In a recent article, Lin Tzong-Hong (2011) argues in favor of the [±finiteness] distinction in Mandarin Chinese by using the contrast between the modal auxiliary verb néng ‘can, may’ and the adverb kěnéng ‘probably’. Although Chinese certainly makes the [±finiteness] distinction, the crucial problem is that Lin (2011) misanalyses the adverb kěnéng ‘probably’ as a modal auxiliary with optional subject raising, in contrast to the modal auxiliary néng ‘can, may’ for which he claims obligatory subject raising.

Our aim in this squib is simply to show that kěnéng is an adverb, not a modal auxiliary, and we leave aside the problems with Lin’s raising analysis for modal auxiliaries proper such as néng (cf. the short bibliography on modal auxiliaries below).

In fact, Chinese only has an adjective kěnéng ‘probable, possible’ (cf. 1) and an adverb kěnéng ‘probably’ (cf. 2-3), but no modal auxiliary kěnéng, an information easily retrievable from any good grammar manual (cf. among others Lü et al. 2000). Note that adjectives in Chinese do not require the copula shì ‘be’:

(1) Zhè wánquán kěnéng / bù dà kěnéng.  
this completely probable/ NEG too probable  
‘This is entirely plausible/ is not too probable.’

Kěnéng as a sentential adverb can either precede or follow the subject (cf. 2). This well-known phenomenon is misinterpreted by Lin as “optional subject raising” of ta ‘s/he’.

(2) {Kěnéng} tā {kěnéng} yě zhīdào zhè jiàn shì.  
probably 3SG probably also know this Cl matter  
‘{Probably}, he {probably} also knows about this matter.’

(3) Tāmen hěn kěnéng hái zài kāi -zhe hùi ne!  
3Pl very probably still PROG have-DUR meeting SFP  
‘They are very probably still in the meeting.’

Like many other adverbs, kěnéng can be modified by degree adverbs, e.g. hěn ‘very’ (cf. (3)).

High VP-level adverbs (e.g. yě ‘also’ and hái ‘still’ in (2-3) above) are excluded from the complement of modal auxiliaries such as néng ‘can’:

(4) Tā jīntiān yě {huì / yào /kěyí/ néng} (*yě) qù Běijīng.  
3SG today also will/ be.gong.to/ may/ can also go Beijing  
‘She will/can/may also // is also going to go to Beijing today.’

The auxiliaries huì ‘will’, yào ‘be going to’, néng ‘can’ and kěyí ‘may’ cannot be combined with each other (cf. (5)). By contrast, the adverb kěnéng ‘probably’ can naturally precede any of these auxiliaries (cf. (6)).

(5) *Tā huì {kěyí/ néng/ yào} lái.  
3SG will may/ can/ be.going.to come
Recall that *kēneng* ‘probably’ as a sentential adverb can also precede the subject (cf. (6b)); this confirms that (6a) is not a case of auxiliary “stacking”.

Furthermore, the adverb *kēneng* ‘probably’ precedes the verbal projection, negation included (cf. (8)). Auxiliaries, however, must follow negation:

(7) Tā bù {kēyī/ nēng/ yào} (*bù) qù Běijīng.

3SG NEG may/can / be.going.to NEG go Beijing

‘She is not going to/ may not/cannot go to Beijing.’

(8) Tā kēneng [bù {kēyī/ nēng/ yào} (*bù) qù Běijīng].

3SG probably NEG may/can / be.going.to NEG go Beijing

‘She is probably not going to/ may not/cannot go to Beijing.’

Note that *bù* in *bùkēneng* ‘improbably, impossibly’ is part of the adverb (cf. Lü et al. 2000: 337), not a syntactic negation to be construed with the following verbal projection, as evidenced by the acceptability of *bùkēneng* in the pre-subject position:

(9) Zhè ge jiǎndān de tímù , {bùkēneng} tā {bùkēneng} bù zhīdào zěnme zuò

this CL easy SUB exercise impossibly SG impossibly NEG know how do

‘This simple exercise, he impossibly does not know how to do it.’

*Bùkēnèng* is thus on a par with the adverbs *bùxìng* ‘unfortunately’, *bùqiǎo* ‘regrettably’ etc.

Aspect markers are excluded in the complement of modal auxiliaries. The verbal projection preceded and modified by the adverb *kēneng*, however, can naturally contain aspect markers, such as progressive *zài* and perfective *-le*.

(10) *Zhāngsān* {kēyī/ nēng/ huì} zài chī Běijīng kāoyā.

Zhangsan may/can / will PROG eat Peking duck

(11a) Zhāngsān kēneng / dàgāi / yēxǔ / yídīng zài chī Běijīng kāoyā.

Zhangsan probably/probably/maybe/certainly PROG eat Peking duck

‘Zhangsan is probably/probably/perhaps/certainly eating Peking duck.’

(11b) Zhāngsān kēneng / dàgāi / yēxǔ / yídīng yǐjīng dào -le Běijīng.

Zhangsan probably/probably/maybe/certainly already arrive-PERF Beijing

‘Zhangsan has probably/probably/perhaps/certainly already arrived at Beijing.’

*Kēnèng* in (11) clearly behaves on a par with other sentence level adverbs, among them its quasi-synonym *dàgāi* ‘probably, approximately’.

To conclude, *kēneng* ‘probably’ is not an auxiliary and hence cannot “trigger” optional subject raising, either. Instead, *kēneng* is a sentential adverb which can either precede or follow the subject. The “pair” it forms with the modal auxiliary *néng* ‘can’ is reminiscent of similar pairs found in English and French: *may - maybe, peut - peut-être*. 
References


Lü, Shuxiang et al. (eds.). *Xiàndài hànyǔ bābáicí* [Eight hundred words of modern Mandarin]. Beijing: Shangwu.