A new approach to -zhe in Mandarin Chinese

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1. Introduction

Among the aspectual suffixes in Mandarin Chinese, the so-called durative/progressive aspect -zhe has proven especially elusive, notwithstanding the large amount of literature devoted to it. The present article adopts a new approach and claims that -zhe is not on a par with the aspect markers zài, -le and -guo. Unlike the latter, which realize a “high” aspect pertaining to the entire event, -zhe is shown to instantiate a “low” aspect (aktionsart) (cf. Travis 2010 for the dichotomy high vs low aspect). Importantly, -zhe also signals the dependent status of the verbal projection concerned. As a consequence, in contrast to the aspect suffixes zài, -le and -guo, for which we observe constraints when in non-matrix contexts, the opposite holds for -zhe: it is severely constrained in matrix contexts, but rather freely occurs in non-matrix contexts.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 provides data that challenge an analysis of -zhe as a high aspect. Interestingly, much relevant data can be found in the literature, but arguably they have not been taken at face value. The examples provided in the literature for -zhe as an alleged high durative/progressive aspect marker typically involve sentences with ‘V-zhe’ in an adjunct clause preceding the matrix verb:

(1) 他吹着口哨下楼梯。 (Chen Chung-yu 1986: 2; (10a), bracketing added)
Tā [vP[adj.clause pro chuī-zhe kǒushào] xià lóu]ǐ
3SG blow-zhe whistle descend stair
‘He walked down the stairs whistling.’

2. Cases challenging an analysis of -zhe as high aspect

In this section, we show that -zhe cannot be analysed as high aspect. Interestingly, much relevant data can be found in the literature, but arguably they have not been taken at face value.

The examples provided in the literature for -zhe as an alleged high durative/progressive aspect marker typically involve sentences with ‘V-zhe’ in an adjunct clause preceding the matrix verb:
First, there is no restriction on the aspect of the matrix verb (V₂) in the adjunct structure ‘S [vP[adj.clause pro V₁-zhe (O)] V₂P]’. This would be difficult to explain if -zhe itself were a high aspect marker on a par with zài, -le and -guo.

(3) 他抱着书走进了教室。  (Chen Zhong 2009: 86)
Tā bào-zhe shū zuǒjìn-le jiàoshì
3SG hold-zhe book enter-PERF classroom
‘He entered the classroom holding a book.’

(4) 他闭着眼睛躺过一会儿。
Tā bì -zhe yānjiēng tàng-guo yī huìr
3SG close-zhe eye lie -EXP one while
‘He had lain down for a while with his eyes closed.’

(5) [他]皱着眉头想了一想。  (Jaxontov 1988: 125, (47))
[Tā] zhòu-zhe méitóu xiǎng-le yī xiǎng
3SG knit -zhe eye.brow think-PERF one think
‘Knitting his brow he thought a moment.’

(6) 老王一定会看着你笑。
Lǎo Wáng yídìng huì kàn-zhe nǐ xiào
Lǎo Wáng certainly will see-zhe 2SG laugh
‘Lǎo Wáng will certainly laugh when seeing you.’

The matrix verb in (3) and (4) is suffixed by the perfective aspect -le and the experiential aspect -guo, respectively. (5) is a case of verb repetition ‘V-le yǐ V’ associated with the meaning of ‘doing something for a short while’. (6) finally illustrates the future auxiliary huì selecting the vP headed by xiào ‘smile’ including the adjunct clause with ‘V-zhe’.

Second, in this structure -zhe cannot be replaced by -le or -guo:

(7) 他站着/*了/*过吃饭。
Tā [vP[adj.clause pro zhàn-zhe/*-le /*-guo] chī fàn
3SG stand-zhe/-PERF/-EXP eat food
‘He eats while standing.’
While (7) with -le or -guo is simply rejected, (8) becomes acceptable with -le when parsed as two successive events: ‘After he had closed the window, he went to sleep’.

Third, if -zhe were a high aspect marker, its presence on both the matrix verb and the verb in the adjunct clause would be unexpected, given that the simultaneous presence of high aspect markers on all verbs within a single sentence is prohibited (cf. (11), (12)).

While the first verb plus -zhe in (9) and (10) is contained in an adjunct clause and represents the canonical case of -zhe, the presence of -zhe on the second, i.e. the matrix verb, seems at first sight unexpected in our approach, which basically considers -zhe as signaling the dependent nature of the verbal projection. This case is discussed in section 5 below.
3. Structures licensing ‘V-zhe’ as dependent predicate

Under more careful scrutiny, many of the cases where ‘V-zhe’ at first sight occurs in a matrix context turn out to involve non-matrix contexts. Again, much relevant data have been cited in the literature.

First, V-zhe is selected as complement by the auxiliary zài indicating progressive aspect:

(13) 他*(在)看着电视。
     Tā [Asp[Asp°*(zài)] kàn-zhe diànhshì]
     3SG PROGR watch-zhe TV
     ‘He is watching TV.’

(14) 他受了伤却仍*(在)坚持着比赛。（Chen Zhong 2009: 81）
     Tā shòu-le shāng què rēng *(zài) jiānchí-zhe bǐsài
     3SG get -PERF wound but still PROGR persist-zhe competition
     ‘He got hurt, but nevertheless continued the competition.’

The combination of zài with ‘V-zhe’ in (13) and (14) is well-known from the literature (cf. Chen Chung-yu 1978: 83, Paris 1988: 165, among others). However, not much attention has been paid to the obligatory presence of zài in sentences such as (13) and (14). Nor has one seen the contradiction arising from the alleged high aspectual status of -zhe and its occurring in the complement selected by another high aspect, i.e. zài. In fact, it is not -zhe that induces the progressive aspect reading in (13) and (14), but zài, as evidenced by the possibility for zài to select a verbal projection without -zhe.

(15) 他在看电视/洗衣服。
     Tā zài kàn diànhshì/xǐ yīfù
     3SG PROGR watch TV /wash clothing
     ‘He is watching TV/doing the laundry.’

The status of zài as a high aspectual head explains why zài cannot take as its complement another high AspP headed by e.g. -le or -guo. In other words, the

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2 It is important to note that the matrix vs. non-matrix dichotomy with respect to -zhe is very sharp for Northern Mandarin speakers, whereas this does not seem to be the case for e.g. Taiwanese Mandarin speakers. Accordingly, the present study is based on the judgements of the first group.

3 An analysis of the semantic differences between ‘V-zhe’ and a ‘bare’ VP as complement of zài is beyond the scope of this article. Note as a first observation, though, that ‘V-zhe’ seems to be incompatible with a habitual interpretation:

(i) 他 zài liàn *(zhe)pāo
     Tā zài liàn *(zhe)pāo
     3SG PROGR practice-zhe pāo
     ‘He is practicing running.’
The unacceptability of (16) is not exclusively due to the incompatibility between the inherent semantics of -le and -guo and that of zài:

(16) *他受了伤却仍在坚持{了/过}比赛。
  *Tā shòu-le shāng què rèng
  3SG get -PERF wound but still
  [AspP zài [AspP jiānchí{-le /-guo} bǐsài]
  PROGR uphold -PERF/-EXP competition

By contrast, -zhe as a low (imperfective) aspect is perfectly acceptable in the complement selected by zài, thus lending further support to the fundamental difference between -zhe and the aspectual suffixes zài, -le and -guo.

Second, ‘V-zhe’ can also occur in the complement of a modal auxiliary or in the complement selected by the copula shì:

(17a) 我会想着你。
  Wǒ [AuxP huì [xiǎng-zhe nǐ]]
  1SG will think-zhe 2SG
  ‘I will be thinking of you.’

(17b) 成功往往是靠着毅力
  Chénggōng wǎngwǎng [shì [kào -zhe yǐlì]]
  success often be depend-zhe perseverance
  ‘Success often depends on perseverance.’

By contrast, an AspP headed by -le or -guo is excluded as complement for alethic modals such as huì ‘will’ and nèng ‘can’:

(18) 下个星期，他会/能去(*过/*了)故宫。
  Xià ge xīngqī tā huì/néng [qù(*-guo/*-le) gùgōng]
  next CL week 3SG will/may go -EXP/-PERF Imperial.Palace
  (‘By next week, he will/may have gone to the Imperial Palace.’)

(19) 下个星期，他会/能(*在)等你。
  Xià ge xīngqī tā huì/néng [(*zài) děng nǐ ]
  next CL week 3SG will/may PROGR wait 2SG
  (‘Next week, he will/may be waiting for you.’)

An AspP headed by -le or -guo is, however, acceptable as complement of epistemic modals such as yīnggāi ‘must (be the case), should be’:
(20) 他现在应该到了机场。
Tā xiànzài yīnggāi [dào -le jīchǎng]
3SG now must arrive-PERF airport
‘He must have arrived at the airport by now.’

(21) 这件事他应该提过。
Zhè jiàn shì, tā yīnggāi tí -guo
this CL matter 3SG must mention-EXP
‘This matter, he must have mentioned it.’

These data confirm the fundamental difference between the high aspectual suffixes zài, -le and -guo, on the one hand, and -zhe, on the other. The high vs. low aspect distinction also explains why -zhe can be selected as complement by huì ‘will’, whereas this is excluded for AspPs headed by zài, -le or -guo.

Third, ‘V-zhe’ is also acceptable as predicate in a complement clause selected by a higher verb (cf. (22)) as well as in a secondary predicate (23):4

(22) 我刚才看见小李打着游戏机。
Wǒ gāngcái kànjiàn [Xiǎo Lǐ -zhe yóuxìjī]
1SG just see Xiao Li play-zhe playstation
‘I saw Xiao Li playing with his playstation just a moment ago.’

(23) 这里有很多人站着。
Zhè lǐ yǒu hěn duō rén [zhàn-zhe]
here have very much people stand-zhe
‘There are a lot of people standing here.’

Last, but not least, the head licensing ‘V-zhe’ can also be a functional category, i.e. a complementizer, realized as a sentence-final particle in Chinese and selecting the TP containing ‘V-zhe’ as its complement. (For a detailed analysis of the split CP in Mandarin, cf. Paul (2009, to appear):

(24) 外边下着雨*(呢)*！
[CP[T[TP Wàibiān xià-zhe yǔ] *(ne)]
outside fall-zhe rain COMP
‘Outside the rain is falling.’

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4 For extensive evidence showing that the second VP in existential constructions of the type illustrated in (23) has to be analysed as a secondary predicate, cf. James C.-T. Huang (1987).
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(25) 门开着*(来着)。 (Zhu Dexi 1982: 209)

\[ \text{[CP [TP Mén kāi -zhe]*(láizhe)]} \]
\[ \text{door open-zhe COMP} \]
\[ \text{‘(But) the door was open just a moment ago.’} \]

(26) 我们已經舒服舒服地坐着*(呢)。

\[ \text{[CP [TP Wǒmen yǐjīng shūshūfufude zuò-zhe]*(ne)]} \]
\[ \text{2PL already comfortably sit -zhe COMP} \]
\[ \text{‘We are already comfortably seated.’} \]

To summarize, this section has discussed the case where -zhe as low aspect is unacceptable as matrix predicate and needs to be licensed by a higher (lexical or functional) head. It thus contrasts with zài, -le and -guo which are higher aspectual heads themselves and accordingly severely constrained in embedded contexts.

4. Locative inversion: ‘PlaceP V-zhe NP’

The locative inversion construction is one case where ‘V-zhe’ is acceptable in a matrix context. This is due to the semantico-syntactic properties of this construction, which are shown to be compatible with the unbounded nature of the event expressed by ‘V-zhe’.

The defining semantic characteristic of the locative inversion construction as a subtype of existential sentences is to be a thetic proposition in the sense of Kuroda (1972), i.e. the event and the event participants are introduced and asserted simultaneously. In the syntax of English and Chinese, this is reflected by the fact that a PlaceP obligatorily occupies the subject position, that the agent is absent and the theme argument realized within the verbal projection, i.e. in postverbal position.

(27) 墙上挂着一幅油画。

\[ \text{[Qiáng shàng]*/Ø guà-zhe yī fù yóuhuà} \]
\[ \text{wall on hang-zhe one CL oil.painting} \]
\[ \text{‘*(On the wall) hangs an oil painting.’} \]

Importantly in Chinese besides -zhe, the perfective aspect suffix -le is likewise acceptable in the case of transitive positional verbs,

(28) 墙上挂了一幅油画。

\[ \text{Qiáng shàng guà-le yī fù yóuhuà} \]
\[ \text{wall on hang-PERF one CL oil.painting} \]
\[ \text{‘On the wall has been hung an oil painting.’} \]
This observation has led to the erroneous assumption of an “alternation” between -zhe and -le in the locative inversion, which in turn is based on the incorrect analysis of -zhe as a high aspect marker.

We will not discuss the various ramifications of the idea that there is a free “alternation” between -zhe and -le here, but concentrate on demonstrating the fundamental differences between the two and thereby further elucidate the characteristics associated with -zhe.

First, in the locative inversion with ‘V-zhe’, the agent role is lacking, in contrast to ‘V-le’. As a result, (29) and (30) are rejected with -le instead of -zhe, because this would require the implausible interpretation that the moon is in the sky and the persimmons are in the tree due to some prior human action.5

(29) 树梢上挂着/*了一轮明月 (Hu Wenze 1995: 106, (34))
Shùshāo shàng guà -zhe/*-le yī lùn míng yuè
‘Above the tree top hangs a bright moon.’

(30) 细细的枝条上挂着/*了绿色的柿子。 (Jaxontov 1988: 132, (78))
Xìxì de zhītiáo shāng guà -zhe/*-le lǜsè de shìzi
‘Green persimmons hung from thin branches.’ (Jaxontov’s translation)
‘On thin branches hang green persimmons.’ (our translation)

As a consequence, there is no corresponding structure (31) with an explicit agent for ‘V-zhe’, while there is one in the case of ‘V-le’ (cf. (32)):

(31) *墙上他挂着一幅油画。
Qiáng shàng tā guà -zhe yī fú yóuhuà
‘On the wall he has hung an oil painting.’

(32) 墙上他挂了一幅油画。
Qiáng shàng tā guà -le yī fú yóuhuà
‘On the wall he has hung an oil painting.’

Furthermore, in contrast to -le, -zhe signals the absence of an end point limiting the event, as witnessed by its incompatibility with temporal adverbs such as zàojiǔ ‘long since’, yòu ‘again’ etc.

5 This is the reason why, unlike (29), (30) may be accepted under a reading where the persimmons have been put into the tree, as an element of decoration, for example.
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(33) 墙上(*已经/*早就/*又)挂着一幅油画。
Qiáng shàng (*yǐjīng / *zǎojiù  / *yòu) guà -zhe yī fú yóu huà
‘On the wall hangs an oil painting.’

(34) 墙上(已经/早就/又)挂了一幅油画。
Qiáng shàng ( yǐjīng / zǎojiù / yòu) guà -le yī fú yóu huà
‘On the wall has (already/again/long since) been hung an oil painting.’

By contrast, adverbs such as bìngpái ‘side by side’ or yīzhí ‘always’ which do not imply temporal end points are compatible with ‘V-zhe’:

(35) 墙上並排/一直挂着几幅油画。
Qiáng shàng bìngpái / yīzhí guà -zhe jǐ fú yóu huà
‘On the wall (always) hang several oil paintings (side by side).’

Last, but not least, the alleged alternation between -zhe and -le in the locative inversion is restricted to transitive positional verbs and does not hold for intransitive positional verbs such as zuò ‘sit’, tǎng ‘lie’ where only -zhe is possible (cf. C.-T. James Huang 1987: 228 and references therein):

(36) 沙发上坐着/*坐了两个小孩儿。
Shāfā shàng zuò-zhe/* zuò-le liàng ge xiǎo háir
‘On the sofa sit two children.’

This confirms the fundamental difference between -le and -zhe, in other words the observed “alternation” is nothing but a surface phenomenon.

To summarize, ‘V-zhe’ is acceptable as matrix predicate in locative inversion, because this construction is a type of thietic proposition, realized here as an unbounded existential construction. Furthermore, in the locative inversion with -zhe, no agent role is present, neither overt nor covert. As to be discussed in the following section, the unbounded nature of the event and the lack of an agent likewise allow ‘V-zhe’ as a matrix predicate of descriptive sentences.

5. ‘S V-zhe (O)’ providing a description (hic et nunc or gnomic)
We note as a first approximation that -zhe has the effect of ascribing the event as a property to the subject, the latter thus being more of a theme than an agent. Unlike an event, a property is not intrinsically defined in terms of boundedness. This gives
rise to two interpretations for ‘S V-zhe (O)’ sentences: a *hic et nunc* interpretation and a *gnomic* interpretation.

5.1 *Hic et nunc* interpretation
A description is provided (rather than an activity being reported) and presented as holding at the utterance time:

(37) 他戴着一頂红帽子。
\[ Tā dài -zhe yī dīng hóng màozi \]
\['He wears a red hat.'\]

(38) 人们跳着, 唱着。
\[ Rénmen tiào -zhe, chàng -zhe \]
\['People dance and sing.'\]

As already pointed out by Teng Shou-hsin (1973: 21, footnote 6), sentence (37) cannot be interpreted as ‘He is putting on a red hat’; this meaning must be rendered using *zài* as in (39):

(39) 他在戴一頂红帽子。
\[ Tā zài dài yī dīng hóng màozi \]
\['He is putting on a red hat.'\]

More examples of the same type as (37) are given below, which also illustrate the crucial role adverbs may play in strengthening the interpretation in terms of a property ascribed rather than an activity reported:

(40) 他*(高高兴兴地)*唱着歌。
\[ Tā *(gāogāoxīngxìngde) chàng -zhe gē \]
\['He sings happily.'\]

(41) 他不停地在本子上记着什么。
\[ Tā bùtīngde zài běnzi shàng jì -zhe shénme \]
\['He is constantly making notes in his notebook.'\]
5.2. Gnomic interpretation

Given a context or adverbs incompatible with a *hic et nunc* interpretation, ‘V-zhe’ in a matrix context has the effect of ascribing an event as a generally valid property to the subject (*gnomic* interpretation).

(42) 我永远等着你。
    Wǒ yǒngyuàn děng-zhe nǐ
    3SG forever wait-zhe 2SG
    ‘I’ll wait for you forever.’

(43) 他通年雇着三个长工。
    Tā tōngnián gù -zhe sān ge chánggōng
    3SG all.year hire-zhe three CL workman
    ‘He keeps three hired hands (farm labourers) the year round.’

(44) 要不然這麼著得了。
    Yàobùrán zhème-zhe dé le
    otherwise be.so -zhe be.enough SFP
    ‘Otherwise, let it be like this and that’s it.

To summarize, the *hic et nunc* or the *gnomic* interpretations of ‘V-zhe’ represent the default interpretations obtained from the fundamentally unbounded nature of the event signaled by -zhe.

6. Conclusion

We have argued that -zhe is a low (imperfective) aspect marker and that moreover it signals the dependent status of the verbal projection concerned. This explains why a significant part of the data provided to illustrate the use of -zhe involves embedded contexts (adjunct clauses, complements to a higher head etc.). This fact has not really been considered significant in previous studies, nor has there been any attempt to explicitly incorporate it into the analysis of -zhe. Upon reflection, if -zhe were really on a par with the high aspect markers zai, -le and -guo, its prominent presence in non-matrix contexts would in fact appear rather incongruous, given the well-known observation that in Chinese aspect markers are often optional in matrix contexts and severely constrained in non-matrix contexts.

When in a matrix clause, ‘V-zhe’ has the effect of ascribing the event as a property to the subject. This entails a present, *hic et nunc*, or a *gnomic* interpretation, depending on the temporal and spatial anchoring of the utterance (*in presentia vs in absentia*). A property interpretation is also available in the locative inversion where ‘V-zhe’ presents an agentless predicate. Last, but not least, from a diachronic point of view it is interesting to note that ‘V-zhe’ in the locative
inversion is attested later than ‘V-zhe’ in embedded contexts (cf. Djamouri 2010, 2011). In other words, -zhe started out as a ‘structural marker’ (结构助词 jiégòu zhùcí) of dependency and only subsequently gave rise to the unbounded interpretation observed in locative inversion and in ‘S V-zhe O’ sentences.

References

