

LIFE Metaphor Variation across Time in Chinese- Evidence from CCL

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ABSTRACT. *This article adopts a diachronic approach to analyze LIFE metaphor via quantitative data in the Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL for short) that demonstrates the variation of LIFE metaphor across time in Chinese. It analyzes the major patterns of source domains of the LIFE metaphor in ancient Chinese and those in modern Chinese respectively. Through comparing the major patterns of the source domain, the study shows how metaphorical source domains changed from ancient to present. The result reveals that LIFE IS A PERIOD OF TIME metaphor occurs much more frequently in ancient Chinese, while LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor dominates LIFE metaphor in modern Chinese, which can be ascribed to the different embodied experiences of ancient Chinese people and modern people.*

KEYWORDS: *LIFE metaphor; metaphor variation; diachronic approach; differential embodied experience*

1. Introduction

“That time of year thou mayst in me behold. When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang.” These two lines excerpted from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73, where life is conceptualized as a year, actually contain a LIFE metaphor, which is LIFE IS A YEAR. LIFE metaphor has been a hot topic in cognitive linguistics and abundant achievements have been made in the study of LIFE metaphor.

Lakoff & Johnson (1980) mentioned LIFE IS A GAMBLING GAME in that one experiences actions in life as gambles [1]. For example, in the linguistic expression “I’ll take my chance,” the concept of life is constructed in terms of a gambling game. To some extent, there are some universal LIFE metaphors like LIFE IS A JOURNEY. Köves’s study on how Americans and Hungarians think about life and which metaphors they use sheds some light on the variation of LIFE metaphor across cultures [2]. According to her study, Americans prefer to conceptualize life as A PRECIOUS POSSESSION, while Hungarians tend to understand the same concept in terms of A STRUGGLE/WAR. One of the best studies of the LIFE metaphor in Chinese culture is done by Ning Yu. He notes, “LIFE IS A SHOW is a salient conceptual metaphor with an exceptionally rich and systematic linguistic manifestation in Chinese.” [3]

Most studies focus on the synchronic study of the LIFE metaphor. This article seeks to explore the variation of the LIFE metaphor in Chinese from a diachronic perspective. Eve Sweetser (1990) presented that many metaphors we have today have been with us for thousands of years [4]. However, a study by Caroline Gevaert(2001a,2001b) illustrated that the conceptualization of anger changed considerably from Old English to the Middle English period [5]. And Kövecses(2005) supports the idea that metaphors vary within cultures [7]. As Gibbs (2018) notes, “the metaphors we use in language reflect the metaphorical basis of human thinking and experience.” [8] Contemporary theories of metaphor within the larger discipline of cognitive sciences have addressed the dynamic nature of metaphor [9]. Therefore, the same concept is likely to be understood differently since people living in different historical periods have different experiences.

In this paper, the following questions will be addressed:(i) to what extent the occurrence of source domains of LIFE in Chinese varies across time; (ii) why the source domains employed to understand LIFE have changed. This article is constructed as follows: the next section briefly introduces the Conceptual Metaphor Theory as the theoretical framework. Section 3 shows how the data for the study is collected and collated. Section 4 analyzes diachronic changes of the LIFE metaphor in Chinese based on the corpus. Section 5 is a conclusion.

2. Theoretical framework

This study of the LIFE metaphor is based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, whose concepts are introduced briefly below.

Lakoff &Johnson (1980) proposed Conceptual Metaphor Theory in their book *Metaphor We Live By*, laying a foundation for the study of metaphor from a cognitive perspective rather than stylistics, in which they emphasized that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action, and metaphors should be largely or mostly universal [10].

Zhuanglin Hu (2006) remarks that metaphor involves the comparison of two concepts in that one is construed in terms of the other [11]. In other words, there are always two domains involved, the source domain and the target domain; the target domain is understood through the source domain since the former is more abstract while the latter more concrete. Kövecses(2005) mentioned it is the embodied experience that results in certain neural connections between areas of the brain(these areas correspond to the source and target) [12].

Linguistically, a conceptual metaphor is always realized by its corresponding linguistic expressions. For example, in the metaphorical linguistic expressions “He attacked every weak point in my argument. Your claims are indefensible. His criticisms were right on target”, here is a conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, and we understand the abstract concept “argument” in terms of a concrete one “war” that we are familiar with. We argue by the means as we employ in a war. The concept of ARGUMENT is constructed in terms of WAR systematically. The participants (in the target domain) are conceptualized as enemies in a war, the

subject that the participants as the battlefield, the opinion one holds as his position in the war, quitting arguing for refreshing as a truce, one of the participants who give up his opinion as surrender, the other one as the winner of the war. Moreover, metaphorical systematicity enables us to comprehend one aspect (the highlighted aspect) of a concept in terms of another and thus other aspects of the concept will be hidden [13]. In the case of the example above, the war-like situation of argument is highlighted, while the cooperative aspect of the argument that is one participant arguing after the other to defend his own opinion, is hidden. That is why we employ various source domains to explain one target domain.

As Kövecses notes, “there can be differences in the range of conceptual metaphor (or, more precisely, the range of source domains), which means people conceptualize the same concept as different concepts [14]. In Chinese, LIFE is understood via various source domains, such as A PERIOD OF TIME, JOURNEY, DREAM, FOOD, SHOW, and so on. According to the data of this study, a same source domain used to understand LIFE occurs with different frequencies across time.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data source

The data used in this study are drawn from the Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL for short), a corpus developed by Peking University. CCL, a large-scale and online free corpus (see http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus/index.jsp), covers about 700 million Chinese characters from the 11th century BC. to the contemporary era. This corpus consists of Ancient Chinese Corpus and Modern Chinese Corpus. The ancient Chinese in the corpora are primarily written language, and most of them were written by cultivated people such as poets, writers to express their view on things, their feelings, to describe the social phenomenon, and so on. There are also some books recording social facts, common people's discourse and behavior, and other literary works reflecting the social reality of that time. To some extent, the data of ancient times are relatively limited in number and form. For example, they do not include oral language. But it is not limited to represent writers' views on LIFE only, the idea of literature work comes from life, it reflects people's life. In contrast, Modern Chinese Corpus in CCL corpora is much more abundant and richer in that the source ranges from oral language (e.g. TV interview), written language (e.g. newspapers) to cyber language, which is much more down-to-earth.

3.2. Data collection

Considering this is a diachronic study, the data of ancient Chinese with LIFE metaphor and of modern Chinese are collected separately. The process of data collection for both is similar. Firstly, the keyword “人生 rensheng” was typed into the search box, and a great number of sentences containing the two characters “人生

rensheng” burst into our field of vision. Given that in Chinese “人生 rensheng” have different meanings, including “life”, “being”, “living”; what is more, it is a verb when the two characters served as different syntactic constituent separately. For example, in the sentence “时许美人生男 shixu meiren shengnan”(later, a concubine gave birth to a son), here “人生 rensheng” means “somebody gives birth to...”. Therefore, only sentences with “人生 rensheng” whose meaning corresponds to “life” in English are chosen; after filtered, 329 metaphorical linguistic expressions of LIFE in ancient Chinese and 5649 metaphorical linguistic expressions in modern Chinese are analyzed under this study.

4. Results and Discussion

According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the conceptual metaphors are generally classified into ontological, structural, and orientational metaphors. The LIFE metaphor under this study is categorized in terms of source domain at a specific level. Through identifying and extracting conceptual metaphors in the corpus, we discovered that the primary kinds of LIFE metaphor include LIFE IS A JOURNEY, LIFE IS A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME, LIFE IS OPERA, LIFE IS A DREAM, LIFE IS DUCKWEED, LIFE IS A SCIENTIFIC STUDY, LIFE IS MUSIC, LIFE IS A STRUGGLE in ancient and modern Chinese, examples of which are exhibited as follows(in this article, the metaphorical linguistic expressions drawn from Ancient Chinese Corpus are marked with ACC, and those from Modern Chinese Corpus with MMC),

- (1) 儒家、佛家、道家这三者都是大教,都决定一个 人生的基本方向.(MMC)

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are major religions, and they all determine the basic direction of life. (LIFE IS A JOURNEY)

- (2) 人生是 一分钟一分钟的总和.生离死别都最终在一分钟里完成.(MMC)

Life is the sum of one minute and one minute. Life and death are all finished in one minute. (LIFE IS A PERIOD OF TIME)

- (3) “真是 人生如梦,转眼就是百年啊.当年,我和你父亲在雪窦山峰寻找墓地时,他...”(MMC)

Life is like a dream, and it has been over a hundred years in a blink of an eye. When your father and I were looking for a cemetery on Xuedou Mountain, he... (LIFE IS A DREAM)

- (4) 人生世,多聚散,似浮萍.《全宋词》__宋 (AAC)

People gathered and departed frequently like duckweed in life.

Extracted from 《Song Dynasty Poetry》- Song Dynasty

- (5)他在未来的生活 道路上,要先备 尝辛酸,历经磨难,然后才能 品味到人生的甘甜.(MMC)

On the road of his future life, he must taste bitterness first and go through hardships before he can enjoy the sweetness of life. (LIFE IS A JOURNEY & LIFE IS FOOD)

(6) ...西方衍化出人本主义哲学思潮,研究人及人的内心情感、体验,研究人生之 真谛 和生存的意义.(MMC)

...The humanistic philosophical trends evolved from the western world explore human beings, their inner feelings, experiences, the true meaning of life, and the value of survival. (LIFE IS A SCIENTIFIC STUDY)

(7) 多种多样的英雄汇合起来, 谱成人生的交响曲、奏出时代的最强音.(MMC)

Representatives from all sectors of society gather to compose a symphony of life and play the highest tone of the era. (LIFE IS MUSIC)

(8) 在人生的 竞技场上,舞台大得很! (MMC)

In the arena of life, the stage is very big! (LIFE IS A STRUGGLE)

(9) 他问自己: 我除了当工人,还能在 人生舞台上 扮演什么角色? (MMC)

He asked himself, what else role can I play on the stage of life but a worker? (LIFE IS OPERA)

4.1. Result of LIFE Metaphor in Ancient Chinese in CCL

Different categories of LIFE metaphor in ancient Chinese occurs with different frequency in CCL, as presented in the following table.

Table 1. The ten most frequent LIFE metaphor in ancient Chinese in CCL

No.	Metaphor	Tokens	Percentage
1	A PERIOD OF TIME	177	53.80%
2	JOURNEY/VOYAGE	60	18.24%
3	DREAM	28	8.51%
4	FOOD	10	3.04%
5	DUCKWEED	7	2.13%
6	BOAT	5	1.52%
7	MOON	5	1.52%
8	DUST	4	1.22%
9	ERIGERON	4	1.22%
10	FALLING FLOWER	3	0.91%
	SUBTOTAL	303	93.1%
	TOTAL	329	100%

As is shown in the table, the number of LIFE IS A PERIOD OF TIME represents 53.8%, exceeding half of the total metaphor extracted from CCL. Ancient Chinese people emphasized how short life is. The second most frequently used source domain is JOURNEY/VOYAGE. Most of the linguistic expressions of LIFE IS A JOURNEY put emphasis on the destination of life, death. DREAM as the source domain of LIFE accounts for 8.51%, much less compared with the two mentioned above. Life is illusory as it is conceptualized as a dream. As for FOOD and DUCKWEED metaphor in ancient Chinese, the bitterness of life people taste and the instability of life people feel are emphasized respectively.

4.2 Result of LIFE Metaphor in Modern Chinese in CCL

The source domains used to understand LIFE in modern Chinese vary greatly in proportion, which is presented as follows.

Table 2. The ten most frequent LIFE metaphor in modern Chinese in CCL

No.	Metaphor	Tokens	Percentage
1	JOURNEY/VOYAGE	3655	64.74%
2	OPERA	277	4.91%
3	FOOD	227	4.02%
4	A SCIENTIFIC STUDY	145	2.57%
5	STRUGGLE	141	2.50%
6	MUSIC	104	1.84%
7	DREAM	89	1.58%
8	A BOOK	87	1.54%
9	TRAGEDY	84	1.49%
10	CLIMBING MOUNTAINS	69	1.22%
	Subtotal	4878	86.40%
	Total	5646	100.00%

JOURNEY /VOYAGE metaphor, used most frequently, represents 64.74%, nearly two-thirds of total metaphorical linguistic expressions of LIFE extracted from Modern Chinese Corpus in CCL. In modern Chinese, the direction and goal of life are emphasized. As for source domain OPERA which is a traditional art form Chinese people are familiar with, it describes people as roles, situations or contexts of events of their life as stages in operas. The FOOD metaphor of LIFE implicates that people taste various flavors of life, including sweetness, sour, bitterness, which means life is full of ups and downs for contemporary Chinese peoples. According to the table above, life is also conceptualized as A SCIENTIFIC STUDY, and the process of learning and pursuing truth in life is highlighted.

4.3. The Variations of LIFE Metaphor in Chinese across Time

As the two tables show, the source domains people used in ancient Chinese and modern Chinese are common in some aspects. JOURNEY/VOYAGE metaphor is widely used to understand the concept of life in both ancient and modern times. In both ancient Chinese and modern Chinese, the start and end of JOURNEY are mentioned, referring to the birth and death of a person, travelers of JOURNEY refer to people leading life, and the obstacles along the way refer to difficulties and hardships people meet in life. Examples are listed below,

(1)

a. 人生 归于 一死.(ACC)

Life ends with one's death.

b. 人生 遇坎与乘流.(ACC)

Whether encountering obstacles or braving waves in life depends on circumstance.

c. 历史进入 70 年代以后,蒋氏夫妇都进入了 人生的最后一站 --冬天.(MCC)

After history entered the 1970s, the Jiangs reached the last stop of their lives-winter.

d. 在他的 人生历程 中,鲜花少于 荆棘.(MCC)

In his journey of life, there are fewer flowers than thorns.

In 7a, death is conceptualized as the end of JOURNEY. In 1b and 1d, the obstacles along the JOURNEY are used to understand the difficulties in life. One's whole life is composed of different stages of JOURNEY.

The DREAM metaphor ranks third and fourth in ancient Chinese corpus and modern Chinese corpus respectively. Both ancient and modern Chinese people view life as a dream, which is based on the universal experience of dreaming. Dreaming is a common biological phenomenon, and people tend to regard something incredible or surprise as those in a dream where nothing is true. They consider those seemingly unreal events in life including life itself as images in a dream. When people distinguish reality from illusion, they wake from the dream. For example,

(2)

a. 当人生 ,梦一场.(ACC)

Treat life as a dream.

b. 她这梦也应当到了醒觉的时候了! 人生就是 一梦 么?(MCC)

It should be time for her to wake from this dream! Is life a dream?

As is shown above, universalities of LIFE metaphor indeed exist in Chinese across time. However, there are more variations than universalities of LIFE

metaphor between ancient Chinese and modern Chinese.

According to the data, the LIFE metaphor in Chinese varies in many aspects from past to present. The idea of life's being a period of time figures first in ancient times, while it does not appear among the top 10 LIFE metaphors in modern times. Ancient Chinese people talked about the length of time in connection with life span. Life was viewed as something that exists for a brief moment and then disappears again, such as morning dew, lighting, and other things. For example,

(3)

a. 人生一世间,如白驹过隙耳.(ACC)

Life is so short that time passes quickly like a white pony's shadow across a crevice.

b. 人生 短促,这是事实.(ACC)

The fact is that life is short.

c. 李陵谓苏武曰: 人生如 朝露.(ACC)

Ling Li said to Wu Su, "Life is like morning dew."

In 3a and 3c, lifespan is compared to the quick disappearance of a horse and morning dew. 3b describes the brevity of life via the length of time straightforwardly.

That ancient people used LIFE IS A PERIOD OF TIME to talk about life very frequently is explained in detail as follows. The average age of people in ancient times is much lower than that of today, due to the spread of infectious diseases and poor medical resource in response to diseases. Besides, without advanced science and technology, the authorities of that time were probably unable to forecast natural disasters, so many people died from that. That is why people always sighed, "Life is short."

OPERA metaphor plays an important role in understanding life in modern Chinese, whereas it does not in ancient Chinese. If life is conceptualized as an opera, the participant in events is conceptualized as the performer, commander of events as director, functions of the participant as the role of performer, plans of events as scripts, events as operas, contents and process of events as plot, the context of events as the stage [15]... The examples are exhibited as follows,

(4)

a. 在人生的 舞台上,唯有奉献才有价值.(MCC)

Only dedication is valuable on the stage of life.

b. 李恩复当了院长,人生又多了 一个角色.(MCC)

Enfu Li takes over as president of the hospital, thus he has one more role in his life.

In 4a, the context of event is conceptualized as the stage of OPERA. In 4b, the position (the function of participant) is conceptualized as a role of OPERA.

FOOD serves as source domain for LIFE in both ancient Chinese and modern Chinese, but there are some differences. Food has different flavors, such as sour, sweet, bitter, spicy, salty, mixed, etc. In ancient Chinese, only bitterness of food is mentioned in the metaphorical linguistic expressions for LIFE, whereas all major flavors of food are involved in modern Chinese in LIFE metaphor. For example,

(5)

a. 人生此苦谁禁得,口欲言时眼又昏.(ACC)

Who can withstand the bitterness (sufferings) of life, and my eyes turned blurred when I was ready to speak.

b. 人生就如 多味豆,一包豆子吃完,必是 什么滋味 都尝过的.(MCC)

Life is like multi-flavored beans. After eating a bag of beans, you must have tasted all the flavors.

Different flavors stand for different kinds of experiences of life, sweet for happiness, sour for hardships, bitter for sufferings, etc. Ancient people put emphasis on the bitterness of life(5a), while modern people describe many aspects of life in terms of different flavors of FOOD(5b) because modern life is much more colorful compared with ancient life.

DUCKWEED metaphor for LIFE ranks fifth in ancient Chinese, not mentioned in modern Chinese. According to Wikipedia, duckweeds lack an obvious stem or leaves, so they float on or just beneath the surface of still or slow-moving bodies of freshwater and wetlands. They refer to people who had no permanent settlement in ancient times. For example,

(6) 人生无定偶然蓬转萍.(ACC)

Life is uncertain as Erigeron flies with wind and duckweeds drift with the water.

In ancient China, people who wanted to become officers had to go to the capitals alone to take part in the Imperial examinations. The capitals might be far away from their hometown, and the traffic was not as developed as today. Therefore, they felt themselves like duckweeds. On the other hand, people who were obliged to move house many times because of disasters and those who drifted from pillar to post were compared to duckweeds.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of a corpus of metaphorical linguistic expressions for the LIFE metaphor in ancient Chinese and modern Chinese in CCL provided evidence that the LIFE metaphor varies at different levels. Firstly, some patterns of metaphors for LIFE are used much less frequently compared with before, such as TIME metaphor, DUCKWEED metaphor. Secondly, some new metaphors appear, like the OPERA

metaphor. Last but not least, a same metaphor may have changed in some aspects. For example, JOURNEY metaphor emphasized the destination (death) and difficulties of life in ancient Chinese, while the direction, process, stages, and goals of life are highlighted in modern Chinese. Another example is FOOD metaphor. Only one flavor, bitter, was mentioned in ancient Chinese, whereas many flavors such as sweet, sour, occur in modern Chinese. This demonstrates the dynamic nature of metaphor.

Different choices of source domain for LIFE metaphor mirrors people's different outlook on life. The analysis of data shows that ancient Chinese had pessimistic outlook on life, since their literature works focus on negative aspects of life, including the brevity of life, death, instability of life, etc. However, modern Chinese people adopt a relatively positive outlook on life. They see things from various perspectives. The variation of LIFE metaphor in Chinese results from different embodied experience.

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