

Introduction: Cross-Cultural Reading

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*Yehong Zhang and Gerhard Lauer*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that culture shapes the way we tell, share, and understand stories. The structures of stories and the conditions under which they are transmitted and read are all quite different depending on the geographical location, time period, and culture in which they originated. For literary studies, the handling of a vast variety of literature from all around the world is the cornucopia for its teaching and research.

It is a wealth that has been merely a minor interest for literary studies for decades. In particular, the sensitivity for a variety of cross-cultural readings has only been treated as a margin in literary studies. For instance, it is nearly impossible to write only about the history of the nineteenth century novels in Europe from Finland to Turkey, because the bibliographies of books shared throughout Europe do not exist. At the same time, we only have limited knowledge on how and to what extent readers from Asian backgrounds understand the same stories in different ways compared to Westerners. Do readers from diverse cultural settings differ in the understanding of topics, do they differ in understanding the characters and plots, or does culture shape the reading in some dimensions, but not in others? Even more general questions on whether cultural reading habits exist have not been extensively investigated in literary studies. In addition to the general claims on reading “between” cultures, literary studies have a poor understanding of what cultural differences in reading means.

It is noteworthy that systematic cross-cultural studies of reading literature remain rather uncommon, despite the diversity of literatures and their readers. In contrast to linguistics, where the mapping of the world’s languages and the differences in the use of languages are major research tasks in projects such as DoBeS, HRELP, TLA and WALs,<sup>1</sup> no world atlas of literature exists to document the diversity of literatures as well as their

readers. However, under other names, a variety of approaches have mapped the differences and intersections in the reading of literatures across the globe.

A common attempt in literary studies is to explore how literature “reads” other literatures and other cultural traditions. The interpretation of colonialism in the literary works of Joseph Conrad, the reception of remote civilization in early modern travel books, the analysis of topics such as the Irish in America or of the genre in the vein of Montesquieu’s *Lettres persane* are all subjects and objects of literary studies. In this kind of hermeneutical interpretation of literary works, scholars analyze how authors make use of other literatures and other cultures and to what extent literature underwent cultural adaptations in the process. In more historically oriented literary studies, asymmetric historical exchanges between literary texts are taken into focus, such as the history of the May Fourth Movement and its impact on writing modern literature in China, or with another focus, Salman Rushdie’s adaptation of Günter Grass’ *The Tin Drum*. Questions of identity and stereotyping are not seldom part of this kind of historical imagology. In the approaches that have been very briefly outlined, literary studies scrutinize the cultural tradeoff between literatures. Not the readers, but the authors as cross-cultural readers are the object of this kind of research.

A great deal in the field of comparative literary studies, which might also count as cross-cultural reading studies, follows the fundamental insight, which is to determine how limited the national paradigm of literary history is. In many cases, it is not literature in the same language that serves as a model for aesthetic innovations, but the literature from a neighboring country. In the eighteenth century, French literature taught German authors how to write better dramas. Herder’s aesthetic was inspired by the aesthetics of Shaftesbury. The list could easily go on. In this sense, comparative literary studies are cross-cultural studies by definition. Since translation is a major source for the kind of reading that crosses languages and cultures, translation (and interpretation) studies are another approach that deals with cross-cultural reading. Translation studies analyze how one literary text is translated into another, and it denotes whether a translation is equivalent, purposeful and culturally adapted, or translator centered. The criticism of translation is strongly connected with interpretation studies, including the practical and pedagogical aspects of translation; and it always has the entitlement to better understand how literature crosses from one language and culture to another. By doing so, comparative literary studies and translation studies are other names for cross-cultural literary studies. However, this should focus on authors and translators as readers, and the (re)writing of

other cultural traditions in literature. In a broader sense, many comparative literary studies are studies in cross-cultural reading.

A further attempt to understand the nested structure of literature across the borders of languages and countries is the study of world literature. Its main argument is that works thrive as world literature if they circulate beyond their place and language of origin. As a consequence, anthologies of world literature such as *The Longman Anthology* or *The Norton Anthology* collect the canon of the works, being read and rewritten beyond their origin. A rich theoretical debate integrates models of world-systems analysis, sociological theories of center and periphery, and theories of untranslatability, to name a few, offering ways to map literature that is read in other cultures and languages. Critics such as Franco Moretti, though, have argued that the very scale of world literature makes it impossible to be understood by established methods of close reading and advocated a mode of what he referred to as “distant reading.”<sup>2</sup> According to Moretti, comparative literature is a means of conducting some sort of cherry-picking, which ignores most parts of the literature read across the world.

The fast emerging field of digital humanities tries to offer exactly the new ways of distant reading to handle the vast amount of literature. However, this type of methodology comes at a price. Computer-based methods and a strong emphasis on modeling and formalization have forced scholarship into a methodological revolution. A debate exists as to whether this is still scholarly research or whether this is either science or neoliberal data-mining which will undermine the humanities. The position has been made more difficult by the fact that even the web, with its petabytes of cultural data, is a resource for cross-cultural studies of unprecedented breadth and depth. Books such as *Harry Potter* are read and rewritten in fanfiction in nearly every language around the globe. All these digital fanfiction books might be the object of cross-cultural reading studies because readers in the present write extensively about their reading experience, and many of these readers become fanfiction authors. Reading in the Internet age is not limited to nation and language, to the same extent, compared to the time before computers and the Internet connected the world. Together with new, computer-based research methods, scholars can improve their understanding of moving concepts and of how narratives are reshaped within different cultures. Researchers can evaluate large text corpora in different languages and determine how narratives adapt with each other in various cultural environments. In summary, it is a fertile test bed to understand the variety of reading literature across cultural borders.

Currently, perhaps the most advanced, or ambitious attempt to analyze reading cross-culturally is cultural evolution. Its fundamental premise is that cultural change in transmitted beliefs, knowledge and stories, social institutions, and technologies and languages, follows the very same principles of Darwinian Theory.<sup>3</sup> Cultural evolutionary approaches have questioned which mechanisms support the transmission of motifs, topics, or narrative techniques across niches. For example, do minimal counter-intuitive narratives such as fairy tales have better chances of survival in changing cultural environments, compared to other types of stories? Can we explain the dissemination of certain types of literature through specific features that make them more attractive to readers across linguistic and cultural boundaries? As a great, unified theory, cultural evolution claims no less than to synthesize the social sciences and tell us what kinds of stories attract readers nearly globally, vs. what kinds of stories remain in their niche of origin. However, in the humanities, and in literary studies in particular, only a small number of studies can be considered as having been inspired by Darwin. The scale of approaches that have explored a variety of cultural evolution theories might be the ultimate point with a commonly performed interpretation of literary works on the other end of the scale. The extremes indicate the many approaches possible in cross-cultural studies, but only if the field of cross-cultural reading is taken in a broad sense.

While in anthropology and in psychology, the studies of cross-cultural issues constitute one of the major fields of research, only a small part in literary studies have taken a similar direction to try and understand the extent to which culture shapes the way people from different backgrounds read and write differently. Studies on differences in reading habits are carried out mostly between Easterners and Westerners as subjects. The results show how narrative space is understood differently by readers from culturally different background, how different concepts of, for example, shame and guilt are differently evaluated or aesthetic preferences differs according to cultural traditions. Although findings based on reading behavior and the reaction of real readers can extend classic literary theory, skepticism against empirical and experimental approaches in the humanities limited research on cross-cultural reading.

In conclusion, cross-cultural approaches have many names and many methods. None of these approaches and attempts or methods and methodologies in literary studies briefly mentioned here have clear borders or are mutually exclusive. Combinations of approaches are often used to understand how literature is read between cultures. This simply underscores that a rich variety of literary studies on cross-cultural issues have been conducted in

many separate fields. It is for this reason that we have invited papers for this issue that are focused on the ways in which cross-cultural reading has come into being and what kinds of problems have been encountered with regards to cross-cultural reading.

Literature from different cultural areas has affinity rather than differences. The narratives develop globally in an analogical form. The close association between literatures from different places of origin is presented in Christine Ivanovic's article on cross-cultural reading of animal tales. The genre of animal tales in literary studies has a long history that has lasted for thousands of years. Animal representations in folk tales are universal in nature. Using famous examples of animal tales, Ivanovic compares various formats of the same stories, exploring how different meanings are generated at different times and within different cultural contexts. The study makes a detailed briefing on the variants of representative animal tales, coming to the point that tales used talking animals as examples. Animal tales use animal narrations to unveil universal truths. In order to systematically find and identify texts with comparable stories that could be used to analyze the differences in the depiction and function of animal tales, the author outlines the project in the end, which takes animal tales as a case study for the development of methods for computational comparative literature.

The comparative analysis on world literature focuses on global performance as well as on cultural historicization. Literature from different cultures constitutes a multilingual literary ocean. In light of this viewpoint, C. Ceyhun Arslan articulates that literary circulation generates multilingual canons. Taking the famous Ottoman literary anthology *Harabat* (1876) by Ziya Pasha as a case study, Arslan draws upon Ziya Pasha's characterization of the Ottoman culture as an "ocean" that encompasses Arabic, Persian, and Turkish "streams" and projects this compilation of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian literatures as a "literary reservoir" that constitutes the multilingual Ottoman canon. Through reading the historical literary canon, the author demonstrates that texts which belong to a canon that is affiliated with a particular linguistic or national tradition can join literary reservoirs through transcultural circulations, becoming part of another canon that encompasses works of diverse languages and source cultures. The historical reading substantiates that literary canons compile texts from diverse geographical and temporal origins.

In the realm of world literature, translation is an important issue in the process of canon formation, which might occur through cross-cultural reading. Cross-cultural reading requires not just ideological concern for power equality of international literary prominence, but a more nuanced

reading of literary texts. Jordan A. Y. Smith addresses this issue in his theory of translationscapes that accounts for the legibility of transnational ideologies in world literary systems. To date, critiques of world literature studies have focused mainly on the power inequalities presented in the international prominence of literary texts. Emily Apter's critiques against world literature<sup>4</sup> should be taken as a caution against ignorance of profound local knowledge and cultural character. So far, studies of world literature have not given enough attention to the role of translation, which provides visibility to literary texts. Smith argues that translationscapes provide a way of combining close-reading of texts within larger contexts of systems-level research. The concept of translation may bring about a new perspective on cross-cultural literature studies.

Translation provides visibility to the literature of "others". The role of translators for cross-cultural understanding is explored by Xiaohui Liang, with the example of Howard Goldblatt's successful translation of Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. The author applies the paradigms used in cognitive poetics to the analysis of transference of metaphorical expressions in the novel and looks into the process of blending the source and target domain. The study compares the abundant culturally loaded metaphors in the original and shows how the author and his translator differ in manners of conceptual blending. Liang summarizes where the translator has different metaphorical blending from the original. In deciphering and representing these metaphors, Goldblatt provides, in some cases, source domains from his own Western cultural frames, demonstrating his tendency in conceptual blending which develops differently from Mo Yan's Chinese cultural frames. The process of different conceptual blending traces back to the different cultural frames.

Methodologically, the cognitive poetic analysis adopts paradigms of cognitive linguistics to explain the potential effect of the text on readers and provides evidence for the generation of the meaning in the process of comprehension. Since the 1970s, there has been a shift in literary theory that advocated focus on the reader. The recent growth of empirical approaches to reader response has been providing support to hermeneutic interpretations, thus contributing to the understanding of literary reading. Empirical studies place reader response at the forefront of analysis and offer empirical evidence on how readers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds read differently or similarly. The next three articles in the issue apply all empirical methods to examine real readers' reactions to narratives and poetry.



The role of a reader's knowledge, including cultural beliefs, values, norms, and others, is under-researched in comparative literary studies, in contrast to cross-cultural psychology. Jan Auracher and Akiko Hirose empirically investigate the influence of readers' stereotypes on the assessment of fictional characters. Their article explores the issue of how cultural backgrounds influence the way readers construct mental images of fictional characters. The results suggest that readers of fictional narratives draw on their stereotypes when evaluating the personality of a fictional character, and that this tendency to focus on (stereo)typical attributes in the evaluation of characters increases rather than decreases with knowledge about the respective culture. Moreover, the authors discuss which cognitive processes presumably underlie these findings and what conclusions can be drawn for the reading process from these theoretical considerations on the influence of readers' cultural beliefs, values, norms, and so on. With the focus of cross-cultural reading, the study highlights the expected influence of culture on the manner by which readers handle the inconsistencies within a narrative.

In line with the research on the emotional reaction of real readers, the study by Anna Chesnokova et al. examines readers' emotional reaction to poem reading. The study offers evidence-based data that may clarify whether real readers' response to poetry is universal or culture-specific. Students from Brazil and Ukraine were asked to read Poe's "The Lake" in the original English or else in a translated version and to report their response to this poem in a questionnaire. The findings indicate that first-hand responses to poetry are to a large degree culture-specific, and that the language and the translation in which the text is written also influence the responses. These results have implications for the teaching of literatures in English across the world—both in English and in non-English speaking settings—and may bring more awareness to educators about what happens when students read in their first language or in a translated version.

In general, there is little systematic research on cross-cultural literary reading. In addition, there is a lack of interdisciplinary support. Evidently, innovations must be made in methodology in order to provide an empirical basis for the research on cross-cultural literary comprehension. The final study conducted by Yehong Zhang is an interdisciplinary approach to cross-cultural reading, which includes empirical investigation and text analysis. The article explores the common ground and poetic elements for the cross-cultural reading of poetry. The study adopts psychological methods to evaluate Chinese and German readers' mental reaction to and involvement in classical Chinese and German poems, and combines



these with the assessment of the monitoring of brain function. The study explores semantic properties that bring poetic function into play, and that are successfully transported into other cultural contexts. In line with literary theories and evolutionary psychology, the results obtained from the different measurements and text analyses indicate that the key to immediate involvement in a cross-cultural poetry reading might lie in the description, which is closely connected to the embodied experience of the readers. The results of the interdisciplinary study provide evidence that supports the assumption of the role of the embodied mind in cross-cultural literary reading, confirming and advancing classic literary theories. These findings open new perspectives for future studies in cross-cultural poetic reading and literary imagination.

The empirical study of cross-cultural literary reading attempts to break through the difficulties in its methodology. Exploring how a literary text impacts a reader's mind and emotion, and determining what kind of impact it would bring, might be an intriguing point for future cross-cultural research. Furthermore, the similarities and differences in textual structure and readers' construction of the meaning globally need to be more systematically investigated. The empirical findings presented in this issue can open new perspectives for future studies on cross-cultural reading.

The present global turn in humanities, particularly in the fields of world literature, translation studies, empirical studies, and digital humanities, analyzes transcultural circulations and intercultural comparisons to overcome the disciplinary and cultural limitations of studying literature. Research with scientific methods can broaden this knowledge and provide a new angle to explore the source of cross-culture reading. Due to the high demand for multidisciplinary training, an interdisciplinary study cannot be the mainstream in literary studies. However, we cannot deny the necessity of interdisciplinary research in offering more enlightening aspects for the fundamental questions that are underlined in humanities, such as the origin and function of literature, narrative imagination, cross-cultural thinking patterns, and so on. This interdisciplinary study has expanded the field of literary studies and will continue to play a supportive role. The exploration of the basic questions of cross-cultural literary reading cannot be replaced by other disciplines. Nevertheless, only scholars in literary studies are most sensitive to the essential issues of their own field.

The risk with a journal issue of this kind is that despite the determination to treat all parties dealing with cross-cultural issues with the same sympathy, we still end up making critics on all sides. Fortunately, we have been blessed with the constructive advice from the editor of *Comparative*

*Literary Studies*, Thomas O. Beebee. We would like to thank him for the open-mindedness to explore this interdisciplinary subject. Lastly, we are grateful to all the contributors, who have made this issue truly special through their thoughtfulness and intellectual vividness.

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GERHARD LAUER, professor for digital humanities at the University of Basel, initially studied literary studies, philosophy, Jewish studies, and musicology, and completed his PhD at the University of Munich. In 2002, he was named to a chair for German studies at the University of Göttingen, since 2017 he is professor at the University of Basel. He has worked extensively on literary history, computational, and experimental literary studies. Lauer is fellow of the Göttingen Academy of Science, cofounding editor of the *Journal of Literary Theory* and visiting professor at many universities.

### Notes

1. Documentation of Endangered Languages (DoBeS), <http://dobes.mpi.nl/>; Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (HRELP), <https://www.soas.ac.uk/elar/about-elar/reports/>; The Language Archive (TLA), <https://tla.mpi.nl/>; The World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS), <http://wals.info/>.
2. Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68.
3. Alex Mesoudi, *Cultural Evolution. How Darwinian Theory Can Explain Human Culture & Synthesize the Social Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
4. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).