

The Value of Non-Fiction Prose in *The Corner of Altay*

Ruixuan Feng

University of International Business and Economics, Beijing, China

Email: 348830884@qq.com

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Abstract

The Corner of Altay was written in the flourishing period when non-fiction literature entered the field of public view in China. It is the creation of this collection of essays that makes *The Corner of Altay* become one of the representative works of non-fiction literature and also makes Li Juan one of the representative writers of non-fiction literature. *The Corner of Altay* has the characteristics of non-fiction literature and the aesthetic value of prose at the same time. This paper will briefly describe the value of non-fiction prose in *The Corner of Altay* from the perspective of the two parts.

Keywords

Li Juan, *The Corner of Altay*, Non-Fiction Literature

1. Research Background

1) A Brief Introduction to the Concept of “Non-Fiction” and the Definition of *The Corner of Altay*

The article *The Picture of China in “Non-fiction” Literature in the New Century* (Tian, 2018) points out that the term “non-fiction” first appeared in the United States in the 1960s. And then the creation of “non-fiction” represented by “non-fiction” and “new news reports” began to prevail. Domestically, the term “non-fiction” has begun to gain traction since *People’s Literature* opened a “non-fiction” column in the second issue of 2010. Li Juan’s *Goat Path Spring Ranch* was included in this year’s *People’s Literature*. In the same year, Li Juan published her second collection of essays: *The Corner of Altay*.

“Non-fiction” literature and documentary literature have certain similarities. The difference is that “non-fiction” literature in the writing emphasize more on supporting the author to write completely independently from a personal perspective, and it is more about the author’s identity as a “recorder”. *The Corner of*

Altay records the pastoral lifestyle of the northern Xinjiang region of China from Li Juan's own view, which shall belong to the "non-fiction" literary category.

2) Li Juan's pioneering work in this book

The Corner of Altay is Li Juan's second collection of essays published after 7 years after the first collection of essays: *Nine Pieces of Snow* although she argues in her preface that the book is as a work of practice as the *Nine Pieces of Snow* (Li, 2010a). Due to the large time span, there is a certain difference in the writing and the emotion of the article. In *Nine Pieces of Snow*, Li Juan's lyrical text occupies a large space, and the literary enthusiasm and ideological enthusiasm of young people are the prominent features of her articles. *The Corner of Altay* is calmer than *Nine Pieces of Snow*, from which you can read the author's experience, especially Li Juan's fluency in expressing her views. The author also thought about the *Nine Pieces of Snow* in the preface that "those words when they were children were self-righteous and rash and arrogant". From *Nine Pieces of Snow* to *The Corner of Altay*, it is a process of style maturity. Li Juan's subsequent creation basically continued the creative style of *The Corner of Altay*. After the creation of *The Corner of Altay* until the *Distant Sunflower Land* in the past two years, with the increase of age and life experience, her thinking has gradually matured, and the language has become calmer and calmer. *The Corner of Altay* is a collection of essays that can be said to be a small turning point in Li Juan's writing style, which is groundbreaking.

3) Research content and focus

This article focuses on the main narrative and emotional aspects of *The Corner of Altay*, thus illustrating the "non-fiction" characteristics of the work. Regarding the specific research content of its literary value, this article will take the concept of "non-fiction" as the basic criterion for judging, and at the same time add the aesthetic thinking of literary works, and specifically explore the value of *The Corner of Altay* as a "non-fiction" prose through the three dimensions of documentary accuracy, aesthetics of language and writing, and empathy with readers.

2. Performance of "Non-Fiction"

1) The Advantages of First-Person Narrative

The Corner of Altay is a narrative prose written by Li Juan from her own perspective, which directly closes the distance with the reader through first-person narrative. Altay is located in the northern Xinjiang of China, bordering Mongolia, Russia and Kazakhstan. In the description of *The Corner of Altay*, the locals are more Kazakhs, speak Kazakh. And Li Juan's family is far away from the area where most of the Chinese will not set foot, dealing with the locals and doing business. This life experience is something that many people have never had the opportunity to experience in their lifetime. Therefore, this first-person narrative method is not only easier to use when describing the author's life experience, but also enhances the reading experience for the reader. Starting from the first point

of view, I intuitively realize that the author wants to convey to us her life scene in Altay. At this time, a simple record of the life of a Han girl in the far north of Xinjiang connects the cultural ties that span most of China for readers, and takes the public to appreciate the story of China's "corner".

2) Life Records and Passionate Expressions

Li Juan's life in Altay is not all pleasant and comfortable. From the most of the content, we can see in the text is about her hard life, but if you bring yourself into the environment which she describes, you will see that she is carrying out a long-term process of dissipation of suffering, and explore the shining points in life, trying to face life optimistically. For example, she writes about the dilapidated houses at the head of the bridge, the vinegar fried winter melon that the family has eaten for a long time, and about the winter night when she sticks her finger out of the wall to touch the falling snow. Although the reader reads brisk words from it, thinking carefully about her life situation will surely feel her optimism about her hard life and the passion between the lines, and will also sigh at her heartfelt love for such a life and for the land of Altay. Some scholars have pointed out that this is an appeal to the spiritual dilemma (Li, 2022). In the era of development and change, more and more herders are leaving those remote areas to work in the city. There are fewer and fewer people in remote areas, the grazing culture is fading year by year, and the narrative in the article will eventually become the memory in the hearts of those people. And Li Juan's dilemma is also derived from this. *The Corner of Altay* is not only a record of Altay's life, but also Li Juan's desire to convey to readers her call for distant memories and spiritual destinations through this book, and such thinking embellishes important shining points for her articles.

3) Recognition of style

Li Juan's style recognition is relatively high. With a strong personal style, we can see through her description of the object, tone, paragraph processing and other places. Born and raised in Xinjiang, Li Juan is full of rich feelings of seeing and feeling in the area where she lives, and the things she describes are basically seen in the Altay region. The tone and paragraph are the prominent features of her articles. If there is a word to describe Li Juan's writing tone, it is "pragmatic". Her narrative part of the tone is brisk, as if people briskly tell a story about themselves, and the richness of the story will let us see a person with a story through these words. Paragraph processing is also the performance of her article's high recognition, the prose to express the author's thoughts and feelings, is the author's true feelings of the expression. Different from the narrative tone of the brisk, her emotional expression biased towards melancholy, and has a strong philosophical reason. She intersperses these emotions and thoughts in the article, forming a contrast between lightness and melancholy. This kind of style recognition helps her to show more briskness and ease when writing. And at the same time, through this personal style, she can bring "regional characteristics" to her writing, thereby increasing the close connection between the scene and the author.

3. The Embodiment of the Value of *The Corner of Altay*

1) Examples of language and characters

Some scholars have pointed out that “non-fiction” literature emphasizes the display of folk positions, personal perspectives, and the details of original ecological life, but non-fiction writing makes the aesthetics of prose lacking. And at any time, aesthetics should be put in the first place, and the aesthetics of prose cannot be sacrificed for “non-fiction” (Chen, 2015). *The Corner of Altay* retains its aesthetic as a prose, and has the characteristics of prose in terms of words and sentences, whether it is to show life or express emotions.

When Li Juan expressed her feelings, the language style had a considerable prose aesthetic, and she saw the night through the crack of the leaking door when she wrote about her residence in Baraltz:

At that time, she knew that some of the glory and beauty of the night sky that she had felt were nothing more than scattered beauty, luxurious beauty that was gradually disappearing; The night sky with the bright moon is the beauty that is gradually condensing, the beauty that is becoming clearer and clearer, the beauty that is sucking, and the beauty that is more “permanent” (Li, 2010b).

The literal meaning of this passage is easier to understand, and in her eyes, the beauty of the night sky with the bright moon is better than the brilliant night sky. And this “permanent” implies that this meaning is obviously not only this, she thinks of Mingyue like Zhang Ruoxu’s “Alas! The moon is lingering over the tower; it should have seen her dressing table all alone”¹. With the aesthetic and philosophical characteristics of “generation” and “year after year” strung together is this “permanent”. There is also a very interesting word in this text “sucking”, the night sky around the bright moon is silent darkness, the moon at this time is particularly bright, it seems to be no longer an object, but a hollow, suck everything into it, this is Li Juan’s moon. The poet Gu Cheng wrote a poem as a child: “The branch of the tree wants to tear the sky, but it only pokes a few tiny holes, and it reveals the light outside the sky, and people call it the moon and the stars.”² Gu Cheng pioneered the moon and stars as “virtual objects” and the sky as “physical objects”. Li Juan’s ideas at this time coincided with Gu Cheng’s, and such words full of personal imagination occupy a certain length in various chapters, full of personal characteristics. This is enough to show that her imagination and sensitivity are increasingly shining under the infiltration of Altay life, and it is this lyrical text that constitutes an indispensable part of *The Corner of Altay* and also makes the prose value of prominent.

2) The authenticity of the narrative content

The aesthetics of the language and writing in *The Corner of Altay* is based on narrative, and if there is no real life scene unfolding from the first perspective, even the best text will become flashy. As one of the representative works of “non-fiction” literature, *The Corner of Altay* is also the embodiment of its lite-

¹Moonlit Night (Zhang Ruoxu), translated by XuYuanhong.

²The Origin of the Moon and the Stars (Gu Cheng).

rary value by the empathy of the narrative content and the reader. Although the scene described in *The Corner of Altay* is something that most readers have not experienced, Li Juan does not distance herself from the reader, and she will try to restore the truth as much as possible when telling the story, such as her “*The Corner of Altay*” will change the language style according to the different situations. And when describing the scene of communicating with the herdsmen:

The drunkard Shahesi comes to my shop to make soy sauce, which is really surprising. My mom asked him, “Why didn’t you come to drink?” He replied happily: “Oh! In the year 2000, the task of drinking is basically completed!”

Li Juan lives in the area, because of the large number of Kazakh herders, the daily communication language is Kazakh, although she can use Chinese, but the communication is not smooth. Li Juan’s use of mood words in the text is to show some obstacles in the language communication of the locals. Why doesn’t Shahesi buy wine in the Kazakh herdsmen’s shops, making it easier to communicate? The title of this chapter is called “The Drinker”, which is the story of a group of drunkards who often go to their stores to buy wine and drink, and it can be seen from this text that Shahesi, even if the language is not fluent, has to go to their stores to buy wine. One of the reasons may be that the local herders are mostly herders, and the herders will change with the seasons, and there are few residents who have been stationed there for a long time, so the shops are very rare. The second may be because Shahesi is an alcoholic and does not care much about the store, as long as he can buy alcohol. From these few short conversations, we can interpret the living habits and living environment of the locals, and also see what kind of state the local drinkers are in. Li Juan’s words when describing these daily trifles seem plain and simple, but in fact contain a huge amount of information, these simple words support the life style of the entire northern Xinjiang herders, and the narrative language that changes according to the scene is also the true presentation of the “non-fiction” of *The Corner of Altay*.

There are many similar examples, such as her writing in the book about the scenery of the five places that she has followed the herdsmen to the transition, each of which has a distinctive character. For example, she will write a lot to talk about some people who happen to stay during the transition and people who have only a few faces. This way of writing has the characteristics of a documentary, and it is precisely this way of writing that enhances the documentary nature of *The Corner of Altay*.

3) Empathy generated by the attitude of life

Everything written in *The Corner of Altay* is not only for documentary, but also for dialogue with the reader, so that the reader can truly feel her life in Altay and empathize with the reader. This empathy is mainly manifested in the narrator’s tone and attitude towards life in her narration, as stated in the “Life Record and Passionate Expression” section above. Although we will yearn for the beautiful landscapes of Altay and the free and free pastoral life in the book, we can still see that her living conditions are not very optimistic, what is optimistic is

her mentality. The Corner of Altay which the biggest feature in the emotional is neither humble nor pushy. The author didn't exaggerate Altay's beauty or her own hard life. In this book, Li Juan tried to avoid some pessimistic thinking to the reader, and tried to use brisk language to narrow the distance with the reader, like having a conversation to the reader to unveil the mystery of Altay. So that readers in their own exploration of the beauty of Altay can recognize the problems that will be encountered in the actual life of Altay. At the same time, she also uses a good attitude to tell the reader that no matter where they are, everyone faces life the same, the mood is the same, everyone is trying to survive for their own situation. There is no absolutely beautiful place in the world, and the beauty can only be found by themselves. Li Juan conveyed her appearance in the face of life to the reader, and empathized with the reader. Therefore, *The Corner of Altay* not only became a work about Li Juan's life, but also a work that allowed readers to see themselves clearly through books.

4. Conclusion

In the first year (2010) of the "non-fiction" literary concept, the prose collection *The Corner of Altay* was published, and its content is both the expression of "non-fiction" and the preservation of prose aesthetics. Around 2010, Li Juan has perfected the characteristics of "non-fiction" in prose, starting from her own experience, skillfully using different styles of writing to record the memories of Altay's life on different occasions and in different chapters, writing the customs and natural features of Altay with natural feelings, and creating *The Corner of Altay*, forming her own literary creation style. It is also the publication of this collection of essays that makes Li Juan one of the representative writers of "non-fiction literature", which shows the high value of *The Corner of Altay* and has important and profound significance for the development of Li Juan and even "non-fiction" literature.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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