



# “Magic and the Mind”: The Impact of Cultural and Linguistic Background on the Perception of Characters in *Harry Potter*

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## Abstract

While there has been a multitude of studies of *Harry Potter* since its first appearance, including studies analyzing individual characters, social classes in the wizarding world, and a number that examine the “*Harry Potter* phenomenon” as a whole, there are none that systematically analyze and compare the characters in terms of how they are perceived. This paper examines and compares the perceptions of the personality of seven characters in *Harry Potter* held by individuals who have read the books or watched the movies of *Harry Potter* in either English or Chinese language. The study was undertaken through an online survey that used the Ten-Item Personality Inventory as the core instrument. It was found that Chinese respondents were significantly more likely to score the characters higher in Extraversion, Agreeableness and Openness, although other factors, including gender and the respondents’ “exposure” to *Harry Potter*, also had a significant impact on perceptions. These findings both confirm various other studies that have examined cross-cultural differences in perceptions and extend previous work by applying it to another domain, namely the analysis of fictional characters. The findings carry important implications for, among others, teachers of multicultural student groups and translators of children’s fiction.

**Keywords** Harry Potter · Intercultural perceptions of characters · Psychology of literature

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## Introduction

Since the first book hit the market in 1997, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has become a global literary phenomenon. The series' phenomenal popularity has led to much analysis of the work. However, there has been no work on the way in which the perception of the characters in *Harry Potter* might vary from one cultural or linguistic group of readers/viewers to another. The study reported in this paper seeks to explore this gap and, specifically, aims to answer the following question: in what ways and to what extent does an individual's cultural and linguistic background affect their perceptions of the characters in *Harry Potter*?

Rowling's world not only reflects numerous elements of contemporary British culture, but also provides the solid grounding required to form rich and nuanced characters that are open to different perceptions and interpretations by the reader. In addition, the extended time setting of the series over seven years provides a timeframe for meaningful development of complex, dynamic characters. These differences in the perceptions of key characters and their actions, in turn, provide a basis for extensive analysis (Thunissen, 2010).

*Harry Potter* allows for a highly mimetic approach to character analysis; i.e., the characters can be treated as similar, or close to, the complexity level of real people (Nikolajeva, 2002). In forming an understanding of high-mimetic characters, readers imagine the characters' existences outside of the limits of the text, drawing on their own experiences, including the social and cultural framework they are most familiar with. It can be expected, then, that readers with vastly different cultural backgrounds will "retrieve" different versions of a character from the text (Hochman, 1985). While the reader, particularly of children's literature, is guided by the author to lean towards one particular interpretation of a character (Culler, 1975), when considering characters with extensive backstory or morally grey roles (such as Severus Snape, in *Harry Potter*), the existence of "textual gaps" can be expected to inform vastly different interpretations of character by each reader (Iser, 1974). This attention to the individual responses of the real reader constitutes part of the wider field of reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1995) and reception-studies approaches to textual analysis (Jauss, 1984).

The genesis of the question investigated in this paper was the first author's observation that many of the comments made by her English-language friends (and in online chat forums) about central characters in the series were somewhat different than those made by her Chinese-language friends (and in Chinese online forums). A great deal of research has been done in the psychology of differences in social perceptions, and particularly the impact of cultural and linguistic background on these perceptions. Additionally, as previously mentioned, research has also been done on the impact of a reader's background on their perception of literary characters. These works are discussed in the next section.

## Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

This section provides an understanding of how an individual's perceptions of literary characters are influenced by a variety of factors. There are four sub-parts to this analysis: first, the development of characters by the author; second, the interaction of the reader with the characters by way of empathy; third, the broader psychological issue of how individuals form impressions of and make inferences about other people, including the impact of cultural influences on that process; and, fourth, other factors.

### Development of Character by the Author

In the critique of literary characters, the “flat and round,” “static and dynamic” metric introduced by E.M. Forster (2010) is a useful tool for analysing the complexity and development of a character. The type of change that makes a character dynamic can be either chronological or ethical (Nikolajeva, 2002). With the key characters of the novel being teenagers, chronological change is naturally expected, as the characters age and mature (Whited, 2004); however, as a fantasy/adventure series, significant events (such as Voldemort's resurrection, Sirius' death and Dumbledore's death) can also result in ethical change in the characters. In contrast, the adult characters of the novel are much more static, as is typical in children's fiction, since they are rarely the focus of the work (Joosen, 2018). Furthermore, the use of “stock characters” and archetypes in the novel has led to the creation of several flat characters, most notably Voldemort. Even rounder adult characters, like Snape and Dumbledore, can be easily identified as fulfilling a certain archetype, e.g. the mean teacher and the wise, approachable leader (Natov, 2001). A flat character typically has one emphasised trait, can be described as either “good” or “evil,” and is easily predictable. Conversely, round characters have a spectrum of traits, both positive and negative, typically revealed through a range of methods (e.g. contrast, repetition, similarity), and are not easily predictable (Nikolajeva, 2002).

While Forster's model is useful in the analysis of character complexity, when considering the perception of readers, the opacity/transparency of the character is of equal or greater importance. An opaque character is characterised primarily through description and narration, including clothes, names and facial expressions, and with some direct speech. A transparent character will be additionally characterised through close following of their actions and reactions, as well as some level of thought and internal reflection. In constructing a character, a character at the opaque end of the spectrum will involve greater incorporation of the reader's experience and assumptions, while the narrator will provide much greater guidance in the construction of a highly transparent character (Nikolajeva, 2002). In *Harry Potter*, as in most novels, the non-central characters are considerably more opaque—e.g. Dumbledore, Snape, Voldemort and Malfoy—while the central group of characters—Harry, Ron and Hermione—have higher levels of transparency. The story, narrated largely from a third-person internal narrator focalized through Harry, gives the reader a strong insight into Harry's thoughts, contributing significantly to his characterisation. In

short, when analysing mimetic characters, the reader must make inferences and form impressions from limited information (typically descriptions, direct speech and actions) to construct a character, during the process of which they may assume traits unintended by the author (Nikolajeva, 2002).

### Reader Empathy with the Character

While characterisation is integral to the reader's perception, the level of reader interaction with the character, largely in the form of reader empathy, is of equal importance. In reading a novel, the reader will feel varying levels of empathy with the characters and other aspects of the fictional world (Keen, 2007). The empathetic experience of the reader can occur in a number of forms and intensities, not necessarily reliant on a strong level of reader/character resonance, or even complex characterisation. In fact, empathy with fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation and feeling, a phenomenon that is particularly evident in children's literature, with such iconic characters as Eeyore from *Winnie-the-Pooh*, or the "Lost Boys" in *Peter Pan* (Keen, 2007). In particular, characters that have undergone hardship can invoke stronger feelings of empathy amongst all readers: Harry Potter, the poor abused orphan boy, or Tom Riddle, the bullied child in a struggling 1930s orphanage, invite the reader to feel sympathy for, if not to empathise with, their plights. The intensity of that empathetic move relies greatly on factors such as age, experience, and the cultural and historical situation of the reader.

Although much reader empathy centres on character, it is also possible for the reader to feel situational empathy, which relates primarily to aspects of plot and circumstance, rather than an identification with a particular character (Keen, 2007). This type of empathy relies much less on the reader's abilities of role-taking and imagination, and more on a recognition of their prior (or current) experience. It can be expected, then, that readers who are familiar with the cultural and historical backdrop of the story are more likely to empathise. For example, a reader who has attended a British boarding school is more likely to have experiences in tune with that of a Hogwarts student than one who has not. Another type of reader empathy is invoked by emotionally charged states of a character, or emotionally intense events in the text. This is particularly common when said emotions are negative in their nature, such as grief, suffering and hopelessness. This could be invoked by a number of canonical events, such as the death of Sirius, the fall of the Ministry of Magic, or Ron leaving the Forest of Dean.

While emotions that invoke empathy are typically fairly universally felt, on occasion empathy can be influenced by the prejudices and stereotypes held by the reader. In particular, this can influence the reference standards for interpretation of actions and reactions by the reader, who may apply a distorted lens to the text or, more likely, a particular character, based on these prejudices. This phenomenon is more likely in relation to characters with whom the reader has little first-hand experience, including older characters, characters of a different socioeconomic background, and characters of a different cultural group (Keen, 2007). In *Harry Potter*, a prime example is Dumbledore, who, as an elderly, respected person of power, is likely to be seen

as a less approachable, but “stronger” person by readers in a society with greater power distance, such as China. In this case, the reader’s preconceived perceptions of people in positions of power can colour their interpretation of Dumbledore’s actions. This is a matter explored further in the next section of the paper.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the text, through its depiction of events and emotions, manipulates the reader to feel empathy with the protagonist (and his/her friends and allies). However, in a text such as *Harry Potter*, where many of the non-central characters are also complex, dynamic and well developed, it is likely that many readers will feel empathy with characters outside of Harry’s circle of friends and allies. In readers of *Harry Potter*, this phenomenon is enhanced by the Hogwarts house system, which often prompts readers to assign themselves to one of the four houses. This house alliance promotes reader group identification (anchored, in psychological terms, in social identity theory—see, for example, Tajfel and Turner 1979), encouraging them to empathise more with characters in “their” house than others.

### **Impact of Psychological Processes on Character Interpretation**

Our understanding of the way readers interpret characters can be furthered by applying the lens of person-perception psychology, the focus of which is the process by which individuals form impressions of and make inferences about others (Aronson and Aronson, 2018).

Person perceptions have been researched through two primary lenses: impression formation and the inference of mental states. Impression formation research examines the process by which the perceiver pieces together information about another person to form a global impression of them. While there are competing theories about the process, it is agreed that perceivers seek coherence and unity in the impressions they form. Also, they typically adjust their impressions based on what they observe in the information that comes to hand, though perceivers have different tendencies to perceive personal qualities such as honesty as either fixed or changing (Dweck, 1996). Of particular interest in relation to this paper is that there are clear differences in person perception among different cultural groups (Mishra, 2001; Nisbett et al., 2001). Indeed, how individuals perceive not just others, but also themselves and the individuality of the person, varies markedly across cultures (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). For example, while in Western cultures it is more common for the person to be modelled as independent, in many Asian cultures, personality is constructed on the basis of an interdependent model of the person (Markus and Kitayama, 1998), reflecting the difference between societies in which individualism (the preferences, needs and rights of individuals) is paramount and those in which collectivism (identification with collective entities such as family, tribe or nation, and acceptance of the norms and duties imposed by that entity) is of greatest importance (Triandis, 1995). There are other cross-cultural differences in impression formation—for example, the greater willingness of Americans to assign fixed, enduring traits to targets than Chinese (Chiu et al., 1997) and the greater likelihood for East Asians to focus on contextual evidence, such as a description of the target by a

friend, in contrast to Americans who relied more upon direct evidence from or about a target (Ames and Peng, 1999).

The second lens through which person perceptions are viewed focuses on the inference of mental states—in other words, how do we know what others are thinking and feeling? Research suggests that the basis on which people assess another's mental state varies by culture. For example, Knowles and Ames (1999) found that Western cultures stress a “norm of authenticity,” such that a person's external actions are consistent with their internal attitudes, in Eastern cultures displays of self-centred desires or to “speak one's mind” are sometimes considered impolite and, in certain situations, slightly bizarre. Other evidence (Ames et al., 2001) shows that Americans tend to value “what they say” over “what they don't say,” while the reverse is true for Chinese. In an overall sense, speakers of different languages are likely to be more (or less) perceptive of certain behavioural codes in individuals (including, one can safely assume, fictional characters), leading to different inferences (Boroditsky, 2001, 2011).

There has been only limited psychological research on the traits of fictional characters (see, for example, Rosenberg and Jones' work on Theodore Dreiser's *A Gallery of Women*, 1972) and no work that has combined research on cross-cultural perceptions and fictional characters. In this respect, this study breaks new ground both in literature and in psychology.

### Other Factors Impacting the Perception of Characters

While cultural and linguistic backgrounds are likely significant factors influencing person perceptions of fictional characters, a number of other things are also potentially important. In the context of this study, one is overall “exposure” to the *Harry Potter* series. As a seven-book series, as one moves through the books, the characters grow and develop in complexity and their history or “backstory” becomes apparent. This is especially true for the teenage characters, many of whom undergo significant change as they grow older. It can therefore be expected that the reader's (or viewer's) perception of the characters will also change (Behr, 2005). An early criticism (Tucker, 1999) made after only three books in the series had been published, that the books contained various social and personality stereotypes, is largely obviated as the characters become more complex and multidimensional. The perceiver's age can also potentially influence their interpretation of moral themes in the series (Whitney et al., 2005); for instance, older readers might find deeper meaning in the moral sensitivity, judgement and motivation of characters, especially those that are morally ambiguous. Since individuals might have encountered the *Harry Potter* series through books, movies, or both, it is important to note that an individual's perception of facial expressions and the emotions they reflect (Jack et al., 2012), as well as the emotions conveyed by and interpreted around voice, are heavily influenced by cultural background (Gendron et al., 2014). This might have a significant impact on people who have seen more movies than they have read books. This is a specific case of a wider issue, namely, how different communication modes provide different interpretive frameworks and repertoires (Cartmell and Whelehan, 2005; Sanders,

2016; Serafini, 2010). It should also be noted that translations of the series inevitably result in variations of meaning, particularly in relation to matters that are highly culture-specific (Davies, 2003). These variations can change how the characters are interpreted; therefore, it is important to know the language(s) in which people have encountered the books or the movies.

It would be too ambitious in such an exploratory study to hypothesize precisely what form differences in the perceptions of *Harry Potter* characters might take. However, we can make some broad predictions and refine them after examining the results of the study. Here, then, are two expectations:

- (1) There will be statistically significant differences in the perception of various characters in *Harry Potter* between those who read/viewed the series in English and those who read/viewed the series in Chinese.
- (2) The perception of the traits of the characters will be significantly influenced by various other factors, such as gender, age, and “exposure” to the books and movies.

## Methodology

In order to explore the research question underlying this study, several key matters needed to be addressed: what particular aspects of the perception of the characters should be assessed, and by what means? On what basis should the characters be chosen? Who should be the subjects of the research (in other words, whose perceptions would be studied)? Besides the language and cultural background of the subjects, what other variables should be measured that might explain differences in perceptions? How should the data be collected? And how should the results be analysed? The following sub-sections explain each of these matters in turn.

### Measurement of the Dependent Variables

Key aspects of person perceptions are the attributions made about the personality of the person perceived. It is widely accepted that personality trait factors (the underlying structure of personality) are universal and consist of five main dimensions; hence, we refer to the Big Five personality trait structure (McCrae and Costa, 1997; Schmitt et al., 2007). These five personality traits are labelled Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism (or Emotional Stability), and Openness, and all include a cluster of correlated sub-traits (Matthews et al., 2003). A brief explanation of each of the five traits is provided in Table 1.

It is important to note that the development of the five personality factors greatly simplify work on person perceptions, as they are used as a consistent global measure of personality. Thus, in the context of this study, it can be expected that while individuals from different cultures might assess the personality of a specific character in *Harry Potter* differently, they should have no difficulty relating to the conceptual notions of each of the Big Five factors.

**Table 1** Sub-traits of the Big Five personality trait structure

Extraversion	Includes traits such as energy, level of positive emotions, assertiveness, sociability, talkativeness and the tendency to seek stimulation in the company of others
Agreeableness	Suggests a tendency to be compassionate and cooperative as opposed to acting suspiciously and antagonistically towards others, and is often a measure of whether a person is generally good-tempered or not
Conscientiousness	Demonstrates a tendency to be organized and dependable, show self-discipline, aim for achievement, and prefer planned rather than spontaneous behaviour, high levels of which often result in what is perceived as stubborn or even obsessive
Neuroticism	The way in which unpleasant emotions are experienced, but also refers to the degree of emotional stability and impulse control a person possesses
Openness	Reflects the degree of intellectual curiosity, creativity and preference for novelty a person has, including an interest in unusual or adventurous events

Source Atkinson et al. (2000)

To assess the perceptions that our subjects had of different characters in *Harry Potter*, the core measurement instrument we used was the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003). This instrument measures the Big Five personality factors using two questions for each factor and a seven-point scale of agreement or disagreement. For example, a subject would be asked to choose one of these options—Disagree strongly/Disagree moderately/Disagree a little/Neither agree nor disagree/Agree a little/Agree moderately/Agree strongly—as to whether Hermione Granger is “Anxious, easily upset”.

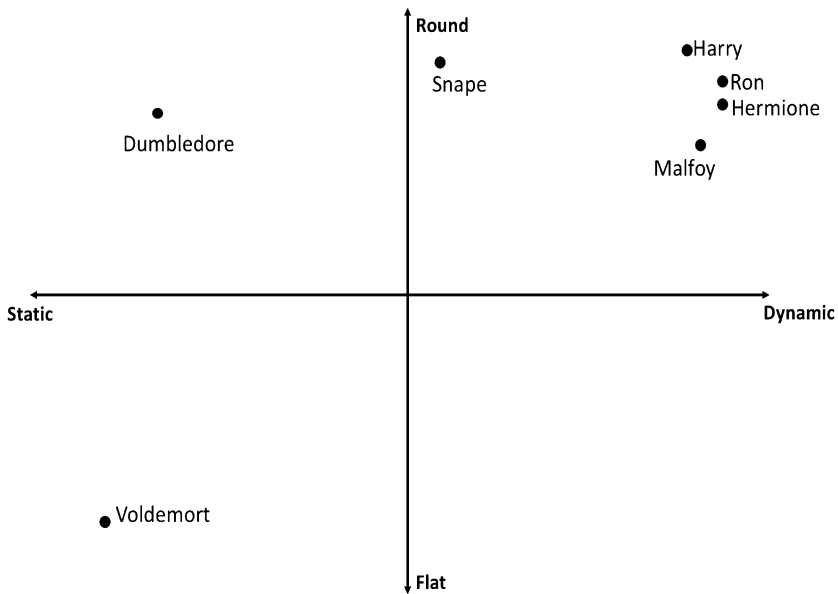
Another reason for choosing TIPI, besides its being a widely used and respected instrument, was the existence of already validated translations of it in Chinese.

## Choice of Characters

The choice of characters that the subjects were asked to analyse was based mainly on their relative importance in the series. This included their “screen time,” the complexity and ambiguity of their morals and personality, and the amount of change they underwent through the series. Since it was important to achieve a balance of “good” and “bad” characters, the “side” the character was on was also considered. On the basis of these factors, seven characters were chosen: Harry Potter, as the protagonist; Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, as the other two main characters in the series, about whom we know almost as much as we do about Harry; Lord Voldemort, as the antagonist; Draco Malfoy, who, although he doesn’t play a critical role in the story, arguably changes more than any other character in the series, and draws the reader’s/viewer’s attention to Harry’s school experiences; Albus Dumbledore, for the controversy about his motives and the guiding role that he plays for Harry; and finally Severus Snape, as one of the most controversial characters, especially considering his complex backstory and high level of moral ambiguity.

Using Forster’s (2010) criteria for round/flat and static/dynamic characters identified earlier, the seven characters are—schematically and subjectively—placed on a two-dimensional figure of those metrics, shown below.





### Independent Variables

Although the central independent variable of interest in this study is the cultural and linguistic background of subjects,<sup>1</sup> the following variables were also measured: nationality<sup>2</sup>; age; gender; the number of books in the series read; the number of movies seen; and the language(s) in which an individual has read or seen the series.

### Data Collection and Research Subjects

Data was collected by means of an online survey in Australia and in China. In China, the survey was distributed via online *Harry Potter* fan forums, selected to consider diverse opinions and aspects of the fans, and therefore provide a generally representative sample of Chinese readers. In Australia, it was sent to high school students through an email with the link to the survey embedded. While school students are at a glance a different reader group to those responding in fan forums, the survey was entirely voluntary, so respondents are those who are already familiar with and

<sup>1</sup> Some people are bicultural (have the attitudes and customs of two cultural groups) and/or bilingual (equally proficient in two languages). Even bilingual individuals, however, might consider that one of those languages is their primary language.

<sup>2</sup> Nationality—a person's citizenship—should not be confused with, and needs to be considered separately from, their cultural and linguistic background.

**Table 2** Characteristics of the respondents

	English language respondents		Chinese language respondents	
	Number of responses	Percentage of responses	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Nationality				
Australian	150	87	0	0
Chinese	0	0	63	100
Other	22	13	0	0
Gender				
Male	36	21	7	11
Female	136	79	56	89
11–15	99	58	27	43
16–20	72	42	11	19
21–25	0	0	24	38
Number of books read				
None	16	9	2	3
One	13	8	2	3
Two	7	4	0	0
Three	5	3	0	0
Four	4	2	1	2
Five	8	5	1	2
Six	4	2	2	3
Seven	115	67	55	87
Number of movies seen				
None	3	2	3	5
One	1	1	1	2
Two	2	1	1	2
Three	5	3	1	2
Four	5	3	1	2
Five	3	2	3	5
Six	6	3	2	3
Seven	3	2	4	6
Eight	144	84	48	76
Number of languages read in				
None	16	9	2	3
One	150	87	39	62
Two	6	3	22	35

interested in *Harry Potter*. Within the three-week timeframe that was allowed, usable (i.e. fully completed) responses were received from 172 people using the English survey and 63 using the Chinese survey.

**Table 3** Statistical differences in extraversion scores of characters

	English		Chinese		Level of significance
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	
HP	3.92	1.28	4.32	1.50	0.05
RW	4.92	1.23	5.58	1.12	0.00
HG	4.65	1.37	5.43	1.06	0.00
DM	4.23	1.36	4.25	1.39	0.33
SS	2.65	1.26	2.45	1.30	0.19
AD	4.36	1.34	5.02	1.17	0.00
LV	4.36	1.61	3.65	1.63	0.00

The higher the mean score, the more that the character is seen as 'high' on that trait. The conventional cut-off points for levels of significance for differences between mean scores are 0.05 (there is a 5% likelihood that the result is different by chance), 0.01 (there is a 1% likelihood that the result is different by chance) and 0.00 (there is less than a one-in-one thousand likelihood that the result is different by chance). If the level of significance is greater than 0.05 (say 0.06), the difference in the means is not considered statistically significant

*HP* Harry Potter, *RW* Ron Weasley, *HG* Hermione Granger, *DM* Draco Malfoy, *SS* Severus Snape, *AD* Albus Dumbledore, *LV* Lord Voldemort

**Table 4** Statistical differences in agreeableness scores of characters

	English		Chinese		Significance
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	
HP	4.11	1.07	4.85	1.31	0.00
RW	3.76	1.13	4.30	0.94	0.00
HG	4.07	1.00	4.08	0.69	0.20
DM	2.15	1.07	2.95	1.10	0.00
SS	2.60	1.22	4.15	1.28	0.00
AD	5.07	1.20	4.55	1.31	0.08
LV	1.95	1.19	2.45	1.16	0.00

## Data Analysis

Two types of analysis were conducted on the data. First, tests of statistical significance (t-tests) were made of differences in the mean scores that the subjects from each of the two samples—English-language and Chinese-language—on each of the five personality traits for each of the seven characters. Second, (Pearson) correlation coefficients were computed to look for significant relationships between the independent variables—age, number of books read, number of movies watched, number

**Table 5** Statistical differences in conscientiousness scores of characters

	English		Chinese		Significance
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	
HP	4.36	1.31	4.20	1.38	0.05
RW	3.01	1.13	3.12	1.13	0.61
HG	6.22	1.19	6.17	1.08	0.77
DM	4.16	1.29	3.97	1.36	0.85
SS	5.49	1.27	5.92	1.22	0.01
AD	5.73	1.31	6.08	1.10	0.01
LV	4.88	1.55	4.93	1.40	0.81

**Table 6** Statistical differences in neuroticism scores of characters

	English		Chinese		Significance
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	
HP	3.85	1.31	3.12	1.14	0.00
RW	3.22	1.02	2.68	1.39	0.15
HG	4.22	1.13	4.15	1.21	0.64
DM	3.15	1.19	3.13	1.36	0.77
SS	4.43	1.35	4.80	1.43	0.05
AD	5.52	1.25	5.62	1.20	0.01
LV	3.00	1.42	3.12	1.68	0.09

of books read *and* movies watched, number of languages in which the books were read, gender and language—and the subjects' perceptions of the characters.

## Results

### Characteristics of the Respondents

A profile of the respondents is provided in Table 2. A majority of both English-language and Chinese-language respondents were female. Almost all of the English-language respondents were aged 11–20 whereas the range for the Chinese-language respondents was somewhat wider: 11–25. This probably reflects differences in the sample frames and the means by which the data was collected. Although in both groups well over half the respondents had seen all the movies and/or read all the books, a significantly higher percentage of Chinese had read all the books, with over a third of them having done so in more than one language (typically Chinese and English). On the other hand, a higher percentage of the English group had seen all the movies compared to the Chinese respondents.

## Differences in the Perceptions of Characters Held by the Two Groups

As explained above, comparisons were made of the mean scores of the two language groups for each of the seven characters in relation to each of the Big Five personality factors. The results are set out in Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6. We will discuss the results under sub-headings of each of the five factors. We are interested both in areas where there are statistically significant differences in perceptions<sup>3</sup> and in areas where there are not.

### Extraversion

As shown in Table 3, when the extraversion scores for the two language groups were compared, there were a number of highly significant differences. Notably, for five of the seven characters, the Chinese respondents scored the extraversion of those characters higher than the English respondents. This tendency was particularly prevalent in characters that had been given relatively high extraversion scores by both groups. The exception is Lord Voldemort, whom Chinese respondents scored significantly lower on extraversion. It is also interesting to note that for both groups, Lord Voldemort had the largest standard deviation, indicating a much higher level of variance in views about him. In the case of two characters, there were not significant differences—both groups saw Draco Malfoy as being in the middle of the extraversion–introversion scale, while there was agreement between the two groups that Severus Snape was very introverted.

### Agreeableness

Table 4 shows that the scores for Agreeableness from the two groups have a highly significant difference in relation to five of the characters. It is notable that the Chinese participants scored the agreeableness of the characters much higher than the English group on six of the seven characters, with the exception of Dumbledore, whom English readers scored as more agreeable; however, the difference was not statistically significant. Dumbledore was also the character seen as most agreeable by the English group, whereas the Chinese group saw Harry as the most agreeable character. There was agreement by the two groups that Voldemort was a highly disagreeable character. It is also interesting to note that the standard deviation of the agreeableness scores are on average the lowest of the five personality factors, indicating a high level of agreement within each group about the seven characters on this dimension.

### Conscientiousness

In relation to Conscientiousness, Table 5 shows that, unlike for the previous two factors, there are relatively few (three) characters where there is a significant difference

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<sup>3</sup> An explanation of what constitutes a statistically significant difference is provided in a note to Table 3.

**Table 7** Statistical differences in openness scores of characters

	English		Chinese		Significance
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	
HP	5.13	1.19	5.15	1.19	0.24
RW	4.02	1.10	3.73	1.08	0.58
HG	5.12	1.21	5.18	1.20	0.40
DM	3.86	1.19	4.23	1.22	0.00
SS	4.08	1.16	5.45	1.25	0.00
AD	5.52	1.34	5.88	1.21	0.08
LV	4.27	1.45	5.15	1.59	0.00

between the two groups. There is agreement that Hermione Granger is highly conscientious and that Ron Weasley is the least conscientious. After Hermione, Dumbledore and Snape are seen as the most conscientious. It is interesting that the Chinese group gave higher scores than the English group to all three adult characters, but lower scores than the English group to the four teenage characters.

### Neuroticism

Table 6 sets out the results in relation to Neuroticism. Both groups regard Dumbledore as the most neurotic character, though only moderately so, followed by Snape. On four of the characters—Ron, Hermione, Draco and Voldemort—there are no statistically significant differences between the two groups. For the three characters that do show significant differences, the largest is in the scores for Harry, though neither group perceives him as neurotic. Interestingly, there is a similar trend to the scores for Conscientiousness in relation to differences for adult and teenage characters.

### Openness

The results for Openness are shown in Table 7. Both groups, English and Chinese, regard Dumbledore as the most open character. Draco and Ron are seen as the least open characters by the English and Chinese groups, respectively, but in each case as only slightly “closed”. It can be seen that although there is a significant difference for only three of the characters, those differences are highly significant, reflecting very wide differences in the perception of those characters between the two groups. For example, the Chinese scored Severus Snape’s openness as 5.45, the second highest of the seven characters, whereas the English group scored him at just over four, the third lowest score in the group. The difference of one and a half points on a seven-point scale makes the difference one of the most significant of the scores for all the traits.

### Correlation Between the Independent and Dependent Variables

In order to get an overview of the relationships between the dependent variables (the thirty-five assessments of the chosen characters—the Big Five personality trait

**Table 8** Correlation coefficients for Harry Potter

	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Language	0.143*	0.312**	- 0.133*	- 0.292**	- 0.078
Gender	0.438**	0.155*	0.111	0.117	0.157*
Age	- 0.027	0.118	- 0.012	- 0.107	0.052
Number of books	0.098	0.078	- 0.094	- 0.081	- 0.100
Number of movies	0.053	0.000	- 0.037	0.092	0.024
Books and movies	0.097	0.055	- 0.086	- 0.008	- 0.057
Number of languages	0.079	0.117	- 0.057	- 0.129	- 0.141*

If there were a perfect correlation between variables, the coefficient would be 1.00. If there were no correlation between two variables, the coefficient would be 0.00. Thus, the higher the number, the more the two variables are related to one another. Language was coded as 0 = English-language respondent, 1 = Chinese-language respondent; gender was coded as 0 = male, 1 = female; age, number of books read, number of movies watched, number of books read and movies watched, and number of languages in which the books were read were all coded as continuous variables. As an example of how to interpret the data, look at the table above. First, the language of the respondent (English or Chinese) is significantly correlated with four of the five personality traits for Harry. The English-language respondents scored him lower than the Chinese respondents on Extraversion and Agreeableness, but higher for Conscientiousness and Neuroticism. Only in the case of Openness is there no statistically significant relationship between the respondents' language and their perceptions of Harry. Second, gender was significantly related to perceptions of Harry on three of the five personality traits. In each of those cases, females saw him as higher on those traits than did males. Third, the only other significant correlation was in relation to number of languages in which the books were read and the perceptions of Harry's Openness. Since the correlation was negative (- 0.141), this means that the more languages in which the books had been read by the respondent, the less likely Harry was to be seen as Open

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 (95% confidence) level; 2-tailed test, \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 (99% confidence) level; 2-tailed test

**Table 9** Correlation coefficients for Ron Weasley

	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Language	0.279**	0.222**	- 0.034	- 0.110	- 0.036
Gender	0.141*	- 0.054	0.020	0.010	0.137*
Age	0.077	0.074	- 0.020	- 0.112	- 0.056
Number of books	0.159*	- 0.108	- 0.144*	- 0.027	0.105
Number of movies	0.092	- 0.033	- 0.083	- 0.013	0.049
Books and movies	0.162*	- 0.094	- 0.146*	- 0.026	0.100
Number of languages	0.185**	0.052	- 0.042	- 0.012	0.023

**Table 10** Correlation coefficients for Hermione Granger

	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Language	0.235**	− 0.071	− 0.018	− 0.032	− 0.055
Gender	0.162*	0.138*	0.356**	0.054	0.107
Age	0.125	0.040	− 0.001	0.031	− 0.057
Number of books	− 0.026	0.084	0.126	− 0.077	0.005
Number of movies	0.002	0.170**	0.213**	− 0.022	0.092
Books and movies	− 0.017	0.151*	0.204**	− 0.066	0.053
Number of languages	0.090	0.018	0.039	− 0.106	− 0.030

**Table 11** Correlation coefficient results for Draco Malfoy

	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Language	− 0.065	0.333**	− 0.013	0.021	0.214**
Gender	0.059	− 0.215**	0.145*	0.134*	0.162*
Age	0.074	0.105	0.044	− 0.126	0.091
Number of books	− 0.051	− 0.061	0.157*	0.063	0.188*
Number of movies	0.027	− 0.147*	0.105	− 0.180**	0.003
Books and movies	− 0.021	− 0.122	0.167*	− 0.053	0.134*
Number of languages	− 0.031	0.141*	0.032	0.071	0.230**

**Table 12** Correlation coefficients for Severus Snape

	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Language	− 0.086	0.414**	0.157*	0.132*	0.453**
Gender	− 0.149*	− 0.047	0.280**	0.152*	0.214**
Age	− 0.155*	0.182**	0.063	0.000	0.197**
Number of books	− 0.172**	− 0.024	0.131*	0.001	0.206**
Number of movies	− 0.259**	− 0.041	0.154*	− 0.017	0.033
Books and movies	− 0.261**	− 0.039	0.176**	− 0.008	0.162*
Number of languages	0.058	0.083	0.018	0.069	0.144*

assessments by seven characters) and the independent variables, correlation coefficients were computed. These are set out in Tables 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14; one table for each of the seven characters. We will examine each character in turn.

## Harry Potter

It is evident from the results in Table 8 for Harry Potter that language group has a significant impact on four of the five personality factors, the exception being



**Table 13** Correlation coefficients for Albus Dumbledore

	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Language	0.209**	– 0.119	0.162*	0.174**	0.111
Gender	0.090	0.174**	0.279**	0.241**	0.324**
Age	0.058	0.014	0.038	0.011	– 0.013
Number of books	0.109	0.068	0.151*	0.071	0.186**
Number of movies	0.005	0.040	0.104	0.027	0.091
Books and movies	0.079	0.069	0.163*	0.065	0.180**
Number of languages	0.077	– 0.010	0.076	0.076	0.042

**Table 14** Correlation coefficients for Lord Voldemort

	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Language	– 0.259**	0.222**	0.015	0.119	0.254**
Gender	0.013	– 0.252**	0.218**	0.074	0.151*
Age	0.037	0.031	0.010	– 0.121	0.088
Number of books	– 0.030	– 0.239**	0.266**	0.053	0.174**
Number of movies	0.028	– 0.248**	0.152*	0.12	0.027
Books and movies	– 0.006	– 0.302**	0.269**	– 0.027	0.137*
Number of languages	– 0.146*	0.095	0.068	0.069	0.124

Openness. The English sample scores him lower than the Chinese sample on Extraversion and Agreeableness, but higher for Conscientiousness and Neuroticism. Gender also has a significant impact on three of the factors, females rating him higher than males, with an especially significant correlation between gender and extraversion.

### Ron Weasley

From the results for Ron Weasley in Table 9, although there are only two factors—Extraversion and Agreeableness—that have significant correlations with language group, they are both highly significant, and show that the Chinese group scored these traits higher. Gender also had a significant impact on two of the factors—extraversion and openness—with females scoring the traits higher. The more books the respondents had read, the more likely Ron was to be perceived as extraverted, but the more likely it was that he would be scored low on Conscientiousness. However, the number of movies the respondents had seen did not have a significant impact on any of the factors. Interestingly, the number of languages the respondents had read the books in has a highly significant positive correlation with the scores for extraversion for Ron Weasley—those who had read the books in more than one language were more likely to perceive him as extraverted.

## Hermione Granger

Table 10 sets out the results for Hermione Granger. Unlike the results for the other characters, language group only had a significant impact on her scores for Extraversion, with the Chinese group scoring her higher. However, gender had a significant impact on three of the factors, with a particularly significant correlation with Conscientiousness, females scoring her higher, as was also the case in respect of Extraversion and Agreeableness. Though there were no significant correlations with the number of books read, the number of movies seen was also highly correlated with Hermione's scores for Conscientiousness and Agreeableness; those who had read more books or seen more movies were significantly more likely to see her as high on those traits. There was also a significant positive correlation between the number of books read *and* movies seen on those two traits. Clearly, exposure to movies was important in shaping perceptions of her, at least on those two dimensions.

## Draco Malfoy

There are a number of highly significant correlations for Draco Malfoy, as seen in Table 11. Language group had a highly significant impact on the scores for Agreeableness and Openness, the Chinese scoring him higher on both. The effect of gender was even more powerful, having a significant impact on four of the factors, males perceiving him as more Agreeable, but females scoring him higher on Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness. The number of books read had a significant positive impact on the scores for Conscientiousness and Openness, while the number of movies seen had a significant negative impact on Agreeableness and Neuroticism, showing that seeing fewer movies led respondents to score him higher on these traits. However, it is interesting that although the number of movies seen had a highly significant negative impact on the scores for Neuroticism, the combined number of movies and books did not correlate significantly with that score, suggesting that they cancelled one another out. The number of languages in which the respondents had read the books also had a significant positive impact on perceptions of Draco's Agreeableness and Openness.

## Severus Snape

As seen in Table 12, language group is significantly correlated with four of the personality factor scores for Severus Snape, in particular Agreeableness and Openness; in all four, the Chinese language respondents scored him higher. Gender also had a significant impact on all of the factors except Agreeableness. While males scored him as more extraverted, females scored him higher on Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness. Unlike the results for the other characters that the respondents were asked to rate, age also had highly significant impact on three traits; the older the respondent the more likely they were to see him as Agreeable and Open but the less likely they were to see him as Extraverted. Perceptions of Snape in relation to Extraversion, Conscientiousness and Openness were also heavily impacted by the

number of books and movies seen, being negatively correlated with Extraversion but positively with Conscientiousness and Openness.

### **Albus Dumbledore**

In relation to Albus Dumbledore, as shown in Table 13, there were significant correlations between language group and three of the factors—Extraversion, Conscientiousness and Neuroticism—with Chinese language respondents scoring those traits higher in all three cases. Gender had a highly significant impact on all of the factors except Extraversion, female respondents scoring him higher than males in all four cases. The only other factors that had a significant impact were the number of books read and the number of books read/movies watched: those who had read more of the books, and read more of the books *and* seen more of the movies, scored him higher on both Conscientiousness and Openness.

### **Lord Voldemort**

As can be seen in Table 14, there were a number of significant correlations for Lord Voldemort: all variables except age had a significant impact on at least one of the five personality factors, with the impact of language group and number of books read being particularly significant. While the English language respondents scored him higher on Extraversion, the Chinese scored him higher on both Agreeableness and Openness. Males were more likely to perceive him as agreeable, but the female respondents perceived him as both more conscientious and more open. The more books that were read, movies seen and exposure to both books and movies, the less likely he would be seen as agreeable. However, the more exposure to all three things was positively correlated with scores of him for Conscientiousness. Those who had read more of the books (and had a higher level of overall exposure to books and movies) also perceived him as more open. The number of languages in which respondents had read the series also had a negative impact on their perceptions of his Extraversion.

## **Discussion of the Results**

Standing back from the results of the mean differences between the groups on their perceptions of the characters on the five personality dimensions and the results of the correlation analysis, several important findings can be drawn from them.

Beginning with the mean difference tests, it is noteworthy that for three of the five personality dimensions—Extraversion, Agreeableness and Openness—there was a marked tendency for the Chinese respondents to score almost *all* of the characters higher than the English-language respondents. To try to explain this, it is useful to examine Schmitt et al.'s (2007) cross-cultural study of the Big Five personality factors. This was a study of personality types in 56 nations, based on several thousand respondents, the objective of which was to compare those countries' levels of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness. In

using the results of this study for our analysis, we should remember that the seven *Harry Potter* characters being assessed by the Chinese respondents are both foreign and, more specifically, British. While they are also somewhat foreign to Australians, the relative degree of cultural similarity between Australians and British is much higher than that between Chinese and British (Hofstede, 2001). Schmitt et al.'s study showed that, compared to countries comprising "Western Europe" (of which the UK is a part), "East Asian" countries had significantly *lower* levels of Extraversion, Agreeableness and Openness—in other words, all three of the dimensions on which the Chinese respondents judged the characters to be *higher*. These results can be explained by the fact that in the absence of almost any *direct* contact with foreigners (as is almost certainly the case for this Chinese sample), their judgement will be based heavily on the contrasts they see between themselves and these (Western European) characters. It is well established in the psychological literature (Everett and Stening, 1980; Stening and Everett, 1979) that individuals' perceptions of culturally different individuals are significantly influenced by contrasts with "self" in combination with *stereotypes* of other national groups. Additionally, Keen (2007) suggests that the greater levels of difference between the characters and (Chinese) readers, particularly in more mature readers (late teens), will reduce the level of character identification, and hence change the nature of their empathy with the characters as well—"alien" characters are more likely to be judged on actions, as opposed to "familiar" characters, whom readers are more likely to perceive on the basis of thoughts, emotions and motivations, since they can easily empathise with them. Notably, one character where these generalisations don't hold very well is Lord Voldemort. This could be attributed to the relatively "flat" nature of his character, which does not provide detail on many of his personality traits, and hence individual reader interpretation of this trait is based on extremely limited information, with very little narrative direction.

Besides that phenomenon, as noted in the [Literature Review and Conceptual Framework](#) section of the paper, while Westerners "speak their mind," the opposite is true of Chinese (Ames et al., 2001), so when the latter are perceiving Western (British) characters, they will see the characters as more extraverted, straightforward and open. It might be noted that while Australians are, on average, somewhat more extraverted than British, they are much closer compared to their distance from Chinese on this dimension (Schmitt et al., 2007). Noting that on four of the five personality dimensions Severus Snape is judged significantly more positively by Chinese than by the English respondents, this may provide an example of how Chinese use evidence differently when forming perceptions (Ames and Peng, 1999). It is well understood that Snape has a very complex backstory and is a morally ambiguous character whose motives and actions are not easily understood (Behr, 2005). In line with the findings of Chiu et al. (1997) and Dweck et al. (1995), Western respondents may be more likely to have formed impressions of him using fixed traits than the Chinese respondents and the positive impressions of the Chinese may indicate greater willingness to take into account his more sympathetic character as the series progresses. This argument is supported by the very significant impact that the number of books read and movies watched had on perceptions of Snape. Furthermore, Snape is a much better fit for the "mean teacher" stock character in Western

children's literature that is largely absent in Chinese literature. Therefore, the perceptions of Western respondents are much more likely to be influenced by the stereotypes they have of "mean teacher" characters in general, which would also reduce the depth of their consideration and evaluation of his character, particularly where it is morally ambiguous.

Additionally, the impact of number of books read/movies watched on the perception of several key characters, which can be explained by the dynamic nature of many of the characters, and the significant chronological change they undergo. It is also likely related to the criticism of Rowling's characters as "somewhat flat" in the first three books, which then become much rounder and complex after *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Nikolajeva, 2002).

In the absence of further information on the respondents (for example, a self-evaluation of their personality or a measure of their self-esteem), it is difficult to know why gender had such a strong impact on a number of the dependent variables. However, it is noteworthy that, with only one exception, where there were significant correlations, females scored the characters higher than males. In this and some other respects, the study has raised almost as many questions as it has answered.

## Conclusions and Suggested Future Research

This study has provided empirical support for the comment that "...*Harry Potter* abroad transcends the cultural specificity of his initial (British) English articulation and comes to mean different things to different people" (Jackson and Mandaville, 2006, p. 57). More than that, it has shown various ways in which the series is different for people, in the specific sense of how they perceive seven of the principal characters. It has also thrown light on things that influence the way that people perceive those characters. Working on the premise that cultural and linguistic background is a major influence on individuals' perceptions, it has provided clear evidence of significant differences between the perceptions of English- and Chinese-language respondents. It might be claimed, then, that it has made a modest contribution to the literature on cross-cultural perceptions, as well as the large body of work analysing *Harry Potter*.

The findings carry important and broader implications for, among others, teachers and translators of children's fiction. First, teachers need to realise that students' perceptions of characters are likely to be influenced significantly by their cultural and linguistic background. This is important in a *cross-cultural* sense as was demonstrated in this study. Perhaps more importantly, it behoves teachers in *multicultural* teaching situations, where students may be reading books in other than their native language, to pay careful attention to different interpretations of characters (and of those texts more broadly). There may be a wider range of "plausible" explanations for a character's personality, behaviour and other attributes than we personally believe. In particular, in multicultural classrooms, teachers would benefit from familiarizing themselves with the different focuses readers of different backgrounds are likely to place on the different methods of characterization (actions, thoughts, speech etc.). This is especially relevant where character identification may play a

major role in the perception of a character's behaviour, as seen in the significant differences regarding traits of extraversion and openness. As Brooks and Browne (2012, pp. 74–75) have stated, "... because a range of cultural positions factor into students' meaning making, we should mine texts more carefully for cultural milieu as well as find acceptance with a broader range of literary interpretations". In studying this text, culturally diverse readers especially would likely benefit from an in-depth examination of their self-perceptions, stereotypes they have of foreign groups, and their levels of empathy with various characters. This is particularly relevant when the characters are round and dynamic, with significant "grey areas" or moral ambiguity. This complexity of character provides an excellent opportunity for educators to focus on the ways in which we perceive others, fictional or real, and in multicultural teaching situations, this may prove to be a valuable lesson on diversity, not only on literature. Second, the study focuses attention on the important role played by translators. The skill, conscientiousness, alertness and fastidiousness of translators (and the attention and responsibility of the publishers who hire them) are critical (Parks, 2014). In particular, teachers may want to place additional attention on the cultural milieu of literature such as *Harry Potter*; it may additionally be the responsibility of educators to also provide further information on the setting of the story, cultural, social and historical, in order to better inform the reader on the possible behaviours of characters, particularly focusing on the contrasts with the social and cultural context their students are familiar with.

Future research should build upon this exploratory study. Besides increasing the sampling frame, it could further test the assumptions underlying the study (and the tentative findings made by it) by gathering data through other-language translations of TIPI—perhaps, French, German and Spanish (so-called Western countries), and Korean and Japanese (besides China, the other so-called "Confucian societies" of the East—Nisbett, 2003). It could also be interesting to ask respondents not just to evaluate the *Harry Potter* characters using TIPI, but also to complete a *self-evaluation* using the same instrument, thus providing a further anchor point.

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