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Cross-Cultural Narrative Translation and Communication Effects of Chinese Online Literature: A Case Study of Lord of the Mysteries

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Abstract

This paper explores Chinese online literature's shift from "going out" to "going in" with Lord of the Mysteries as a case. It analyzes cross-cultural narratives at worldview and value levels and examines reader sentiment via WebNovel comments. While feedback is largely positive and generates emotional resonance, cultural identification remains implicit. Overseas communication should balance cultural uniqueness and narrative intelligibility.

Keywords

Chinese online literature; cross-cultural narrative; communication effects; Lord of the Mysteries

1. Introduction

As an emerging cultural form rooted in digital and intelligent communication, Chinese online literature — with distinctive artistic tension, innovative vitality and strong cultural adaptability — forms the "new trio" of Chinese cultural exports alongside online games and web dramas[1], serving as a key fulcrum for building national international communication capacity and enhancing cultural soft power.According to the 2025 Research Report on the Development of Chinese Online Literature, by end-2025, the sector had nearly 200 million active overseas users, 5.64 billion yuan in overseas revenue, and influence spanning over 200 countries and regions worldwide.Yet amid expanding scale, its overseas growth faces deep-seated bottlenecks. Cognitive barriers from cultural differences confine many works to superficial dissemination, failing to effectively deliver their cultural core. Achieving systematic cross-cultural narrative translation is thus the core challenge for online literature to shift from "quantitative expansion" to "qualitative

improvement" in its going-global process.

2. Literature Review

Abundant research exists on Chinese online literature's overseas expansion. On industry models, Ji Yunfei[2] (2019) finds Qidian International's localized model outperforms fan-translation sites like Wuxiaworld, with "going in" replacing large-scale "going out" as the deeper goal. Sun Qiaoke et al.[3] (2022) analyze dilemmas from fandom culture, fan economy and translation; Chen Rui[4] (2025) identifies linguistic barriers, cultural discount and commercialization bottlenecks, proposing an AIGC-based empowerment framework; Lu Mengmeng[5] (2026) highlights global digital platforms' structural role in multimodal communication.

Against cultural discount, scholarship turns to narrative adaptation. Yu Jianxiang et al.[6] (2026) propose an audience-gratification narrative turn via adjusted pleasure points and golden-finger settings. Wu Changqing[7] (2025) shows online literature balances ideological guidance and humanistic care through cultural symbiosis in Japanese and Korean markets. Wan Anlun et al.[8] (2026) summarize three national-image narrative paradigms: collective ensemble, individual hero, and non-human intelligent other. These studies confirm commercial platforms have cultivated global-oriented narrative templates rather than replicating traditional Chinese narratives.

Hall's encoding/decoding theory frames cross-cultural meaning transfer as context-based reconstruction rather than simple symbolic conversion[9], illuminating reader comments as a window into interpretive processes. Empirically, Cheng Ling et al.[10] (2025) establish a data-driven effect framework with TikTok user data; Qi Dexiang[11] (2024) builds a four-dimensional evaluation system along the "contact–cognition–attitude–behavior" journey; Zhang Lun et al.[12] (2024) use website traffic to reveal cultural discount/premium effects and cultural distance's impact. This paradigm expands evaluation dimensions and uncovers links between platform affordances and content reception.

3. Research Design

Written by Cuttlefish That Loves Diving, *Lord of the Mysteries* integrates a Victorian Western setting, Cthulhu mythology and the leveling-up logic of Chinese online literature, winning wide acclaim and popularity in European and American markets and nurturing an active overseas fan community. Its success stems from systematic cross-cultural narrative design, giving it representative research value. Taking the work as a case, this paper focuses on cross-cultural narrative translation, examines its narrative strategies at the worldview, setting and value levels, and empirically tests communication effects using first-hand overseas reader comments.

Core data are drawn from user comments on high-traffic chapters of *Lord of the Mysteries* on WebNovel. After denoising, deduplication and removal of platform

metadata and invalid posts, a valid sample of 3,016 comments was obtained. Two text-mining methods are applied: VADER sentiment analysis to measure overall audience sentiment and verify cross-cultural emotional identification; and high-frequency word statistics combined with sliding-window co-occurrence network analysis to reveal readers' core concerns and their cognitive system of narrative symbols, so as to verify the in-depth effects of cultural translation. Cross-platform Reddit data serve as supplementary verification.

This paper defines "cross-cultural narrative" as the process by which a work enables readers from diverse cultural backgrounds to access and interpret the story through plot organization, characterization, worldbuilding and cultural symbol arrangement. "Cross-cultural" here neither requires direct narration of traditional Chinese culture, nor equates positive overseas reviews with cultural identification. Accordingly, this paper addresses three questions: What narrative devices reduce overseas readers' entry barriers? What narrative content dominates reader comments, and what features characterize their understanding? To what extent do comment data confirm the work's cross-cultural comprehension?

4. Cross-Cultural Narrative Strategies of Lord of the Mysteries

Cross-cultural adaptation is an ongoing interaction between two cultures. When competing popular cultural connotations clash, the two sides can reach stable, balanced symbiosis via verbal and nonverbal communication[13]. For online literature, overseas readers confront linguistic barriers and unfamiliar historical contexts, cultural symbols, genre norms and narrative conventions. Thus, using readers' existing cultural experience to build reading access, simplifying complex worldbuilding, and delivering emotionally shared values through characters and plots are key to cross-cultural acceptance.

4.1. Worldview Level: Integration of Familiar Cultural Context and Genre Elements

Cross-cultural reading is first hindered by unfamiliar story settings and cultural contexts. When a work's historical backdrop, social system and genre deviate sharply from readers' prior cognition, readers expend extra effort to grasp its setting and character logic, raising reading difficulty. Lord of the Mysteries adopts Victorian-style society as its core background, blending industrial cities, class divides, machinery and mysticism. Rooted in Western cultural knowledge, this setting lets overseas readers rely on existing historical and literary experience to understand the story without deep background research, lowering cross-cultural reading barriers and meeting audience expectations[14].

The work further boosts worldview recognizability via Cthulhu horror, detective suspense and steampunk. Cthulhu mythos creates an oppressive, mysterious tone with incomprehensible supernatural beings and human cognitive limits. Detective

plots engage readers through cases, clues, reasoning and twists. Steampunk supplies tangible retro-industrial imagery. These genres are familiar in Western popular culture, helping readers quickly grasp narrative rules. Layered mysteries, identity puzzles and supernatural rules form the core reading drive. Readers follow investigations and plot twists to follow the story even without full knowledge of its occult or historical references. Character growth and power progression also anchor long-form reading, letting audiences absorb complex worldbuilding alongside protagonists' journeys.

4.2. Setting Level: Rule-Based Expression of the Beyonder System

While familiar historical and genre elements offer narrative entry points, the intelligibility of complex settings directly determines sustained reader engagement. Lord of the Mysteries translates abstract Eastern cultivation logic and philosophical ideas into plot-serving narrative rules, constructing a Beyonder system of sequence levels, potion formulas, the acting method and mystical rituals tied to character growth, plot progression and conflict resolution.

Traditional Chinese cultivation's core logic—realm advancement, skill practice and tribulation breakthrough—is reframed as this concrete rule system. The clear Sequence 9 to 0 hierarchy aligns with Western fantasy's occupational progression, enabling quick grasp of the growth path. As the core advancement vehicle, potions integrate Western alchemical mystique with elements from traditional Chinese mythology and philosophy[15]. The acting method, centered on "you become what you act", transforms the Eastern philosophy of the unity of knowledge and action into operable narrative rules. This self-consistent system fully serves plot and character development; readers naturally absorb its underlying Eastern growth logic while following the protagonist's journey.

Cultural symbols are embedded in organizational dynamics, character interactions and plot progression rather than left as isolated decoration. The Tarot Club, for instance, merges the secrecy of Chinese jianghu associations with the formality of Western secret societies, embedding Chinese-style interpersonal logic in members' mutual support and checks. Symbols like the Wheel of Fortune and divination function as devices for suspense building, fate foreshadowing and plot advancement. As necessary narrative elements rather than standalone Eastern markers, they enable natural cultural cognition during reading. The gamified narrative structure enhances immersion and organizes the plot with clear rules and explicit rewards, improving accessibility for non-Chinese audiences[16].

4.3. Value Level: Value Expression in Character Growth and Emotional Relationships

Cross-cultural narrative must not only lower entry barriers and clarify settings, but also elicit emotional responses through character relationships and values. Rather

than directly expounding cultural ideas, Lord of the Mysteries gradually unfolds themes of responsibility, trust, sacrifice and guardianship through protagonist Klein's growth, relationships and critical choices.

At the story's outset, Klein adapts to his post-transmigration situation and learns the world's rules. As his abilities grow, he assumes greater responsibility: his development encompasses both Beyonder sequence advancement and evolving awareness of others' fates and social duty. Choices between personal interests and collective safety turn abstract values into tangible plot conflicts. This trajectory echoes the traditional Chinese ethical logic of progressing from self-cultivation to social obligation, embodied in the maxim "when poor, cultivate oneself alone; when prosperous, benefit the whole world". Yet this affinity exists at the narrative level: responsibility, sacrifice and protecting the weak are universal ethical concerns, and overseas readers can fully comprehend the character's actions through their own cultural experience.

Universal human emotions—family affection, friendship, justice and sacrifice—serve as carriers of Eastern values. Klein's bond with his siblings, mutual trust among Tarot Club members, and sacrifice against dark forces all transcend cultural boundaries. Compared with abstract value statements, familial care, friendship and mutual protection in crisis form cross-cultural emotional connections more effectively.

Readers' emotional investment may lead them to grasp the ethical choices behind character actions, but emotional resonance does not equal cultural identification. By integrating values into concrete narrative via character growth, relational ties and responsible choices, the work avoids detaching values from the plot and facilitates emotional connection with overseas audiences.

5. Verification of Cross-Cultural Communication Efficacy Based on Audience Comments

Overseas audiences' positive interactions (voting, commenting, recommending and sharing) underpin online literature's overseas fan ecosystem—a complex system comprising audiences, authors, platforms, products and services[17]. Having outlined three layers of textual narrative translation strategies, this paper empirically tests their communication effects at the audience level. Based on 3,016 valid WebNovel comments, it evaluates the strategies' efficacy across three dimensions: emotional identification, symbolic cognition and value identification.

5.1. Emotional Identification: High Acceptance under Cultural Context Adaptation

The worldview-level context-anchoring strategy aims to reduce initial cultural resistance and achieve audience emotional acceptance. This study employs VADER sentiment analysis, an NLP technique that scores words via a built-in sentiment

lexicon and averages scores to determine sentence-level sentiment orientation. Results reveal 2,521 positive comments (83.59%), 9.1% neutral and only 7.3% negative, indicating an overwhelmingly positive overall evaluation.

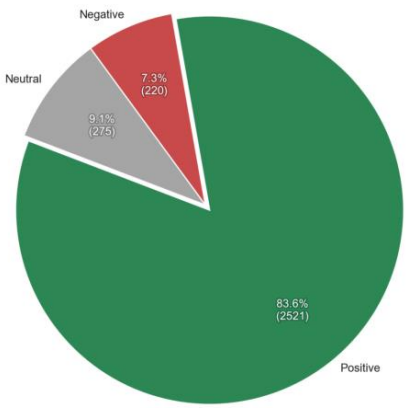


Figure 1. Results of Sentiment Tendency Analysis

High-frequency positive terms include good (1,419), best (925), great (531), love (497) and amazing (402), with widespread use of "masterpiece" and "highly recommend" to express strong approval. Semantic co-occurrence analysis reveals tight links between positive words and "world", "setting" and "victorian", indicating audience praise is closely tied to worldview adaptability. Negative comments are minimal, centered on "slow", "waiting" and "update" — these reflect demand for faster updates, not content disapproval. Minor translation-related criticism addresses localized experience issues, with no culture-driven rejection observed.

Reader Aslhy_Echavez called the worldview and characters impressive and "so real that empathy comes easily", noting she experienced joy, fear, anger, sorrow and loneliness through Klein and other characters. Another reader, faceoff, stated the characters stay on his mind in daily life. As the protagonist levels up and grows, overseas readers experience emotional compensation and personal projection; this resonance crosses national boundaries, allowing audiences to connect the work to their own knowledge frameworks18. Precise anchoring of Western cultural context effectively reduces cultural discount and greatly lowers cross-cultural cognitive barriers. Rather than encountering acceptance obstacles due to its Eastern cultural background, the work gains widespread emotional identification via a "familiar shell, fresh core" approach, achieving the first layer of cross-cultural communication breakthrough.

5.2. Symbolic Cognition: Cross-Cultural Commensurability of Eastern Logic

The setting-level narrative translation strategy aims to help audiences accurately grasp Eastern cultural logic and achieve cross-cultural commensurability of

narrative symbols. High-frequency word and semantic structure analysis shows audience interaction is not superficial emotional expression, but layered deep participation centered on the narrative core.

Core high-frequency terms include character (1,165), world (1,015), plot (373) and building (334). Three participation patterns emerge: character-focused discussion on Klein's growth arc, personality and choices; setting-focused discussion on worldview systems, magical lore and era background; and plot-focused discussion on twists, suspense and pacing.



Figure 2. Word Cloud of High-Frequency Words in Lord of the Mysteries

Co-occurrence network analysis further verifies this deep connection: character is the absolute central node of the semantic network, with strong co-occurrence links to world, plot, development, good and best. Co-occurrence intensity reaches 414 for character-world, 162 for character-plot, and 182 for character-development. Readers consistently discuss characterization alongside worldbuilding, plot progression and character growth, rather than judging elements in isolation, reflecting holistic, in-depth recognition of the narrative system and full reception of its systematic innovative value.

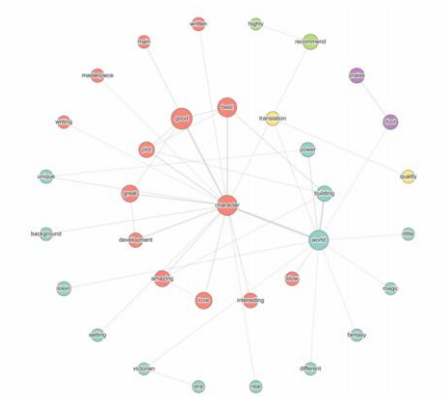


Figure 3. Co-Occurrence Network of High-Frequency Words

The high frequency of "character" confirms characters are a central focus of comments. Characters act as a fulcrum that translates abstract world rules into tangible experience: readers care not only how settings function, but how they

shape characters' circumstances. While aggregated word frequency cannot confirm which specific traits dominate discussion, it clearly shows character topics hold high visibility in reader discourse.

The high frequency and co-occurrence of "world" and "building" indicate the worldview is not static background, but an active topic of reader discussion. When discussing worldview, readers may evaluate its richness, test its self-consistency, or map the rule system framing characters and plot. Reader tsukkin analyzed how the 22 Tarot Major Arcana shape Tarot Club member identities, linking card meanings to abilities and roles. This shows readers move beyond recognizing tarot as a cultural symbol, actively connecting its meanings to characters, abilities and plot to form independent interpretations. Culturally specific symbols thus gain concrete narrative functions and enter overseas readers' active interpretive process.

Links between "plot", "development" and character terms show readers do not evaluate narrative elements in isolation, but connect character change, plot progression and worldview. This aligns with reading patterns of long serialized fiction: characters grow through sequential events, world rules constrain action, and readers synthesize scattered information as updates unfold.

Reader SpectatingDog mapped Klein's multiple identities and their roles in information concealment and relational dynamics, also discussing Derrick's goal of liberating the City of Silver via the Tarot Club. Such discussion around identity clues and plot progression shows the work's complex narrative structure offers overseas readers sustained space for reasoning and information reintegration.

Notably, complex settings do not guarantee uniform reception. Reader John_Jiggler criticized the power system, arguing potion advancement feels like resource-driven ability gain, and noted overly dense information delivery. Setting-level narrative translation therefore is not simply adding setting content, but must balance information presentation order, plot integration and readers' comprehension processes.

5.3. Value Identification: Implicit Reception of Eastern Ethics

The value-level implicit transmission strategy aims to achieve a soft landing of Eastern ethics and deep cultural identification. Comment data and co-occurrence networks show audiences have formed general recognition of the work's core values. Reader Keiwen observed that unlike many popular web novels, Lord of the Mysteries genuinely conveys moral values, with a believable world and nuanced character emotions, confirming some readers perceive value expression beyond the plot.

First, character evaluations are closely aligned with positive ratings. In the co-occurrence network, "character" strongly co-occurs with positive terms (good, best, great, love), while high-frequency trait words—responsible, kind, smart—consistently describe protagonist Klein. The robust

"character–growth–positive evaluation" association reflects broad approval of Klein's arc: from self-preservation, to protecting those around him, to assuming responsibility for the world. This trajectory embeds the Chinese ethical ideal of collective responsibility embodied in the saying "when prosperous, one benefits the whole world". The core logic of the "acting method"—behavior shapes identity, and knowledge unites with action—also aligns with Eastern practical rationality.

Second, audiences strongly identify with values of guardianship and responsibility. Comments widely praise the protagonist's choices, such as protecting ordinary people and his remarkable sense of responsibility. Reader Chocolate_Troll highlighted Klein's efforts to shield his siblings from danger, calling the ending's preserved sibling bond deeply moving. This shows readers' understanding of responsibility is rooted in concrete relationships and plot experience, making protective behavior a critical link between value expression and emotional identification.

However, overseas readers do not interpret the work's values uniformly. Reader Nighterfield pointed out a moral contradiction: Klein punishes evil as an "evil hunter" yet serves a goddess who once destroyed an entire nation, questioning whether his later choices deviate from his original wish to cherish life and return to Earth. This demonstrates readers do not passively accept preset values, but examine characters against their own moral standards, negotiating or challenging ethical choices.

Character responsibility, emotional bonds and moral choices remain key entry points for overseas readers to engage with the work's values, but judgments diverge. This indicates the work's value expression has entered overseas readers' discursive scope, yet resonance and judgment are shaped by personal experience and moral frameworks. In sum, Lord of the Mysteries creates opportunities for overseas readers to engage with its ethical concepts through character growth and emotional relationships, and this understanding is not a unidirectional, uniform reception process.

6. Research Conclusions

Overseas dissemination of Chinese online literature should preserve cultural distinctiveness while ensuring narrative intelligibility. Genre elements familiar to overseas audiences can serve as reading entry points, with complex settings presented through rule-based, plot-integrated approaches. Values should be conveyed via character growth and emotional bonds, avoiding rigid cultural output detached from the narrative. Platforms and communication stakeholders should leverage reader comments on common questions, setting disputes and translation quality to optimize strategies and better meet audiences' comprehension needs.

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