

Educational Metaphors in *Mencius*: Conceptual Mappings and Translation Strategies

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Abstract: *This study examines five educational metaphors in Mencius through Conceptual Metaphor Theory: three teacher metaphors (THE TEACHER IS A CRAFTSMAN, THE TEACHER IS A NURTURER, THE TEACHER IS A FAMILY ELDER) and two teaching metaphors (TEACHING IS NATURAL NOURISHMENT, TEACHING IS DRAWING THE BOW WITHOUT RELEASING). The teacher metaphors construe the teacher as a craftsman bound by technical limits, as a cultivator fostering natural growth, and as a moral exemplar bearing familial responsibility. The teaching metaphors structure instruction as context-sensitive nourishment and as deliberate restraint that elicits learner agency. Comparative analysis of James Legge's and D.C. Lau's translations of these metaphors reveals a systematic tension between preserving culturally specific imagery and securing target-language accessibility. Legge preserves source-domain materiality and places the interpretive burden on the reader. Lau recodes metaphors into abstract, psychologized terms and shoulders that burden to ensure immediate fluency. This divergence is not merely a linguistic choice but an intercultural negotiation between Chinese and Anglo-American epistemic frameworks that shapes how readers conceptualize the nature of education.*

Keywords: *Mencius*, Conceptual metaphor theory, Educational metaphor, Metaphor translation.

1. Introduction

Metaphor constitutes a fundamental mechanism of human cognition and conceptualization. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) posits that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but a deep-seated cognitive operation through which abstract domains are systematically understood in terms of more concrete source domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) [1]. Because metaphors are historically and culturally embedded, they encode culture-specific worldviews and cognitive patterns that rarely map neatly across linguistic boundaries. This cultural specificity (Kövecses, 2005) [2] renders metaphor translation a site of particular complexity, especially when the source and target cultures diverge significantly in their conceptual systems.

Mencius [3] offers a particularly rich corpus for investigating educational metaphors. Its educational philosophy is articulated through a dense network of conceptual metaphors drawn from the agrarian and natural world of early China. One typical example is “揠苗助长” (pulling up seedlings to help them grow), in which the student is metaphorically framed as a cultivated plant, the teacher as a husbandman, and pedagogical intervention as the regulation of growing conditions. While such mappings originate from a particular ecological and philosophical context, they instantiate universal cognitive processes amenable to cross-cultural comparison. Fundamentally, these metaphorical correspondences operate via conceptual projection: the systematic projection of concrete source domains onto abstract target domains exemplifies such processes.

Existing English translations of *Mencius* have predominantly prioritized philosophical and terminological equivalence, yet the systematic rendering of its underlying conceptual metaphors remains underexplored. Translating these metaphors into English is essential not only for introducing the Mencian educational thought to Anglophone readers but also for testing the cross-cultural robustness of CMT itself. The present study examines the translation strategies

employed in rendering the educational metaphors of *Mencius*, with a view to identifying how source-domain mappings are negotiated, adapted, or compensated for in English.

2. Mapping Mechanisms for Educational Metaphors in *Mencius*

CMT posits that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but a fundamental cognitive mechanism underlying human thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) [1]. Abstract concepts (target domains) are structured through mappings from concrete, embodied experiences (source domains), which allow humans to grasp complex ideas through sensorimotor experience. Nevertheless, such embodied mappings are not culturally neutral, and their linguistic manifestations mirror context-bound worldviews (Kövecses, 2005) [2]. As metaphors simultaneously embody universal cognitive mechanisms and culture-specific meanings, they constitute a productive analytical framework to explore how abstract thought, including pedagogical reasoning, achieves conceptual embodiment in language.

2.1 Mappings of Teacher Metaphor

Case 1: 梓匠轮輿能与人规矩，不能使人巧。(《孟子·尽心下》)

This dictum systematically activates the conceptual metaphor THE TEACHER IS A CRAFTSMAN. Within this mapping, the master craftsman (梓匠) corresponds to the teacher, the apprentice corresponds to the student, and the workshop corresponds to the pedagogical setting. The compass and square (规矩) represent explicit and transmissible knowledge, including rules, methods, and technical norms that the teacher can directly provide. By contrast, refined artistry (巧) represents higher-order competencies such as creative insight and practical mastery, both of which resist direct transmission.

This cross-domain mapping yields precise logical implications for the teacher's role. Just as the craftsman can demonstrate standard procedures yet cannot transfer hands-on expertise to the apprentice, the teacher can provide external guidance yet cannot ensure the student's internal mastery. The metaphor therefore captures the fundamental limits of teaching, specifically that the teacher's guidance is necessary yet insufficient for students' full development. Furthermore, it implies a non-coercive pedagogical model. Just as the craftsman works with the natural qualities of the material rather than imposing arbitrary form, the teacher must provide technical norms while respecting the student's natural developmental pace. This mapping ultimately construes teaching as a facilitative practice rather than a deterministic process, acknowledging that the teacher's agency reaches the provision of structure but stops at the threshold of the student's internal transformation.

Case 2: 中也养不中,才也养不才,故人乐有贤父兄也。(《孟子·离娄下》)

This saying demonstrates a double-layered conceptual metaphor. The first layer, THE TEACHER IS A NURTURER, is grounded in the source domain of biological growth through the Chinese character 养 (to nurture or cultivate living things). In this mapping, the nurturer corresponds to the teacher, the seedling to the student, and the provision of nutrients and suitable conditions to moral and intellectual cultivation. From this mapping follows the pedagogical implication that education must align with students' natural tendencies rather than resort to external coercion. Concurrently, the phrase 贤父兄 (worthy fathers and elder brothers) introduces a second mapping: THE TEACHER IS A FAMILY ELDER. The source domain of family ethics maps onto social pedagogy. The father's moral responsibility and the elder brother's guiding example correspond to the teacher's duty to assist those with weaker innate capacities. This family-based framing suggests that teaching is not a commercial transaction but a relationship of care and moral obligation.

Together, these mappings construct a coherent conceptualization in which the teacher is both a patient cultivator and a family role model, and learning is understood as a gradual and natural process of growth. Whereas the craftsman metaphor emphasizes the technical limits of instruction, the nurturing and family elder metaphors foreground relational care and non-coercive moral development.

2.2 Mappings of Teaching Metaphor

Case 3: 君子之所以教者五: 有如时雨化之者……(《孟子·尽心上》)

This saying applies the conceptual metaphor TEACHING IS NATURAL NOURISHMENT, which is grounded in weather and agricultural experience. In this mapping, 时雨 (timely rain) corresponds to the teacher's intervention, and the natural growth of plants corresponds to the student's moral and intellectual development. This mapping generates three key implications for the teacher's role. First, it implies timeliness.

Just as rain must arrive at the proper season to benefit crops, effective teaching must occur when students are receptive and ready. Second, it implies gentleness. Rain nourishes without forcing growth, which suggests that the teacher provides supportive conditions rather than imposing external form upon the student. Third, it implies gradual transformation. The verb 化 indicates a slow and subtle process of change rather than sudden mechanical alteration. Emerging from early Chinese agrarian culture, this metaphor conceptualizes teaching as organic nurturing: teachers act as facilitators who enable self-unfolding, while learning constitutes an endogenous developmental process. In contrast to the craftsman metaphor which stresses the inherent technical constraints of teaching, the natural nourishment metaphor emphasizes that competent teaching demands contextual discernment, and presents moral cultivation as a patient, responsive process.

Case 4: 大匠不为拙工改废绳墨,羿不为拙射变其彀率。君子引而不发,跃如也。(《孟子·尽心上》)

This case instantiates a conceptual metaphor: TEACHING IS ARCHERY. In this mapping, the master archer corresponds to the teacher, and the bow fully drawn but deliberately unshot corresponds to the pedagogical act of preparing knowledge to the brink of revelation while withholding the final answer. This cross-domain mapping produces three key implications for teaching. The first implication concerns the maintenance of instructional standards. Just as the master craftsman refuses to lower the ink-line for clumsy workers and the archer Yi refuses to relax his draw for poor shooters, the teacher preserves rigorous standards rather than accommodating the students' inadequacy. The second implication involves the deployment of demonstrative restraint in instruction. The phrase 引而不发 (drawing the bow without releasing) captures the essence of heuristic teaching, in which the teacher exhibits the complete trajectory of thought yet deliberately suspends conclusion, thereby creating productive tension in the learning process. The third implication centers on the cultivation of activated readiness in students. Students' state 跃如也 (poised to leap) corresponds to their eager, anticipatory cognition, which the teacher primes for independent insight through deliberate instructional design. Unlike the nurturing metaphors of rain and cultivation that highlight passive receptivity in students, this archery metaphor foregrounds the teacher's active guidance of cognitive tension and the deliberate orchestration of student agency through pedagogical means.

3. Translating Educational metaphors in Mencius

Conceptual metaphors are culturally situated (Tao, 2017) [4]. Although they arise from shared bodily experience (Kövecses, 2005) [2], their linguistic expressions are shaped by local traditions and values. The agrarian, meteorological, artisanal, and familial metaphors analyzed above are deeply rooted in early Chinese material culture and social ethics. These source domains may lack semantic transparency for English-speaking readers (Hu & Tan, 2017) [5], which obscures both individual metaphorical expressions and the broader pedagogical arguments they support. Consequently,

effective translation of these metaphors cannot rely on literal substitution. Translators must first identify the cultural roots of the source-domain mappings and then reconstruct them in forms that resonate with the target audience. The English rendering of Mencian educational metaphors is therefore not a mechanical transfer between linguistic systems, but an intercultural negotiation between Chinese and Anglo-American epistemic frameworks. In this section, we use translation versions of those metaphors by James Legge [6] and D.C. Lau [7] to illustrate it.

3.1 Translation of Teacher Metaphor

3.1.1 Teacher Is Craftsman

ST: 梓匠轮舆能与人规矩，不能使人巧。

TT1: *Mencius* said, "A carpenter or a carriage maker may give a man the circle and square, but cannot make him skillful in the use of them!" (James Legge [6])

TT2: *Mencius* said, "A carpenter or a carriage-maker can pass on to another the rules of his craft, but he cannot make him skillful." (D.C. Lau [7])

From a teacher-metaphor perspective, the ST construes teacher as a master craftsman, the student as an apprentice, and pedagogical competence as the embodied skill that exceeds rule-based transmission. Within this framework, 规矩 functions as the source-domain element that structures the teacher's role as the holder and transmitter of technical norms, whereas 巧 marks the limit of teachability and thus defines the boundary of the teacher's agency.

TT1 renders 规矩 as "the circle and square," preserving the concrete materiality of the source domain and thereby maintaining the teacher as an embodied craftsman who possesses specific physical tools. The verb "give" frames instruction as one-way object transfer rather than interactive apprenticeship. This literal rendering retains the historical cognitive architecture of the metaphor, allowing the reader to reconstruct the teacher's role through its original material and cultural context. However, the reduction of the teaching relationship to simple delivery obscures the recurrent practice and bodily engagement central to craft-based pedagogy.

TT2 recasts the source domain through the abstract phrase "the rules of his craft". The verb "pass on to another" retains a minimal sense of interpersonal transfer, yet the shift from concrete instruments to general procedural norms transforms the teacher from a craftsman into a curriculum deliverer. The rendering of 巧 as "skillful," omitting the qualifier "in the use of them," further weakens the metaphor's emphasis on applied dexterity and tacit bodily knowledge. This abstraction repositions the teacher metaphor within contemporary educational discourse on explicit knowledge transmission, sacrificing the source domain's embodied specificity for cross-cultural conceptual accessibility.

These divergent renderings illustrate a systematic tension in the cross-linguistic reconstruction of teacher metaphors. TT1 preserves the cognitive depth of the TEACHER IS

CRAFTSMAN mapping by requiring the reader to engage with the foreign conceptual system, whereas TT2 adapts the mapping to the target culture's educational assumptions for greater readability. TT1 thus offers richer data for examining how teacher roles are cognitively anchored in material practices, while TT2 provides more immediate access to Mencius's core argument about the limits of instructional transmission. Neither rendering is inherently superior; rather, they represent different allocations of cognitive labor among translator, source text, and audience in the cross-cultural circulation of teacher metaphor.

3.1.2 Teacher Is A Nurturer / Family Elder

ST: 中也养不中，才也养不才，故人乐有贤父兄也。

TT1: *Mencius* said, "Those who keep the Mean, train up those who do not, and those who have abilities, train up those who have not, and hence men rejoice in having fathers and elder brothers who are possessed of virtue and talent." (James Legge)

TT2: *Mencius* said, "Those who are morally well-adjusted look after those who are not; those who are talented look after those who are not. That is why people are glad to have good fathers and elder brothers." (D.C. Lau)

This saying activates two interlocking conceptual metaphors: THE TEACHER IS A NURTURER and THE TEACHER IS A FAMILY ELDER, which are anchored in the key terms 养 and 贤父兄. The two translations handle them in markedly different ways.

TT1 preserves the active and formative force of the nurturer mapping by rendering 养 as "train up." This verb choice retains the goal-directed and transformative character of cultivation, suggesting that the teacher actively constructs students' capacities rather than merely sustaining them. The phrase "train up those who do not" preserves the asymmetrical yet purposeful relationship between the teacher and students. In handling the family elder mapping, TT1 renders 贤父兄 as "fathers and elder brothers who are possessed of virtue and talent." Although this expanded description sacrifices the lexical compactness of the ST, it preserves the full scope of the source-domain mapping by maintaining both moral virtue and practical talent as defining attributes of the exemplary elder.

TT2, by contrast, weakens the nurturer mapping by replacing "train up" with "look after." This phrase evokes daily maintenance and passive oversight rather than active cultivation. In classical discourse, 养 denotes the cultivation of latent potential through sustained and intentional guidance, not the mere preservation of existing conditions. By flattening this action into routine care, TT2 obscures the entailment that teaching is a constructive process of capacity building. Similarly, TT2 narrows the family elder mapping by rendering 贤父兄 as "good fathers and elder brothers." This reduction removes the talent component implied by 才 and recasts the exemplary elder exclusively in moral terms. The rendering of 中 as "morally well-adjusted" further shifts the mapping from a concept of cosmic and ethical alignment to a

subjective psychological state, thereby distancing the metaphor from its original philosophical grounding.

To wrap up, TT1 adopts a source-domain preservation strategy that preserves the full structure of both the nurturer and family-elder metaphors. It sustains the transformative force of cultivation and the dual emphasis on virtue and talent. This strategy requires the reader to engage with foreign imagery and infer its pedagogical meaning. TT2 applies a target-domain recoding strategy that recodes both metaphors into familiar contemporary terms. It replaces formative cultivation with benevolent guardianship and narrows the elder's attributes to general moral support. This strategy does the interpretive work for the reader and ensures immediate accessibility. The former secures cultural specificity and metaphorical depth at the cost of readerly effort. The latter secures discursive fluency at the cost of source-domain richness. The choice between them is ultimately a decision about who bears the burden of cross-domain interpretation.

3.2 Translation of Teaching Metaphor

3.2.1 Teaching Is Timely Rain Transforming

ST: 君子之所以教者五: 有及时雨化之者……

TT1: Mencius said, "There are five ways in which the superior man effects his teaching. There are some on whom his influence descends like seasonable rain." (James Legge)

TT2: Mencius said, "A gentleman teaches in five ways. The first is by a transforming influence like that of timely rain." (D.C. Lau)

In conceptual metaphor TEACHING IS TIMELY RAIN TRANSFORMATION, the source domain encodes three essential properties: temporal appropriateness, gentle noncoercive action, and gradual transformative effect.

TT1 renders the ST as "his influence descends like seasonable rain," preserving the spatial and meteorological structure of the source domain. The verb "descends" captures the natural hierarchy between teacher and student, suggesting that moral influence flows downward much as rain falls from the sky. This rendering maintains the agricultural sense of 时雨 as tied to natural seasonal cycles, which is central to the metaphor's cultural rootedness. However, it weakens the transformative component of the mapping. By emphasizing spatial movement rather than causal effect, the verb "descends" obscures the active transformative power that 化 encodes. TT1 thus privileges the meteorological imagery and hierarchical structure of the source domain while reducing the visibility of the pedagogical outcome.

TT2 employs an alternative strategy by rendering 时雨化之 as "by a transforming influence like that of timely rain." This version places the transformative effect at the center of the mapping, restoring the causal power that 化 denotes. By introducing the explicit category "transforming influence," TT2 makes the pedagogical outcome immediately accessible to readers familiar with contemporary discourse on transformative learning. Nevertheless, this strategy alters the source-domain architecture. The rain image functions as an

illustrative comparison rather than the primary structuring frame, and the meteorological source domain is subordinated to an abstract educational concept. The shift from "seasonable rain" to "timely rain" further reduces the agricultural specificity of the ST.

Such divergent approaches reveal a fundamental tension in translating educational metaphors across epistemic frameworks. TT1 preserves the meteorological source domain in its cultural embeddedness and requires readers to engage with a foreign conceptual system to infer its pedagogical significance. This places the cognitive burden on the audience. TT2 prioritizes accessibility within the pedagogical target domain and ensures that the transformative outcome is immediately readable within contemporary educational frameworks. This places the interpretive burden on the translator. The former secures cultural specificity and source-domain richness at the cost of immediate clarity. The latter secures instructional coherence and target-domain transparency at the cost of conceptual depth. Neither approach is inherently superior. They represent alternative allocations of cognitive labor between translator and reader in reconstructing cross-domain mappings.

3.2.2 Teaching Is Drawing But Not Releasing

ST: 大匠不为拙工改度绳墨, 羿不为拙射变其彀率。君子引而不发, 跃如也。

TT1: A great artificer does not, for the sake of a stupid workman, alter or do away with the marking-line. I did not, for the sake of a stupid archer, change his rule for drawing the bow. The superior man draws the bow, but does not discharge the arrow, having seemed to leap with it to the mark. (James Legge)

TT2: "A great craftsman," said *Mencius*, "does not put aside the plumb-line for the benefit of the clumsy carpenter. Yi did not compromise on his standards of drawing the bow for the sake of the clumsy archer. A gentleman is full of eagerness when he has drawn his bow, but before he lets fly the arrow, he stands in the middle of the path, and those who are able to do so follow him?" (D.C. Lau)

The ST encodes the conceptual metaphor TEACHING IS DRAWING THE BOW WITHOUT RELEASING through 引而不发. TT1 adopts a source-domain preservation strategy that sustains the archery mapping's materiality and spatial logic. The participial phrase "having seemed to leap" suspends action between intention and execution, while "with" constructs a shared trajectory rendering the teaching act physically traceable. The closing phrase reinforces this spatial logic through concrete placement. Methodologically, this treats the source domain as epistemically constitutive. The withheld release is preserved as a demonstrative technique rather than abstracted into a general principle. By maintaining the bodily architecture of the source domain, TT1 allocates the cognitive labor of cross-domain mapping to the reader, securing cultural specificity and material richness.

TT2 adopts a target-domain recoding strategy that replaces bodily posture with emotional state. By rendering 跃如也 as "is full of eagerness," TT2 substitutes a visible trajectory with an internal affective disposition. The archery source domain is

systematically dismantled: the bodily link between teacher and arrow is severed, and spatial precision is loosened by omitting "exactly." The withheld release becomes an emotional cue rather than a demonstrative technique. From a methodological perspective, this position treats source imagery as a replaceable medium for pedagogical principles, which may be reformulated in modern psychological language. The translator undertakes the cognitive labor involved in cross-domain mapping, reconstructing the metaphor within the target readers' familiar conceptual framework of motivation and affect. This strategy prioritizes coherence within the target domain, sacrificing the tangible concreteness and cultural embeddedness inherent to the source domain.

These two translations represent two distinct approaches to translating teaching metaphor. TT1 preserves the archery source domain intact, presenting the teacher as a demonstrative agent whose bodily movement traces a visible path for learner imitation. This strategy requires the reader to engage with foreign imagery and infer its pedagogical significance. TT2 recodes the metaphor into psychological terms, presenting the teacher as an affective facilitator whose internal state prompts learner response. This strategy requires the translator to restate the original imagery in contemporary educational language. The former preserves cultural specificity and tangible concreteness at the cost of immediate accessibility. The latter secures reading fluency at the cost of tangible concreteness. Ultimately, the choice between them is a decision about where to place the interpretive burden.

4. Conclusion

This study examines how educational metaphors in *Mencius* are translated into English. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, it traces five source-domain mappings across four representative cases. The conceptual metaphor THE TEACHER IS A CRAFTSMAN, as evidenced in the first case maps the craftsman onto the teacher. This mapping encodes the inherent limits of teaching, specifically that the teacher can provide external tools and norms but cannot ensure students' embodied mastery. The conceptual metaphors THE TEACHER IS A NURTURER and THE TEACHER IS A FAMILY ELDER, activated by the terms 养 and 贤父兄 in the second case about cultivating the less able, draw on biological growth and family ethics. These mappings frame education as patient cultivation that follows students' natural disposition rather than relying on external coercion. The TEACHING IS NATURAL NOURISHMENT metaphor, as demonstrated by the third case about timely rain, draws on meteorological imagery to highlight the teacher's contextual sensitivity and the gradual noncoercive nature of moral formation. Finally, the TEACHING IS DRAWING THE BOW WITHOUT RELEASING metaphor from the fourth case about the archer, construes exemplary instruction as deliberate restraint. The teacher draws the bow to the point of release, thereby creating productive tension that elicits students' learning agency.

Translating these metaphors necessitates a strategic balance between retaining the tangible imagery of the source domain and ensuring target-domain accessibility. Comparative analysis on the translation cases of these metaphors by Legge

and Lau reveals fundamentally different strategies. Source-domain preservation, exemplified by Legge, keeps the concrete imagery intact. This approach anchors the metaphor in its cultural and historical roots and requires the reader to actively engage with the source context to reconstruct its pedagogical significance. Target-domain recoding, exemplified by Lau, replaces culturally specific material referents with abstract formulations. This makes the core pedagogical principle immediately accessible within contemporary educational discourse. Neither strategy carries an inherent advantage over the other. At its core, translating educational metaphors cannot be reduced to mechanical linguistic conversion. Rather, it constitutes an intercultural negotiation between Chinese and Anglo-American epistemic traditions. Within this process, translators must negotiate trade-offs between tangible concreteness, cultural specificity and instructional transparency. The settlement reached in such negotiation consequently shapes how target-culture readers conceptualize the educational essence in *Mencius*.

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