

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The historical characteristics of the source domains in Chinese LIFE metaphor

Yi Tie\*

Zhengzhou University, China

**Abstract:** This research investigates the diachronic variation of the source domains in Chinese LIFE metaphor. Close examination of data from historical corpora has revealed that the source domain types evolve gradual diversified changes based on the social material and cultural life. Specifically, the results show that (1) harsh living environment and farming understanding account for Chinese ancestors' preference for crops as the source domain in their life metaphors, (2) the territory extension and duplicate metaphysics together give reasons why the Tang Chinese favor transportation as well as natural phenomenon as the source domains in their life metaphors, (3) the increasing material enrichment and cultural diversification of modern times provide experiential motivation of the gamut of source domain types in Mandarin life metaphors. Thus, a conclusion can be reached that metaphor variation reflects social material level and intellectual level throughout the ages.

**Keywords:** Chinese LIFE metaphor; source domain; historical characteristics; material level; intellectual level

\*Corresponding author: Yi Tie, Zhengzhou University, China; zztieyi@163.com

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## 1. Introduction

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) believes that metaphor comprises the source domain and the target domain. Generally speaking, concepts in the source domain are used to be more concrete or physical, while those in the target domain are more abstract or elusive. As a way of thinking and cognition, metaphor shows both universality and cultural differences.

Social culture influences the metaphorical expressions in different ways; metaphor is created and accepted in a certain cultural context (Kövecses, 2005, 2015). Culture helps to select and filter the appropriate physical experience, and form a conventionalized metaphoric expression (Yu, 2008; Yu and Jia, 2016). Owing to the significant role of culture in the formation of conceptual metaphor, the topic of comparing metaphorical expressions in different cultural backgrounds is not a new one (Guo, 1998; Ding, 2004; Kövecses, 2006; Li, 2007; Wang, 2009; Zhang, 2012; Qin and Huang, 2014).

From the perspective of embodied philosophy and culture, these studies have revealed the influence of culture in different periods on metaphorical expressions, but there is still a lack of systematic and in-depth research on the historical characteristics of metaphors and its underlying motivation.

As a cross-domain mapping process, metaphor is a series of correspondences from the concrete concept to the abstract concept, which is rooted in our embodied experience and life knowledge, and is based on the cognitive experience of national culture and daily language. This paper focuses on the metaphorical expressions of “life” (人生 *rensheng*) in Chinese, with particular attention to its diachronic evolution and the underlying motivations. For the convenience of discussion, this study compares LIFE metaphor in modern Chinese<sup>1</sup> with those in *The Book of Poetry* of the pre-Qin Period (Qin Dynasty 221 B.C.E.–207 B.C.E.) and *300 Tang Poems* of the Tang Dynasty (618 A.D.–907 A.D.). The reason for choosing these two books lies in: on the one hand, in the past and present, numerous writers share ideas and express emotions with metaphors in poems; on the other hand, *The Book of Poetry* is the first collection of poems in China, representing the Chinese ancestors’ world view, while *300 Tang Poems* is a representative of the Tang civilization.

## 2. The LIFE metaphor in *The Book of Poetry*

“Fu” (赋 *fu*), “Bi” (比 *bi*) and “Xing” (兴 *xing*) are three important artistic features of *The Book of Poetry*, heralding the poetic compositions in ancient China. For a long time, when Chinese scholars talk about the origin of metaphors, they usually highlight the great contributions made by 比 *bi* and 兴 *xing* in *The Book of Poetry*. In short, 比 *bi* means to make comparisons, including metaphors and similes. That is, the poet should write about one object by comparing it to another. In other words, the object that the poet depicts in the poem is not what he really means to sing of. He only makes a comparison to convey his thoughts and feelings. 兴 *xing* means “to stimulate”. That is, the poet is prompted to sing when certain objective things arouse his emotions. Therefore, it usually appears at the beginning of a poem or a stanza within a poem. As a matter of fact, 兴 *xing* is a kind of metaphor (Wang, 2006: 484). Therefore, this study regards both 比 *bi* and 兴 *xing* as metaphorical expressions in *The Book of Poetry*.

By collecting and analyzing the corpus, 24 life metaphors are found in 305 poems of *The Book of Poetry*. Through further generalization, we can roughly summarize the source domains of life metaphors in *The Book of Poetry* into the following several upper-level conceptual domains and rank them from high to low according to the proportion of mappings contained in each upper-level conceptual domain. The results are as follows: (i) animal/plant domain (83.3%); (ii) action/transportation domain (8.3%); (iii) natural phenomenon domain (4.2%); (iv) matter/object domain (4.2%) (see **Table 1**).

### 2.1. The animal/plant domain

According to Table 1, people usually use concepts of the animal/plant domain to metaphorically understand “life” in *The Book of Poetry*, especially the plant concepts (among the 20 life metaphors projected from the animal/plant domain, 19 are mapped from the plant concepts). The ancient Chinese often use the growth cycle of plants to refer to the different stages of life:

1. The Mandarin corpus in this study comes from the Modern Chinese Corpus of the Chinese Linguistics Research Center of Peking University.

Table 1. LIFE metaphor in *The Book of Poetry*

Source domain	Concrete concepts	Number of mappings (%)	Total 24 (100%)
Animal/plant	Fruits and trees: peach (tree), plum, jujube tree, mulberry, gourd, and grape vine; Crops: millet, and sorghum; Ornamental plants: Chinese bush cherry, and lotus; Herbaceous plants: motherwort, weeds, tarragon, wormwood, mugwort, creeper, reeds and sweet sedge; Animals: mayfly	20 (83.3%)	
Action/transportation	Swimming, and taking a boat	2 (8.3%)	
Natural phenomenon	Snow, and graupel	1 (4.2%)	
Matter/object	Stone	1 (4.2%)	

(1) 桃之夭夭，灼灼其华。之子于归，宜其室家。桃之夭夭，有蕢其实。之子于归，宜其家室。桃之夭夭，其叶蓁蓁。之子于归，宜其家人。 (《周南·桃夭》)

The peach tree stands wayside, with blossoms glowing pink. I wish the pretty bride, affluence in food and drink. The peach tree stands wayside, with fruits hanging rife. I wish the pretty bride, abundant wealth in life. The peach tree stands wayside, with leaves thick and dense. I wish the pretty bride, a pleasant home e'er hence.

(*Southern Zhou: The Beautiful Peach*, translated by Wang, 2008: 11)

Example (1) is a poem congratulating a young girl on her marriage. The whole poem consists of three chapters. In each chapter, the concept of peaches is metaphorically used first to mapped onto the life concept, and then flowers, fruits and leaves. From flowering to fruiting, and then fruits abscission to a profusion of leaves, it metaphorically refers to the happy life of the newlyweds after marriage, in which the gradual change of metaphorical mappings naturally integrates with the plant growth.

(2) 摽有梅，顷筐墜之。求我庶士，迨其谓之。 (《召南·摽有梅》)

I cast you plums from the tree, in baskets on the way. If you want to marry me, you'd better come and say.

(*Southern Shao: The Plums*, translated by Wang, 2008: 33)

(3) 桑之落矣，其黄而陨。自我徂尔，三岁食贫。 (《卫风·氓》)

The mulberry leaves are dry, When from the tree they fly. Since I became his wife, I've led a wretched life.

(*Songs of Wei: My Man*, translated by Wang, 2008: 105)

Example (2) and (3) use the growth of “plum” and “mulberry” respectively to refer to the life process. As time goes by, the growth process of plants from the germination to the fallen blossom is just like the passing of life time. Thus, these two examples both use the decaying plum and mulberry leaves to metaphorically understand people’s fading youth.

Besides, the luxuriant plants growing at the edge of the water can be metaphorically used to describe the vigorous development of life as well as the young man in love, as illustrated in example (4):

(4) 彼泽之陂，有蒲与荷。有美一人，伤如之何？ (《陈风·泽陂》)

Along the lakeshore by the edge, grow the lotus and sweet sedge. A handsome man is standing there; how he fills me with despair!

(*Songs of Chen: The Lakeshore*,  
translated by Wang, 2008: 245)

The following example (5) uses different concepts in the animal/plant domain, namely, “tarragon”, “wormwood”, and “mugwort”, to metaphorically describe different ways of life. Tarragon ( 莪 *e*) is a plant with leaves that have a strong taste and are used in cooking as a fragrant and delicious herb; here, it is a metaphor to describe someone who becomes a useful person and shows filial obedience. However, wormwood ( 蒿 *hao*) and mugwort ( 蔚 *wei*) are scattered plants; wormwood is a plant with a bitter flavor and not edible here, while mugwort cannot bear seeds and be eaten as food either. Here, they are jointly used to metaphorically refer to a person who is not able to be successful and filial:

(5) 蓼蓼者莪，匪莪伊蒿。哀哀父母，生我劬劳。 (《小雅·蓼莪》)

Unlike thick tarragons that grow, the worthless wormwood crawls below. Alas, my father; alas, my mother! You helped me more than any other.

(*Minor Odes: Thick Tarragons*,  
translated by Wang, 2008: 419)

There are many other metaphorical expressions of LIFE IS PLANTS GROWTH in *The Book of Poetry*. Due to limited space, they cannot be discussed one by one. The following example (6) is a metaphorical expression of LIFE IS ANIMALS GROWTH in *The Book of Poetry*:

(6) 蜉蝣掘阅，麻衣如雪。心之忧矣，于我归说。 (《曹风·蜉蝣》)

The mayfly puts on wings, just like a white hemp dress. I’m filled with deep distress; what is it that fate brings!

(*Song of Cao: The Mayfly*,  
translated by Wang, 2008: 253)

Mayfly, which is born in the morning and dies at night, usually has a very short lifespan. At the beginning of example (6), the poet firstly describes how the mayfly flaunts its wings and appearance.

By focusing on the brevity of this beautiful but weak insect's life, this example understands the living conditions of human beings metaphorically with the concept of mayflies.

## 2.2. The action/transportation domain

There are two metaphorical expressions projected from the action/transportation domain in *The Book of Poetry*, as illustrated in the following examples (7) and (8):

(7) 就其深矣，方之舟之。就其浅矣，泳之游之。 (《邶风·谷风》)

When river water's deep and wide, I'll take a boat upon the tide. Where river water's low and slow, I'll swim or wade across the flow.

(*Song of Bei: The Mountain Gales*,  
translated by Wang, 2008: 61)

By stating the view of “taking a boat when river water is deep and wide, while swimming when river water is low and slow”, in example (7), the concept of journey is mapped onto the concept of life. More specifically, the water depth is described as a metaphor for numerous difficulties in life, and the poet here expresses his attitude that no matter what kind of difficulties people encounter in their life, we should find ways and means to solve the problems.

(8) 泛泛杨舟，载沉载浮。既见君子，我心则休。 (《小雅·菁菁者莪》)

Unsteady the poplar boat goes, on the river afloat. Pleasing are gentlemen like those; in ease and content I gloat.

(*Minor Odes: The Thick Tarragon*,  
translated by Wang, 2008: 323)

Example (8) begins with a pledge that two people will pull together in times of trouble and share their joys and sorrows forever by metaphorically describing an unsteady poplar boat floating on the river. Through the LIFE IS JOURNEY metaphor, this example illustrates that no matter in good or bad times, women will always feel happy as long as they are accompanied by their love.

## 2.3. The natural phenomenon domain

In *The Book of Poetry*, there is a life metaphor which is mapped from the natural phenomenon domain as shown in example (9). Here, the concepts of snow and graupel are used to metaphorically refer to the life that will die at an unknown time, which demonstrates the poet's short-lived and precarious outlook on life:

(9) 如彼雨雪，先集维霰。死丧无日，无几相见。乐酒今夕，君子维宴。(《小雅·頍弁》)

Life is like a heavy snow—it comes and swiftly it will go. Death befalls within a night, as time is short and life is slight. Let's enjoy ourselves tonight, at the banquet in delight.

(*Minor Odes: The Thick Tarragon*,  
translated by Wang, 2008: 467)

## 2.4. The matter/object domain

As shown in the following example (10), the poet describes one's bullied life as the stepped stone under others' feet with the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS STONE, which expresses the miserable fate of a woman after she was dethroned, just like the flat stone being trampled on:

(10) 有扁斯石，履之卑兮。之子之远，俾我疚兮。（《小雅·白华》）

The stepping stone is flat and low, the man who steps on it can't grow. My man has gone far, far away, leaving me in severe dismay.

(*Minor Odes: The Reeds*,

translated by Wang, 2008: 497)

## 3. The LIFE metaphor in 300 Tang Poems

In the Tang Dynasty, the Chinese poems reached a peak of development and one representative work, the objects-describing poetry (咏物诗 *yong-wu-shi*), is a clever use of metaphorical thinking in poetry writing. The so-called “understanding virtues with objects (观物比德 *guan-wu-bi-de*)” and “expressing emotions with objects (咏物寓兴 *yong-wu-yu-xing*)” are to use objects characteristics to metaphorically understand people's virtues, aspirations and behaviors, which means the poet does not directly describe certain emotions, but makes them a symbol to convey his inner emotional experience by describing those external objects that are closely related to the poet's inner experience. The present corpus analysis shows that there are altogether 36 life metaphors in *300 Tang Poems*, including 14 mapped from the animal/plant domain, 12 from the natural phenomenon domain, 9 from the action/transportation domain, and 1 from the matter/object domain (see **Table 2**).

**Table 2.** LIFE metaphor in *300 Tang Poems*

Source domain	Concrete concepts	Number of mappings (%)	Total 36 (100%)
Animal/plant	Flower, grass, and spring silkworm, etc.	14 (38.9%)	
Natural phenomenon	Season, morning, and dusk	12 (33.3%)	
Action/transportation	Travailing, mountain-climbing, and journey	9 (25%)	
Matter/object	Candle	1 (2.8%)	

### 3.1. The animal/plant domain

The Tang people also used the growth cycle of plants to metaphorically refer to different life stages, but the frequency was lower than that of the pre-Qin Period:

(11) 自小刺头深草里，而今渐觉出蓬蒿。时人不识凌云木，直到凌云始道高。

（杜荀鹤《小松》）

While young, the pine tree thrusts its head amid tall grass; now by and by we find it outgrow weed in mass. People don't realize it will grow to scrape the sky; seeing it tower in cloud, then they know it's high.



(Du Xunhe: *The Young Pine*,  
translated by Xu, 2008: 86)

Example (11) is a poem based on the conceptual metaphor of HUMAN BEINGS ARE PINES. The concept of pines in the animal/plant domain is mapped onto the image of the poet himself. In this way, the poem expresses the poet's eagerness to get noticed, appreciated and promoted.

(12) 去日儿童皆长大, 昔年亲友半凋零。 (窦叔向《夏夜宿表兄话旧》)

The children of the past have all grown tall and high; half of our friends and kinsmen are gone and departed.

(Dou Shuxiang: *Talking with My Cousin One Summer Night*,  
translated by Xu, 2008: 153)

Example (12) is from one of Dou Shuxiang's poems, *Talking with My Cousin One Summer Night*, which is about Dou's visit to his cousin, drinking at his cousin's home and chatting about old times. The Chinese expression 凋零 *diaoling* in this example, originally means the withering of flowers and plants. Here, the poet uses it to metaphorically describe the separations in life or death, which further reflects the vicissitudes of one's life.

(13) 娉娉袅袅十三余, 豆蔻梢头二月初。 (杜牧《赠别二首(其一)》)

Not yet fourteen, she's fair and slender. Like early budding flower tender.

(Du Mu: *At Parting I*,  
translated by Xu, 2008: 209)

The Chinese expression 豆蔻 *doukou*, which is similar to the English word "cardamom", is a plant grown widely in the south of the Yangtze River, and is usually used to metaphorically describe the teenage of girls and the budding beauty in Chinese. In example (13), the concept of "early budding cardamom flower" is mapped onto the image of the poet's young love, a thirteen or fourteen young singing girl. This poem is the poet's farewell to his beloved singer in the city of Yangzhou.

It is thus clear that the conceptual metaphor of LIFE IS PLANTS GROWTH also exists in the Tang poetry. However, the concrete concepts that the Tang poets used to map onto the concept of life are usually catch-all terms, such as "flowers" and "grass", while those in *The Book of Poetry* are more concrete and diversified. According to Table 1, the ancient Chinese tend to use various kinds of plants to understand the concept of life in *The Book of Poetry*, including the concept of ordinary fruits and trees (e.g, peach, plum, jujube tree, and melon, etc.), the concept of crops (e.g, millet, and sorghum, etc.), the concept of ornamental plants (e.g, Chinese bush cherry, and lotus, etc.), the concept of herbaceous plants (e.g, motherwort, weeds, and tarragon, etc.) and so on.

Similarly, there is also a metaphorical expression of LIFE IS ANIMALS GROWTH in *300 Tang Poems*:

(14) 春蚕到死丝方尽,蜡炬成灰泪始干。 (李商隐《无题》)

Spring silkworm till its death spins silk from love-sick heart; a candle but when burned out has no tears to shed.

(Li Shangyin: *To One Unnamed*,

translated by Xu, 2008: 213)

Spring silkworm (春蚕 *chuncan*) binds itself in a cocoon and never stops until the last moment of its life. In the first half of example (14), the poet uses the concept of spring silkworm as a metaphor for a life-long love, which indicates that the missing for one's love is just like the silkworm spinning silk till its death.

### 3.2. The natural phenomenon domain

There is also a kind of life metaphor in Tang poetry, which maps from the change of the seasons or the passing of the days and nights in the natural phenomenon domain, as shown in the following example (15):

(15) 雨中黄叶树,灯下白头人。 (司空曙《喜外弟卢纶见宿》)

A yellow-leafed tree in the rain, by lamplight but white hairs remain.

(Sikong Shu: *My Cousin Lu Lun's Visit*,

translated by Xu, 2008: 152)

This poem records that Lu Lun, the poet's cousin, came to his home to have a talk and stay for night. In example (15), the poet and his cousin looked at each other's white hairs and lamented the change of seasons and the flow of time. The Chinese expression 黄叶树 *huang-ye-shu* (a yellow-leafed tree) implies that it is about autumn, which is closely related to the concept of desolation, so here the poet uses autumn to metaphorically refer to the aging life and expresses his sorrowful mood.

(16) 两处春光同日尽,居人思客客思家。 (白居易《望驿台》)

Spring comes to end in two places on the same day; you think of home and she of you far, far away.

(Bai Juyi: *For Roaming Yuan Zhen*,

translated by Xu, 2008: 165)

In example (16), the Chinese phrase 春光 *chunguang* (spring sights), not only refers to the beautiful scenery of spring, but also indicates the beautiful youth of life, especially the happy time with one's love.

However, 夕阳 *xiyang* (setting sun) and 黄昏 *huanghun* (dusk) in example (17) express their metaphorical meanings in two aspects: on the one hand, the concepts of setting sun and dusk are used to metaphorically indicate the poet's late in his life; on the other hand, these two concepts also imply the declining fate of the country. By using the conceptual metaphor of LIFE IS THE



ALTERNATION OF SUN AND MOON, the poet sighs his inability to retain a better life with regret in example (17):

(17) 夕阳无限好, 只是近黄昏。 (李商隐《乐游原》)

The setting sun seems so sublime, but it is near its dying time.

(Li Shangyin: *On the Plain of Imperial Tombs*,  
translated by Xu, 2008: 374)

Based on the conceptual metaphors of LIFE IS THE CHANGE OF SEASONS and LIFE IS THE ALTERNATION OF SUN AND MOON, there are altogether 12 life metaphors projected from the natural phenomenon domain in *300 Tang Poems*. Due to the limited space, we will not analyze them one by one. Nevertheless, as for the life metaphor mapped from the natural phenomenon domain, it is worth noting that the concrete concepts used in *300 Tang Poems* are different from those in *The Book of Poetry*. In *The Book of Poetry*, there are only a few life metaphors that are mapped from the concepts of “snow” and “graupel” in the natural phenomenon domain; however, in *300 Tang Poems*, the life metaphors mapped from the natural phenomenon domain are not only numerous, but also focus on some other concrete concepts, such as “the change of seasons”, and “the change of days and nights” or “the alternation of sun and moon”.

### 3.3. The action/transportation domain

The metaphorical expressions of LIFE IS JOURNEY can also be found in *300 Tang Poems*, as illustrated in the following examples (18–20):

(18) 长风破浪会有时, 直挂云帆济沧海。 (李白《行路难》)

A time will come to ride the wind and cleave the waves; I'll set my cloud-like sail to cross the sea which raves.

(Li Bai: *Hard Is the Way of the World*,  
translated by Xu, 2008: 348)

Example (18) uses the concrete concept of “riding a boat” from the action domain to metaphorically understand life. By using the LIFE IS TAKING A BOAT metaphor, the poet expresses his belief that despite the obstacles ahead, one's life will ride the wind and waves and cross the sea to reach the other side of success one day.

(19) 生者为过客, 死者为归人。天地一逆旅, 同悲万古尘。

(李白《拟古十二首(其九)》)

The living are but passers-by, and those are going home who die. The sky and earth are hotels just, for all to grieve over age-old dust.

(Li Bai: *Life and Death*,  
translated by Xu, 2008: 356)

In example (19), the concept of passers-by in a hurry on the journey is used to metaphorically describe the insignificant life, and the comings and goings in the journey is another metaphor for life and death. Centered on the LIFE IS JOURNEY metaphor, the poet illustrates his forlorn plaint of short life.

(20) 欲穷千里目,更上一层楼。 (王之涣《登鹳雀楼》)

You will enjoy a grander sight, by climbing to a greater height.

(Wang Zhihuan: *On the Stork Tower*,  
translated by Xu, 2008: 341)

Example (20) metaphorically understands the struggle process of life as ascending a height to enjoy a distant view. As everyone knows, those farsighted who climb high only want to seek higher and see further, and this kind of climbing experience is mapped onto the enterprising and exploring spirit in life as shown in the above example (20).

As has been said before, there are altogether 9 life metaphors mapped from the action/transportation domain in *300 Tang Poems* and thus it is obvious that the metaphorical expressions mapped from the action/transportation domain in *300 Tang Poems* are richer than those in *The Book of Poetry*. Specifically, the former relates to various activities and transportation methods, such as boating, mountain-climbing, and traveling, etc.; while the latter only takes 2 concrete concepts from the action/transportation domain to construct the life metaphor, namely, LIFE IS SWIMMING and LIFE IS TAKING A BOAT.

### 3.4. The matter/object domain

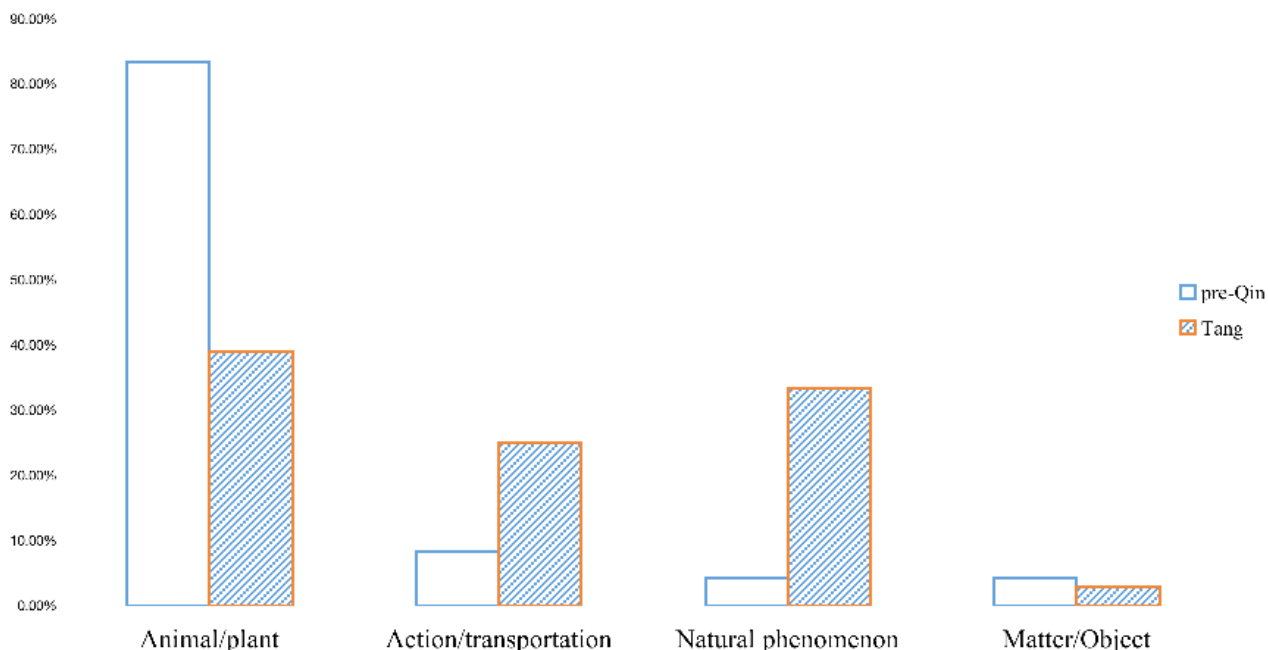
(21) 春蚕到死丝方尽,蜡炬成灰泪始干。 (李商隐《无题》)

Spring silkworm till its death spins silk from love-sick heart; a candle but when burned out has no tears to shed.

(Li Shangyin: *To One Unnamed*,  
translated by Xu, 2008: 213)

In 3.1, we have already discussed the LIFE IS ANIMALS GROWTH in the first half of example (21) 春蚕到死丝方尽 *chun-can-dao-si-si-fang-jin* (spring silkworm till its death spins silk from live-sick heart). The second half of the above example 蜡炬成灰泪始干 *la-ju-cheng-hui-lei-shi-gan* (a candle but when burned out has no tears to shed) is a metaphor for the pain of not being able to get together. Here, 泪 *lei* (tear) refers to both the melted wax dribbled down the side of the candle and the tears of separated love. The poet uses an ordinary object—a red candle, to metaphorically describe two people's melancholy and worries because they can't meet each other.

On the whole, the numbers of source domain types of LIFE metaphor in the pre-Qin Period as well as in the Tang Dynasty are both very limited, involving only 4 kinds of source domains, namely, the animal/plant domain, the action/transportation domain, the natural phenomenon domain and the matter/object domain. As shown in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1.** The source domain distribution of LIFE metaphor in the pre-Qin Period and the Tang Dynasty.

(i) More than 80% of LIFE metaphor in *The Book of Poetry* of the pre-Qin Period are projected from the animal/plant domain represented by crops; while the source domains of LIFE metaphor in *300 Tang Poems* of the Tang Dynasty are relatively evenly distributed in the three major domains, namely, the animal/plant domain, the natural phenomenon domain and the action/transportation domain.

(ii) As for the LIFE metaphorical expressions projected from the plant domain, the concrete concepts or specific instances used in *The Book of Poetry* are more abundant than those in *300 Tang Poems*; that is to say, people of the pre-Qin Period are good at understanding the life concept from various plant types, including common fruits, trees, crops, and ornamental plants, etc.

(iii) As for the LIFE metaphorical expressions mapped from the natural phenomenon domain as well as the action/transportation domain, the types of concrete concepts in *300 Tang Poems* are more than those in *The Book of Poetry*.

(iv) There is little difference in the concrete concepts from the source domain of animals between the two ages.

#### 4. A comparative analysis on the source domains in Chinese LIFE metaphor of three historical periods

The foregoing paragraphs have discussed the historical characteristics of Chinese LIFE metaphor in the pre-Qin Period and the Tang Dynasty in detail. Tie (2016) also fully analyses and summarizes 16 representative types of source domains in Mandarin LIFE metaphor (see **Table 3**).

Based on the findings of the present study and Tie (2016), the historical characteristics of the source domain in Chinese LIFE metaphor are gradually clear: in the pre-Qin Period, the ancient Chinese often use the concept of plants (especially, crops) to map onto the “life” concept; in the

Table 3. LIFE Metaphor in Mandarin

Source domain	Number of mappings	Percentage (%)	Examples
Action/transportation	316	38.2	导航人生 <i>dao-hang-ren-sheng</i> (navigate one's life), 人生旅途 <i>ren-sheng-lü-tu</i> (life journey), and 人生方向 <i>ren-sheng-fang-xiang</i> (life direction), etc.
Economy/commerce/occupation	103	12.5	人生本钱 <i>ren-sheng-ben-qian</i> (life capital), 职场人生 <i>zhi-chang-ren-sheng</i> (life of workplace), and 财富人生 <i>cai-fu-ren-sheng</i> (life of wealth), etc.
Perception/emotion	90	11.0	咀嚼人生 <i>ju-jue-ren-sheng</i> (chew one's life), 人生最灰暗的时期 <i>ren-sheng-zui-hui-an-de-shi-qi</i> (the darkest period of one's life), and 一缕清香说人生 <i>yi-lü-qing-xiang-shuo-ren-sheng</i> (a breath of fragrance on life), etc.
Education/culture/art/sport	85	10.3	人生舞台 <i>ren-sheng-wu-tai</i> (life stage), 人生重要一课 <i>ren-sheng-zhong-yao-de-yi-ke</i> (an important life lesson), 悲剧人生 <i>bei-ju-ren-sheng</i> (life tragedy), 人生竞技场 <i>ren-sheng-jing-ji-chang</i> (life arena), and 人生之歌 <i>ren-sheng-zhi-ge</i> (song of life), etc.
Universe/earth	48	5.8	人生的春天 <i>ren-sheng-de-chun-tian</i> (the spring of one's life), 人生气象 <i>ren-sheng-qi-xiang</i> (one's life meteorology), 人生朝露 <i>ren-sheng-zhao-lu</i> (the morning dew of one's life), and 风雨人生 <i>feng-yu-ren-sheng</i> (the storm of one's life), etc.
Thought/language/information	40	4.8	人生的逻辑 <i>ren-sheng-de-luo-ji</i> (life logic), 人生哲学 <i>ren-sheng-de-zhe-xue</i> (life philosophy), 书写人生 <i>shu-xie-ren-sheng</i> (to write one's life), and 人生篇章 <i>ren-sheng-pian-zhang</i> (a chapter of one's life), etc.
Quantity	30	3.6	人生的轨迹 <i>ren-sheng-de-gui-ji</i> (life trajectory), and 人生坐标 <i>ren-sheng-de-zuo-biao</i> (life coordinate), etc.
Matter/object	21	2.5	单面的人生 <i>dan-mian-de-ren-sheng</i> (single-sided life), 提高人生质量 <i>ti-gao-ren-sheng-zhi-liang</i> (enhance the quality of one's life), and 人生截面 <i>ren-sheng-jie-mian</i> (a cross section of one's life), etc.
Living things	19	2.3	人生的养料 <i>ren-sheng-de-yang-liao</i> (the nourishment of one's life), and 人生后花园 <i>ren-sheng-hou-hua-yuan</i> (the rear garden of one's life), etc.
Diet/clothing/housing/property	17	2.1	浪费人生 <i>lang-fei-ren-sheng</i> (waste one's life), and 人生就像白兰地 <i>ren-sheng-jiu-xiang-bai-lan-di</i> (life is like a glass of brandy), etc.
Politics/law/military affairs	15	1.8	人生斗争 <i>ren-sheng-dou-zheng</i> (contend for one's life), and 人生的“判决书” <i>ren-sheng-de-pan-jue-shu</i> (the verdict of one's life), etc.
Human body/health care	12	1.5	人生如梦 <i>ren-sheng-ru-meng</i> (life is but a dream), and 人生创伤 <i>ren-sheng-chuang-shang</i> (a life trauma), etc.
Agriculture	11	1.3	耕耘人生 <i>geng-yun-zi-ji-de-ren-sheng</i> (life ploughing and weeding), and 收获人生 <i>shuo-huo-ren-sheng</i> (reap one's life), etc.
Industry/technology	11	1.3	人生实验 <i>ren-sheng-shi-yan</i> (life experiment), and 建设人生 <i>jian-shen-ren-sheng</i> (build one's life), etc.
Religion/folk belief	7	0.8	人生信仰 <i>ren-sheng-xin-yang</i> (life belief), and 人生修行 <i>ren-sheng-xiu-xing</i> (life austerity), etc.
State of affairs	2	0.2	人生循环 <i>ren-sheng-da-xun-huan</i> (life cycle), and 人生圆满 <i>ren-sheng-yuan-man</i> (a satisfactory life), etc.
Total	827	100	

Tang Dynasty, Chinese people usually understand “life” with various concepts from the animal/

plant domain, the natural phenomenon domain, and the action/transportation domain; while the source domains in Mandarin LIFE metaphor presents a multi-level distribution of 16 types of source domain with open and comprehensive characteristics.

Kövecses (2005: 232) tries to explain the causes of metaphor variation from two aspects: one is the differential experience, and the other is the differential cognitive preferences and styles. He puts forward that there are several distinct causes that produce differential experience and hence different metaphors, including awareness of context, differential memory, differential concerns and interests, and their various subcases; and the factors appear to account for differential preferences and styles include experiential focus, viewpoint preference, prototype and framing, and metaphor versus metonymy preference. Then, Kövecses (2006: 2) emphasizes the important role of experiential focus in the diachronic evolution of metaphor and makes a point that experiential focus is the main factor that affects both cross-cultural variation and within-cultural variation in metaphor.

According to the present study on the source domain distribution of Chinese LIFE metaphor in three different historical periods, the following conclusion can be drawn that there are two aspects that influence the choice of source domain, namely, the material level and the intellectual level. The material level mainly refers to material elements such as physical environment, food and clothing, construction, transportation and production tools, etc.; while the intellectual level means the dominant cultural thoughts in certain historical period. Generally speaking, different historical periods often have different experiential focuses; and the historical characteristics of the source domains are determined by the corresponding characteristics of certain experiential focus.

#### **4.1. The pre-Qin Period**

*The Book of Poetry* is the first collection of Chinese poems, which collects the ancient Chinese folk songs from the early years of Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C.E.–771 B.C.E.) to the middle of the Spring and Autumn Period (770 B.C.E.–476 B.C.E.). As far as its natural geographical environment is concerned, the Chinese ancestors mainly settle along the Yellow River and the Yangtze River, where the climate is humid and the land is fertile. From the beginning, the ancient Chinese have developed a sense of worship for the nature of heaven and earth, and then gradually form the faith of “harmony between nature and human beings” (天人合一 *tian-ren-he-yi*) in the frequent contact with nature (Feng, 2013: 13). It is important to note that the idea of harmony between man and nature has also become a basic feature of Chinese traditional culture. The Chinese ancestors believe that nature gives birth to human beings, protects human beings and endows them with food and life. Therefore, people tend to use the natural concepts, such as animals and plants, to help express their emotions and wishes. By explaining or describing the abstract spiritual activities in the concrete natural forms, the rhythm of nature is mapped onto the fate of mankind, and the growth of human life is the growth of all animals and plants bred by nature. Henceforth, the metaphorical mapping between man and nature has been established.

It is particularly worth observing that in the pre-Qin Period where *The Book of Poetry* was written, manual gathering and working are the major source and style of people’s life. Due to the limitation of productivity development, agriculture occupies a special position in the socioeconomic system. Thus, Chinese ancestors are more inclined to use the concept of crops that they encounter frequently during their daily farming to understand those abstract concepts in the human world. As a result, a lot of metaphorical expressions based on LIFE IS CROPS GROWTH projected from the



plant domain can be found in *The Book of Poetry*.

Generally speaking, the material level represented by the limited products in the pre-Qin Period restricts Chinese ancestors' experience and cognition of the external world. On the other hand, to a certain extent, the germination of farming understanding (农事思想 *nong-shi-si-xiang*) as well as the idea of "harmony between man and nature" together influence the ancestors' LIFE metaphorical thinking model based on the concept of crops. Hence, the life metaphors in *The Book of Poetry* are mostly projected from the plant domain, whose representative concrete concepts include mulberry, millet, melon as well as other fruits and crops.

#### 4.2. The Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty was a golden age of Chinese feudal society with a vast territory. Presented the Zhenguan Period (贞观之治 *zhen-guan-zhi-zhi*) and the Flourishing Kaiyuan Region Period (开元盛世 *kai-yuan-sheng-shi*) constituted the prosperous Tang Dynasty featured with political oneness and economic prosperity, which witnessed unprecedented frequent exchanges between China and foreign countries and created unparalleled opportunities for the development of interaction between the Tang people and the outside world. Along with the rapid development of farming instruments, handicraft industry and commerce in the Tang Dynasty, an inclusive and innovative cultural atmosphere is being promoted within the enlightened and flourishing political environment.

重玄学 *chongxuanxue* (duplicate metaphysics), which is originated in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317 A.D.–420 A.D.), reached its peak in the Tang Dynasty. The so-called 重玄 *chongxuan* comes from the first chapter of *Tao Te Ching* (the classic of Taoist Philosophy):

玄之又玄，众妙之门 *xuan-zhi-you-xuan, zhong-miao-zhi-men*

Together we call them the Mystery. Where the Mystery is the deepest is the gate of all that is subtle and wonderful. (Legges, 1891: 9)

The purport of 重玄 *chongxuan* is to get rid of all constraints and achieve a realm of absolute freedom by using the method of double negation (Liu, 2007: 68). Duplicate metaphysics (重玄学 *chongxuanxue*) advocates that Tao (道 *dao*) is the principle of nature, and its ultimate stratum belongs to the nature of heaven and earth. The invisible Tao shifts people's attention from the real tangible world to the visionary universe. Metaphysics (玄学 *xuanxue*), in this sense, is not only a realm of life pursued by scholars, but also a goal of their life. The concepts of "nature" and "universe" are not only the objects of scholars' philosophical thinking, but also the symbol of their good taste, which are often used in their speeches and writings (Ge, 2015: 310).

In terms of the LIFE metaphor, it is found that the types of the source domains in LIFE metaphor of *The Book of Poetry* and *300 Tang Poems* are basically the same, but the concrete concepts that are used to be mapped onto the life concept are quite different: first, under the influence of duplicate metaphysics, the Tang people constructed many life metaphors projected from the natural phenomenon domain, such as LIFE IS THE CHANGE OF SEASONS and LIFE IS THE ALTERNATION OF SUN AND MOON, shifting their experiential focus to the invisible universe; second, as the Tang Dynasty still attached importance to the development of agriculture, it inherited the conceptual metaphor of LIFE IS PLANTS GROWTH of the pre-Qin Period, but varied the concrete concepts from crops to common plants and flowers, which reflects the elegant life taste of



the Tang people; third, with the frequent need of foreign exchanges and daily traveling, the Tang Chinese had further developed the life metaphors projected from the transportation domain, such as LIFE IS TAKING A BOAT and LIFE IS MOUNTAIN-CLIMBING, whose number is significantly larger than that of *The Book of Poetry*, and the concrete concepts used to metaphorically understand “life” are also more diversified. In a word, the increasingly rich material life as well as the dominant culture model characterized by duplicate metaphysics and individual pursuits of personality development worked together to produce a marked effect on the LIFE metaphor of the Tang Dynasty, presenting a trend of gradual opening to the overall scheme of things.

### 4.3. Modern times

Compared with *The Book of Poetry* and *300 Tang Poems*, the source domains of LIFE metaphor in modern Chinese have the following characteristics:

(i) The LIFE metaphor in Mandarin presents the gamut of source domains with 16 different types (as shown in Table 3). On the one hand, Chinese people use concrete concepts based on physical experience to refer to “life”, such as perception, emotion and so on; on the other hand, many concrete concepts based on social experience such as arts, sports, agriculture, industry, commerce, and military affairs can also be used metaphorically to understand the life concept in modern Chinese.

(ii) Most of the life metaphors in *The Book of Poetry* and *300 Tang Poems* are projected from concepts of the outside world (such as the animal/plant domain, etc.), while modern Chinese also takes concepts from people’s physical experience (such as the perception/emotion domain, etc.) to metaphorically understand the concept of life. This is because, with the increasing enrichment of people’s knowledge about the external world, they begin to turn their attention from the external visible world to the internal invisible world, and from the objective material world to the subjective human existence, which is also called the awakening of human beings’ subjective self-consciousness (Guo, 1998: 90).

**Table 4** shows how experiential focus influences Chinese LIFE metaphor in different historical periods from both the material level and the intellectual level.

**Table 4.** The motivations for the historical characteristics of the source domains in Chinese LIFE metaphor

Historical period	Material level	Intellectual level	Experiential focus
Pre-Qin	Poor and harsh living environment; and limited material products.	The idea of harmony between man and nature; and farming understanding.	The plant domain represented by crops.
Tang	Wide territory and rapid development of agriculture, industry and commerce.	Duplicate metaphysics; and individual pursuits for personality development as well as good taste.	Focusing on the plant domain, the action/transportation domain and the natural phenomenon domain.
Modern times	Overall improvement of productivity; and increasing enrichment of material life.	A people-oriented and all-round coordinated social value system.	Comprehensive distribution of the source domains from the perspectives of both natural world and human existence.

## 5. Conclusion

The diachronic evolution of language is the essence of linguistic structure, not a defect of language (Li, 2015: 45). Each historical period has its characteristic experiential focus, which reflects its unique material and intellectual life. The different experiential focuses of different historical periods will be reflected in the metaphors they construct. This study investigates the source domains of Chinese LIFE metaphor in *The Book of Poetry*, *300 Tang Poems* and the Mandarin. It demonstrates that people's choice of the source domains in different historical periods is determined by the experience focus from two aspects: one is the material level, the other is the intellectual level. With the deepening of people's understanding about nature, society and human existence, the distribution of the source domains in Chinese LIFE metaphor presents a trend of gradual diversity. On the one hand, it is shown that there is a feature of inheritance on the source domains between two different historical periods, which means that Chinese in different periods share certain kind of source domain in LIFE metaphor. On the other hand, the source domains of LIFE metaphor in different periods have their own distinctive characteristics. That is, the social material level and the intellectual level are labeled by certain historical characteristics, which leads to the diachronic characteristics of embodied conceptualization in different historical periods. Thus, the source domains of Chinese LIFE metaphor present a diachronic evolution of historical characteristics.

## Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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