

The Acceptance, Challenges and Prospects of Distant Reading Theory in China

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Abstract

Distant reading theory is a research method involving the analysis of large corpora of texts utilizing information technology. Proposed by Franco Moretti in 2000 and introduced to the Chinese academic sphere through Shi Yi's 2010 translation of *Conjectures on World Literature*, the theory has subsequently stimulated extensive scholarly discussion within China. Current academic engagement primarily focuses on evaluating distant reading theory and its application within specific fields. Notwithstanding some challenges, distant reading remains an effective and innovative methodology with broad application prospects, particularly in interdisciplinary research domains.

Keywords

Distant reading theory, research methods, acceptance, challenges; prospects.

1. Introduction

Distant Reading is a concept proposed by Franco Moretti, an Italian-American scholar and Marxist cultural critic, in 2000. Its core principle advocates moving beyond the close reading of individual texts. Instead, it employs digital technologies to aggregate and analyze vast quantities of textual data, subsequently interpreting literary works to explore commonalities, summarize literary phenomena, and identify patterns. As a significant component within the field of digital humanities, distant reading theory represents a methodological departure from traditional literary research. This paper examines the theoretical foundations and practical applications of distant reading, its reception within the Chinese academic context, the challenges it confronts, and its future prospects, thereby elucidating the theory's current status and scholarly value.

2. Introduction to Distant Reading Theory

Distant reading theory constitutes a comprehensive methodological framework characterized by the digital analysis of texts. Chad Wellmon, a professor at the University of Virginia, defines Moretti's "distant reading" as "the study of gradually emerging and longstanding patterns in literary history by analysing massive amounts of texts with computational and quantitative methods" [1]. This definition broadly captures the research method and objectives of distant reading. In practice, however, distant reading manifests in diverse forms, often utilizing visualization techniques such as charts and graphs to present research findings. Consequently, distant reading represents a significant innovation within literary studies. Its reliance on computers, databases, and related technologies addresses a gap in prior literary research methodologies and aligns with the developmental characteristics of the information age. Distant reading theory, and the digital humanities paradigm it exemplifies, effectively bridges traditional literary scholarship with modern scientific and technological approaches, establishing a vital interdisciplinary research pathway.

It is noteworthy that when Moretti initially introduced the concept of "distant reading" in his essay *"Conjectures on World Literature"* [2], he did not explicitly frame it as an independent research methodology. Within that text, distant reading constituted only a minor component. Moretti primarily employed the concept as a tool to critique inequalities within the world literary system and to advocate for scholarly attention to literature from Third World countries. This perspective reflects an intellectual lineage extending from Antonio Gramsci's critiques of Western cultural hegemony in the twentieth century, imbued with postcolonial undertones. However, the concept of distant reading rapidly gained significant traction beyond its initial scope. It evolved into an autonomous literary research method and, in conjunction with information technology, has become a powerful instrument for analyzing literary flows.

The emergence of distant reading theory inevitably involved a critique of the prevailing method of close reading. Moretti contends that "the crux of close reading of texts is that the classical scope of close reading is necessarily narrow" and that "close reading of texts does not take non-classical works into account" [3]. More directly, in *The Slaughterhouse of Literature*, Moretti laments: "Literary history is the slaughterhouse of literature. A large number of books are lost forever—and by 'a large number' of practically lost books I mean that if we were to select today more than 200 classics among the novels of nineteenth-century England, they would account for no more than 0.5 per cent of all published novels. What about the remaining 99.5 per cent?" [4] Thus, distant reading functions as an inversion of close reading. Its emergence is inextricably linked to the dominance of text-immanent analysis prevalent in twentieth-century European and American literary studies. Distant reading transcends the inherent limitations of focusing solely on individual texts, adopting instead a holistic and macroscopic perspective on literary history. This theory emphasizes the diachronic development of literature across global literary systems. Through digital humanities methodologies, all texts—not merely canonical works—become legitimate objects of study.

Following its conceptual proposal, Moretti subsequently applied distant reading in practice to reinterpret traditional canonical texts. In her paper "Distant Reading, Literary Laboratory and Digital Humanities: Franco Moretti's Path to Literary Research," Yang Ling specifically details Moretti's research outputs [5], including studies on the transnational emergence and literary cycles of the novel, big data interpretations of novel titles, and network mapping of characters in *Hamlet*. Post-2010, Moretti further refined his approach, quantifying factors such as literary syntax and style within literary classics, thereby demonstrating the broad applicability of distant reading. Conclusions derived from this statistical analysis of big data often possess an intuitive persuasiveness that can be challenging to achieve within traditional discursive frameworks.

Overall, distant reading theory constitutes a comprehensive methodological approach that has demonstrated its value in practical application. This theory transcends established paradigms, constructing a new framework for literary inquiry. The quantitative analytical methods it employs hold significant implications for traditional literary research beyond the digital humanities sphere. Naturally, distant reading theory itself possesses limitations, which have attracted considerable scholarly critique, to be discussed in the subsequent section on challenges.

3. The Acceptance of Distant Reading Theory in China

Although distant reading theory was proposed in 2000 and introduced to Chinese academia through Shi Yi's 2010 translation of *Conjectures on World Literature*, its reception within China was not immediate. A search of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database using "distant reading" (远读) as a keyword reveals that research articles explicitly engaging with Moretti's theory did not appear until 2016. Among earlier publications not employing

"distant reading" as a keyword, *"Frank Moretti's Critique of 'Close Reading'"* represents one of the earliest considerations of Moretti's perspective. The year 2017 saw the publication of *"Distant Reading, Literary Laboratory and Digital Humanities: Franco Moretti's Path to Literary Studies"*, which offered a more comprehensive introduction to Moretti and his theory. Subsequently, research outputs utilizing distant reading theory gradually emerged, extending beyond literary studies into fields such as translation studies, Marxist theory, and sociology. Distant reading remains a prominent research focus within literary and artistic studies.

Within literary theory studies, relevant research articles primarily concentrate on evaluating distant reading theory. *"Digital Humanities as a Method: Current Status and Prospects of Western Research"* is an early review article featuring "distant reading" as a keyword. It surveys the development of digital humanities, highlighting the significance of Moretti's distant reading theory within post-2000 developments [6]. *"Frank Moretti's Critique of 'Close Reading'"* focuses specifically on Moretti's critique of close reading, outlining its limitations and revealing the holistic view of literature inherent in distant reading theory. Simultaneously, the article discusses the impact and challenges of distant reading, noting its tendencies towards objectification and empiricization [7]. *"On Moretti's Distant Reading and Its Impact"* examines Moretti's view of world literature, exploring his rationale for proposing distant reading, its primary contributions, the controversies it provoked, and its development within digital humanities. Despite ongoing debate, the article argues that Moretti's distant reading theory, through its conceptual and practical innovations, has significantly influenced methodological shifts in world literature research [8]. Conversely, *"Literary Research Methods in the Age of Big Data - An Examination Based on Frank Moretti's Quantitative Analysis of Literature"* focuses on Moretti's quantitative approach. It contends that Moretti establishes the legitimacy of using big data for literary study through dual analysis of form and content. However, his quantitative findings were deemed to lack individuality and the value judgments characteristic of the humanities, sparking considerable controversy and underscoring the complexity of quantitative literary analysis [9]. Furthermore, *"Media Construction and Paradigm Production: The Evolution of the 'Distant Reading' Method and Its Prospects"* delineates two stages in distant reading's development—from reading secondary sources to employing quantitative analyses. The article suggests that distant reading integrates multidisciplinary methods (literature, statistics, computer science) and possesses the potential to become a new research paradigm within the humanities [10]. Overall, research within literary theory studies has centered on analyzing the theory itself—its origins, evolution, characteristics, and prospects.

In the fields of classical and contemporary literature, distant reading theory is primarily employed as a method for textual interpretation, yielding numerous research outputs over the past five years. *"A Study of Mining Jin Yong's Texts from the Perspective of Digital Humanities"* utilizes distant reading to analyze thematic ideas, character centrality and cohesive subgroups, protagonists' emotional changes, moral and cultural elements, and the distribution of scenes and spacetime within Jin Yong's novels, achieving significant results [11]. *"Distant Reading as Computational Criticism—Taking the Rhythm and Mood in the Upgraded Text of Network Novels as an Example"* applies distant reading theory to the study of online literature. Through keyword distribution and relational analysis, it examines the pacing changes in popular male-oriented *"upgrading texts"* (升级文) published between 2005 and 2019. The study finds that the pacing of these novels synchronizes with the prevailing mood of the times, exhibiting an overall slow-fast-slow trend. At the level of individual texts, the article identifies only two dominant pacing patterns—slow and fast—each correlating with specific social and psychological contexts [12]. Leveraging modern technology, *"Text Exploration and Visual Analysis of Linchuan Four Dreams by Tang Xianzu"* employs word frequency analysis, LDA topic modeling, and character social network analysis. It reveals that the "Four Dreams" share a vocabulary style characterized by class clustering and relatively discrete yet uniform thematic

distribution across the plays. Notably, *The Handan Dream* exhibits distinct structural, emotional, and linguistic features, including the lowest frequency of emotional vocabulary, reflecting shifts in Tang Xianzu's mindset during his later years [13]. These examples demonstrate the efficacy of applying distant reading theory to literary analysis.

The applicability of distant reading theory extends beyond literary studies, proving effective in other domains. *"Distant Reading and Metadata: A Study of Translation Knowledge Dissemination in the Era of Big Data"* adopts distant reading, combining digital technology and qualitative analysis. It collects, collates, and analyzes metadata from international academic publications on English translation studies over six years. Findings indicate that international translation research centers geographically on the UK, with the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as secondary centers, while China, Japan, and India constitute key centers in Asia. Translation studies with a Chinese context exhibit high international visibility, particularly in Hong Kong, Macau, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing. Research topics are diverse, with literary translation, world literature, and global politics identified as promising areas [14]. Conversely, *"Classical Distant Reading: Machine Learning-Based Analysis of the Complete Works of Marx and Engels"* employs distant reading to analyze the writings of Marx and Engels. It identifies major themes encompassing labor and surplus value, society and history, revolution and political parties, with the capitalist system and its developmental laws discussed most frequently, followed by class, revolution, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The analysis further suggests that the development of Marx and Engels' thought exhibits distinct stages, corresponding to changes in social reality and the internal logic of their thinking [15]. *"A Study on the Method of Social Portrait Construction Based on Digital Distant-Reading Technology"* focuses on sociology. Using the text of *Zuo Zhuan* (Zuo's Commentary) as a case study, it constructs a social portrait of the Spring and Autumn period across five dimensions: political, economic, cultural, social, and military. Results indicate a period marked by frequent diplomatic and political events, recurrent warfare, and a strong emphasis on rites and music culture. By introducing distant reading theory, this thesis provides an intuitive portrayal of ancient society, offering a generalizable research methodology [16]. These non-literary studies underscore the broad applicability of distant reading theory: wherever a corpus of interrelated texts exists, distant reading can be employed to analyze their characteristics, commonalities, and developmental trends. To some extent, the extension of distant reading's scope from literary to non-literary texts aligns with the contemporary phenomenon of "pan-textualization," which in turn expands the horizons of literary research itself.

4. Challenges to Distant Reading Theory

Despite demonstrating significant vitality and generating numerous research outputs, distant reading theory possesses inherent limitations. The challenges it faces remain substantial, broadly categorized as critiques of the theory itself and limitations imposed by external conditions.

Critiques of distant reading theory itself are evident in the aforementioned papers. For instance, *"On Moretti's Distant Reading and Its Impact"* outlines several controversial aspects. A central point of contention concerns whether distant reading, as an information technology-driven methodology, significantly impacting traditional literary research, risks diminishing literature's uniqueness. Critics question whether it transforms literary reading and study into cold data analysis, thereby supplanting the sensuous pleasure of literary engagement. In reality, distant reading and close reading are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary methodologies. If close reading focuses on resolving internal textual problems, distant reading emphasizes external research, building upon the foundation provided by close reading. An overemphasis on distant reading could indeed diminish the perceived aesthetic value of

literature and impede reading pleasure. However, distant reading theory undeniably offers a novel and valuable research pathway. Leveraging new information technologies, it possesses the potential to uncover previously overlooked tendencies and trends, potentially resolving unresolved questions within literary history. Simultaneously, by integrating literature with social, economic, and historical factors, distant reading fosters interdisciplinary potential. This cross-disciplinary engagement can broaden researchers' horizons, stimulate new lines of inquiry, and contribute to cultivating intellectuals with wide-ranging knowledge and social awareness. Furthermore, regarding its current status, distant reading remains an emerging approach. Compared to traditional literary methods, research employing distant reading is still relatively scarce, indicating it is unlikely to replace traditional text-focused reading in the foreseeable future. While the concern about literature losing its uniqueness is understandable, it cannot serve as a definitive argument against distant reading. Walter Benjamin observed the diminution of literature's "*aura*" as early as the 1930s. Under the influence of postmodernism, the reception of literature has largely shifted from traditional aesthetic reading towards recreational consumption—a trend not reversible by rejecting distant reading. Therefore, the application of distant reading theory in literary research represents an innovation, opening new avenues within a well-established field. However, as Yang Ling astutely notes: "At present, distant reading theory is merely an idea, offering primarily a vastly expanded archive and faster computational procedures than the traditional literary canon. It lacks groundbreaking theoretical manifestos comparable to Shklovsky's *Art as Technique*, Roland Barthes's *On Racine*, or Said's *Orientalism*. Only a transformation in the theoretical framework and interpretive mode can precipitate a fundamental change in literary studies" [5]. This observation highlights a crucial consideration for the future development of distant reading theory.

Constraints on the further advancement of distant reading also stem from external factors. Foremost among these is the current state of digitization for historical texts and printed publications. As highlighted in Yang Ling's work, researchers in classical Chinese literature, benefiting from significant progress in ancient text digitization projects and database accessibility, demonstrate greater engagement with digital humanities than their counterparts in modern and contemporary literature. This points directly to a practical limitation: because distant reading necessitates analyzing large volumes of non-canonical works, it relies fundamentally on statistical methods impossible to implement through manual reading of physical publications. It requires the establishment of searchable and analyzable digital databases. Consequently, the lag in digitizing printed materials—particularly modern and contemporary literary works and publications issued before the widespread adoption of computer technology (roughly pre-1990s in China)—severely hinders the application of distant reading theory. Many modern and contemporary researchers still depend on physical archives, libraries, and used book markets to locate primary sources, making systematic distant reading analysis difficult. Beyond classical texts and the readily available digital archives of online novels (a research hotspot mentioned earlier), or popular reprinted works like Jin Yong's novels, access to digitized corpora for systematic analysis remains a significant barrier. Another limitation involves researcher capabilities. As a novel methodology grounded in computer and database technology, distant reading demands additional skills from researchers: not only literary sensibility but also proficiency in computational data processing. Such skills are often underdeveloped within traditional humanities pedagogy. Overall, the wider adoption of distant reading theory faces considerable hurdles; resolving existing practical and pedagogical challenges is essential for its further development.

5. Prospects of Distant Reading Theory

Despite the current challenges of distant reading theory, it is an innovation that has shown wide applicability in various fields. Therefore, in the last chapter of this paper, some fields that are currently less involved but have certain applicability and research prospects are proposed, in order to provide some references for future research.

In the history of literature, folk songs, ballads and folk tales are rarely mentioned. Only *The Book of Songs* in ancient times and the folk songs of the Northern and Southern Dynasties in the Middle Ages have left some traces in the history of literature. Folk literature works of other times are often ignored, but the stories and ballads circulated among the people reflect the folk customs of a specific period and have certain significance for studying the changes in social thought. In addition, various forms of folk literature often lack artistry, which means that in the process of research, it is not necessary to adopt a close reading method, but it is more appropriate to use the theory of distant reading to analyze and summarize the folk songs and stories of a certain period of time, and then draw conclusions about the changes in folk thought. Another area worth studying is the "Cultural Revolution Literature". Since the 1980s, China's intellectual circles have believed that "there is no literature during the Cultural Revolution". This statement actually refers to the superficiality of the "Cultural Revolution Literature" in terms of artistry. However, the study of the "Cultural Revolution Literature" has its own significance and value, and many important results have been produced since the 21st century. The "Cultural Revolution Literature" is also suitable for the use of the distant reading theory for research, for three reasons: First, the "Cultural Revolution Literature" does contain a large number of works, especially after 1973, when literature and art gradually thawed and a series of publications such as the *"Shanghai Literature and Art Series"* appeared; second, the "Cultural Revolution Literature" is not very artistic as a whole, so it is unnecessary to use the method of close reading of the text; third, the "Cultural Revolution Literature" contains a strong ideological color, which is quite different from today's literary works, and it is difficult to analyze specific works one by one using traditional research methods. Therefore, the distant reading theory can also be applied to the study of the "Cultural Revolution Literature".

By extension, the preliminary conclusion can be made as follows: Distant reading theory has its place in fields that have received little attention before, are large in number, and are not very artistic but have research value. Therefore, with the acceptance and dissemination of digital humanities in China, distant reading theory will also play a more important role in more directions and disciplines.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the distant reading theory possesses profound implications and unique application scenarios. This approach of introducing statistics and summarization into literary research undoubtedly offers valuable lessons. Despite facing numerous challenges, distant reading theory is not a closed or exclusive theory, but rather a beneficial supplement that works in conjunction with existing theories, including close reading. Based on increasingly comprehensive literary databases, distant reading theory is expected to be applied to a wider range of fields in the future and attract greater attention from researchers.

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