

# The Challenges and Strategies in Chinese Translation of Literary Texts

-- Taking the 36th Han Suyin Translation Competition as a case study

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**Abstract:** Since the inception of translation activities, literary translation has consistently held a dominant position within the field. With the increasing frequency of cross-cultural interactions between China and the world, the translation of literary texts between Chinese and foreign languages has also seen a rise. This paper takes the 36th Han Suyin International Translation Contest as a case study, in which the author participated in the English-to-Chinese translation. In guidance of the translation principle of literary texts, it explores how translators can address the cultural disparities between the East and West, break through the constraints of the source language, and faithfully represent the literary qualities of the original texts. The main challenges identified include: the abundance of literary expressions, continuous durative verbs in English, context-dependent imagery and metaphors, and complex sentence structures. To address these challenges, this paper proposes several strategies: emphasizing linguistic allure and translation aesthetics, decoupling cultural content to enhance cultural adaptability, extracting substantive information in context, and strategically segmenting texts to clarify logical structures. The author hopes that this paper will provide useful insights and references for the study and practice of literary translation.

**Keywords:** Han Suyin International Translation Contest, Literary Translation, Translation Challenges, Translation Strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

Translation practice in China has a history of over two thousand years, yet literary translation did not emerge until the late Qing Dynasty, with a history of just over a century. Literary works contain rich historical and cultural connotations, characterized by region-specific characteristics and cultural identities. In today's rapidly globalizing world, literary translation serves as a crucial means of cultural exchange, and its importance is self-evident. Through literary translation, readers from different countries and regions can access and understand literary works from other cultures, thereby deepening their understanding and respect for diverse cultural traditions.

The Han Suyin International Translation Competition was established in 1989. Initially launched by the journal Chinese Translators, the competition has provided an essential platform for the study and practice of literary translation. Since its inception, the Han Suyin Translation Competition has been successfully held for numerous editions, attracting active participation from many young translators and enthusiasts. It has not only generated widespread influence within China but has also garnered attention and recognition from translation enthusiasts overseas. The competition has discovered and inspired generations of outstanding young talents to devote themselves to the field of translation, making significant contributions to the development of translation studies in China.

The case study discussed in this paper is derived from the 36th Han Suyin International Translation Competition. It aims to explore core issues in literary translation, particularly the question of how to transfer cultural values across different cultures.

This paper is divided into three main sections. Chapter One outlines the overview of the translation project, its operational process, text type, and translation principles. Chapter Two

categorizes the difficulties encountered in translating literary texts based on specific challenges and provides illustrative examples. Chapter Three proposes corresponding translation strategies to address prominent difficulties and examines the feasibility of these strategies through case studies.

Literary translation involves not only the conversion of language but also the transmission of culture and the exchange of values. Through the case studies in this research, the author hopes to contribute more practical examples to the field of literary translation and to offer new perspectives and approaches for translators engaged in literary translation projects.

## 2. Chapter One: Case Description, Text Type, and Translation Principles

*The Solace of Open Spaces* is a prose work in which the author poetically depicts the vast, diverse, and magnificent landscape of Wyoming, USA. The text not only meticulously portrays Wyoming's expansive natural scenery—the grandeur of its mountains, the breadth of its grasslands, and the depth of its skies—but also tenderly recounts the author's personal experiences of working and living on this land, skillfully intertwining individual narrative with natural beauty. The original text flows smoothly, offering a profound depiction of both America's natural beauty and its humanistic spirit, illustrating a harmonious integration of humanity and nature. Together, these elements form a beautiful picture rich with American charm and imbued with aesthetic resonance, making it a typical literary text.

Since the emergence of translation activities, translators have faced the challenge of dealing with cultural differences. The choice between domestication and foreignization has thus become a central issue in both translation theory and practice. Similarly, the approach to literary translation is

inevitably tied to the long-standing debate between literal and liberal translation. As Sun Zhili writes in his essay “Foreignization and Domestication in Translation”: “For most of the twentieth century, domestication dominated translation practice. However, by the twenty-first century, the situation began to change. With the increasing frequency of international cultural exchanges and growing communication among peoples worldwide, foreignization, which moves closer to the author, will be adopted more widely, balancing domestication and even potentially gaining the upper hand.”

[1] From this, we can see that literary translation in China initially largely followed the principle of domestication, attempting to introduce Western cultural contexts to transform Chinese literature and culture. With continuous social and era developments, by the late twentieth century, the translation and introduction of a series of Western translation theories sparked new reflections on literary translation in China’s translation community. The principle of foreignization gradually became mainstream in literary translation. Sun Zhili argues: “The core of foreignization is to preserve the foreignizing elements of the original text as much as possible.” [2]

Wang Dongfeng once noted: “The reason literature is considered literature lies in its aesthetic or poetic function. This is an important feature that distinguishes literature from other linguistic products.” He further states: “If literary translation is to live up to the name of literature, it should strive to the greatest extent to reflect the foregrounding or deviation of the original text and its effects.” [3]

In summary, literary translation is by no means an easy task. Translators of literary works must select appropriate translation strategies to maintain a balance between the original and the translated text. When translating, they must not only preserve the linguistic consciousness and literary strategies of the original through foreignization but also pay attention to maintaining the literary attributes and poetic function of the translation. This ensures the replication of literariness and provides readers with a more valuable translated version.

### 3. Chapter Two: Challenges in Translating *The Solace of Open Spaces* into Chinese

#### 3.1. Diverse Literary Expressions

Literature is an art form centered on language, encompassing genres such as poetry, fiction, and prose. Translation, on the other hand, is the act of transforming linguistic information from one language into another. Literary translation thus possesses a dual nature, combining both literary and translational attributes. Xu Jun argues that “to a large extent, literary translation is an attempt to achieve the seemingly unachievable.” [4] Literary translation can be understood as the process of translating literary texts, language, or content with literary qualities into a target language. [5] Therefore, when engaging in literary translation, the translator must convey the artistic essence of the original work in another language, ensuring the equivalence of literary attributes.

Example 1:

[Original Text]The Solace of Open Spaces.

[Analysis]This sentence serves as the title of the essay. A literal translation could be “开阔空间的慰藉” (kuankuo kongjian de weijie), which maintains semantic fidelity but

fails to capture the artistic and creative nature unique to literary translation. The word “solace” in English carries strong emotional connotations, referring to comfort or consolation amid difficulty or pain. Thus, the translation must find a word that conveys this deeper emotional resonance. Additionally, “open spaces” signifies not only physical expanses but also symbolizes freedom, infinite possibilities, and spiritual liberation. The translator must identify an appropriate term that conveys the imagery of openness, freedom, and boundlessness, aligning with the literary qualities of the original text.

Example 2:

[Original Text]Today the sun is out-only a few clouds billowing.

[Analysis]The original sentence is concise and vivid, depicting a natural weather scene. A word-for-word translation would be “今天出太阳了，天上有几朵云在翻滚” (jintian chu taiyang le, tianshang you ji duo yun zai fangun). However, literary translation is a process of recreation, allowing the translator to break free from the structural constraints of the original language to avoid overly rigid expressions.

#### 3.2. Culture-Specific Elements

Translation is closely intertwined with culture, and when translating literary works, cultural differences can significantly impact the process. China and Western countries possess distinct natural environments, historical traditions, values, and ways of thinking, resulting in substantial cultural disparities. Misinterpretations of meaning due to cultural differences can affect the quality of translation. Therefore, during the translation process, the translator must fully understand certain culturally specific images and elements.

Example 3:

[Original Text]Instead of big, roomy barns and Victorian houses, there are dugouts, low sheds, log cabins, sheep camps, and fence lines that look like driftwood blown haphazardly into place.

[Analysis]Due to differences in cultural backgrounds, there are numerous lexical gaps between Chinese and Western languages. A search for the term “dugouts” in the Oxford Dictionary may yield meanings such as “air-raid shelter” or “underground bunker.” However, searching for “dugouts + Wyoming” on a search engine reveals that “防空洞” (fangkongdong, air-raid shelter) does not fully capture the intended meaning in this context. Therefore, when translating from English to Chinese, semantic transformation can be employed to ensure readers’ comprehension and achieve the purpose of translation.

#### 3.3. Context-Dependent Imagery and Metaphors

When studying the expressive techniques of foreign literature, the importance of metaphors—a highly developed and frequently employed expressive strategy—cannot be overlooked. In the classical literary masterpiece \*The Homeric Epics\*, the author skillfully employs metaphors as a rhetorical device, constructing a multidimensional and multisensory narrative space through visual, auditory, and even kinesthetic metaphors. Furthermore, metaphors are not confined to the realm of literary rhetoric; they are also a cognitive tool pervasive in human thought and linguistic communication.

Liquefaction, reification, and personification constitute

the primary forms of metaphorical verbs. [6] The use of metaphorical verbs yields various effects, such as enhancing emotional expression, establishing emotional resonance with readers, creating vivid imagery, and enriching linguistic expressiveness. [6] From an academic perspective, metaphors span multiple disciplines, including linguistics, cognitive psychology, and cultural studies, serving as a key pathway to understanding how humans comprehend and express abstract concepts through concrete entities. Thus, an in-depth study of metaphors not only aids in a more comprehensive understanding of the inner workings of literary texts but also deepens our insight into the cognitive processes of translation.

Example 4:

[Original Text]This gives the vastness a sheltering look.

[Analysis]When interpreting context-dependent imagery, the first step is to focus on the contextual environment. The original text describes how the geographical features of Wyoming impart a specific visual impression to “the vastness.” Here, the word “sheltering” does not directly denote physical protection or refuge but instead evokes an abstract and poetic imagery derived from the context. In this setting, the surrounding mountains imbue the expansive arid valley with a visual sense of being gently embraced and anchored. Unlike literal physical shelter, this imagery of “encirclement” or “protection” conveys more of a psychological comfort and sense of security.

### 3.4. Challenges of Intricate Sentence Structures

In this translation practice, the source text contains numerous intricate and complex sentences characterized by elaborate syntactic structures and profound logical layers. So-called intricate sentences generally include those with multiple modifiers, convoluted grammatical constructions, and compound sentences expressing two or more layers of meaning—even some semantically rich simple sentences may fall into this category. Additionally, long sentences often feature parallel complex elements, such as dense verb-object phrases, non-finite verb structures, and fixed collocations, compounded by numerous modifiers before and after nouns (or headwords), further increasing the difficulty of translation. These issues are particularly pronounced in this translation practice, not only hindering direct comprehension but also necessitating a deep analysis of the internal logic and structure of long sentences to address translation challenges posed by ellipsis, substitution, verb-object phrases, and non-finite verb structures.

When translating from English to Chinese, the translator must artistically process and adjust the text while remaining faithful to the original intent, ensuring that the translation preserves the essence of the source text and reads naturally and fluently for the target audience.

Example 5:

[Original Text]In the Great Plains the vistas look like music, like Kyries of grass, but Wyoming seems to be the doing of a mad architect—tumbled and twisted, ribboned with faded, deathbed colors, thrust up and pulled down as if the place had been startled out of a deep sleep and thrown into a pure light.

[Analysis]This example is a compound sentence connected by the coordinating conjunction “but.” The main clause of the first sentence consists of “the vistas” as the subject and “look” as the predicate, in the simple present tense. “In the Great Plains” is an adverbial prepositional phrase indicating location, while “like music, like Kyries of grass” uses two

parallel prepositional phrases introduced by “like” acting as predicative complements. The main clause of the second sentence has “Wyoming” as the subject and “seems” as the predicate, also in the simple present tense, followed by an infinitive phrase “to be” acting as a predicative complement, which leads into a predicative clause. The elements after the dash function as parenthetical insertions. During translation, the translator must understand the structural relationships within such complex sentences and clarify the architecture of long sentences to ensure the translated text is clear, coherent, and naturally cohesive.

## 4. Chapter Three: Translation Strategies for *The Solace of Open Spaces*

### 4.1. Emphasizing Linguistic Charm and Translation Aesthetics

In the translation of British and American literary works, linguistic charm and aesthetic presentation are indispensable elements that collectively constitute the artistic quality of the translated text. The original work’s language style, rhetorical devices, and emotional tone are key components of its literary value. During the translation process, the translator must preserve and convey these elements. Translators should deeply contemplate the language style of the original work, whether it is classical and elegant or modern and concise, as these styles reflect the literary charm of the work. Given the literary nature of the text, translators should employ certain linguistic techniques. These techniques can shape more intuitive and authentic images for readers and accurately convey the work’s connotations and emotions. [7] Language is a carrier of culture, and each language embodies its unique cultural background. Translators need to utilize translation techniques, adopting different vocabulary, sentence structures, and rhetoric to enrich the emotional expression of the original text.

At the same time, the study of translation is inseparable from the study of aesthetics. Liu Miqing, in his essay “An Overview of Translation Aesthetics,” states: “Aesthetics is the science of studying beauty, aesthetic experience, and artistic beauty”.[8] The integration of translation and aesthetics not only highlights the aesthetic qualities of the translated work but also enhances the reading experience for the audience. Focusing on translation aesthetics can not only reproduce the beauty of the original work but may even guide readers to appreciate an aesthetic realm that transcends the original.

Example 6:

[Original Text]The Solace of Open Spaces.

[Initial Translation]开阔空间的慰藉。

[Revised Translation]无垠旷野，慰藉盈心。

[Analysis]The initial translation employed a literal approach, translating “The Solace of Open Spaces” as “开阔空间的慰藉,” which conveyed the basic meaning of the original but lacked linguistic charm and literary conception, resulting in a rigid and mechanical translation. The original title not only conveys the vastness of space and a sense of solace but also embodies a poetic and emotional resonance. The revised translation pays greater attention to linguistic charm and aesthetic effect. Changing “开阔空间” to “无垠旷野” not only aligns more closely with the depiction of vast natural landscapes in literary works but also adds a sense of immense, limitless visual imagery. By splitting the two nouns

of the original into two distinct images separated by a comma, the translation gains greater poetic and aesthetic quality. A good title should capture the reader's attention. English titles tend to be more concise, often using simple words to convey meaning, while Chinese titles need to emphasize appeal. The revised translation makes the title more consistent with the conventions of Chinese literary expression while preserving the emotional tone and artistic value of the original, reflecting the focus on linguistic charm and aesthetics in literary translation.

## 4.2. Separating Cultural Content to Enhance Cultural Adaptability

When translating British and American literary works, cultural differences are a critical factor that cannot be ignored. To ensure the accuracy and fluency of the translation, translators need to pay special attention to culture-specific elements in the work. Achieving this requires translators to possess keen cultural insight, enabling them to identify expressions in the original text that carry significant cultural characteristics, such as idioms, allusions, and religious beliefs. For these elements, translators should adopt appropriate strategies, such as adding annotations, explanations, or replacing them with corresponding expressions in the target culture, striving to preserve the cultural distinctiveness of the original text to the greatest extent possible.

Furthermore, through meticulous handling of cultural content, the translated text can remain faithful to the original while being easily accepted and understood by readers from the target culture.

Example 7:

[Original Text]They call him “High pockets,” because he’s so long-legged; his graceful stride matches the distances he has to cover.

[Initial Translation]他们叫他“高口袋”，因为他的腿很长；他优雅的步伐正好符合他需要走的距离。

[Revised Translation]因为双腿修长，步伐优雅，人们亲切地称他为“大长腿”。他的步伐，总是与他需要走的距离相匹配。

[Analysis]In the initial translation, the sentence was translated literally, preserving the original structure but failing to fully convey the culturally specific expression “High pockets.” Directly translating it as “高口袋” might confuse target readers, as they would not understand the cultural meaning behind “High pockets.” Therefore, it is necessary to separate the cultural content to enhance the adaptability of the translation and employ suitable translation strategies. First, the cultural connotation of “High pockets” must be understood. In English, this nickname vividly describes a person whose pockets appear high due to their long legs, which is a figurative and humorous expression. The term “大长腿” (long legs) is a commonly used phrase in modern Chinese to describe people with long, straight legs. Extracting the meaning of the original term and restoring its true cultural significance can help target readers better understand the text.

## 4.3. Integrating Context to Convey Substantive Meaning

This strategy emphasizes the importance of considering the context and situation of the original text during translation to ensure that the target version accurately conveys the core message and true intent of the source material. Translation involves not only interpreting the surface meaning of words

and sentences but also understanding their role and position within the entire paragraph or text. Translators must possess keen insight to identify contextual cues in the original text, discern implied meanings, and strive to convey them through appropriate linguistic forms in the target language.

Example 8:

[Original Text]Most of Wyoming has a “lean-to” look.

[Initial Translation]怀俄明州的大部分地区有一种倾斜的外观。

[Revised Translation]俄明大部分地区的建筑都有一种“一边倒”的外形风格。

[Analysis]In the original text, “lean-to” is used to describe the visual characteristics of most areas in Wyoming. Here, “lean-to” does not merely mean “tilted” in a literal sense but carries a deeper metaphorical meaning. The context that follows provides an explanation for the term, revealing that it refers not only to the architectural style but also hints at the history, culture, and way of life behind these structures. Wyoming is known for its vast wilderness, harsh natural conditions, and deep-rooted cowboy culture. The “lean-to” architectural style is a direct reflection of this living environment, symbolizing resilience, self-sufficiency, and an adaptation to and respect for the natural surroundings. By carefully reading the context, the translator can better understand the meaning and function of the imagery within its specific situational framework.

## 4.4. Flexible Restructuring for Clear Logic

In the translation of British and American literary works, translators must pay close attention to linguistic logic. These works often feature rigorous language structures and logical relationships. Therefore, translators should carefully analyze the syntactic and semantic structures of the original text, clarify logical connections between sentences, and ensure that the translation is accurate and well-organized. Additionally, translators need to be mindful of the expressive conventions and norms of the target language to avoid ambiguities, grammatical errors, or logical inconsistencies in the translated text. Through in-depth consideration of linguistic logic, translators can convey the original meaning while ensuring the accuracy and fluency of the translation.

1) Following the Original Word Order

When dealing with long sentences in English, adhering to the original word order can help maintain the coherence and consistency of the translation. As Cao Minglun points out in his essay “Form Embodies Spirit, Spirit Complements Form: On Translating English Long Sentences into Chinese”: “With modern Chinese now nearly perfected, we should have sufficient linguistic means to preserve the form of the original text as much as possible or construct a similar form in the translation, thereby ensuring that the form embodies the spirit and that the translation achieves a harmony of spirit and form.” [9]

Example 9:

[Original Text]When her husband died, she quickly moved to town, bought a car, and drove around the States to see what she’d been missing.

[Translation]在丈夫去世后不久，她就做出了一个出人意料的决定——搬到城里，并买了一辆车，开始环游美国，去看那些她未曾见过的风景。

[Analysis]The original text is a long sentence containing multiple parallel actions, describing a continuous chain of events. The translation largely preserves the original word

order and meaning to maintain the coherence of the source text.

## 2) Adjusting Sentence Structures

English emphasizes hypotaxis (explicit grammatical connections), while Chinese prioritizes parataxis (implicit logical connections). The fundamental structures and grammatical rules of English and Chinese differ significantly. These structural differences lead to notable variations in how the same meaning is expressed across the two languages. Therefore, in cross-language translation, translators must deeply understand and master the syntactic structures and grammatical rules of the target language to ensure accuracy and fluency. Particularly when translating complex English sentences into Chinese, it is often necessary to break them into looser or shorter clauses to better align with Chinese expressive habits and logic.

Example 10:

[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.

[Initial Translation] 现在，它们聚集在一起，被暴风雨激发成奔跑的状态，穿越干燥的土地，像水一样翻滚进入低洼地带，然后再次冲出，奔上那些崎岖不平的高原，这些高原是这个州的基石。

[Revised Translation] 现在，羊群正聚在一起，在风暴的驱赶下乱窜，穿越干燥的荒原。羊群如潮水般涌入沟壑，继而又如海浪般汹涌而出，跃上怀俄明那高原，高原崎岖不平，而这正是怀州之主要地貌。

[Analysis] The original text is a complex sentence with a lengthy structure and employs metaphors and other rhetorical devices. When translating, the translator needs to analyze the semantic layers from a holistic perspective. Breaking the original into shorter sentences aligns with Chinese logic. When translating long and difficult sentences, translators must deconstruct the surface structure of the sentence, grasp the substantive meaning of the original, and ensure the readability and clarity of the translation, thereby enhancing the reading experience for the target audience.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has analyzed and explored the translation process of *The Solace of Open Spaces*, examining the challenges posed by the unique expressions of literary texts, culture-specific elements, context-dependent imagery and

metaphors, as well as complex sentence structures. Based on these challenges, the study proposes a series of translation strategies, including emphasizing linguistic charm and translation aesthetics, decoupling cultural content to enhance cultural adaptability, integrating context to convey substantive meaning, and flexibly restructuring sentences to ensure logical clarity. These strategies not only provide practical methods for addressing specific issues in translation but also contribute significantly to improving the overall quality of the translated text and enhancing the reading experience for the target audience.

However, due to the author's limited involvement in translation projects, this study has certain shortcomings. Language constraints have occasionally made it difficult to fully grasp the nuances of some culture-loaded terms, necessitating further revision and refinement of the translation. It is hoped that this study will offer new perspectives and approaches for translators engaged in literary translation projects.

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