The Opposite of Many Is Not Few

“My books are many” or “my books are few” sounds awkward in English but perfect, and actually preferred, in Chinese. While “I have many book” is fine in both Chinese and English, “I have few books” sounds ungrammatical in Chinese. Nevertheless, “my books are interesting” and “I have interesting books” sound perfect in both Chinese and English. I will account for these asymmetries by first studying how quantifier adjectives like “many” and “few” are different from qualitative adjectives like “interesting” and “boring” cross-linguistically. And then I will focus more on how preverbal and postverbal nouns behave differently in Chinese, a language that does not have articles like “the” and “a”. I conclude that Chinese has only a word for “many” but not its usual antonym “few”. I will also discuss if “many” and “few” are indeed bona fide antonyms in English. Or can “many” and “few” ever be as perfect antonyms as “interesting” and “boring” in any human language?

Dr. Haiyong Liu is a Chinese syntactician. He is interested in applying general principles of syntax and typology to study the idiosyncratic, although sometimes only seemingly so, phenomena of the grammar of Chinese, and in turn expand or adjust the coverage of general syntactic and typological theories. He has recently published on puzzles related to Chinese counterfactuality, inalienable possession, and adjective intensification on journals like Journal of Chinese Linguistics, International Journal of Chinese Linguistics, and Language and Linguistics etc.

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