Silva Iaponicarum Fasc. LXXIV (2025), pp. 49–72
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14746/sijp.2025.74.3

Tianyi DU

Ritsumeikan University

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6087-9534
e-mail: dutianyi418@gmail.com

Submitted: 15.03.2025 Accepted: 30.09.2025 Published: 14.01.2026

A Comparative Study of "Eat" Verbs used in the Passive Voice Function in Chinese, Japanese, and English

ABSTRACT
This study investigates the role of functional verbs in expressing passive voice across Chinese, Japanese, and English, with a focus on the Chinese verb *chī* (吃), the Japanese verbs *kuu* and *kurau*, and the English verb *eat*. The hypothesis is that these verbs can convey passive meanings by shifting the subject's role from agent to patient, even in the absence of overt passive markers. Through a syntactic and semantic analysis, this study reveals that functional verbs in all three languages can assign passive interpretations, often implying undesirable outcomes. The findings highlight the grammatical and pragmatic similarities and differences in the use of functional verbs across these languages, emphasizing their role as a cross-linguistic phenomenon. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of passive voice beyond traditional syntactic markers, offering new insights into the interaction between functional verbs and passive constructions.

KEYWORDS: functional verb, passive voice, syntactic structure, semantic interpretation, cross-linguistic comparison

Introduction

The passive voice is a grammatical construction that shifts the focus from the agent to the patient of an action. In typological and syntactic research, an *agent* typically refers to the initiator of an action, a *patient* to the entity that undergoes the effect of the action, and an experiencer to one who receives or senses the outcome psychologically or emotionally (Henley et

al. 1995). These thematic roles are crucial to understanding how passivity operates across languages.

While traditional studies on passive voice have primarily focused on grammaticalized markers such as the Chinese *bèi* (被) and the Japanese *-(ra)reru* (e.g., Li and Thompson 1981; Sugimura 2004; Kimura 1992, 2000, 2012; Shen 1992; Ogoshi et al. 2008), this study explores an alternative mechanism: the use of functional verbs to express passive meanings. Functional verbs, which often undergo semantic bleaching, can convey passive interpretations without relying on overt passive markers.

This study distinguishes between the morphological, syntactic, and semantic dimensions of passive constructions. Morphologically marked passives involve explicit grammatical forms, such as affixes or auxiliary verbs, whereas syntactic passives involve changes in argument structure (e.g., the suppression of the agent and promotion of the patient). In contrast, semantic passives refer to constructions that convey a passive meaning even in the absence of any overt morphosyntactic markers. Recognizing these distinctions is essential for cross-linguistic comparison, as the notion of "passive" does not always correspond to consistent formal indicators across languages – a point also emphasized in typological studies such as Abraham and Leisio (2006), who highlight that the diversity of passive constructions often stems from functional rather than purely formal motivations.

This study aims to compare the syntactic and semantic behavior of functional verbs in passive constructions across Chinese, Japanese, and English, with a particular focus on the Chinese verb *chī* (吃), verbs *kuu* and *kurau*, and the English verb *eat*. By analyzing their grammatical and pragmatic features, this research seeks to elucidate the mechanisms by which functional verbs express passive meanings and to highlight the cross-linguistic similarities and differences in their usage.

1. Passive voice in previous studies[1]

1.1 Passive voice marker *bèi* in Chinese and *-(ra)reru* in Japanese

Research on the passive voice in Chinese and Japanese has traditionally focused on the comparison between the Chinese passive marker *bèi* and the Japanese passive suffix *-(ra)reru* (e.g., Wang 1990, 2016; Yang 2018; Sasaki 2013). A key distinction lies in the semantic interpretation of passive constructions: in Chinese, passive sentences marked by *bèi* often imply an undesirable or unfortunate outcome (*bùrúyì*), whereas in Japanese, indirect

[1] In this paper, unless otherwise indicated, the Chinese examples were created by the author, the English examples were provided by native English speakers, and the Japanese examples were provided by native Japanese speakers.

passives frequently convey an adverse effect (*higai*) directly experienced by the subject (cf. 2.1). Direct passives refer to constructions in which the subject is directly affected by the action of the verb, while indirect passives refer to constructions in which the grammatical subject is not the direct object of the verb's action but is affected by the event, typically in an adverse way. One can look at the following examples to see the difference between direct and indirect passives (cf. 2.1).

(1) a. *Boku-wa* *Tarō-ni* *nagu-rare-ta.*
I-TOP Tarō-DAT hit-PASS-PST
'I was hit by Tarō' (direct)

b. *Boku-wa* *Tarō-ni* *jitensha-o* *nusum-are-ta.*
I-TOP Tarō-DAT bicycle-ACC steal-PASS-PAST
'I had my bicycle stolen by Tarō' (indirect)

(Shibatani 1985: 841–842)

The following sentence provides the Chinese corresponding example to the Japanese indirect passive example in (1b).

(2) *Wǒ* *de* *chē* *bèi* *Tàiláng* *tōu* *le.*
I-TOP GEN bicycle PASS Tarō steal PFV
'My bicycle was stolen by Tarō'

When Japanese requires the use of an indirect passive (as in 1b), the corresponding Chinese example (2) employs a direct passive, with the subject expressed as a genitive phrase (*wǒ de chē* 'my car'). This difference suggests that the conditions for passive constructions in Chinese and Japanese differ not only syntactically but also in terms of semantic and pragmatic interpretation. While both descriptions, "unfortunate outcome" and "adverse effect", pertain to negative consequences, they differ in degree and focus. In Chinese passive constructions, an "unfortunate outcome" typically refers to a less direct or less personalized negative result. The emphasis is on the external event being undesirable, rather than on the experiencer's emotional or personal involvement, thus reflecting a more event-centered interpretation. In contrast, Japanese indirect passives highlight "adverse effects" that are directly experienced by the subject, often involving a clear sense of personal loss, harm, or inconvenience. This corresponds to a more experiencer-centered and pragmatically marked use,

in which the passive construction serves to foreground the subject's victimhood.

Previous studies have largely concentrated on structural analyses of *bèi* and *-(ra)reru* (e.g., Li and Thompson 1981; Sugimura 2004; Shen 1992) and their corresponding syntactic properties. However, *bèi* is not the only marker used to indicate passive constructions in Chinese. Other markers such as *ràng* (让), *jiào* (叫), and *gěi* (给), also convey passive meaning, although they are not fully grammaticalized as passive markers and primarily function as lexical verbs in many contexts (Xiao and McEnery 2010: 124-125).

Additionally, research from a translation perspective has revealed significant differences in the distribution of passive constructions across the two languages. For instance, Nakajima (2007) found that direct passive constructions in Japanese do not always correspond to *bèi*-passives in Chinese, with alternative structures such as active transitive sentences or zero-passive constructions frequently employed instead. This discrepancy may be attributed to the broader range of strategies available in Chinese for expressing passivity. In addition to grammatical passive markers such as *bèi*, Chinese also makes use of lexical verbs that inherently encode passive or affected meanings. Verbs such as *zāo* (遭), *ái* (挨), and *shoù* (受) are typically associated with negative experiences, e.g., *zāo le pī píng* (遭了批评) 'got criticized', *ái le dǎ* (挨了打) 'got a beating', *shoù le shāng* (受了伤) 'got injured'.

As Ishizuka (2015) notes, the Japanese passive voice encompasses not only direct passives but also a wide range of indirect and adversative passives, which highlight the experiencer's psychological or social burden. This pragmatic function is particularly salient in *-(ra)reru*-marked constructions, distinguishing them from their syntactic counterparts in other languages.

1.2 Beyond markers: Lexical and unmarked passive constructions in Chinese

While grammatical passive markers and lexical passives provide explicit or semi-lexicalized cues for passivity, Chinese also exhibits unmarked passive constructions that rely solely on semantic interpretation. These so-called unmarked passives or notional passives convey a passive meaning purely through the semantics of the sentence, with no explicit morphosyntactic indicator of passivity. As discussed in Pan and Hu (2021: 31–32) and Xiao and McEnery (2010: 124–125), such constrictions highlight the importance of aspect, word order, and contextual cues in Chinese passive interpretation. Consider the following examples:

(3) *Yīfu* *xǐ* *gānjìng* *le.*
clothes wash clean PFV
'The clothes have been washed clean.'

(4) *Dàngāo* *chī* *le.*
cake eat PFV
'The cake has been eaten.'

In both cases, the subject (*yīfu*, *dàngāo*) is the patient of an implied action, yet no agent or passive marker is expressed. These constructions are semantically passive, often appearing in perfective or resultative contexts. As Pan (2001) and Xiao and McEnery (2010) observe, such expressions exemplify the flexibility of Chinese in conveying passivity through context and aspectual cues rather than syntax.

In addition to these unmarked forms, Chinese also employs constructions that blur the line between causative and passive semantics. A useful comparison can be made between the following sentences:

(5) a. *Tā* *ràng* *lǎoshī* *pīpíng* *le.*
he PASS teacher criticize PFV
'He was criticized by the teacher.'

b. *Tā* *bèi* *lǎoshī* *pīpíng* *le.*
he PASS teacher criticize PFV
'He was criticized by the teacher.'

The first sentence (*rang*-passive marker) retains a causative structure and agentively, suggesting that the subject had some control over or initiated the event. In contrast, the *bèi*-passive marker highlights the subject's role as a patient and their lack of volition, clearly situating the sentence within the passive domain. While these two constructions differ in their semantic focus, they both fundamentally belong to the domain of passive expressions in Chinese. The *rang*-passive marker construction conveys indirect agency and coerciveness, yet it also implies a degree of involuntariness or loss of control on the part of the subject. This can be interpreted as a case of semantic retention of agentive force (Shibatani et al. 1990), forming a transitional structure between causative and passive constructions. These examples suggest that passivity in Chinese is not restricted to syntactic patterns alone but may be shaped by the interaction between verb semantics, event structure, and speaker perspective.

This diversity of passive constructions in Chinese – including grammatical passives, lexical passives, and unmarked passives – demonstrates that passivity in Chinese is not limited to a single morphosyntactic pattern. Rather, it encompasses a range of strategies that foreground the affectedness of the subject or patient, whether through syntax, verb semantics, or discourse pragmatics.

1.3 Functional verbs in passive constructions

In Japanese, functional verbs such as *kurau* and *atsumeru* have been examined for their passive-like properties (Oyamada 2017). Despite extensive research on Japanese functional verbs (e.g. Muraki 1980, 1991; Oyamada 2017), their counterparts in Chinese passive constructions remain underexplored. In Chinese, verbs such as *chī* exhibit similar characteristics to Japanese functional verbs, functioning as "formal verbs" with significantly weakened lexical meanings (Lü 1980; Zhu 1985). Unlike lexical passives, these functional verbs do not rely on explicit passive markers, yet they still convey passive interpretations (cf. 1.2).

2. Comparative analysis of passive voice in Chinese and Japanese

2.1 Passive voice in Chinese and Japanese

The following examples illustrate corresponding passive voice sentences in Chinese (6a) and Japanese (6b; cf. 1.1).

(6) a. *Cìláng* *bèi* *Tàiláng* *dǎ* *le.*
Jirō PASS Tarō hit PFV
'Jirō was beaten by Tarō.'

b. *Jirō-wa* *Tarō-ni* *nagu-rare-ta.*
Jirō-TOP Tarō-DAT hit-PASS-PST
'Jirō was beaten by Tarō.'

(Wang 2016: 42)

As seen in (6), both Chinese and Japanese use accusative passive voice constructions. In Chinese, the passive marker *bèi* is used to indicate the passive voice, where the subject *Cìláng* is the patient of the verb *dǎ* ('to hit'), and the agent is *Tàiláng*. Similarly, in Japanese, the subject *Jirō* is the patient of the verb *naguru* ('hit'), and the agent is *Tarō*.

(7) a. *Cìláng bèi Tàiláng wèn le hěnduō wèntí.*
Jirō PASS Tarō ask PFV plenty.of question
'Jirō was asked many questions by Tarō.'

b. *Jirō-wa Tarō-kara iroiro shitsumon-sare-ta.*
Jirō-TOP Tarō-DAT various question-LV-PASS-PST
'Jirō was asked many questions by Tarō.'

(Wang 2016: 42)

In (7), both Chinese and Japanese use dative passive voice constructions, where the subject *Cìláng*/*Jirō* is the patient of the verb *wèn*/ *shitsumonsuru* ('ask'), and the agent is *Tàiláng*/*Tarō*.

(8) a. *Cìláng bèi Tàiláng nòng huài le zìxíngchē.*
Jirō PASS Tarō break PFV bicycle
'Jirō's bicycle was broken by Tarō.'

b. *Jirō-wa Tarō-ni jitensha-o kowa-sare-ta.*
Jirō-TOP Tarō-DAT bicycle-ACC break-PASS-PST
'Jirō's bicycle was broken by Tarō.'

(Wang 2016: 42)

In both (8a) and (8b), passive construction does not involve a direct patient as the grammatical subject, but rather promotes an experiencer who is indirectly affected by the event. The component *zìxíngchē*/*jitensha* ('bicycle') functions as the patient, the entity that undergoes the event of being broken. *Tàiláng/Tarō* is the agent, performing the action. Meanwhile, *Cìláng*/*Jirō* is the experiencer: although not directly acted upon, he is negatively impacted as the possessor of the broken object.

This structure illustrates a key feature of indirect or adversative passives in both Chinese and Japanese, where the subject is promoted not due to syntactic argument structure, but based on pragmatic salience or affectedness. Moreover, it reflects an implicit ditransitive framework: the verb involves two participants beyond the agent – one being the direct object (patient) and the other the experiencer (indirectly affected). This pattern, which is typologically salient, merits further discussion in contrastive analysis of passive constructions.

(9) a.

Wǒ	*bèi*	*língjū*	*de*	*háizi*
I	PASS	neighbor	GEN	child
chǎo	*le*	*yí*	*yè.*	
make.noise	PFV	one	night	

'I was kept awake all night by the neighbor's child being noisy.'

b.

Watashi-wa	*tonari-no*	*ko-ni*	*hitobanjū*	*nak-are-ta.*
I-TOP	next-GEN	child-DAT	all night	cry-PASS-PST

'I was kept awake all night by the neighbor's child crying.'

(Wang 2016: 42)

It is well-known that Japanese has an adversative passive voice construction employing originally intransitive verbs as seen in (9b) that does not exist in English. As seen in (9a), Chinese also has an adversative passive voice construction with intransitive verbs, where the subject is negatively affected by the action.

The examples above illustrate corresponding accusative, dative, possessive, and adversative passive voice constructions in Chinese and Japanese. While the two languages share similar structural patterns, there are also cases where passive voice constructions do not correspond between the two languages. For example, in (10) and (11), psychological verbs are used.

(10)	*Wǒ*	*bèi*	*Tàiláng*	*xià*	*le*	*yí*	*tiào.*
a.	I	PASS	Tarō	scare	PFV	one	jump

'I was startled by Tarō.'

#b.	*Watashi-wa*	*Tarō-ni*	*odorok-are-ta.*
	I-TOP	Tarō-DAT	surprise-PASS-PST

'I was surprised by Tarō.'

c. *Watashi-wa* *Tarō-ni* *odorok-as-are-ta.*
I-TOP Tarō-DAT surprise-CAUS-PASS-PST
'I was surprised by Tarō.'

(Yang 2009: 18–19)

In Chinese, as in English, psychological transitive verbs such as *xià* ('scare') typically take the experiencer as the object, whereas in Japanese, psychological intransitive verbs such as *odoroku* generally take the experiencer as the subject. Consequently, in (10b), the symbol # indicates that although the sentence is grammatically well-formed, it is semantically infelicitous: it would require the object *watashi* ('I') to function as the experiencer, which is incompatible with the lexical properties of *odoroku* and therefore does not correspond to the Chinese passive sentence in (10a). In other words, while the Chinese *xià* allows a structure in which the experiencer ('I') is passivized and the agent "Tarō" is explicitly marked, the Japanese verb *odoroku* lacks a comparable transitive use, making a simple passive unacceptable for the intended meaning. In both (10b) and (10c), Tarō is the agent rather than the experiencer, but (10c) introduces the causative form of *odoroku* (*odorok-as-*) followed by passivization (*-are*), a two-step derivation that licenses the natural interpretation "I was surprised by Tarō" and thus provides the closest Japanese equivalent to the Chinese sentence in (10a).

(11) *a. *Tàiláng* *bèi* *Huāzi* *hàipà.*
Tailang PASS Huazi fear

(Example by the author)

b. *Tarō-wa* *Hanako-ni* *osore-rare-te-iru.*
Tarō-TOP Hanako-DAT fear-PASS-CVB-PROG
'Tarō is feared by Hanako.'

(Yang 2009: 18–19)

In (11), unlike (10), when an intransitive verb is used, the Chinese passive voice construction is ungrammatical, while the Japanese passive voice construction is acceptable. This is because in Chinese, *hàipà* ('to fear') is an intransitive verb, and passive constructions generally require a transitive verb in order to license the passive marker *bèi*. For a passive clause to be acceptable, a transitive verb is typically required, such as *xià* ('to scare') in (10a), as it allows for an agent to be expressed and a patient to be affected,

which conforms to the syntactic and semantic constraints of Chinese passives.

To contrast Japanese with Chinese, Japanese passive constructions with intransitive verbs are typically classified as indirect or adversative passives, which express that the subject has suffered an inconvenience or harm as a result of the event. For example:

(12) *Watashi-wa* *ame-ni* *fur-are-ta.*
I-TOP rain-DAT rain-PASS-PST
'I got rained on.'

In (12), the verb *furu* ('to rain') is intransitive, and yet the sentence employs a passive construction to foreground the experiencer's negative impact. Interestingly, a similar phenomenon can be observed in Chinese, particularly in recent years on social media platforms, where certain passive constructions with intransitive verbs have emerged to express social criticism or helplessness. Consider the following examples:

(13) a. *Tā* *bèi* *jiùyè* *le.*
he PASS employ PFV
'He was employed (without his knowledge or consent).'

b. *Tā* *bèi* *tuìxiū* *le.*
he PASS retire PFV
'He was suicided (i.e., officially ruled as suicide despite clear evidence of foul play).'

Although these sentences are syntactically unorthodox, they have gained traction as creative and ironic expressions in online discourse. As discussed by Lu (2013) and Chen (2016), such constructions reflect a shift in focus to the experiencer, who is involuntarily involved in the event, often under ambiguous or opaque social forces – such as "the system" or "society" – that are left implicit as the agent.

These examples highlight a significant typological parallel: in both Japanese and Chinese, certain passive constructions serve not merely to demote the agent or promote the patient, but to express the psychological or social burden experienced by the subject. In such cases, the experiencer is not the direct patient of the action but is indirectly affected, often negatively, and often in agentless constructions. This usage extends the scope of passive

voice beyond its canonical syntactic function, incorporating pragmatic and socio-political dimensions.

3. Functional verbs in Chinese, Japanese, and English[2]

Muraki (1991: 203) defines functional verbs as "verbs that delegate substantive meaning to nouns while primarily serving grammatical functions." In Chinese, analogous verbs are categorized as "formal verbs", characterized by a significant weakening of their original meanings, to the extent that their removal may not substantially alter the sentence's meaning (Lü 1980; Zhu,1985). Zhu (1985) identified six formal verbs in Chinese: *jiāyǐ* (加以), *jíyǔ* (给予), *gěiyǔ* (给与), *yǔyǐ* (予以), *jìnxíng* (进行), and *zuò* (作). Zhu (2018) compared these formal verbs with Japanese functional verbs but did not examine whether phenomena akin to Japanese functional verbs in the passive voice exist in Chinese.

3.1 Functional verbs *chī* in Chinese and *kuu/kurau* in Japanese

This section analyzes the syntactic behavior, semantic properties, and pragmatic constraints of functional verbs in Chinese, Japanese, and English, focusing on their role in passive constructions. First, the usage of prototypical transitive and lexical verbs in Chinese, such as *chī*, will be examined.

(14) *Tā chī le jiǎozi.*
he eat PFV dumpling.
'He ate dumplings.'

In (14), the action of *chī* is performed by the subject *tā* ('he'), while the object *jiǎozi* ('dumplings') is the object being consumed. However, the usage of functional verbs differs significantly, as they can convey a passive or affective meaning.

(15) a. *Tā chī le kuī.*
he eat PFV loss
'He suffered a loss.'

[2] The Chinese examples in this section were constructed by the author. Grammaticality judgments for the Japanese examples are based on consultations with native speakers. Cf. Acknowledgements.

b. *Tā* *chī* *le* *yì* *jīng.*
he eat PFV one shock
'He suffered a shock.'

In these Chinese examples, the verb *chī* functions as a functional verb, encoding an affective meaning equivalent to 'to suffer' or 'to undergo'. The subject *tā* undergoes the event involuntarily, serving as the patient in the argument structure rather than the agent, which illustrates an argument structure alternation typical to functional verb constructions. This demonstrates how the verb, originally meaning "to eat," has undergone semantic extension and bleaching, shifting from its literal sense to an experiential and passive-like function.

(16)?a. *Kare-wa* *dai-shippai-o* *kurat-ta*[3].
he-TOP big-fail-ACC eat-PST
'He suffered a major failure.'

b. *Kare-wa* *ōkina* *shokku-o* *kurat-ta.*
he-TOP big shock-ACC eat-PST
'He suffered a big shock.'

In Japanese, the verb *kurau* can convey the meaning of "suffering" or "experiencing," with the subject *kare* functioning as the patient of the verb's action. While (16b) *Kare-wa ōkina shokku-o kuratta* ('He was hit by a big shock') is widely accepted as natural, (16a) *Kare-wa daishippai-o kuratta* ('He suffered a major failure') may sound slightly unnatural to native speakers. One possible reason for this is phraseological: although the construction is grammatically well-formed and semantically plausible, the particular combination of *kurau* and *daishippai* is not commonly used. Native speaker intuitions may prefer different expressions for describing such abstract or prolonged failures. That said, it is worth noting that *kurau* is typically associated with experiences that are sudden, forceful, or physically impactful, such as *shokku* ('shock') or *panchi* ('punch'). *Daishippai*, being a more abstract and temporally diffused concept, may not align as naturally with the prototypical usage of *kurau*. However, further corpus-based or usage-driven investigation would be needed to determine whether the

[3] With sufficient context, *shippai-o kuratta* can also sound natural. For example: *Yūmei-na anarisuto-no kotoba-o shinjite, tōshikaku-o fuyashita kekka, daishippai-o kuratta* ('Trusting the words of a famous analyst, I increased my investment amount, and as a result, I suffered a major failure').

awkwardness of (16a) is truly due to semantic mismatch, or simply a matter of phraseological convention.

Similar to *kurau* is the related verb *kuu*. Although *kuu* and *kurau* share a common historical origin and both can function as functional verbs expressing adverse or involuntary experiences, their modern distributions reveal a clear divergence. *Kuu* retains its core meaning 'to eat' while extending to both negative and neutral idiomatic usages, displaying greater semantic flexibility. *Kurau*, by contrast, has undergone stronger semantic bleaching and specialization, functioning almost exclusively to denote sudden, forceful, and typically negative experiences as shown in (16). This distinction, together with the wider pragmatic range of *kuu*, highlights how Japanese functional verbs differ not only from each other but also from their Chinese counterpart *chī*, which remains more tightly bound to expressions of misfortune.

3.2 Comparative analysis of functional verbs in Chinese and Japanese

This section compares the use of functional verbs in Chinese and Japanese, highlighting their systematic properties and argument structure alternations in passive-like constructions.

(17) a. *Tā chī le yì quán.*
he eat PFV one punch
'He took a punch.'

b. *Kare-wa ippatsu kurat-ta.*
he-TOP one eat-PST
'He took a hit.'

These two sentences employ functional verbs (*chī*, *kurau*) to convey a passive meaning, where the subject serves as the patient of the action rather than the agent. Similarly, the following cross-linguistic examples illustrate metaphorical expressions where verbs meaning "to eat" appear to encode passive or affective meanings:

(18) a. *Tā chī le bì mén gēng.*
he eat PFV close door soup
'He was turned away.'

b. *Kare-wa* *monzenbarai-o* *kurat-ta.*
he-TOP turn.away.at.the.door-ACC eat-PST
'He was turned away at the door.'

Across Chinese and Japanese, the verb denoting "to eat" (*chī*, *kurau*) appears in metaphorical constructions that express affective or passive-like experiences. In such expressions, the subject typically undergoes an unpleasant or involuntary event – such as rejection, attack, or loss – and is semantically aligned with the role of a patient rather than an agent.
Despite this surface-level convergence, the constructions diverge considerably in terms of their grammatical status and lexical productivity. The Chinese expression in (18a), *chī le bì mén gēng*, constitutes a fixed idiomatic expression whose meaning is non-compositional and syntactically opaque; it therefore does not serve as evidence of a productive argument structure alternation. By contrast, the Japanese verb *kurau* in (18b) appears in a variety of colloquial affective constructions – e.g., *sekkyō-o kurau* ('to get a scolding'), *kōgeki-o kurau* ('to be attacked') – demonstrating a higher degree of syntactic flexibility and semantic generalization characteristic of functional verb usage.

(19) a. *Tā* *chī* *le* *bù* *shǎo* *kǔtou.*
he eat PFV not few suffering
'He suffered a lot.'

?b. *Kare-wa* *ōku-no* *kurō-o* *kurat-ta*[4]
he-TOP many-GEN hardship-ACC eat-PST
'He suffered a lot of hardships.'

While (19a) in Chinese sound natural, (19b) in Japanese feels unnatural to native speakers. As already explained in the previous example (16) that in Japanese, *kurau* is more commonly used with concrete and forceful events, such as *shokku* ('shock') or *panchi* ('punch'), rather than abstract, prolonged suffering like *kurou* ('hardships'). In contrast, Chinese *chī* can be used metaphorically for both sudden and sustained adversity, reflecting a broader metaphorical range. These observations point to a structural similarity across

[4] With the provision of contextual information, however, the phrase *kurō-o kuratta* can also be rendered natural and appropriate. For instance, in the sentence *Muri shite nankankō-ni shingaku shita kekka, ōku-no kurō-o kurau koto-ni natta* ('As a result of forcing myself to enter a highly competitive school, I ended up enduring a great deal of hardship'), the phrase is contextually embedded and thus appears more natural and coherent within the discourse.

languages in the use of functional verbs to encode passivity. However, the full range of meanings depends not only on syntax and semantics but also on conventionalized expressions, which are discussed in the next section.

In sum, the data reveal both shared structural patterns and language-specific constraints, which are further influenced by idiomatic usage – a topic examined in the next section. One commonality across these two languages is that these verbs can be used metaphorically to express an experiencer undergoing a sudden, forceful, or impactful event, such as punch or shock. In such contexts, the functional verbs exhibit similar argument structure alternations, with the subject serving as the experiencer rather than the agent. However, in Chinese, *chī* can extend to metaphorically denote enduring suffering over time, making expression like *chī kǔ* (吃苦, 'to endure hardship') acceptable. In contrast, Japanese *kurau* is less commonly associated with prolonged adversity and tends to be restricted to more immediate, forceful, or unexpected experiences.

3.3 Functional verb *eat* in English

In English, the verb 'eat' can serve as a functional verb with extended meanings of to endure, or 'to suffer'. Importantly, this usage appears almost exclusively in idiomatic expressions rather than as a general semantic extension of the basic verb meaning. Unlike Chinese *chī* or Japanese *kurau,* English *eat* does not productively form metaphorical expressions in which an experiencer undergoes adversity, and its functional-verb behavior is considerably more restricted. Because of this limitation, it is difficult to identify English examples that correspond directly to the Chinese and Japanese data presented in earlier sections. Consequently, the following examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; Davies 2008) are provided not as strict cross-linguistic equivalents, but as partial parallels illustrating how *eat* behaves as a functional verb in idiomatic contexts:

(20) a. ...a much larger part of me that would rather *eat dirt* than cry in front of a doctor.

b. ...e-book for whatever price they wanted, and *eat the loss* or earn the profit depending on the retail price they set.

c. ...wants to sell an e-book for less, they should *eat the cost* of the discount and pay the publisher/author the negotiated price.

(Davies 2008)

In these idiomatic uses, *eat dirt* expresses the idea of enduring humiliation or mistreatment, while *eat the loss* and e*at the cost* refer to accepting a financial loss or absorbing an unwanted consequence. Compared with Chinese *chī* and Japanese *kurau*, however, such metaphorical extensions of *eat* are far less productive in English and are restricted to a small and lexically fixed set of expressions.

In these expressions, the subject of *eat* does not act as an agent but instead appears as the patient who undergoes the event. This shift from an agentive to a patientive interpretation can also be observed in the Chinese and Japanese examples discussed earlier. In this sense, all three languages show a similar pattern in how the verb meaning 'to eat' can be used metaphorically, permitting passive interpretations.

3.4 Semantic constraints and idiomatic usage of functional verbs

In addition to systematic features, the use of functional verbs in passive constructions is heavily influenced by idiomatic and collocational constraints. This section shifts from grammatical alternations to the conventionalized collocations and pragmatic tendencies in each language.

In Chinese, *chī* appears frequently in idiomatic expressions denoting adversity or misfortune. Classic examples include:

(21) *chī kuī* (吃亏 'to suffer losses'), *chī kǔ* (吃苦 'to endure hardships'), *chī ruǎn fàn* (吃软饭 'to live off a woman'), *chī lì* (吃力 'requiring great effort')

These are lexicalized expressions that have developed fixed meanings over time. Their acceptability arises from usage conventions, not from syntactic productivity. Expressions such as *chī kuī* ('to suffer losses') are semantically non-literal from the outset − one cannot literally "eat" an abstract notion like "loss". What licenses them is not the possibility of literal eating, but the fact that they have become entrenched idiomatic patterns in the language.

By contrast, novel combinations such as *chī fú* (吃福 'eat fortune') or *chī sǔnshī* (吃损失 'eat a loss' in a purely literal sense) are unacceptable not because of any grammatical restriction, but because they lack such idiomatic status in contemporary usage.

Moreover, not all idioms with *chī* have a negative meaning. Consider:

(22) *chī xiāng* (吃香 'to be popular') – positive, *chī de kāi* (吃得开 'to be well-connected/ popular') – positive, *chī guā* (吃瓜 'to watch gossip as a

bystander') – colloquial and neutral, *chī yí qiàn, zhǎng yí zhì* (吃一堑，长一智 'to gain wisdom from a setback' or 'to learn from one's mistakes') – neutral

These expressions show that *chī* is not inherently negative, but its idiomatic use often leans toward adverse contexts when conveying passive or affected meanings.

In Japanese, the verbs *kuu/kurau* are used in a wide range of fixed idiomatic expressions, far more extensively than Chinese *chī*. Many of the most common phrases encode misfortune, harm, or involuntary suffering. For instance, *doku-o kurawaba sara made* ('if you eat poison, you might as well lick the plate') depicts a knowingly harmful act; *ōmedama-o kuu* ('to be severely scolded') describes an unpleasant reprimand; *hato-ga mamedeppō-o kuratta yō* ('like a pigeon hit by a pellet gun') portrays sudden shock or fear; and *fūfu-genka-wa inu-mo kuwanu* ('even a dog won't eat a couple's fight') warns against involvement in messy conflicts. These expressions reveal a strong conventional link between 'eating' and adversity in Japanese idiomatic usage. By contrast, while Chinese *chī* also forms many idioms of hardship (e.g., *chī kuī* 'suffer loss', *chī kǔ* 'endure hardship' in (21)), it retains a broader semantic range with neutral or positive collocations such as *chī xiāng* ('be popular'), *chī de kāi* ('be well-connected'), and *chī guā* ('watch gossip as a bystander') in (22). The comparison shows that Japanese *kuu/kurau* are culturally shaped toward negative meanings, whereas Chinese *chī* develops numerous idioms of misfortune, it also exhibits diverse semantic shades, encompassing negative, neutral, and positive collocations.

In English, the verb *eat* appears in a variety of idiomatic expressions such as: *eat dirt*, *eat the loss*, and *eat the cost*. These idioms consistently convey forced endurance, often highlighting the experiencer's lack of agency. In this respect, English *eat* parallels Japanese *kuu/kurau*, which also predominantly appear in expressions of passive suffering. However, unlike Japanese, where *kuu/kurau* are highly entrenched across a wide idiomatic spectrum, English *eat* is less systematic and not as culturally embedded. While both languages metaphorically extend "eating" to cover negative experiences, English idioms tend to be fewer in number and more lexically restricted. This difference may reflect cultural variation in the metaphorical conceptualization of "eating" as a means of enduring hardship (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

The analysis in this section demonstrates notable cross-linguistic differences in the idiomatic collocations and semantic extensions of "to eat" verbs in Chinese, Japanese, and English. In Chinese, *chī* exhibits particularly active

usage in expressing adversity or passive experiences. It not only encompasses a large set of fixed expressions denoting misfortune but also extends to neutral or even positive contexts, revealing both a broad semantic range and a high degree of lexicalization. Japanese *kuu/kurau* likewise appear in a considerable number of idiomatic expressions, but their semantic core is more strongly oriented toward adverse, passive, or accidental situations, with neutral or positive usages being relatively rare. English *eat* also occurs in a few fixed phrases conveying endure negative consequences or passivity, yet its lexicalization is limited and lacks the systematic semantic network observed in Chinese and Japanese. These contrasts highlight the diverse roles of cultural metaphor, conventionalized usage, and semantic bleaching across languages, illustrating the varied interaction of grammatical and cultural factors in the construction of passive or adversity-related meanings.

Conclusion

This study shows that the "eat" verbs in Chinese, Japanese, and English give a clear example of how languages can express affectedness and passive-like meanings without using formal passive grammar. In all three languages, verbs that initially meant 'to eat' have lost some of their original meaning and can describe situations where the subject is the one affected. However, the range and productivity of this change are very different. The Chinese verb *chī* has the widest meaning and is used in many idioms, describing not only bad situations but also neutral or even good experiences. The Japanese verbs *kuu* and *kurau* also appear in many set phrases, but they mostly describe involuntary or negative events, with *kurau* often implying a sudden impact or harm. The English verb *eat* is found in only a few fixed expressions that show endure negative consequences or humiliation and has little ability to create new patterns.

These cross-language patterns show that passive or adversative meanings can develop through different paths – such as semantic extension and bleaching – and that each language uses these paths in its specific way.

Abbreviations

ACC accusative
CAUS causative
CVB converb
DAT dative
GEN genitive

LV light verb
PASS passive
PFV perfective
PROG progressive
PST past
TOP topic

Acknowledgements
Grammaticality judgments for the Japanese examples are based on consultations with native speakers. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Justyna Harasimiuk and David Coulson for their assistance with English proofreading, and to Noriaki Yukimoto for insightful comments on the grammaticality of the Japanese sentences.

Author Contributions
The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results, and manuscript preparation.

Conflicts of Interest
The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

References
Abraham, Werner, Larisa Leisio (eds.) 2006. *Passivization and typology: Form and function*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Chen Luqin 2016. "Chūgokugo-to nihongo *daisansha-no ukemibun*-no taishō kenkyū: jutsugo dōshi-to kekka-teki eikyō-ni tsuite [a contrastive study of indirect passives in Chinese and Japanese: the case of predicates and resultative influence]". *Kyūshū Daigaku Gengo Ronshū* / *Kyushu University Papers in Linguistics* 36: 29–57.
陳陸琴.「中国語と日本語『第三者の受身文』の対照研究：述語動詞と結果的影響について」.『九州大学言語学論集』.

Davies, Mark 2008. *The Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). URL: https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/ [access date: 15 November 2025].

Henley, Nancy M., Michelle Miller, Jo Anne Beazley 1995. "Syntax, semantics, and sexual violence: Agency and the passive voice". *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 14 (1–2): 60–84.

Ishizuka, Tomoko 2015. "The passive voice". In: Shigeru Miyagawa, Masayoshi Shibatani (eds.). *The handbook of Japanese syntax*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. 348–390.

Kimura Hideki 1992. "BEI ukemibun-no imi-to kōzō [the meaning and structure of BEI passive sentences]". *Chūgokugo* 389: 10–15.
木村英樹.「BEI 受身文の意味と構造」.『中国語』.

Kimura Hideki 2000. "Chūgokugo voisu-no kōzōka-to kategorika [the structuring and categorization of voice in Chinese]". *Chūgokugo* 247: 9–39.
木村英樹.「中国語ヴォイスの構造化とカテゴリ化」.『中国語』.

Kimura Hideki 2012. *Chūgokugo bumpō-no imi-to katachi – 'kyo'-teki imi-no keitaika-to kōzōka-ni kansuru kenkyū* [the meaning and form of Chinese grammar: A study on the morphological and structural aspects of "abstract" meanings]. Tokyo: Hakuteisha.
木村英樹.「中国語文法の意味とかたち―『虚』的意味の形態化と構造化に関する研究―」. 東京都: 白帝社.

Lakoff, George, Mark Johnson 1980. *Metaphors we live by.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Li, Charles, Sandra Thompson 1981. *Mandarin Chinese: A functional reference grammar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lu Haoyu 2013. "Chūgokugo-no jidōshi jutsugo ukemi hyōgen-ni tsuite: Intānetto-de mochiirareru *bei jiuye*-no taipu-o rei-to shite [on the passive constructions with intransitive predicates in Chinese: the case of the *bei jiuye* type used on the internet]". *NU Ideas* 2 (1): 22–31.
路浩宇.「中国語の自動詞述語受身表現について：インターネットで用いられる"被就业"のタイプを例として」.

Lü Shuxiang 1980. *Hanyu babai ci* [800 words of modern Chinese]. Beijing: Commercial Press.
吕叔湘. 「现代汉语八百词」. 北京: 商务印书馆.

Muraki Shinjirō 1980. “Nihongo-no kinō dōshi hyōgen-o megutte [on Japanese functional verb expressions]”. *Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyuūjo Kenkyū Hōkokusho* 2: 17–75.
村木新次郎.「日本語の機能動詞表現をめぐって」.『国立国語研究所研究報告集』.

Muraki Shinjirō 1991. *Nihongo dōshi-no shosō* [aspects of Japanese verbs]. Tokyo: Hitsuji Shobō.
村木新次郎.「日本語動詞の諸相」. 東京都：ひつじ書房.

Nakajima Emiko 2007. *Nitchū taishō kenkyū. Voisu – ji/ta no taiō, ukemi, shieki, kanō, jihatsu* [a comparative study of voice in Japanese and Chinese. Correspondences between transitive and intransitive, passive, causative, potential, and spontaneous constructions]. Tokyo: Ōfū.
中島恵美子.『日中対照研究　ヴォイスー自・他の対応・受身・使役・可能・自発ー』. 東京都：おうふう.

Ogoshi Naoki, Kimura Hideki, Washio Ryūichi (eds.) 2008. *Voisu-no taishō kenkyū – Higashi Ajia shogo-kara-no shiten* – [contrastive studies of voice: Perspectives from East Asian languages]. Tokyo: Kuroshio.
小樽尚樹・木村英樹・鷲尾龍一.　『ヴォイスの対照研究―東アジア諸語からの視点―』. 東京都：くろしお出版.

Oyamada Toshihiro 2017. “Judōtai-ni kakawaru kinō dōshi-no kenkyū [study of functional verbs related to the passive voice]”. *Keiryō Kokugogaku* 31 (2): 84–98.
小山田由紀.「受動態に関わる機能動詞の研究」.『計量国語学』.

Pan, Haihua, Xiaoshi Hu 2021. “The passive construction in Chinese”. In: Mark Aronoff (ed.). *Oxford research encyclopedias: Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1–29.

Sasaki Izumi 2013. “Voisu kōbun-to shukansei – washa-no gengoka-o megutte [voice constructions and subjectivity: On the linguistic expression of the speaker]”. In: Kimura Hideki Kyōju Kanreki Kinen Ronsō Kankōkai (ed.). *Kimura Hideki kyōju kanreki kinen. Chūgokugo bumpō ronsō* [festschrift for Professor Kimura Hideki's 60th birthday: essays on Chinese grammar]. Tokyo: Hakuteisha. 315–331.

佐々木いずみ.「ヴォイス構文と主観性―話者の言語化をめぐって―」. 木村英樹教授還暦記念論叢刊行会編.『木村英樹教授還暦記念中国語文法論叢』. 東京都: 白帝社.

Shen Li 1992. "Chūgokugo-to nihongo-no judōbun-no kōzō-ni tsuite: goiteki judōbun-to tōgoteki judōbun [on the structure of passive sentences in Chinese and Japanese: lexical and syntactic passives]". *Gengogaku Kenkyū* 11: 63–96.
沈力.「中国語と日本語の受動文の構造について: 語彙的受動文と統語的受動文」.『言語学研究』.

Shibatani, Masayoshi 1985. "Passives and related constructions: a prototype analysis". *Language* 61 (4): 821–848.

Shibatani, Masayoshi 1990. *The languages of Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shibatani Masayoshi, Nakagawa Masayuki, Kimura Hideki, Ogawa Akio 1990. "Kansetsu ukemi-no imi-to sono hattatsu [the meaning and development of indirect passive voice]". *Gengogakkai Dai-100-kai Taikai Kenkyū Happyō Yōshi*: 144–146.
柴谷方良、中川正之、木村英樹、小川暁夫.「間接受身の意味とその発達」.『言語学会第 100 回大会研究発表要旨』.

Sugimura Hirofumi 1992. "Sōgū-to tassei – chūgokugo hidōbun-no kanjōteki shikisai [adverse encounter and achievement: the emotional coloring of Chinese passive sentences]". In: Ōkōchi Yasunori (ed.). *Nihongo-to chūgokugo-no taishō kenkyū ronbunshū (ge)* [collected essays on contrastive studies of Japanese and Chinese, part 2 of 2]. Tokyo: Kuroshio Publishers. 45–62.
杉村博文.「遭遇と達成―中国語被動文の感情的色彩―」. 大河内康憲編.『日本語と中国語の対照研究論文集（下）』. 東京都: くろしお出版.

Sugimura Hirofumi 2004. "Chūgokugo-no judō gainen [the concept of passivity in Chinese]". In: Tsukuba Daigaku Gendai Gengogaku Kenkyūkai (ed.). *Jisedai-no gengogaku* III [next-generation language studies III]. Tsukuba: Tsukuba Daigaku Gendai Gengogaku Kenkyūkai. 29–43.

杉村博文.「中国語の受動概念」. 筑波大学現代言語学研究会編.『次世代の言語研究Ⅲ』. つくば市: 筑波大学現代言語学研究会.

Wang Yong 1990. "Nihongo-to chūgokugo-no voisu – ukemi hyōgen-no bāi – [voice in Japanese and Chinese: the case of passive expressions]". *Kokubungaku Kaishaku-to Kanshō* 55-1: 129–135.
王勇.「日本語と中国語のヴォイス―受身表現の場合―」.『国文学解釈と鑑賞』.

Wang Yong 2016. "Nihongo-to chūgokugo-no judōbun-ni mirareru ruijiten-to sōiten [similarities and differences in passive sentences between Japanese and Chinese]". *Tōyō Daigaku Ningen Kagaku Sōgō Kenkyūjo Kiyō* 18: 41–63.
王勇.「日本語と中国語の受動文に見られる類似点と相違点」.『東洋大学人間科学総合研究所紀要』.

Xiao, Richard, Tony McEnery 2010. *Corpus-based contrastive studies of English and Chinese*. New York: Routledge.

Yang Chao 2009. "Chūgokugo jukubun-no seiritsu jōken – nihongo-to-no taishō kenkyū-o tōshite – [conditions for the formation of Chinese passive sentences: a contrastive study with Japanese]". *NEAR Conference Proceedings Working Papers NEAR–2009–10*: 1–23.
楊超.「中国語受身文の成立条件―日本語との対照研究を通して―」.

Yang Kairong 2018. "*Chūgokugogaku/nitchū taishō ronkō* [Chinese studies and Sino-Japanese contrastive studies]". Tokyo: Hakuteisha.
楊凱栄.『中国語学・日中対照論考』. 東京都: 白帝社.

Zhu Dexi 1985. *Yufa jiangyi* [lectures on grammar]. Beijing: Commercial Press.
朱德熙. 『语法讲义』. 北京: 商务印书馆.

Zhu Wei 2018. *Nōdōteki oyobi judōteki imi-o arawasu nihongo-no kinō dōshi ketsugō-no kenkyū* [a study on functional verb combinations in Japanese expressing active and passive meanings]. Doctoral dissertation. Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

朱偉. 『能動的及び受動的意味を表す日本語の機能動詞結合の研究』. 東京都:東京外国語大学.