Existential sentences in Chinese have the verb “有” serving as the predicate, with the subject and the object respectively expressing a (spatial or temporal) setting and someone/something that exists in that setting. It has previously been observed that the object of this construction “is in many cases an indefinite nominal expression, generally accompanied by a quantifier, and cannot be a bare noun” (劉月華等 1983). Thus the underlined parts of (1) and (2) would be regarded as typical existential sentences.

(1) 我抬头一看發現樹上 有 一 只 熊貓，……
   tree on be one CLF panda
   When I casually looked up, there was a panda up in the tree …

(2) 從前 有 一座 山，山上住着一群土匪。有一天，……
   previously be CLF mountain
   Once upon a time there was a mountain, where bandits lived. One day, …

As the phrases “in many cases” and “generally” suggest, however, there are actually quite a few existential sentences with their object positions filled by either definite noun phrases or bare nouns unaccompanied by quantifiers.

(3) 家里情況挺好的，有一老人，有 我 爱人，有两个小孩儿。
   House-in are I wife (《当代北京口语语料 东城》)
   [Things were going well in the house, where there were an old man, my wife and two children.]
   [家のなかはうまく行っていて、年寄りが一人がいて、私の妻がいて、子供が二人いた。]

(4) 乌鸦看见一个瓶子。瓶子里 有 水。（《小学语文》）
   bottle-in is water
   [The crow saw a bottle. In the bottle was water.]

The question naturally arises: what are the circumstances in which either the object of an existential sentence need not be an indefinite noun phrase (i.e. it can be definite) or a bare noun without an accompanying quantifier is allowed to serve in that capacity? To the best of my knowledge, no attempt has been made to give a clear answer to this question.

The purpose of my presentation is to take another look at the properties of existential sentences in Chinese from a syntactic and a functional perspective, focusing on the (in)definiteness of the object nominal as well as the presence/absence of an accompanying quantifier.