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Fighting as a SOLDIER or Guilty as a SINNER? Metaphorical Insights into Early Career Researchers in Chinese Social Media Platform Little Red Book

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the metaphors used by Chinese early career researchers (ECRs) on the influential social media platform *Little Red Book* to discuss their roles and identities. It aims to provide empirical insights into their authentic ideas and attitudes regarding career development within the current landscape of Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs). Applying the MIPVU (Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit), 161 relevant linguistic metaphors were identified within a self-compiled small-scale corpus for this study. These metaphors were categorized into 33 metaphorical patterns using the Dynamic Discourse Approach, such as *ECR IS A SOLDIER*, *ECR IS A SINNER* and *ECR IS A TOOL*. The findings illuminate the discrepancy between external expectations and supports received, tensions between widely implemented quantitative performance evaluation system and lower-tier university platform restrictions, compromised research creativity and a pessimistic existential crisis experienced by ECRs in mainland China. Crucially, this research introduces a linguistic research perspective that is distinct from conventional questionnaire and semi-structured interview methods commonly used in studies regarding university teachers. Furthermore, it reveals the shared challenges encountered by this group and the diverse impact of these challenges in widespread practice.

Keywords: Early career researcher; Metaphor; Dynamic Discourse Approach; Chinese social media; Public discourse

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1. Introduction

University faculty members face an escalating burden due to their multifaceted responsibilities, including scientific research, teaching, and diverse social activities, often leading to high levels of pressure (Meng and Wang, 2018). Within this population, early career researchers (ECRs) may emerge as a notably vulnerable group, as they frequently encounter a range of challenges while striving to secure a stable professional position over a considerable period (Castelló et al., 2015). In China's social media platforms, ECRs are often called *qīng jiāo* [green peppers]. This Chinese term is an abbreviated and colloquial name for *gāo xiào qīng nián jiào shī* [young university teachers], usually referring to those who are new to higher education institutions (HEIs), younger than 35 years old, and hold junior academic titles. They frequently experience exploitation as cheap labor and face restricted prospects for professional growth (Li, 2016). However, it is noteworthy that research on how ECRs utilize metaphors, a crucial cognitive tool, in public discourse to discuss their roles and identities remains quite limited.

From a cognitive perspective, metaphors are not merely linguistic decorations but rather tools that reflect our ways of thinking (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Furthermore, from a discourse standpoint, a thorough examination of the usage of metaphors in real discourse allows us to understand the potential impact and consequences of these metaphors within specific contexts, thereby enabling inferences about the thoughts, attitudes, and values of discourse participants (Cameron et al., 2010). Currently, metaphor-led discourse analysis has explored individuals' beliefs and values in various social issues, including physical and mental health (Huang and Bisiada, 2021; Littlemore and Turner, 2020; Plug et al., 2011), gender relations (Li, 2024; Li et al., 2023) and education (Nacey, 2022). For instance, Nacey (2022) examined how doctoral students from a Norwegian university use metaphors in dissertation acknowledgements to depict their entire education period. By building systematic patterns in real discourse, it seeks empirically uncover pertinent attitudes, beliefs, and values within higher education from the perspectives of these students, offering particular insights for understanding the experiences of another important role in the higher education system, i.e., early career researchers (ECRs).

Therefore, this paper applies a Dynamic Discourse Approach (DDA) (Cameron, 2010) to analyze the metaphors utilized by Chinese ECRs on the social media platform *Little Red Book*. The objective is to gain insights into the challenges they encounter and how these challenges impact them. This research is innovative in that, establishing a schematic representation from the metaphorical language evidence provides a novel perspective for understanding the professional development and psychological states of university faculty. This approach diverges from the methodology of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews widely used in higher education research (Adcroft and Taylor, 2013; Bristow et al., 2017; Lai and Li, 2020; Meng and Wang, 2018; Sun et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2023).

2. Background

In contemporary higher education, there is an increasing emphasis on international rankings (Shahjahan et al., 2017). In recent decades, China's higher education system has undergone various policy reforms aimed at establishing world-class universities (Ngok and Guo, 2008) and enhancing international recognition (Serger et al., 2015, p. 883). These include the *211* and *985* projects initiated in the 1990s, as well as the *Double First-Class Universities project* launched in 2015, encompassing around 140 universities in the mainland China. Compared to other lower-tier universities outside of these projects, these universities receive substantial financial support from the government and attract a greater number of talented academics (Lai and Li, 2020; Song and Yang, 2023). Correspondingly, these universities usually impose greater expectations on their faculty in terms of scholarly productivity.

Another important reform in Chinese universities is the introduction of the Tenure-track recruitment system, commonly known as the *非升即走* (*up or out*) policy in China. It was initially piloted at Tsinghua University in 2003 (Qiu, 2010) and later implemented in most of the universities under the *985* and *211* projects (Tian et al., 2015; Zhang, 2014). In Chinese universities, there are three main academic ranks: lecturer, associate professor, and professor (Lai and Li, 2020, p. 5). Typically, young scholars, upon entering university as lecturers, are required to publish a considerable number of high-quality papers and monographs,

obtain research project funding, as well as achieve many other merits within a three- or six-year period to be promoted to associate professor. Failure to meet these high research output requirements leads to dismissal. Nevertheless, meeting predetermined criteria does not guarantee tenure either. Different from the tenure guaranteed in the United States and other countries where candidates only compete against themselves in order to meet the predefined criteria (Musselin, 2013), the *up or out* policy functions as a managerial performance tool which requires young faculty to vie for a limited number of positions amongst themselves (Si, 2023). As a result, these demanding research expectations, intense peer competition, and the extremely low promotion rate create significant insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety among young scholars in Chinese universities (Tian and Lu, 2017).

Recent survey-based studies have indicated that the factors contributing to Chinese university faculty members' pressure are diverse, such as excessive non-academic tasks, lack of financial support and recognition, career advancement pressure, reforms in the management and evaluation systems of Chinese HEIs (Meng and Wang, 2018; Wu et al., 2023). Through a questionnaire survey of 240 faculty members in a Chinese university, Meng and Wang (2018) found that faculty members below the rank of associate professor experience higher levels of pressure compared to associate professors and professors. Besides, another study involving semi-structured interviews with 18 ECRs in China indicated that the excessive emphasis on interpersonal connections in research project evaluation mechanisms, unequal power relations within collaborative research teams, and the low-quality research caused by weak external accountability systems have all accelerated the exploitation of ECRs and strengthened their vulnerability in academia (Lai and Li, 2020).

Regarding the metaphorical insights into university teachers' perceptions of their identities and roles, which this article particularly focuses on, there remains limited documentation. However, existing research concentrated on secondary school teachers has provided preliminary insights through data gathered via personal interviews (Sefer-

oğlu et al., 2009; Wan et al., Zhao et al., 2010). For example, Zhao et al. (2010) found that metaphors such as MANAGER, HOUSEKEEPER, ROBOT, SKILLED WORKER and BURNING CANDLE were frequently used by Chinese secondary school teachers to discuss their identities and teaching practices, suggesting an absence of encouragement for creativity within the educational context influenced by industrialization and commercialization. Another metaphor study relevant to higher education is that of Nacey (2022), who indicates the prevalent use of the metaphor *BUILDING*¹ by PhD students in their acknowledgements to positively view the academic support received during their doctoral experience. Since buildings are rarely constructed by individuals alone, this concept strongly suggests social cooperation, i.e., a doctoral dissertation is not the result of just one person, but of multiple people helping to complete it. And *JOURNEY* is the most used metaphor for describing their whole education process, indicating that obtaining a PhD is a goal-oriented activity with highly valued objectives that emphasizes the need for patience, as it takes time to reach the final destination.

Therefore, conducting metaphor-led discourse analysis of Chinese ECRs based on linguistic evidence from public social media holds significant importance. It has the potential to offer us more genuine comprehension of the dilemmas, expectations, and inner conflicts encountered by this pivotal group for the future development of the higher education sector. This, in turn, could serve as a basis for HEIs to formulate more precise and effective policies, offering guidance in fostering an environment that is more inclusive and conducive to the development of ECRs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Database

The data for this study comes from *Little Red Book*, a media platform that integrates social networking, e-commerce, and content creation (Pemarathna, 2019). Presently, many university faculty members post notes on the app to share their life and work experiences. This paper

¹Here the capitalized terms (e.g., MANAGER) indicate a conceptual metaphor. By contrast, other italicised capital terms (e.g., BUILDING) in this paper refer to systematic metaphor proposed by DDF, which reflects the possible metaphorical patterns of the participants' thinking in the discourse without giving them an independent a priori existence like the Conceptual Metaphor Theory does.

focuses on ECRs who serve as young university teachers in mainland China, excluding those who are currently pursuing their PhD or working as postdoctoral researchers.

By using the keyword *gāo xiào qīng jiāo* [university green pepper] that refers to young university teachers in China, we retrieved 999 relevant notes in *Little Red Book*, the maximum number of notes that can be displayed in one search. These notes include both video and image-text formats, and the time span ranges from December 31st, 2020, to May 17th, 2023, the date of data retrieval. As this study only focuses on the textual content within these notes, 98 video notes were excluded after an initial screening. In the second round of screening, irrelevant notes were removed, including those consisting solely of tags, recipes of *qīng jiāo* [green pepper] as a food, job-seeking notes from ECRs still in the interview stage, and notes by ECRs outside mainland China. This process yielded a total of 740 valid notes specifically relevant to young university faculty in mainland China.

Subsequently, Python was employed to denoise the 740 textual notes, removing content such as mentions (i.e.,), hashtags, emojis, and non-Chinese special characters. The resulting dataset consists of approximately 173,000 Chinese characters, which serves as the corpus for the identification of linguistic metaphors related to the topic of *young university faculty*.

Using *Little Red Book* as the data source offers several key advantages. Firstly, its widespread user base across China enables us to access perspectives from ECRs across different regions and universities², enhancing the generalizability of findings. Secondly, its users usually have a strong willingness to share authentic and natural content (Qianmockay, 2022), reflecting their genuine emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Finally, the interactive features of the platform provide engagement metrics such as the number of likes, favorites, and comments. However, as a single note may encompass several different metaphors and the attention a note receives is also influenced by the platform's commercial traffic promotion mechanism and the note contributor's ('contributor' hereafter) own follower base, the interaction metrics of the notes do not precisely quantify each metaphor's resonance degree but can serve as a reference

in specific contexts. For instance, if a metaphor with low frequency receives a considerable number of likes, it potentially reflects the genuine and shared sentiments among the ECR community.

3.2 Methods

This research applies a Dynamic Discourse Approach (DDA). Before presenting the concrete research steps, a brief explanation of the key statements within the DDA is needed.

Although deeply influenced by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), DDA shifts the attention from the conceptual level of metaphor across whole speech communities to the complex dynamics of real-world language use in social situations (Cameron et al., 2009). DDA assumes that metaphors in use have different interconnected dimensions, such as linguistic, cognitive, affective, physical, cultural, social (Cameron, 2010). Additionally, DDA proposes the notion of “systematic metaphor”, which refers to a collection of semantically related linguistic metaphors (i.e., vehicle-topic mappings) (Cameron, 2010, p. 91). Different from a conceptual metaphor in CMT, a systematic metaphor is not a permanent fixture in the mind but rather a local phenomenon that arises within a discourse based on a particular context and potentially changes as the discourse unfolds (Maslen, 2017, p. 91). Therefore, the analysis in this study will be based on the linguistic metaphors and their systematic metaphors within the corpus (Cameron et al, 2010; Cameron & Maslen, 2010). It is noteworthy that current literature grounded in CMT conventionally employs uppercase letters to denote “universally existing conceptual mappings identified in cognitive processes” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), e.g., SOLDIER. To differentiate from this convention, this study adopts capitalized italicized letters to denote potential systematic metaphors proposed in real discourse through the application of the DDA, e.g., *SOLDIER*.

The method of this research consists of three steps: (1) identifying metaphor vehicles related to the topic determined a priori, i.e., *young university faculty*, (2) categorizing the identified vehicles into corresponding vehicle groups, and (3) establishing systematic metaphors by link-

²Typically, the location of the note contributor will be automatically displayed beneath each note, including the names of different provinces within China and country names worldwide.

ing the vehicle groups with the topic. To mitigate potential biases introduced by individual investigators, each step of the data processing was independently conducted by two authors. Subsequently, consensus was reached through discussion before proceeding to the next step.

For the first step, following the MIPVU (*Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit*) (Steen et al., 2010) and an operational definition of metaphor proposed by DDA (Cameron and Maslen, 2010), the two investigators focused on words or phrases that can be justified as somehow anomalous or incongruous in the ongoing discourse but can be understood through meaning contrast and transfer between their basic meaning and contextual meaning. The basic meaning of a potential metaphor vehicle was confirmed in the online Chinese dictionary *Hàn diǎn*³. In addition, metaphors with analogical signals as *xiàng* [like], *fǎng fú* [as if] (i.e., similes) in Chinese were included, as they can also reflect the metaphorical thinking of the discourse participants. However, the term *qīng jiāo* [green pepper], which is part of the note search keyword, was not considered a metaphor vehicle, as it is a nickname that has evolved due to its phonetic similarity to the abbreviation for *young university faculty*, i.e., *qīng jiào* [young teachers].

For the second step, the semantically related metaphor vehicles were collected into the same group and each group was assigned a semantic label (Cameron et al., 2010), which can capture the collective or overall idea of these metaphor vehicles. Crucially, the labels need to remain as specific as possible to avoid encompassing vehicles with limited relevance, and the whole process should be flexible, interpretive, and recursive (Cameron et al., 2010, p. 118–120). As researchers handle more data during the grouping process, a newly emerging vehicle may prompt a reflection on whether the previous labels capture sufficient meaningful information, leading to potential splitting, merging, or renaming of existing group labels.

The third step links the obtained labels for vehicle groups with the topic to unveil relevant systematic metaphorical patterns, which encompasses linguistic metaphors frequently and occasionally recurring in the complex and dynamic discourse. The next section will present detailed quantitative results of the three steps presented.

4. Results

161 relevant metaphor vehicles were identified in the corpus. Most of them are directly relevant to the topic of *young university faculty*, while some of them involve a metaphorical conceptualization of “working in university”, thus implying their roles and identities in this field. These 161 metaphor vehicles are derived from 84 notes published by 77 different contributors. The likes on these notes range from 0 to 1360, with an average of 208.54. However, since a single note often contains multiple metaphor vehicles, after grouping them according to semantics it is challenging to determine the original number of likes received by each vehicle group. Therefore, the number of likes will not be listed in the overview of metaphor vehicle grouping but will be referenced later when analyzing specific cases.

Through grouping these vehicles, 33 metaphorical patterns were established. There are 29 systematic metaphors and 4 metaphorical patterns that occur only once, as illustrated in **Table 1**:

The 33 metaphor vehicle groups presented in **Table 1** provide diverse perspectives for describing and understanding the status, roles, and identities of young Chinese university faculty. Firstly, among these metaphors, the most prevalent systematic metaphors, represented by *SOLDIER*, *TRAVELER*, *ANIMAL*, *GAME PLAYER*, and *GARLIC CHIVES*, may reflect common and shared cognitive framings in shaping their identity. Meanwhile, other less frequently occurring patterns are equally important for our analysis as they may reveal more personalized experiences. Furthermore, the number of likes they received is not necessarily low. For example, a note containing the metaphor of *CONSORT* has received 106 likes, exceeding the median value of 54, which suggests that it may also resonate to some extent within the young university faculty community.

Secondly, associations among some different metaphorical patterns have been observed. For instance, *TOOL* and *MACHINE* are both related to objects or devices that can be used to accomplish specific tasks or achieve certain purposes. Similarly, *TRAVELER* and *NAVIGATOR* are associated with movement and journey. Nevertheless, to comprehensively understand the meaning and affective connotations reflected in these metaphorical patterns, specific linguistic contexts and discourse backgrounds should

³Access the online Chinese dictionary 汉典/Hàn diǎn: <https://www.zdic.net/>.

Table 1. Overview of metaphor vehicle grouping.

Vehicle groups	Number of vehicles	Vehicle groups	Number of vehicles
<i>SOLDIER</i>	20	<i>SPORTS COMPETITOR</i>	3
<i>TRAVELER</i>	18	<i>GAMBLER</i>	3
<i>ANIMAL</i>	11	<i>PERFORMER</i>	3
<i>GAME PLAYER</i>	9	<i>SPINNING TOP</i>	3
<i>GARLIC CHIVES</i>	9	<i>CONSORT</i>	3
<i>WASTE</i>	7	<i>DROWNING PERSON</i>	2
<i>RELIGIOUS BELIEVER</i>	7	<i>NAVIGATOR</i>	2
<i>AGRICULTURALIST</i>	7	<i>TOOL</i>	2
<i>CONSTRUCTION</i>	6	<i>MACHINE</i>	2
<i>WORKER</i>			
<i>INVESTOR</i>	6	<i>FOOD</i>	2
<i>BOTTOM</i>	6	<i>TORTURE VICTIM</i>	2
<i>PATIENT</i>	4	<i>VAGABOND</i>	2
<i>MATERIAL</i>	4	<i>GIANT</i>	1
<i>ARTISAN</i>	4	<i>MICROENTREPRENEUR</i>	1
<i>SINNER</i>	4	<i>DWARF</i>	1
<i>PREY</i>	4	<i>INDENTURED</i>	1
		<i>SERVANT</i>	
<i>DUST</i>	3		

be considered, as this may lead to notable differences in the conveyed messages.

Lastly, a notable feature is that many of the vehicles are inherently associated with negative or pessimistic connotations even without specific contextualization, i.e., *WASTE*, *SINNER*, *DROWNING PERSON*, and *TORTURE VICTIM*. These metaphorical patterns might directly portray the challenges, pressures, adversities, or negative experiences faced by Chinese young university faculty.

5. Analysis

The selected cases in the qualitative analysis concern (1) systematic metaphors with high frequency; (2) associations and distinctions between those related metaphorical patterns; (3) metaphors with strong affective valence. Besides, the number of likes received by each note to which the metaphor belongs is indicated in parentheses.

5.1 Discrepancy between expectations and supports obtained

The *SOLDIER* metaphor appears most frequently, with 20 instances. However, since the specific scenarios

in which the young scholars find themselves as *SOLDIER* may vary, the relevant linguistic metaphors reveal different aspects. Additionally,

- (1) 希望每位青椒都有光明而灿烂的未来，都是国家院士的后备军，都成为一个厉害的人，让这个世界因为有你们的才智有一点点不一样。(369 likes)

I hope that every green pepper has a bright and brilliant future, becomes a reserve force for national academicians, and becomes an outstanding individual, so that this world will be slightly different because of your talents and wisdom.

- (2) 奉劝各位青椒们，身体要紧。但愿我们爬出战壕那一天，能够身心都大获全胜！(85 likes)

I advise all the green peppers to take care of their health. Hopefully, the day we climb out of the trenches, we will emerge victorious in both body and mind!

- (3) 高校的团队资源倾斜也太狠了，单打独斗，公平竞争，毫无空间了。(12 likes)

The resource allocation in the university is too biased, fighting all alone, and there is no room for fair competition.

In example (1), the metaphor vehicle of 后备军/hòu

bèi jūn [reserve force] highlights the young university faculty's positive professional expectations, goals and aspirations to make significant contributions to their field. Additionally, it implies their determination to endure rigorous challenges and take on greater responsibilities in the pursuit of excellence and potential societal impact. Example (2) directly places young university faculty in the scenario of "war" through the metaphor vehicle of 战壕/*zhàn háo* [trenches]. This implies the inherent brutality of academic work itself as a relentless *war*, where young teachers are likened to *soldiers* engaged in intense combat in the trenches, facing the dual pressures of heavy workloads and the consequent health issues. Despite these challenges, the context still demonstrates an expectation and determination to achieve both mental and physical victories in the future.

However, other *SOLDIER* metaphors may directly reflect the difficulties and obstacles encountered by young university faculty in their work. In example (3), the metaphor vehicle of 单打独斗/*dān dǎ dú dòu* [fighting all alone] express the contributor's feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and anxiety when unable to obtain sufficient resources and supports within the university solely relying on individual abilities. Besides, the internal resource distribution issue is considered to have caused potential unfair competition.

Apart from the complexity observed within one systemic metaphor, various interconnected metaphorical patterns can also uncover both the commonalities and variations in how young university faculty perceive their academic status:

- (4) 差学校的青椒，如果没有青基，基本上是死路了。(196 likes)

For the green peppers from less prestigious universities, without the Youth Scientific Fund, it's essentially a dead road.

- (5) 学术之旅如逆水行舟，不进则退。(353 likes)

The academic journey is like rowing a boat against the currents, if you don't move forward, you'll regress.

Metaphors in (4) and (5) show the common experience of young scholars in a constant exploration process within their career *journey*, in which they may encounter various challenges and uncertainties. However, the two labels from different contributors each suggest distinct ways of moving forward on this *journey*.

In (4), *sǐ lù* [dead road] reflects the desperate situation of young scholars from lower-tier universities as a *TRAVELER* who lacks essential support and resources along their challenging career path, thus becoming entirely uncompetitive and disadvantaged in a bleak academic journey. The essential aspect is that the note containing this metaphor vehicle received 196 likes, indicating a certain resonance of the conveyed idea within the ECRs community. This indirectly suggests a widespread mismatch between "low platform resources" and "high output demands" within lower-tier universities. While example (5) portrays university teachers as *NAVIGATORS* who are *rowing against the direction of the water flow*, indicating that they must exert double efforts in their academic research to prevent regression and continue to move forward. Otherwise, they would be unable to keep pace with rapidly evolving academic landscape.

5.2 Passivity caused by up or out policy

Through *GARLIC CHIVES* metaphor, contributors have expressed explicitly the anxiety and insecurity about their career development especially caused by the *up or out* policy.

- (6) 即使熬过“非升即走”，将来还有“非升即转”，年轻韭菜在2x倍速的传送带上任人宰割，一茬一茬... (417 likes)

Even if one endures the *up or out* situation, there will still be the "promotion or job transfer" in the future. Young garlic chives are being cut on the conveyor belt of accelerated progression, one batch after another.

As a widely cultivated and eaten plant in China, 韭菜/*jiǔ cài* [garlic chives] has become a popular internet term in recent years, referring to ordinary Chinese individuals who are constantly lured into various economic activities but are destined to be exploited and drained of their wealth by powerful interest groups (Peng, 2022, p. 83). This term has been repeatedly used by different contributors to express self-deprecation about their common experience. Specifically, within the limited time during the *up or out* contract, their personal and academic energy is depleted by rigorous assessment systems. However, they may still be dismissed by the universities if they fail to outperform their peers in competition (Tian and Lu, 2017). Meanwhile, as the "harvesters" the universities can continue to sign such contracts

with new recruits, thus perpetuating the cycle of exploiting newly grown *garlic chives*.

Similarly, unpromising conditions have also been revealed by *ANIMAL* metaphors:

- (7) 现在的高校真是拿青椒当猪宰, 当老母鸡, 下完蛋就杀掉... (3 likes)

Nowadays, universities are really treating green peppers like pigs to be slaughtered, like old hens, killed after laying eggs...

- (8) 新来的真的容易被老家伙们牵着鼻子走。如果你不是本校毕业, 家庭条件很一般, 就一定要小心他们各种招数拿捏你... (411 likes)

Newcomers are really easy to be led by the nose by the old guys. If you are not a graduate of this university and your family conditions are ordinary, you must be careful of their various tricks to manipulate you.

In example (7), the contributor complains that nowadays young scholars are commonly treated as *pigs* and *old hens* by universities, two farm animals that serve to provide meat and eggs for humans. In other words, the contributor considers that the only value of their existence lies in the research output and the enhancement of the university's prestige and access to more resources, thus reflecting the discontent and frustration towards the *up or out* contract. Moreover, despite their research contributions, like an *old hen*, young scholars still face the destination of being *slaughtered* (i.e., dismissal) by the university, leading to a strong sense of insecurity among young scholars. This note received less attention, with only 3 likes, but the metaphor does confirm the problem of extremely negative emotions and existential crises caused by the *up or out* policy. While case (8) focuses on the pressure that young teachers feel from their senior colleagues in the workplace. The metaphor vehicle *qiān zhe bí zi zǒu* [to be led by the nose] is a Chinese proverb, suggesting that a person may be treated like a *cow*. In traditional China's farming economy, cows serve as an agricultural productivity tool to assist people in farming activities. In this process, the cow's nose is often tied to a rope and is controlled and guided by humans to accomplish specific tasks, such as plowing and transportation. Although this metaphor is not directly concerned with the *up or out* policy, it validates that young scholar without strong social capital, besides struggling with heavy research tasks and in-

tense peer competition, may be forced into unequal power relations in a complex work environment emphasizing seniority and cliques.

The power dynamics formed around performance metrics within the *up or out* policy in Chinese HEIs also emerge from another metaphor:

- (9) 当然也是幸运, 基金中了之后仿佛后宫有了子嗣的妃子, 应该不会非升即走了。(106 likes)

Of course, it is also a stroke of luck. After getting those fundings, it feels like being a consort in the imperial harem who has had an heir, so I wouldn't be forced to leave anymore.

The *CONSORT* metaphor in this note needs to be interpreted in conjunction with the unique Chinese historical context. Typically, a consort gained unique favor, peer respect, and servant reverence only after bearing children for emperor. Otherwise, she would often face marginalization or even mistreatment. Compared to those consorts (i.e., young scholars) in the imperial court (i.e., the university) who have not yet produced any heir (publications or fundings), the contributor in (9) is situated in a relatively stable professional environment with a sense of security. Essentially, this metaphor draws a systematic connection between the objectification of women in traditional feudal and patriarchal systems and the deprivation of agency among young educators within modern academia. This environment, centered around offspring/research output as the sole survival rule, reveals ECRs' passive positioning and power constraints within the institutional framework.

5.3 Compromised research creativity and personal well-being

Metaphors in the corpus also reveal young scholars' research motivation, productivity, mental well-being, and personal value judgement within the rigid performance metric evaluation system in Chinese HEIs.

- (10) 其实晋升职称就是一个升级打怪的游戏, 那些目标明确、带着任务清单和进度条、有强大执行力的人, 都会顺利通关。(137 likes)

In fact, the promotion of academic titles is like leveling up and battling monsters in a game. Those who have clear goals, carry a task list with progress bars, and possess strong execution power will suc-

cessfully advance to the next level.

Similar to the *SOLDIER* metaphor in the previous examples (1) and (2), the *GAME PLAYER* metaphor in example (10) portrays an optimistic stance towards career development. The contributor maintains the belief that, by assuming the role of a *GAME PLAYER* with clear objectives, a well-defined task list, and strong execution abilities, one can overcome challenges (i.e., *monsters*) and attain academic titles (i.e., *leveling up*) in the *game* of academic career. This reflects the contributor's inclination to prioritize the strategic planning of the professional trajectory within an atmosphere marked by pressures while remaining confident that diligent endeavors will result in positive feedback and outcomes. However, such metaphors of positive valence to high-pressure work environments are rare; instead, a greater prevalence of metaphors with passive, negative and despondent attitudes have been observed.

(11) 低头当螺丝钉就好，不要思考螺丝钉的意义，不去想意义就会轻松快乐很多…(136 likes)

Just lower your head and be a screw, don't consider the meaning of being a screw. Not thinking about meaning will bring much more ease and happiness...

(12) 总之就是好像整个人随着科研工作一起陷入停摆状态，重启不了…(54 likes)

In short, it feels as if my whole being is trapped in an inoperable state along with the progress of research work, unable to reboot.

The contributor of case (11) suggests that young faculty should lower their heads and work like *screws*, functioning as mere *TOOL* to complete assigned tasks without contemplating their sense. This metaphor with 136 likes unveils a self-suppressive tendency among ECRs, deliberately overlooking individual creativity, aspirations, and autonomy to desensitize personal discomfort within the current academic environment. Likewise, in example (12), another contributor is depicted as *inoperable* and *unable to reboot*, referring to the role of a *MACHINE* suggesting a severe lack of motivation, enthusiasm, and energy when facing scientific research tasks.

Besides, the heightened levels of negative emotions and existential crises of the young scholars are also presented:

(13) 真的感觉自己像个废物，并没有创造任何价值。(29 likes)

I truly feel like a waste, as I haven't created any value.

(14) 在这套运行机制和评价体系之下，慢热就是原罪…(417 likes)

Under this operational mechanism and evaluation system, growing slowly is considered an original sin ...

In (13), the contributor expresses a sense of self-deprecation by describing herself as a *WASTE*. The example (14) indicates that in the current rigorous and quantified performance evaluation system of Chinese universities, the inability to quickly produce research outcomes is regarded as an *original sin*, thus making those young scholars inherent *SINNER* who are unsuitable for survival in this context. In essential, in such a work environment, the individual's uniqueness, free will, and intrinsic nature are in severe conflict with the external demands and expectations of the reality. Hence, the two metaphors emphasize the young scholars' struggles, perplexity, and negative attributional introspection regarding their self-identity and value realization.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study has applied a Dynamic Discourse Approach (DDA) to investigate metaphors used by ECRs on the Chinese social media *Little Red Book* about their experiences and status, aiming to uncover their primary challenges and relevant impacts on their career development and personal well-being. Based on a series of in-depth analyses and nuances of the metaphorical linguistic evidence from these authentic discourses, a picture of the current situation of Chinese young university teachers can now be presented, as shown in **Figure 1**:

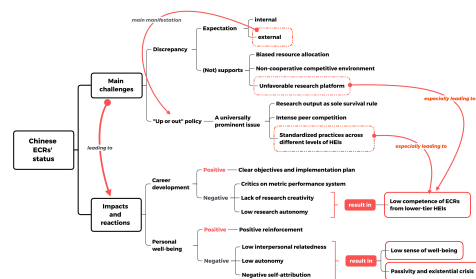


Figure 1. Schema of Chinese ECRs' status based on data from Little Red Book.

The first major challenge presented in the data of this study lies in the divergence and mismatch between the ex-

expectations of research output and the reality of the support received. According to the metaphors in this study, the *unsatisfactory support* in HEIs includes biased resource allocation (see example 3), non-cooperative competitive environment (see example 8), and unfavorable research platform (see example 3, 4 and 8). Among them, the issue of limited research platform is more notable in HEIs that are not *985*, *211*, or *double first-class* (see example 4). The *Expectations* include, on the one hand, the internal expectations of ECRs for particular academic achievements, and on the other hand, the external expectations and requirements from HEIs for ECRs' research outputs. The specific manifestation of this external expectation, in turn, is directly related to another major challenge for ECRs observed in this study, namely the personnel management system centered on the *up or out* policy. While the data in this paper was not searched with this keyword, the intensity of the discussion on this policy suggests that it is already a generalized issue among Chinese ECRs.

The *up or out* policy is centered on research output as sole survival rule (see example 9), intense peer competition (Lai and Li, 2020), and standardized practices across HEIs (Si, 2023, p. 54), which means that ECRs from different HEIs typically face similar assessment criteria, including a certain number of internationally acknowledged journal articles, monographs, and fundings. However, a noteworthy issue is that while the *up or out* policy is considered "only operated in some Chinese HEIs" (Si, 2023, p. 54), linguistic evidence in this paper suggest that it presents a clear tendency for expansion. In other words, it has evolved from initially being applied in top-tier universities that can provide favorable research platforms to other lower-tier universities that struggle to compete with them in resources. Therefore, regardless of the resources and academic platforms that the university itself can provide, ECRs from lower-tier universities face similar performance requirements, thus struggling more in this competition than those from higher-tier universities.

As shown in **Figure 1**, the impact of these challenges and the ECRs' reaction on them are different. In terms of career development, metaphors of ECRs actively developing coping programs in the midst of rigorous assessment metrics emerged in the data (see example 1, 2 and 10). This is in line with findings in previous study that part of Chi-

nese ECRs show positive attitudes towards the policy as a viable approach to reforming the management of higher education in China, including the ability to attract internationally renowned scholars, flexibility in the allocation of resources according to the needs of the institution, and the opportunity to obtain tangible research results (Si, 2023, p. 57). However, in contrast to this rationalization of the policy, more pronounced in this study are the critical attitudes (see examples 6 and 7) and negative impacts, including lack of creativity (see example 12) and low autonomy (see example 11) in research.

It is noteworthy that although the negative impact of the constraints of resource allocation in HEIs on ECRs is also mentioned in Si (2023), it is essentially a tension between China's overall resources and its large population base, rather than a contradiction between the "platform's ability to provide resources" and "high external expectations" as revealed in this study. This is likely due to differences in the scope of data collection. In concrete, data of Si (2023) were obtained from five universities in Shenzhen, China that "profile themselves as forerunners with regard to managerial reforms and have employed their tenure track as a marketing strategy to attract young academics globally" (p. 56). While this study also involves ECRs who are not from research-intensive universities or high-tier universities. Thus, the divergence between external expectations and actual support described earlier is more directly reflected in these lower-tier universities, leading to the extremely low competitiveness of these ECRs in academia.

Another notable impact indicated in the Figure 1 is the personal well-being of Chinese ECRs. Similarly, ECRs who are relatively well-resourced and have proactive coping strategies receive positive feedback on the *up or out* policy. Yet, the ECRs who have succeeded in this intense competition are a minority. The majority find themselves still struggling in this game or have already failed, displaying notable fragility concerning their personal well-being. This vulnerability encompasses aspects such as experiencing low interpersonal relatedness in the non-collaborative and social capital academic environment, diminished autonomy due to rigid metric evaluation systems, and a pessimistic self-perception arising from an inability to adapt to the external environment. These impacts are not only highlighted in examples (8), (11), (12), (13) and (14) but also

lighted in examples (8), (11), (12), (13) and (14) but also supported by other metaphors conveyed clear negative valence in **Table 1**, such as *BOTTOM*, *PATIENT*, *DROWNING PERSON*, *TORTURE VICTIM*. As emphasized in Weinstein et al. (2023), both autonomy and relatedness are important psychological needs in improving the personal well-being of researchers. Besides, given that another important aspect of personal well-being lies in the fact that high expectations must be matched with a climate that values and supports researchers (Weinstein et al. 2021), this contradiction in lower-tier universities revealed in this paper exacerbates the low well-being of large part of Chinese ECRs. Furthermore, the more alarming dimension is that these negative psychological states extend beyond their roles as scholars and professionals, triggering a personal existential crisis that fundamentally questions the value of their individual existence within the current evaluation system.

While researchers may not capture all issues from naturally occurring metaphors in public discourse, this study, as a preliminary attempt, has demonstrated the effectiveness of metaphor-led discourse analysis in revealing the status of university faculty members. Distinguishing from past research that concentrated on data from specific universities (e.g., Tian and Lu, 2017) or regions (e.g., Si, 2023), this approach enables us to observe both the common challenges confronting Chinese mainland ECRs and the individual unique issues arising from different institutional ranks. Importantly, though metaphors with relatively low frequency may not reflect universal issues, they indeed provide diverse insights from individual perspectives into the impact of personnel systems within the complex Chinese academic environment. Future research could further refine the analysis by accurately categorizing researchers based on factors such as gender, institutional ranking, and geographical region during data collection, facilitating a more nuanced examination of the identities and roles of different ECRs. Hopefully this study will inspire the creation of a more positive and supportive academic environment, fostering the professional growth and personal well-being of young university faculty.

Author Contributions

The contributions of all listed authors should be described here. Co-first authors should have a more detailed description of their involvement compared to the other authors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential competing interests with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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