

Article

# A Comparative Study of the Chinese Classifier "ZHI" and the Vietnamese Classifier "CON"

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**Abstract:** The Chinese classifier "ZHI" and the Vietnamese classifier "CON" are both quantifiers that denote units of objects. These two classifiers share several similarities, such as their frequent use with animal nouns and their formation of "number + classifier + noun" structures. Due to their resemblance, Vietnamese learners often encounter difficulties and make various errors when learning the Chinese classifier "ZHI". These errors result not only from native language interference but also from the inherent complexity of the classifier "ZHI" itself. This paper conducts a comparative analysis of these two classifiers. Although the Chinese classifier "ZHI" and the Vietnamese classifier "CON" have many similarities, each exhibit unique grammatical, semantic, and usage characteristics. This study aims to identify the similarities and differences between the two classifiers in terms of grammar, semantics, and application, thereby contributing to better understanding and instruction of Chinese classifiers for Vietnamese learners.

**Keywords:** Chinese classifier; Vietnamese classifier; ZHI; CON; contrastive linguistics; syntax

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Chinese Classifiers

Chinese classifiers are words used to indicate units of people, things, or actions. Typically, classifiers in Chinese do not function independently as sentence constituents. Instead, they combine with numerals or demonstratives to form quantifier phrases that act as attributives, adverbials, or complements. Phrases consisting of a numeral, a classifier, and a noun (e.g., "one chicken") are termed classifier phrases. When the classifier is placed after the noun or used in reduplication, it may imply plurality or generality (Figure 1).

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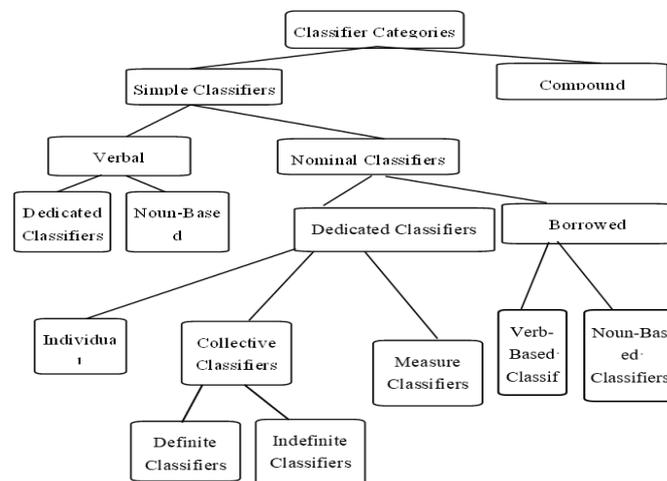
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**Figure 1.** Chinese Classifiers Are Categorized by Their Usage.

## 1.2. Vietnamese Classifiers

In Vietnamese grammar studies, classifiers are commonly referred to as "noun indicators" or simply as "classifiers". Some researchers in their works categorize classifiers into nominal and verbal classifiers [1]. They further divide nominal classifiers into:

Individual classifiers (Loại từ cá thể), such as cái (item), chiếc (piece), CON (classifier for animals).

Measure classifiers (Loại từ đo lường), such as ki-lô-mét (kilometer), dặm (mile), ki-lô-gam (kilogram).

Collective classifiers (Loại từ tập thể), such as đôi (pair), chuỗi (string).

Most Vietnamese classifiers correspond to Chinese classifiers. For example, classifiers such as trang (page), bát (bowl), and giọt (drop) have equivalents in Chinese. This overlap provides a basis for comparative study [2].

## 2. The Chinese Classifier "ZHI"

### 2.1. Etymology and Meaning of "ZHI"

According to A Study on Chinese Classifiers from the Perspective of Linguistic Typology, the classifier "ZHI" has undergone the following developmental process:

The ancient Chinese character for "ZHI" was written as traditional Chinese "ZHI", and its oracle bone and bronze script forms depict a hand holding a bird. Thus, the original meaning of "ZHI" was related to counting birds. It inherently carries two semantic components: first, it refers to birds, indicating its applicable category; second, it signifies singularity (i.e., one unit). For example:

- 1) Wang Du did not hear the Jade Calf and the Pheasant-"The Legend of the Tortoise Strategy" from "Records of the Grand Historian".
- 2) The Horse that turns the wheel without returning-"The Warring States Period: The Story of Gongyang" – some scholars.

"ZHI" may also be used for individual items in a pair or as a unit for objects. For instance:

- 1) Typically, a single earring worn on the right ear symbolizes homosexuality.
- 2) A long, narrow wooden board and four legs assembled into a stool are referred to as "one stool".

The classifier "ZHI" was not commonly used during the Han dynasty; it was in a nascent stage. Its application expanded during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern dynasties, especially for animals such as birds and beasts, e.g. [3]:

Once, a cave was inhabited by a tiger and a fox.

### 2.2. Characteristics of the Chinese Classifier "ZHI"

#### 2.2.1. Collocation with Nouns

"ZHI" typically collocates with animal nouns:

one chicken, one mouse, one monkey, one tiger, one cat, one butterfly, one duck, one rabbit).

Several birds soared before the rosy clouds, chirping joyfully.

However, not all animal nouns in Chinese use "ZHI". For example: a snake, an elephant, a horse. Some animals may be paired with more than one classifier, e.g., a dog.

"ZHI" can also be used with body parts: one eye, one hand, one wing, one ear, one foot, one leg.

One of the gosling's wings was injured, making it a lagging, lonely goose. – some scholars.

It is also used with household items: bottle, box, stool, pot.

Li brought a stack of lunch boxes, filling them one by one with food.

Additionally, "ZHI" collocates with clothing and accessories: sock, earring, shoe, glove, diamond ring.

"She extended her fair and delicate hand, with a dazzling diamond ring on her finger."

It can also be used with boats: boat, motorboat, dragon boat, cruise, bamboo raft.

"This icebreaker saved the frozen gosling trapped on the icy surface."

### 2.2.2. Syntactic Position and Grammatical Function of the Chinese Classifier

In Chinese, the classifier "ZHI" typically occurs between a numeral and a noun, forming a "numeral + classifier + noun" structure. This structure serves as a nominal modifier, functioning syntactically as an attributive [4]. For example:

We are all angels with only one wing; only by embracing each other can we fly.

Additionally, in contexts involving classification, enumeration, or emphasis, the quantifier phrase may appear after the noun, forming a "noun + numeral + classifier" structure. For instance:

Over the course of two years, he stole chickens on seven occasions — 10 chickens in total and 2 dogs. How long would someone be imprisoned for such a case according to the law?

Moreover, ZHI may occur between a demonstrative pronoun and a noun, yielding a "demonstrative + classifier + noun" structure, often used to specify a particular referent. For example:

That cat is the one I found two years ago; back then, it wasn't as fat as it is now.

When reduplicated, "ZHI ZHI" can independently function as a sentence constituent and often implies a plural or distributive meaning [5]. For example:

Tiny crabs, each only the size of a broad bean, scurried rapidly across the sand.

## 3. The Vietnamese Classifier "CON"

### 3.1. Etymology and Meaning of "CON"

The Vietnamese classifier "CON" originates from the noun meaning "child", which stands in opposition to "mother" (mẹ) and "father" (cha). The usage of "CON" as a classifier can be traced back to traditional Northern Vietnamese folk songs such as \*Cò lả\*, where expressions like "CON cò" (a stork) appear. In classical literature such as Nguyễn Du's \*The Tale of Kiều\*, examples include "CON én" (a swallow), "CON dao" (a knife), "CON nước" (a water current), and "CON tằm" (a silkworm). Initially, it was unclear which types of nouns could be modified by "CON". It was not until linguists like Taberd and Trương Vĩnh Ký documented its frequent use with animate nouns that its grammatical role became clearer [6,7].

However, this generalization has exceptions. In Vietnamese, "CON" is also used with inanimate nouns such as "CON đường" (road) and "CON thuyền" (boat). Nguyễn Phú Phong noted that the distinction between animate and inanimate objects in language extends beyond natural properties to include semantic and grammatical categorization. Hence, determining whether something is considered animate depends on its syntactic and semantic behavior in context.

### 3.2. Characteristics of the Vietnamese Classifier "CON"-Collocation with Nouns

The classifier "CON" is typically used with animals: một CON gà (one chicken), một CON chó (one dog), một CON bò (one cow), một CON ngựa (one horse), một CON lạc đà (one camel), một CON rắn (one python), một CON ruồi (one fly).

In Vietnamese, almost all animal nouns are preceded by "CON", which functions to differentiate animate nouns from mass nouns [8].

Examples from Vietnamese literature:

- 1) "The innocent deer raised its velvet antlers from the misty grass and stared at me drifting slowly on a boat." – some scholars.
- 2) "The old cat curled up beside me, eyes closed in peace and leisure." – some scholars.

3) "The rooster stood dazed for a moment, then pecked at food to entice the hen."  
– some scholars.

4) "Thousands of stars twinkled above, mingling with fireflies that flitted across the earth and trees." – some scholars.

"CON" is also used with abstract or inanimate nouns:

một CON hẻm (an alley), một CON sóng (a wave), hai CON ngươi (pupils of the eyes), một CON tàu vũ trụ (a spaceship), một CON xúc xắc (a dice).

In artistic language, the classifier "CON" may acquire additional connotations depending on context, as in personification:

"Last night I sat under the dunes / The bashful moon hid behind the pine branches."  
– some scholars.

Here, the moon is inanimate, yet "CON trăng" personifies it, turning it into a romantic companion.

"CON" can also animate natural phenomena like the sun or wind:

"Thanh sat on a bamboo bed, watching the sunlight slowly crawl up the windowsill."  
– some scholars.

#### 4. A Comparative Analysis of the Classifiers "ZHI" and "CON"

##### 4.1. Similarities

##### 4.1.1. Collocational Ability

Classifiers in both Chinese and Vietnamese cannot independently serve as sentence constituents. Instead, they form quantifier phrases by combining with numerals or demonstratives.

Both "ZHI" and "CON" can modify animal nouns. For example:

1) The so-called happiness is just chasing a dragonfly barefoot in the field until one gets tire.

2) Năm CON sói cùng xâu xé CON mỗi nhỏ, CON nào cũng như chết đói lâu ngày.

The two classifiers typically appear in the structure "number + classifier + noun", as in:

1) The weasel carried away a bird. Surely it has nothing to eat today.

2) Đó không phải là cục bông trắng mà là một CON thỏ trắng đang cuộn tròn.

Both can also appear in structures that emphasize listing or classification by placing the quantifier phrase after the noun:

1) The gifts for outstanding students include: 100 notebooks, 70 pen cases and 50 certificates.

2) Muốn làm món mực xào hành tây cần có: hành tây 1 củ to, mực hai CON, dầu ăn 30g, muối 25g.

In addition, both classifiers are compatible with demonstrative pronouns:

1) Is this dog male or female?

2) Cả nhà bà lão giờ chỉ trông chờ vào mỗi CON bò kia mà nó lại đang bệnh nặng không biết sống được bao lâu.

##### 4.1.2. Grammatical Function

Both classifiers can appear in specific syntactic structures that allow them to function as attributives. In the "number + classifier + noun" structure, the phrase acts as a modifier of the noun. For example:

1) Two chickens are fighting fiercely and it's not known which one will win in the end?

2) Đó không phải là cục bông trắng mà là một CON thỏ trắng đang cuộn tròn.

## 4.2. Differences

### 4.2.1. Collocational Scope

The Vietnamese classifier "CON" can modify all animal nouns, while the Chinese "ZHI" is limited in scope. For example, long-shaped animals use "TIAO" (e.g., a snake), larger animals may use "TOU" (e.g., an elephant), and horses use "PI" (e.g., a horse).

Moreover, "CON" can be directly used without a numeral or demonstrative, while "ZHI" generally cannot unless it is reduplicated. For example:

One can say: "CON thỏ đang ăn cà rốt" (The rabbit is eating a carrot), but not "A rabbit is eating carrots".

### 4.2.2. Grammatical Roles

The Chinese classifier "ZHI", when reduplicated, can serve as various sentence components such as subject, attributive, or adverbial to express plurality. This feature is absent in the Vietnamese classifier "CON". For example:

Bees are flying among the flowers like little fish, swimming merrily.

Additionally, in verb-object constructions, "ZHI" can act as an attributive before the noun, while "CON" in Vietnamese typically functions as the head of the noun phrase:

I went to buy a rabbit. vs. Tôi mua CON thỏ.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has provided a detailed comparative analysis of the Chinese classifier "ZHI" and the Vietnamese classifier "CON" in terms of their grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic features. While both classifiers share many similarities — particularly in structure, collocational ability, and syntactic roles — they also demonstrate notable differences.

The classifier "CON" has a broader scope in Vietnamese, capable of modifying virtually all animate nouns and even some inanimate ones through personification. In contrast, "ZHI" in Chinese is more restricted and must be used according to specific rules of noun compatibility. Additionally, "ZHI" has a reduplication feature that allows it to serve as various sentence components, a trait not present in Vietnamese.

Recognizing both the commonalities and distinctions between these two classifiers is vital for language learners, especially Vietnamese students studying Chinese. Understanding their respective origins and extended uses enhances learners' ability to use them accurately and contextually. This paper aims to contribute to the field of contrastive linguistics and hopes to assist both Chinese learners of Vietnamese and Vietnamese learners of Chinese.

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