MASS NOUNS AND COUNT NOUNS IN CLASSICAL CHINESE*

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Many linguists have noted parallels between Chinese common nouns and English mass nouns.¹ In modern spoken Chinese, these parallels are brought out by the compulsory use of classifiers with most nouns when they occur with numbers. The case is not so clear in classical Chinese, because classifiers are relatively uncommon and many nouns can be directly counted. However, the lack of a singular/plural distinction and of other markers of count nouns has led some writers to conclude that classical Chinese nouns are nonetheless mass nouns. John Cikoski presents the strongest version of this view, saying that they are “genuine mass nouns” even when they are directly counted.² A more moderate hypothesis holds that when classical Chinese nouns occur with numbers and certain other expressions they must function as count nouns, but that they normally function as mass nouns. This position has been advanced most prominently by Chad Hansen, and has also been endorsed by W.A.C.H. Dobson and A.C. Graham.³

* This article developed out of discussions with Chris Fraser, and takes advantage of several of his insights. It has also benefited from criticisms made by Donald Harper and an anonymous reviewer for Early China.


Following Hansen, I refer to the hypothesis that classical Chinese nouns parallel English mass nouns as the mass noun hypothesis. In this article I give a more precise specification and defense of this hypothesis than has hitherto been tried. (I spell out the hypothesis in detail in section 2.) I conclude that all classical Chinese nouns function most commonly as mass nouns, and that unlike English nouns, classical Chinese nouns need not be classified as count nouns or as mass nouns. My argument is concentrated in sections 4 to 6. It begins with an extended criticism of a competing analysis by Christoph Harbsmeier, which I detail in section 3.4 Harbsmeier has argued that the mass noun hypothesis is falsified by a number of “neat grammatical contrasts” between count nouns, mass nouns, and a third class he calls generic nouns.5 I show that Harbsmeier fails to draw illuminating syntactic or semantic distinctions between these noun classes, and that the mass noun hypothesis offers the best explanation of the behavior of classical Chinese nouns. Sections 7 through 10 take up some related semantic and ontological issues. First, however, section 1 discusses the nature of the distinction between count nouns and mass nouns.

1. The Nature of the Count/Mass Distinction

Intuitively, when we use a count noun (such as “tables” or “chairs”), we are construing its extension as a collection of individual items, whereas when we use a mass noun (such as “tea” or “water”), we are construing its reference as an unstructured mass. There are a number of ways to cash out this intuition, and in order to set up my comparative claims I shall discuss two of them, and explain how they relate.

First, a noun can occur in such a way that in order to understand it we have to be able to divide and count the things it refers to. (When it

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does, I will say that the noun divides its reference. In English, this happens whenever the noun is pluralized, and when it occurs directly with numbers, with “a” (or “an”), or with certain quantifiers (including “each” and “every”). I shall intellectualize somewhat, and say that when we must divide and count the reference of a noun in order to understand its contribution to a particular sentence, we do so according to a principle of individuation associated with a noun. Put simply, the principle of individuation associated with a noun “x” tells us what it is for something to count as one x. When we rely on a noun’s principle of individuation in order to interpret it, we construe its reference as a collection of units.

Many nouns that are associated with principles of individuation do not always divide their reference, so we do not always rely on their principles of individuation when we interpret sentences that use them. For example, the statement that English is a language can be understood only by someone who knows what it is for something to count as a language, and this requires her to have mastered a principle of individuation for the noun “language.” But she does not rely on this principle when she interprets the statement that language is rule-governed, since she does not need to know what counts as a single language in order to understand this statement. The noun “language” sometimes does, and sometimes does not, divide its reference. We therefore need to distinguish between the questions of whether a noun is associated with a principle of individuation, on the one hand, and of whether on a particular occasion of use it divides its reference, on the other. Intuitively, count nouns are nouns that always (or at least typically) divide their reference, whereas principles of individuation are not (or are rarely) relevant to the interpretation of the occurrence of a mass noun.

There is a second way to develop the idea that count nouns do, and mass nouns do not, construe their extension as a collection of individuals.

6. The expression is Quine’s. See, for example, W.V.O. Quine, Word and Object (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), 90–95.

7. One might try to make this criterion purely syntactic by giving an exhaustive list of the syntactic frames in which nouns must divide their reference, as in Harry C. Bunt, Mass Terms and Model-Theoretic Semantics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 12–15, but that would be of limited use for comparative work, since we would need a way to determine which classical Chinese contexts distinguish between count nouns and mass nouns. I assume that we can often tell whether a noun divides its reference on a particular occasion, and that we can distinguish between classical Chinese syntactic frames on that basis.

8. For ease of expression I write as if each noun is associated with, at most, a single principle of individuation. As I make clear in section 5, this is a simplification, but avoiding it would not affect my arguments in any significant way.
Whereas mass nouns often seem to refer to something solely in virtue of the matter it consists of, count nouns refer to things in virtue of both their matter and their form (or sometimes in virtue of their form alone). (It is largely because of this apparent relation to the matter/form distinction, and to related puzzles about identity, that philosophers have been interested in the count/mass distinction.) When we use the word “chairs,” it does not simply refer to chair-stuff (whatever that is); it refers only to chair-stuff that is actually in the form of chairs. By contrast, it ordinarily seems as if the word “water” does not pick out any qualities beyond that of consisting of water. When a noun refers to things at least partly in virtue of their formal features, I say that the standards for applying it invoke a structural threshold, so that only something that passes that threshold will be a part of the extension of the noun.

At this point, it is possible to suggest three ways in which we might distinguish between count nouns and mass nouns:

1. Count nouns are, and mass nouns are not, associated with principles of individuation.

2. If, on a particular occasion, a noun divides its reference, it occurs as a count noun on that occasion. If it does not divide its reference, it occurs as a mass noun on that occasion.

3. Count nouns are, and mass nouns are not, associated with structural thresholds.

The mass noun hypothesis is most naturally associated with the second of these ways of distinguishing between count nouns and mass nouns. In the remainder of this section, I argue that this is the correct way to mark the distinction.

Let me first say how the first and second options differ. The first distinguishes between count nouns and mass nouns at the level of the word-type. It allows us to say what class a noun belongs in without reference to any specific context. The second criterion applies at the level of a particular occurrence of a noun. It does not allow us to talk about what class a noun falls in; instead, it tells us whether on a particular occurrence the noun functions as a count noun or as a mass noun.

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9. I treat as formal any feature of a thing that goes beyond what the thing is made of. In this sense, formal features include all sorts of organizational, structural, functional, and even quantitative features.

10. I learned the distinction between functions and classes from John S. Cikoski, Classical Chinese Word Classes (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1970), 11–16; and Boltz, “Desultory Notes,” 312.
it tells us only how a noun functions on a particular occasion, it leaves open the question of how that noun functions on other occasions. It allows us to say, for example, that on some occasions “language” is a mass noun, but on other occasions it is a count noun.

It is this last feature that makes the second way of drawing the distinction more attractive than the first. The problem with the first way is that a noun can be associated with a principle of individuation and yet still occur freely as a mass noun. Indeed, in English, most of the nouns that we would intuitively classify as mass nouns are associated with principles of individuation, and thus can be used as count nouns in normal English sentences. Many linguists, including Christoph Harbsmeier (whose views are the subject of sections 3 to 5 of this article), maintain that in such cases the noun is ambiguous: one of its meanings associates it with a principle of individuation, and another doesn’t. The problem with the ambiguity thesis is that it does not explain anything that is not explained by the simpler hypothesis that a noun can be associated with a principle of individuation and yet not have that principle invoked every time the noun occurs. For example, according to the ambiguity thesis, in “I ate a pizza” the meaning of the noun “pizza” associates it with a principle of individuation; but in “I like pizza,” “pizza” has a different meaning, one that does not associate it with a principle of individuation. It is only fair to ask what this multiplication of meanings gives us that we do not get by concluding that though the noun “pizza” is associated with a principle of individuation, that principle is not invoked by every occurrence of the noun “pizza.” This problem is all the more serious given how many nouns must be ambiguous if the ambiguity thesis is true. To take the extreme case, if my arguments in section 6 are correct, the ambiguity thesis entails that there are no unambiguous count nouns in classical Chinese. This is sufficient reason to reject the ambiguity thesis. I conclude that if the distinction between count nouns and mass nouns involves principles of individuation, then

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11. I will not give any detailed justification of this claim, but will mention two common ways in which nouns that we would intuitively classify as mass nouns can be used as count nouns. First, most can be used to refer to kinds, as when the expression “three wines” is used to refer to three kinds of wine. Second, many that refer to food or drink can be used to refer to individual servings or portions, as when “three wines” refers to three glasses of wine. For more on this issue, see the many examples in Robert X. Ware, “Some Bits and Pieces,” in Mass Terms: Some Philosophical Problems, ed. Francis Jeffry Pelletier (Holland: D. Reidel, 1979), 15–29; and the discussion of the “universal grinder” in Francis Jeffry Pelletier, “Non-Singular Reference: Some Preliminaries,” in Mass Terms, 5–6. See also Keith Allan, “Nouns and Countability,” Language 56 (1980), 546–47; and Bunt, Mass Terms and Model-Theoretic Semantics, 9–12.
it applies at the level of the word occurrence, and it distinguishes between noun functions rather than noun classes.\textsuperscript{12}

There remains the third option, that of distinguishing between count nouns and mass nouns according to whether a noun is associated with a structural threshold. One problem with this option is that one can argue that many paradigmatic mass nouns are associated with microscopic structural thresholds.\textsuperscript{13} But even if we assume that structural thresholds must be macroscopic, they cannot provide the basis for the count/mass distinction. The first step towards seeing this is recognizing that a noun’s principle of individuation will always appeal to formal features of the noun’s referents. It must do this in order to differentiate between one x and two x’s, since the two cannot consist of relevantly different material. This means that when a noun divides its reference (and thus occurs as a count noun according to the second way of distinguishing count nouns and mass nouns, above), its principle of individuation will ensure that its referents pass whatever structural threshold is associated with the noun. There will therefore be no need to posit a structural threshold independent of the noun’s principle of individuation in order to explain its behavior as a count noun. It is only when the noun occurs as a mass noun that it may give us reason to associate it with an independent structural threshold. And it is only if the nouns that are associated with such independent structural thresholds correspond closely to the nouns we intuitively feel to be count nouns that structural thresholds can provide a basis for a count/mass distinction that is more satisfactory than the two I have already considered.

In order to simplify expression, I will narrow my use of the phrase “structural threshold” so that it refers only to macroscopic structural thresholds that are associated with nouns even when they occur as mass

\textsuperscript{12} My conclusion is close to that of Allan, “Nouns and Countability,” 545–47, which concludes that the count/mass distinction applies to noun phrases, rather than to lexical entries (that is, more or less, word-types). This is usually true in English, since in English the noun phrase generally includes enough information to determine whether the head noun is a count noun or a mass noun. However, the situation is different in classical Chinese, because it gives determiners much less importance than does English, and its quantifiers are not typically constituents of the relevant noun phrase. Thus, in classical Chinese it is often necessary to consider more than the noun phrase to determine whether a noun divides its reference on a particular occurrence.

\textsuperscript{13} The argument starts with Hilary Putnam’s and Saul Kripke’s well-known arguments that something that is not H\textsubscript{2}O could not count as water, whatever its macroscopic properties, and add the truism that it is at least partly in virtue of formal features—namely, its arrangement—that some collection of atomic stuff counts as H\textsubscript{2}O. See Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning,’” in Mind, Language and Reality, vol. 2 of Philosophical Papers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 223–25; and Saul Kripke, Naming and Necessity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 116–29.
nouns, and are thus independent of principles of individuation. There are two reasons for thinking that such thresholds do not give us a way to distinguish between count nouns and mass nouns. First, there are nouns that are not associated with structural thresholds but which divide their reference, and when they do it is highly unnatural to say that they are mass nouns. Relatively clear examples include the English “onion” and “culture” and the classical Chinese *mu* 木 “wood, log,” and *shui* 水 “water, stream, flood.” As a mass noun, *shui* 水 refers to all water, regardless of its form, and so it is not associated with a structural threshold; but it occurs as a count noun in expressions such as *san shui* 三水 “three rivers, three floods,” and there is no reason to think that *shui* 水 remains a mass noun in these expressions despite its apparent function in them. I would argue that most paradigmatic English count nouns (including “table” and “chair”) also display this pattern, but the issue is complicated because these nouns do not normally occur as mass nouns.

Second, nouns that are associated with structural thresholds count intuitively as mass nouns when they function as mass nouns. The best examples of this pattern are nouns such as “furniture,” “footwear,” and “fruit” that are not associated with principles of individuation, and so cannot occur as count nouns, but that are associated with structural thresholds. (I conclude in section 8 that we will probably never know if there are any classical Chinese analogues of these nouns.)

To sum up, for a noun to be a count noun it is necessary but not suf-

14. My view is that when paradigmatic English count nouns are made to function as mass nouns in unusual contexts, they lack structural thresholds. I take this to be one of the lessons to be drawn from Pelletier’s “universal grinder” (see Pelletier, “Non-Singular Reference,” 5-6). The grinder is a machine that reduces anything to its component stuff. If you put books in one end, out the other end spurts the stuff those books had been made of. Pelletier makes the plausible claim that it is appropriate to refer to the product of the grinding as book, where “book” (used as a mass noun) refers to the unstructured stuff that the books had been made of, and is not associated with a structural threshold. Unless we accept some version of the ambiguity thesis, we are left concluding that the normal English noun “book” is not associated with a structural threshold. By contrast, if the mass noun hypothesis is true, then a classical Chinese noun such as *pian* 篇 “bamboo scroll” will have to be associated with a structural threshold even when it occurs as a mass noun, since when used as a mass noun it has the same extension it has when used as a count noun. (When *pian* is used as a mass noun, it refers to all and only individual *pian*; it does not refer to the stuff that *pian* are made out of regardless of what form it is in.) This entails that Pelletier’s “universal grinder” argument could not go through in classical Chinese, since it would be inappropriate to say that when you put *pian* into the universal grinder, *pian* comes out the other end: what comes out the end is not *pian*, but the stuff that the *pian* was made of. (We get the same effect in English if we imagine what the grinder produces when we pass furniture into it. It certainly isn’t furniture that comes out the other end, though it may be a mixture of chair and table.)
ficient for it to be associated with a principle of individuation, and it is neither necessary nor sufficient for it to be associated with a structural threshold. What seems to be both necessary and sufficient is that it divide its reference and thus function as a count noun—which is to say that the distinction between count nouns and mass nouns applies primarily to nouns as they occur in particular contexts, so that taken on its own a noun does not count as either a mass noun or as a count noun.

There are two ways we might go on to say that there really are distinct classes of count nouns and mass nouns. First, one might consider the relative freedom of different nouns to function as count nouns or as mass nouns. In English, paradigmatic count nouns are nouns that are not free to function as mass nouns, and paradigmatic mass nouns typically (if not always) function as mass nouns. Such an analysis will not really be satisfying in the present context, however, since it is unlikely to result in a simple binary distinction.\textsuperscript{15}

Second, we might have to assign nouns to distinct classes in order to explain why they function as they do in particular contexts. In many cases, a noun’s syntactic context makes it clear how it is functioning. For example, any noun must function as a count noun if it is pluralized, and any noun must occur as a mass noun if it occurs with neither pluralization nor a determiner such as “a,” “the,” “that,” or “her.”\textsuperscript{16} But in English there are syntactic contexts in which different nouns function differently, and in order to explain why nouns function as they do we have to assign them to different classes (or, perhaps better, to assign binary features). For example, “water” functions as a mass noun in “her water,” but “axe” functions as a count noun in “her axe.” Because nothing in the context explains this difference, it must result from a difference between the two nouns, considered outside of any specific context. The simplest possibility is that “water” is a mass noun while “axe” is a count noun. In section 6 I conclude that the situation in classical Chinese is different, for there are no syntactic contexts in classical Chinese in which some nouns function as count nouns while others function as mass nouns. Consequently, there is no reason to classify classical Chinese nouns as count nouns and mass nouns except according to how they function in particular contexts.

\textsuperscript{15} Keith Allan, “Nouns and Countability,” 548–65, pursues this sort of analysis and distinguishes eight levels of countability among English common nouns.

\textsuperscript{16} Strictly speaking, in both of these contexts a noun can function in a third way, as a kind term. (When a noun functions as a kind term, it refers to its entire extension, but construes it as a kind, as in “Horses have four legs” and 聖人不仁 “Sages are unkind.”) Here and in the rest of the article I ignore this function; taking it into account would complicate expression without undermining my basic analysis.
2. The Mass Noun Hypothesis

The mass noun hypothesis, as I will defend it, consists of three claims:

1. All classical Chinese nouns are free to function as mass nouns.

2. Classical Chinese nouns vary in their freedom to function as count nouns. This variation is analogous to the variation among English count nouns, but in an important sense classical Chinese nouns are in general less free to function as count nouns than are their English translations.

3. In understanding and using classical Chinese sentences, it is never necessary to know whether a given noun should be classed as a count noun or a mass noun; therefore, there is no reason to classify classical Chinese nouns in this way.

An important step in understanding the mass noun hypothesis is understanding what it says about nouns such as ren 人 “person”—nouns that translate paradigmatic English count nouns. According to this hypothesis, ren 人 “person”:

1. is free to function both as a count noun and as a mass noun (like “culture”)

2. divides its reference into easily distinguishable and countable physical objects when it functions as a count noun (like “person”)

3. is associated with a structural threshold even when it functions as a mass noun (like “furniture”)

Not all classical Chinese nouns are like this, of course. They differ in their freedom to function as count nouns, and in the principles of individuation (if any) and structural thresholds (if any) that are associated with them. I will say something in the pages that follow about these differences, but the bulk of the article is given over to defending the basic mass noun hypothesis.

3. Harbsmeier’s Analysis

Christoph Harbsmeier explicitly sets out to refute the mass noun hypothesis, arguing that we should distinguish between three classes of classical Chinese noun. Two of these classes (count nouns and mass nouns) align fairly closely with classes that Harbsmeier assumes are important in English, consisting of nouns that are free to function only as count nouns (on the one hand) or as mass nouns (on the other). The third class that Harbsmeier identifies, that of generic nouns, has no
English analogue. I argue that the distinctions that Harbsmeier draws between these classes do not help illuminate classical Chinese syntax or semantics, and give us no reason to reject the mass noun hypothesis. In section 6, I turn to an issue that Harbsmeier overlooks in order to develop a more direct argument in favor of the mass noun hypothesis.

Harbsmeier does not mark a distinction between noun functions and noun classes. Consequently, I shall have to rephrase his claims considerably. This will not affect the substance of his views, though it will allow me to highlight their weaknesses.

Harbsmeier distinguishes between three functions that nouns can play. These are:

1. *Count*. The noun divides its reference into individuals.

How a noun functions can depend on certain elements of the syntactic context. Harbsmeier distinguishes between two sorts of relevant elements. Elements of the first sort *force individuation* (this expression is mine). They are associated with a certain noun phrase, and require the extension of that noun phrase to be divided. Harbsmeier’s examples of these elements include all numbers; non-specific indicators of number such as *shu* 数 “several,” *qun* 群 “the whole flock of,” *zhu* 諸 “the various,” and *zhong* 羣 “the many”; and some quantifiers, including *jian* 兼 “all, both,” *ge* 各 “each,” and *mei* 每 “every.” If one such element forces individuation on a noun phrase, the head noun of the noun phrase must divide its reference unless one of two situations obtain. The first obtains when there are several coordinate nouns in the noun phrase, and it is only necessary to divide between the separate references of the several nouns, as in “the water and the wine are both finished.” “Both” forces individuation on “the water and the wine,” but to understand the sentence we only need to distinguish between the water and the wine; the two nouns function as mass nouns. The second situation obtains when some other element of the noun phrase *takes care of individuation*, in my words. This is the work of classifiers: words that specify how the extension of a noun phrase is to be divided. Classifiers are the second sort of

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17. A classical Chinese example of this pattern might be 鳥魚皆生於陰 “birds and fish are both born of *yin*” (*Huainanzi* 淮南子 4/35/13; citations are to *pian*, page, and line in *A Concordance to the Huainanzi* [Institute of Chinese Studies Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series], ed. D.C. Lau 劉殿爵 and Chen Fong Ching 陳方正 [Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1992]). If “birds” and “fish” are count nouns in this sentence, it is probably not because of the *jie* 截 “both.”
element that Harbsmeier identifies, and he distinguishes between two kinds of classifier in classical Chinese. Itemizing classifiers appear with a small number of nouns, indicating explicitly the units into which the noun’s reference is to be divided, as in the expression *chen san ren* 臣三人 “minister three individuals = three ministers,” in which *ren* 人 “person” is used as an itemizing classifier. Other terms that can be used as itemizing classifiers include *sheng* 乘 “vehicle” and *si* 駟 “team of four,” which is used primarily of horses. These classifiers always follow the noun. Container classifiers are more familiar. They indicate a container that can be used to measure the reference of the noun, as in *san hu jiu* 三壺酒 “three pots of wine.” Container classifiers precede the noun.

I say that a noun occurs in a **count context** if some element or elements force individuation on it or the noun phrase of which it is a part, and there is no other element to take care of its individuation. In a count context, then, all nouns must divide their reference. According to Harbsmeier, they can do this in two ways. If they divide their reference into individuals, they are functioning as count nouns. If they divide their reference into kinds, they are functioning as generic nouns. A noun occurs in a **mass context** if it occurs within the scope of a classifier, and the classifier takes care of any individuation that is forced on the noun or its noun phrase. When a noun occurs in a mass context, it functions as a mass noun. A noun that is associated with none of the elements that either force or take care of individuation is in a **neutral context**. By far the majority of noun occurrences in classical Chinese are in neutral contexts.

Let me note one possibly counterintuitive consequence of the above remarks. They entail that in an expression such as *chen san ren* 臣三人 “ministers three individuals,” the noun (*chen* 臣 “minister”) functions as a mass noun. Harbsmeier explicitly recognizes this consequence only with container classifiers, considering the expression *yi ju ren* 一車人 “one cartload of people,” but there is no relevant difference between itemizing and container classifiers here. When a noun occurs with a classifier, it divides its reference according to a principle of individuation that is associated with the classifier, and not one that is associated with the noun. Thus, even though the noun’s reference is divided, the noun itself functions as a mass noun. (There are exceptions to this when some element within the scope of the classifier forces individuation. This occurs in the expression *yi ju da yu* 一車大魚 “one cartload of big fish,” which I assume to be acceptable classical Chinese. The number forces individuation, and the classifier takes care of that; but, as I argue

in section 7, the adjective da 大 “big” also forces individuation here, and there is nothing to take care of of that. In this expression, then, yu 魚 “fish” must function as a count noun. In English, we get the same result whenever the noun that occurs with a classifier is pluralized, as in “a cartload of people.”

Harbsmeier claims that the function a noun takes on in a particular context depends both on the syntactic context it occurs in and on the class of the noun. He distinguishes between count nouns, mass nouns, and generic nouns. His analysis entails that:

1. in mass contexts all nouns function as mass nouns
2. in count contexts, (a) count nouns function as count nouns, and (b) mass nouns and generic nouns function as generic nouns

Surprisingly, Harbsmeier does not state how nouns function in neutral contexts. However, given that his aim is to show that the count/mass distinction is as fundamental in classical Chinese as it is in English, I suppose he would say that:

3. in neutral contexts, (a) count nouns function as count nouns, (b) mass nouns and generic nouns function as mass nouns

It may not be obvious that Harbsmeier is committed to the claim that generic nouns function as mass nouns in neutral contexts. However, this is the natural conclusion. In neutral contexts, generic nouns must function as count nouns, as generic nouns, or as mass nouns. It is hard to believe they divide their reference in both count and neutral contexts, but do so as generic nouns in count contexts and as count nouns in neutral contexts. And Harbsmeier should not claim that generic nouns function as generic nouns in neutral contexts. If they functioned as generic nouns, they would divide their reference into kinds. But the way in which a generic noun divides its reference into kinds seems to be highly context-sensitive, at least given Harbsmeier’s examples of generic nouns. One can, for example, talk equally of si min 四民 “four kinds of people,” wu min 五民 “five kinds of people,” and liu min 六民 “six kinds of people,” depending on how one is distinguishing between kinds. 19 It is therefore appropriate for a noun to take on the generic

function only when there is an explicit indication of the criteria by which its reference is being divided into kinds. In neutral contexts, there will not in general be any such indication, and therefore it is unlikely that any nouns function as generic nouns in neutral contexts. The only remaining option is that generic nouns function as mass nouns in neutral contexts.

Harbsmeier also recognizes three grammatical rules:

1. Only count nouns can occur in count contexts where individuation is forced by shu 数 “several”; and probably by ge 各 “each,” jian 兼 “all, both,” and mei 每 “every.”

2. Only count nouns can occur with itemizing classifiers.

3. Mass nouns cannot occur in count contexts where individuation is forced by qun 群 “the whole flock of,” zhu 諸 “the various,” zhong 種 “the many,” wan 萬 “ten thousand,” and bai 百 “one hundred.”

I discuss these rules below.

4. Harbsmeier’s Grammatical Rules

Harbsmeier distinguishes between noun classes partly on the basis of the syntactic contexts that nouns can occur in. His rules 1 and 2 distinguish count nouns from nouns of other classes, and his rule 3 distinguishes mass nouns. Generic nouns are the nouns that are left over once count nouns and mass nouns have been distinguished by the rules.
In establishing these rules, Harbsmeier relies on an unjustified inference. He observes that in the extant classical Chinese texts he has surveyed, certain combinations do not occur. He infers that they cannot. He has done nothing to justify this shift in modality, even in republishing his analysis years after Graham’s criticisms of him on precisely this point. In this section, I develop Graham’s arguments, concluding that they are of much greater import than even Graham recognized. Properly understood, they show that Harbsmeier’s rules are not genuine rules of classical Chinese grammar, and therefore that the syntactic distinctions he draws between noun classes have no foundation.

I will start with rule 2. Graham notes that “even the count nouns with which we find [itemizing classifiers] are too few to establish a clear distinction from generic.” That is, Harbsmeier adduces so few nouns that can occur with itemizing classifiers, and so few generic nouns, that the fact that no generic nouns occur with itemizing classifiers is of no statistical significance. There is also at least one counter-example that Graham does not note. Harbsmeier himself cites the noun phrase 職二人 “officials two individuals,” though he claims that 職吏 “official” is elsewhere a generic noun. Thus, of the very few nouns that can occur with itemizing classifiers, at least one is a generic noun. Rule 2 should be abandoned.

Graham claims that there is an important counter-example to Harbsmeier’s rule 1, the common noun 物 “thing.” Graham argues that it functions as a generic noun in phrases such as 萬物 “ten thousand things” and 百物 “one hundred things,” naming kinds of thing rather than individual things. He then notes that 物 can occur with at least 兼 “every, both” and 各 “each,” violating Harbsmeier’s rule 1. (I will claim in section 5 that the semantics of 物 are more complicated than Graham allows, though I suspect he is correct concerning 萬物 and 百物.)

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25. In support of Graham, 物 “thing” does seem to divide its reference into kinds in the sentence 萬物之生而各異類 “as for the production of the ten thousand 物 ‘things,’ each is of a different kind” (Huainanzi 4/35/17).
Graham adds another argument that is especially powerful. In effect, he argues that even if it is true that generic nouns do not occur in certain count contexts, it was nonetheless probably acceptable for them to do so. Harbsmeier allows that one can say “four kinds of people” in classical Chinese (by saying *si min* 四民). It should follow that one can say “several kinds of people.” An obvious way to say that would be with the expression *shu min* 數民, but Harbsmeier claims that this combination would be unacceptable.26 There should therefore be another word meaning “several” which can occur with generic nouns. But Harbsmeier does not suggest a candidate for such a word, or for the generic analogues for *jian* 兼 “all,” *ge* 各 “each,” and *mei* 每 “every.” The natural hypothesis, then, is that the expression *shu min* 數民 could occur in idiomatic classical Chinese.

Graham takes these arguments to show only that Harbsmeier fails to establish a syntactic distinction between count nouns and generic nouns, but allows that Harbsmeier’s mass nouns are genuinely distinct. I believe that a stronger conclusion is justified.27 For the same reasons that *shu min* 數民 is probably acceptable classical Chinese, *shu jiu* 數酒 “several wines” is probably acceptable as well, meaning “several kinds of wine.” Once Harbsmeier admits that low numbers can force his mass nouns to divide their reference, there is no basis for the claim that this cannot also be done by *shu* 數 “several,” or by the higher numbers that are supposed to be distinctive of count nouns and generic nouns. If it is grammatical to speak of three wines, surely it is grammatical to speak of ten thousand wines (if there aren’t that many kinds of wine in the

26. There is a typographical error in Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, 316, resulting in the mistaken attribution of the expression *shu min* 數民 “several people” to Mengzi 孟子 1.2/1/14 (citations are to section, page, and line in *A Concordance to the Mengzi* [Institute of Chinese Studies Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series], ed. D.C. Lau and Chen Fong Ching [Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1995]). The expression used there is *shu min* 庶民 “numerous people,” which is cited accurately in Harbsmeier, “The Mass Noun Hypothesis,” 55.

27. Graham’s failure to draw the stronger conclusion may be based on a misreading. Graham takes Harbsmeier to be claiming that the use of container classifiers is distinctive of mass nouns in two ways: mass nouns require these classifiers when counted, and only mass nouns can occur with them (Graham, “Reflections and Replies,” 275). But Harbsmeier makes neither of these claims. He explicitly recognizes that one can directly count mass nouns in expressions such as *san jiu* 三酒 “three wines = three kinds of wine.” In “The Mass Noun Hypothesis” (to which Graham was responding), he says nothing about phrases such as *yi jiu ren* 一車人 “one cartful of people,” but in *Language and Logic*, 318, he allows that they are probably acceptable, with *ren* 人 “person” functioning here atypically as a mass noun. Thus, besides his rule 2, the only syntactic difference Harbsmeier posits between count nouns and mass nouns is that the former can, and the latter can’t, occur with certain quantifying expressions.
world, that is a fact about the world, not about grammar); and once one has listed three wines, it should be possible to make a comment about all of them.

This argument may seem weak in the absence of further counter-examples to Harbsmeier’s rule 1. However, properly interpreted, each so-called generic noun is just such a counter-example. I have concluded, with Graham, that Harbsmeier fails to establish a syntactic distinction between count nouns and generic nouns. He also does not claim that there is a semantic distinction between generic nouns and mass nouns (in count contexts, both mass nouns and generic nouns function as generic nouns; in mass contexts and neutral contexts, they both function as mass nouns). That is, he draws a syntactic distinction and a semantic distinction, and shows that they fall in different places. Of the nouns that are (according to his analysis) semantically distinct from count nouns, namely the larger group consisting of both generic nouns and mass nouns, Harbsmeier shows that some do, and some do not, occur in certain contexts—but this could hardly fail to be true. In constructing the class of generic nouns, then, Harbsmeier assumes that there is something distinctive about those nouns that have the semantic characteristics of mass nouns but the syntactic characteristics of count nouns. But the only thing distinctive of these nouns is that they contradict the hypothesis that there is a clear syntactic distinction to be drawn between count nouns and mass nouns in classical Chinese. The appropriate reaction is to abandon the hypothesis, not to construct a new class of nouns.

5. Individuation in Classical Chinese

I have shown that Harbsmeier fails to draw illuminating syntactic distinctions among his three noun classes. I also concluded that he does not claim that there is any semantic distinction between mass nouns and generic nouns. What remains is his claim that there is an important semantic distinction between his count nouns, on the one hand, and his mass nouns and generic nouns, on the other. Harbsmeier claims that when they occur in count contexts, count nouns divide their reference into individuals (er ma 二馬 = two individual horses), while mass nouns and generic nouns divide their reference into kinds (san jiu 三酒 = three kinds of wine).28 The purpose of this section is to argue that this distinction is not important. There are at least four reasons for thinking that it is inadequate:

28. If these nouns behave differently in neutral contexts, that would also be a semantic difference. But because Harbsmeier does not see the importance of neutral contexts, he does not raise this possibility. I turn to this issue in section 6.
1. **Nouns that divide their reference into individuals do not divide it into individuals of the same sort.** For the individual/kind distinction to reflect a fundamental semantic difference, we would have to have a sense of what an individual is that is prior to our knowledge of how to divide the reference of any one noun. However, the opposite seems to be the case: our knowledge of what an individual x is seems to be parasitic on our knowledge of what one x is. Nouns that divide their reference into something like individuals include “person,” “ball,” “table,” “staircase,” “sunset,” “whirlpool,” “item,” “perspective,” “culture,” “history,” “language,” and “science.” (With each of these nouns, the expression “an individual x” makes sense and is nearly equivalent to “one x.”) There is no one concept of an individual that would enable us to count all of the things referred to by these nouns. Rather, we have to learn the principles of individuation associated with each noun, and on that basis we can go on to talk of individuals.

2. **Nouns that divide their reference into individuals can often also divide their reference into kinds.** Harbsmeier mentions one example of this, a florist who stocks five flowers.29 As in his other references to non-paradigmatic English cases, Harbsmeier suggests that because this pattern occurs in English, if it occurs in classical Chinese it does not undermine the distinctions he aims to draw. This assumes that these distinctions are fundamental in English. They are not; counterexamples such as the one Harbsmeier notes are systematically reproducible in English, as the following examples demonstrate:

   a. The hardware store stocks four wrenches.
   b. The article discusses five beetles.
   c. The engine is missing a part.
   d. The cougar is a cat.

   It is natural to read each of the italicized nouns as dividing its reference into kinds. These and many other nouns (including at least those nouns that name products or animals) can easily divide their reference into kinds as well as into individuals. This means that often the individual/kind distinction distinguishes between different uses of one word, and not between words of different classes.

3. **Some nouns that divide their reference into individuals function freely as mass nouns.** The examples “culture,” “history,” “language,” and

“science,” given in (1), are all examples of this. Another, more concrete example is “pizza”: “one pizza” typically (not always) refers to an individual pizza, yet “pizza” occurs freely as a mass noun. There is no reason to think that these words are ambiguous. They merely function sometimes as mass nouns, and sometimes as count nouns; in the latter case, they divide their reference into individuals.

4. Some nouns divide their reference into neither individuals nor kinds; with these nouns the distinction doesn’t make sense. There is a sense in which two copies of War and Peace are the same book—War and Peace is one book, and Anna Karenina is another. This divides books neither into individuals (copies?) nor into kinds (genres?). Nouns whose reference has something like a semantic structure often work this way; consider “a map,” “a story,” and “a name.” With these nouns, two instances of x can count as the same x, even though “x” obviously doesn’t name a kind. Further examples would include “a situation,” “a predicament,” and “a method.”

I will try to be more specific, concentrating now on classical Chinese examples. A more complete study of principles of individuation in classical Chinese would probably confirm the following generalizations:

1. The principles of individuation associated with classical Chinese nouns do not appear to be very different from the principles associated with English nouns, though in particular cases nouns that are usually used to translate one another may not divide their reference in the same way. This makes trouble for translators, but is not significant for comparative semantics.

2. Where English has a noun that divides its reference into easily distinguishable and countable objects, classical Chinese generally has a noun that translates it that divides its reference in the same way, if it has any noun at all for that kind of thing.

3. There are probably nouns in classical Chinese that are not associated with principles of individuation, and that therefore could not function as count nouns. English examples include “furniture” and “fun.” We are probably not in a position to determine which classical Chinese nouns are of this sort, however. The strongest conclusion we could ever draw is that a certain noun never functions as a count noun in extant classical Chinese writings. It would remain possible that its failure to occur as a count noun in these writings was a coincidence.
4. Classical Chinese nouns that refer to easily distinguishable and countable objects, like their English analogues, can also divide their reference into kinds rather than individuals, given an appropriate context. Harbsmeier notes two cases of this, with huan 患 “disaster” and ma 馬 “horse.” Harbsmeier sets aside these two examples, the first as a case of lexical ambiguity and the second as “isolated and late,” but given that both instantiate a pattern that is common in English there is no reason to reject them. Also, there is an extended example of just this use in Mozi 16, where er shi 二人 “two officials” and er jun 二君 “two lords” refer to officials of two kinds and lords of two kinds, respectively. I suspect that min 民 “people,” which Harbsmeier categorizes as a generic noun, is also of this sort. While it is true that a phrase such as san min 三民 “three people” refers to three kinds of people, this is not a plausible way to construe wan min 萬民 “ten thousand people.” Also, in Mengzi 1.6/3/17, 3.5/17/30, and elsewhere, min jie 民皆 “people all . . .” indicates all individual people, rather than all kinds of people.

5. Some nouns that can function as mass nouns have count uses where they divide their references as do fairly typical English count nouns—into individuals rather than kinds. To make this point I will have to rely on some relatively exceptional cases. This is because with the more ordinary cases someone who adopts Harbsmeier’s analysis would insist that the relevant nouns are always count nouns, and I am not yet ready to argue that she

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30. Ci shu huan 此數患 “these several disasters” refers to individual disasters at Zhuangzi 莊子 53/20/38 (citations are to page, pian, and line in Zhuangzi yinde 莊子引得, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 20 [Peiping: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1947]), but qi huan 七患 “seven disasters” refers to kinds of disaster in the title and opening passage of Mozi 墨子 5; see Mozi 4/5/1 (citations are to page, pian, and line in Mozi yinde 墨子引得, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement No. 21 [Peiping; Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1948]). Harbsmeier discusses this example in “The Mass Noun Hypothesis,” 52. When it occurs as a count noun, ma “horse” usually refers to individual horses, but the expression liu ma 六馬 “six horses” refers to six kinds of horses at Zhou li 周禮 4.51/60/13 (citations are to section, page, and line in A Concordance to the Zhouli [Institute of Chinese Studies Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series], ed. D.C. Lau and Chen Fong Ching [Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1993]). Harbsmeier mentions this case in “The Mass Noun Hypothesis,” 58, and Language and Logic, 319. Ma 馬 probably also divides its reference into kinds of horses in the stock expression liu ma 六馬 “the six horses,” which refers to the horses that take up six positions on a team, as in Hanfeizi 34.717.

31. Mozi 25/16/23–26/16/45.
would be wrong. In these ordinary cases, the extension of the noun is made up entirely of the sort of entity that is picked out by the noun’s principle of individuation. Thus, the noun can only be used to refer to entities of the sort that are picked out by the noun’s principle of individuation. (I am thinking here of nouns such as ren 人 “people.”) My argument that even such nouns are usually mass nouns will come in section 6. Here I will consider cases where a noun’s extension (at least when the noun functions as a mass noun) is not entirely made up of the sort of entity that is picked out by the noun’s principle of individuation. Examples of such nouns include jin 金 “metal, coin,” mu 木 “wood, piece of wood, tree,” shi 石 “stone, stone,” and shui 水 “water, river, flood, flow.” Shi, to take one example, does not always come in the form of one or more shi’s—some shi does not display the formal features picked out by the principle of individuation associated with the noun shi 石. In order to refer to this shi, it is necessary to use shi 石 as a mass noun, so that its principle of individuation will not be triggered. Nonetheless, when the word is used as a count noun, it refers to individual shi, and not to kinds of shi. Of these cases, Harbsmeier explicitly mentions only jin 金 “metal, coin,” saying that it is ambiguous.32 However, everything that makes it seem ambiguous is adequately explained once we recognize that the word’s principle of individuation is triggered only some of the time.

6. Many nouns relativize the way they divide their reference to the way in which their reference is described elsewhere in the context. In English, one example is “desire,” which divides its reference into units of desire each of which can be described by a single infinitive or that-clause. We find a similar pattern in the following classical Chinese examples:

老老而壯者歸焉，不窮窮而通者積焉，行乎冥冥而施乎無報，而賢不肖一焉。人有此三行，雖有大過，天其不遂乎。

Treat the aged as aged and vigor will be restored by it. Do not impoverish the poor and success will be accumulated by it. Act unseen and work without recompense, and the worthy and ignoble will be unified by it. If people have these three xing 行 “behaviors,” although there be great calamity, it is not nature’s doing.33

Accordingly, laboring one’s muscles but not being appropriate to the people’s service is called wicked business. Laboring one’s understanding but not modeling oneself after the former kings is called wicked heart. Distinguishing and persuading, comparing and illustrating, setting things out and making them serve, but not following the rituals and duties is called wicked persuasion. These three jian “wickednesses” are what the sages prohibited.34

Accordingly, rulers desire security, so nothing compares to balanced policies and caring for of the people. They desire honor, so nothing compares to encouraging ritual and respecting the officials. They desire to establish a successful reputation, so nothing compares with elevating the worthy and employing the capable. These are the great measures of a ruler. If these three jie “measures” are in place, then everything else will be in place. If these three measures are not in place, then even if everything else is more or less in place, it won’t do any good.35

Those who serve as people’s masters all desire strength and hate weakness, desire security and hate danger, desire honor and hate disgrace. In this Yu and Jie were the same. Seeking these three yu 欲 “desires” and avoiding these three wu 惡 “hatreds” — what way will ultimately achieve this?36

The list of nouns in (6) could be extended indefinitely. In each case, we divide the extension of the noun into units analogous to the ones that are explicitly listed. In none of these cases is the individual/kind distinction relevant.

Let me discuss two terms that are especially interesting: wu 物 “thing”
and *shi* 療 “reality.” *Wu* 物 “thing,” like the English “thing,” often divides its reference according to the way it is divided elsewhere in the linguistic context, perhaps implicitly:

祁奚...稱其讎,不為諂;立其子,不為比;舉其偏,不為黨…建一官而三物成,能舉善也。
Qi Xi... in praising his enemy was not engaging in flattery; in establishing his son was not being partial; and in promoting his side was not acting on behalf of a faction... Being elevated to one office but having three *wu* 物 “things” accomplished—it was being able to promote the talented.37

公共曰: 何謂六物? 
對日: 岁、時、日、月、星、辰, 是謂也。
The Duke said: What do you mean by the six *wu* 物 “things”?

He replied: The year, the seasons, the celestial stems, the months, the constellations, and the terrestrial branches—these are what I mean.38

為君臣上下, 以則地義; 為夫婦外內, 以經二物。
[Ritual] sets lord and minister above and below in order to obey the dutifulness of the earth; it sets husband and wife outside and inside in order to channel the two *wu* 物 “things.”39

或求名而不得, 或欲蓋而名章, 懲不義也。齊豹為衛司寇, 守嗣大夫, 作而不義, 其書為盜。邾庶其、莒牟夷、邾黑肱以土地出, 求食而已, 不求其名。賤而必書。此二物者, 所以懲肆而去貪也。

Some seek a name and fail to get one, some seek obscurity and


38. *Zuo zhuan*, Duke Zhao 7.14/340/24. The *wu* 物 here seem to be various lengths of time defined by natural cycles, though this passage is subject to commentarial disagreement. (I have based my translation on commentaries cited by Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu Zuo zhuang zhu*, 1297.)

39. *Zuo zhuan*, Duke Zhao 25.3/387/8. The “two things” are probably husband and wife, or perhaps their roles. James Legge, *The Chinese Classics, Volume 5: The Ch’uan Te Chuan* with the *Tso chuen* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 708, treats husband, wife, inner, and outer as four distinct things. Presumably the two things would then be the two distinctions in question.
their name is emblazoned. This warns against lack of dutifulness. Qi Bao was the minister of crime in Wei, a great gentleman by inheritance. In his initiatives he was not dutiful, and thus he is written [in the Chunqiu] as a robber. Shu Qi of Zhu, Mou Yi of Ju, and Hei Gong of Zhu took their lands and left, seeking nothing but food, not seeking a reputation. They were humble, but they had to be written in. These two wu 物 “things” are the way to warn against indulgence and be done with greed.40

The major difference between shi 實 “reality” and wu 物 “thing” is that the former seems particularly suited to contexts where the reality is being contrasted with what is said about it, and does not seem to take on an anaphoric role as freely as does wu 物. Shi 實 “reality” divides its reference into individuals, into kinds, and into realities that are neither individual nor generic in any obvious sense:

二名一實，重同也。
Two names and one shi 實 “reality,” this is the sameness of doubling.41

物有同狀而異所者，有異狀而同所者，可別也。狀同而為異所者，雖可合，謂之二實。狀變而實無別而為異者，謂之化。有化而無別，謂之一實。
Among wu 物 “things,” some have the same features but different places, some have different features but the same place; these can be separated. Where the features are the same but it is deemed to be a different place, though they can be brought together, call it two shi 實 “realities.” Where the features change so that though the shi 實 “reality” is not separated it is deemed different, call it transformation. If there is transformation but no separation, call it one shi 實 “reality.”42

攻伐之與救守，一實也。
Attacking it and defending it are one shi 實 “reality.”43

40. Zuo zhuan, Duke Zhao 31.5/403/30. Here the “two things” are the two narratives, or the lessons they exemplify.
41. Mozi 69/42/41. Here “one reality” most likely refers to one kind of thing. The stock example for the situation described here is dogs, who can be referred to both as gou 犬 and as quan 犬. All dogs taken together count here as one reality. See A.C. Graham, Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978), 218, 335; cf. Mozi 67/41/27 and Graham, Later Mohist Logic, 408–9.
42. Xunzi 22/109/11. Shi 實 here are distinguished by spatial separateness. Thus shi 實 “reality” is now dividing its reference into individual things.
43. Lushi chunqiu 7.3/35/13. Here one shi 實 is just one reality, as distinct from the way it is described, and the individual/kind distinction doesn’t apply. We might get a
As the examples above illustrate, the differences among the principles of individuation associated with nouns in classical Chinese are far more complex than Harbsmeier’s appeal to the individual/kind distinction allows. Above all, they do not allow us to distinguish nouns into two classes, according to which of two kinds of principles of individuation each is associated with.

I now leave the question of how various nouns divide their reference, and turn to the question of when they divide their reference.

6. Neutral Contexts

A noun occurs in a neutral context when nothing forces individuation on it and it does not occur with a classifier. Classical Chinese nouns occur in neutral contexts far more frequently than they occur in either count contexts or mass contexts. Determining how nouns function in neutral contexts is thus essential to any argument either for or against the mass noun hypothesis. The most important weakness of Harbsmeier’s analysis is that it does not address these contexts. In this section, I argue that in neutral contexts all classical Chinese nouns can function as mass nouns and none can function as count nouns. Given how common neutral contexts are, this conclusion will entail the three claims that make up the mass noun hypothesis advanced in section 2:

1. Since all classical Chinese nouns can function as mass nouns in neutral contexts, and since all classical Chinese nouns are free to occur in neutral contexts, all classical Chinese nouns are free to function as mass nouns.

2. Since classical Chinese nouns function as count nouns in a much smaller range of contexts than do their English counterparts, they are less free than English nouns to function as count nouns.

3. Since all classical Chinese nouns function in the same way as one another in neutral contexts, and since they also function in the same way as one another in both count and mass contexts, there is no need to classify them as count nouns or as mass nouns in order to explain how they function.

similar effect in English by saying that attacking and defending are “really the same thing” or that they “amount to the same thing.” (Chris Fraser brought this example to my attention.)

44. I adopt this phrasing in order to allow for the fact that most nouns can function as kind terms in some neutral contexts.
Let me first return to the issue of what makes a particular noun a count noun. In section 1, I argued that the count/mass distinction applies primarily to individual occurrences of nouns, and only derivatively (if at all) to nouns considered outside of any particular context. This is why we cannot settle the question of how a noun functions in neutral contexts by showing how it functions in count or mass contexts. I also maintained that what distinguishes count nouns is that they divide their reference. A noun is a count noun just if we rely on its principle of individuation when we interpret the sentence it occurs in. This means that a noun is a count noun on a particular occasion if, and only if, the meaning of the sentence it occurs in requires that it divide its reference.

There are just two reasons why we might have to divide the reference of a noun in order to understand a sentence, and consequently just two reasons we might give for thinking that a noun occurs as a count noun in a particular sentence:

1. Often we have to divide the reference of a noun to determine its scope on a particular occasion. For example, in order to know what the expression *san ma* 三馬 “three horses” refers to, we need to know how much horse counts as one *ma* 馬 — we need to divide the reference of *ma* 馬 in order to determine how much horse the expression refers to. In general, when we must count the items that make up a noun’s extension in order to determine its scope, the noun must be functioning as a count noun if it is not accompanied by a classifier.

2. Sometimes we use count nouns in order to indicate that we are making claims about the things it refers to taken as individuals, and not as an aggregate. For example, 物各從其類也 “It is because each thing follows its own kind”45 is a statement about each (living) thing taken separately. (It does not say that all things together constitute a kind, and each thing follows things of that kind—namely, all other things.) Similarly, regardless of whether the expression *da shu* 大樹 “big tree” refers to one tree or many, it tells us that each tree is big on its own, and not that the group of trees it refers to is big. We therefore have to divide the reference of the noun *shu* 樹 “tree” in order to interpret the expression. In general, whenever a statement is about the reference of a noun divided into individuals (rather than as a whole), then in order to interpret the sentence correctly it is necessary to divide the reference

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45. *Xunzi* 1/2/5.
of the noun. The noun must then be a count noun if there is no classifier to divide its reference for it.

Consider the following sentence:

北冥有魚，其名為鯤。
In the northern darkness there is a fish, its name is Kun.

The word *yu* 魚 “fish” occurs in a neutral context in this sentence. It refers to a particular fish or group of fish, so it is not a kind term—it must be either a count noun or a mass noun. If it is a count noun, then the fact that it divides its reference must contribute to the meaning of the sentence in one of the two ways I noted above. However, it makes neither sort of contribution. First, since the sentence, taken on its own, could easily be about any number of fish, we cannot determine the scope of the noun *yu* 魚 at all. *A fortiori*, we do not determine it by dividing the reference of the noun. Second, the sentence does not say that each of a group of fish is present in the northern darkness. Even if this interpretation is genuinely distinct from the interpretation according to which the sentence simply says that a group of fish are present in the northern darkness, there is no reason to prefer the first interpretation. But we would be justified in saying that *yu* 魚 is a count noun here only if the first interpretation were clearly correct. I conclude that *yu* 魚 is a mass noun in this sentence.

Now consider this sentence:

昔者莊周夢為胡蝶。
Last night Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly.

First, I assume that there is no way to interpret this sentence so that *huodie* 胡蝶 “butterfly” refers to a group of butterflies, taken as individuals rather than as a group; we therefore lack the second of the two

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46. There are many cases where it is not clear that the two potential interpretations of a sentence differ in any significant way. In these cases, the noun occurs as a mass noun, since dividing its reference would not alter the meaning of the sentence. (I consider cases of this sort in section 7.)

47. *Zhuangzi* 1/1/1.

48. *Ming* 名 “name” also occurs in a neutral context; I will discuss it below. *Kun* 鯤 “fish eggs” and *bei ming* 北冥 “northern darkness” may both be proper names. Even if they are, both still have descriptive content, and my arguments in the main text are relevant to determining what that content is. For example, they entail that the fish would have as a name a mass noun (Fish Roe) rather than a count noun (Fish Eggs). (I thank Donald Harper for suggesting this idea.) If, as many commentators suggest, *kun* 鯤 is the name of a species of large fish rather than a proper name, then it would be occurring as a kind term, and not as either a count noun or a mass noun.

49. *Zhuangzi* 7/2/94.
potential reasons for thinking that hudie is a count noun in this sentence. We will have the first sort of reason for thinking that it is a count noun only if we both know something about the scope of the hudie (for example, that it is a single butterfly), and have to divide the reference of that noun in order to know this. I will leave aside the possibility that Zhuang may have dreamed he was several butterflies, for even if we conclude that he can only have dreamed himself to be a single butterfly, we do not reach this conclusion by dividing the reference of the noun hudie. It is not so much the sentence itself that tells us that Zhuang dreamt of himself as a single butterfly as it is a conviction that personal identity remains singular even in dreams—common sense, and not semantics. (It would be semantics if the sentence were something like 昔者莊周夢為一胡蝶 “Last night Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was one butterfly” or, for that matter, 昔者莊周夢為數胡蝶 “Last night Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was several butterflies.” We would be forced to divide the reference of the noun hudie 胡蝶 in order to determine what yi hudie 一胡蝶 “one butterfly” and shu hudie 數胡蝶 “several butterflies” refer to.)

This illustrates an important point. Often it is fairly clear what the scope of a noun is, but we know what the scope is from contextual factors, not because we have divided the reference of a noun. When we know a noun’s scope in this way, the noun might itself be functioning as a mass noun. Here are another two examples:

攦工倕之指.
Crush the fingers of artisan Chui.\(^{50}\)

亦將有以利吾國乎.
Indeed you must have something with which to benefit my state!\(^{51}\)

Encountering these sentences, we know that zhi 指 “finger” purports to refer to several fingers, and that guo 國 “state” refers to a single state. But this is because we know that artisan Chui, if such a person existed, almost certainly had several fingers, and that King Hui of Liang had only one state. The sentences themselves are ambiguous with respect to the scope of the nouns in question. (It would be appropriate to use either sentence unchanged in a situation in which it would be natural to interpret the key noun with an arbitrarily different scope. For example, the second sentence would be perfectly appropriate even if the person uttering it controlled several states.) Thus, though we know the scope of the nouns in question, we do not know this because we know which

\(^{50}\) Zhuangzi 24/10/26.
\(^{51}\) Mengzi 1.1/1/3.
principles of individuation are associated with the nouns. The two nouns are functioning as mass nouns.

My interpretation of these examples may be counter-intuitive, so I offer another example that is structurally identical, but in which it is easy to believe the noun is functioning as a mass noun. The example is an extended narrative from the *Zuo zhuan* that concerns a jade ring.52 (Han Xuanzi 韓宣子 of Jin 晉 has let the ring fall into the hands of a merchant in Zheng 郑, and is trying to recover it.) The narrative is explicitly about a single ring: it is first mentioned as one of a number of disks, and is referred to both as *yi huan* 一環 “one jade ring” and as *yi yu* 一玉 “one jade = one piece of jade.”53 However, the text refers to the jade most often simply as *yu* 玉 “the jade.”54 When the text does this, its use of the word *yu* 玉 is precisely parallel to the use of the words *zhi* 指 “fingers” and *guo* 國 “state” in the examples mentioned above, and the argument for considering these mass nouns is the same in each case. Though all three can be used as count nouns, and though in each case we know the scope of the noun, each noun occurs as a mass noun in the sentences I am discussing. The only difference is that intuitions based on English (and similar languages) support the mass noun interpretation of *yu* 玉 “jade,” though they conflict with mass noun interpretations of *zhi* 指 “fingers” and *guo* 國 “state.”

One important corollary of these remarks is that using a mass noun to refer to something does not by itself construe that thing as an unstructured mass.55 Here it is important to differentiate between the question of whether a noun divides its reference on a particular occasion, and the question of whether it is associated with a structural threshold. To return to an example from above, in saying that *ming* 名 occurs as a mass noun in the sentence 其名為昆 “Its name is Kun,” I do not make any claim about what sort of thing the writer of this sentence took a name to be. In particular, I do not claim that the word was taken to refer to a kind of name-stuff (whatever that might be). Whether a noun refers to unstructured stuff or not is determined by the structural threshold it is associated with, if any. The question of whether it functions as a count noun or as a mass noun is not relevant to this issue. *Ming* 名


53. The ring is introduced with the sentence 宣子有環，其一在鄭商 “Xuanzi had jade rings, one of them was held by a merchant in Zheng” (*Zuo zhuan*, Duke Zhao 16.3/364/15). It is referred to as *yi huan* 一環 at Zhao 16.3/364/17, and as *yi yu* 一玉 at Zhao 16.3/364/22.


55. This paragraph responds to a concern raised by an anonymous referee for *Early China*. I address a related issue in section 10.
occurs as a mass noun, but this does not have any bizarre ontological consequences.

It is easy to generalize my conclusions above, because they follow directly from the lack of a singular/plural distinction in classical Chinese. Recall how English nouns function when they occur with possessive pronouns and no plural morpheme. “Water” functions as a mass noun in “her water,” but “axe” functions as a count noun in “her axe.” The difference is that we know how many axes “her axe” refers to (one), but we have no specific idea how much water “her water” refers to. The fact that “axe” functions as a count noun in “her axe” is relevant only because we know that it would be “her axes” if it referred to more than one axe. That is, it is relevant only because “axe,” interpreted as a count noun, is marked singular. Thus, if there were no explicitly marked distinction between singular and plural count nouns, and we therefore could not interpret “axe” as singular, then we would have no reason to say that “axe” functions as a count noun in “her axe.” In classical Chinese, there is no such distinction, so we can interpret a noun as singular or as plural only when it occurs with explicit indications of number, such as the ones that Harbsmeier concentrates on. When a noun occurs in a neutral context, it occurs without such indications of number, so we do not have to divide its reference in order to determine its scope. This will often mean that the noun occurs as a mass noun.

This conclusion must be qualified in two ways. First, I have not addressed everything that can force individuation on classical Chinese nouns. In particular, even if a noun’s principle of individuation does not help us determine its scope on a particular occasion, we may have to rely on it if the sentence it occurs in is about the reference of that noun taken as a group of individuals rather than as a whole. This issue is relatively complex in classical Chinese, and I take it up in the next section. Second, I have said nothing about when classical Chinese nouns function as kind terms, and thus as neither count nouns nor as mass nouns. This can happen neither in count contexts nor in mass contexts, but is possible in many neutral contexts. (Like English, classical Chinese does not appear to have any contexts in which any noun must function as a kind term; it is possibly unlike English in having no nouns, such as “humankind,” that are free only to function as kind terms.) In order to further study this issue, one might make a typology of those elements (including, for example, possessive pronouns but not demonstratives) that rule out the possibility that a given noun functions as a type noun. Or one might try to determine what elements in a context tend to suggest that a noun functions as a type noun. These issues go beyond the scope of this article, and I leave them aside.
Neither of these qualifications undermines the mass noun hypothesis, however. All nouns occur frequently in neutral contexts. No nouns can function as count nouns in neutral contexts, and all nouns frequently function as mass nouns when they do occur in neutral contexts. There is no context in which some nouns can only function in one way, and other nouns must function in another way.

7. Division into Autonomous Units

In section 6 I noted that sometimes we divide the reference of a noun not in order to determine scope, but because the sentence says something about a plurality of things that it does not say of the things taken as an aggregate or whole. For example, the phrase “big people” refers to a group of people each of whom is big, and not to a big group of people. The classical Chinese da ren 大人 “big person, people” is the same, except that there is no plural to force individuation: the modifier da 大 “big” must do that on its own. In this section, I give a brief account of the conditions under which elements of classical Chinese sentences force individuation to this end.

There are quantifiers (such as ge 各 “each” and xiang 相 “each other, one another”) that explicitly force this sort of individuation, but I will focus on expressions of other sorts. Where a given noun phrase is the adjunct of a preposition or a verb, potentially it will be forced to individuate; and the same is true of that part of the noun phrase that is subject to modification by an adjective. In any of these cases, the principle of individuation can be given in one of three ways: by an intervening classifier (“each bottle of water,” “big bottles of water”), by the divisions between the discrete references of different nouns in the noun phrase (“between the water and the grass”; lists usually cannot take care of individuation that is forced in this way, however), or by a principle of individuation associated with the head noun or nouns of the noun phrase.

I have already raised one important issue. The fact that the expressions I will be discussing must occur with count nouns can be handled, at least to a large extent, by co-occurrence restrictions in English. “Big,” for example, normally occurs only with count nouns. The situation in classical Chinese is different, because often the nouns in question will not otherwise be marked as count nouns. In English, we might say that the use of certain expressions requires individuation; in classical Chinese we must conclude instead that these expressions force individuation.

Another problem is that it is often not obvious whether a given sentence is about a group of things taken one by one, or as a whole. In particular cases our judgments may depend on intuitions about English
that are irrelevant to an analysis of classical Chinese semantics. (Intuitions that we may have about classical Chinese cannot count as evidence either; it is a dead language.) Consider the sentence “Cattle and sheep then come and graze on it.” There is a sense in which the animals must have done their grazing as individuals, but I doubt that this provides any justification for concluding that 牛羊 “cattle and sheep” function as count nouns here. We can and do say that a herd is grazing, so there is nothing unnatural in attributing that action to a group rather than to individuals. Further, it makes no clear difference to the meaning of the sentence from the Mengzi which way we interpret it. Since there is nothing else to force individuation on these nouns, it is simplest to take them as mass nouns, with the verb applying to the whole.

Here is another example where this issue is important:

登高而招，臂非加長也，而見者遠；順風而呼，聲非加疾也，而聞者彰。

If you climb heights and wave, it is not that your arms have added length, but they are seen further away. If you follow the wind and call, it is not that your voice has added shrillness, but it is heard more distinctly. We have long arms and shrill voices, conveniently translated into English using count nouns, and indeed there is an intuitive sense in which the sentence must be about some number of arms, each of which is of a certain length, and a certain number of voices, each of which is of a certain shrillness. However, this does not mean that there are count nouns in the classical Chinese. There would be no important change of sense if we translated 聲 “voice” instead with the mass noun “sound,” and little change if we rendered 臂 “arm” with the mass noun “reach.” The sentence sets up comparisons between two situations, and what is important is not so much the length or shrillness of each arm and voice, but the length and shrillness of the aggregate of arms and voices in each situation: the sentence concerns the whole, and not the parts. Thus, we have no reason to deny that 聲 “voice” and 臂 “arm” (as well as 高 “height” and 風 “wind”) function as mass nouns in this sentence.

Let me turn to some classical Chinese sentences that are clearly about the parts rather than the wholes. In these sentences, it is necessary to divide the reference of a noun in order to correctly understand what is being said about it, even though the scope of the noun may be left

56. Mengzi 11.8/59/11.
57. Xunzi 1/1/12.
entirely unspecified. This occurs most commonly when the noun is modified by an adjective whose applicability depends on how much of something one considers. For example:

不積小流，無以成江海。
If you do not accumulate xiao liu 小流 “small flows,” you will lack that by which to form rivers and seas.\(^{58}\)

The adjective xiao 小 “small” must apply to the flows in question taken one-by-one, and not as a whole, because the whole point of the sentence is that the aggregate of small flows constitutes a large one. Liu 流 “flow” therefore occurs as a count noun. More generally, xiao 小 typically applies to the parts rather than to the whole of a noun’s reference, so it typically forces individuation. (It does not force individuation when its sense is moralistic, as in xiao ren 小人 “common people.”)

Da 大 “big” is precisely analogous to xiao 小, as in the following example:

吾在於天地之閒，猶小石小木之在大山。
I am between the sky and the ground like a small stone or small tree on da shan 大山 “a large hill.”\(^{59}\)

Adjectives can force individuation without indicating physical size, as in this example:

王速出令，反其旄倪，止其重器，謀於燕眾，置君而後去之，則猶可及止也。
If your majesty quickly issues orders to return their old and young and to leave their zhong qi 重器 “valuable vessels,” consults with the Yan masses, establishes a ruler, and then leaves, then [the attack] can still be prevented.\(^{60}\)

The reference of zhong qi 重器 is to a number of vessels, each of which is valuable, not to a valuable collection. As with xiao 小 “small” and da 大 “big,” whether or not something counts as zhong 重 “heavy, valuable” depends on how much of it one considers. A collection of cheap cups can be valuable if it is large enough, just as a collection of small flows can constitute a large river.\(^{61}\) With each of the three adjectives, we arrive

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58. Xunzi 1/2/10.
59. Zhuangzi 42/17/9. Da 大 also has a moralistic use in which it does not force individuation.
60. Mengzi 2.11/12/7.
61. The Mohists seem to mark this distinction in Mozi 76/44/33:
苟是石也白，敗是石也盡與白同。是石也唯 虽 [≠雖] 大，不與大同。
If this stone is white, then broken this stone is all the same as the white. If the stone was big, it is not the same as the big thing.
at significantly different interpretations depending on whether we take it to apply to parts or the whole of the reference of the noun it modifies. Since in all three examples, general grounds of plausibility unambiguously support the first sort of interpretation, we must divide the reference of the nouns modified by these adjectives in order to correctly interpret the sentences they occur in. Because there are no classifiers in these sentences, the nouns function as count nouns.

In the following sentence, tong 同 “same,” functioning as an adverb, has a similar effect:

心之所同然者何也？
What is it that hearts tong 同 “equally” approve of？

The sentence asks us to take each heart on its own, see what it approves of, and then determine what it is that all hearts taken as individuals approve of. The force of tong 同 “same” here is similar to “all,” and in order to take it into account we must divide the reference of the noun xin 心 “hearts,” presumably in such a way that each person has a single xin.

In principle, it should be possible for both prepositions and verbs to have similar effects, but I do not know of any example in which they do. In particular, classical Chinese does not seem to have any prepositions analogous to the English “between” and “among,” each of which requires a plural adjunct. To take the two most obvious candidate expressions, neither zai…zhi jian/xian 在…之間/閒 “between, within” nor zai…zhi zhong 在…之中 “among, within” must occur with plurals. With verbs, it is in general natural to take the reference of the noun as a whole as the relevant unit, so no individuation is necessary. However, this issue requires further study.

I have been assuming that if a noun divides its reference, it does so in accordance with an associated principle of individuation, and therefore functions as a count noun. Examples such as the following might seem to challenge this assumption:

木直中繩，輮以為輪，其曲中規，雖有槁暴，不復挺者，輮使之然也。
Mu 木 “wood,” if it is zhi 直 “straight,” matches the plumb-line. If you steam it and thereby make it round, its bend will match the compass. Even if there is drying heat, it will not be restored to straightness. It is the steaming that makes it so.

63. See, for example, the sentences 以偷生反側於亂世之閒 “In order to make off with their lives they switch sides in a disorderly age” (Xunzi 4/14/14) and 夢之中又占其夢焉 “Within a dream—one even interprets one’s dream there” (Zhuangzi 6/2/82).
64. Xunzi 1/1/3.
The adjective *zhi* 直 “straight” forces individuation, because whether or not some wood is *zhi* 直 depends on the straightness of the pieces of wood and not on the straightness of the aggregate into which they are assembled. (It is impossible to make a collection of bent sticks *zhi* 直 by arranging them into a straight rectangle.) But the expression *zhi mu* 直木 “straight wood” translates into English most naturally with the mass noun “wood” translating *mu* 木. When we encounter the English expression “straight wood,” we rely on common sense to individuate the wood in question, and not on a principle of individuation associated with the noun “wood.” Could we not do the same with the classical Chinese expression, and thus could not *mu* 木 be occurring there as a mass noun? I will not deny that there were probably acceptable classical Chinese sentences that required this sort of commonsense individuation. But in cases such as the present one, the simplest and best hypothesis is that when an adjective forces individuation on a noun, normally that noun functions as a count noun.

### 8. Structural Thresholds in Classical Chinese

I have concluded that the classical Chinese analogues of English count nouns are free to function as mass nouns. This need not mean that they are not associated with structural thresholds. As I argued in section 1, it is only when nouns function as mass nouns that the question of structural thresholds can even arise.

A more complete study of structural thresholds in classical Chinese would probably find something like the following:

1. Many classical Chinese nouns are associated with structural thresholds and principles of individuation in such a way that if you can refer to something as x, you can also refer to it as a certain number of x’s. For such nouns, something that does not count as some number of x’s cannot count as x. Probable examples include *ren* 人 “person,” *ju* 車 “cart,” and *niao* 鳥 “bird.” The English translations of these nouns lack a structural threshold, because they are not free to function as mass nouns. It is possible that the rela-

65. Commonsense individuation is required to interpret sentences such as 金重於羽 “Metal is heavier than feathers” (*Mengzi* 12.1/62/3), where the point is surely not that some number of coins is heavier than an equal number of feathers. On the general issue of modification and individuation, see Bunt, *Mass Terms*, 197–211.

66. Note that we are prevented from drawing this conclusion in the English case only because the lack of a determiner and a plural morpheme forces us to treat “wood” as a mass noun even in the expression “straight wood.” There is no similar pressure to treat the classical Chinese *mu* 木 “wood” as a mass noun in *zhi mu* 直木 “straight wood.”
tive unimportance of count nouns in classical Chinese is offset by a much greater role played by structural thresholds. (Note my claim in n. 14 that paradigmatic English count nouns are not associated with structural thresholds.)

2. There are also classical Chinese nouns that have principles of individuation but no macroscopic structural thresholds, though this sort of noun is not nearly so common in classical Chinese as it is in English. Examples include *shi 石* “stone” and *shui 水* “water, river, flow.” In both cases, something can count as x without counting as one x (as the parts of a stone are stone but not stones).

3. If classical Chinese has nouns that have macroscopic structural thresholds but lack principles of individuation (analogous to English “furniture” and “footwear”), we will probably never know it. I mentioned in section 5 the difficulties with showing that a noun lacks a principle of individuation. Locating this sort of noun has the added problem that the fact that a given noun is associated with a macroscopic structural threshold is plausibly a good reason to expect it to have also a principle of individuation, in the absence of disconfirming evidence—and it is hard to know what would count as disconfirming evidence here in the absence of native speakers’ intuitions.

9. The Neutrality of Count Nouns

There are many nouns in English that can function freely only as count nouns. Partly as a result, it is common to use a noun as a count noun when the inferences this supports (especially concerning scope) are uninformative or irrelevant to communicative purpose. (This happens whenever a noun is pluralized with no further indication of number, for example.) In these situations, a mass noun would do just as well, but English forces us to use a count noun. As I have argued, in these situations classical Chinese allows the more natural mass noun. One consequence of this is that English count nouns are often neutral in a way that classical Chinese count nouns are not. Because it is never necessary for syntactic reasons to use a noun as a count noun in classical Chinese, using a count noun will be in the service of specific semantic or pragmatic ends. This is one respect in which classical Chinese nouns are less free than English nouns to function as count nouns: they do not do so neutrally. It is, rather, the mass use that is neutral in classical Chinese.67

67. The semantic neutrality of English count nouns obscures the fact that, syntactically speaking, they are marked, while mass nouns are neutral. (Allan, ”Nouns and
10. Mass Nouns and Ontology

Some of the interest in the mass noun hypothesis has resulted from its perceived relevance to questions of ontology. This interest was provoked by Chad Hansen’s use of the hypothesis in his account of Warring States assumptions about language and mind.68 The central issue for Hansen is the relation between a thing and its kind.69 Western theories have construed this as the relation between a particular and a universal, or more recently as the relation between a member and a set. Hansen argues that Warring States philosophers tended to construe it as the relation between a part and a whole, and that the “masslike” character of classical Chinese nouns helps explain why they did so. On the view he attributes to Warring States philosophers, then, a kind is a single physical object, discontinuous in space, with its instances being its parts. This view does not invoke any abstract entities such as universals or sets.70 Hansen has independent reasons for attributing this ontology to Warring States philosophers, and I will not address them here.71 But I doubt that it has much to do with mass nouns. What distinguishes mass nouns from count nouns is that they do not divide their reference. This means that in learning a noun “x” that is not free to function as a count noun one does not have to learn how much x counts as one x. This is unrelated to the question of why two different instances of x can both count as x—what it is for them to be of the same kind. If there is a problem with using the member/set relation to model the semantics of mass nouns that does not also arise with count nouns, it arises when the extension of a mass noun does not come divided into units that can be treated as members; there is no analogous problem with relating the kind as a whole to an abstract object such as a universal.

In effect, Hansen’s view is that Warring States folk linguistics treated

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69. Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1992), 46–48, relates the mass noun hypothesis instead to the problem of change, or the relation between a thing and the stuff it is made of. I believe that this has more to do with structural thresholds than it does with the count/mass distinction, and leave the issue aside here.
70. Harbsmeier argues against Hansen’s claims on the ground that they attribute to Warring States philosophers a highly unnatural and abstract view. This assumes that the universal/particular view is not merely familiar, but is also in some sense objectively more natural, or less theoretical. As Graham, “Reflections and Replies,” 276–77, points out, this begs the question against Hansen. See Harbsmeier, “The Mass Noun Hypothesis,” 49–50, and *Language and Logic*, 311–12.
all nouns as singular terms, many of them referring to single scattered objects. But mass nouns are not singular terms any more than are count nouns. If they were, then we could never conclude that two encounters with water were encounters with different water—we would have to say, for example, that the water in two puddles is the same water. But this is not how mass nouns work. If common nouns ever work as singular terms, it is when they function as kind terms—when they refer to their entire extension, construed as a single kind. Therefore, if Warring States folk linguistics did treat all nouns as singular terms, this could be motivated by a focus on kind terms (or perhaps proper names), but not by a focus on mass nouns.

Conclusion

There is no fundamental distinction between count nouns and mass nouns in classical Chinese. Much less is there a third class of “generic” nouns. Rather, nouns vary in at least three ways:

1. in their freedom to occur in count contexts
2. in the principles of individuation associated with them
3. in the structural thresholds associated with them.

This variation cannot be explained by constructing a small number of noun classes. However, it does allow us to note certain paradigms in classical Chinese, and compare them with English paradigms. The most interesting such paradigm is the one that corresponds to English count nouns. A paradigm classical Chinese noun of this sort:

1. functions freely both as a count noun and as a mass noun
2. divides its reference into easily distinguishable mid-sized physical objects, such as goblets or people
3. is associated with a structural threshold that ensures that the noun “x” cannot be used of something that does not count as (at least) one x

The important contrasts with English are in the freedom of these nouns to function as mass nouns, and in the need to associate them

72. A singular term is a term that construes its reference as a single object. (Proper names are often offered as examples of singular terms.) Singular terms contrast with general terms, which can refer to two things of the appropriate kind without construing them as a single thing. See Hansen, Language and Logic, 35, and A Daoist Theory, 49, notes * and **.
with structural thresholds in order to explain why (for example) a finger doesn’t count as *ren* 人 “person.?”

There are, of course, important similarities between English and classical Chinese nouns. There does not seem to be any important difference in the ways that principles of individuation vary in the two languages. Even the increased reliance in classical Chinese on structural thresholds reveals a parallel. Where a classical Chinese noun is associated with a threshold but the corresponding English noun isn’t, this is often because the English noun is free only to function as a count noun, and so no reference to a structural threshold is necessary to explain its behavior. We can still say that the classical Chinese noun has the structural threshold that the English noun would have, if it had any. (I have not given this issue the attention it warrants, though, so this conclusion remains tentative.) Finally, when we leave paradigm count nouns aside, there are several sorts of noun, or paradigms, that seem to be equally present in the two languages. Paradigm English mass nouns seem to have close classical Chinese analogues, for example; and as I argued in section 5, both languages have many nouns that relativize their mode of individuation to linguistic context in much the same way. Of course, this should not obscure the fact that many nouns in both languages are not paradigmatic.