

A Comparative Study of Metaphorical Reconstruction in the English Translation of “Tianxia” in *the Mozi*

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Abstract: As a core political-philosophical concept in *the Mozi* that integrates geographical, political, and ethical dimensions, “tianxia” has no equivalent expression in English, and its translation is essentially a cross-cultural reconstruction of metaphor. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this paper compares the ways in which tianxia is handled in the translations by Mei Yi-Pao and Ian Johnston: Mei’s version emphasizes political metaphor and frequently employs omission to achieve pragmatic adaptation, while Johnston’s version uses geographical metaphor throughout, pursuing universality and textual coherence. The translator’s cultural stance, translation purpose, and audience jointly constrain metaphor choice. This study provides an empirical reference for the foreign translation of political-philosophical terms in Chinese classics, advancing cultural communication and the standardization of translation terminology.

Keywords: *the Mozi*; Metaphorical reconstruction; Terminology of Chinese classics; Translation strategies

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1. Introduction

The Mozi, a pre-Qin classic, was introduced to the West in 1858, and sixteen English translations have appeared to date. Its thought of “promoting the benefit of tianxia and eliminating the harm of tianxia” is an important cornerstone of early Chinese political philosophy. The core concept tianxia combines geographical, political, and Mandate-of-Heaven ethical meanings, and no equivalent concept exists in Western discourse. This paper selects the two translations by Mei Yi-Pao and Ian Johnston and statistically analyzes the English translation strategies for tianxia, the differences in metaphor, and their constraining factors. In 1929, Mei Yi-Pao produced *The Ethical and Political Works of Motse*, the first standalone English translation of *the Mozi* and an early translation endeavour by a Chinese translator^[1]; in 2010, Ian Johnston’s complete translation was published—the first English translation completed independently by a Western scholar—and it has been

widely acclaimed in academic circles ^[2]. This study seeks to provide norms and practical reference for the translation of political-philosophical terms in Chinese classics, support the international communication of Chinese culture, and expand the overseas influence of the classics.

2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual Metaphor Theory was systematically put forward by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*. The theory's breakthrough lies in pointing out that metaphor is not mere linguistic rhetoric but a basic cognitive model by which human beings understand abstract concepts. Conceptual metaphor is a cognitive mechanism for generating and interpreting conceptual meaning, possessing the dual attributes of both instrument and outcome, and shaping human thought and conceptual expression ^[3]. Human beings rely on "the mapping of knowledge from one cognitive domain to another" to achieve cognition of the world ^[4], and metaphor participates in constructing social and political reality and in extending the boundaries of human cognition ^[5]. Newmark also proposed that the key to text translation lies in the choice of translation methods, and that metaphor translation is the most complex link therein ^[6]. The English translation of tianxia is essentially the cross-linguistic reconstruction of conceptual metaphor, and this abstract political concept must rely on the source-domain projection of metaphor to achieve cognitive concretization. "Tianxia" in *the Mozi* contains three interwoven meanings: the first is the geographical-spatial dimension, corresponding to the actual territory delimited by "within the four seas" from the perspective of an agrarian civilization; the second is the political-order dimension, namely the pyramidal hierarchical governing entity under the thought of "exalting unity"; the third is the Mandate-of-Heaven ethical dimension, representing the sacred legitimacy of ruling power. Together, the three dimensions constitute the complete political-philosophical meaning of tianxia.

3. A comparative statistical analysis of the translations of *the Mozi*

Systematic comparison of multiple translations of the same original work can effectively reveal the diachronic evolution and cultural-adaptation mechanisms of the translation of political-philosophical terms. The English translation of tianxia in *the Mozi* must not only restore its three-dimensional composite meaning integrating geographical territory, political entity, and ethical order, but also prompt target-language readers to understand traditional Chinese social institutions. The two translators' treatment of tianxia falls mainly into four categories: (1) the world / the whole world / the human world; (2) the empire / the state; (3) all under Heaven; (4) direct omission, with different renderings corresponding to different metaphorical domains. This study selects the four chapters that centrally embody the core thought of *the Mozi*—*Exalting the Worthy*, *Exalting Unity*, *Universal Love*, and *Condemning Offensive War*—as its corpus, collecting a total of 220 term instances (see **Table 1**), comparing the English translation of tianxia and the differences in its metaphorical domains, analyzing the cultural stances of Chinese and Western translators, and providing ideas for constructing norms for the translation of political-philosophical terms in contemporary Chinese classics.

Table 1. Statistics of the English Translations of “Tianxia” and Their Metaphorical Domains in the Two Translations of *the Mozi*

Translation	Metaphorical Domain	Mei Yi-Pao's Translation		Ian Johnston's Translation	
		Count	Percentage / %	Count	Percentage / %
the world / the whole world / the human world	Geographical	81	36.82	211	95.91
the empire / the state	Political	70	31.82	0	0.00
all under Heaven	Religious	1	0.45	6	2.73
Omission	/	67	30.45	1	0.45
Other	/	1	0.45	2	0.91

Through systematically counting the distribution of metaphorical domains among the renderings of tianxia in Mei's and Johnston's translations, a fundamental difference in their conceptual-cognitive reconstruction is found.

Mei's translation presents a three-way balanced structure of geographicalization, politicization, and omission. While retaining the geographical-spatial meaning, the translation foregrounds the political dimension when it involves expressions such as “Son of Heaven,” “governing,” and “exercising government,” and makes extensive use of omission to achieve pragmatic adaptation. In translating classics, the translator is permitted to moderately add to or delete from the text to ensure coherent, fluent writing^[7]. The omissions in Mei's translation fall mainly into two categories: the first is the internalization of the concept in attributive position, where tianxia is omitted when it functions as a modifying element—for example, “天下百姓” is rendered as “all the people,” preserving the core meaning of the myriad people; the second is the simplification of reference in discourse, where the repeated tianxia is deleted once the contextual meaning is clear—for instance, in translating “接天下之政, 治天下之民”, the second tianxia is omitted to avoid verbosity. Mei's translation also contains a creative transposition: in handling “古者禹治天下”, it borrows the Western biblical Great Flood narrative, transforming the sage-king's governance of tianxia into the pacification of a flood, which both preserves the indigenous story core of Yu the Great taming the floodwaters and conveys the deeper meaning of pacifying a disordered age.

By contrast, Johnston's translation is absolutely dominated by geographical metaphor and entirely abandons political metaphor. The translator uniformly uses “the world” to translate tianxia, simplifying this composite concept into a mere geographical container and dissolving the hierarchical governing system of Son of Heaven, feudal lords, and villages and districts within the Mohist thought of exalting unity. Among the three special treatments in non-metaphorical domains, two use the pronoun “it” to refer anaphorically to the tianxia in the preceding text, as in translating “以为天下博大, 是故靡分天下,” and one is an omission at the grammatical level, all serving textual coherence. Wang Rongpei and Wang Hong once evaluated Johnston's translation as faithful to the original, fluent in style, and outstanding in its translation standard^[8].

Both translations show a marked tendency to suppress the religious domain, and this commonality reflects the two translators' shared avoidance of any linkage with Christian theocracy.

4. Factors constraining the English translation of “Tianxia” and the selection of metaphorical domains

In the process of translation, the move from source text to target text always undergoes certain changes^[9]. Translation activity specifically encompasses the historical and cultural context already existing before

the act of translation, as well as the key elements generated within a particular contextual framework—translation purpose, text, readers, and translator^[10]. In light of the distinctive properties of *the Mozi* text, this study divides the constraining factors in the English translation of the political-philosophical term *tianxia* into two major dimensions: the intratextual factors internal to the text and the extratextual factors manifested outside the text. The following sections systematically explain and analyze each type of factor through specific cases.

4.1. Textual factors

4.1.1. Features of the source text

James Legge called Mozi a highly innovative thinker^[11]. Mozi stressed that all conduct must take “promoting the benefit of *tianxia* and eliminating the harm of *tianxia*” as its goal, and the multidimensionality of his concept of *tianxia* constitutes the core textual constraint on translation. As a composite category integrating geographical territory, political order, and Mandate-of-Heaven ethics, *tianxia* displays a dynamic shift of semantic focus across contexts: when expressing spatial scope such as “within the four seas,” the geographical dimension is emphasized; when it involves governing actions such as “governing *tianxia*” and “exercising government over *tianxia*,” the political-order dimension is emphasized; and when linked to discussions such as “becoming king over *tianxia*,” the religious-ethical dimension is implied.

Example 1: 今王公大人欲王天下，正诸侯，夫无德义将何以哉？

Mei's translation: Now, the rulers want to be lord over the empire and be head of the feudal lords. But how can it be done without virtue and righteousness?^[12]

Johnston's translation: At present, kings, dukes and great officers wish to rule all under Heaven and govern the feudal lords but, without virtue and righteousness, how will they do this?^[13]

The word “王”(“to be king”) in “王天下” carries a dual meaning: the first is the political-order dimension, pointing to leadership of the feudal lords and governance of social order, and emphasizing the hierarchical control of the “kings, dukes, and great officers” over *tianxia* as a political entity; the second is the religious-ethical dimension—in the pre-Qin context, *wang* implies the sacredness of “that to which the Mandate of Heaven is granted,” and “王天下” connotes the legitimacy of rule recognized by Heaven. This multidimensionality directly influenced the translators’ choice of metaphorical domain. Mei uses “empire” (the political metaphorical domain) to reinforce the attribute of *tianxia* as a political-ruling entity, restoring the political dimension of “leading the feudal lords and governing order,” reflecting an emphasis on the hierarchical power relations in “王天下”. Johnston, however, uses “all under Heaven” (the religious metaphorical domain) to preserve the association between *tianxia* and *tian* (“Heaven”), highlighting the religious-ethical dimension behind “王天下”, namely that “the Mandate of Heaven confers the qualification to rule.”

4.1.2. Differences between linguistic systems

Chinese and English conflict in grammatical structure and linguistic expression. Chinese frequently omits the subject but repeats core nouns or modifying elements to strengthen semantic association and structural symmetry, whereas English tends to avoid repetition through grammatical integration or simplified reference.

Example 2: 尧得之服泽之阳，立为天子，使接天下之政，而治天下之民。

Mei's translation: Yao discovered him at Fuze, made him emperor, and handed him the government of the empire and the rule over the people^[12].

Johnston's translation: Yao found him on the northern side of Fu Marsh and established him as the Son of Heaven, transferring to him the government of the world and the administration of the world's people ^[13].

“天下之政”和“天下之民”form structural symmetry through the repetition of tianxia, which both strengthens the semantic association that “government” and “people” together belong to tianxia and enhances discourse rhythm through parallel structure. Such repetition is a typical way of foregrounding conceptual coherence in Chinese expression, but in the English grammatical system, repetition is regarded as verbosity, and the translator must achieve conciseness through structural optimization. While retaining “the empire” as the counterpart to the core meaning of tianxia, Mei omits the second “the empire”; through the parallel structure of “government of the empire” and “rule over the people,” he both maintains the logical relations of the original and conforms to the English grammatical habit of avoiding repetition and pursuing compactness. Johnston uses “the world” for tianxia, replacing the repeated “the world of” with the possessive “world's,” reducing literal repetition through a change in grammatical form and reflecting, to a certain degree, English's tendency to avoid repeating core nouns.

4.2. Extratextual factors

4.2.1. Cultural context

A translated work cannot be separated from the shaping of a particular socio-cultural context, which is in turn profoundly and inherently linked to ideology and dominant value orientations ^[14]. In the Eastern collectivist cultural tradition, tianxia is not a mere geographical space but an organic political community centered on “Mandate of Heaven–Son of Heaven–myriad people,” emphasizing hierarchical cooperation, overall unity, and the binding of ethical responsibility. Tianxia is regarded as a dynamic socio-political system, and governing actions (such as “治天下” and “立三公”) are understood as necessary links in maintaining collective order. In the Western individualist cultural context, spatial cognition leans toward “container” thinking, which treats the world as an objectively existing physical category and emphasizes the individual's domination or transformation of space; governing actions are often simplified into the individual's one-way shaping of spatial order, foregrounding the binary “individual–space” relationship.

Example 3: 天子以其知力为未足独治天下，是以选择其次，立为三公。

Mei's translation: Conscious of the insufficiency of his power alone to govern the empire, the emperor chose the next best (in virtue and wisdom) and honoured them to be the three ministers ^[12].

Johnston's translation: Because the Son of Heaven knew that his strength alone was not sufficient to bring order to the world, he selected his deputies and established them as the ‘Three Dukes’ ^[13].

“治天下”和“立三公”are tightly linked in logic: because the Son of Heaven's individual ability is limited, he must establish the Three Dukes to achieve collective governance of tianxia, and this expression embeds the political cognition of Eastern collectivism that “hierarchical cooperation sustains the order of the community”—tianxia as a vast political community whose governance relies on the hierarchical system of “Son of Heaven–Three Dukes” rather than individual arbitrariness. Mei uses “empire” (the political metaphorical domain) to echo this logic. Although “empire” carries a connotation of centralization in the Western context, Mei here invests it with the meaning of a “hierarchically governed community,” forming a relationship between governing subject and object with “立为三公,” highlighting the Eastern idea of “cooperation maintaining order” and matching the communal essence of tianxia. Johnston uses “the world” (the geographical metaphorical domain) to convey the spatial cognition of Western individualism. Tianxia

is reconstructed as an objective geographical container, and “bring order” simplifies the governing action into the one-way shaping of spatial order by the individual (the Son of Heaven), weakening the core logic of cooperation and making the role of the “Three Dukes” closer to “assistants of the individual (the Son of Heaven)” than to “hierarchical members of the community’s governing system.”

4.2.2. Translation purpose

The translator’s translation purpose directly determines the strategic orientation of the English translation of tianxia. As the first standalone English translation of *the Mozi*, Mei Yi-Pao’s *The Ethical and Political Works of Motse* had as its core purpose to systematically introduce Mozi’s political and ethical thought to the West, reaffirm the important standing of Mohist learning, and bring into prominence the culture of the “Other”^[15]. Johnston’s translation is positioned as an academically oriented complete translation, with the goal of providing Western academia with a complete and readable textual reference. The expert review committee of the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press lavished praise on Johnston’s translation, holding that it “defines the standard of contemporary Chinese classical translation”^[16]. This difference in purpose leads the two translations to present a sharp divide of “pluralistic balance” versus “singular focus” in their choice of metaphorical domains.

Example 4: 天下既已治，天子又总天下之义，以尚同于天。

Mei’s translation: Now that the empire becomes orderly, the emperor will further organize the purposes in the empire and identify them with the Will of Heaven^[12].

Johnston’s translation: If the world is already well ordered, it means that the Son of Heaven has also unified the principles of the world through exalting unity with Heaven^[13].

“天下已治” foregrounds the political attribute of tianxia as the object of governance, while “天子总天下之义以尚同于天” links the ethical meaning of the “天志”; the two together constitute the core of the Mohist thought of exalting unity. Mei uses “empire” in both places, foregrounding through political metaphor the attribute of tianxia as a hierarchically governed community and binding the unification of righteousness to the governing order of the empire. This treatment directly faces the political coloring of “empire” and, relying on the reference to power, makes it easier for Western readers to apprehend the close integration of politics and ethics in the Mohist concept of tianxia. Johnston uniformly chooses “the world” for translation, avoiding the complex political associations attached to “empire” and dissolving the hierarchical characteristics of the political entity contained in tianxia. However, this treatment maintains the conceptual stability and textual coherence of the translation, fitting the demand of an academically popularized translation to lower the reading threshold and keep the rendering unified, and it can provide Western academia with an accessible textual reference.

4.2.3. Translator identity and reader expectations

Translation is a cultural phenomenon whose main purpose is to satisfy some need of the target culture^[17]. The translator’s cultural identity and presuppositions about reader expectations also constrain metaphor choice. As a Chinese scholar, Mei Yi-Pao possessed a culturally endogenous understanding of the political-philosophical connotations of tianxia, and the readers presupposed by his translation were Western audiences wishing to gain an in-depth understanding of traditional Chinese political institutions. As a Western scholar, Ian Johnston’s translation stance was influenced by the universalism of Western philosophy, and his

presupposed readers were more inclined to accept geographical concepts of universal validity.

Example 5: 古者禹治天下，西为西河渔宝，以泄渠孙皇之水。

Mei's translation: When Yu was working to bring the Deluge under control, he dug the West River and the Youdou River in the west in order to let off the water from the Qu, Sun, and Huang Rivers ^[12].

Johnston's translation: In ancient times, when Yu brought order to the world, in the west, he controlled the West River and Yudou by diverting the waters of the Qu and the Sunxing ^[13].

The Chinese scholar Mei Yi-Pao possessed an indigenous cultural understanding of “禹治天下”. Conveying Chinese philosophical wisdom to the West is the core task and a practical difficulty in translating classics ^[18]. To this end, Mei undertook a creative transposition, borrowing “the Deluge,” familiar to the West and evoking readers’ association with the story of Noah’s Ark. Although this treatment departs from the literal, it grasps the metaphor that “平定乱世如治水患”, preserves the cultural core of Yu the Great taming the floodwaters, and reveals to Western readers that “治天下” is the political symbol of a sage-king putting chaos to rest and establishing order, responding to readers’ expectations of understanding traditional Chinese political wisdom. The Western translator Ian Johnston, influenced by universalism, presupposed readers who would find it harder to accept distinctive cultural metaphors. The many proper allusions in *the Mozi* easily exceed Western readers’ cognitive boundaries ^[19]. Johnston therefore uniformly uses “the world,” treating “治天下” as the ordering of objective spatial order, removing the political-philosophical meaning behind it and confining Yu’s actions to hydraulic governance within geographical space. This treatment sacrifices some cultural depth, but by relying on the universal geographical concept, it lowers the reading threshold and ensures the readability of the translation.

5. Conclusion

By comparing Mei Yi-Pao’s and Ian Johnston’s English translations and metaphorical domains for 220 instances of tianxia in the core chapters of *the Mozi*, the study reveals significant differences in their choice of metaphorical domains. While retaining the basic geographical-spatial reference, Mei Yi-Pao’s translation markedly uses political-domain metaphor together with high-frequency omission, reflecting a Chinese scholar’s emphasis on the political connotations of the concept and a pragmatic translation strategy. Ian Johnston’s translation is highly concentrated on the geographical domain and strives for textual coherence, embodying the Western scholar’s tendency to pursue universality and decontextualization; both very rarely draw on religious-domain metaphor. These differences profoundly map the translators’ distinct cultural stances (an embodied recognition of Chinese political culture versus Western philosophical universalism) and translation intentions (fluency and practicality versus scholarly literal translation), foregrounding the complexity of translating key political-philosophical terms and the inevitability of cultural filtering. Chinese cultural classics not only carry Chinese thought and culture but also contain China’s literary essence, aesthetic ideas, value orientations, and understanding of the world ^[20]. This study not only deepens the understanding of the English translation of key concepts in *the Mozi* but also, through detailed data, reveals the cultural motivations behind translators’ choices, providing important empirical evidence and a direction for theoretical reflection for constructing, in the new era, norms for translating political-philosophical terms in Chinese classics that are more scientific, more flexible, and more respectful of the richness of terminology.

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