

The "Ship of Theseus" Dilemma and Reconstruction of World Literature in the AI Era: Taking Li Yiyun's Cross-Cultural Writing as a Mirror

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ABSTRACT

The advent of the AI era has placed world literature in an identity dilemma analogous to the ancient Greek "Ship of Theseus" paradox. AI technology has enacted a "component replacement" of world literature in two aspects: language translation and narrative creation. While this has brought about a revolution in efficiency, it also poses the risk of cultural homogenization, leading to the simplification of cultural symbols and the standardization of narrative patterns. However, Chinese-American cross-cultural writers represented by Li Yiyun, relying on the "cultural homogenization" of cultural memory and the "implicit experience" of emotional expression, have practiced cross-cultural writing in world literature and safeguarded the humanistic core of world literature. The essence of world literature does not depend on the tools of creation and dissemination, but lies in its core mission of carrying human cultural memory, individual emotional experience, and reflections on life. This "voyage purpose" constitutes its irreplaceable "identity anchor" in the AI era.

KEYWORDS

AI era; World literature; Ship of Theseus; Li Yiyun; Cross-cultural writing

1 From "Wooden Ship" to "Data Vessel": AI Identity Dilemma of World Literature

Since the concept of "world literature" was put forward by Goethe in the 19th century, it has undergone an evolution from an idealistic vision to the practice of globalized literature. When Goethe read Oriental literary works such as *The Fortunate Union* (*Hao Qiu Zhuan* in Chinese), he discovered the commonalities among the literatures of various nations and predicted that "it is now time to turn from national literatures to world literature, appreciating the best that every literature has to offer." From the perspective of economic globalization, Marx and Engels pointed out that the formation of the "world market" has turned the spiritual products of all nations into "public property", promoting the transformation from "national and local literature" to "world literature". In the 20th century, René Etiemble's "cross-cultural studies", René Wellek's "aesthetic universality", and David Damrosch's "cross-cultural dialogical reading model" further enriched the theoretical system of world literature.

Entering the AI era, the development of world literature has encountered new variables. AI translation (such as ChatGPT's multilingual generation and DeepL's contextual adaptation) has broken the "lag" in language dissemination. AI creation (such as the GPT series models) can imitate the style of writers to generate texts. These technologies not only provide the convenience of "delocalization" for world literature but also trigger disputes over its essential identity. When the carriers of narration, narrative logic, and dissemination paths of world literature are replaced one by one by AI, does this "literary ship" that carries human cultural memory and emotional experience still retain its original identity core?

The ancient Greek paradox, "Ship of Theseus", provides a profound metaphor for this: if all the components of a ship are replaced, is it still the same ship? This paradox directly points to the core contradiction of world literature in the AI era: is the essence of literature determined by material carriers (language, narrative form) or by the humanistic values it carries (cultural memory, emotional experience)? Cross-cultural writers like Li Yiyun once anchored their identity as "cultural intermediaries" through bilingual practice, exploring the commonalities of human experience in the gaps between different languages. Nowadays, AI breaks cultural boundaries in a more radical way, but it may dissolve cultural uniqueness and flatten human emotional experience. Reflecting on this dilemma is essentially a quest for the "irreplaceability" of human literary creation in the AI era—how those cultural memories, emotional experiences, and life insights that cannot be quantified by data become the "soul anchor" to safeguard the identity of world literature.

2 "Ship of Theseus" Paradox and Reflections on Essence of World Literature

2.1 The Connotation of "Ship of Theseus" Paradox

The "Ship of Theseus" is a famous ancient Greek philosophical paradox. It describes such a scenario: as the Ship of Theseus sails, its parts are constantly replaced. When all the parts have been replaced, is the ship still the original Ship of Theseus? This paradox has triggered profound reflections on the essence of things and identity recognition. From a philosophical perspective, it involves two core questions: first, whether the essence of a thing is determined by its

material composition or by its function and meaning; second, how to determine the continuity of a thing's identity during its process of change.

Different philosophical schools have different interpretations of the "Ship of Theseus" paradox. Essentialism holds that things have a fixed and unchanging essence. When all parts of the Ship of Theseus are replaced, it is no longer the original ship, because its material composition has undergone a fundamental change. In contrast, relativism emphasizes that the essence of a thing is relative and determined by its function and meaning in a specific context. From this perspective, as long as the functions (such as sailing) and symbolic significance (such as being the Ship of Theseus) of the Ship of Theseus remain unchanged, it can still be regarded as the original ship even if all its parts are replaced.

2.2 Implications for Essence of World Literature

When introducing the "Ship of Theseus" paradox into the study of world literature, it can be found that world literature is also faced with similar problems. With the development of the times, the constituent elements of world literature (such as the subject of creation, communication media, reading methods, etc.) are constantly changing. Then, in the AI era, has the essence of world literature also changed? Is it still the world literature we understand in the traditional sense?

From the perspective of essentialism, if we define the essence of world literature as literary works with global value created by human writers through humanistic perception and creativity, then works created by AI obviously cannot be included in the category of world literature because they lack human emotional experience and humanistic care. Similarly, if we emphasize the importance of translation in the dissemination of world literature and believe that only human translators can accurately convey the cultural connotations of literary works, then works translated by AI can hardly be regarded as genuine world literature translations.

However, from the perspective of relativism, the essence of world literature is determined by its function and meaning in global cultural exchanges. The main functions of world literature are to promote understanding and communication between different cultures, break down cultural barriers, and demonstrate the common emotional and value pursuits of humanity. If AI creation and AI translation can realize these functions to a certain extent, they may become part of world literature. For example, although AI-created works lack the depth of human emotions, if they can present human life conditions and ways of thinking in novel forms and unique perspectives, and arouse resonance among readers around the world, then they possess the significance of world literature. Similarly, although AI translation has shortcomings in cultural understanding, if it can help more literary works cross language barriers, spread globally, and promote dialogue and communication between different cultures, then it also contributes to the development of world literature.

In addition, from the perspective of continuity amid changes, world literature has been in a state of constant change throughout its development process. From the initial dissemination of oral literature to the publication of books in the printing era, and then to the current digital age, the communication media and reading methods of world literature have undergone tremendous changes, but this has not changed the essential function of world literature as a promoter of cultural exchanges and a showcase of human values. The advent of the AI era is just a new stage in the development of world literature. Although it brings new challenges and changes, we cannot therefore deny the continuity of world literature amid changes.

3 "Component Replacement" of World Literature by AI: Efficiency Revolution and the Risk of Cultural Homogenization

3.1 Elimination of Language Barriers: AI Translation and Illusion of "Instant Cross-Cultural Narration"

AI translation technology is reconstructing the dissemination path of world literature. In the past, bilingual translations that took years to be polished can now be completed by AI in an instant. Even when creating, writers can use AI to convert local experiences into multilingual narrative frameworks in real time. Although such instant cross-cultural communication appears advantageous, it ultimately hides the trap of "cultural simplification". AI's translation of cultural images mostly stays at the level of "symbol correspondence" and is difficult to convey the implicit meaning behind literary images.

In *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, Li Yiyun tells the story of Mr. Shi, a retired rocket scientist, who goes to the United States to visit his divorced daughter. There is a scene describing the estrangement between them: "'We're the only family for each other now,' Mr. Shi says, almost pleading, but his daughter closes her bedroom door before he says more. Mr. Shi looks at the dishes that are barely touched by his daughter, the fried tofu cubes stuffed with chopped mushrooms, shrimps, and ginger, the collage of bamboo shoots, red peppers, and snow peas. Even though his daughter admires his cooking every evening, he senses the halfheartedness in her praise; she does not know the cooking has become his praying, and she leaves the prayers unanswered." The word "collage" here is a metonymy deliberately used by the author. If AI processes this word, it will most likely use the word "拼贴 (pīn tiē)" in the Chinese version. However, this Chinese word

has the connotation of "patchwork" in the Chinese context, which fails to convey the richness of the dishes and the father's sincere intentions as expressed in the original text.

This kind of "de-emotionalized" language conversion reduces the cross-cultural dissemination of world literature to the "transportation of vocabulary" rather than the "resonance of human experiences". Just like the wooden planks of the Ship of Theseus being replaced with smooth plastic boards, although the appearance of the ship is retained, the traces of the sea breeze and years carried by the wood are lost.

3.2 Generation of Narrative Templates: AI Creation and Flattening of "Human Emotional Experience"

By analyzing a large number of world literature texts, AI has been able to extract narrative templates for "cross-cultural resonance", such as "family estrangement + intergenerational conflict" and "lonely individual + cultural stranger". It can even imitate Li Yiyun's "Chinese-style blankness" style to generate texts. However, it erodes the authors' personalized expression frameworks and forms a standardized scenario of human uniformity.

For example, in *Where Reasons End*, the conversations between the mother and the son are barely sensational, with an equal and restrained tone, and there are few direct descriptions of the mother's emotional expressions. Yet, readers can feel the heartbreaking grief and regret from this restraint. For instance, "The kitchen is all set up and running, I said, It's warm and bright. It has the kind of oven you like. Perhaps I should start learning to bake. That's nice, he said. I couldn't tell if he was annoyed or bored or sad or angry. Tones were what we were missing now, and without tones words were floating, gravity-less, missing one another or, worse, clashing without a warning." The author of this paper used the prompt "a conversation between a mother and her son in an imaginary time and space after the son's suicide" and asked the AI writing platform of Doubao to provide an English paragraph. The result is as follows: "The mother's eyes stung, but she tugged at the corner of her mouth, feigning the same exasperation she'd used back then: 'Of course it was. I took it apart three times and still couldn't fix it. Then you said, 'I'll finish it when I'm home for the holidays'—and then...' Her words faltered, her fingers tightening around the edge of the tablecloth. 'I looked up tutorials later. I'm almost done now. The stitches just aren't as neat as yours.'" This text seems to have the characteristics of "Chinese-style implicitness" and does not directly express grief in the conversation. However, the overly detailed descriptions of expressions precisely weaken the deep emotional power of the mother-son dialogue.

What is more alarming is that AI's "templated creation" is shaping readers' aesthetic inertia. The algorithm continuously recommends simplified narratives with "high resonance", causing readers to gradually lose patience with complex cultural experiences. Narratives that do not conform to AI templates, such as the "clan ethics" in Chinese rural literature and the "interweaving of mythology and reality" in Latin American magical realism, are at risk of being marginalized. This "efficiency-oriented" narrative screening ultimately leads to the "cultural homogenization" of world literature. Stories from different cultural backgrounds are forced into the "safe framework" set by AI, becoming similar narratives with "different skins but the same core". Just like the components of the Ship of Theseus being replaced with industrial parts of uniform specifications, the unique texture and story of each plank are lost.

4 Human Writers' "Identity Guardianship": Anchoring Cultural Memory and Emotional Authenticity in the Gaps of AI

4.1 "Non-Encodability" of Cultural Memory: The Resistance of Li Yiyun's "Implicit Experience"

AI can imitate Li Yiyun's narrative style, but it cannot replicate her unique perspective of looking back at China in English. This perspective stems from her real experience as a "cross-cultural subject": the sense of identity fragmentation after refusing to return to China, the "detachment and attachment" when writing in English, and the implicit adherence to the cultural roots of the Chinese language. These personalized cultural memories are the "soul components" that cannot be digitized by AI. In *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*, Li Yiyun describes the Chinese-style emotional bonds among three characters: Siyu, Hanfeng, and Professor Dai, reflecting the loneliness and alienation between them. Siyu remains single at the age of 38, harboring her hidden feelings for Professor Dai that she cannot express, and feels lonely inside. Hanfeng, Professor Dai's son, returns to China from the United States and gets together with Siyu under Professor Dai's matchmaking. Their relationship is not based on romance or passion, but on a compromise with loneliness. Such a story, which seems "harmonious" and "perfect" yet implies real cultural experiences, cannot be generated by AI. AI can create estrangement filled with contradictions and conflicts, but it cannot embed unspeakable loneliness in the "gentle flow" of "harmony" and "perfection". In the AI era, the core value of human writers lies in transforming non-encodable cultural memories into literary details. These details are like the "rusty iron nails with the ship's body temperature" in the Ship of Theseus, which are identity marks that AI cannot replicate.

4.2 "Non-Algorithmic Nature" of Emotional Expression: From "Resonance Symbols" to "In-depth Insights into Life"

AI is good at calculating emotional symbols for cross-cultural resonance, such as "a tight hug when parting" or "a phone ring suddenly sounding late at night", but it cannot convey the depth and complexity of human emotional experiences.

In *Must I Go*, to better understand the reason for her daughter Lucy's suicide, Lilia begins to repeatedly read the diaries of Roland Bouley, the lover in her youth, and makes annotations beside them. By means of "diaries" and "annotations", Li Yiyun alternately presents human emotions in two modes—explicit and implicit, past and present—exploring the reason for her daughter's suicide and also reviewing her own life. AI may be able to use symbols such as "childhood swing", "lover's kiss", "empty house" etc. to string together a woman's life, but it will be unable to calculate that diaries are the most private carriers of human memories.

The charm of world literature has never been the "stacking of emotional symbols", but the "deep experience of life". Just as the value of the Ship of Theseus does not lie in its ability to sail, but in the fact that it has carried the crew's laughter, tears, and expectations for the other shore. AI can assemble the "hull of emotional symbols", but it cannot inject the soul of life experience.

5 Ethics and Reading of World Literature in the AI Era: Extended Dimensions of Identity Reconstruction

5.1 Ethical Dilemma of AI Literary Creation

The generation of world literature in the AI era faces many ethical challenges. Firstly, there is the dispute over copyright ownership. AI creation is based on the learning of a large number of existing literary works. Should the copyright belong to the AI development company, the original authors of the training data, or the AI itself? Currently, there is no clear conclusion at the legal and ethical levels. Secondly, there are doubts about originality and authenticity. AI creation lacks human subjective initiative and emotional investment, and its works are often criticized as "pseudo-original works composed by algorithms", which may weaken the aesthetic value and social significance of literature. Thirdly, there is the risk of cultural bias. The cultural biases in the data AI learns (such as stereotypes about specific groups) may be amplified during its development, which undermines cultural diversity.

In response to this, it is necessary to establish ethical norms for AI literature: clarify the copyright allocation principles for AI creation, strengthen the screening and review of training data, and encourage human-machine collaborative creation—guiding AI with human writers' cultural cognition to avoid the blindness of algorithms. Only by adhering to the ethical bottom line can AI truly become a "assistant" rather than a "hinderance" to world literature.

5.2 Transformation of Literary Reading Experience in the AI Era

Reading is a core link for world literature to realize its value. AI technology has not only optimized the convenience of reading but also brought about an experiential crisis. On the one hand, e-reading devices and digital libraries allow readers to access global literary works anytime and anywhere. AI recommendation algorithms can push personalized texts according to reading preferences, improving reading efficiency and interest. On the other hand, fragmented reading has replaced the immersive experience of paper reading. Readers are easily distracted by electronic devices and find it difficult to deeply understand the connotation of literary works. At the same time, the loss of cultural elements in AI translation prevents readers from fully perceiving the artistic value of the original works. For example, it is difficult for AI translation to convey the emotional tension of cultural images such as "moon", "wild goose", and "willow" in classical Chinese poetry.

To safeguard the reading value of world literature, a two-pronged approach is needed. Firstly, to cultivate readers' in-depth reading literacy and guide them to maintain concentration in the digital environment. Secondly, to promote the "AI + human" translation model—AI completes the basic language conversion, and human translators supplement cultural annotations to ensure the complete transmission of the cultural connotation of literary works.

6 "Soul Definition" of World Literature — Not a "Ship with Complete Components", but a "Story of Turbulent Voyage"

The essential dispute over the "Ship of Theseus" has never been about whether the components of the ship have been replaced, but about whether the ship is still carrying its original voyage purpose. For world literature in the AI era, the

"voyage purpose" is to convey human cultural memory, emotional experience, and reflections on life. This core mission determines the identity of world literature. It does not depend on whether the language is translated by AI or whether the narrative is assisted by AI, but on whether it retains the "soul of human creation".

AI can become a "tool" for world literature, but it cannot replace humans as the masters of stories. It can transport cultural symbols, but cannot understand the weight of life behind the symbols; it can generate narrative frameworks, but cannot show the uniqueness and individuality of human cultural experiences; it can calculate cross-cultural resonance, but cannot express the depth of human emotional experiences. "I love language and I love writing. I'm fascinated by people, and I like to tell their stories,"¹ Li Yiyun says. This passion and attention to people and their own stories are precisely the "identity anchor" of world literature in the AI era.

In the future, the development of world literature does not need to confront AI, but should pursue "human-machine coexistence": using the efficiency of AI to break the boundaries of dissemination, and using human creativity to safeguard cultural depth. As long as the "story of the voyage" is still written by humans, world literature will never become an "empty ship assembled by data", but will always be a "warm, living ship" carrying the memories, emotions, and dreams of different cultures. This "Ship of Theseus" will eventually sail into a broader cultural ocean in the AI era.

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