

FROM INSIDE CHINA

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# GREEN

## GREAT WALL 毛乌素绿色传奇

*An historical witness of  
the disappearing Maomusu Desert*

肖亦农 著 Neil Thomas 译

WINNER OF  
THE LU XUN  
LITERARY PRIZE  
2014

中国出版集团  
中译出版社

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毛乌素绿色传奇

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## *Preface*

### Autumn is a Racket in the Maowusu Desert

In late autumn, the sky was high and cloudless in the Maowusu Desert, creating a haven for floating thoughts. Driving down the shiny dark desert road, I gazed far into the distance. The grass waves covering the sand dunes were already tinged with a ginger hue and the blades coated with thin frost. Amidst bright autumn scenery, vast expanses of glossy *Sabina vulgaris* woods seemed to cover the Maowusu Desert with a sheet of boundless green felt. Drenched in deep jade, Mongolian scotch pines and Chinese pines stood upright in the rustling autumn wind; soaked in golden yellow and dazzling red, willows and white poplar trees revealed unspeakable grace and elegance under the clear blue sky. Wandering freely in the greenish-yellow grass waves were cloud-like herds of livestock. Like an endless, bright and colorful Russian oil painting, the Maowusu Desert unfolded before my eyes.

Plants stopped growing as soon as Frost's Descent came. The grazing prohibition policy in effect over the Wushen Desert in Ordos was loosened, liberating horses, cattle and sheep. Herdsmen opened the gates of stables and drove the livestock that had been

pent up for spring and summer into the Maowusu Desert and the prairielands. As free and joyous as pardoned prisoners, the long-suffering livestock shook their necks and bellowed loudly, or raised their hoofs and galloped wildly, or leisurely strolled back and forth, or repeatedly kissed the gradually withering grass. Grass waves billowed as the autumn breeze gently swept through, and the herds drifted far into the horizon like colorful clouds . . .

In the late autumn of 2011, I finally glimpsed the legendary sight of “cattle and sheep grazing between the vast grey sky and the immense fields amongst the low grass in the breeze.”

Tears danced uncontrollably into my eyes. Since I came to the North at the age of twenty, I have been living on the Ordos Plateau for a full forty-one years. At this moment, as I drove across the Maowusu Desert filled with billowing grass waves, I asked myself over and over again, “Have I ever seen such fantastic grasslands? Is this still the land I am familiar with?” What did the Maowusu Desert used to look like? Perhaps people have long forgotten its original visage.

The Maowusu Desert is also called the Maowusu Sandland and the Ordos Sandland, and the region within the Uxin Banner is called the Uxin Desert. It occupies an area of over 30,000 square kilometers on the Ordos Plateau. Facing the Ming Great Wall to the south, the Maowusu Desert stretches from the southern regions of Ordos to Anbian, Dingbian, Jingbian and Shenmu counties of Yulin City in Northern Shaanxi. These lands used to be the meadowlands of the Mongolian Uxin tribe. The Uxin Desert is one of the major sources of China’s sandstorms. A saying has it that in the desert, “Every year there is a wind blustering from spring to winter.”

As soon as I stepped onto the Ordos Plateau, I realized that

the Uxin Desert is a synonym for poverty. At that time, people dubbed Ih Ju League (the predecessor of Ordos) as a “twelfth-class city”, meaning it ranked worst among the twelve cities of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The leaders of Ih Ju League hung their heads in shame at regional meetings. And, ranking last or second-to-last among the counties within Ih Ju League, Uxin Banner was the poorest of the poor.

The Uxin Desert was so poor! It was an old liberated area, a minority area, a border area, and a poverty-stricken area.

Back in the late 1980s, I once accompanied Mr. Zhang Shouren, deputy editor-in-chief of the magazine *October*, and his wife Ms. Chen Ke on a tour to Batuwán in the Uxin Banner. We got caught in heavy rain and were stuck in the middle of the Maowusu Desert. With no village ahead and no hotel behind us, we were drenched through with rain and mud. Fortunately, we later came across a warm-hearted village postman riding a motorbike, who took us to a herdsman's home in Tukesumu. The herdsman and his family lived in a small thatched hut built of sand willow twigs and brimming with stranded travellers. We wanted to find something to eat, but there was no food left in the herdsman's household. The kind and hospitable Mongolian matriarch had no choice but to keep offering us bowl after bowl of brick tea. Finally, it was the warm-hearted postman who ran out in the rain and returned out of nowhere with some boiled eggs which were barely enough to assuage the hunger Mr. Zhang and his wife. That night, the three of us huddled onto the herdsman's heated brick bed. I remember there were over a dozen people, male and female, young and old, all crowding together on that bed, none of us knowing where the herdsman's family were spending the night.

I explained to Shouren that I had not expected to encounter a rainstorm in a dry desert. He responded, "What is all the fuss about this? Just take it as an unusual life experience. After this trip into the Maowusu Desert, just write a good novella about it. I will publish it in my magazine once you finish." Shouren's encouragement only made me sick at heart. If life becomes a novel, I thought, then it is no longer life.

When talking about the modern ecological restructuring of the Ordos and Maowusu deserts, many experts and scholars love quoting in conclusion doggerel from the Ordos Plateau. In Particular, "Among the lowered grass in the breeze grazed flocks and herds in the 1950s, excessive land reclamation and cultivation happened in the 1960s, the desert forced itself forward as humans retreated with no places to hide in the 1970s, the desert and humans were deadly enemies in the 1980s, humans forced the desert back in the 1990s, and in the new century we will fuss over the industrial chain . . ."

The greenish-yellow desert is the under-painting of Ordos. In my memory, it meant endless dust and winds. There is a joke that goes like this, "In Ordos, even eggs are filled with sand." As for the claim that "Among the lowered grass in the breeze grazed flocks and herds in the 1950s", I doubt it is true, as more than 200 years ago there was an anonymous poet in the Qing Dynasty who composed a poem that described Ordos' natural scenery as such, "Stretching to the farthest end of the sky, Ordos is packed with barren, infertile and steep mountains, the sand willow trees sprout in late April. Blasts of yellowish wind blow from morning till night."

The desert marched forward, the people retreated, sands covered fertile farmland, and a withering yellow overwhelmed Ordos. The

Maowusu Desert and the Kubuqi Desert have writhed for thousands of years like two giant yellow dragons, stirring up their neighbors in all directions. Early this century, I once entertained an environmentalist writer from Japan who was on a special tour of the Maowusu Desert. She told me that the dust of the Maowusu Desert had already drifted to Japan. She wanted to stay in a room with an en-suite bathroom, but I searched every hotel in Uxin Banner and could not find one. I eventually found her a standard room with a bathroom in Dongsheng, the prefecture of Ih Ju League (currently the Dongsheng District of Ordos), but no water came out of the taps, so I had to get the hotel maid to find my guest a big plastic bucket to hold water for her.

It was early summer then, but the Japanese writer still wore a gauze mask to filter out the dust. She kept wiping her face with wet tissues along the way, explaining to me that her skin could not bear the dry weather and needed moisturizing. Later, she wanted to go to the restroom. Not until after we had driven quite some distance did we finally spot a public latrine near a small village. She rushed inside but immediately dashed out again with a face purple and swelling like a ripe eggplant. She squatted down and retched with mouth wide open, shaking her head again and again, "How horrible! How horrible!"

I knew what she had seen. I could picture how filthy a village latrine in Uxin Banner would be. With shame I turned my face away, but her strange cries pricked my eardrum like a needle. The image of the Japanese woman stooping and retching burnt into my brain like a soldering iron. Whenever I think of it, my heart shudders.

For years I have wondered, when will the Maowusu Desert be

modernized? When will it take on a new appearance? Could we present only primitiveness and backwardness to the world? Could the Maowusu Desert become merely a destination for novelty-seekers? When would the people feel human honor and dignity?

Back on the road, past events kept springing to mind. I was lost in thought when suddenly our driver screamed and startled me. I looked and saw a black shadow flash past my eyes as if pouncing onto my face, and I felt uneasy. The driver said, "The bushes by the roadside are full of pheasants, they nearly broke my windshield! Look! Are the birds in that lake swans? There are so many!"

Indeed, a great pool of bluish water lay to the south of the road. The local Mongolians call lakes *haizi*. Floating on the *haizi* were countless flocks of birds, almost covering the entire surface of the water. From the distance there came quacks, chirps and tweets. Looking more carefully, I found that there were many white swans swimming around the lake. I knew these birds only stayed temporarily at this nameless *haizi* in the middle of the Maowusu Desert during their southward migration, stopping to rest and refresh themselves until they regained enough strength and were ready to fly again. Row after row of wild geese flew across the blue sky<sup>9</sup>. The hustle-bustle of birds in the air and on the earth brought me back to a bygone event.

In the spring of 2009, at the invitation of the American Asby Foundation, Mr. Liu Qingbang and I started a one-month writing project in a seaside villa on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. Facing the swirling Victoria Harbor, the villa was surrounded by an impenetrable forest, and wild elks and raccoons often appeared on the lawns in front and out back of the house. Early every morning, little squirrels perching on large cedars woke me from my dreams



with their merry songs. Strolling down the dark forest trails, I often saw wooden boards with drawings of bear heads hanging on the trees, warning people to watch out for grizzly bears. But the locals told us that grizzly bears in this forest had never harmed anybody, as there were enough berries and leaves for them to eat and they seldom ventured towards human habitation.

The small town where I stayed is called “Oyster villa”, because it abounds with oysters. Piles of oyster shells were heaped up by the seashore like hills, glittering with bright silver light in the sun. Blowing in the wind was the moist fishy smell of the ocean. In town there lived a woman named Dio. She was plump with a rosy face and I could see overflowing between her eyebrows the burning passion of America. We met her in the chapel. After learning that we were Chinese authors, she cordially invited us to visit her house. At dusk the following day, Ms. Dong Mei, the translator from the foundation, took us to Dio’s house. It was a country cottage, and a brass plate inscribed with the construction date hung at the gate. Dong Mei informed us that this edifice was probably built during Lincoln’s time, almost as old as America itself.

Qingbang sighed, “America is so young, but its ecological environment is so ancient.”

Dio and another elegant woman greeted us at the door. She was Barbara, an original founder of the American Asby Foundation. It seemed that Dio had made careful preparations for inviting such a distinguished guest. We drank red wine and praised Dio’s cooking, which made her very excited. During the meal, Dio told us that she usually lives on a rural farm in Oregon and only returns to her seaside cottage for vacations in the offseason. With just over twenty *mu* of land and farmhouse, Dio planted vegetables and raised cows