

Parallel Readings, Fluid Meanings, and Local Imaginations

Cross-Cultural Readings of Chinese Webnovels in Global Media Flows



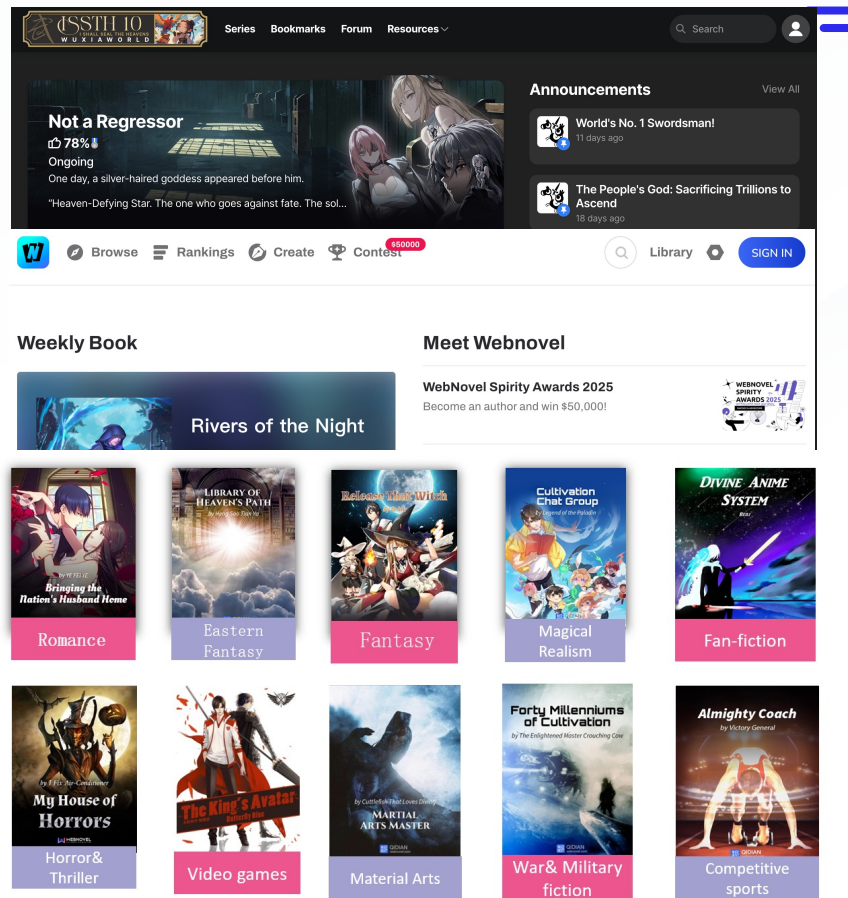
Yi Zhu

Xiamen University

Chinese Webnovels Going Global

- 2014 Wuxiaworld established
- 2017 Webnovel.com launched
- 2024 Over 300 million English users

Rare Chinese popular cultural products achieving widespread international popularity.



Literature Review - Three Streams



Global Cultural Flows

- Cultural imperialism → contra-flows → digital platform reshaping
- Multi-directional dynamics (Appadurai, 1996; Thussu, 2019)

Cross-Cultural Reception

- Active audience theory → cultural schemas → digital participation
- Cultural backgrounds shape interpretation (Hall, 1980; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003)

Chinese Webnovels' Global Circulation

- Digital narrative conventions + serialized format
- Hybrid circulation: fan communities + official platforms
- New cross-cultural dialogue through reader communities

Theoretical Framework



Jullien's Cultural Distance (l'écart):

Cultural "gap" as productive space for reflection rather than barrier

Key Insight: Cultural distance → dynamic meaning-making site

Integration:

Reception Theory

+

Digital Participation



How cultural frameworks become productive in digital environments



Research Questions

RQ1

How do English and Chinese readers interpret and imagine the same webnovels in their respective cultural contexts?

RQ2

What cultural patterns emerge in their interpretative frameworks?

RQ3

How do parallel readings create productive spaces for cross-cultural dialogue and meaning-making in the digital environment?

Method - Data Collection

Sample

- 20 popular webnovels (cross-platform ranking)
- High ranking on both Qidian.com & Webnovel.com

Data

- 4,253 comments total
 - 2,200 English (Webnovel.com)
 - 2,051 Chinese (Qidian.com)
- Criteria: likes ≥ 2 + analytical depth

No.	Book Title	Webnovel Recommendations	Qidian Recommendations
1	Library of Heaven's Path	11M	6120419
2	The King's Avatar	8.7M	6274660
3	Release That Witch	4.2M	7206597
4	Cultivation Chat Group	4.0M	17318416
5	Lord of Mysteries	3.1M	32477128
6	The Legendary Mechanic	2.9M	8972914
7	The Legend of Futian	1.2M	6776496
8	Superstars of Tomorrow	999.3K	6572124
9	Lord Xue Ying	991.7K	9269148
10	My House of Horrors	989.9K	6807529
11	Swallowed Star	717.1K	7746782
12	Tales of Herding Gods	692.8K	15286591
13	Scholar's Advanced Technological System	553.6K	6531775
14	The Legend of the Dragon King	461.5K	9484809
15	Seeking the Flying Sword Path	424.7K	17924540
16	Immortal Mortal	358.4K	8979824
17	Great Doctor Ling Ran	304.2K	8292404
18	A World Worth Protecting	291.8K	27611700
19	The Great Ruler	236.3K	8190777
20	Embers Ad Infinitum	228.5K	6633237

Method - Analysis

Approach

Qualitative thematic analysis
(MAXQDA)

Process

1. Initial coding (deductive + inductive)
2. Theme development
3. Cross-cultural pattern identification

Data Record	Initial Codes	Theme Refinement
Entertaining and fun! An Author's Opinion: Pick this book up and give it a chance! This story is a mid-paced adventure that will entertain you with its fantastic reactions and fascinating storyline. The mystical power our main character has is unique and one of a kind, and he uses this power to get out of a host of problematic scenarios. This story's strong point is its humor and reactions, as well as its developing scenarios. It's all very fun to read, and really leaves you wanting more. There is currently no major overriding plot beyond our character getting stronger and the story developing, but there is still room for this to develop. As of now, it feels similar to a slice of life novel, but with storylines that hook up, to a degree. The situations that unfold are usually loosely connected in that they happen as a result of the previous scenario.	1. Mid-paced adventure and fascinating storyline 2. The mystical power our main character has is unique 3. This story's strong point is its humor and reactions 4. Character getting stronger 5. It feels similar to a slice of life	1. Developing of the story 2. Skill setting 3. Post-reading reaction 4. Character developing 5. World setting

Core Finding



The Discovery

Similar evaluation criteria + Respective cultural approaches

Shared Focus		English Readers	Chinese Readers
World-Building	Criteria for well-rated world-building include being "complete," "grand," "detailed," "complex," and "logical."	Authenticity	Coherence
Character Engagement	Not overly powerful (not too OP), multidimensional, unique, interesting protagonists, distinctive supporting characters, and dynamic interactions among characters.	Individual-Oriented	Relationship-Oriented
Story Progression	Innovation in pacing, subplot coherence, quality, and foreshadowing of future plotlines are key elements valued by readers in story development.	Process-Focused	Outcome-Focused
Reading Pleasure	The pleasure of escaping real-life pressures, a sense of relaxation, and an unending desire for narrative progression.	Entertainment	Reflective Engagement



World-Building - Authenticity & Coherence



Shared

Complex, detailed, logical world-building valued by both groups

English - Authenticity Focus

"The world background is very realistic... similar to post-industrial revolution era in England" → Connecting fiction to real-world referents

Chinese - Coherence Focus

"世界架构感觉不合理... 这是什么逻辑?" [The world building feels unreasonable...What kind of logic is this?] → Internal systemic consistency over external realism

Character Engagement- Individual & Relationship-Oriented



Shared

Multidimensional, well-developed protagonists and ensemble narratives

English - Individual-
Oriented

"Every character introduced is unique" → Focus on personal traits and individual development

Chinese - Relationship-
Oriented

"叶修不只是优秀选手，更是有魄力的好队长"[Ye Xiu is not just a skilled player, but a capable team captain] → Emphasis on social roles and interpersonal dynamics

Story Progression - Process & Outcome-Focused



Shared

Appropriate pacing and narrative coherence valued by both groups

English - Process-Focused

"More funny moments with the clash between cultivator 'culture' and the modern day" → Emphasizing journey and experience

Chinese - Outcome-Oriented

"网上有人说小说结尾仓促...很多坑还没补上"[The ending is rushed... many plot holes unresolved] → Greater concern for narrative conclusions

Reading Pleasure - Entertainment & Reflective Engagement



Shared

Protagonist identification and immersive reading experiences

English - Entertainment
Relief

"It brought me much joy and made reading this novel the highlight of my day" → Stress reduction separate from everyday life

Chinese - Reflective
Engagement

"叶修解决问题的从容...都是我向往并努力学习的"[Ye Xiu's composure... are what I strive to learn from] → Personal insight and development source

Answering Research Questions



- English Reader: Authenticity, individual-oriented, process-focused, entertainment
- Chinese Reader: Coherence, relationship-oriented, outcome-focused, reflection

RQ1 & 2

RQ3

- Cultural frameworks complement rather than conflict with each other
- Platforms reveal how cross-cultural interpretation actually happens
- Real-time visibility of how different cultures make sense of the same content

Theoretical Contributions



01

Reception Theory Extension

Dynamic cross-cultural meaning-making in digital environments

02

Cultural Distance as Resource

"Parallel cultural dialogue" - maintains rather than eliminates distinctiveness

03

Global Cultural Flows

"Transparent cultural distinctiveness" - success without homogenization



THANKS

yi_zhu0908@outlook.com

