(From: The Principle of Phonology-Free Syntax)
Verb-final Sentences in Mandarin Chinese[1]

A. M. Zwicky

Although the normal word order in Mandarin is SVO, there are
a number of syntactic processes that result in verb-final sentences.
In the discussion given by Wang ms. 1972, these include the formation
of the BA and BEI constructions, in which a verb is moved to the
end of its S, and topicalization and object-preposing rules, which
can move objects away from final position; compare (2)-(5) with (1):

(1) Tā dǎ-le JāngSān. 'He beat JangSan'
    he beat LE JangSan

(2) Tā bǎ JāngSān dǎ - le. 'He beat JangSan'

(3) JāngSān bèi tā dǎ - le. 'JangSan was beaten by him'

(4) JāngSān, tā dǎ - le. 'JangSan he beat'

(5) Tā JāngSān dǎ - le. 'He beat JangSan'

Wang observes that verb-final sentences are unacceptable when
the verb is monosyllabic (Chao 1968:345 similarly characterizes a
restriction on the BA construction in modern spoken Mandarin[2]).
The examples corresponding to (1)-(5), but without the aspect marker
LE, are as follows:

(6) Tā dǎ JāngSān. 'He beats JangSan'

(7) *Tā bǎ JāngSān dǎ.

(8) *JāngSān bèi tā dǎ.

(9) *JāngSān, tā dǎ.

(10) *Tā JāngSān dǎ.

Wang further observes that untransformed sentences with final verbs
are also unacceptable if the verb is monosyllabic:

(11) *Wǒmen tán. 'Let's talk'
     we   talk

(12) *Tā hǎu. 'He is good'
     he good

Compare:

> (13) Wǒmen tán - tán.   'Let's talk a while'
>   we   talk talk

> (14) Tā hǎu - kàn.   'He is good-looking'
>   he good look-at

Wang concludes that Mandarin exhibits a constraint that 'disallows
sentences in which a verb is sentence-final, unless contrast is
expressed' and that this restriction is an output constraint.

Wang's argument that these facts should be accounted for by a
surface structure constraint rather than by a constraint on rules,
is a straightforward condition duplication argument (Ross 1972:
sec. 2.1). He also argues against the position that the restriction
is syntactic; for the BA and BEI constructions, he counters the
claim of some Chinese grammarians that the constructions are limited
to resultative verbs, as in

> (15) Děng wǒ bǎ ywángu shwō - míngbai.   'Let me explain the
>   wait I BA reason speak   clear   reason'

by citing three types of examples; those like (2)-(5), with
aspectual LE; those like

> (16) Nǐ bǎ shū ná - lai.   'You bring the book here'
>   you BA book bring here

with directional adverbs; and those like

> (17) Jāngsān bèi tā dǎ - le shí -jǐ - cì.   'JangSan was
>   JangSan BEI he beat LE ten how-many times beaten by him
>   more than
>   ten times.'

with number expressions. A brief survey of the cases in which the
BA construction is possible is given by Li 1971, who argues against
the monosyllabicity formulation and in favor of a condition requiring
a sentence-final verb to 'consist of more than one grammatical unit'
(47). Li observes that 'polysyllabicity is not in itself a sufficient
condition for using BA' (47), citing cases of disyllabic verbs that
are not analyzable into parts in modern Mandarin (tǎulwùn 'discuss',
shōushr 'tidy up'); these do not occur in the BA construction, unless
they are in construction with further elements:

> (18) *Laǔmādz bǎ   fàntǐng   shōushr.   'The maid tidies up
>   maid   BA dining-room tidy-up   the dining room'

> (19) Lǎumādz bǎ fàntǐng shōushr-le.   'The maid tidied up
>   the dining room'

Thus it appears that the surface structure constraint demands not
polysyllabicity, but rather grammatical complexity.

Footnotes

1. We are indebted to Sandra Annear Thompson for providing us with the Wang and Li references. Our examples are adapted from these two sources.

2. Apparently, the restriction is less severe in the literary language.

References

Chao, Yuen Ren. 1968. A grammar of spoken Chinese. Univ. of California Press, Berkeley.

Li, Frances Catheryn. 1971. Case and communicative function in the use of BA in Mandarin. Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell Univ.

Ross, John Robert. 1972. Doubl-ing. LingI 3.1.61-86.

Wang, Peter Chin-tang. Ms. 1972. Anti-monosyllabicity in Chinese sentence structures. California State Univ., Fresno.