

Original Paper

Conceptual Metaphors and Their Translation Strategies in
Political Discourse: A Case Study of the 2026 *Report on the Work*
of the Government

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Abstract

Metaphor plays an essential role in political discourse. Guided by the Cognitive Translation Hypothesis, this paper investigates the metaphorical expressions in China's 2026 Report on the Work of the Government, discusses the conceptual mappings from various source domains to abstract political concepts and analyzes the translation strategies adopted in the official English version. As found in the results, the conversion of metaphor into sense is commonly used to express hidden political ideologies in the process of publicity. Through the semantic restoration of metaphors, this study helps foster a more accurate global understanding of China's development while exploring how China builds its national image within political discourse.

Keywords

conceptual metaphor, political discourse, translation strategy

1. Introduction

The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In political discourse, national leaders often use metaphors to transform abstract ideas into perceptible representations, making it easier for the public to understand the underlying political thoughts.

These metaphorical structures selectively highlight certain features of the source domain, thus weaving governing concepts and ideologies into the target audience. A number of studies have shown the unique contribution of conceptual metaphor in Chinese political discourse, yet there is little information on

how metaphors achieve communicative equivalence in translation. This paper intends to demonstrate how metaphors encode cognitive and lived-in experiences with Chinese characteristics, and how they are perceived by international audiences through translation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor in Political Discourse

The theory of conceptual metaphor was first proposed in the influential book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), written by Lakoff and Johnson. In revealing the prevalence of metaphors in ordinary language, Lakoff and Johnson claimed that metaphors are not merely a rhetorical device or poetic expression, as traditional metaphor studies had suggested, but a foundation of the conceptual system that supports human thought processes. In the theoretical framework, Conceptual Metaphor is regarded as a stable, systematic, and asymmetric structural mapping relationship from the source domain (mainly derived from people's physical, social, and cultural experiences) to the target domain (usually abstract). Therefore, metaphor is often given a cognitive function whereby human beings draw upon the embodied experiences of one another, non-human surroundings, or even other concepts or images (Al-Ali, 2007).

On the importance of metaphors in political discourse, Thompson (1996, p. 1) claims that "Politics without metaphors is like a fish without water". For abstractions like "democracy" or "justice", and for a large number of political phenomena, there is no empirical referent. Understanding depends entirely on verbal symbols that lack extra-verbal reality (Graber, 1993, p. 311). That is where metaphor appears as an essential tool enabling to turn an empirical void into the conceptual structure, allowing the public to understand politics. On the flip side, if a specific metaphor used by politicians becomes the primary conceptual schema in explaining a certain aspect of life, people may accept it as a common-sense view of reality. In other words, metaphors serve to reconstruct the concepts of the public's political mindset in accordance with the purposes of politicians (He, 2011).

2.2 Metaphor and Cognitive Equivalence in Translation

Nida (1964) concluded the "best" translation as the one capable of evoking in the TL reader the same response as the SL text does to the SL reader. However, in conceptual metaphor theory, experiences in the source domain take place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), making the best translation a rather unattainable objective. To clarify, sometimes, the source and target domains in the source text do not have direct equivalents in the target language. And even when equivalent concepts do exist in the target language, cultural factors may prevent a direct mapping, thereby requiring the translator to make a conscious conceptual switch. Based on this, Mandelblit developed the "Cognitive Translation Hypothesis" in 1995 and included two schemes of cognitive mapping conditions (i.e., Similar Mapping Condition (SMC) and Different Mapping Condition (DMC)). In the Similar Mapping Condition, the source idiomatic expression and the expected translation are

based on the same general metaphorical mapping. In the Different Mapping Condition, the expected idiomatic translation is based on a different ontological mapping than that of the source expression (Mandelblit, 1995, p. 491). With this methodology, the author can establish a more logical and systematic categorization of metaphorical translation strategies, which facilitates subsequent analysis. In the translation of metaphor in political discourse, different source domains may produce disparate cognitive imagery across cultures, leading to cognitive dissonance or even political misinterpretations. Translators must give careful consideration to the cognitive features of metaphors during the translation process—namely, whether the target text enables target readers to activate the corresponding conceptual mappings and recognize the usage of the metaphor, thereby achieving an equivalent cognitive effect (Chen, 2022). In other words, the translator is called upon to play the role of a proxy agent doing the act of conceptual mapping on behalf of the TL reader (Al-Ali, 2007). According to *Approaches to Translation* written by Peter Newmark, the procedures for translating metaphor can be summarized in seven points: Reproducing the same image in the TL; Replace the image in the SL with a standard TL image; Translation of metaphor by simile; Translation of metaphor by simile plus sense; Conversion of metaphor to sense; Deletion; and Same metaphor combined with sense (Newmark, 2001, pp. 88-92). Overall, different translation strategies should be adopted for different mapping conditions.

3. Research Data and Methodology

The full text of the 2026 Government Work Report consists of 19,511 Chinese characters. Initially, the Chinese text underwent lexical segmentation and Part-of-speech tagging via CorpusWordParser. On the basis of the processed Chinese text and its English translation, two small-scale corpora were created in AntConc 4.3.1. These corpora, combined with the software's capacity for metaphorical keyword identification and rapid frequency enumeration, provide a solid foundation for studying the typologies and attributes of conceptual metaphors.

The analysis shows that there are 27 conceptual metaphors used in the 2026 Chinese Government Work Report, and they can be summarized as shown in the Table below:

Table 1. Conceptual Metaphors in CGWR (2026)

Metaphor Categories	Keywords	Frequency
Journey Metaphor	领航掌舵、开局、格局、道路、征程、步伐、台阶、	7(26%)
Architecture Metaphor	建设、根基、夯实、打牢基础、挑大梁、支柱	6(22%)
War Metaphor	科技革命、领军、保卫战、攻坚战、攻关、	5(19%)
Machine Metaphor	动能、配置、运行	3(11%)
Nature Metaphor	培育、不正之风、风雨洗礼	3(11%)
Sports Metaphor	苦练内功、组合拳、	2(7%)
Object Metaphor	饭碗	1(4%)

As shown in the table above, there is considerable variation in the overall frequency of use across metaphor categories, with the journey, architecture, and war metaphors accounting for the largest share. Among these, journey metaphors are the most frequent, constituting over a quarter of the total in the 2026 Government Work Report. It is noteworthy that they target the same domains with architecture metaphors, specifically analogies for “life”, “the nation’s future”, and “politics”.

4. Analysis of Metaphors and their Translation Strategies in the 2026 CGWR

4.1 Similar Mapping Condition

Example (1)

ST: 国内生产总值连续跨越 110 万亿……140 万亿元台阶。

TT: China’s GDP **crossed** successive **thresholds**, topping 110 trillion yuan, 120 trillion yuan, 130 trillion yuan, and 140 trillion yuan.

In the source text, the term “台阶” (physical steps) triggers the conceptual metaphor ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IS AN UPWARD JOURNEY (or DEVELOPMENT IS UP), where significant macroeconomic data are framed through the lens of daily physical actions. Thus, it transforms abstract economic performance into tangible and dynamic imagery, which helps lighten the audience’s cognitive load. Since the source and target domains share similar embodied experiences and activate identical schemata through mapping mechanisms, the translator uses the strategy of metaphorical reproduction that retains the source-text schemata in the target text. The spatial metaphor is idiomatized by rendering “台阶” as “thresholds” and “跨越” as “crossed”, which conforms to standard English collocations regarding GDP performance.

Example (2)

ST: 这些重大成就的取得，根本在于以习近平同志为核心的党中央领航掌舵，

TT: We owe these remarkable achievements to the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core, which has been **at the helm charting our course**.

Example (2) presents a typical example of a conceptual metaphor related to navigation. Human beings from different nations have similar cognitive experiences of maritime navigation that in turn result in similar metaphors. An example is where the ancient Greek philosopher Plato employed the “Ship of State” metaphor in explaining his political philosophy of governance by a philosopher-king. Moreover, a widely popular song “Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman” was created in the early years of the People’s Republic of China to glorify the Party’s leadership and Chairman Mao. In this example, the country is metaphorically depicted as a vulnerable wooden vessel, while national decisions made by Comrade Xi Jinping become the act of steering—an effort that calls for constant vigilance, political expertise, and adaptability to shifting difficulties and storms. This metaphorical image is retained by the translator in the target language. Through the use of the idioms “be at the helm” and “chart one’s course”, the translator not only conveys political leadership but also strategic direction of the process,

thus achieving cognitive equivalence in the target text.

Example (3)

ST: 经历了风雨洗礼，我们的意志更加坚强。

TT: Having been *tested by storms and met tough challenges*, we are more determined than ever to forge ahead.

The phrase “风雨洗礼” means “honed by wind and rain(storm)”. It uses the metaphor DIFFICULTY AS STORM to conceptualize China’s political or national hardships as storms, which frames challenges not as mere setbacks but as transformative tests that strengthen collective resilience. Since there is an almost identical cognitive process of understanding this metaphorical construct in both Chinese and English, the translator chooses to retain the imagery and add a brief explanation. By adding the phrase “met tough challenges”, the target text clearly brings the underlying political message to light, effectively avoiding the potential ambiguity for international audiences.

Example (4)

ST: 深入打好蓝天、碧水、净土保卫战。

TT: *Fresh headway* will be made in keeping our skies blue, waters clear, and lands clean.

“保卫战” (defensive war) employs the conceptual metaphor ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IS WARFARE. By mapping the source domain of military defense onto ecological governance, abstract environmental initiatives are conceptualized as urgent, life-and-death battles to protect the homeland. It is evident that not only did such a metaphor raise environmental protection to the level of national security issues, but it also provided a sense of urgency that encouraged public involvement. However, the target text completely omits the original military imagery by employing the phrase “Fresh headway”. War metaphors in Chinese political discourse are mostly used to underscore the government’s unwavering determination and perseverance rather than to engender a sense of tension or controversy. Therefore, despite retaining the conceptual essence of the metaphor, omitting the war imagery in the source text for functional equivalence in the target one proves to be an effective way of translating war metaphors (Bai, 2024).

Example (5)

ST: 加强对权力配置、运行的规范和监督。

TT: We will tighten regulation and oversight over *the allocation and exercise of power*.

“配置” (configuration) corresponds to the machine’s hardware and functional division, whereas “运行” (operation) signifies its dynamic output of power in the subordinate government department. Framed in this way, the conceptual metaphor POLITICAL SYSTEM IS A MACHINE is evoked in the minds of the audiences to transform intangible political power into resources available for mobilization within the mechanical system, which underscores the order and controllability of power under regulation. In rendering this metaphor, the translator primarily adopts the strategy of reproducing the same image in the target language; the translation of “配置运行” as “the allocation and exercise of power”

successfully attains both conceptual and functional equivalence.

4.1 Different Mapping Condition

Example (6)

ST: 第二个百年奋斗目标新征程实现良好开局。

TT: This has ensured a good start for our new *journey* toward the Second Centenary Goal. “征程”, which means “Long March” in Chinese but is associated with Chinese-specific features, puts a strong stress on the firm intention to forge a path towards the future, whereas “journey” in English does not carry this meaning (Bai, 2024). Nevertheless, when it comes to cognitive functions, the word shares significant overlap with the conceptual metaphor POLITICS AS A JOURNEY WITH ROUTE. Although the use of this journey metaphor instead of the imagery used in the source text may lead to the loss of some spiritual connotations, it retains the underlying metaphorical structure so as to facilitate comprehension for international audiences. Moreover, given that political discourse places great emphasis on the precise articulation of ideological concepts, choosing “journey” and not “expedition” helps minimize the risk of political misunderstanding.

Example (7)

ST: 必须以苦练内功来应对外部挑战。

TT: *Hone our own capabilities* to navigate external challenges.

The term “内功” derives from the Chinese Kung Fu and literally means exercises that benefit the internal organs. It conceptualized the nation as a martial artist, with internal institutional reforms accomplished by the Government as the “internal power”. In responding to external challenges, the source text emphasizes that the key to success lies in the nation’s internal strength—a political stance that calls for strategic resolve and a commitment to self-reliance. Clearly, no counterpart metaphors related to the same conceptual domain can be found in the target language. To address this, the translator opts to translate the metaphor into its intended meaning for greater readability, though it does lose some of the cultural connotations.

Example (8)

ST: 共同端牢中国人的饭碗。

TT: And make concerted efforts to ensure the security of China’s *food supply*.

The term “饭碗” is translated literally as “rice bowl” in English—an everyday object that is essential to survival. The metaphor of “food supply” creates an instant link between the abstract notion of food supply and the practical concern of individuals about their basic needs, thus gaining considerable public attention and emotional involvement for the problem of livelihood security. The commitment by the Communist Party of China to “jointly holding our rice bowls firmly” implies the citizens “your basic livelihood will not get out of control”, consolidating public trust in the government’s governance abilities and ensuring social stability. As a result of different eating habits, the Western world do not have a comparable word for “rice bowl”. It would be a mistake to replace the word by something similar

like “plate”, which might confuse the reader and will not help convey the desired meaning of the original text. For that reason, the translator chose to transform the metaphor into the sense, omitting the literal translation of the word “rice bowl” and using “food supply security” instead to disseminate the political message.

Example (9)

ST: 支持经济大省挑大梁。

TT: All with the aim of supporting major provincial economies in *assuming greater responsibility*. In Chinese, the word “大梁” refers to the central beam that holds up the roof, thus representing the structural core. The verb “挑” means to shoulder the load. Through the metaphor of mapping the source domain of the building’s main beam onto the target domain of political and economic responsibility, it becomes clear that major provinces play important roles, as they are vital and highly productive. It is also an embodiment of the Chinese value system of collectivism and individual contribution, where the person defines himself in relation to the larger community and uses his abilities in furthering the development of the community as a whole.

There is no corresponding English idiom for the Chinese term. Translators often omit the metaphor and use only a simple explanation of the political ideology in English. However, there are also other metaphors with a similar meaning. The author therefore proposes the following translations: “All with the aim of supporting major provinces in serving as the economic backbone” or “shouldering greater responsibility”. These renderings achieve both faithfulness to the source text and smoothness in expression.

5. Conclusions

There are many conceptual metaphors used in China’s 2026 Government Work Report as the means to represent governance philosophies and political perspectives of China. The number of conceptual metaphors found in the text amounts to 27; there are seven kinds of these metaphors. Of all the metaphors mentioned in the text, journey metaphors (26%), architecture metaphors (22%), and war metaphors (19%) form the majority and play an important role in structuring the abstract political issues, economic accomplishments, and further development of the country through association with tangible source domains.

The analysis shows that there are many metaphorical expressions that are not transferred into the target text during the semantic restoration. Take a war metaphor as an example, in order to create the same communicative effect without portraying an inappropriate image of the nation to foreign audiences, it is necessary to get rid of the metaphorical expression and convey the concept behind it explicitly to maintain the function of the metaphor. In cases with metaphors that have different mapping conditions in two languages, literal translation becomes the best way. This translation strategy results in the loss of some cultural characteristics; however, the accurate transmission of political ideology remains the main

objective of the translation, according to the theory of functional equivalence in political discourse. To summarize, when translating metaphors in political speeches, it is necessary to consider all similarities and differences of cultures. Only through accurate translation of meanings will the audiences be able to understand the peculiarities of Chinese political language and culture.

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