Case 26: Dirty Clean Water Advocacy

Jennie is a 16-year-old girl living in the United States with Chinese immigrant parents who don't speak English. Her parents are both avid supporters of President Trump's plan for the Dirty Water Order, which would essentially remove protection for wetlands, and in doing so, eliminate clean drinking water sources for more than 117 million Americans. Jennie suspects that they don't fully understand the scope of the bill, but doesn't want to risk upsetting them by bringing it up and insinuating that they are uninformed. Chinese culture dictates that one should always be respectful to one's elders, and parents especially should be regarded with high reverence.

One day, someone from Clean Water Action knocks on Jennie's door and asks if she'll sign a petition against Trump's Dirty Water Order. The organization's goal was to achieve 100,000 signatures in 30 days in order to mandate a government response. They were currently at 99,562 signatures, and it was the last day of the petition drive.

Unfortunately, Clean Water Action can only count signatures of those who are at least 18. Jennie's disappointed that she can't sign the petition when she feels so strongly about the topic, but offers to advocate on behalf of the petition to her friends' parents that very night. Meanwhile, the advocates from Clean Water Action ask if there was anyone over 18 years old in her house that would be willing to sign. Jennie calls her parents over and decides to lie about the petition by "mistranslating" into Chinese the idea that this is a petition to see how many people were in support of the Dirty Water Order. Both her parents are more than happy to sign.

Jennie can't help but feel conflicted. The next day, it's announced that Clean Water Action has reached the number of signatures required with exactly one more than necessary. A few months later, Trump's Order is rescinded, to her parents' severe disappointment. If Jennie hadn't convinced her parents to sign without properly informed consent, there was a high chance that the Order wouldn't have been overturned. She feels guilty that she lied to her parents, but at the same time, she's glad that she was able to protect the environment as well as the drinking water for hundreds of millions of people.

Study Questions:
1. What should Jennie have done? Was it wrong to lie to her parents to promote her own values?
2. To what extent can one be held morally culpable for lying for the sake of good? Are lies, or mistruths, inherently wrong?
3. Does being an ethical translator mean that one only provides a word for word text? Or is there room for a translator to say or write something more eloquently/concisely than the original author in any case?
4. Imagine that Clean Water Action hadn't acquired enough signatures, so that Jennie's parents' signatures had no effect on the Order in the end. Is this more or less wrong than lying in the original case?

Sources:
1. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/06/climate/trump-water-pollution-wotus-replacement.html
2. https://www.nrdc.org/trump-watch/epas-new-dirty-water-rule-risks-millions-peoples-drinking-water-supply
3. https://www.cleanwateraction.org/
4. https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/about