Guo₂* relates to a reference time (RT), itself computed relative to the time of speaking, just like the suffixes *-le*, *-zhe* and *-guo*. That is, it refers to a reference point external to the process/event, while RVCs make reference to the internal semantic structure of processes/events prior to any temporal anchoring. *Guo₂* thus expresses “viewpoint aspect” and not “situation aspect,” as all other RVCs do.

Guo₂ involves a particular (determined) event, whose occurrence is expected in the context. Mangione and Li (1993: 72) talk about “a specific past action or event” or “a past event that had been expected to occur.” The existence of the event is not in question, it is presupposed. Note that presuppositions involve the speaker and his/her point of view. This corroborates the argument that the phase complement *guo* pertains to “viewpoint aspect” and not to “situation aspect.” It is deictic or referential in the sense that it refers directly to the situation within which an utterance takes place. Moreover, the presupposition of existence is confirmed by (and accounts for) the incompatibility of *guo₂* with the existential negation *méiyǒu* (cf. above).

It should be noted that the phase complement *guo* does not indicate the same thing as the suffix *-le*. I argue that it marks an instantaneous passage into the class of the past events. The suffix *-le* is more grammaticalized than the phase complement *guo*. The operation of which it is a trace is therefore more abstract and has a wider scope. Since *guo₂* marks an abrupt (instantaneous) passage of a specific event into the class of the past events, by adding the suffix *-le*, one validates the resultant state of this temporal passage (cf. Klein and Hendriks 2000: 758). The event has passed and is (now) past. Note that what is validated at the reference time, is not the process or event itself, but merely its temporal passage. Because, once the event has passed (that is, entered the class of the past facts), it is disconnected from the reference time. In other words, it is disconnected by virtue of the very passage into the (relative) past. I therefore maintain that *guo₂* does not mark the same operation as *-le*. The two operations are not identical, although they may combine (they are not mutually exclusive) in the fixed order *guo-le* (composition of operations).

We are dealing with a relative past, constructed in relation to a given reference time (RT), not necessarily the moment of speaking, which can be shifted in the past as well as in the future. Some other event can act as RT, hence the possibility for *guo*₂ to mark anteriority in a sequence of events: E₁ < E₂. It's like moving past a boundary mark, in the present case, a given reference time (RT). Seen from RT, the event has gone by (i.e., moved into the past, among the past events) and is now past. What matters is whether an identified, expected event has already passed (*guo*₂) or not yet (*hái méi...ne*), regardless of what stage it has reached, whether it has been completed or not. The event is viewed globally, from the outside, as an indivisible whole. With *guo*₂, it is only a question of temporal passage, i.e., crossing of a boundary line in time. By itself, *guo*₂ does not close the process/event, nor does it ascribe a final endpoint. In fact, the event is already delimited in space-time (isolated as a separate unit), for it has been posited before (presupposition of existence).

The formal proximity of *guo*₂ to RVCs, from which it is derived and to which it remains close, may account for its transitional character and the type of verb it requires. Xiao and McEnery (2004: 61) observe that the affixation of RVCs (V₂) to action verbs (V₁) makes the derived predicates V₁V₂ transitional, i.e., they are “achievement verbs.” They (2004: 62) suggest that RVCs function to change activity (or semelfactive) verbs into achievement verbs.¹⁵ Mangione and Li (1993: 68) speak in the same sense of “transitional verbs” and exemplify them by a resultative verb compound V₁V₂. If V-guo₂ behaves as V₁V₂, this explains why it marks an instantaneous (abrupt) passage and why it essentially selects verbs of “activity” type. Notionally, an achievement is conceived as a demarcation line between two domains, with zero spatial extension. The temporal corollary is that it can be presented in only two ways, either before crossing or after crossing, never during the crossing (e.g., *sǐ* ‘to die’ in Chinese, *win the race*, *reach the top* in English). In fact, the validation of a transitional process/event entails that the dividing line has been crossed (e.g., *sǐ-le* ‘has died’), which corresponds to an instantaneous passage into a stabilized condition (state).

To sum up, *guo*₂ marks an instantaneous transition in time. Formally, V-guo₂ is comparable to V₁V₂, that is, an achievement verb. *Guo*₂ typically selects a durative action verb, usually an activity, as the preceding verb (Xiao and McEnery 2004: 61-62, 166-167, 169). However, it is different from *wán* ‘to finish’. The RVC *wán* denotes the final endpoint of a process, whereas the phase complement *guo* indicates the temporal passage beyond a given refer-

¹⁵ Xiao and McEnery (2004: 166-167, 169) remark that RVCs can be affixed to almost all verb classes other than achievement verbs. The affixation turns the resulting compound verbs into derived achievements encoding a result. They also note that a resultative verb compound typically takes an action verb as the preceding verb.

ence time into the relative past. *Guo₂* marks the crossing or passing of an external reference line, this passage (abrupt transition) is not part of the process/event. With *guo₂*, the existence of the event is not in question, it is presupposed (an expected event). The fact that it cannot co-occur with the existential negation - it is deleted in the negative form - is a further evidence of that. In order for an event to pass, it has to be dynamic, discrete (finite) and have a certain extension (be susceptible of duration), which automatically eliminates "achievements" and "states." There is no implied agentivity in *guo₂*. Liu et al. (1983: 331) remark that phase complements have no "causative" meaning (*méiyǒu shídòng yìyì*). The transition depends exclusively on the progress of time. The logic of *guo₂* is binary: has the event passed (already) or not (yet)? Is it over or not? With *guo₂*, the focus is on the event's having passed.

The event is apprehended globally. The speaker believes that it is going to happen. What causes it to pass is not an agent, but time. The transition/ passage is a function of time only. In a sense, the event is already there, it is expected, i.e., posited by the speaker with respect to his subjective space (pre-construction). Its passing is only a matter of time.

Unlike the suffix *-guo*, the phase complement *guo* implies that the event referred to by the predicative relationship is determined. It is not a matter of asserting the existence of at least one occurrence of a certain type of event, but rather of signifying that an event that was to occur actually did occur. We are dealing with an expected event, which presupposes both a preconstruction (an event is going to happen) and the identification of the event referred to as the expected one. Thus, *chī-guo* <eat-GUO₂>, the positive answer to the question in (20) above, can be glossed as follows: 'the meal has been taken, it's over.'

2.3. A Comparison of *-guo* and *-le*

Within the aspectual system of Chinese, the aspect markers *-guo* and *-le* illuminate each other, hence the importance of a systematic comparison.

2.3.1. Negation

An essential difference between the two is patent in the negative. The existential negation *méi* (*yǒu*) 'not have, there is not,' used to negate verbs suffixed by *-guo*, also occurs with the suffix *-le*. However, contrary to what is the case for *-guo*, *-le* is deleted in the negated form. Indeed, while the negative counterpart of V-*guo* is *méi* (*yǒu*) V-*guo*, the one corresponding to V-*le* is *méi* (*yǒu*) V, and not **méi* (*yǒu*) V-*le*. It means that in Chinese one cannot, strictly speaking, negate the completion of the action. Doing so comes to negating its very existence. The completion marker *-le* and the existential negation *méi*

(*yǒu*) are thus mutually exclusive, whereas there is no contradiction between *méi* (*yǒu*) and the suffix *-guo* (or *-zhe*, for that matter). For the negation of *guo*, see §2.2.5. above.

2.3.2. Absence of event at the point of reference

One of the outstanding characteristics of *-guo* is the discontinuity (hiatus) it entails between the event (action or state) and the point of reference (Smith 1997: 71, 226). This translates concretely as the absence of anything that might connect this previous event to the point of reference, whether it be a state resulting from the past action or the event itself.¹⁶ In this, *-guo* differs from *-le*, since the latter normally implies a resultative state,¹⁷ as in the minimal pairs below:

- (33) *Tā duàn-guo shōubi.*
she-break-GUO₁-arm
'She broke her arm.' [It has healed since.]
- (34) *Tā duàn-le shōubi.*
she-break-LE-arm
'She has broken her arm.' [Unless otherwise specified, it is still in a cast.]
- (35) *Tā dāng-guo bīng.*
he-serve as-GUO₁-soldier
'He was a soldier.' [He isn't any more.]
- (36) *Tā dāng-le bīng.*
he-serve as-LE-soldier
'He has become a soldier.' [He still is.]
- (37) *Chuānghu guān-guo.*
window-shut-GUO₁
'The window was (had been) shut.' [Now, it is open.]
- (38) *Chuānghu guān-le.*
window-shut-LE
'The window has been shut.' [It still is.]
- (39) *Lái-guo.*
come-GUO₁
'She/he came.' [and left]

¹⁶ Cf. Ma (1977: 17) 'The previous conditions which once had been true for some period of time, no longer hold true.'

¹⁷ To be compared with the Indo-European perfect as defined by Kurylowicz (1964: 61): "These formal and semantic facts authorize us to consider I.E. perfect as a verbal form denoting a state (resulting from a preceding action)."

- (40) *Lái-le.*
 come-LE
 ‘She/he has come.’ [Unless otherwise stated, she/he is still here.]

In fact, *-guo* tells nothing about the result or outcome of the action. Everything one knows about the subject is inferred from contextual evidence and from physical and cultural properties of notions at work. This explains the occurrence of *-guo* in situations where action was exerted on a particular object (there may be some traces of it left, especially when the object, though altered by the action, is still there), but where the action has not been completed or where the speaker focuses on the previous existence of that action rather than on its result. That’s exactly what emerges from the comparison made by Huang and Davis (1989: 151) between the suffixes *-guo* and *-le* in:

- (41) *Gǒu gāngcái chī-le nǐ de píngguǒ.*
 dog-just now-eat-LE-you-DE-apple
 ‘The dog just ate your apple.’

and

- (42) *Gǒu gāngcái chī-guo nǐ de píngguǒ.*
 dog-just now-eat-GUO₁-you-DE-apple
 ‘The dog just took a bite of your apple.’

or in:

- (43) *Wǒ hē-le nà bēi chá.*
 I-drink-LE-that-CL-tea
 ‘I drank up the tea in that cup.’ [Probably no tea is left.]

and

- (44) *Wǒ hē-guo nà bēi chá.*
 I drink-GUO₁-that-CL-tea
 ‘I had a sip of tea in that cup.’ [There is still some tea left.]

These examples illustrate again the difference between *-guo* and *-le* in respect to result. While the first sentence of each pair implies by default the completion of the action through exhaustion or disappearance of the object affected by it, the second merely signals that there was action of “eating” and “drinking” respectively, without any relevance to a possible result. The emphasis is exclusively on the existence of the action. Note that the speaker’s attention

shifts here from the object to the action. With *-le*, the reverse is true, the attention switches from the action (completion) to the object.

2.3.3. Mesuring the distance between the action (event) and the point of reference

With the suffix *-guo*, the event is considered as an element of a non-empty class of occurrences, as one among others. What matters is the existence of the event (at least one occurrence), not its boundaries. This is borne out by the fact that, unlike the suffix *-le*, *-guo* does not allow to measure the distance between the time of speaking and the event. This is a strong argument against those who claim that *-guo* marks some kind of completion (Frei 1941, Cartier 1972, Ryaloff 1973, etc.). Compare:

- (45) *Tā lái-le yǐjīng yǒu liǎng ge zhōngtou le.*
she/he-come-LE-already-have-two-CL-hour-FP
‘It has been two hours (already) since she/he arrived.’
[She/he arrived (already) two hours ago.]

- (46) **Tā lái-guo yǐjīng yǒu liǎng ge zhōngtou le.*
she/he-come-GUO₁-already-have-two-CL-hour-FP

Measuring the length of time separating a past event from now is tantamount to calculating the duration of a state resulting from some previous situation (resultative state), which is possible with *-le* but not with *-guo*.

However, this observation has to be refined. It turns out that sometimes GUO does allow estimation of distances. Of course, in such cases, we are dealing with the phase complement *guo* and with a particular event.

- (47) *Tā dǎ-guo diànhuà yǐjīng yǒu bǎn ge zhōngtou le.*
she-strike-GUO₂-telephone-already-have-half-CL-hour-FP
‘It’s already half an hour since she phoned.’
[She phoned half an hour ago.]

- (48) *Tā hē-guo kāfēi yǐjīng yǒu yǐhuìr le.*
she-drink-cofee-already-have-a little while-FP
‘It has been a little while since she drank her coffee.’
[She drank her coffee a little while ago.]

Unlike *-le*, by means of which one can measure the time from which the action has been completed (how long the action has been completed); with the phase complement, one estimates the time from which the situation referred to by the predicative relationship has joined the class of the past events. *Guo₂* functions as an instantaneous (punctual) verb. It is therefore possible to

measure the distance between this passage and now (the point of reference).

2.3.4. Narrativity

The suffix *-guo* not only entails discontinuity between the event and the point of reference but also a disintegration of temporal order. The different moments prior to the point of reference are disconnected from each other, as though the past were split up into a series of isolated facts. As a result a sentence containing several verbs suffixed by *-le* will be understood as a succession of events in time, which is not true of *-guo*:

- (49) *Qùnián wǒ zuò-le mǎimài, xué-le jìsuànjī, shàng-le yèdàxué.*
 last year-I-do-LE-business-study-LE-computer-attend-LE-evening
 university
 ‘Last year I did some business, (then) studied computers, (then) at-
 tended evening university.’
 [chronological perspective]
- (50) *Qùnián wǒ zuo-guo mǎimài, xué-guo jìsuànjī, shàng-guo yèdàxué.*
 last year-I-do-GUO₁-business-study-GUO₁-computer-attend-GUO₁-
 evening university
 ‘Last year I did some business, (and) studied computers, (and) at-
 tended evening university.’
 [class perspective]

The non-affinity of *-guo* with narrativity, defined in Dahl's (1985: 112-113) sense as temporal ordering, accounts for its incompatibility with the ordinal prefix *dì*. By contrast, the suffix *-le*, implying order (succession in time), is perfectly compatible with an ordinal relation. Compare the following:

- (51) **Wǒ qùnián dōngtiān dì yī cì huá-guo bīng.*
 I-last year-winter-ordinal-one-CL-slide-GUO₁-ice
 (52) *Wǒ qùnián dōngtiān dì yī cì huá-le bīng.*
 I-last year-winter-ordinal-one-CL-slide-LE-ice
 ‘I ice-skated for the first time last winter.’

This dissimilarity between the two suffixes is also observed when, instead of different actions, we are dealing with several occurrences of the same action.

- (53) *Tā lái-le sān cì.*
 she/he-come-LE-three-CL
 ‘She/he came three times (in a row).’

The completion suffix presents the three occurrences as following each other in time. It is this succession in time that makes up the event the completion of which is marked by *-le*. Let *p* be a predicative relationship. With *-le*, the temporal points (the locators for *p*) are viewed as ordered: $t_i < t_j < t_k$, hence $p_i < p_j < p_k$. (The symbol $<$ reads ‘prior to.’)

- (54) *Tā lái-guo sān cì.*
 she/he-come-GUO₁-three-CL
 ‘She/he came three times (in all).’

With *-guo*, the temporal locators are not seen as ordered, but solely as elements of a class disconnected from one another: $t_i \omega t_j \omega t_k$, hence $p_i \omega p_j \omega p_k$ (The symbol ω represents the operation of ‘disconnection’.)

Even though this does not always seem to entail a huge difference in meaning, the speaker looks at things from a different angle. With *-guo*, it is a matter of class perspective (past situations are considered in terms of class or type). (54) means that in the past, that is to say among the past events, there are three occurrences of the event <she/he-come>.

What is remarkable about *-guo* is thus the abrogation of the linearity of time in the sense that, when it applies to different events or several occurrences of the same event, it presents them only as included among the facts having occurred prior to the reference point, without any indication at all about the order in which they really happened (which is not necessarily the order in which they are stated). This is confirmed by the impossibility to use *-guo* in narrative contexts in which the accent is on sequentiality. Such contexts require the suffix *-le*. The following pair from Li and Thompson (1981: 231) illustrates the point well:

- (55) **Wǒ zuótiān wǎnshàng kàn-guo diànshì, fēng-guo liǎng shuāng wàzi jiù qù shuǐjiào.*
 I-yesterday-evening-watch-GUO₁-TV-sew-GUO₁-two-CL/pair/-sock-then-go-sleep
- (56) *Wǒ zuótiān wǎnshàng kàn-le diànshì, fēng-le liǎng shuāng wàzi jiù qù shuǐjiào.*
 I-yesterday-evening-watch-LE-TV-sew-LE-two-CL/pair/-sock-then-go-sleep
 ‘Last night I watched TV, sewed two pairs of socks, and went to bed.’

One of the main consequences of the class meaning of the suffix *-guo* is the suppression of temporal order in narration (Iljic 1987, 1990). Unlike the completion marker *-le*, the suffix *-guo* (the so-called experiential aspect) does

not present a series of past events as an ordered sequence, but only as members of a class, disconnected from each other. The situation referred to by a sentence with *-guo* is not included in a succession of events, it does not participate in the progression of the narrative.¹⁸

That's why it can form a background to a sequence of events, as noted by Yeh (1996: 159, 173), who talks about "background information." She describes this in terms of temporal inaccessibility: "The event in a *guo_{exp}*-sentence is inaccessible to those in the subsequent sentence." She argues, however, that there are cases in which *-guo* does not break up temporal order. She quotes the following example in support of her claim:

- (57) a. *Xiǎochén qù Marble falls diào-guo yú* (e_1),
 Xiaochen-go-Marble Falls-angle-GUO₁-fish
- b. *zǒngshì diào dào bànyè shí'ér dian* (e_2), *cái huí jiā* (e_3).
 always-angle-until-midnight-12-o'clock-only-return-home
 'Xiaochen went fishing in Marble Falls (before) and always angled until midnight 12:00, then went home.' (Yeh 1996: 155, 159, 173-74/ex. 10, 19 and 50)

Yeh (1996: 156) contends that the event in *b*, which is subdivided into events e_2 and e_3 , comes after the one in *a* (e_1). This assertion does not stand up to scrutiny. As a matter of fact, the meaning of (57) should be analyzed as follows. *-Guo* signals that there is at least one occurrence of "Xiaochen's going fishing in Marble Falls." In the second part of the sentence, the adverb *zǒngshì* 'always' specifies that this happened several times, and the rest of *b* depicts each situation from the inside. Events e_2 and e_3 are subsumed under e_1 . In other words, the sequence $e_2 < e_3$ represents the internal structure of e_1 . The adverb explicitly refers to occurrences posited previously by means of *-guo* (co-reference). The relation between event e_1 and the sequence $e_2 < e_3$ is not one of consecution but of inclusion, that is, a relation between a whole and its parts. Every time it occurs, event e_1 is broken up into two parts: first, e_2 ; next, e_3 . The situations in *a* and in *b* are not on the same plane. We are faced with a complex event $e_1 \supset (e_2 < e_3)$, not a linear sequence $e_1 < e_2 < e_3$. Clearly, the event in *a* is not temporally related to the events in *b*. Only events e_2 and e_3 (which together make up e_1) are consecutive, i.e., ordered in time. Contrary to what Yeh (1996: 156, 159-160) advances, events quantified via *zǒngshì*, for example, are not temporally subordinated to an experiential sentence. In (57) the relation of subordination is not temporal but merely structural (inclusion). The proof of this is that, while it is true that the temporal

¹⁸ Cf. Yeh (1996: 159): "[It] is not temporally related to the forward movement of the narration."

coordinate of e_1 cannot be retrieved from e_2 and e_3 , the reverse is also true. There is no way of predicting the relation of anteriority that holds between e_2 and e_3 from e_1 . The event in *a* might just as well be generic (timeless) or lie in the future, this wouldn't alter the temporal relation in *b* one bit. The time of e_1 and the time of the string $e_2 - e_3$ are unconnected.

Temporal inaccessibility, due to a breaking-up of temporal order, one of the salient features of the suffix *-guo*, admits of no exception. Therein lies the contradiction in Yeh's objection. It is precisely because it does not take part in the progression of the narration that *-guo* can convey background information.

2.3.5. Verbal reduplication

Between the two occurrences of a reduplicated verb of action one can insert the completion marker *-le*, whereas the insertion of the suffix *-guo* is impossible (cf. XHBC 1980: 217):

- (58) *děng-le děng*
wait-LE-wait
'have waited a little, have waited a minute'
- (59) **děng-guo děng*
wait-GUO₁-wait
- (60) *cāi-le cāi*
guess-LE-guess
'have had a guess, have tried to guess'
- (61) **cāi-guo cāi*
guess-GUO₁-guess

In Chinese verbal reduplication generates a range of meanings going from downtoning to attempt: "do V a little bit," "do V for a short span of time," "try to V." Chao (1968: 204-205) talks about *tentative* aspect. Li and Thompson (1981: 232-236), who note that this phenomenon only seems to concern volitional verbs, call it *delimitative* aspect.

Verbal reduplication reflects a quantifying operation, which is transparent at an abstract level. One of its forms, restricted to monosyllabic verbs, is V *yī* V, where *yī* is the numeral 'one.' This is strongly reminiscent of "verb + quantified object" phrases. A string such as *cāi yī cāi* <guess-one-guess> 'have a guess, try to guess' exhibits a structure similar to that of *xiě yī ge jùzì* <write-un-CL-sentence> 'write a sentence.' The second occurrence fulfils the function of an object, *cāi yī cāi* may be glossed as 'to guess one (occurrence of) guess.'

The conditions of use of reduplicated forms show that there is always a matter of one particular action in one particular situation, and which is moreover directed towards a specific goal. Of course, the focus is on doing an action a little bit, not on its result. That's why the resultative verb compounds (which encode the result) cannot be reduplicated (Li & Thompson 1981: 57-58). In these circumstances, extracting a small quantity of action implies a minimal progression within this action and thus a continuous succession of instantaneous states. To put it another way, if an action is viewed as fragmented into a series of internal occurrences, these occurrences necessarily follow each other in time. By imposing discontinuity between occurrences, *-guo* prohibits any relation of order, hence its incompatibility with verbal reduplication. In this verbal structure, both *guo*₁ and *guo*₂ are ruled out.

2.3.6. Imperatives

The suffix *-le* may be used in imperative sentences when the emphasis is laid on anticipation of the achievement (result) of the action, including in negative forms with *bié* 'don't', interpreted as warnings to the listener (Li and Thompson 1981: 207-213):

- (62) *Cā-le tā!*
erase-LE-it
'Get rid of it [e.g. what's on the blackboard]!'
(Li & Thompson 1981: 208)
- (63) *Bié tūn-le gútou!*
NEG-swallow-LE-bone
'Don't swallow the bone!' (Li & Thompson 1981: 211)

Imperatives with the experiential *-guo* do not make sense because, as Li and Thompson (1981: 230) put it, "a person cannot be ordered to *experience* something": **hēguo chá!* <drink-EXP-tea>. Xiao and McEnery (2004: 144) also observe that the experiential *-guo* does not co-occur with imperatives.

In negative imperatives, the verb can be followed by *-le*, never by *-guo* (XHXL 1982: 224; Sun 1987: 38). Indeed, an order or warning may bear on the result of a future action. Such an effect is guaranteed by the suffix *-le*, for it supposes a continuity between the action and the reference point (adjacency), but is excluded with *-guo*, because the latter implies a discontinuity between the action (event) and the point of reference. For example:

- (64) *Bù yào wàng-le dài yǔyī.*
NEG-should-forget-LE-carry-raincoat
'Don't forget to take your raincoat along!'

- (65) *Bié diū-le dōngxi.*
 NEG-mislay-LE-thing
 ‘Don’t mislay things!’

One does not say:

- (66) **Bù yào wàng-guo dài yǔyī.*
 NEG-should-forget-GUO-carry-raincoat
- (67) **Bié diū-guo dōngxi.*
 NEG-mislay-GUO-thing

With GUO (whether *guo*₁ or *guo*₂) it is impossible to aim at achieving some result, because the action and the result are disconnected. You can no more order that there shall ‘have been’ an event in the (remote) past than command that a given situation shall ‘have passed’ (be bygone). It is not in anyone’s power to change (act upon) the past.

2.3.7. Directional complement (Directional RVCs)

Chinese verbs of movement may be followed by a compound directional complement, consisting of two elements: a verb specifying the mode of transfer (translation) in space (drawn from a finite set comprising *shàng* ‘go up,’ *xià* ‘go down,’ *jìn* ‘enter,’ *chū* ‘go out,’ *qǐ* ‘rise,’ *huí* ‘return,’ *guò* ‘pass’) and the morpheme *lái* ‘come’ or *qu* ‘go,’ indicating whether an entity is approaching or moving away from the speaker/narrator (or some other deictic center set up by him/her).

While the suffix *-le* may be placed between the verb and its complement, the suffix *-guo* cannot (XHXL 1982: 224; Sun 1987: 38).

- (68) *pǎo-le chūlai*
 run-LE-go out.come
 ‘have run out [getting nearer to me]’
- (69) *zǒu-le jìnqu*
 walk-LE-enter.go
 ‘have entered [moving away from me]’
- (70) **pǎo-guo chūlai*
 run-GUO-go out.come
- (71) **zǒu-guo jìnqu*
 walk-GUO-enter.go

Movement cannot be dissociated in time from its mode, both being inextricably mixed, that's why GUO, as a discontinuity marker, is inappropriate here. Neither *guo*₁ nor *guo*₂ are acceptable in this context.

2.3.8. Co-occurrence with classifiers

In Chinese, in order to count the occurrences of a notion, whether discrete, mass, or compact, one has to place an appropriate measure word (commonly referred to as “classifier”) between the numeral and the term it modifies. For example, *sān zhāng chuáng* <three-CL-bed>, where *zhāng* is a noun classifier, signifies “three beds.” This is a very general quantification rule, as it applies in the same way to both nominal and verbal occurrences (more exactly, to occurrences of predicative relationships). The only thing that changes is the type of classifier, noun classifiers (CL_N) versus verb classifiers (CL_V).¹⁹

The suffix *-guo* bears on the predicative relationship taken as a whole, which accounts for the great affinity of this aspect marker with verbal classifiers:

- (72) *Tā duàn-guo liǎng cì shǒubi.*²⁰
she-break-GUO₁-two-CL-arm
‘She broke her arm twice.’ [This happened to her twice.]

-Guo refers to a non-empty class of occurrences of the event represented by the predicative relationship. When their number is not explicit, the cardinality of the class remains vague. However, there is at least one occurrence.

- (73) *Wǒ qù-guo Riběn.*
I-go-GUO₁-Japan
‘I have been to Japan (some time in the past).’ [at least once]

The fact that *-guo* describes the event in terms of a class of occurrences has an important consequence. The relations between the constituents of the predicative relationship are considered invariant. Conversely, quantification of the object (if there is one) is usually associated with a modification of these relations. The proof of this is the high frequency of quantified objects in utterances containing the completion marker *-le*, which is highly compati-

¹⁹ Sometimes one and the same measure word can function as both a verb and a noun classifier. For instance *cì* ‘time,’ respectively in *tā lái-le liǎng cì* ‘He came twice’ and in *dì yī cì shíjiè dàzhàn* ‘the First World War.’

²⁰ Normally, the “numeral + verb classifier” phrase is inserted between the verb and the object. However, when the object is a personal pronoun, the phrase in question will only occur after the pronoun, that is, in sentence final position.

ble with a dynamic understanding of the relations within a given situation.

-*Guo* presents the event referred to by the predicative relationship as one among many. The event is not singled out, it is not considered in itself. On the contrary, with -*le*, one literally ‘plunges’ into one specific situation.

In concrete terms, this means that the co-occurrence of -*guo* with a noun classifier modifying the object is possible only when the latter can be interpreted as not altering the relations within the predicative relationship, that is, in a static way. In such a case, the quantified object functions exactly as a non-quantified object and forms one semantic unit with the preceding verb.

- (74) *Tā yī dùn fàn hē-guo shí bēi píjiǔ.*
 he-one-CL_V-meal-drink-ten-CL_N-beer
 ‘He has (already) drunk ten glasses of beer during one meal.’
 [Such an event occurred at least once.]

Utterances with -*guo* combining a noun classifier bearing on the object and a verbal classifier, the scope of which is the whole predicative relationship, are even less frequent, especially when the number of occurrences of the event is greater than one. For it implies a repetition in time with the same quantification of the object, which is uncommon. More often than not it is the difficulty to imagine a plausible context that motivates the rejection of such utterances.

- (75) *Wǒ liǎng cì bǔ-guo sān tiáo gōuyú.*
 I-two-CL_V-catch-GUO₁-three-CL_N-pike
 ‘I caught three pikes twice.’ [Such an event occurred twice.]

It is impossible to apprehend the same entity simultaneously from the inside (in its internal structure) and from the outside (globally). Chinese prefers the movement which goes from the exterior to the interior, and which conforms with a progressive determination of the predicative relationship. The most natural procedure for combining a verb classifier and a noun classifier in the same utterance consists in correlating the former with -*guo* and the latter with -*le*. One first posits one or more occurrences of the predicative relationship, and then describes them, which implies a change of scale.

- (76) *Tā cānjiā-guo sān cì Àoyùnhuì, měi cì huòdé-le yī méi tóngpái.*
 she-participate-GUO₁-three-CL_V-Olympics-each time-win-LE-one-CL_N-bronze medal
 ‘She participated in the Olympic Games three times, and each time won a bronze medal.’

This way of proceeding, by first positing the existence of a predicative relationship and next by determining it step by step, transcends both this particular case in Chinese and the case of Chinese in general.²¹ For instance, it is encountered in descriptive sentences such as:

- (77) *Tā huà huà, huà de hěn hǎo.*
 she/he-paint-picture-paint-DE-very-good
 ‘She/he paints well.’
 [lit. ‘She/he paints pictures, (s/he) paints (them) very well.’]

The hiatus between the event and the point of reference and the absence of succession in time are thus the two chief characteristics of *-guo* as opposed to *-le*, and which an inquiry into the operation marked by *-guo* will have to take into account. This inquiry should also integrate the fact that *-guo* is incompatible with certain predicates (cf. §2.1.2 above).

3. The Grammatical Meaning of *guo*₁ (The Operation Marked by the Suffix -*guo*)

The operation of which the suffix *-guo* is the trace at surface level can be straightforwardly defined as a certain type of temporal location. *-Guo* locates the event symbolized by the predicative relationship within a given period of time.

There exists a formal similarity between the utterances in *-guo* (quantification of the predicative relationship) and the utterances which assert the existence of a noun (nominal quantification), between temporal and spatial dimensions. Compare:

- PREDICATIVE RELATIONSHIP
- (78) *Qùnián tā jiēchù-guo wàiguórén.*
 last year-s/he-come into contact with-GUO₁-foreigner
 ‘Last year s/he met with foreigners.’
 [This happened to him/her at least once during that period.]
- (79) *Qùnián tā jiēchù-guo liǎng cì wàiguórén.*
 last year-s/he-come into contact with-GUO₁-two-CL_V-foreigner

²¹ Positing the existence of one or more occurrences of a predicative relationship corresponds to what Culicoli (1989) terms “extraction” (*opération d’extraction*). In order to describe a predicative relationship or to make a value judgment of it, one has to posit it first. Its description or evaluation thus implies the presence of a second mention of it, the second occurrence having the property of being identical with the extracted occurrence. Culicoli calls this operation of qualitative identification with the first occurrence “pinpointing” or “re-identification” (*fléchage*). Extraction precedes pinpointing, which is reflected in Chinese at surface level.

'Last year she/he met with foreigners twice.'

NOUN

- (80) *Ménkǒu yǒu rén.*
 entrance-have-human
 'There is someone at the door.' [at least one person]
- (81) *Ménkǒu yǒu liǎng ge rén.*
 entrance-have-two-CL_N-human
 'There are two persons at the door.'

Whereas *-guo* affords no clue as to what stage the action/event has reached, the zone within which it is situated may on the contrary always be specified. The interval of time is determined and can be measured:

- (82) *Liǎng nián zhī jiān, wǒ zhǐ huí-guo yī cì guó.*
 two-year-subord.-within-I-only-return-GUO₁-one-CL-country
 'Within two years I returned to my country only once.'

This point is easily verifiable:

- (83) **Yǒu yī nián wǒ qù-guo Cháng Chéng.*
 have-one-year-I-go-GUO₁-Great Wall [XHBC 1980: 216]

It is because the period of one year is not specified (any year whatever) that (83) is not acceptable. It suffices to specify the period to make it acceptable.

- (84) *Qùnián wǒ qù-guo Cháng Chéng.*
 last year-I-go-GUO₁-Great Wall
 'Last year I went to the Great Wall.' [at least once]

The span of time is thus definite though it may remain non-explicit, which is common. By default, it is constructed relative to the time of locution, and amounts to the class of temporal points prior to that moment.

-Guo implies the partition of the class of temporal points – built in relation to a given point of reference (normally the time of speaking) – into two disjoint subclasses, which might be called “past” and “present” with respect to this reference point. It signifies that in the subdomain “past” there is at least one occurrence of the event represented by the predicative relationship, that is to say at least one occurrence of that type (qualitative occurrence).

With *-guo*, one is interested neither in the event’s boundaries nor phases,

but solely in its existence. The event is not viewed in its internal development, but globally as something compact, as a fact. This is indicative of the aoristic character of the suffix *-guo*. The only thing that matters is whether the interval prior to the point of reference contains at least one instance of the event of the type <a r b> or not.²² Therefore, as pointed out earlier, the operation marked by the suffix *-guo* is not reducible to the concept of experience. Thus the sentence:

- (85) *Tā xiě-guo shénme?*
 she/he-write-GUO₁-what
 ‘What has she/he written (before)?’

does not underscore the “experiences” of the subject, but constitutes a request for a listing of the works of the person in question, that is, an inventory of the past events which satisfy the formula <she/he-write-something>

We are dealing here with a genuine assertion of existence. There is at least one temporal point *t* by which the predicative relationship is located. With *-guo*, the temporal points comprised in the interval prior to the point of reference are viewed only as appertaining to a class, the linearity of time being suspended. It is a relation of equivalence, not a relation of order.

To assert that there is a temporal point *t* by which the predicative relationship is located is tantamount to positing the existence of one phenomenal occurrence of that relationship. Now, if the temporal points prior to the point of reference are viewed as locators of events, one may construct the class of the anterior facts.²³ Let <a r b> stand for the predicative relationship. *-Guo* then indicates that among all the facts prior to the point of reference, there is at least one of the type <a r b>.²⁴ In other words, with *-guo*, one delimits within the class of the anterior facts the subclass of those exhibiting the feature <a r b>. It is a matter of a non-empty class (subclass), having at least one occurrence.

One of the essential characteristics of a class of occurrences is that the occurrences are at the same time qualitatively identifiable (and consequently,

²² The predicative relationship is symbolized by <a r b>, where *a* is the source, *b* the target, and *r* the predicate. The choice of *a* or *b* as “starting point” (French *terme de départ*) determines the orientation of the relationship, which may or may not differ from that of the primitive relationship (viz., from the source to the target). The two-place predicate can be adequately applied to so-called intransitive relationships (reflexive or loop relations) as well as to relationships containing three or more arguments (by breaking them down into two-argument relations). [cf. Culoli 1982]

²³ “Anterior” (prior) to the point of reference, that is, “past” when the latter coincides with the time of locution, which is the most frequent case.

²⁴ We are faced with an occurrence representative of a class, as the presence of the suffix *-guo* (for example, in *chī-guo Zhōngguó fàn* ‘have eaten Chinese food before’) automatically entails an existential interpretation: there was at least one event of this type.

from this point of view, equivalent to each other), but quantitatively distinguishable. The fragmentation into occurrences presupposes discretization and entails the properties of both countability and iteration. This excludes any singling out of one particular occurrence, which on the aspectuo-temporal level means establishing a discontinuity between the event and the point of reference. That's why one of the principal properties of *-guo* is precisely the absence of event at the reference point. For actions, this results in the absence at the point of reference of any link or adjacency with the previous event, and especially the absence of a resultative state. For states, this requires the absence of the event itself at the point of reference.

4. The Grammatical Meaning of *guo*₂ (The Operation Marked by the Phase Complement *guo*)

The phase complement *guo* marks the passage of an identified occurrence of the event referred to by the predicative relationship into the class of the past events. It is a question of a definite occurrence (an expected event), whose existence is presupposed. As soon as the event has passed the dividing line between the (relative) “present” and “past,” it becomes an element of the class of the past events. Note that by virtue of the passage (into the past), the event is disconnected from RT (reference time), only the passage itself is connected to and can be validated at RT. The entry into the class is interpreted as a resultative state of the passage, as evidenced by the possibility of suffixation by *-le* (§2.2.2. above). The fact that the time that has elapsed since the passage (i.e., the duration of the resulting state) may be measured constitutes an additional proof of this (§2.3.3.).

The correlation between *guo*₂ in the affirmative and *hái méi* (*yǒu*) ‘have not yet’ in the negative shows that we are dealing with a preconstruction: the event was expected, it was to take place. The presence of *guo*₂ indicates conformity or congruence between this preconstruction (what was expected) and what actually happened.

The phase complement is concerned only with the temporal passage of the event, regardless of what stage (phase), quantity or result it has attained. This passage can be located exactly. A precise time reference will be interpreted as either dating the passage itself or as specifying the position of a viewpoint in the past, from which the event was already considered as past. For example:

- (86) *Wǒ shíyī diǎn bàn yǐjīng chī-guo fàn.*
I-eleven-o'clock-half-already-eat-GUO₂-food/meal

- a) 'It's done, I have already eaten (taken my meal) at half past eleven.'
- b) 'At half past eleven I had already eaten (taken my meal).'

In the first sense, it is at 11.30 a.m. that the crossing of the line dividing the class of temporal points into two disjoint subclasses took place. It is at that point in time that the event <I-eat-food/meal>, taken as a whole, entered the class of the past events, and has become a part of it since.

In the second sense, 'half past eleven' does not state the time of the passage, but indicates the temporal coordinate of the reference point situated in the past (a shifted point of view) relative to which the event in question had already passed (i.e., was seen as having gone by). At 11.30 <I-eat-food/meal> had already been included among the past events. For instance, this interpretation would be appropriate within the framework of a police investigation where one would stress the fact that at half past eleven the event belonged already to the past (at that time, the meal had already been taken). Note that, in this case, the partition of the class into two disjoint parts is effected relative to the shifted point of view (the reference point in the past), and not relative to now as in the previous case.

This division may also be implemented relative to a future reference point, as in examples (21) and (28) above, where it is the action of the main clause that serves as time reference.

The value *guo*₂ appears only with non-punctual events (cf. §2.2.3.). This is connected with the primary meaning of the verb *guò* 'to pass, cross, traverse in space', either lengthways (longitudinally) or widthways, from one point to another, by covering a non-zero distance.

The aspectuo-temporal meaning of the phase complement is more abstract than the spatial meaning of the homonymic resultative complement. The absence of potential form observed in the case of *guo*₂ (§2.2.2.), not to mention *guo*₁, ensues from this emptying of lexical meaning or, to be more precise, from its growing abstraction.

5. A Critical Discussion of the Notion of Recurrence

One of the goals of this study was to ascertain the status of recurrence (repeatability) as the main semantic criterion for the use of verbs with the suffix *-guo*. As observed at the outset, the problem with previous analyses is that they fail to accommodate the fact that verbs denoting non-recurrent states do sometimes occur with *-guo*. I argue here that recurrence may still be a viable concept, provided it is redefined as a sufficient condition, by which I mean that it should no longer be regarded as the necessary one.

For an event to be compatible with *-guo*, its semantic properties should

make it separable from the point of reference. This rules out both the actions which lead to irreversible states and the states which were once established never disappear. However, this does not necessarily boil down to the semantic condition of recurrence. Therefore the latter, as we have seen, is overall too strong. In this regard, Chen's (1979: 28-29) argumentation can hardly be refuted. Actually, recurrence is merely a sufficient semantic condition: it is sufficient indeed that an event be recurrent to be compatible with *-guo*. Yet this is not a necessary condition since there are non-recurrent states, such as *niánqīng* 'to be young', which are also compatible with *-guo*.

Xiao and McEnery (2004: 147) arrive at the same conclusion: "repeatability of a situation is a *sufficient*, but not a *necessary* condition for it to take the experiential *-guo*."

The necessary semantic condition is in fact the possibility to view the event as a non-empty class of occurrences. Everything else, especially the separability from the point of reference, stems from that. In particular, it is because an adjectival verb like *niánqīng* fulfils this condition that it can take *-guo*. Two different cases are to be distinguished accordingly:

- 1) the case of actions (verbs of action), where the necessary condition stated above systematically results in recurrence;
- 2) the case of states (expressed notably by adjectival verbs), where the absence of recurrence does not necessarily prevent the co-occurrence with *-guo*. For events of this kind, the condition of recurrence turns out to be, on the whole, too restrictive.

5.1. Actions

The constitution of a class of occurrences, and the hiatus it entails with respect to the reference point, cancels any result or effect of the action. From the point of view of its result, it is as if the action had never been undertaken, hence the possibility of recurrence (iteration).

As pointed out above, the actions which bring about a permanent result are in semantic contradiction with the operation marked by *-guo*. That's why a verb like *sǐ* 'to die' should not, in principle, take the suffix *-guo*. However, this is not absolutely impossible, for instance, when somebody's death is situated relative to a subject-locator as an event which may affect him/her more than once:

- (87) *Tā sǐ-guo yī ge xifur le.*
 he-die-GUO₁-one-CL-wife-FP
 'He has lost one wife (before).' [lit. 'He suffered one spouse to die on him.'][Such an event happened to him.] (Jahontov 1957: 32)

That is also what we may observe in a context where the present situation is assimilated to a fictitious one, in which the occurrence of the event is negated.

- (88) *Hǎoxiàng Zhào zǒngshūjì cónglái méi sǐ-guo.*
 seem-Zhao-secretary-general-never-NEG-die-GUO₁
 'It is as if the secretary-general Zhao Ziyang were never dead (had never been dead).'

This turns out to be much easier in the negative form simply because, by saying that an irreversible event has never taken place prior to the point of reference, one neither infringes the condition of separability imposed by *-guo* nor contradicts the meaning of the verb (that is, the fact that such an event can only occur once).

Likewise, any verb denoting an action the result of which is a complete disappearance of the object is incompatible with *-guo*. That's exactly the meaning of the resultative complement *diào* 'to fall, drop; remove, make disappear'.

- (89) **Zhè ge shízǐ chī diào-guo.*
 this-CL-persimmon-eat.eliminate-GUO₁

The implication of *-guo* would be that, after having been eaten completely, the persimmon reappeared and is now here again!

Yet, if there is the slightest chance of interpreting the state attained by the action as non-permanent, it is that value that will be filtered out by *-guo*.

- (90) *Tā de yá diáo-guo.*
 she/he-DE-tooth-fall-GUO₁
 'She/he once lost her teeth.' (His/her teeth fell out.)
 [Now, they have grown again.]

The fragmentation into occurrences imposed by *-guo* is generally implemented relative to a certain type of action. The object, if any, does not refer to a particular entity, but remains purely qualitative (notional).

- (91) *Wǒ qùnián chī-guo yī cì shérou.*
 I-last year-eat-GUO₁-one-CL-snake flesh
 'I ate snake flesh once last year.'
 [As for me, last year, there was one occurrence of such an event.]
- (92) *Tā tīng-guo jīngjù.*
 she-listen/hear-GUO₁-Beijing opera

'She has heard Beijing opera before.' [at least once]

As for her, there was at least one occurrence of the event <[]-listen/hear-Beijing opera>. The fragmentation is realized through the class of musical plays having the property of being Beijing operas. The action of listening/hearing does not necessarily apply to the same Beijing opera.

When the action affects a uniquely determined object, whether given in a particular situation or specified through other means, it cannot be fragmented via a class of objects, but must either be reversible:

- (93) *'Lùnyǔ' wǒ kàn-guo jǐ cì.*
 Confucian Analects-I-read-GUO₁-a few-CL
 'I have read *The Confucian Analects* several times.'

or not reach the result instantaneously. In that case, several occurrences of the action with one and the same object are possible, as the meaning of the verb allows them to be understood as not having reached the final result. This is the case par excellence of the contexts where the object is present, but where certain signs enable us to infer that there was action. See also examples (42) and (44) above.

- (94) *Shéi dōng-guo wǒ de dōngxi?*
 who-move-GUO₁-I-DE-thing
 'Who touched (moved) my things?'

The speaker realizes that somebody touched his/her things, since their position was slightly altered.

- (95) *Cháijí sháng fàng-guo yī píng huā. Hái yǒu yìnr.*
 tea table-on-put-GUO₁-one-CL-flower-still-have-trace
 'There was a vase of flowers standing on the tea table. You can still see its trace.'

- (96) *Nǐ bié chī le, zhè kuài bǐnggān wǒ chī-guo.*
 you-NEG-eat-FP-this-CL-biscuit-I-eat-GUO₁
 'Don't eat this biscuit, I bit into it!'

The speaker justifies his warning (do not eat this biscuit) by informing the addressee of the existence of a relevant previous fact.

In some particular cases where, on the one hand, the object is identified and the action is clearly terminative and, on the other hand, the context explicitly or implicitly indicates that the goal has not been attained, the verb

suffixed by *-guo* will be interpreted as an attempt to achieve this goal. This makes the notion of recurrence available again, an attempt being by definition repeatable. For example:

- (97) *Tā shā-guo nèi ge rén.*
 he-kill-GUO₁-that-CL-human
 ‘He tried (at least once) to kill that person (without success).’
 (Ma 1977: 23)

Shā ‘to kill,’ more exactly, ‘to undertake the action of killing,’ which normally ends with the death of the victim, has in (97) the meaning of ‘try to kill.’

5.2. States

For states, recurrence implies reversibility. As a general rule, the states which depend upon an agent or a factor other than the mere passage of time may recur. For example:

- (98) *Měiguó niúròu yě guì-guo.*
 America-beef-also-expensive-GUO₁
 ‘Beef in America has also been expensive (but is not now).’
 (Ma 1977: 17)
- (99) *Tā niánqīng de shíhou pàng-guo.*
 he-young-DE-time-fat-GUO₁
 ‘He used to be fat in his youth.’

However, there are states which are controlled neither by the subject nor an identifiable outside force (agent), but vary continuously simply on account of the irreversible passage of time. Some verbs denoting such irreversible and therefore non-recurrent states are nevertheless compatible with *-guo*.

- (100) *Nǐ yě niánqīng-guo, nǐ huì dǒngde wǒ de xīnqíng.*
 you-young-GUO₁-you-will-understand-I-DE-state of mind
 ‘You were young once too, you’ll understand my feelings.’

Though it is true that *niánqīng* ‘be young’ can only occur once, and is thus obviously non-recurrent, the fact remains that in order to construct a non-empty class of occurrences, which is what *-guo* implies, a single occurrence is enough.²⁵ Furthermore we are faced with a state that decreases as time passes, and eventually completely disappears at a certain point in time,

which is consistent with the requirement of separability from the point of reference, that is, the absence of the event at that moment. Accordingly, nothing precludes *niánqīng* from taking the suffix *-guo*.

The situation is totally different with another non-recurrent state *lǎo* 'be old.' This is true of positive assertion, which does not prevent *lǎo* from occurring with *-guo* in the negative form under certain conditions (no event of this type, i.e., an empty class). For instance:

- (101) *Tā cónglái méi lǎo-guo.*
 she/he-never-NEG-old-GUO₁
 'She/he has never been old.'
 [About a person who, though old, still looks young and/or is young
 at heart.]

Niánqīng and *lǎo* are both associated with the notion of ageing, which rests on the idea of the irreversibility of physical/physiological time. On the semantic level, *niánqīng* is opposed to *lǎo*, which means that they are notionally exterior to one another. However, while *niánqīng* implies the idea of getting out of the given state and consequently that of an exterior which from the chronological point of view is posterior to the state in question, *lǎo* cannot by any means be temporally conducive to *niánqīng*. In other words, *niánqīng* 'be young' is a degressive state, the intensity of the property it denotes decreases as time passes,²⁵ whereas *lǎo* 'be old' describes a progressive state as the intensity of the property increases with the passage of time. *Lǎo* may temporally follow *niánqīng*, but the opposite is not true. The only possible way of temporally getting out of *lǎo* is through the process 'to die.'

Consequently, in order to add the suffix *-guo* to a verb denoting a non-recurrent state, the latter has to be semantically compatible with the following distribution in time: presence prior to the point of reference, absence at the point of reference. For a state of this kind, the possibility of a temporal exterior constitutes the semantic minimum required for its occurrence with *-guo*. This is the case of *niánqīng*, but not of *lǎo*. Indeed, the implication of **lǎo-guo* would be that at the moment of reference the subject is not 'old,' that is to say young again,' which contradicts the physical properties of the

²⁵ -Guo presupposes the construction of a class of occurrences. Note that *niánqīng* 'be young' refers to an experience shared by all humans (and more generally by all living creatures), which accounts for the high frequency of rhetorical questions and of the adverb *yě* 'also' in this kind of example.

²⁶ *Niánqīng* 'be young' implies that one will become less and less 'young' as time goes by and a time will inevitably come (unless one dies an untimely death) when one will no longer be young at all and will thus find oneself in the exterior. That is, according to the semantic properties of this notion, in the state *lǎo* 'be old.'

notion *lǎo* ‘be old’.²⁷

In conclusion, I have shown that the necessary semantic condition for a verb to occur with *-guo* is the possibility for the predicative relationship to be construed as a non-empty class of occurrences.²⁸ This implies interchangeability of occurrences and hence discontinuity between each of them and the point of reference. To connect an occurrence to the point of reference would amount to singling it out, to determining it univocally, which contravenes the very definition of a class of occurrences and of course violates the condition of separability required by *-guo* (the absence of the event at the reference point). This allows us to clarify the problem, raised by Chen (1979), of the compatibility of *-guo* with a non-recurrent state like *níānqīng*, perceived as paradoxical when the property of recurrence is set up as a sine qua non. Recurrence is the most usual but by no means automatic consequence of the construction of a class of occurrences. It is always verified for actions, but not necessarily for stative situations.

My objective in this section has been to propose an analysis that covers all of these cases, some of which cannot be accounted for by the notion of recurrence (repeatability).

6. The Unification of *guo₁* and *guo₂*

We can now unify *guo₁* and *guo₂* at a theoretical level. The two aspectuo-temporal values that come from the verb *guò* ‘to cross, pass’ actually reflect one and the same complex operation: the division of the class of temporal points, constructed relative to a given reference time (normally the moment of speaking) into two disjoint subclasses, that may be called “past” and “present” with respect to that time, and the location of the event represented by the predicative relationship within the past subdomain. They represent its two facets, static (*guo₁*) and dynamic (*guo₂*).

It is the orientation of the relationship “locator-locatum” that differs. With GUO₁, one goes from the locator (the past taken as a set of past events) to the locatum (the event referred to by the predicative relationship <a r b>, cf. note 22): LOCATOR → LOCATUM. With GUO₂, one goes from the locatum (the event) to the locator (the past): LOCATUM → LOCATOR. This

²⁷ Of course, one could very well imagine the occurrence of *lǎo* with *-guo* in a story or some other work of fiction, where one and the same character would have the possibility of going through the various phases of life several times. Given the operation marked by the suffix *-guo*, this would in such a case imply the reconstruction of the semantic properties of *lǎo*, that is to say recurrence.

²⁸ With *-guo*, the occurrences are anchored in time. That is, we are dealing with a class of events of the type <a r b> anterior to the point of reference, and not a class of abstract occurrences. Cf. “operation of extraction” above (note 21).

can be written schematically as follows:

GUO₁: the past ⊃ E<a r b>

The past includes (is the locator for) one or more occurrences of the event <a r b>.

GUO₂: E<a r b> ⊂ the past

The event <a r b> is included (located) in the past.

Both situate relative to the past. However, while the first case (*guo₁*) falls within the predication of existence (situational anchorage of members of a notional class, cf. operation of *extraction*), the second (*guo₂*) is a location in the sense that we locate entities in space-time, that is, specify or identify the position of something with respect to a reference point or a spatio-temporal reference frame.

Existence (*guo₁*): In the past, there is one or more instances of the event <a r b>. Among the past events, there is at least one of the <a r b> type. Such an event occurred before. [This took place at least once.]

Location (*guo₂*): It's over. (It's done.) The event <a r b> – an expected, determined, occurrence – has happened, that is, has joined the class of the past events. The event <a r b> has passed and is now in the domain of the past. In plain words, the event <a r b> has passed into the class of the past events and is now an element of it.

In terms of orientation of the relationship of location, we have with the suffix *-guo* (*guo₁*) and the phase complement *guo* (*guo₂*) the same division of labor on the temporal plane as with *yǒu* ‘have/exist’ and *zài* ‘be located’ on the spatial plane. Compare:

guo₁

(102) *Wǒ chī-guo yúchī*.

I-eat-GUO₁-shark's fin

‘I have eaten shark's fin before.’ [at least once].

guo₂

(103) *Wǒ chī-guo yúchī*.

I-eat-GUO₂-shark's fin

‘I have eaten the shark's fin.’ [I am ready for the next course.]

yǒu

(104) *Chōuti lìyǒu yàoshi*.

drawer-in-have-key

‘There is/are (a) key(s) in the drawer.’ [at least one]

zài

(105) *Yàoshi zài chōuti lǐ.*

key-be located-drawer-in

‘The key(s) is/are in the drawer.’

[In the context, one knows exactly what key(s) we are talking about.]

If it weren’t for the fact that, with *guo*₂, location has a dynamic reading, not a static one, as with *zài*. Indeed, the phase complement entails an active interpretation of location. The proof of this is, as noted above, that *guo*₂ can be suffixed by the completion marker *-le*, in which case the passage among the past facts is explicitly presented as the result of the action of “passing.”

The change of orientation (direction) induces a change in the determination of the event referred to. *Guo*₁ involves interchangeable, indefinite occurrences, representative of a class or type. It has a generic value. *Guo*₂ deals with definite occurrences, uniquely determined in the context. It has a specific value. The distinction between generic and specific is basically a difference in definiteness (Culioli 1989, 1990; Iljic 1994). The expression of definiteness may be covert, as in Chinese, or overt, as in English or French.

In summary, GUO indicates in all cases that an event took place: either (*guo*₁) that in the past there is at least one occurrence of such an event (*chī-guo Zhōngguó fàn* ‘have eaten Chinese food before’); or (*guo*₂) that a uniquely identified (expected) event has happened, is over (*chī-guo fàn* ‘have had one’s meal, it’s done’).

The event is grasped globally, considered as a single unit, as a fact, regardless of its internal structure (phases or stages of its development). This presupposes an external point of view. It is as if, with GUO (both the suffix *-guo* and the phase complement *guo*), the past were broken up into a series of facts that are not only disconnected from the reference point, but also from one another. By virtue of which we I affirm that GUO possesses aoristic features.

7. Conclusion

Let me recapitulate what I hope to have shown in this article.

1. The aspect marker GUO presents aoristic properties (holisticity, discontinuity, class).
2. The grammatical meanings of the suffix *-guo* (*guo*₁) and the phase complement *guo* (*guo*₂) are the two manifestations, static and dynamic, of the underlying operation of location/inclusion into the class of the past events, hence the possibility of unification at a higher (theoretical) level. They are opposed as *existence in the past* ('there is') versus *moving into the*

- past* (i.e., passing or crossing the line between “not yet there” and “already there”).
3. The suffix and the complement differ in respect of definiteness/indefiniteness. *Guo*₁ refers to indefinite occurrences, *guo*₂ refers to definite occurrences. This is directly related to the operations involved. The operation marked by *guo*₁ corresponds to an *assertion of existence*, the operation marked by *guo*₂ corresponds to an *identification* (it presupposes existence), the actual occurrence is identical to the presupposed (expected) one. This is consistent with Lin’s (2007) view that GUO has two components: assertion and presupposition.
 4. This analysis makes it possible to compare Chinese GUO and Indo-European aoristic tenses and thereby bridges the gap between research on aspect in Indo-European and in Chinese linguistics.

I have provided a detailed, internally consistent semantic analysis of GUO that accounts for all the interpretations associated with this marker. This study has significant implications for many aspects of linguistic theory. In particular, it suggests several lines for further research in typological linguistics (distribution of aoristic features across languages), and in the theory of aspect (formal characterization of the aoristic dimension). I hope it stimulates more collaborative research within the boundaries of East Asian linguistics and across them.

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