The bracketed constituent in (1) and the clause in (2) are treated as Chinese small clauses. It has been argued that Chinese nominal small clauses are ‘bare’ NPs, lacking any functional categories (Tang 1998). However, there seem to be some problems of this view. First of all, the predicate nominal may be preceded by a classifier in many northern dialects (like the Beijing dialect) and southern dialects (like Cantonese), such as Mandarin *ge* in (3). Secondly, the predicate nominal may be modified by some adverbs, as in (4) (Chao 1968, Wei 2004). Thirdly, the ‘bare’ analysis of small clauses is problematic in the bare phrase structure theory (Chomsky 1995 et seq), according to which the subject α in (5) cannot be in the specifier of N’, assuming that the predicate nominal N projects.

In this paper, it is proposed that Chinese small clauses have an additional functional category dubbed as ‘light noun’ *n*. (6) shows that the subject is in the specifier of *nP*, which is a legitimate structure in the bare phrase structure theory. ‘Bareness’ of Chinese small clauses should be reinterpreted with the notion of ‘phases’ (Chomsky 2001): small clauses have a full argument structure (i.e. the phase associated with *nP*) but lack the ‘left periphery’ (i.e. the phrase associated with CP). The light noun can be either phonetically null or realized as a classifier, deriving (2) and (3), respectively. As adverbs can be adjoined to *n’, (4) is permitted. Though there is a functional projection, NumP is missing in the structure and hence the predicate nominal cannot be preceded by the numeral in (7).

The light noun in small clauses has a dual function at LF. In the clausal domain, it can be regarded as an eventuality predicate ‘BE’. The nominal nature of BE is not impossible empirically: the copula *shi ‘be’* was used as a demonstrative in archaic Chinese, which could undergo *n*-to-1 movement diachronically, à la Szabolcsi-Kayne’s story of D-to-I movement. Furthermore, the light noun (realized as a classifier) is a manifestation of individuation or singularization (Ilijic 1994, among many others), deriving the so-called ‘derogatory’ meaning conveyed by the small clause with *ge* in (3).

Based on the analysis of Chinese small clauses, it is further argued that light verbs, light nouns, and light adjectives form a family of ‘light categories’. On the one hand, the light categories in the clausal domain are treated as eventuality predicates like DO, CAUSE, OCCUR, BE/HOLD in the argument structure, along the lines in Huang (1991, 1997). On the other hand, the light categories play a role in quantification, functioning as a marker to close off an open range of the predicates (Abney 1987, Smith 1997, Sybesma 1999). Light verbs and light adjectives can be realized as aspect markers like *le* in (8) and degree words like *hen ‘very’* in (9), respectively. When the light category is null, it tends to trigger a modality/habitual reading.

The analysis presented here may shed light on the typological study of light categories. Unlike Chinese, English lacks a classifier in nominal predication (=10)) and an aspect marker in verbal predication (=11)). Degree words are optional in adjectival predication (=12)). The richness vs. impoverishment of light categories in Chinese and English suggests that predicates in Chinese enter into syntax as ‘pure roots’ with no argument structure and quantificational features while those in English enter into syntax with rich semantic information, lending support to the parametric theory of analyticity-synthesis of these two languages (Huang 1997, Lin 2001).
(1) Wo dang [ni shagua].
   I consider you fool ‘I consider you a fool.’
(2) Ni shagua.
   You fool ‘You are a fool.’
(3) Ni ge shagua!
   you Cl fool ‘You fool!’
(4) Na ge ren jianzhi pianzi.
   that Cl person simply fraud ‘That person is simply a fraud.’
(5) \{N \{α, N \}\} \rightarrow *[NP α [N' N]]
(6) [nP Subject [n' n [NP N]]]
(7) *Ni yi-ge shagua.
   you one-Cl fool ‘You are a fool.’
(8) Ni chi-le fan.
   you eat-Perf rice ‘You ate rice.’
(9) Ni hen gao.
   you very tall ‘You are (very) tall.’
(10) You fool!
(11) You left.
(12) You are (very/too/so) tall.