

Framing Power, Making Meaning: Rethinking Metaphor Translation in Contemporary Chinese Political Discourse

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Abstract

Political metaphor has become one of the quiet engines of official Chinese rhetoric. It does not simply decorate policy language. It helps organise legitimacy, compress history into portable formulas, and project a future oriented moral horizon. Once translated, however, these metaphors enter a different ecology of reading, where the cues that make them persuasive at home may not be available, or may be read through quite different ideological expectations. This paper reviews scholarship on metaphor translation in contemporary Chinese political discourse and argues that a significant strand of this work has tended to frame translation as technical transfer rather than as public negotiation. Bringing functionalist, cognitive and discourse-oriented traditions into dialogue, the review foregrounds reception as the missing hinge between strategy and effect. Across the literature and a small set of emblematic cases drawn from widely circulated official translations, five recurring tensions are traced: semantic density, cultural embeddedness, strategic ambiguity, institutional constraint and reception drift. These tensions show why common strategies such as abstraction, elaboration and standardisation are never neutral fixes. They reshape what the metaphor can do, and for whom it can do it. The research therefore reframes political metaphor translation as a contested event of meaning making, situated at the intersection of language, ideology and global politics.

Keywords: Chinese political discourse, cross cultural communication, discourse strategy, ideological framing, audience reception, metaphor translation

1. Introduction

Metaphor does not merely embellish contemporary Chinese political discourse. In

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many flagship formulations it functions as a kind of organising grammar, holding together policy, memory and aspiration. Figurative language has moved from rhetorical flourish to a recurring method of state narration, where images of journey, renewal, struggle and harmony are asked to carry ideological weight as well as affective appeal. In the Xi era, this metaphorical repertoire has become especially visible, folding cultural inheritance into policy expression and lending coherence to narratives of national renewal (Tian et al., 2021). The point is not only what these metaphors say, but what they make thinkable about China's trajectory.

The translation problem begins when such expressions travel. Phrases like “人类命运共同体” (a community with a shared future for mankind) (Xi, 2022), or “中国式现代化” (Chinese style modernisation) (Xi, 2022), can look transparent on the page, and their English versions often read with a surface smoothness that suggests equivalence. Yet their persuasive force is rarely lexical. They rest on thick symbolic layers, from philosophical sediment to policy genre conventions, and they often rely on strategically maintained ambiguity (Chen, 2024). When rendered for international audiences, the same metaphor may gain clarity at the cost of resonance, or preserve resonance at the cost of interpretive stability. What appears as a neat solution can therefore become a subtle shift in stance, alignment and reader positioning (Wang & Munday, 2020).

Existing scholarship offers powerful tools for thinking about these shifts, although it tends to do so in separate lanes. Functionalist traditions highlight communicative purpose, institutional readability and the demands of the target situation (Vermeer, 2021; Nord, 2018). Cognitive perspectives, drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, focus on cross lingual mapping and the extent to which conceptual structures travel with the metaphor (Kövecses, 2020; Musolff, 2022). Discourse oriented approaches, often informed by critical discourse analysis, attend to how metaphor participates in power, legitimisation and the management of

public meaning (Fairclough, 2015; Chilton & Ilyin, 2019). Each illuminates part of the problem. The difficulty is that political metaphor translation rarely stays within one frame.

One area, however, has remained conspicuously thin: reception. The question is not only how metaphors are translated, but what happens once the translated metaphor is released into circulation. Who reads it, in what media environments, and with what prior assumptions about China and its political vocabulary? Liu et al. (2025), for instance, show how readers may rely less on literal accuracy than on familiar interpretive habits when judging whether a political metaphor feels plausible. Related reception work suggests that a translation can be technically competent yet pragmatically unstable, precisely because it lands in an audience space the source text never had to negotiate. Reception, in short, is where strategy becomes consequence.

This review takes that reception turn seriously, but it does so without assuming that one approach can simply replace the others. Instead, it reads across functionalist, cognitive and discourse-based work, asking what each can contribute once we treat metaphor translation as a situated decision under institutional and ideological pressure. The goal is not to police a single correct rendering, but to clarify what different strategies do to the metaphor's semantic contour, its ideological signal and its uptake conditions.

Five tensions recur across the discussion: semantic density, cultural embeddedness, strategic ambiguity, institutional constraint and reception drift. These are not abstract categories. They name the points at which translators are forced to choose between competing goods, such as clarity and ambiguity, domestication and estrangement, or fluency and traceability.

What is proposed here is therefore not a recipe for better metaphor translation. The claim is diagnostic. Political metaphor translation is treated as a contested event in which meaning, legitimacy and audience positioning are negotiated in public. The empirical

illustrations are used to show how strategies such as abstraction, elaboration and genre-based standardisation do not simply solve problems. They reconfigure what the metaphor can do, and for whom. That is also why reception is not an afterthought in this paper, but part of the metaphor's political life.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Political metaphor in discourse

It is easy to speak about political metaphor as if it were a stylistic layer, detachable from the “real” argument. The problem is that political discourse rarely grants us that separation. Metaphor often arrives early, sometimes before anything like an explicit claim appears, and it quietly sets the limits of what can count as a sensible claim. That is why political metaphors can sound ordinary and still matter. Their ordinariness is not innocence. It is training.

Take the navigation frame. Few readers pause over steering the ship of state or charting a new course, because the phrasing has become almost infrastructural. Yet those images smuggle in a whole arrangement of political agency. Someone is presumed to see farther than others. Someone is expected to hold the wheel. Collective life becomes a movement that must stay “on track”, and once that track is naturalised, dissent can be reimagined as obstruction while alternatives begin to look like drift. The persuasive move is not necessarily emotional. It is often procedural, a rearrangement of what feels reasonable.

Scholars who study metaphor in this context often point to its capacity to shape not only ideas but also the ground on which ideas can be received. That shaping is not always direct. It may emerge through resonance, or through repetition, or through a kind of familiarity that resists scrutiny (Charteris-Black, 2011). The political effect, then, may lie as much in what becomes unsayable as in what is said (Musolff, 2022).

Lakoff and Johnson (2008) made it difficult to keep metaphor confined to ornament

by insisting that metaphor belongs to cognition, not merely to rhetoric. If a metaphor organises how politics is thought, then it is not simply dressing policy language. It is shaping the reasoning routes that a discourse makes available. Yet the cognitive account becomes thin if it is treated as culturally weightless.

Later developments added further texture. Musolff's (2016, 2022) work on metaphor scenarios matters here because it shows how metaphors bring patterned expectations, almost a narrative grammar, and those patterns are never purely formal. They are historical, and cultural. They can misfire, not because the words are unclear, but because the scenario's moral cues are not shared (Chilton, 2004).

These general points become sharper when the discourse itself is institutionally stabilised. Official Chinese political language is a case where metaphor does not merely occur, it is cultivated. Formulations recur across genres with a steadiness that can feel like governance speaking in images. Many phrases draw on long standing cultural resources, but those resources do not always travel with the words. A simple image, taken at face value, can carry philosophical sediment and institutional cadence that fluent English cannot automatically preserve (Zhou, 2023; Xu, 2024).

Translation, then, is not simply a matter of choosing between equivalence and deviation. What moves across languages is a bundle of associations, some tightly anchored to source discourse, others more portable, and some that seem portable only if the stance subtly shifts. Loss is routine, which makes the real question less moral than diagnostic. Which loss changes what the metaphor can do in public, and which loss merely thins the texture. A metaphor can remain recognisable as a phrase while its political work is quietly re-distributed.

2.2 Chinese political metaphor in the Xi Era

Metaphor has long been present in Chinese political discourse, but its institutional rhythm becomes more pronounced in the Xi era. Figurative formulations recur across

speeches, white papers, and state media with a steadiness that makes them feel less like occasional flourish and more like a governing idiom.

The surface compactness of many Xi era metaphors can mislead. They often look economical, yet they compress a great deal of historical and ideological material. “中国梦”, often rendered as The Chinese Dream (Xi, 2022), illustrates that compression. It gathers revolutionary memory, civilisational aspiration, and policy ambition into a portable formulation. Wu (2023) notes that the force of the metaphor is not produced by a simple borrowing of an English language idiom, but by the way it borrows recognisable shape while refusing the liberal moral horizon that the phrase might casually evoke. The metaphor can read as if it were convergent, and still do work that is deliberately not convergent.

A related difficulty appears when a formulation is legible in English but not genuinely transparent. Chen (2021), examining metaphorical phrases such as “人类命运共同体”, points to the way surface accessibility can conceal an inward facing political logic. The phrasing can be read with ease, while the ideological architecture it belongs to remains hard to perceive unless one already has the discursive map. In such cases, translation is not a simple choice between accuracy and inaccuracy. It becomes a judgement about which layer can be carried without flattening the formulation into something harmless, or redescribing it so strongly that it triggers an unintended reading.

Circulation matters as much as content. Song and Zhang (2024) suggest that Xi era metaphors often operate as constellations, reinforced across genres and time. A formulation can appear in a major speech, echo through provincial reporting, and resurface in diplomatic briefings. Authority accumulates through repetition. Translation therefore has to confront echo, not merely a sentence in isolation.

Metaphors also change function as they migrate. A formulation may move from one policy domain to another without shedding earlier resonances. That means translation must

cope with layered use rather than a single stable meaning. Renderings such as “中国号巨轮”, commonly translated as the giant ship of China (Liu et al., 2025), can preserve the visible image while thinning the governance logic the metaphor animates. What slips away is often not propositional content but a structure of feeling, including implied coordination, managed momentum, and an expectation of directed movement.

This is also why the translational problem is institutional, not merely lexical. Jiang et al. (2022) emphasise that decisions about what to carry forward are rarely made alone. Editorial consensus, timing, precedent, and assumptions about what audiences will tolerate shape what becomes possible. Sun and Subramaniam (2023) describe translational judgement as intuitive but not casual, since translators respond to rhetorical expectations that are felt before they are articulated.

Nor do metaphors necessarily arrive at the translator as fresh inventions. Guo (2025) notes that political metaphors may undergo internal testing and iterative adjustments before public release. By the time a foreign language version is produced, the formulation has often been rehearsed, trimmed, and politically weighted. Translation works with a distilled message rather than a spontaneous figure of speech.

Zhang (2022) goes further, arguing that translated metaphors can function as instruments of projection. Tone and framing can shift with diplomatic purpose, geopolitical conditions, and anticipated reception. Translation in this setting is not an afterthought to politics, but part of political communication itself. The translator's labour often resembles calibration, managing resonance, navigating ideological residue, and attempting to pre-empt misreading. In some cases, controlled ambiguity functions as shelter, allowing a metaphor to remain usable across interpretive environments that would otherwise pull it apart.

2.3 Translation approaches to metaphor

Work on political metaphor translation tends to cluster around a small set of approach

families, yet the families do not line up neatly because they begin with different assumptions about what metaphor is doing. Some treat it primarily as an instrument of communicative effect, some as conceptual structure, and some as a form of ideological positioning embedded in discourse. None of these starting points is wrong, but each brings a different “problem” into view, and each makes a different kind of loss easier to tolerate.

Functionalist traditions take purpose and situational fit as their organising premise. Nord (2018), building on Skopos theory, places communicative goal at the centre of translational reasoning, which legitimises adaptation or omission where a metaphor risks confusion or mismatch with target audience expectations. The strength of this orientation is its clarity about audience and function. Its weakness is that it can treat metaphor as expendable once it threatens fluency, even when the metaphor is carrying stance, alignment, or institutional memory. Wang and Munday (2020) hint at this tension in official contexts, where decisions often look less like principled optimisation and more like incremental recalibration of tone and imagery.

Cognitive perspectives begin elsewhere, with the claim that metaphor belongs to reasoning rather than to decoration. Lakoff and Johnson (2008) and Kövecses (2020) frame metaphor as mapping between domains that shapes how political realities are perceived and evaluated. From this angle, a metaphor is not simply a rhetorical flourish that can be swapped out without consequence, because the metaphor may be doing conceptual work that the discourse relies on. The difficulty is that preservation can become an ideal that outruns context. Valdeón (2024) notes how formal fidelity can produce pragmatic confusion when readers lack the conceptual ground a metaphor presupposes. Yang (2023) therefore argues for selective preservation, weighing conceptual scaffolding against communicative clarity. What is at stake is not whether the source image survives intact, but whether the reasoning work remains legible without turning the target text into explanatory prose that disrupts the genre’s

authority.

Discourse oriented approaches shift attention again by treating metaphor as a positioning device, part of how authority is legitimised and public meaning managed. Fairclough (2015) and Chilton and Ilyin (2019) treat political discourse as a site of power, within which metaphor participates in framing and contestation. Tianying and Bogoyavlenskaya (2023) likewise frame metaphor as part of the rhetorical field through which ideology circulates. Song and Zhang (2024) show how metaphors tied to rejuvenation or historical rise can be rephrased in translation to evoke inclusivity or balance, not as neutral stylistic adjustment but as stance management under imagined audience sensitivities. The usual concern raised about this family is not political insight but decision guidance: Wei (2018) notes that ideological effects become clearest in hindsight, while decisions are made in real time.

A shared premise still runs through these approaches despite their differences. Metaphor is a comparatively unstable object under translation. Shifts are expected, whether in structure, tone, or positioning. What remains harder to specify is how such shifts are to be evaluated when the same metaphor must serve communicative function, conceptual coherence, and ideological signalling at once.

A translated metaphor can look settled once it reads as fluent English, yet its interpretive life is only beginning. It enters media environments that were never part of the source text's rhetorical design, and readers bring priors that can do the heavy lifting. Under those conditions, drift is less an error than a predictable feature of circulation. The practical consequence is that reception is not simply "afterwards", because it shapes what later becomes normal or risky in official English.

3. Approaches in Practice

It is one thing to describe approach families as if they were stable tools laid out on a

bench. It is another to watch what happens when a translator reaches for those tools while working inside official routines. Political metaphor does not present itself as a purely linguistic puzzle. It comes with timing, with precedent, with institutional memory, and with the persistent question of how an international reader will take a phrase once it leaves the protected space of domestic circulation. Under those conditions, approaches begin to look less like methods and more like habits of judgement. Each habit brings certain aspects of the problem into focus, and each habit has blind spots that only become obvious once the translator is already mid decision.

3.1 Functionalist reasoning

Functionalist thinking often survives in institutional translation not as an explicit theory that translators quote back to themselves, but as a quiet permission structure. Purpose matters, and audience matters. “What is this translation for” becomes the most defensible question to ask. Skopos theory formalised that orientation, and it is easy to see why it remains attractive (Vermeer, 2021; Nord, 2018). Yet the moment one enters party authorised discourse, the freedom implied by “purpose” contracts. The translator is rarely inventing the communicative goal. More often, the goal is assumed, inherited, or embedded in an established protocol.

That is where some of the most telling shifts occur. Wang and Munday (2020) show how metaphor is frequently made safer through thinning. A phrase like “筑梦之路”, for instance, is rendered as path to development (Wang & Munday, 2020). It reads fluently. It also reads as if it could have been written without the metaphor in the first place. The aspirational charge that makes the source formulation feel like a call, not merely a description, becomes harder to hear in English. One can call that domestication, or simplification, or strategic smoothing. Whatever label is preferred, the effect is the same: the metaphor’s affective register is quietly flattened.

Wu's (2024) corpus based findings make it difficult to treat such flattening as occasional. Across government reports, metaphorical language appears regularly levelled into policy neutral vocabulary. The pattern is not chaotic. It is consistent enough to look like a house style. Clarity is gained, and clarity is rarely a trivial gain. Yet the gain invites an uneasy question that functionalist rhetoric sometimes avoids: at what point does legibility start to resemble compliance rather than communication.

Schäffner (2016) helps name what is at stake by warning that metaphors do not carry only “content”. They also carry a medium, a way of organising value and alignment. In Xi era discourse, this point becomes sharper still. Brown (2022) argues that political metaphors in such texts function as compressed ideological signals. If that is right, then smoothing is never a neutral clean up. It can retexture the politics of the text, not simply its style.

What is striking, however, is how often functionalist work invokes an audience without really seeing it. Pan and Zhang (2022) are valuable precisely because they stop treating reception as an assumption. Their survey work suggests that simplification does not reliably generate understanding. A simplified rendering can be perceived as bland, or oddly opaque, or even suspicious, while literal renderings can sound technical and still fail to clarify. The functionalist promise, in other words, holds most comfortably when the audience is imagined. Once actual readers enter the picture, “purpose” becomes a contested variable rather than a stable instruction.

So the model remains useful, but it is easy for it to become reactive. It can encourage a kind of defensive pragmatism, where the safest phrasing wins by default. The deeper question keeps returning, and it is not a question functionalism can avoid forever: whose purpose is being served, and what is being paid for the appearance of fluency.

3.2 Cognitive approaches

Cognitive approaches begin from a premise that feels immediately relevant to

metaphor translation: metaphor is not decoration. It is part of how political thinking is structured. Conceptual Metaphor Theory, as shaped by Lakoff and Johnson (2008), gives translators a language for taking metaphor seriously as conceptual infrastructure rather than rhetorical surface. It also tempts one toward a practical ideal. Preserve the mapping, keep the image, and carry the structure across.

Kövecses (2020) strengthens that temptation by emphasising how metaphors organise political and moral reasoning. Under this view, metaphors are not optional. They are formative. Translating them, then, can look like a kind of conceptual stewardship. Yet stewardship is harder than it sounds, because conceptual structure does not travel in a vacuum. One can preserve a frame formally and still lose the conditions that make the frame politically legible.

Liu et al. (2025) offer a useful illustration in their discussion of “中国号巨轮” (the giant ship of China), and in the English variants that circulate alongside it. The image survives in translation. The conceptual labour does not necessarily survive. Domestically, the ship metaphor can imply coordinated momentum, managed direction, and an authorised sense of navigation through turbulence. In English, the same wording can drift toward a generic maritime trope. It may even invite a literal reading that was never the point. The phrase travels, but the political cues that stabilise its scenario are not carried automatically by lexical fidelity.

The cognitive tradition is often excellent at showing what is preserved or lost in mapping terms. The difficulty arises when “preservation” is treated as the highest virtue. Structural fidelity can produce a translation that is formally loyal and pragmatically thin. The metaphor becomes recognisable but inert. Xi era metaphors, dense with inter text and governance cadence, are especially likely to expose this limitation. They can arrive intact in English and still fail to land, because landing is not a property of structure alone.

3.3 Discourse oriented approaches

Discourse oriented work begins from a different intuition. It treats metaphor as a positioning device, embedded in institutional narratives and ideological scaffolding, rather than as an isolated linguistic artefact (Fairclough, 2015; Chilton & Ilyin, 2019). Under this lens, metaphors do not merely “mean”. They legitimise, they exclude, they normalise, and they organise who can speak with authority. Translation becomes an ideological encounter, even when it presents itself as technical.

Song and Zhang (2024), analysing official CPC commemorative texts, show how metaphors tied to rejuvenation or geopolitical confidence are recalibrated in English versions so that they project inclusion and harmony. That is not the same as mistranslation. It is closer to self-presentation under reception risk. Chen (2024), working with selections from Xi Jinping: The Governance of China (Volume IV), similarly observes attenuation in metaphors that carry sovereignty, security, or civilisational pride. The English becomes smoother, more compatible with the global governance lexicon, less likely to jar. The political effect is not necessarily to remove ideology, but to re stage it in a different key.

And yet, a familiar complaint follows. Eriksson (2019) is sharp on this point: discourse oriented studies are often strongest after the fact. They diagnose ideological movement with precision, but they struggle to offer operational guidance for decision making under pressure. In many accounts, the translator appears as an agent of discursive negotiation, but the practical parameters of negotiation remain abstract. One learns what a choice “did” once it has been made, not how to decide while the choice is still open.

There is also an additional complication that deserves more than a passing remark. Power is sometimes described as if it flowed in a single direction, from institution to translator to text. Yet the lived reality can be more granular. Translators may shade emphasis, adjust cadence, or embed cues within a mandated line, not as open resistance, but as micro

judgement inside constraint. That does not romanticise agency. It simply recognises that institutional translation is rarely pure execution. It is an enacted practice, and enactment is always contingent.

3.4 Comparative insights

The three paradigms do not resolve into harmony. Each makes certain things visible. Each also makes certain losses easier to tolerate.

Functionalist reasoning tends to privilege legibility, and in doing so it can trade away metaphor's symbolic density. Cognitive approaches defend conceptual structure, but they can underestimate how quickly a preserved image becomes pragmatically thin once the shared scenario falls away. Discourse oriented work exposes ideological repositioning with real acuity, yet it often remains methodologically light at the moment where a practitioner most needs it: the moment of decision.

What looks missing is not "another theory". It is a workable way of moving across lenses without turning hybridity into an excuse for vagueness. Zhang et al. (2025) offer a composite framework that invites translators to assess metaphor along intersecting lines such as typology, context, and anticipated reception. It is a promising gesture, because it treats the translator as an interpreter of narrative risk rather than as a faithful executor of any single model. At the same time, Schäffner (2016) reminds us that institutional practice can shape how far such composite thinking can actually be enacted, since institutional positioning and reader inference are not neutral background conditions.

The harder problem, then, is not invention but evidence. There are still too few studies that track hybrid decisions under operational pressure, and fewer still that trace how those choices are received by real audiences rather than projected ones. In Xi era discourse that absence is consequential, because many metaphors in these texts are not primarily about picturing an image. They encode aspiration, stage legitimacy, and manage alignment.

Translating them becomes a performance in which fidelity and political imagination sit uncomfortably together. One can sense why translators reach for multiple lenses, and why none of those lenses, on its own, can carry the whole weight.

4. Translational Strategies in Practice

When metaphor enters policy discourse and then has to do work as global rhetoric, translation rarely follows neat theoretical lines. The work is untidy, shaped by institutional mandate, expectations of international legibility, and the quiet weight of editorial precedent. Strategy becomes a repertoire assembled under pressure, often pulled from prior solutions rather than derived from a single, stable model.

One recurrent move is rhetorical recalibration. Instead of stripping metaphor into flat literalism, translators may keep a recognisable argumentative frame while shifting tone, evaluative colour, or register. Song and Zhang (2024), reading the English version of the CPC's centenary address, show how metaphors rooted in struggle and mobilisation are frequently retuned so that continuity and inclusion come forward more strongly than martial intensity. The choice is interpretive rather than incidental. It seeks to preserve ideological intelligibility without provoking ideological fatigue among global readers.

Example 1 (rhetorical recalibration).

Chinese: 打响改革攻坚战 (Xi, 2022).

English (official translation): *We have carried out critical tasks and enhanced top level design for reform.* (Xi, 2022).

The Chinese line frames reform as a battle, invoking mobilisation and sacrifice. The English keeps urgency, but routes it through task language and a vocabulary of governance. The war image retreats, and with it some of the emotional temperature the source formulation carries.

Another familiar tendency is abstraction. Where a metaphor depends on culturally saturated embodiment, translators may shift from image to function, keeping the direction of the claim while changing the figurative vehicle. In anti-corruption discourse, for instance, phrases that evoke self-cutting, self-scraping, or turning the blade inward are often rendered as calls for self-reform or internal rectification. The imagery recedes, but the evaluative stance is kept. Mussad (2022) describes this kind of risk minded move as judgement about likely interpretive consequences, not only about semantic fit.

Elaboration appears as a third pattern, especially where short metaphor clusters compress several policy ideas into a tight sequence. Translators sometimes unpack that compression in English, not to abandon metaphor, but to stabilise the intended progression. Reform sequences built from deep waters, hard bones, and dangerous shallows, for example, are often translated with added verbs and abstract nouns so that the chain reads as escalating difficulty rather than as a collage of images. In Zhou and Tang's (2022) account, this sort of controlled expansion preserves direction while making the logic legible for readers who do not share the source genre's compression habits.

Example 2 (elaboration and imagery retention).

Chinese: 冲破思想观念束缚，突破利益固化藩篱 (Xi, 2022).

English (official translation): *We have broken the shackles of stale thinking and torn down barriers erected by vested interests.* (Xi, 2022).

The Chinese original uses two compact metaphors, one of constraint and one of enclosure. The English keeps both images, but supplies concrete nouns and verbs that make the sequence read as action, and it adds stale and vested to steer evaluation. Vividness is retained, yet the rhythm of the four character clusters is remade into a narrative sentence.

Metaphor treatment also varies across state authored genres. A single expression may circulate through speeches, policy reports, and white papers, yet its English rendering can shift depending on the genre's implied readership. In a leader's speech, metaphor can be allowed to sound like metaphor, because performative force is part of the event. In a policy report, the same line is more likely to be standardized into an administratively smooth register. This helps explain why stable formulae, such as community with a shared future, can appear remarkably consistent across documents even when their Chinese prompts remain context sensitive. Genre functions as a constraint that quietly selects what kinds of figurative meaning are treated as communicatively permissible, a point also emphasised by Wu (2024).

The same repertoire looks different when these moves are placed side by side. Table 1 maps recurrent strategy patterns against the structural pressures they answer, and shows how each strategy also generates its own secondary problems.

Table 1 Translational strategy patterns and the pressures they address.

Strategy pattern	What changes in the English	Typical pressure addressed	Risk it creates	Theoretical alignment
Rhetorical recalibration	Keeps an underlying frame while moderating tone and evaluative colour	Avoids overcharged or militant overtones while maintaining coherence	May flatten affect and reduce historical texture	Discourse sensitive modulation
Abstraction through paraphrase	Replaces culture bound imagery with governance lexicon or process language	Prevents exoticism or misreading of embodied imagery	May thin the metaphor and weaken memorability	Functionalist reasoning
Elaborative framing	Expands compressed clusters into a readable progression of difficulty or purpose	Improves accessibility when a metaphor bundles multiple claims	May over-determine meaning and narrow ambiguity	Cognitive scaffolding
Genre	Stabilises formulae	Maintains	Can detach a	Contextual

sensitive modulation	across official genres despite local variation	institutional consistency and recognisable policy wording	line from its situated rhetorical event	pragmatic hybridity
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Even with clear patterns, the work itself rarely unfolds as a clean application of theory. Translators often describe it as a sequence of micro judgements responding to constraints that are sometimes explicit, such as house style or politically preferred wording, and sometimes tacit, such as anticipations about how particular images are likely to be heard in Anglophone public debate. The practical effect is that strategy is often assembled from precedent and institutional memory rather than derived from a single theoretical commitment.

Chen (2024), also examining metaphor in Xi Jinping: The Governance of China (Volume IV), shows how security related metaphors can be retained at the level of frame while being domesticated in tone. In English, the line can still signal vigilance and firmness, yet the image is often routed through a vocabulary of governance, stability, and rule based order. These alterations do not mark inconsistency. They reveal a resource whose guiding question is not whether a metaphor is accurate in the abstract, but whether it will spread without triggering associations that distort the intended stance.

Translational decision making in political discourse is therefore anticipatory. It responds to semantic clarity, but also to circulation, drift, and the fact that a line will be read inside an ideological weather that the source text did not have to negotiate. Functionalist, cognitive, and discourse based frameworks offer useful scaffolds, but the practical work lies in calibrating a phrase so that it remains politically legible and rhetorically functional once dislocated from its original setting. Strategy and challenge are inseparable here: each choice answers a pressure, and each pressure becomes visible because a choice has to be made.

5. Key Translational Challenges in Xi-Era Political Discourse

Key translational challenges in Xi era political metaphor are rarely about finding an elegant English phrase. The more persistent difficulty lies in what the metaphor is doing inside the source discourse, and what it is likely to do once it is detached from that discourse and read elsewhere. Five pressures surface again and again in both the scholarly discussion and the institutional record: semantic density, cultural embeddedness, strategic ambiguity, institutional constraint, and reception drift. None is a defect in itself. Each names a point where the translator has to choose between competing goods, and where a choice that looks “reasonable” on the page can still reorganise the metaphor’s political work.

5.1 Semantic density

Many headline formulations compress policy, evaluation, and stance into a short rhythm. When such compression is carried by a metaphor, the target text has to decide what to keep compact and what to unfold. A triadic structure, for instance, can stage escalating difficulty while also signalling a cultivated political temperament: courage, resolve, and controlled risk.

Example 3.

Chinese: 敢于突进深水区, 敢于啃硬骨头, 敢于涉险滩。 (Xi, 2022)

English (official translation): *We have had the courage to brave uncharted waters, take on tough problems, and navigate potential dangers.* (Xi, 2022)

The English keeps the movement and the escalation, but the rhetorical economy shifts. In Chinese, the repeated “敢于” pattern works like a drumbeat, turning a list into a posture. In English, the line reads more like narrative reporting, and the emotional compression loosens. That loosening is not automatically a loss, yet it does change how easily the metaphor can function as a rallying cue rather than a retrospective summary.

5.2 Cultural embeddedness

Some metaphors draw on cultural lexicon that is neither purely literary nor purely every day. Terms can carry long genealogies, moral expectations, and genre memory, even when they look plain. “小康” (moderate prosperity) (Xi, 2022), for example, sits at the intersection of classical aspiration and modern policy vocabulary, and it resists being treated as a simple equivalent.

Example 4.

Chinese: 实现了小康这个中华民族的千年梦想。(Xi, 2022)

English: *We have achieved moderate prosperity, the millennia-old dream of the Chinese nation.* (Xi, 2022)

“Moderate prosperity” is a defensible rendering, and it is also a revealing one. It conveys an outcome, but it cannot bring across the cultural normality the source term can carry for domestic readers, where the phrase can feel less like a slogan and more like an achieved moral threshold. To compensate, translations often add explanatory weight, as the English does here with “the millennia old dream”. The added explanation helps the line circulate, yet it also nudges the metaphor towards didactic framing, which may sit uneasily with the authoritative plainness expected of official English.

5.3 Strategic ambiguity

Political metaphors are rarely built to pin meaning down as tightly as possible. Quite often, their usefulness lies in certain looseness, a capacity to hold several audiences together without forcing them into one authorised interpretation. In Xi era discourse, ambition is often voiced through images that open interpretive space rather than close it, inviting readers to

recognise a direction of travel without being handed a single, final reading.

Example 5.

Chinese: 实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦。(Xi, 2022)

English: *Realize the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.*

(Xi, 2022)

The English keeps the central image, but the phrase “Chinese Dream” is never culturally neutral in Anglophone political memory. It can sound familiar while pulling readers toward an American frame of individual aspiration, which the source formulation does not actually endorse. At the same time, an overly explicit translation risks collapsing the productive vagueness that gives the metaphor its mobilising reach. The dilemma is not whether to be clear, but how much clarity a political metaphor can afford before it stops functioning as a shared horizon.

5.4 Institutional constraint

Even when a translator can see multiple plausible renderings, institutional translation rarely rewards variation. House style, precedent, and vetted phrasing act as an invisible architecture, encouraging consistency and discouraging rhetorical experimentation. That architecture is especially evident when a source metaphor carries combative colour that might travel badly in international media environments.

Example 6.

Chinese: 打响改革攻坚战。(Xi, 2022)

English: *We have carried out critical tasks and enhanced top-level design for reform.*

(Xi, 2022)

The English removes the battle frame and replaces it with governance vocabulary. Something is gained: the line reads as administratively credible, and it avoids militarised overtones. Something is also reweighted: the mobilisation mood, which in Chinese can signal urgency and collective discipline, becomes managerial competence. This is a familiar institutional move, and it illustrates how constraint is not only about censorship or control. It is also about what kinds of rhetoric an institution is willing to license as “normal” English.

5.5 Reception drift

Once translated metaphors circulate internationally, they meet readers who approach Chinese political language with uneven prior knowledge and uneven trust. Under those conditions, drift is common. A formulation may be read as aspirational, empty, or strategically evasive, depending less on linguistic accuracy than on the interpretive habits a reader brings to it.

Example 7.

Chinese: 推动构建人类命运共同体。(Xi, 2022)

English: *We have promoted the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.* (Xi, 2022)

“a community with a shared future for mankind”, is precisely a sort of phrase that can look smooth while remaining unstable in uptake. It borrows a universalist register that resembles multilateral diplomacy, and this can help it cross borders. Yet the same register can also invite scepticism from readers who treat official Chinese formulations as strategic messaging by default. Translation can reduce obvious misunderstanding, but it cannot fully govern the political suspicions that attach to a phrase once it becomes part of contested

international discourse.

These challenges help explain why strategy in this domain rarely looks like the application of a single model. Semantic density pushes translators toward expansion, cultural embeddedness invites selective glossing or abstraction, ambiguity demands restraint, institutional constraint pressures standardisation, and reception drift keeps the whole enterprise provisional. Metaphor translation here is therefore best understood as calibration under pressure, where every “solution” is also a redistribution of what the metaphor can plausibly do in public.

6. Future Directions

The concerns traced in this review are not only obstacles for translators. They press on a larger question about what translation is doing when political metaphor is involved. Once a metaphor is carried into another language, it is no longer protected by the domestic routines that made it sound self-evident. It has to live in other media environments and other ideological climates, where the same image may be taken as aspiration, euphemism, provocation, or simply as odd phrasing. So the point of the discussion that follows is not to offer a final model, but to sketch the kinds of work that now seem hard to avoid if metaphor translation research is to stay credible.

One repeatedly runs into theoretical insufficiency, though it is not a failure of any single tradition. Political metaphors operate at once as cognitive scaffolds, as ideological signals, and as practical instruments of persuasion. It is therefore more revealing to follow the overlaps and frictions between theories than to pledge allegiance to one. Some recent studies move in that direction by treating strategy as a situated choice rather than a technical

operation (Jafarnezhad et al., 2023; Liu & Li, 2023). What becomes interesting, then, is not only how a metaphor is rendered, but what the choice suggests about a translator's reading of institutional risk, genre expectation, and imagined uptake.

A second implication concerns where the evidence sits. Much translation research still tends to stop at the text, or at the translator, even though political metaphors do not finish their work there. Once a formulation circulates, it meets new ideological priors and new interpretive shortcuts. It may sharpen, soften, or drift. That drift is not a marginal detail, because it is precisely where strategy becomes consequence. Digital corpora, reader-response methods, and platform analysis make it increasingly possible to observe reception rather than presuppose it. The more demanding claim is that reception ought to be treated as part of the translational event itself, not as a separate afterword.

This also has pedagogical and professional consequences. Neutrality in political translation is never complete, and the limits are not only linguistic. Editorial precedent, institutional protocols, and diplomatic timing delimit what can be said. Yet judgement still enters through tone, emphasis, and sometimes the decision to leave an image partially unsettled rather than over-clarified. Translator education, in other words, needs more than linguistic competence. It needs genre literacy, a feel for discourse strategy, and some capacity to anticipate how a metaphor may be heard once it leaves the source setting.

A further adjustment concerns perspective. Reception is still too often treated through an Anglophone lens, as if the relevant audience were singular. Contemporary Chinese political metaphors circulate far beyond that corridor, and they are read in Southeast Asian, African, Latin American, and Eastern European settings, each with distinct media logics and

interpretive histories. Research that combines multilingual interviews, corpus work, and comparative media analysis would make those differences visible, and it would also show how metaphorical stability or instability becomes a diplomatic resource. A policy formula can be repeated consistently and still land unevenly, and that unevenness matters for how mutual intelligibility is built, or fails to be built.

Finally, method. Close reading and case analysis remain indispensable, particularly for tracing how a metaphor's semantic contour and ideological signal are reconfigured. But they are no longer sufficient on their own, given the scale of multilingual, multimodal circulation. What seems needed is a more cooperative methodological imagination: translation scholars working with cognitive researchers, media analysts, and data specialists to follow metaphors through texts, screens, and publics. If political metaphor has an afterlife, the study of its translation needs methods that can see that afterlife.

7. Conclusions

To translate metaphor in contemporary Chinese political discourse is to negotiate far more than lexical transfer. These metaphors often carry policy sequencing, moral address, and institutional memory, and none of that migrates automatically. Even small shifts can recalibrate affect and quietly alter the implied social contract of the line.

Seen this way, translation reads most plausibly as an event shaped by constraint and by anticipated reception. Strategy patterns such as rhetorical recalibration, abstraction, elaboration, and genre standardisation can be understood as responses to pressure, yet each response also generates its own vulnerabilities, including semantic thinning and interpretive drift. The same metaphor may therefore look stable as a repeating formula while shifting in

political function as it circulates.

What the cases and the literature jointly make visible is a recurring structure of trade-offs: semantic density and cultural embeddedness press against international legibility, strategic ambiguity collides with institutional standardisation, and reception drift becomes the point at which strategy turns into political consequence. A reception-aware approach does not dilute theoretical synthesis. It puts it under stress. Keeping strategies and challenges in view at the same time makes it harder to treat metaphor translation in Xi era discourse as either a purely linguistic problem or a purely ideological one. It is a site where rhetoric, governance, and audience positioning meet, and where meaning is made through negotiation rather than delivered as a stable object.

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