

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND CHINESE LITERARY THEORY: CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

Literary theory and criticism are essential for understanding how literary texts are interpreted, evaluated, and connected to cultural and ideological contexts. In comparative literature, English and Chinese literary criticism represent two major traditions shaped by different philosophical, linguistic, and historical backgrounds. English literary theory has been influenced by Greco-Roman philosophy, Enlightenment rationalism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, post-structuralism, and postcolonial studies, emphasizing critical inquiry, textual plurality, and the questioning of authority. Conversely, Chinese literary criticism is grounded in Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and classical Chinese poetics, focusing on moral cultivation, social harmony, symbolic expression, and historical continuity. This study examines cross-cultural perspectives on literary interpretation in English and Chinese literary theory, a qualitative comparative analysis. Employing a qualitative comparative approach, the research integrates hermeneutic textual analysis, discourse analysis, and cross-cultural interpretation. The findings indicate that English criticism tends to prioritize analytical interpretation and multiple meanings, while Chinese criticism emphasizes holistic understanding and ethical relationships. Furthermore, globalization and intercultural exchanges have increasingly connected these traditions, enriching literary studies and broadening perspectives on culture, identity, and human consciousness.

Keyword: Comparative Literary Criticism, English and Chinese Literary Theory, Cross-Cultural Interpretation, Ideological Discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long been recognized not merely as artistic expression, but as a complex intellectual and cultural system through which societies articulate values, memory, power relations, and philosophical understandings of existence (Bennett, A., & Royle, 2022). Literary theory and criticism, therefore, emerge as essential disciplines that enable scholars to interpret texts beyond surface-level narratives. They investigate how meaning is produced, how ideology is embedded within language, and how readers interact with literary structures within specific historical and cultural contexts (Habib, 2025).

In the Western tradition, particularly within English literary criticism, theoretical development has been strongly shaped by philosophical inquiry. Beginning with classical Greek thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, literary discourse was tied to questions of mimesis, morality, and aesthetic representation (Di Leo, 2025). Aristotle's *Poetics* significantly influenced later English literary analysis by emphasizing plot construction, catharsis, and dramatic unity. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, literary criticism increasingly reflected rationalist thinking, emphasizing logic, form, and human-centered inquiry (Young, R. J. C., & Dwivedi, 2025). In modern and postmodern periods, English literary theory expanded dramatically through structuralism, deconstruction, Marxist criticism, psychoanalytic interpretation, feminist theory, reader-response criticism, and postcolonial analysis.

The study is guided by three interrelated research questions. First, it seeks to investigate how English and Chinese literary theories differ in their approaches to literary interpretation. This question focuses on the distinct interpretive traditions that have emerged within Western and Chinese intellectual contexts, examining how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and understood within literary texts. Particular attention is given to the contrasting assumptions underlying textual analysis, reader engagement, and the relationship between language and meaning.

Second, the study explores the cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic factors that shape literary criticism in English and Chinese traditions. By examining the influence of Western philosophical rationalism alongside Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought, the research aims to identify the intellectual foundations that inform critical practices, aesthetic values, and interpretive frameworks within each tradition. This inquiry highlights the extent to which literary criticism is embedded within broader cultural and ideological systems.

Third, the study examines how globalization has contributed to the development of cross-cultural and hybrid interpretive frameworks in contemporary literary studies. As literary texts, theories, and critical methodologies increasingly circulate across national and linguistic boundaries, the research investigates how interactions between English and Chinese literary traditions have generated new forms of literary interpretation that challenge conventional East–West distinctions and promote greater intercultural understanding.

English literary criticism gradually shifted from author-centered interpretation toward text-centered and reader-centered models. Structuralists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes reconceptualized literature as a network of signs rather than direct representation of reality (Jogdand, 2025). Later, post-structuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida challenged the possibility of fixed meaning, arguing that textual interpretation is unstable and endlessly deferred. As a result, English literary criticism often privileges plurality, ambiguity, ideological resistance, and interpretive openness (Rivkin, J., & Ryan, 2023).

By contrast, Chinese literary theory and criticism evolved within a substantially different intellectual tradition. Chinese literary thought was deeply influenced by Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism (Zhang, 2024). Rather than isolating literary text as an autonomous object, classical Chinese criticism often positioned literature as inseparable from ethics, governance, spirituality,

and social harmony (Zhong, 2025). Confucian literary principles emphasized moral refinement and educational value, while Daoist aesthetics privileged naturalness, silence, emptiness, and indirect expression. Buddhist philosophy contributed introspection, impermanence, and symbolic transcendence (Wan, 2025).

Classical Chinese literary criticism frequently focused on poetic resonance, emotional depth, relational subtlety, and harmony between form and spirit. Literary meaning was often understood not solely through explicit textual analysis but through contextual sensitivity, historical continuity, and symbolic allusion (Xie, 2022). The relationship between language and silence, especially in Chinese poetics, occupies a major aesthetic role distinct from many Western analytical traditions.

This study argues that English and Chinese literary theories offer distinct yet complementary approaches to literary interpretation. While English literary criticism tends to emphasize textual analysis, plurality, and theoretical critique, Chinese literary theory foregrounds ethical values, relational harmony, and cultural continuity. In the context of globalization, these traditions increasingly interact to produce hybrid interpretive frameworks that transcend conventional East–West divisions.

The comparative study between English and Chinese literary theory is increasingly relevant in a globalized era where literature crosses linguistic and ideological borders. Translation, migration, transnational scholarship, and digital discourse have transformed literary interpretation into a cross-cultural enterprise. Comparative criticism allows scholars to understand how language shapes cognition, symbolism, identity, and worldview differently.

This research seeks to explore how English and Chinese literary theories differ and intersect in terms of epistemology, aesthetics, ideology, textuality, and reader engagement. It also examines how globalization has generated hybrid interpretive frameworks that challenge rigid East-West binaries.

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine cross-cultural perspectives on literary interpretation in English and Chinese literary theories. A qualitative comparative approach is particularly appropriate because the research seeks to analyze philosophical assumptions, interpretive frameworks, aesthetic principles, and cultural values embedded in literary criticism. These dimensions involve meaning, context, and theoretical interpretation rather than numerical measurement. Furthermore, the comparative design enables a systematic examination of similarities and differences between two major literary traditions, allowing for a deeper understanding of how cultural and intellectual backgrounds shape literary interpretation (Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, 2024).

The study utilizes secondary textual data obtained from canonical theoretical works representing English and Chinese literary traditions. The English corpus includes selected texts and theoretical writings associated with structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxist criticism,

feminist criticism, and reader-response theory. The Chinese corpus consists of classical and modern works related to Confucian poetics, Daoist aesthetics, Buddhist literary philosophy, and contemporary Chinese literary criticism. These sources were selected because of their significant influence on the development of literary theory and criticism within their respective intellectual traditions.

Data collection was conducted through document-based research. The researcher systematically identified, selected, and reviewed major theoretical texts that address literary interpretation, aesthetics, textual meaning, reader engagement, and the relationship between literature and society. Selection criteria included theoretical significance, historical influence, scholarly recognition, and relevance to the research questions.

The analysis was carried out in four stages. First, a hermeneutic reading was conducted to identify key concepts, philosophical assumptions, and interpretive principles within each literary tradition. Particular attention was given to how literary meaning is constructed, how texts are interpreted, and how readers are positioned within the interpretive process. Second, thematic coding was employed to classify recurring concepts into several analytical categories, including epistemology, aesthetics, textuality, ideology, and reader engagement. These categories served as the basis for systematic comparison.

Third, discourse analysis was applied to investigate how literary theories construct authority, legitimacy, and cultural values. Rather than treating literary criticism as a neutral intellectual activity, the analysis examined how theoretical discourses establish particular understandings of knowledge, beauty, morality, and truth. This stage enabled the identification of ideological dimensions embedded within both English and Chinese critical traditions.

Fourth, cross-cultural comparative interpretation was conducted by comparing themes, concepts, and interpretive assumptions identified in the previous stages. The comparison focused on points of convergence and divergence between English and Chinese literary theories, particularly regarding approaches to meaning-making, aesthetic judgment, reader participation, and the relationship between literature and society. Through this process, broader patterns of cultural influence and intellectual orientation were identified.

To enhance analytical credibility, the study employed theoretical triangulation by integrating insights from literary hermeneutics, discourse analysis, and comparative literary studies. The use of multiple analytical perspectives reduced the risk of relying on a single interpretive framework and strengthened the validity of the findings.

Despite its strengths, this research has several limitations. First, the analysis is restricted to selected canonical texts and therefore cannot fully represent the diversity of all English and Chinese literary traditions. Second, because the study relies on textual interpretation, some degree of researcher subjectivity is unavoidable. Third, the comparative analysis focuses primarily on theoretical discourse rather than empirical reader responses or contemporary literary practices. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the value of the study, as its primary objective is

to provide a theoretically grounded comparison of literary interpretation across two influential intellectual traditions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis between English and Chinese literary theory and criticism reveals that both traditions emerge from profoundly different philosophical foundations, yet they frequently converge in their broader concern with morality, human consciousness, social order, identity formation, and aesthetic expression. Literary criticism, whether in Western or Chinese traditions, functions not merely as an interpretive activity but as an intellectual structure through which societies define truth, beauty, ideology, and human relations. However, the pathways through which these meanings are constructed differ substantially in terms of epistemology, language, textuality, and reader engagement.

In the Chinese critical tradition, this interpretive orientation toward subtlety and implication can be clearly observed in Liu Xie's *Wenxin Diaolong* (文心雕龙), where literary meaning is described as emerging through “wen wai zhi yi” (文外之意), or meaning beyond the text itself, emphasizing that true literary value lies in what is suggested rather than explicitly stated. Similarly, classical Chinese poetics frequently privilege the concept of *yijing* (意境), or “aesthetic realm,” as discussed in Wang Guowei's literary criticism, where meaning is generated through imagery, emotional resonance, and symbolic depth rather than direct explanation. For instance, in his *Renjian Cihua* (人间词话), Wang Guowei highlights how poetic excellence is achieved through indirect expression and layered emotional suggestion, demonstrating the importance of metaphorical density and interpretive openness in Chinese literary thought.

In contrast, English literary criticism—particularly within structuralist and post-structuralist traditions such as those developed by Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida—tends to emphasize textual autonomy, analytical deconstruction, and the instability of meaning, where interpretation is grounded in linguistic structure rather than metaphysical or aesthetic harmony. Nevertheless, despite these differences, both traditions converge in their shared concern with how literature constructs meaning, reflects ideological structures, and engages with human experience across cultural contexts.

One of the most significant distinctions lies in the epistemological orientation of literary criticism. English literary theory, particularly in its modern and postmodern developments, exhibits a strong tendency toward analytical fragmentation, conceptual categorization, and theoretical abstraction. This orientation is especially evident in structuralist and post-structuralist traditions. Structuralist theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes conceptualize literature as a system of signs governed by linguistic relations rather than authorial intention, emphasizing the internal structures of language as the primary site of meaning production. Post-structuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man further challenge the stability of

meaning by arguing that textual interpretation is inherently deferred, unstable, and never fully complete, thereby opening literary texts to infinite interpretive possibilities.

However, it is important to note that English literary theory is not monolithic. Alongside these theoretical paradigms, humanist and moral critical traditions represented by critics such as Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis maintain a contrasting emphasis on ethical evaluation, cultural refinement, and the moral function of literature. These critics view literary works not only as linguistic structures but also as vehicles for moral and cultural education. Nevertheless, the dominance of modern critical theory has often foregrounded analytical and deconstructive approaches, reflecting a broader epistemological tradition that values rational inquiry, critical interrogation, and interpretive plurality.

Chinese literary criticism, by contrast, frequently demonstrates a holistic epistemology. Rather than fragmenting literary components into isolated analytical units, Chinese literary traditions often emphasize interconnectedness between language, ethics, nature, memory, and social harmony. Confucian criticism historically regarded literature as a medium for moral cultivation and collective order. A poem, narrative, or historical text was not only appreciated for artistic quality but also evaluated through its ethical resonance and social contribution. Consequently, literary interpretation in Chinese traditions often moves toward relational synthesis rather than analytical fragmentation.

Language itself also plays a central role in shaping literary worldview. English, as an Indo-European language with strong syntactic linearity and explicit grammatical markers, often facilitates direct argumentative structures, sequential logic, and discursive clarity. These linguistic characteristics influence literary criticism by encouraging explicit interpretation, argumentative debate, and textual dissection. Critical writing in English often foregrounds thesis construction, analytical segmentation, and argumentative coherence.

Chinese, however, as a logographic and context-sensitive language, frequently operates through semantic compression, symbolic multiplicity, and contextual resonance. Chinese literary language often allows a single character or phrase to carry layered historical, emotional, and philosophical significance. As a result, Chinese literary criticism often privileges implication, subtlety, intertextual memory, and metaphorical density. Silence, omission, and indirect expression may carry as much interpretive power as explicit discourse. This creates a literary aesthetic in which absence can function as meaning.

Another central difference emerges in narrative structures and textual organization. English literary criticism, particularly within realist and postmodern traditions, often focuses on plot architecture, narrative voice, focalization, temporal disruption, and representational instability. Aristotle's influence on beginning-middle-end narrative structures remained central to Western literary studies, while later theorists examined nonlinear narratives, metafiction, and fragmented temporality.

Chinese literary traditions, especially classical Chinese literature, often present narrative progression differently. Rather than emphasizing dramatic conflict and climactic closure, many

Chinese literary works privilege cyclical temporality, contemplative pacing, environmental symbolism, and emotional continuity. Landscape, seasonal imagery, and relational silence frequently become integral narrative devices. Literary criticism in Chinese contexts therefore often interprets narrative not only through events but through atmosphere, rhythm, and philosophical implication.

Symbolism and metaphor further illustrate the divergence between these traditions. English literary criticism frequently analyzes symbolism through semiotic systems, psychoanalytic interpretation, political ideology, or deconstruction. Symbols are examined as unstable signifiers open to multiple readings. A rose, for instance, may represent love, mortality, class distinction, irony, or textual instability depending on the interpretive framework.

In Chinese literary criticism, symbols often function through historical continuity and cultural memory. The moon may signify longing, separation, spiritual reflection, or dynastic nostalgia. Bamboo may symbolize resilience, humility, and moral integrity. Plum blossoms often suggest perseverance amid hardship. These symbols are deeply embedded in Chinese philosophical and literary traditions, making interpretation strongly dependent on cultural context and historical literacy.

Ideology and power relations constitute another major area of comparison. English literary criticism, particularly after Marxism, feminism, and postcolonial theory, became increasingly concerned with exposing structures of domination. Literature was no longer treated as ideologically neutral. Marxist critics examined class struggle and material conditions; feminist critics interrogated patriarchy; postcolonial critics exposed imperial discourse, racial hierarchy, and linguistic dominance.

Similarly, Chinese literary criticism also became politically significant, particularly during modern Chinese intellectual history. Twentieth-century literary discourse was influenced by nationalism, socialism, revolutionary aesthetics, and ideological reconstruction. Literature was frequently mobilized as a social instrument. However, unlike some Western postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives, Chinese criticism often historically maintained stronger ties between literature and collective political identity.

Reader-response and interpretive agency also differ meaningfully. English literary criticism increasingly recognizes the reader as a co-creator of meaning. Reader-response theorists argue that texts remain incomplete until interpreted. Meaning becomes relational, dynamic, and subjective.

Chinese literary criticism traditionally places greater emphasis on shared cultural competency. Interpretation often depends on familiarity with poetic convention, classical references, dynastic history, and symbolic heritage. While individual reading remains important, meaning is frequently understood within communal interpretive traditions.

Translation studies have become one of the most critical areas where English and Chinese literary criticism intersect. Translation is not merely linguistic substitution but cultural negotiation. English translations of Chinese poetry often struggle to capture tonal brevity, ambiguity, and

symbolic compression inherent in the original texts. For example, in Li Bai's (李白) poem *Jing Ye Si* (静夜思), the line “床前明月光” is composed of only four concise Chinese characters, which carry a layered poetic rhythm, visual imagery, and emotional stillness. A common English translation renders it as “Before my bed, the bright moonlight,” which, while semantically accurate, expands the compact structure of the original line and reduces its tonal economy and rhythmic silence. Similarly, the final line “低头思故乡” is translated as “I lift my head and think of home,” yet the original Chinese expression relies heavily on implied emotion and brevity, where the act of “lowering the head” already conveys introspective longing without explicit elaboration. This demonstrates how translation inevitably involves interpretive expansion, where the compact aesthetic and suggestive power of Chinese poetic language are partially transformed in the process of English rendering. Likewise, Chinese translations of English literary texts may face challenges in preserving irony, syntactic rhythm, and philosophical nuance.

Globalization has increasingly transformed literary criticism into hybrid discourse. Contemporary scholars integrate comparative poetics, intercultural hermeneutics, transnational feminism, diaspora studies, and multilingual criticism. East-West binaries are becoming less rigid. English literary theory now engages with Chinese philosophy, while Chinese criticism increasingly incorporates post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and global literary frameworks.

This hybridization demonstrates that literary criticism is not static. It evolves through dialogue, translation, migration, digital scholarship, and global intellectual exchange. Comparative literary theory therefore enables richer understanding of how language shapes identity, interpretation, and cultural consciousness.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the comparison between English and Chinese literary theory reveals not only contrasting intellectual traditions but also a dynamic field of interaction in which both systems mutually illuminate the processes of meaning-making. Rather than simply categorizing English criticism as analytical and fragmented and Chinese criticism as holistic and ethical, the findings suggest a more complex relationship in which each tradition contains internal diversity and moments of conceptual overlap. For instance, while English literary theory is often associated with structuralist and post-structuralist fragmentation, it also preserves humanist and moral-critical dimensions that emphasize ethical reading practices. Similarly, although Chinese literary criticism is frequently characterized by holistic and relational thinking, it also involves structured interpretive principles, codified symbolic systems, and historically developed critical categories that demonstrate analytical rigor.

A key insight emerging from this study is that the distinction between the two traditions should be understood not as a rigid binary opposition but as a spectrum of interpretive tendencies shaped by epistemology, language structure, philosophical heritage, and cultural memory. The analysis of translation practices, symbolic systems, and narrative structures further illustrates that

meaning is not fixed within either tradition but is continuously reconstructed through interpretive mediation, especially in cross-cultural contexts. This suggests that literary theory itself functions as a translational space where epistemological differences are constantly negotiated rather than simply opposed.

However, this study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on selected canonical theoretical texts rather than an exhaustive corpus of literary criticism from both traditions. As a result, the findings may not fully represent the diversity and internal debates within English and Chinese literary scholarship. Second, the interpretive nature of the analysis introduces a degree of subjectivity, particularly in cross-cultural comparison where conceptual equivalence is not always symmetrical. Third, the study risks oversimplification in certain thematic categorizations, despite efforts to acknowledge internal complexity. Additionally, care must be taken to avoid essentialist or Orientalist framing when describing “Chinese” and “Western” traditions as unified systems.

Future research could address these limitations by focusing on more specific and empirically grounded case studies, such as direct comparative analyses of individual critics (e.g., Roland Barthes and Liu Xie, or Jacques Derrida and Wang Guowei). Further studies may also explore hybrid theoretical frameworks emerging in contemporary scholarship, particularly in transnational academic environments where bilingual and bicultural critics reinterpret both traditions simultaneously. In addition, empirical reception studies examining how readers from different cultural backgrounds interpret the same literary texts could provide valuable insight into how theory operates in practice. Such approaches would deepen understanding of how literary meaning is continuously shaped through global intellectual exchange.

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