



# Translation of the Metaphors in Chinese Educational Discourse

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## Abstract

The important expositions of President Xi Jinping on education represent a significant component of the Treatise, *Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era* and play a pivotal role in guiding and nurturing national consciousness. Chinese educational thoughts are replete with metaphors, which embody the core socialist values. However, the divergence in metaphor systems between Chinese and English poses significant challenges to comprehension and translation, thereby necessitating further academic inquiry to promote understanding of the fine traditional Chinese culture. Taking *Understanding Xi Jinping's Educational Philosophy*, as the research object, the article conducts an in-depth analysis of the abundant metaphors expounding Chinese educational philosophy from the perspective of metaphorical types, and strives to provide theoretical support and reference for studying the educational discourse with Chinese characteristic. The study aims to address an unexplored territory in the translation of metaphors characterizing educational thought with Chinese characteristics.

## Subject Areas

Linguistics

## Keywords

Conceptual Metaphor, Translation, *Understanding Xi Jinping's Educational Philosophy*

## 1. Research Background

### 1.1. Chinese Educational Philosophy

Xi's important expositions on education constitute a vital component of *Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*. They

represent the latest integration of basic Marxist principles with China's educational practices, possessing significant theoretical value and practical guidance. To thoroughly study and implement the spirit of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and solidly advance the construction of an educationally powerful nation, it is imperative to deeply grasp Chinese educational thought.

In the great historical process of comprehensively advancing the building of a strong country and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through Chinese-style modernization, we should take Chinese thought on culture as a powerful ideological weapon and a scientific guide for action to steer the high-quality development of education in the new era [1].

Chinese educational thought was elucidated by quoting extensively from classics, presenting a rich connotation. The China National Image Global Survey Report (2018) reveals that international recognition of China is closely linked to its metaphor dissemination strategies [2]. Not only do metaphors serve as a rhetorical device and an important form of linguistic expression, vividly presenting abstract educational concepts to enhance the appeal and persuasiveness of the discourse, but also serve as a cognitive tool that frequently appears, showcasing the essence of China's educational philosophy and thought. As such metaphors pose challenges to comprehension and translation of Chinese educational philosophies, hence research into the types and translations of metaphors embedded in these educational philosophies and their English translation is essential.

## 1.2. Overview of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory was proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which represents a novel perspective on metaphor theory, positing that metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon or a decorative device in language, but rather a mode of thinking and a conceptual system. It is one of the cognitive ways in which people perceive, understand, think about, and express one thing in terms of another, involving a systematic mapping from a concrete conceptual domain to an abstract one. Rooted in language, thought, culture, and conceptual systems, it is a fundamental cognitive activity of humanity with universality and commonality. The theory emphasizes that metaphor is a mode of thinking and a cognitive tool, rather than solely a matter of linguistic expression.

They argue that human thought processes are largely metaphorical, and that human conceptual systems are constructed and defined metaphorically. When understanding and describing the world, people often use metaphors to establish connections between one concept and another, thereby enabling better grasp of abstract concepts and ideas. Metaphors construct our conceptual systems, meaning that humans become familiar with concepts and perceive the world through metaphors [3].

Therefore, metaphor is not just a rhetorical device in language; it is a fundamental way in which humans cognitively engage with the world. This article delves into the discussion from the perspective of conceptual metaphor. Concep-

tual metaphor refers to understanding and experiencing one concept in terms of another, constructing the cognition of the target domain through the structure and characteristics of the source domain.

### 1.3. Current Research Status

Before the 1970s, metaphor was studied as an independent discipline, yet unconnected with translation studies, and it has undergone three developmental stages throughout human history. The first stage, which took place prior to the 1930s, was the study of metaphor within the realm of rhetoric, with Aristotle serving as a representative figure. The second stage, spanning from the 1930s to the 1970s, focused on metaphor research under the framework of semantics. Prominent scholars during this period included I. A. Richards and M. Black, who posited that metaphor results from the semantic interaction between the tenor and the vehicle. The third stage, which began in the 1980s and continues to the present, is marked by the study of metaphor within cognitive science. Dagut was among the first to explore the translatability of metaphors, emphasizing their significance in translation studies and sparking the interest of scholars such as Raymond van den Broeck and Peter Newmark in the issue of metaphor translation.

Newmark, a renowned British translation theorist, whose metaphor translation theory encompasses semantic translation and communicative translation, provides a critical framework for the study of educational metaphors. Semantic translation prioritizes preserving the contextual meaning and cultural specificity of the source text, making it particularly suitable for literary and scientific texts. Conversely, communicative translation emphasizes reader comprehension in the target language, adopting a reader-centered approach and proving effective for non-literary genres such as journalism and textbooks. In practice, these two methodologies are often employed interchangeably when translating educational metaphors to ensure accurate conveyance of their intended meanings.

Newmark asserted that “the translation of metaphor is the epitome of all translation,” [4] and he summarized seven metaphor translations strategies in his *Approaches to Translation* [5]. Within the domain of Chinese educational philosophy metaphor research, Newmark’s theory demonstrates applicability across multiple dimensions. In rendering culturally specific Chinese metaphors, semantic translation facilitates the retention of cultural connotations, while communicative translation ensures target audience comprehension of underlying implications.

Previous domestic research primarily explores the use and distributional patterns of metaphors in Chinese political discourse, as well as English translation strategies for such metaphors. However, while extensive efforts have been devoted to examining the characteristics and translation strategies of political metaphors, there remains a notable research gap concerning the study of metaphors in Chinese educational thought. While existing research predominantly concentrates on the cognitive functions of metaphors in political discourse, relatively scant scholarly attention has been directed towards a systematic investigation of metaphori-

cal types and their translation within educational texts. Therefore, the article accordingly shifts its focus to the study of the comprehension of metaphor types and their English translation. Using the corpus tool Coh-Metrix, frequently occurring metaphors were identified, and 10 exemplary cases were ultimately selected for in-depth study.

## 2. Analysis of Metaphor Types in the Original Text

Conceptual metaphors are mainly classified into structural metaphors, ontological metaphors, and orientational metaphors. Structural metaphors refer to constructing one concept using the structure of another, thereby superimposing the two concepts. Ontological metaphors treat abstract concepts or events as concrete entities. Orientational metaphors, on the other hand, are a series of metaphorical concepts constructed with reference to spatial orientations. Manual annotation was performed using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), excluding expressions containing only conventionalized cultural analogies, for example, in the proverb “十年树木，百年树人”，the analogy between “cultivating trees” and “cultivating individuals” constitutes a fixed expression and is thus excluded from metaphor analysis.

### 2.1. Structural Metaphors

Structural metaphors construct one conceptual framework through another and explain the similarities of the latter by the features of the former. They often employ familiar concepts to analogize and elucidate abstract or complex ideas [6].

The essence of structural metaphor is to use the cognitive framework of a concrete domain (source domain) to understand and express an abstract domain (target domain). By mapping abstract concepts onto concrete domains, a “cross-domain cognitive bridge” is formed, making complex ideas easier to perceive and communicate.

#### 2.1.1. Architectural Metaphor

Architectural metaphor is used to construct the stability of the state and education, reflecting the pragmatic philosophy of “foundations determine the superstructure” in traditional Chinese culture, by building elements such as foundations, cornerstones, and trunks, emphasizing foundational, load-bearing, and systematic qualities.

##### Example 1

SL: “欲筑室者，先治其基。”<sup>1</sup>

TL: To build a house, first lay the foundations.

The Chinese proverb exemplifies a profound architectural metaphor deeply rooted in both linguistic and cultural frameworks. At its core, this metaphor draws a parallel between the tangible process of constructing a physical structure and the abstract endeavor of building systems such as governance, education, or societal

<sup>1</sup>All the examples are from *Understanding Xi Jinping's Educational Philosophy* (2022).

institutions.

The metaphor's power lies in its universal resonance. Architectural practices, as a shared human experience across cultures, provide an accessible cognitive framework for understanding complex abstract concepts. By likening foundational elements of architecture like laying a solid base for a house to the establishment of fundamental principles in abstract domains, the proverb underscores the indispensability of stability and systematic planning. Just as a house risks collapse without sturdy foundations, the metaphor implies that any nation, policy, or long-term project will falter if its underlying structures—be they educational frameworks, legal systems, or ethical values—are neglected. Not only does the analogy emphasize the priority of groundwork, but it also implicitly critiques short-termism, advocating instead for a philosophy of gradual, deliberate development. The proverb transcends its literal meaning to articulate a philosophy of governance and societal progress. Its architectural metaphor serves as a cognitive tool, simplifying complex ideas while reinforcing values of foresight, structural integrity, and prioritization.

### 2.1.2. Natural Metaphor

Natural metaphor is used to endow governance and morality with vitality, reflecting the natural philosophical view of “harmony between man and nature”, analogous to social governance and natural laws. Its source domain characteristics are the natural imagery such as water flow, trees, and springs, emphasizing growth, circularity, and sustainability.

#### Example 2

SL: “教师是立教之本、兴教之源。”

TL: Teachers are the foundation of education and the source of its vitality.

The education system is likened to a water conservancy system, with teachers serving as the “water source” nourishing the educational ecosystem. This sentence assigns fundamental and source-like characteristics to teachers' educational and instructional work. This structural metaphor emphasizes teachers' foundational role in the education system, akin to how tree roots are crucial for tree growth, with teachers being the foundation and driving force for the development of education.

#### Example 3

SL: “德者，本也。”

TL: Virtue is the root.

The sentence uses the roots of a tree to refer to morality, pointing out its role as the survival foundation for human growth, emphasizing morality's foundational role in personal character and social development. This is a structural metaphor about moral values, viewing morality as the cornerstone of all behavior and values, as exemplified in how tree roots are crucial for tree growth.

### 2.1.3. Human Body Metaphor

The human body metaphor depicts the coordination of social organisms, contin-

using the holistic thinking of traditional Chinese medicine, emphasizing the organic unity of society. Its source domain characteristics is the human bodily functions such as the heart, blood vessels, and commanders, focusing on coordination, and leadership.

Example 4

SL: “国之交在于民相亲，民相亲在于心相通。”

TL: Friendship which derives from close contact between people, holds the key to sound state to state relations.

The sentence possesses deep structural features of emotional connection and mutual understanding, which are mapped onto “friendship between countries”, emphasizing that the establishment and maintenance of friendly relations between countries depend on mutual understanding and emotional bonds among their peoples. Thus, the structural metaphor about harmonious international relations, using the heart’s blood circulation to metaphorize the emotional connections among people, emphasizing that international exchanges require contact, highlighting the crucial role of humanistic exchanges in promoting cooperation and peace between countries.

#### 2.1.4. Military Metaphor

The military metaphor reinforces the authority of strategy and hierarchy, echoing the Legalist idea of “using law as warfare” (e.g., Han Feizi’s “A country is not always strong, nor always weak”), embodying instrumental rationality. Its source domain characteristics is the military elements such as strategy, provisions, and commanders, highlighting planning, resources, and hierarchy.

Example 5

SL: “加强党对教育事业的全面领导，要求不断提高党在教育事业发展进程中把方向、管大局、作决策、抓班子、带队伍、保落实的能力和定力。”

TL: Overall Party leadership over education requires us to improve the Party’s capacity and confidence in performing leadership responsibilities, including the resolve and ability to set the direction, control the overall situation, make decisions, build capacity, foster and appoint leaders, and ensure implementation.

The statement constructs strategic and disciplinary authority of Party leadership over education through military metaphors. In the Chinese original, “把方向” corresponds to determining core strategic objectives in military operations, while “管大局” implies the Party must orchestrate educational development with militarized precision, akin to a commander grasping the battlefield’s entirety. “保落实” directly references “battlefield discipline” in policy execution, demanding error-free task completion like military operations. Meanwhile, “抓班子” and “带队伍” metaphorically equate Party organizational construction to hierarchical military management—cadre selection parallels officer appointments, and team-building emphasizes ideological unity and obedience, reminiscent of soldiers following orders.

The English translation reinforces military command tones through phrases like “control the overall situation” and “ensure implementation,” likening Party

governance to a military command system. The pairing of “resolve” and “ability” underscores the decisiveness and execution force required in military decision-making. However, the Chinese term “定力”, translated as “confidence,” dilutes its military connotation of “holding ground”, while “build capacity” neutralizes hierarchical control into a value-free capacity-building framework, softening the original emphasis on organizational discipline.

## 2.2. Entity Metaphor

Entity metaphors turn abstract concepts into concrete entities or actions, making these concepts more intuitive, easier to understand, and manipulate. This metaphorical technique not only enriches the connotation of text but also enhances its expressiveness and persuasiveness.

### Example 6

SL: “顺木之天，以致其性。”

TL: Accord a tree with the regularities in its environmental conditions to allow the manifestation of its nature.

In this sentence, the “natural disposition or growth pattern of the tree” is personified as an object to be followed, while the “inherent nature or traits of the tree” is viewed as an entity that can be realized or expressed. This personification makes the abstract relationship between natural laws and tree growth concrete and sensible.

Furthermore, from the perspective of the personification of actions and relationships, the action of following is given substantial meaning. It is not just an abstract behavior but a concrete manifestation of respecting and cooperating with the tree’s growth patterns. At the same time, “to realize” also implies a concrete result or state, namely the full expression of the tree’s nature.

Lastly, from the personification of environmental conditions, the regularity of environmental conditions further materializes environmental factors, transforming abstract natural laws into physical paths to follow. Nature is projected as a tangible goal that can be reached through action, emphasizing the concrete interaction between tree growth and its surrounding environment, reflecting a metaphorical way of thinking where laws are seen as paths.

### Example 7

SL: “凿井者，起于三寸之坎，以就万仞之深。”

TL: He who digs a well starts with a three inch pit and eventually makes it into a well that is ten thousand feet deep.

The process of achieving great accomplishments, or any endeavor that requires long-term accumulation and perseverance, is likened to the meticulous and sustained effort of digging a well. The sentence uses the specific physical dimensions of “a three-inch hole” and “a depth of ten thousand feet” to view the process of digging a well as a journey from a tiny beginning to great achievement. It transforms the law of quantitative change into the physical process of well-digging—the stark contrast between a shallow three-inch pit and a ten-thousand-ren-deep

well gives the abstract process of accumulation a tangible depth scale, with each digging action becoming a visible progress marker. This metaphor not only depicts the hardships and achievements of well-digging but also conveys the value of perseverance and determination.

#### Example 8

SL: “扎根中国大地办大学。”

TL: We should foster more outstanding universities by grounding ourselves in our own culture.

“Grounding” materializes culture into land, transforming abstract cultural identity into a tangible foundation and suggesting that culture serves as the physical bedrock of universities. “Foster” implicitly carries the metaphor of “nurturing plants”, echoing “rooting” and reinforcing the imagery of universities as “organisms growing in cultural soil”. The sentence converts culture from an abstract concept into a possessable resource, establishing a cross-linguistic correspondence with the sense of belonging in “China’s land”.

In terms of materializing abstract values, the sentence reduces “cultural foundation” from an ideological plane to a perceivable “land”, shifting the university-culture relationship from spiritual resonance to material interdependence.

In terms of constructing a developmental path, through the metaphorical chain, it implies that university development requires a linear process from cultural absorption to internalization, finally to output. In terms of strengthening indigenous identity, it converts culture from an abstract symbol into a physical space for rooting, countering cultural nihilism’s erosion of university ethos.

### 2.3. Orientational Metaphor

Orientational metaphor refers to the construction of abstract concepts or emotions by borrowing from the concepts of spatial orientation. Since it is difficult to think about relations in a completely abstract manner [7], it is necessary to use spatial thinking for visual computation. Meanwhile, in the process of translation, the translator must have a comprehensive understanding of the different hierarchical systems within the semantic domain and accurately depict the spatial projection images in metaphorical concepts [8].

Natural material laws subtly shape the Chinese way of thinking when understanding abstract concepts. When expounding on educational thoughts, Xi quoted a lot of allusions, anchoring abstract categories such as ethics, aspirations, and state governance within a metaphorical system of the physical world. This not only provides a concrete fulcrum for philosophical speculation but also inscribes the practical code of “unity of knowledge and action” into the cultural DNA. Orientational metaphors can construct and convey complex concepts and relations through spatial or temporal orientational relationships.

#### Example 9

SL: “坚持什么样的办学方向，关系教育事业兴衰成败。”

TL: The direction we take in education affects whether or not we achieve suc-

cess in education.

This statement transforms the strategic choice of education into a spatial path issue through orientational metaphor, implying that educational development must advance along a specific path—prosperity if the direction is correct, decline if it deviates. It constructs a spatial opposition between the correct direction and the wrong direction, and extends this into the vertical metaphor of rise and fall. The word “direction” in the English translation accurately retains the orientational metaphor and strengthens the result-oriented spatial cognitive framework, where the correct direction leads to success and the wrong direction leads to failure.

Not only does the metaphorical strategy construct a strategic framework for educational development, transforming abstract policies into actionable guidelines, but it also implicitly implants value judgments, internalizing policy orientations as the natural logic of spatial choice. Meanwhile, the orientational metaphor aligns with universal human spatial cognitive experiences, possessing cross-cultural communicative advantages, providing theoretical support at the cognitive level for educational policies, and implying path dependence in educational reform, refers to the principle that once a direction is chosen, subsequent reforms must maintain consistency.

#### Example 10

SL: “人才有高下，知物由学。”

TL: People differ in talent, but all need to learn.

The source domain is the hierarchical height in vertical space, and the target domain is the difference in ability levels among talents. “High” represents exceptional ability and profound knowledge, while “low” represents limited ability and scant knowledge.

By using the vertical orientation of “high and low”, the learning process is analogized to “climbing the peak of knowledge”, embodying the cognitive logic that “ability is equivalent to height”. It implies the value judgment that “high is superior to low”, motivating active learning to ascend the hierarchical ladder.

### 3. Conclusion

Metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a way of thinking and a cognitive tool. Metaphor, with its formidable explanatory and cognitive power, serves as the “backbone” underpinning discourse and its translation.

The extensive employment metaphorical expressions are imbued with distinct Chinese characteristics, constituting a significant feature of his ideological expression, vividly conveying profound educational philosophies and cultural connotations through various forms such as structural metaphors, entity metaphors, and orientational metaphors. In terms of discourse delivery, metaphor constructs cognitive frameworks through cross-domain mapping. Metaphor translation, carried via channels such as educational discourse, shapes China’s international discursive power in education and its national image. Empirical studies demonstrate

that accurate metaphor translation significantly enhances international audiences' identification with Chinese policies, culture, and educational concepts, while cultural mistranslation may lead to image misalignment. Thus, the storytelling and illustrative examples evoke empathetic resonance among audiences, while drawing extensively on exemplary cultural elements from both ancient and modern times, across China and the world, to forge a shared consensus [9]. Not only do the usages enhance the concreteness, vividness, and resonance of discourse, but they advance dispelling complex or abstruse linguistic expressions that might otherwise hinder comprehension.

The translation of metaphors featuring Chinese characteristics holds profound significance for the nation and its people [10] and constitutes a vital conduit through which China communicates its voice to the world, and the world listens to China's narratives.

In summary, this article examines the types, interpretations, and translations of metaphors in China's educational discourse, uncovering cognitive and cultural differences between Chinese and English metaphorical systems. Guided by Newmark's translation theory, the study analyzes disparities in historical contexts, ideological frameworks, and linguistic structures between Chinese and English metaphors, elucidating how culturally specific metaphors in China's political and educational narratives create obstacles for precise cross-linguistic communication. By integrating cognitive linguistics theory with cross-cultural communication models, this research offers practical insights for translators and scholars to bridge metaphorical divides, facilitating the accurate translation of these metaphors—a critical prerequisite for global audiences to comprehend China's educational philosophy, particularly in international communication contexts. The approach not only respects China's cultural uniqueness but also is conducive to advance the international dissemination of China's educational concepts, thus contributing to constructing an educational discourse system, shaping its global educational image, and enhancing the cultural exchange globally through educational translation practices.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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