

A Comparative Review of the Source Text for the 36th Han Suyin International Translation Contest and *My Altay*

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ABSTRACT

The source text for the English-to-Chinese translation task in the 36th Han Suyin International Translation Contest is an excerpt from Gretel Ehrlich's 1985 essay, *The Solace of Open Spaces*. The primary challenge of translating this text lies in its literary ambiguity. Identifying suitable parallel texts can significantly aid in accomplishing this translation task. Li Juan's essay collection, *My Altay*, shares many similarities with the source text in terms of literary genre, thematic elements, and cultural setting. By comparing these two works, we can deeply explore the literary characteristics and cultural contexts of wilderness literature. This comparative study not only aids in improving the accuracy and quality of translating similar literary works from English to Chinese but also expands our understanding of different literary forms and cultural contexts, thereby fostering cross-cultural exchange and understanding.

Keywords: English-to-Chinese translation, Parallel text, Wilderness literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Wilderness and solitude are profound and recurrent themes in literature, especially in works depicting the relationship between humans and nature. These elements highlight humanity's reverence for nature and reflection on its own existence. The source text for the English-to-Chinese translation task in the 36th Han Suyin International Translation Contest is an excerpt from Gretel Ehrlich's 1985 essay, *The Solace of Open Spaces*. This work portrays the vast, lonely, yet serene world of the American West. The primary challenge in translating this text lies in its literary ambiguity, and identifying a suitable parallel text can greatly assist in this task. Coincidentally, Li Juan's essay collection, *My Altay*, has gained significant attention this year due to the popularity of a TV series based on it. Li Juan's detailed descriptions of the Altay region in Xinjiang showcase the magnificence of nature and the resilience of humanity. Despite originating from different cultural backgrounds, both works share similarities in language, content, and philosophical significance. Gretel Ehrlich and Li Juan both

explore the themes of loneliness and inner peace in the wilderness through detailed natural descriptions and profound emotional expressions. Therefore, *My Altay* provides an excellent parallel text for this translation contest. By comparing these two works, we can gain deeper insights into their expression of wilderness and solitude themes in different cultural contexts, aiding in the accuracy and quality of the English-to-Chinese translation of *The Solace of Open Spaces*.

2. SIMILAR SETTINGS: WILDERNESS

The Solace of Open Spaces recounts the author's experiences on a small farm in Wyoming, USA, while *My Altay* records the author's life in the Altay region of northern Xinjiang, China. Wyoming and Xinjiang share some similarities in their natural conditions, both possessing vast land areas. Xinjiang is China's largest provincial-level administrative region, and Wyoming is one of the larger states in the USA. Both regions feature diverse topography, including mountains, plains, and deserts. Wyoming has the Rocky Mountains

and extensive plateaus, while Xinjiang has the Tianshan Mountains, the Tarim Basin, and the Gobi Desert. Both areas have low population density, with people concentrated in a few cities and towns, leaving much of the region sparsely populated with large undeveloped natural areas. Wyoming is home to the famous Yellowstone National Park and Grand Teton National Park, while Xinjiang boasts scenic attractions like Kanas Lake and Tianchi Lake, drawing tourists with their unique natural landscapes. Both regions experience dry climates, with Wyoming having dry conditions with cold winters and warm summers, and Xinjiang having diverse climates ranging from arid desert to cold mountainous weather.

In *My Altay*, Li Juan vividly depicts the vast natural landscapes with delicate brushstrokes, using descriptions such as "undulating," "tilting," and "sliding" to vividly present the geographical features and natural beauty of the Altay region.

2.1 Undulating Land

Li Juan describes the land as subtly undulating, conveying a dynamic sense in both terrain and visual perception. For instance, "the land gently undulates" highlights the gentle and expansive nature of the scenery, while "we walk small and feeble with two people and three dogs in the undulations of the land" emphasizes the smallness of humans in vast nature. She uses "the trail's traces bump and undulate through the wilderness" to depict the ruggedness and uncertainty of the wilderness, serving as a metaphor for human exploration. "Falling into the ochre undulating land" combines color and terrain, creating a rich visual effect. In the final sentence, Li Juan showcases the grandeur of nature and the weight of history by describing "along the edge of the mountains, along the undulating terrain of the Gobi Desert."

- Original Text: "Bunched together now, and excited into a run by the storm, they drift across dry land, tumbling into draws like water and surge out again onto the rugged, choppy plateaus that are the building blocks of this state."
- Translation: 它们挤挤攘攘，暴风雨让它们兴奋地奔跑起来，在干燥的土地上涌动，如水流一般灌入沟壑，然后再次漫出，涌向崎岖不平的、仿佛堆叠在本州大地上的积木块儿一样的高原。(tā men jǐ jǐ rǎng rǎng, bào fēng yǔ rǎng tā men xīng fèn dī bēn pǎo qǐ lǎ, zài gān zào de tǔ dì shàng yǒng dòng, rú shuǐ liú yī

bān guān rù gōu hè, rán hòu zài cì mǎn chū, yǒng xiàng qí qū bú píng de, fǎng fú duī dié zài běn zhōu dà dì shàng de jī mù kuài ér yī yàng de gāo yuán)

2.2 Tilting

Li Juan uses "the sky tilts clear toward the horizon ahead" to depict the grandeur of natural landscapes and convey the serene and hopeful atmosphere of dawn.

- Original Text: "In the east, where the sheep have started off without me, the benchland tilts up in a series of eroded red-earthed mesas, planed flat on top by a million years of water;"
- Translation: 东边，羊群不用赶也开始兀自前行，河岸段丘倾斜，现出一片片被侵蚀的红土台地，顶部被百万年的水流刨平；背后，一条粗犷的断崖线陡然耸立成一万英尺的比格霍恩山脉。(dōng biān, yáng qún bú yòng gǎn yě kāi shǐ wú zì qǐ ān háng, hé àn duàn qiū qīng xié, xiàn chū yī piàn piàn bǎi qīn shí de hóng tǔ tái dī dǐng bù bǎ bǎi wàn niǎn de shuǐ liú páo píng; bèi hòu, yī tiáo cū guǎng de duàn yá xiàn dǒu rán sǒng lì chéng yī wàn yīng chǐ de bǐ gé huò ēn shān mò)
- "In the east, where the sheep have started off on their own, the benchland tilts up, revealing a series of eroded red mesas, their tops flattened by a million years of water; behind them, a rough cliff line abruptly rises to form the ten-thousand-foot-high Bighorn Mountains."

2.3 Sliding

"The world's center of gravity smoothly and subtly shifts to the other side of the abyss along an indescribable but undeniable axis," uses "slide" to portray the dynamic changes of the world, as if nature itself has life and will.

In *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Gretel also uses words like "undulating," "tilting," and "sliding" to vividly portray the wilderness of the American West. For example:

- Original Text: "In the eastern part of the state, which slides down into the Great Plains, the new mining settlements are boomtowns, trailer cities, metal knots on flat land."
- Translation: 州的东部滑入大平原。那些新的矿业定居点是繁荣的城镇、拖车城市，是平坦土地上的金属节点。(zhōu de dōng bù huá rù dà

páng yuán。 nà xiē xīn de kuàng yè dèng jū
diǎn shì fán róng de chéng zhàn、 tuō chē
chéng shì shì páng tǎn tǔ dì shàng de jīn
shǔ jiē diǎn)

3. HUMAN CONNECTION: COMPASSION

Both Li Juan and Gretel portray the bonds and emotions between people in the wilderness, reflecting the warmth and kindness of humanity, which become crucial sources of life force for the authors in desolate lands.

In *My Altay*, Li Juan vividly describes the warm ties between people through an experience in the Gobi Desert. When the author and her uncle's motorcycle ran out of gas halfway across the wilderness, they found themselves in a seemingly hopeless situation. However, they encountered a Kazakh youth who selflessly gave them gas from his tank. Later, when they got lost and nearly ran out of borrowed gas, they spotted a dust cloud in the distance, which turned out to be an old Liberation truck. The driver, despite being on a different route, was willing to take them further and, when they insisted on going alone, patiently gave directions, refueled their motorcycle, and gave them half a bottle of water. In this desolate environment, the mutual aid between strangers becomes especially precious. This warmth and interaction between people showcase the brilliance of human nature and the gentle arrangements of fate in extreme environments.

In *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Gretel describes the human connections in the Wyoming wilderness. Wyoming's environment and climate are unpredictable, often causing severe fluctuations between isolation and reintegration. However, the harsh environment fosters a tradition of kindness. Strangers on the road wave friendly greetings, and two pickup trucks often stop on distant ranch roads, where drivers share cigarettes, open thermoses, and share steaming coffee. These encounters provide not only brief rest but also emotional exchanges and bonds between people. In Wyoming, individual histories are largely public, and people know each other, sharing stories of generations. This tradition of friendliness and sharing appears especially warm and important in the wilderness.

Both Li Juan and Gretel, in their depiction of human connections in the wilderness, emphasize mutual aid and warmth between people, despite different backgrounds and cultures. Li Juan uses

specific stories and detailed descriptions to convey warmth and kindness in the wilderness. Through vivid language and subtle brushstrokes, she allows readers to feel the warmth encountered in desolation. In contrast, Gretel, through descriptions of common phenomena, illustrates the lifestyle and traditions of people in Wyoming, highlighting friendliness and kindness as customs and virtues.

Both Li Juan and Gretel celebrate the goodness of human nature and the spirit of mutual aid through their depictions of human connections in the wilderness. These portrayals not only enrich the emotional depth of their works but also provide readers with a spiritual guide to finding life force in desolate environments. In the wilderness, the warm interactions between people become the most important sources of strength in life, offering courage and hope to face unknown challenges.

4. THE SOLACE OF WILDERNESS: INNER PEACE

Li Juan, in *My Altay*, demonstrates how she finds solace and meaning in life within the vast natural environment through her experiences in the wilderness. The book details various challenges encountered in nature and the warmth of human connections. These experiences allow her to appreciate the harshness and beauty of nature and the kindness and goodwill of humanity. Through interactions with nature and people, Li Juan finds inner peace and strength, with her experiences in the wilderness becoming a solace for her soul.

For instance, when she and her uncle were crossing the wilderness on a motorcycle and ran out of gas, the help from a Kazakh youth and the guidance and assistance of a kind driver when they got lost became invaluable. In the desolate environment, the warmth of human connection provides comfort and security to the soul, becoming an important source of strength for overcoming challenges and finding inner peace.

Similarly, in *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Gretel narrates her unique experiences in the wilderness. Initially, she came to Wyoming to "lose herself" in a new, sparsely populated place to escape her past life. However, the wilderness did not bring her the numbness she sought; instead, it revitalized her. Her life on the sheep ranch and interactions with locals allowed her to release inner raw emotions. The vast natural environment became a space for her to find inner peace and solace. In Wyoming, she

learned to balance solitude and community, gaining profound life experiences and peace in the process.

In the wilderness, Li Juan and Gretel find solace through the healing power of nature and the warmth of human connections. Their experiences allow them to rediscover meaning and direction in life, and find peace and solace within themselves. Both writers reflect the inner growth and transformation of individuals in nature through vivid and sincere narratives, allowing readers to gain strength and comfort through their stories.

5. CONCLUSION

My Altay and *The Solace of Open Spaces* provide profound descriptions of wilderness and solitude, each depicting the intimate relationship between humans and nature from unique perspectives. Li Juan's vivid portrayal of life and the environment in the Altay region, and Gretel Ehrlich's depiction of the vastness and harshness of Wyoming, showcase the universal themes of solitude and solace found in nature. Their works emphasize the healing power of nature and the importance of human connections, offering readers valuable insights into finding peace and meaning in life through the wilderness.

In terms of translation, comparing the narrative styles, thematic content, and cultural context of both works can enhance the understanding of the original text's nuances. *My Altay* serves as an excellent parallel text for translating *The Solace of Open Spaces*, providing insights into expressing similar themes in different cultural contexts. By understanding the language, content, and philosophy of both works, translators can achieve a more accurate and culturally resonant translation of *The Solace of Open Spaces*, capturing the essence of solitude and solace in the wilderness.

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