

Original Paper

Metaphor Translation in the Belt and Road Initiative: Typologies, Strategies, and Cultural Adaptation within a Conceptual Metaphor Framework

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Abstract

This study investigates the predominant metaphor types, translation strategies, and underlying principles observed within the discourse of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Drawing upon Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and employing textual analysis and case study methodologies, the research analyzes relevant authoritative literature and textual evidence. Key findings indicate that journey, architecture, and plant metaphors constitute the major metaphorical typologies, with each source domain mapping onto distinct target domains. Metaphors are primarily translated using literal translation, free translation, and substitution. The use of metaphors and corresponding translation strategies is largely governed by the principle of cultural adaptation, underscoring their significance in shaping China's outward-facing political discourse and in improving the efficacy of its international communication.

Keywords

Metaphor, translation, the Belt and Road, Conceptual Metaphor Theory

1. Introduction

Since its inception, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has attracted extensive international attention and assumed a critical role in advancing global cooperation and development. In official BRI speeches

delivered by Chinese leadership, metaphor functions as a vital rhetorical and cognitive device for framing policy narratives. The accurate Chinese-English translation of metaphors is essential to effectively communicate the BRI's core principles to global audiences and shape Chinese international image. As a foundational field of study, metaphor research dates to classical antiquity, with Aristotle's work on its rhetorical function (Feng, 2021). Based on the nature of the source domain, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) initially classified conceptual metaphors into structural metaphors, ontological metaphors, and orientational (spatial) metaphors. British translation theorist Newmark (1988) provided a comprehensive and systematic exploration of metaphor translation in *A Textbook of Translation*, classifying metaphors into six distinct types. While this taxonomy offered significant practical guidance, it has been critiqued for inadequately addressing the transmission of cultural memes inherent in metaphors (Zhang, 2023). Yang (2022), in a study of *My Life as Emperor* translation, demonstrated the effectiveness of the literal translation plus annotation strategy for historical metaphors in classical texts. Rendering “紫衣” as “purple robe” supplemented by an explanation of Tang Dynasty official ranks (where purple denoted third-rank officials) exemplifies this approach. Shu (2024) further proposed that translating aesthetic metaphors requires distinguishing between culture-specific and universal elements. Culture-specific images like “Loong” and “Phoenixes” often necessitate explanatory free translation, whereas universal symbols like snow representing purity can frequently be translated literally. While prior scholarship has explored conceptual metaphor types and translation strategies in BRI documents, translation strategies for metaphors in the most recent leadership speeches lack systematic analysis especially in BRI discourse.

This study employed Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) developed by Lakoff and Johnson to analyze the latest BRI speech texts. It provides a powerful and robust theoretical foundation for analyzing BRI discourse because it moves beyond simply cataloging rhetorical flourishes. CMT posits that metaphor is not merely a linguistic device but a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which abstract concepts are understood in terms of more concrete, embodied experiences. This research investigated dominant metaphor typologies, translation strategies for metaphors, and guided cultural principles. It aims to develop a theoretically informed framework for BRI translation for metaphors, enhance the precision of cross-cultural conveyance of China's policy concepts, and optimize international audience comprehension of the BRI's conceptual foundations and China's national image.

2. Literature Review

Metaphor research has undergone a significant paradigm shift, evolving from its Aristotelian rhetorical roots to its current grounding in cognitive science. This theoretical trajectory is marked by the progression from CMT to Conceptual Integration Theory (CIT). Contemporary studies on translation for metaphors increasingly focus on addressing the challenge of cultural default through innovative strategies and on exploring metaphor's distinctive functions within political discourse.

2.1 Theoretical Development of Metaphor

Metaphor research extended over a long history, originating with Aristotle's foundational exploration of metaphor within rhetoric in ancient Greece. The field has continuously expanded, undergoing a significant shift from traditional rhetoric to cognitive linguistics. Traditional rhetoric conceptualizes metaphor as a purely linguistic phenomenon—a rhetorical device employed to enhance expressive effect, primarily manifested at lexical and grammatical levels (Black, 1962; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In contrast, cognitive linguistics approaches metaphor as occurring fundamentally at the conceptual-cognitive level, viewing it as a mode of thinking, a cognitive tool, and a primary means of conceptualization (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Pan, 2021; Eskandari, 2025). Huang (2020) discussed metaphor as a special type of linguistic sign, whose interpretation involves multi-level semiotic chains and information flow, highlighting the interconnectedness, holism, divergence, and uniqueness of metaphorical thinking. Central to CMT is the concept of cross-domain mapping. Metaphor is understood as the process of comprehending a target domain by analogy with a source domain, facilitated by systematic mappings of attributes and relationships from the source to the target domain. The theoretical development of conceptual metaphor progressed beyond CMT into conceptual integration. Following Lakoff and Johnson, cognitive linguists Fauconnier and Turner (1998, 2002) formally proposed CIT, also known as Conceptual Blending Theory as a supplementary perspective alongside CMT.

2.2 Metaphor Translation: Strategies and Functions

Research on metaphor translation from a cognitive linguistic perspective has achieved significant breakthroughs. Scholars have moved beyond static strategy classifications to investigate the cognitive mechanisms underlying metaphor generation and their reconstruction processes during translation. This research direction is primarily grounded in CIT and the principle of mapping equivalence, emphasizing the translator's role in identifying the source metaphor's cognitive schema and achieving its functional reconstruction in the target language. For example, a study on the thematic metaphor of “red sorghum” in *Red Sorghum* identified four cognitive reconstruction strategies in its English translation (preserving source and target domains, substituting source or target domains, explanatory translation, and omission) (Wang, 2022). The translation strategies analyzed, such as domain substitution or preservation, directly operationalize the principles of CMT by focusing on the functional equivalence of the cross-domain mappings that constitute the metaphor's cognitive essence.

The translation of cultural metaphors presents particular difficulty due to their deep roots in specific cultural environments, historical events, and aesthetic traditions. Recent research focuses on how innovative strategies can resolve the problem of cultural default. Scholars argue that translating culture-loaded metaphors necessitates balancing the transmission of core symbolic meaning and associated cultural memes. Strategy selection requires careful analysis across dimensions of regional culture, historical context, and aesthetic value. While the Chinese idiom “九牛一毛” and the English idiom “a drop in the bucket” share structural similarity denoting insignificance, “ox” is a core symbol

of Chinese agrarian civilization, whereas the “bucket” (or “ocean”) relates to different cultural contexts; it requires selecting functionally equivalent symbolic items (Guo, 2023).

Numerous scholars highlight the distinctive pragmatic and ideological functions of metaphor within political discourse. Metaphors serve to concretize complex, abstract political concepts into vivid, comprehensible expressions, thereby enhancing audience receptivity and understanding. Crucially, metaphor use inherently reflects and constructs the discourse community's perspective and evaluation of reality. The choice of specific metaphors is laden with affective investments and employed strategically to foster identification and achieve persuasive aims (Zhao, 2023). Wang (2020) investigated the ideological construction function of metaphors in BRI speeches, revealing that metaphors construct frames—positive, negative, and neutral—that elicit readers' emotional and value-based resonance, playing a vital role in ideological dissemination. Framing national development as a “journey,” for instance, vividly depicts its process, goals, and challenges, stimulating audience empathy to achieve objectives like persuasion and guiding public opinion (Ma, 2022). Simultaneously, metaphors construct specific political ideologies, reinforcing or weakening particular concepts and shaping political images (positive or negative) through the strategic selection of source domains (Sun, 2023).

While scholars have conducted multifaceted research on metaphors within the BRI context, examining aspects such as their types, discursive functions, cultural connotations, and construction mechanisms, significant limitations persist in the extant literature. Firstly, much of this research relies predominantly on a single CMT, neglecting the potential co-occurrence and interaction of multiple metaphor types within the texts. Secondly, studies analyzing metaphors in Chinese leadership's speeches or opening addresses often utilize outdated corpora and provide incomplete analyses of the metaphorical phenomena present. Thirdly, research on metaphor translation strategies within this specific domain requires deeper exploration. Crucially, existing studies insufficiently address critical questions such as: How the translation process embodies the distinctive features of Chinese political discourse? How cultural integration between Chinese and foreign elements is achieved through specific translation strategies? It is precisely these critical gaps—the lack of comprehensive metaphor typology analysis in current BRI speeches, the absence of systematic translation strategy analysis for the latest BRI documentation, and the insufficient exploration of discourse specificity and cultural fusion in translation—that the present study seeks to address.

3. Research Design

This study investigates metaphor translation strategies employed within the discourse of the BRI. Specifically, it aims to identify the predominant types of metaphors utilized, analyze the translation strategies applied to these metaphors, and elucidate the underlying principles guiding strategic choices. The research adopts a combined methodological approach, integrating textual analysis with case studies. The primary data source comprises official Chinese-English parallel texts of BRI documents,

systematically retrieved from authoritative government platforms. Metaphor identification is conducted following the established Metaphor Identification Procedure, grounded in CMT.

3.1 Research Questions

Building upon the research design, this study addresses the following specific questions:

- (1) What are the primary typologies of metaphors prevalent in the BRI discourse?
- (2) What strategies are adopted for translating these metaphors in the BRI discourse?
- (3) What principles govern the selection of these metaphor translation strategies?

3.2 Research Methods

This study primarily employs textual analysis and a case study approach. The core research objects consist of relevant sections extracted from official BRI discourse. Through systematic textual analysis, metaphorical expressions are identified and their corresponding translations are categorized. This foundational analysis is complemented by an in-depth case study approach, involving detailed examination and illustration of representative metaphor translation instances. This dual methodological framework facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the application and functional efficacy of various metaphor translation strategies within the BRI context.

3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The primary corpus consists of officially published Chinese-English parallel texts of the BRI, encompassing both print and electronic formats excluding non-authoritative in 2013-2025. These texts represent authoritative and widely cited BRI discourses delivered across diverse contexts (e.g., policy documents, key speeches). Sources include credible government websites and authoritative databases. For instance, key introductory articles were sourced from China Youth Online. The keynote speech from the opening ceremony of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was retrieved from the official website of the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (complete Chinese and English versions).

Building upon the curated corpus, metaphors were systematically identified and classified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure, theoretically anchored in CMT. This structured framework ensured methodological rigor and systematicity throughout the analysis. The analytical process revealed identification of prevalent metaphor types (e.g., journey, architectural, plant metaphors), their frequency of occurrence, and specific linguistic realizations; Analysis of the strategies employed for translating each identified metaphor instance; Examination of the patterns in strategy selection to infer the governing principles (e.g., the application of cultural adaptability principles). The data analysis involved systematically synthesizing the identified metaphor types with their corresponding translation strategies. This synthesis enabled an in-depth exploration of the principles, particularly those related to cultural adaptation, that translators appear to adhere to when processing different categories of metaphors within the BRI discourse.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis identified a variety of conceptual metaphors and translation strategies in the texts. The most common metaphors are journey metaphors, architectural metaphors, and plant metaphors. Likewise, the dominant translation strategies are literal translation, free translation, and substitution. These findings revealed that translators applied the principle of cultural adaptability most frequently to convey meaning and cultural nuance effectively in English.

4.1 Primary Metaphor Typologies

4.1.1 Journey Metaphors

Journey metaphors are the most prevalent in the data. A journey inherently has a starting point, a path, direction, travelers, and a destination. A journey might be long and winding, but with steady effort along the right path, it eventually reached its goal. In the national development domain, the metaphors map as follows. Participants (people or countries) correspond to travelers; the start of the journey represents the initial state of affairs; the destination corresponds to development goals (e.g. communism); the path or route represents guiding principles and policies; the mode of travel (walking, running, riding) corresponds to development strategies; steps or distance traveled represent measurable achievements; pace represents implementation speed; road conditions (smooth, tortuous, detours) stand for external challenges; and milestones mark major events or achievements. Table 1 summarized this systematic mapping between the source domain (journey) and the target domain (national development).

Table 1. The Mapping Relations in Journey Conceptual Metaphors

Metaphor Type	Source Domain	Target Domain
Movement framework	Journey	National development and international relations
Participant role	Traveller	Participant in events (people/countries)
Initiation point	Starting point of journey	Initial state of things (e.g., people's interests)
Ultimate objective	Destination	Objectives of events (e.g., communism)
Guidance system	Direction, Route, Way, Track	Principles, guidelines, policies, measures
Progression mode	The way forward (walking/running/train)	Development strategy and status
Quantifiable advancement	Step (first step)	Developmental achievement
Implementation speed	Pace	The speed of events
Condition evaluation	Road condition (straight/flat/tortuous/detour)	Development conditions

Result accumulation	Coverage distance	The gained achievement
Critical milestone	Milestones	Major events in development

Charteris (2004) noted that journey metaphors described life or processes in terms of purposeful movement toward a goal. Emphasizing the destination implied that all efforts along the path are meaningful. In political discourse, journey metaphors typically conveyed a positive outlook – portraying development as a path that leads to success if the right direction is maintained. For instance, the phrase “promoting high-quality Belt and Road cooperation (Xi, 2023)” framed the BRI construction as a journey, incorporating elements such as a starting point, direction, path, and obstacles. Such metaphors facilitated audience comprehension of the BRI's advancement and objectives by concretizing the abstract development process through a journey. It effectively delivered the positive conviction that persistent adherence to the correct path and overcoming difficulties will lead to prosperous development.

China has reached a new starting point in its development endeavors (Xi, 2017). It likens the development of the Belt and Road to a journey. As mentioned above, the starting point of this journey is the contemporary situation in China and the development of the BRI. The people are travelers who adhere to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, pursue high-quality development, persist in comprehensively deepening reform, and follow the path of peaceful development as the principles, concepts, and strategies of the journey. Ultimately, the goal of promoting the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind is realized at the endpoint. Xi (2017) also recounted Zhang Qian's westward mission in Han Dynasty as a “journey” that opened a road bridging East and West. This journey promoted economic and cultural exchanges between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions, created conditions for the Western Regions to become part of the central regime of the Han Dynasty, and laid a foundation for the opening of the Silk Road. Trains speeding along rail tracks, automobiles running on roads, flights connecting different countries, cargo ships breaking waves, and e-commerce bringing so much convenience to people - they have all become symbols of international trade in the new era, just like camel caravans and the sailing ships were for the past age (Xi, 2023). By comparing historical explorers and modern infrastructure as different eras' journey tools, the metaphors highlighted continuity.

Overall, journey metaphors stressed that staying on course leads to shared goals. Journey metaphors rhetorically legitimize policy goals by framing them as an inevitable, collaborative progression toward a shared future. They shape international perceptions by constructing a positive narrative of mutual destiny and common development, which naturalizes the BRI and softens power asymmetries. By leveraging culturally resonant archetypes of progress and historical exchange (e.g., the Silk Road), these metaphors depoliticize strategic interests, presenting them instead as a neutral and beneficial pathway for all participants. The journey metaphor acts as a powerful discursive tool to legitimize the

BRI, foster a sense of partnership among diverse participants, and project an image of peaceful and patient development. CMT provides the foundational framework explaining why journey metaphors are so pervasive and powerful. CMT posits that abstract thought is largely metaphorical, relying on concrete physical experiences to structure understanding. Journey metaphors are a prime example, where the abstract concept of purposeful activity (often cooperation or policy) is structured by the more tangible source domain of physical travel. This mapping allows complex, long-term initiatives to be conceptualized in terms of a shared path, a common destination, and collective progress, making them intuitively comprehensible and rhetorically persuasive.

4.1.2 Architecture Metaphors

Architecture refers to man-made assets, encompassing all buildings constructed from various materials. A solid, well-designed architecture requires a blueprint, a strong foundation, and gradual construction. In the target domain of national development, the architecture metaphorical mapping can be described in five categories in Table 2.

In the Design domain, the source concepts of “Blueprint” and “Design” map to the target concept of “National development plan and policy design”. It suggests that the initial planning and design phases in construction are analogous to the formulation of national development strategies and policies; The Construct domain encompasses a range of source concepts such as “Construction”, “Building”, “Maintenance”, etc. These map to the target concept of “Process of development implementation and system operation”, indicating that the various stages of construction are akin to the processes involved in implementing and operating development systems; The Foundation domain is represented by source concepts like “Foundation”, “Cornerstone”, and “Root”, which are metaphorically connected to “Fundamental conditions for development”. It implied that the foundational elements in construction are equivalent to the basic prerequisites necessary for development; In the Structure domain, source concepts including “Framework”, “Structure”, “Pillar”, etc., map to “Institutional frameworks and connection mechanisms”. It suggested that the structural components in construction are analogous to the institutional frameworks and mechanisms that facilitate connections and interactions within a development context; Lastly, the Space domain, with source concepts “Space” and “Platform”, is metaphorically linked to “Areas for cooperation and interaction”. It indicated that the spatial aspects in construction are comparable to the areas designated for cooperation and interaction in development initiatives. In summary, these metaphorical mappings provided a structured approach to understanding the complex processes of national development by drawing parallels with the well-understood domain of construction.

Table 2. The Mapping Relations in Architecture Metaphors

Metaphor Type	Source Domain (Construction Concept)	Target Domain (Abstract Concept)
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Design	Blueprint, Design	National development plan and policy design
Construct	Construction, Building, Maintenance, Forging, Creating, Setting up, Joint Construction, Rise, Construction Establishment, Setting up, Building, Erecting	Process of development implementation and system operation
Foundation	Foundation, Cornerstone, Root	Fundamental conditions for development
Structure	Framework, Structure, Pillar, Support, Gate, National Gateway, Window, Steps, Barrier, Bridge	Institutional frameworks and connection mechanisms
Space	Space, Platform	Areas for cooperation and interaction

Architecture metaphor existed in “We chart a blueprint for cooperation encompassing financial integration and people-to-people bonds” (Xi, 2023). As indicated in Table 2, the source domain for the conceptual metaphor “blueprint” is national development planning and policy design. The type of metaphor conceptualizes the Belt and Road cooperation as the construction of an edifice. Within this framework, the “blueprint” for Belt and Road cooperation represents the construction itself, China and partner nations are the builders who constitute its constructors, and the successful completion of this cooperative structure depends on collective effort, mutual collaboration, and a unified commitment. The architectural metaphor discourse instantly forges connections among nations, powerfully conveying that only through joint endeavor can common development be realized. It thus serves as a highly persuasive vehicle for constructing and disseminating the meaning of Belt and Road cooperation. “Generation after generation, the Silk Road travelers built a bridge for peace and East-West cooperation” (Xi, 2017). It emphasizes foundational nature, inherent cooperativeness, and the characteristic of progressive construction. Through the architectural metaphor, the critical importance of joint efforts by all parties is underscored. It vividly embodied the BRI as a grand project requiring meticulous planning and steadfast implementation. The metaphorical representation effectively conveyed the scale and nature of the endeavor, thereby enhancing international confidence in the BRI and fostering greater participation.

4.1.3 Plant Metaphors

As a type of conceptual metaphor, elements of plant growth (roots, fruits, flourishing) are mapped onto aspects of development and cooperation. Table 3 outlines key mapping relations in plant metaphors. In the Plant growth domain, “Root” is linked to the target domain concept of “Projects steadily advancing,” suggesting that the foundational aspects of project development are akin to the root system

of a plant, which is essential for its growth and stability; Similarly, “Fruit” is associated with “Cooperation achieving tangible results,” indicating that the outcomes of collaborative efforts are comparable to the fruition of a plant, representing the culmination of growth and development; Within the Ecological prosperity domain, “Flourishing” is connected to “People-to-people exchanges flourishing,” implying that the vitality and success of interpersonal interactions can be likened to the flourishing state of an ecosystem, which thrives through interaction and mutual support; Lastly, in the Cultural symbol domain, “Peach” and “Plum” are metaphorically linked to the BRI’s success winning international participation. It suggests that the cultural significance of these fruits, often symbols of prosperity and good fortune, can be extended to represent the success of the BRI that attract international engagement and collaboration. In summary, these metaphorical mappings provide a structured framework for understanding the dynamics of project development, ecological interactions, and cultural exchanges by drawing parallels with the natural processes of plant growth and ecological prosperity.

Table 3. The Mapping Relations in Plant Metaphors

Metaphor Type	Source Domain	Target Domain
Plant growth	Root	Projects steadily advancing
Plant growth	Fruit	Cooperation achieving tangible results
Ecological prosperity	Flouring	People-to-people exchanges flourishing
Cultural symbol	Peach, Plum	Initiative's success winning international participation

Some cases of plant metaphor in Xi (2023) as below. “(1) *The BRI is rooted in the ancient Silk Road*; (2) *Thanks to our efforts, the vision of the BRI is becoming a reality and bearing rich fruit*; (3) *Projects of people-to-people cooperation such as Silk Road culture year, tourism year, art festival, film and TV project, seminar and think tank dialogue are flourishing. These interactions have brought our people increasingly closer.*” Within political discourse, the plant metaphors function by mapping the organic biological characteristics of plants onto abstract, non-living entities. As observed in the above metaphor translation, “be rooted in”, “bear rich fruit”, and “flourish” demonstrate a close semantic correspondence between the source domain (plants) and the target domain (BRI cooperation/national development). The conceptual mappings engaged audiences by evoking the tangible biological process of plants: taking root in soil, absorbing nourishment, growing vigorously, and ultimately bearing fruit/flowering. Consequently, it fosters a profound understanding that nations participating in the BRI are developing healthily and becoming stronger. This metaphorical framing serves not only to bolster confidence in continued collaboration but also acts as an incentive, encouraging broader international participation. Furthermore, the plant metaphor effectively conveys core attributes of the BRI. It signifies the BRI's deep-rooted historical and cultural foundations. By grounding these abstract

concepts in the familiar, observable logic of organic growth, the metaphor provides audiences with an intuitive grasp of the BRI's long-term value.

As a Chinese saying goes, “桃李不言，下自成蹊” (Xi, 2017). It originates from Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian: Biography of General Li Guang*. Its original meaning is that peach and plum trees do not speak, yet because of their beautiful blossoms and delicious fruit, people flock to them, thereby naturally wearing a path beneath the trees. It metaphorically signifies that sincerity and integrity naturally win people's hearts. However, Yang and Dai (2001) rendered it as “The peach and plum trees cannot speak, yet a path is trodden out to them!” Watson (1993) translated it as “Though the peach tree does not speak, the world wears a path beneath it.” The character “蹊” inherently means “path” in Chinese, establishing a direct semantic link with the themes of the “Belt and Road” and the “Silk Road.” This resonance allows the allusion to subtly evoke relevant associations among English-speaking audiences. Compared to the prior scholarly translations, the leader's translation adds “they are so attractive” to make the causal link explicit. By invoking this allusion, the speech both preserves Chinese cultural flavor and highlights the BRI's broad appeal. Through plant metaphors, the discourse underscores BRI's deep roots in history and its organic, sustainable growth logic.

4.2 Translating Strategies for Metaphors

Analysis of the translation strategies employed for metaphors in BRI reveals the application of diverse strategies. This section primarily explored three most frequently occurring strategies in the data (literal translation, free translation, and substitution).

4.2.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation (also called direct translation) is frequently used when the metaphorical mapping is clear and culturally transferable. It is exemplified in the translation of idiomatic metaphors used by Xi (2019). For instance, “honoring a promise carries the weight of gold” (Si, 2001). This idiom originates from the *Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of Ji Bu and Luan Bu*. It conveys that words spoken and promises made will inevitably be fulfilled, typically used to describe someone who highly values integrity and trustworthiness. In this context, the translator did not simply apply a free translation. Instead, a literal translation was applied, rendering it as “a promise carries the weight of gold”. It retains the source language's concrete image “weight of gold” to vividly express the paramount importance of keeping one's word. Literal translation proves more direct and effectively conveys the intended meaning within the target context. Similarly, another idiomatic metaphor cited in Xi (2023) “A tower is built when soil on earth accumulates, and a river is formed when streams come together.” The idiom signifies that grains of sand, accumulated persistently, can form a pagoda, and droplets of water, gathered together, can create a deep abyss. The translator employed the literal translation, rendering the idiom's meaning directly through its literal wording. The translation preserves the concrete images of accumulating soil and converging streams, effectively conveying the original metaphorical sense of gradual accumulation leading to significant achievements.

Architectural metaphors are often translated literally. For examples, “(1) *Generation after generation,*

the silk routes travelers have built a bridge for peace and East-West cooperation; (2) We should establish a multi-tiered mechanism for cultural and people-to-people exchanges, build more cooperation platforms and open more cooperation channels; (3) Carried out cooperation in science, education, culture, health and people-to-people exchange. Such cooperation has helped lay a solid popular and social foundation for pursuing the BRI” (Xi, 2023). It was used literal translation in “build a bridge/platform, establish, open, lay a foundation”. Literal translation preserved the original architectural metaphor structure and lexicon, enabling the English-speaking audience to directly grasp the conveyed concepts of connection and cooperation, while simultaneously retaining the source text's rhetorical effect and cultural image. Within this architectural metaphor, the English rendering of the target domain largely corresponded semantically to the source domain.

Likewise, the mapping path of journey and plant metaphors within political discourse exhibited fundamental similarities. This semantic and structural equivalence validated the use of literal translation or literal translation supplemented by annotation as effective strategies. As stated in the discourse “The BRI is rooted in the historical soil of the Silk Road” (Xi, 2023). The plant metaphor vividly portrays the BRI as possessing profound historical roots, akin to a tree drawing sustenance from fertile soil, enabling it to thrive and bear abundant fruit. The translator employed a literal translation, rendering directly as “be rooted in”. This preserves the original metaphorical structure and vocabulary, allowing the English audience to intuitively perceive the BRI's historical depth and vitality.

In some cases, literal translation is strategically chosen to leverage familiar expressions in the target culture. For instance, “Some regions along the ancient Silk Road used to be lands of milk and honey” (Xi, 2019). Milk and honey, staples of the Western breakfast table, signify agricultural prosperity within the cultural cognition of Western audiences. By skillfully employing “milk and honey,” the translator evoked the memory of the once flourishing agricultural economies prevalent along the ancient Silk Road. Crucially, the translator directly utilized the inherent English expression “a land of milk and honey” (originating from the *Bible*, referring to fertile and prosperous land). The translator directly used “lands of milk and honey” to describe those regions for inspiring positive Western cultural connotations of abundance. It bridges the gap between Chinese and Western audiences, conveying the BRI vision of shared prosperity in terms that resonate with Western readers.

4.2.2 Free Translation

When the exact source metaphor is culturally ambiguous or discrepant in English, translators utilized free translation (sense-for-sense translation). They preserved the conceptual meaning but adjust the expression for the target language. For instance, “Finance is the lifeblood of a modern economy” (Xi, 2019) literally “the blood vessels of a modern economy”. A literal rendering would sound odd, so the translator chose free translation “lifeblood of a modern economy.” It kept the idea of finance as vital fluid, but used the more idiomatic English phrase “lifeblood”. The body metaphor clearly illustrated finance's nourishing role, yet the wording was natural for English readers. Another example, “*In the past few years, the Belt and Road Initiative became a freehand brushwork in its general layout. Now*

we should work with focus to add fine brushwork to this painting and turn it into a meticulous painting” (Xi, 2023). This artistic metaphor vividly depicted the transition of the BRI from the macro-level phase of broad planning to the micro-level phase of detailed implementation. Recognizing the potential cultural opacity of the specific Chinese painting terms “a freehand brushwork” and “a meticulous painting” to a general Western audience, the translator applied a free translation strategy. This adaptation aligned with English linguistic conventions and conceptual frameworks, enabling the target audience to more readily understand the distinct phases and requirements of BRI development, while retaining the core contrast between broad planning and detailed execution.

Free translation is also used for abstract phrases. The term (people-to-people exchange) was rendered as “people-to-people bonds” (Xi, 2023). “People-to-people bonds” explicitly articulated its significance as a strategic objective within the BRI, transcending generic notions of interpersonal collaboration. The deliberate emphasis on the metaphors of “channels” and “bridges” aligned precisely with BRI’s core principle of “connectivity”. While “channels” connotes institutional pathways for exchange, “bridges” symbolically represent connection, communication, and cooperation. The free translation achieved contextual integration by transforming abstract cooperative mechanisms and platforms into established BRI conceptual imagery—specifically, the widely recognized goal of “people-to-people bonds” and the tangible manifestations of “connectivity”. Consequently, the rendering demonstrated enhanced contextual alignment with BRI’s policy discourse and communicative objectives. Beyond semantic accuracy, the translator has achieved seamless conceptual integration within the BRI paradigm, foregrounding the strategic imperative of “people-to-people bonds” and the cooperative philosophy of “connectivity”. The terminological application also reflected linguistic compatibility with Chinese official discourse conventions, rendering it a contextually grounded free translation. The interpretative translation of “people-to-people cooperation” as “people-to-people bonds” constitutes a strategic conceptual metaphor, transcending literal equivalence to activate BRI’s policy ontology. The metaphors of “channels” and “bridges” function as source domains mapping systematically onto the target domain of transnational cooperation. Crucially, this metaphor shifted individualistic “cooperation” toward collectivist “bonding”—a cognitive re-constructed pivotal for BRI’s soft power efficacy.

4.2.3 Substitution

When a source metaphor contains culturally specific imagery that English audiences won’t understand, the translator often employs substitution. This strategy replaces parts of the source metaphor with more familiar equivalents. For example, Xunzi said “不积跬步无以至千里” (literally “without accumulating half-steps, you cannot reach a thousand li”). Instead of keeping the Chinese unit “里” (mile) and “跬步” (half-steps), the translation substituted “a long journey” for “千里” and “one step” for “跬步”. “A long journey can be covered only by taking one step at a time”, translator applied substitution to preserve the meaning (great distances require small steps) and use universally comprehensible terms. It also ties together with subsequent phrases (step by step, one by one), reinforcing the incremental theme in fluent English.

However, Sinologist Knoblock's (1994) applied foreignizing translation of the same saying from the Xunzi: "If you do not accumulate paces and double paces, you will lack the means to reach 1000 li". While faithful to the original lexicon, this rendering presents significant cognitive barriers for general Western readers. Faced with the culturally opaque terms “跬步” (paces/double paces) and “千里” (1000 li), Western audiences struggle to construct the same mental space as Chinese readers or access its cultural resonance. Therefore, translator prioritizing contextual relevance and audience comprehension, implemented dynamic cultural adaptation in the BRI speech. Substituting “a long journey” for “千里” and “one step” for “跬步” successfully reconceptualized the BRI as a long-term endeavor requiring step-by-step advancement. This substitution fulfilled the contextual demands of the speech and facilitated the target audience's accurate understanding of the allusion's adapted cultural meaning within the BRI framework.

Another instance of substitution is found in the translation of the phrase “This is indeed a gathering of great minds” (Xi, 2023). The original saying derived from the *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection* and literally means “all virtuous and talented individuals have gathered here, young and old alike.” A literal translation of this classical allusion would likely result in a cumbersome and opaque rendering for the target audience. Instead, the translator made a culturally strategic substitution, borrowing the phrase “great minds” from the well-known Western proverb “Great minds think alike.” It utilized a familiar cultural reference point to connote the gathering of wise, virtuous, and capable individuals. The phrase “great minds” resonates with Western audiences, evoking a sense of immediate recognition and affinity. Consequently, this substitution effectively elicited an emotional response from the audience, aligning with the speech's rhetorical goals more effectively than a literal translation could achieve.

4.3 Cultural Principles of Translating Metaphor Strategies

Because the BRI's discourse is rich in Chinese cultural elements, translators adapt metaphors to the target audience's cultural context. They often explain or integrate culturally bound metaphors, or replace them with similar expressions familiar to Western readers, to reduce barriers and highlight shared values. Simultaneously, translators may borrow analogous foreign proverbs to reinforce commonality. It ensures the English text is acceptable and relatable, enhancing cross-cultural communication.

The use of allusions and proverbs from both Chinese and foreign sources highlights the cultural connections between nations along the Belt and Road. It is evident from the leader's speech that numerous allusions and proverbs are employed with cultural commonalities from both China and abroad to construct discourse. By citing the Chinese proverb “Radish or cabbage, each to his own delight” (Xi, 2023), the leader vividly depicted the diversity of civilizations and the inclusiveness towards different ones, thereby underscoring the source-language culture. This translation is easy to understand, and Western readers can fully grasp the political connotations and contextual meanings of the proverb. It accurately conveys the political implications of the speech while preserving the cultural

characteristics of the Chinese language. On the one hand, the leader's frequent references to Chinese proverbs make the content of the speech more accessible and comprehensible. On the other hand, they convey the inherent cultural gene of China, which has long valued harmony in diversity and inclusiveness.

Another proverb “Stick together through thick and thin” (Xi, 2023) originates from *The Nine Situations in The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. Its original meaning refers to people sitting in the same boat and crossing a river together, and it later came to signify unity and joint efforts to overcome difficulties. The leader utilized the phrase “Stick together through thick and thin” on numerous occasions to describe the relationship between countries involved in the BRI. This reflects Chinese initiative for global cooperation, shared responsibility, and joint navigation of challenges, as well as its opposition to shifting burdens onto neighbors. China aims to promote trade liberalization and build an open, inclusive, and mutually beneficial world through the “Silk Road”. The translator adopted a translation strategy of cultural borrowing with the English proverb “Stick together through thick and thin.” This accurately conveys both the literal meaning and metaphorical implications of “cooperation in the same boat,” achieving a perfect unity of form and meaning. As a result, English-speaking readers can reconstruct the same cognitive context, gaining a clear and accurate understanding of the BRI. That is, China is willing to join hands with countries around the world to jointly build the Belt and Road, address global challenges, and create a community with a shared future for mankind characterized by cooperation in the same boat and shared responsibilities and interests.

When using classical allusions, the translator often adds brief clarifications. For example, in the “peach and plum” allusion discussed above, the English version includes “they are so attractive,” making explicit why a path appears under the trees. This addition clarifies the causal link implicit in Chinese but necessary for English understanding. It ties the “path” imagery to the familiar concept of the Silk Road, invoking that memory. In this way, the translator both preserves Chinese cultural imagery (the trees and path) and adds enough explanation, so Western readers appreciate its relevance to BRI success. The result is a metaphorical expression that conveys Chinese values while resonating in the target culture.

From the perspective of CMT, above translation strategies are not merely technical choices but reflect a deeper, systematic effort to map culturally grounded source-domain mappings onto coherent and acceptable target-domain structures. According to CMT, metaphors are fundamental cognitive mechanisms through which abstract ideas (such as international cooperation or cultural diversity) are understood in terms of more concrete experiences (e.g., journeys, architecture, or plant). In translating BRI discourse, the frequent use of metaphors like “a shared journey” reveals a conscious activation of cross-cultural cognitive schemas that make complex political concepts tangible and relatable.

The translation approach aligns with the core tenet of CMT—that metaphor is a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system—and applies it within the real-world context of Global South–North dialogue.

For instance, the Chinese proverb “同舟共济” is structured by the underlying conceptual metaphor “solidarity is sharing a boat”. When translated as “stick together through thick and thin,” the translator selects a pre-existing metaphorical mapping in English that emphasizes joint struggle and resilience, thereby preserving the cognitive intent while adapting the cultural vehicle. This strategy ensures that the conceptual metaphor (cooperation as shared travel) remains active and intelligible across linguistic boundaries. Moreover, in the case of the “peach and plum” allusion, the addition of “they are so attractive” explicitly reinforces the conceptual metaphor “success is attractiveness”, making the logical connection clear within the Western cognitive frame. This adjustment is particularly necessary in light of the current international environment, where China’s discourse often encounters heightened skepticism. By strengthening the metaphor’s conceptual transparency, translators facilitate smoother cognitive processing and reduce translation resistance.

These strategies are fundamentally guided by the principle of cultural adaptability, which requires that translingual practices be not only linguistically accurate but also cognitively resonant and culturally appropriate within the target setting. Cultural adaptability emphasizes dynamic negotiation between the source culture’s expressive needs and the target audience’s conceptual repertoire. In the context of the BRI, this means selecting or constructing metaphors that reflect Chinese perspectives yet align with internationally shared experiential bases—such as mutual benefit and civilizational diversity. The cultural adaptability principle is strategically employed to support China’s broader objectives in global discourse. Rather than straightforward domestication or foreignization, the translations perform a delicate balancing act. They retain core Chinese cultural concepts while packaging them in cognitively accessible forms for foreign audiences. For example, the use of culturally borrowed proverbs like “stick together through thick and thin” acknowledges the recipient culture’s metaphorical inventory, thereby enhancing persuasiveness and reducing perceived cultural distance.

Furthermore, cultural adaptability operates not only at the linguistic and metaphorical levels but also at the level of narrative framing. By embedding Chinese allusions within explanatory contexts that highlight universal values—e.g., inclusiveness, cooperation, resilience—the translator makes traditional Chinese cultural elements speak to contemporary global concerns. This practice reflects an innovative application of CMT within real-world intercultural communication, where the goal is not merely comprehension but also conceptual affiliation and empathy. In a word, the translation strategies discussed are undergirded by a sophisticated application of CMT guided by the principle of cultural adaptability. This approach recognizes that successful cross-cultural communication depends on activating shared conceptual mappings while making strategic adaptations where frameworks diverge. It offers a creative, theoretically informed model for how nations can cultivate mutual understanding in a complex and multipolar world, supporting the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind.

In short, translators balanced fidelity to Chinese imagery with cultural adaptation. They use literal translation when possible, free translation rendering for clarity, and substitution to invoke equivalent

imagery in English. They draw on Western sayings or clarifications to bridge gaps, ensuring metaphors convey both the source text's meaning and its cultural subtext. This careful strategy maintains the authoritative tone and ideological impact of Chinese political discourse, making the translated text polished and persuasive for an international audience.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study's examination of journey, architecture, and plant metaphors within BRI discourse, grounded in CMT, offers meaningful contributions to both translation studies and political discourse analysis. The identified strategies—literal and free translation, along with substitution—highlight how metaphors serve as critical discursive tools that shape ideological perception across linguistic boundaries. These strategies not only facilitate cross-cultural communication but also reflect deliberate efforts in constructing China's international narrative.

Despite these insights, the study is limited by its narrow focus on three metaphor types and qualitative design, which restrict the generalizability of findings. Future research should employ corpus-based, comparative, or experimental methods to analyze a wider range of metaphors and test their reception across different cultures. Such steps would not only advance the practical application of CMT in critical discourse studies but also refine translation strategies for greater impact. Ultimately, a more reflexive and empirically grounded approach to metaphor translation will strengthen the efficacy of China's international communication—enabling more nuanced storytelling while exposing the power of metaphors to shape global political imagination.

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