

# Causes of Formation and Modes of Dissemination of World Literary Classics

**Deyi Woody**

**Abstract:** The value of the classics of world literature has been realized through incessant evolution, transformation and discoveries. This paper seeks to investigate the causes for the making of classics of world literature and the modes of their dissemination. As for the causes behind the formation of literary classics, close connections with the primitive religion, ethical teachings as well as human perceptions of nature are easy to identify. Literary classics, first and foremost, serve to satisfy people's spiritual needs such as ethical selection through different stages of human history. The dissemination of literary classics has undergone various forms covering cerebral, hieroglyphic, cuneiform and phonetic texts, varying from papyrus, clay tablets, bamboo, wood, pottery, bronze to the movable-type printing, from oral literature to written literature, from "bylina" to heroic epics, from national literature to translated literature, and from print media to cross-media dissemination. Due to the progress in science and technology, the evolution of modes of dissemination not only has encouraged circulation and popularization of literary classics, but has witnessed the development of human civilization. In this light, exploring the origins and modes of dissemination of literary classics in terms of the cultural context of the source language and cross-media transmission as well as analyzing their cultural function and cognitive values pose an important subject for interdisciplinary studies of literature which deserves deeper consideration.

**Keywords:** world literary classics; formation; modes of dissemination; moral teaching; cross-media study

**Author:** Deyi Woody is Professor at Zhejiang Yuexiu University (Shaoxing 312000, China), professor and Ph.D. supervisor at the Institute of World Literature and Comparative Literature, Zhejiang University (Hangzhou 310058, China). His research interests include English Literature, Russian Literature and Comparative Literature (Email: hzwudi@yahoo.com).

**标题:** 世界文学经典的生成缘由与传播途径

**内容摘要:** 世界文学经典在不断发现、不断演变和深化中体现自身价值。本文旨在探究世界文学经典的生成缘由和传播途径。文学经典的生成缘由是多

方面的, 但与万物有灵论等原始宗教信仰、伦理教诲以及人类对自然的认知有关, 其基本取向是满足人们包括伦理选择在内的精神需求, 适应于各个不同时代人类生存和发展的需要。世界文学经典的传播经历了多种途径, 以其脑文本、象形文字、楔形文字、拼音文字等多种形式, 历经了从纸草、泥板、竹木、陶器、青铜直到活字印刷术的演变, 以及从口头文学到书面文学、从“壮士歌”到英雄史诗, 从民族文学到翻译文学、从平面媒体到跨媒体传播等多种媒介的发展变换。传播途径的变化, 不仅促使了文学经典的流传和普及, 而且伴随科学技术的进步, 在一定层面上折射出人类文明的历史进程。因此, 从源语文化语境以及跨媒介传播等方面探索世界文学经典的生成缘由及传播途径, 研究文学经典的文化功能和认知价值, 无疑是值得我们深入思考的一个具有跨学科性质的重要命题。

**关键词:** 世界文学经典; 生成缘由; 传播途径; 道德教诲; 跨媒介研究

**作者简介:** 吴笛, 文学博士, 浙江越秀外国语学院教授, 浙江大学世界文学与比较文学研究所教授, 主要从事英美文学、俄罗斯文学和比较文学研究。本文系国家社科基金后期资助重点项目“俄罗斯古代诗歌发展史”【项目编号: 21FWWA002】的阶段性成果。

The charms and powers of world literary classics are enormous, and their value has been realized through constant evolution, transformation and discoveries. Since the word “canon” was first used as an important measure of value in the examination of literary works, the academic circle has been searching for the meaning and value of literary canon, which, in turn, has led to its formation and dissemination.

### I. Causes of Formation of Literary Classics

Undoubtedly, literature, though non-utilitarian, has a utilitarian aspect and offers an important access to our perception of human society though not in the sense of providing information. Although literary classics do not usually communicate what we generally consider useful information, they have the specific value of searching for truth, cultivating emotions, reviewing any given epoch, and interrogating social realities. Despite that the causes of formation of literary classics are multifaceted, literary classics, first and foremost, serve to satisfy people's spiritual needs such as ethical selection through different stages of human history.

To begin with, literary works were first created in close connection with primitive religions in ancient times. For instance, it is “animism”, the worldview of ancient Egyptians, which leads to the genesis of *The Book of the Dead*, a collection of poetry, which is considered the oldest written literature in the world. Moreover, the doctrine of witchcraft is also associated with primitive religions. Although it

is possible to find some connection between early poetry, such as *The Vedas*, and witchcraft, the latter, as an important social activity of early humans, plays only a minor role in the creation of poetry. As a matter of fact, when we talk about “literary classics” and “literary canon”, we almost talk about the same thing, but the difference is obvious. When we say “literary classics”, we usually refer to literary works that are “exposed to the test of time”(Easterling 35), while the word “canon” is most directly associated with religion, and has its origins in an internal debate within the Christian church about the “canonical” aspects of poetry. “The idea of a canon of writings first developed in relation to the *Bible*, in the 4th century of the modern era” (Makaryk 514). As such, it is not difficult to see the relationship between literary classics and their connection with religion. As Jeremy Hawthorn notes that what is accepted as having divine authority in the church is called classic, while that which has no authority or whose authority is doubtful is said to be pseudepigrapha (Hawthorn 34).

The formation of literary classics is also closely related to people’s emotions and aesthetic needs. Those who advocate the “imitation theory” also have emotional communication in mind. The “imitation theory” begins with two ancient Greek philosophers, Democritus and Aristotle. Democritus believes that poetry originates from man’s imitation of the sounds of nature, while Aristotle states in his *Poetics*, “Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature” (Aristotle 15). He goes on to explain that these two causes result from man’s instinct to copy and that the pleasure is always felt in the work being copied. He further notes, “The graver spirits imitated noble actions, and the actions of good men. The more trivial sort imitated the actions of meaner persons, at first composing satires, as the former did hymns to the gods and the praises of famous men” (Aristotle 16). The “emotion theory” holds that poetry originates from the expression of emotions and the need to communicate ideas. This view reveals some essential connections between poetic composition and emotional expression, but it fails to explain the source of poetry, and only illustrates certain motives for the creation of poetry.

The history of world literature also proves that the earliest oral literature in the world is work songs. It is the work that determines the formal characteristics of poetry as well as its functional significance, linking it to rhythm and rhyme. Since shouting or yelling while working is accompanied by swinging of the tool and twisting of the body, one of the important features of primitive poetry is the unity of poetry, music and dance. Zhu Guangqian notes that both Chinese and Western countries believe that the origin of poetry lies in human nature, that poetry, music

and dance are originally a trinity, and that the very thing that unites the three arts is rhythm. “With the passage of time, the three arts diverged, each retaining its rhythm, while in addition to rhythm, music developed towards ‘harmony’, dance towards gesture, and poetry towards words. Eventually, the three arts grew further apart” (Zhu 11). This also indicates that literature is produced out of the need for emotional communication and pleasure. “Mere aesthetic essentialism can hardly explain the nature of canons, including literary classics” (Yan 1).

Furthermore, the creation of literary classics is related to people’s ethical needs including ethical teachings. A literary classic must be an exemplary work which is widely revered. In this context, the word “exemplary” is already an element of value judgment. In fact, the formation of literary classics which have been handed down through generations, does not merely depend on the charm of their language or aesthetic values, and ethical values also play a significant role in obtaining their esteem. It is the ethical choices that make people yearn time and again for answers and lessons from literary classics, and that offer them the enduring value and charm. The ethical and aesthetic values in literary works are not necessarily incompatible for the reason that aesthetic reading is not the only way to study literary classics. In the process of reading, “we are willing to allow our various interests as human beings to become subordinate to the total experience” (Brooks 227).

In this respect, Harold Bloom’s conception of aesthetic creativity is too biased, and he overemphasizes the importance of aesthetic creativity in Western canon-formation, opposing the moral philosophy and ideological criticism embedded in literary theories such as New Historicism. Aesthetic standard is important in its own right, however, if the aesthetic function is regarded as the only function of literary classics, it clearly weakens the “raison d’être” of literary classics. Moreover, the moral and political values in literature are even less, as Bloom puts it, “the greatest enemies of aesthetic and cognitive standards” (Bloom 40). The cognitive function of literary classics is precisely their ethical value; especially when we say the purpose of reading literary works is to cultivate moral sentiments, we are already talking about the ethical need.

In *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, Nie Zhenzhao gives a theoretical account of the ethical value of literary classics as well as the practical use of ethical criticism in literary genres such as fiction, drama, and poetry. In comparison with Bloom’s aforementioned statement, Nie’s view is undoubtedly more scientific and objective. In regard to the relationship between aesthetic and ethical value, Nie insists that, “the value of literary classics lies in their ethical value, and their aesthetic value is only an extension of the ethical value, or a form or means of

realizing the latter. In this sense, whether a literary text can become canonical is determined by its ethical value” (Nie, *Introduction* 142). Clearly, there is no aesthetics without ethics, and without ethical choices, aesthetic choices are even less available. Discovering the ethical value of literary classics, cultivating the ethical consciousness of the reader, and learning from literary classics, makes the values of literature more keenly felt than ever before. One of the missions of literary classics is to emphasize the ethical teachings and awaken the reader’s ethical consciousness. French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas constructs a “to do something for the Other” view of ethical philosophy, arguing that “the authentic relationship with the Other” is “discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility” (Levinas 88). Also, Canadian scholar Markus Poetzsch places more emphasis on the practice of literary ethical criticism and its ethical teachings (Poetzsch 134).

Needless to say, ethical teachings should become one of the goals literary classics strive to achieve. The connection between the formation of literary classics and their ethical teachings can be strongly felt in works such as *Oedipus the King*, *Aesop’s Fables* and *Legend of Lena Fox*, to name just a few. Obviously, ethical teachings are more prominent in ancient literature, not to mention the fact that many literary forms originate from ethical teachings. Early Egyptian autobiographical works, for instance, display salient tendencies of ethical teachings. *The Autobiography of Methen*, *The Autobiography of the Weni*, and *The Autobiography of Harkhuf*, for example, mostly either state the noble virtues of the emperor’s ministers, or show off how to serve the emperor and instill moral codes in the minds of ancient Egyptians. “The praises of the virtue of charity, which permeate many autobiographical inscriptions of the times, undoubtedly have influenced later biographical literature” (Lin 286). Apart from autobiographical works, oracular literature of ancient Egypt also offers direct examples of ethical teachings such as the earliest *The Instruction of Prince Hardjedef*, and the most well-preserved *The Instruction of Ptahhotep*, both concerning various aspects of social ethics.

Finally, the formation of literary classics is related to human perception of nature. Literary classics are, to a certain extent, records of human cognition of nature. In particular, some ancient literary works are interpretations of natural philosophy. Almost every nation has had its peculiar system of mythology, and a significant body of these myths conveys the perception of nature. Both Greco-Roman and Eastern mythologies invariably reflect man’s comprehension of natural forces and his exploration of the relationship with nature. In earlier times before the Renaissance, due to poor knowledge of natural sciences and limitations of the way people think, people can only accept the control of natural forces passively, which

leads to fear of nature and being in awe of God's mercy, as a result of which, people begin to deify natural forces. Many myths and legends as well as various rituals are motivated by man's fear and deification of nature. In terms of language, people even consider "heaven" and "God" one and the same concept and allow each to play the role of supreme power, so the word "heaven" is a typical example of human deification of natural forces.

## II. The Evolution of the Modes of Dissemination of Literary Classics

In the course of time, the dissemination of literary classics has undergone various forms covering cerebral, hieroglyphic, cuneiform and phonetic texts, varying from papyrus, clay tablets, bamboo, wood, pottery, bronze to movable type, from oral literature to written literature, from "bylina" to heroic epics, from national literature to translated literature, and from print media to cross-media dissemination. Due to the progress in science and technology, the modes of dissemination not only have encouraged circulation and popularization of literary classics, but have witnessed the historical process of human civilization. Generally speaking, the dissemination of literary classics has gone through seven important stages or modes, which are oral, performative, written, printed, organizational, visual, and internet transmission respectively.

The oral stage marks the beginning of the formation and dissemination of literary classics, which is closely connected with the birth of language. Not a small number of ancient literary classics have undergone a long phase of oral transmissions such as *Iliad* and *Aesop's Fables*, and not until later when writing is invented, are they collected and recorded to form fixed texts. Actually, the evolution from oral to written literature marks the transformation of brain texts into material texts. "The only way to preserve brain text relies on oral expression, so that brain text can be kept permanently. Consequently, a vast number of brain texts possessing literary significance disappeared, and only a small part could be passed down via written texts" (Nie, "Ethical Literary Criticism" 194). Obviously, brain texts as oral literature can only be preserved and transmitted after being transformed into a fixed form, be it material or electronic.

Theatrical activities have contributed a great deal to the formation and dissemination of literary classics. Take literary classics of ancient Greece, for instance, the works of the three best-known tragic poets, namely, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, were then transmitted through theatrical performances. Back then, theaters were mostly amphitheaters, such as the Dionysus Theater in Athens, which was large enough to hold 30,000 people. In addition to theatrical

transmission of literary classics, chanting is also an effective way of spreading poetry. Much of the lyric poetry of ancient Greece was transmitted by chanting to the accompaniment of instruments such as the flute and the lyre. In ancient Persia, the works of the poets were transmitted by the “poetizer,” a person who disseminated poetry by chanting.

Writing, invented at the beginning of the slave society, marks a crucial stage in the formation and dissemination of literary classics. Around the third or fourth millennium B.C., in China, Egypt, India and the region of Tigris-Euphrates River, early pictographs emerged successively. The invention of writing is undoubtedly a fundamentally important event in the development of human civilization, because writing overcomes the weaknesses of oral transmission and is able to preserve information precisely and permanently. From this moment onward, the preservation of literature overcomes the limitations of human memories as well as the spatial and temporal constraints of oral transmission, greatly enhancing the dissemination of literary classics.

Even with the invention of writing, mass dissemination of literary classics would still not be possible without the development in printing technology. Before the movable-type printing was invented by Bi Sheng, literary works could only be recorded on plants such as papyrus and bamboo, or engraved on clay tablets or slates. Thanks to the movable-type printing, mass dissemination of literary classics was eventually made possible.

Organizational dissemination is also an efficient way of transmitting literature. With the development of science and technology, especially the invention of the printing press, the concept of “community” is more strongly felt than ever before, which includes the expansion of reading and writing groups, literary salons, schools, journals and publishing houses. The dissemination of literary classics cannot be separated from a particular medium, and each medium reflects the zeitgeist of a particular historical period. In effect, the word “medium” has multiple meanings under different circumstances. “In a broader sense, transmission mediums of literature can be understood in two aspects. On the one hand, it is the carrier, channel, tool, and technical means of literary information such as ‘fiction texts,’ ‘dramatic scripts,’ ‘epic legends,’ ‘textual web pages;’ on the other hand, it may refer to organizations engaged in information collection, symbol processing and dissemination...However the objects and domains indicated by the two aspects may differ, transmission mediums are an indispensable part of social information systems” (Wen 52).

From the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, mass media has become a major

means of transmission of literary classics which provide a steady source for film and TV adaptations. Since the advent of the Internet in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Internet has added a new dimension to the dissemination of literary classics. With the popularization of computers as well as the development of information technology such as image scanning and text recognition, electronic books have become popular with more readers and researchers, which are easier to read, carry and disseminate. Besides, online dissemination has made literary classics reach out to a larger audience. From papyrus and clay tablets to Internet, the evolution of transmission modes has not only witnessed the development of human civilization but contributed immensely to the circulation and popularization of literary classics.

### III. Video Texts and New Media Circulation of World Literature

Classics of world literature deserve to be considered as an important part of the cultural and spiritual heritage of all humankind. All through the 20th century, film, television and media together have had a great impact on people's daily life, and accordingly, literary classics have also become popular materials for film and television adaptations and other new media communications, and thus continue to play an active part in the construction of national culture. Ever since the literary classic *Cinderella* hit the screen in 1900, film and television creations have constantly turned to literature for inspirations. According to statistics, 85% of the best Oscar films are based on literary works (Chen 1). Well-known films such as *Troy*, *Dante's Inferno*, *The Lion King*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Olive Twist*, *Doctor Zhivago*, to name just a few, are all successful adaptations of literary classics. Hollywood adaptations of Chinese classics such as *Kung Fu Panda*, and *Mulan*, as well as Chinese adaptations of foreign classics such as *How Steel is Made*, further prove that literary classics are not only able to provide affluent materials for film and animation adaptations, but can be globally popularized and even integrated into other cultures.

Considering different characteristics of literature and visual arts, when discussing film and television dissemination of literary classics, we cannot take "faithfulness" as an absolute criterion to judge the quality of a film. As a matter of fact, we seldom expect film or television adaptation to be completely "faithful" to and fully represent the content of the original text. Nevertheless, the conversion of linguistic symbols into visual symbols is not a conversion in the general sense of the word, but a "translation" from one artistic form to another. Now that it is a screen "translation," faithfulness to the original text, especially to its ideological content, is an important factor that cannot be neglected, which can also be considered a major

criterion for measuring the quality of a “translation.”

Scholars at home and abroad have different views on what principles should be followed when it comes to a cinematic adaptation of literary texts. Xia Yan notes that, “If the original text is one of the classics authored by Tolstoy, Gorky, Lu Xun and other literary masters, I believe that the adaptation should always strive to be faithful to the original text, even necessary additions and deletions should be consistent with the themes and unique style of the text. On the other hand, if the original text is one of the myths, folklores or the so-called ‘anecdotes’, greater freedom concerning any additions, deletions or alterations will be allowed” (Xia 498). Xia Yan believes that literary adaptations differ from one another because the nature of the original texts varies. He further points out, “How much of the original style of a literary text can be retained depends on the aesthetic and historical value of the literary text itself” (Yan 329).

After all, literature and film are of different artistic categories. If a film mimics the original text in a strict sense, such “translation,” at best, is “stiff translation” or “dead translation.” The dissemination of literary works from one language to another is considered a kind of “re-creation,” while the transmission of literary works from one artistic form to another is undoubtedly a sort of artistic “re-creation” which, however, is subordinated to the original texts. As for film adaptations of literary classics, the moral, psychological and intellectual connotations of the original texts should also be conveyed to the audience. As a matter of fact, a great number of films adapted from literary classics, more often than not, have inspired the audience to read the original literary texts precisely because of the charm and power of literature, thus contributing enormously to the popularization and cross-cultural transmission of literary classics.

### **Conclusion**

After a long period of time, the world literary classics have not only aesthetic value but also important cognitive value. “The process of the formation of literary classics is a process of cognition of human being to the nature and human society” (Wu 1). Throughout the course of history, literary classics have become the precious cultural heritage of all mankind. It is therefore of great significance to study the causes of formation and modes of dissemination of literary classics. Furthermore, it is undoubtedly an important interdisciplinary subject to study the cultural functions and cognitive values of literary classics in terms of the context of the source texts and their cross-media dissemination.

## Works Cited

- Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Edited with critical notes and a translation by S. H. Butcher. London: Macmillan, 1898.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. London: Dennis Dobson Ltd, 1960.
- Chen, Linxia. *From Novel to Film: A Comprehensive Study of Film and Television Adaptations*. Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2011.
- Easterling, P. E. ed. *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*. vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy. *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: Anorld, 2000.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985.
- Lin, Huruoming. *Egyptological Studies: The Glorious Ancient Egyptian Civilization*. Changchun: Jilin UP, 2008.
- Luo, Xinzhang ed. *On Translation*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1984.
- Makaryk, Irena. *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory Approaches, Scholars, Terms*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993.
- Nie, Zhenzhao. "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory." *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 189-207.
- . *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Beijing: Peking UP, 2014.
- Poetzsch, Markus. "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism: The Lessons of Levinas." *Antigonish Review*. Issue 158 (Summer 2009): 127-134.
- Wen, Yan ed. *Introduction to Literary Communication*. Shenyang: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 2006.
- Wu, Di. *Studies in the Formation and Dissemination of Foreign Literary Classics*. vol. 2. Beijing: Peking UP, 2019.
- Xia, Yan. "Miscellaneous Adaptations." *An Anthology of Chinese Film Theory*. vol. 1. Beijing: Culture and Arts Press, 1992.
- Yan, Jingjuan. *Literary Canons Controversy in America*. Beijing: Social Science Literature Press, 2010.
- Zhu, Guangqian. *Poetics*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1984.