



The Chinese translation and reception of *The Alchemist*: A python-based sentiment analysis and topic modeling of Douban reader reviews

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Abstract: This study investigates the reception of Ding Wenlin's translation of *The Alchemist* within the Chinese digital reading sphere, employing a computational approach that integrates SnowNLP sentiment analysis and LDA topic modeling on a corpus of Douban reviews. It examines three interrelated dimensions: emotional tendencies, thematic structures, and evaluative behaviors. Findings indicate a predominantly positive reception, with textual sentiment surpassing star ratings, reflecting readers' nuanced affective engagement. Thematic analysis identifies five latent clusters—spiritual inspiration, reading experience, literary critique, gender and character reflection, and religious/philosophical metaphors—revealing a dialectical engagement in which readers internalize the “Personal Legend” motif while exercising critical scrutiny, particularly regarding stylistic choices and gender representation. Community evaluation patterns highlight a preference for substantive critique: low-rating reviews, though rare, attract disproportionate attention, signaling a collective prioritization of analytical depth over mere affective endorsement. Theoretically, the study enriches the empirical reception history of Brazilian literature in China and demonstrates the utility of digital humanities methods in cross-cultural translation studies. Practically, it offers insights for publishers and translators seeking to facilitate the reception of global literary works among Chinese readers.

Keywords: reader reception; sentiment analysis; topic modeling; *The Alchemist*; Douban reviews.

1. Introduction

Paulo Coelho is arguably the most commercially successful Brazilian author in the twenty-first century (Feijó, 2015), yet his works occupy a paradoxical position in the literary field: widely read and translated, yet often dismissed as “low literature” by literary critics. *The Alchemist*, first published in 1988 and now translated into over eighty languages, exemplifies this tension. Its allegorical narrative of Santiago's journey to fulfill his “Personal Legend” and its philosophical motifs of spiritual growth have earned massive popular acclaim worldwide, while academic recognition remains limited. Scholars have noted that translation strategies, marketing practices, and the work's



universal themes have transformed it into a global cultural commodity, highlighting a persistent gap between popular reception and literary prestige.

In China, *The Alchemist* has been translated into multiple editions since the late 1990s, with the version translated by Ding Wenlin becoming the most widely circulated and extensively discussed among contemporary readers. Its sustained commercial success, frequent appearance on bestseller lists, and wide cultural visibility indicate that it occupies a significant position in China's translated-literature market.

Nevertheless, despite the novel's popularity, systematic empirical research on how Chinese readers interpret and evaluate it remains limited. Previous studies have primarily addressed literary themes or cultural symbolism, rather than examining reader response, affective orientation, or evaluative behavior. The growing availability of large-scale digital review data makes it possible to analyze such dimensions with greater methodological rigor. Leveraging these new resources can therefore deepen understanding of how foreign literary works are received, interpreted, and socially negotiated within Chinese reading communities.

To address this research gap, the present study investigates reader responses to Ding Wenlin's Chinese translation of *The Alchemist* through computational analysis of user reviews collected from Douban, one of China's earliest and most influential book-oriented platforms. A corpus of 893 valid reviews was compiled using Python-based data collection techniques. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods—including sentiment analysis, Chinese word segmentation, and topic modeling—the study systematically examines patterns in readers' emotional attitudes, thematic concerns, and evaluative behaviors. Specifically, it addresses the three research questions:

1. What overall emotional tendencies characterize Chinese readers' evaluations of the Chinese translation of *The Alchemist* as reflected in large-scale online review data?
2. What dominant thematic dimensions structure Chinese readers' discussions of the work, as identified through computational topic modeling of review texts?
3. How do evaluative behaviors and community interaction logic characterize the reception of the work within Chinese digital reading communities?

By integrating computational text analysis with reception theory, this study aims to map the contemporary digital reception landscape of *The Alchemist* in China. More broadly, it demonstrates how digital-humanities methodologies can contribute to empirical research on cross-cultural literary reception and provides analytical insights into the circulation of Brazilian literature within the Chinese cultural sphere.

2. Literature review

2.1 Research on the global translation and cross-cultural reception of *The Alchemist*

Existing scholarship on the translation of *The Alchemist* has explored its reception primarily from macro-level cultural and institutional perspectives. Melo (2017), reviewing the dissemination of Brazilian literature in the Anglophone world, observes that despite remarkable sales figures, *The*



Alchemist remains marginalized within English-language literary evaluation systems, revealing structural tension between market success and academic recognition. Similarly, Fernandes (2014), examining the U.S. reception of the English translation, argues that the work's Brazilian cultural identity was largely erased in its marketing and paratextual presentation, where it was positioned as a universal self-help bestseller rather than a national literary text. Pin (2021) further contends that its global popularity, especially in the UK and France, derives less from translators' stylistic "enhancement" than from its universal themes and stylistic accessibility, which align with the expectations of mass readerships. Sousa and Amorim (2010) likewise demonstrate that translation strategies such as cultural deletion and domestication contributed to transforming the text into a globally consumable cultural commodity, while Teixeira and Olher (2012) emphasize that translation operates as a discursive practice shaped by translator subjectivity, cultural constraints, and publishing mechanisms, thereby reshaping textual meaning and reception trajectories.

Comparative cross-linguistic research has also illuminated the dynamics underlying its global circulation. Aljahdali (2016, 2018), using a functional social-semiotic framework to compare English, Arabic, and Turkish translations, shows that translators' creative reconstruction of narrative and semiotic structures enables cultural adaptation, which partly explains the paradox of low literary prestige yet high popular reception. Moczkoan's (2024) study of the Polish reception history highlights persistent debates surrounding literary value, spirituality, and cultural fashion despite sustained commercial success. Vila Barbosa (2012) argues that the novel's favorable reception in Spain exemplifies a model of "translatable, market-oriented Brazilian literature," in which accessibility, thematic universality, and coordinated author-publisher marketing outweigh literary innovation. More broadly, Murta (2018) links the global reception of *The Alchemist* to the interplay of postmodern narrative, cultural hybridity, and digital media, noting that Coelho's direct online engagement in media platform Xiaohongshu (Rednote) with Chinese readers has rendered reception increasingly participatory and personalized. Empirical regional studies likewise reveal structural inequalities in global literary circulation: for example, Anasthasie and N'gana (2020) show that the novel's popularity in Ivory Coast constitutes a mediated and incomplete form of literary consumption that reinforces cultural dependency rather than fostering local translation culture.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, most studies concentrate on textual interpretation, cultural positioning, and institutional circulation, with limited attention to readers as the concrete agents through whom translation effects are realized (Bao & Gao, 2021). The few attempts to address reader response remain methodologically restricted. Oliveira (2013), for instance, analyzes comments from Coelho's blog to examine how readers negotiate cultural legitimacy, but the dataset consists exclusively of Brazilian readers and lacks cross-cultural scope. The existing academic discussions of *The Alchemist* remain largely text-oriented rather than empirically examining reader reception dimensions such as emotional tendencies, evaluative discourse, or collective reading behavior.

The gap is particularly evident in the Chinese context. With the deepening of China–Brazil cultural relations, the translation and dissemination of Brazilian literature in China has entered what has been described as an "innovation period," characterized by increasing academization of translation and research alongside the growing dominance of market-oriented publishing models (Min, 2025). Within this context, *The Alchemist* represents a unique case. To date, seven Chinese



versions have appeared: Sun Guoyong's 1997 translation (*Lianjin Shushi*, Chinese Literature Publishing House); Sun Cheng'ao's 2001 and 2004 translations published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House under two successive titles (*Muyang Shaonian Qihuan zhi Lü* and *Lianjin Shushi*); Ding Wenlin's translations issued by Nanhai Publishing Company and Beijing October Literature & Art Publishing House in 2009, 2017, and 2024; and a 2022 comic adaptation published by Guizhou Publishing House. Among the Chinese translations, the Ding Wenlin version has received over 160,000 reader reviews on Douban, making it the bestselling and most widely circulated translation currently in print in mainland China. This popularity echoes the remarkable success of *The Alchemist* in the Anglophone market (Chan, 2014). It has generated sustained reader discussion and can therefore be regarded as the most influential Chinese translation of *The Alchemist*.

Nevertheless, despite its exceptional visibility and reader engagement, no systematic academic investigation has yet examined its reception among Chinese readers. Existing studies of Brazilian literature in China largely remain confined to translation history surveys (Min, 2025) or author-specific historical analyses, such as research on translations of Jorge Amado (Xing, 2023; Zhang, 2023). The limited existing academic studies of *The Alchemist* focus primarily on literary criticism and cultural interpretations content (Han & Han, 2015; H. Zhang, 2019), with little empirical investigation of reader reception, affective tendencies, or evaluative discourse. Methodologically, this indicates that research on *The Alchemist* in Chinese translation continues to be shaped by traditional historiographic paradigms rather than empirical reception analysis.

Yet, substantial reader reception data on the Chinese translation of *The Alchemist* is available on Douban. Douban is characterized by long-form, essay-like user reviews that contain detailed interpretive and evaluative responses (Yecies et al., 2016). Similar to platforms such as Amazon and Goodreads, reader reviews on Douban exhibit several methodologically significant characteristics: they are naturally occurring rather than researcher-elicited, large in scale and suitable for corpus-based analysis, and socially interactive, with engagement metrics such as likes and replies reflecting forms of community evaluation. These features make Douban particularly suitable for computational analysis of reception structures.

Building on this observation, this study argues that cross-cultural reception in China should be conceptualized as a platform-embedded and reader-driven process, in which meaning is continuously reconstructed through collective digital discourse rather than passively transmitted through translation alone. This perspective resonates with the “technical turn” in translation studies, particularly in reception research, where data-driven approaches have increasingly been applied to large-scale reader-generated corpora (e.g., Kotze et al., 2021), shifting attention from interpretive abstraction to empirically grounded evaluative patterns.

2.2 The application of Python sentiment analysis and topic modeling in reception studies of translated works

With the rise “technical turn” in translation studies, digital humanities (Terras et al., 2018; Luhmann & Burghardt, 2022) has enabled Python-based natural language processing (NLP) techniques to become increasingly integrated into translation reception research. Among these, sentiment analysis and topic modeling constitute two core methodological approaches for



empirically examining reader responses to translated texts. Recent scholarship demonstrates that computational analysis can substantially expand both the scale and explanatory power of reception studies by enabling systematic investigation of large-scale reader-generated corpora (e.g., Zhang & Huang, 2025; Huang & Zhang, 2025).

Sentiment analysis, often termed opinion mining, uses computational methods to classify texts according to emotional polarity. It is typically implemented through lexicon-based or machine-learning approaches, such as Python libraries including TextBlob. In translation reception research, these techniques allow scholars to calculate emotional polarity scores across large datasets of reader reviews, thereby capturing overall evaluative tendencies and subtle attitudinal differences (Guan & Lu, 2022). Empirical studies demonstrate their applicability: L. Zhang (2019) analyzed Amazon reviews of the English translation of Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* and identified predominantly positive reader attitudes; Tao and Hu (2024) improved sentiment classification accuracy using deep-learning models to examine responses to English translations of Confucius's *The Analects*; Zheng and Fan (2023) revealed that readers praised the humor retention of the English translation of Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged* while criticizing cultural transfer and narrative pacing. These findings indicate that sentiment analysis can assess translation acceptability at both macro and micro levels, particularly when combined with aspect-based analysis of specific dimensions such as plot, characterization, or translation quality.

Topic modeling, another widely used Python-based text-mining method, treats textual corpora as “bags of words” and employs algorithms such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) or BERTopic to extract latent thematic structures (Jaworska & Nanda, 2018). Its efficiency far exceeds manual coding, making it especially suitable for large-scale reception datasets. Recent studies have applied topic modeling to identify focal points of reader discussion: Wu et al. (2024) found that readers of Sunzi's *The Art of War* in English and Spanish frequently discuss translation quality and book design; Deng and Deng (2025) used BERTopic to reveal overseas readers' interest in Chinese rural culture and narrative techniques in the English translation of Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem*; Chen et al. (2025) conducted cross-lingual topic comparisons showing how cultural identity shapes reader concerns. These results demonstrate that topic modeling can systematically reveal multidimensional reception structures and is particularly valuable for cross-cultural comparison.

Furthermore, combining sentiment analysis and topic modeling has enabled comparative reception studies across platforms and linguistic communities. Hu et al. (2025), for example, compared reader reviews from Douban and Goodreads to identify cultural differences in evaluative standards, while Li and Wang (2020) and Xie (2024) constructed cross-regional reception maps using multi-platform datasets. Such work underscores how Python-driven data processing provides methodological infrastructure for large-scale, multi-source reception research.

Despite these advances, several limitations remain. Existing studies rarely integrate sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and diachronic analysis to construct multidimensional reception profiles. Community-interaction features within review ecosystems—such as discrepancies between ratings and textual sentiment or correlations between liking behavior and emotional expression—remain underexplored. In addition, nuanced sentiment detection still poses challenges, requiring integration with deeper semantic analysis, mixed-methods design, and emerging AI techniques. Most importantly, within Chinese translation studies, computational reception research has focused

predominantly on the overseas dissemination of Chinese literature, with relatively little attention to how translated Brazilian literature is received by Chinese readers. Consequently, for a globally bestselling text such as *The Alchemist*, systematic empirical research based on authentic reader data is still lacking.

Accordingly, by collecting a large corpus of real reader reviews from Douban and applying sentiment analysis, topic-modeling techniques and examining rating–sentiment discrepancies, the present study aims to investigate the multidimensional reception of *The Alchemist* in China. Through this approach, it seeks not only to fill a significant empirical gap in the study of Brazilian literature’s reception in the Chinese context but also to offer methodological reflections for translation reception research in the digital era.

3. Research design

3.1 Text data collection, cleaning, and noise reduction

Data were collected from Douban, focusing on short reader reviews of Ding Wenlin’s translation of *The Alchemist*. A self-developed Python script simulated browser access to scrape publicly available reviews, extracting username, review time, review text, number of likes, and star rating. HTML pages were parsed using the *parsel* library, with CSS selectors identifying review content, followed by basic text cleaning and verification of page status to prevent errors from access denial or expired cookies.

Due to platform restrictions, only the first 20 pages of reviews were accessible. Consequently, although the translation has over 160,000 ratings, the dataset comprises 893 reviews. This sample is considered sufficient, as Douban’s algorithm prioritizes highly liked and system-promoted reviews, ensuring that the captured entries reflect the community’s evaluative tendencies and thematic discussions. After removing invalid or incomplete entries—including empty records, duplicated comments, and incomplete reviews caused by webpage truncation—were manually identified and removed through close inspection. The resulting dataset of 893 reviews provided the dataset used for subsequent sentiment analysis and topic modeling.

3.2 Text processing pipeline and analytical methods

3.2.1 SnowNLP sentiment analysis method

To examine the emotional tendencies expressed in reader reviews, sentiment analysis was conducted using SnowNLP, a lightweight tool for Chinese text. SnowNLP includes a pre-trained Naïve Bayes sentiment classifier that assigns each review a sentiment score ranging from 0 (most negative) to 1 (most positive). Prior to analysis, reviews containing primarily duplicated content, garbled characters, emoji-only text, or incomplete textual content were removed through an automated Python-based cleaning procedure. Each cleaned review was then processed automatically by SnowNLP to generate its corresponding sentiment score.



For further analysis, sentiment scores were categorized into three classes: positive, neutral, and negative. Specifically, scores above 0.6 were labeled as positive, scores below 0.4 as negative, and scores between 0.4 and 0.6 as neutral. Thresholds were determined based on prior sentiment classification conventions and validated through distribution inspection of the dataset (Guan & Lu, 2022). Two new fields were generated for each review: `sentiment_score_snownlp` and `sentiment_label_snownlp`.

3.2.2 Chinese word segmentation processing

To facilitate topic analysis and word cloud visualization, word segmentation was conducted on the original Chinese review texts using *pkuseg*, a tool optimized for high-accuracy Chinese segmentation. Each review was converted into a space-separated string of segmented words, which was subsequently used to generate word frequency statistics, construct the LDA topic model, and create positive/negative word clouds. Grammar words and words occurring fewer than 3 times were removed to reduce noise and improve semantic representation, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of topic extraction and keyword analysis.

3.2.3 LDA topic modeling method

To uncover the thematic structure of reader reviews, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was applied to the tokenized corpus generated through the word segmentation procedure described above. A bag-of-words representation was constructed, excluding grammar words. The optimal number of topics was determined through iterative training based on coherence scores and interpretability. The model output included representative keywords for each topic and topic assignment probabilities for each review. These results were subsequently used to analyze topic distributions and examine correlations between topics and sentiment.

4. Research results and analysis

4.1 Statistical analysis of reader review sentiment and annual trend analysis

The corpus comprised 893 Douban reviews together with their corresponding five-star user ratings. On Douban, readers rate books using a five-point ordinal scale, from one star (very negative) to five stars (very positive), reflecting their overall evaluation of the work. For analytical purposes, these ratings were grouped into three categories: positive (4–5), neutral (3), and negative (1–2). The star rating categories were then compared with the textual sentiment scores described in Section 3.2.1. The results of this comparison are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Cross-distribution table of star rating levels and sentiment score levels

Category	Positive Sentiment	Neutral Sentiment	Negative Sentiment
Star Rating Level	668 (74.80%)	165 (18.48%)	60 (6.72%)
Sentiment Score Level	702 (78.61%)	100 (11.20%)	91 (10.19%)

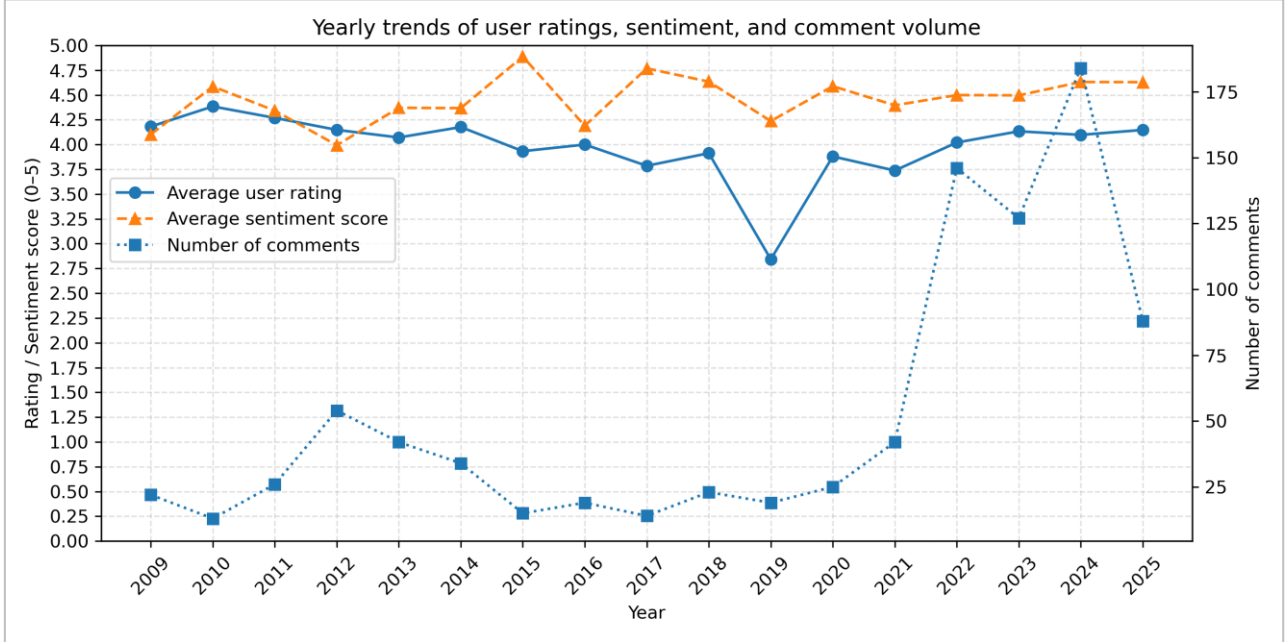
Source: The authors



Both star ratings and sentiment scores indicate that positive evaluations exceed 70%, reflecting high overall acceptance and emotional engagement among Chinese readers. From a cross-cultural perspective, these positive responses may partly express readers’ excitement and inspirational resonance with the novel’s universal themes. However, a discrepancy exists in magnitude: positive sentiment is higher in textual analysis (78.61%) than in star ratings (74.80%), neutral sentiment is higher in star ratings (18.48%) than in sentiment scores (11.20%), and negative sentiment is lower in star ratings (6.72%) compared to sentiment scores (10.19%). This difference likely reflects the psychological and behavioral divergence between explicit rating actions and implicit textual expression.

The year of each review was extracted, and annual averages of reader star ratings, sentiment scores, and review counts were calculated. Sentiment scores were linearly scaled to a 0–5 range to align with user ratings. Trends were plotted to compare the evolution of sentiment scores and star ratings over time (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Diachronic trend chart of reader star ratings, reader review text sentiment scores, and reader review count



Source: The authors

From 2009 to 2025, sentiment scores and star ratings generally followed similar trajectories, remaining at high levels. Between 2015 and 2023, both indicators exhibited coordinated fluctuations with mean values above 4.0, indicating a stable positive reception. Sentiment scores showed relatively minor variation, whereas star ratings were more volatile, particularly in 2019, when several low-star reviews criticized the novel as “hollow” or “superficial”, although positive sentiment texts remained abundant.

4.2 Analysis of word clouds and semantic network graphs for reader reviews

Word frequency statistics were generated separately for positive and negative reviews based on the segmented text. To ensure representativeness, grammar words, punctuation, and incomplete words were removed, retaining only content words. Two sentiment-specific word clouds were then constructed: a positive sentiment word cloud (Figure 2) and a negative sentiment word cloud (Figure 3).

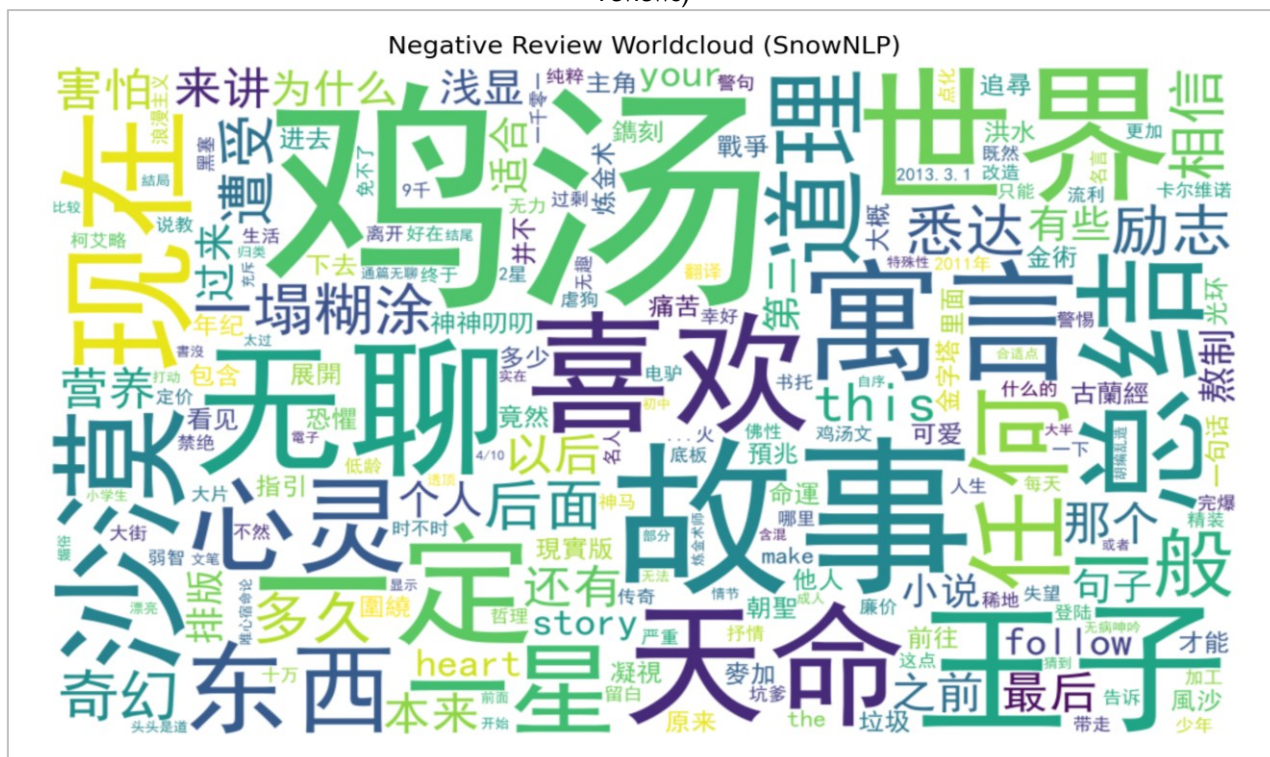
Figure 2: Positive sentiment word cloud for reader review texts (based on keyword frequency counts in positive reviews)



Source: The Authors

Font size in the word clouds corresponds to word frequency, providing an intuitive visualization of the primary focus of each sentiment category. Differences in high-frequency terms between positive and negative reviews inform subsequent topic analysis. Table 2 reports the top 20 most frequent words within each sentiment category based on raw frequency counts. As the positive and negative corpora differ in size, the rankings are intended to reflect within-group salience rather than cross-group comparability.

Figure 3: Negative sentiment word cloud for reader review texts (based on keyword frequency counts in negative reviews)



Source: The Authors

Table 2: Comparison of high-frequency words in positive and negative reviews (top 20)

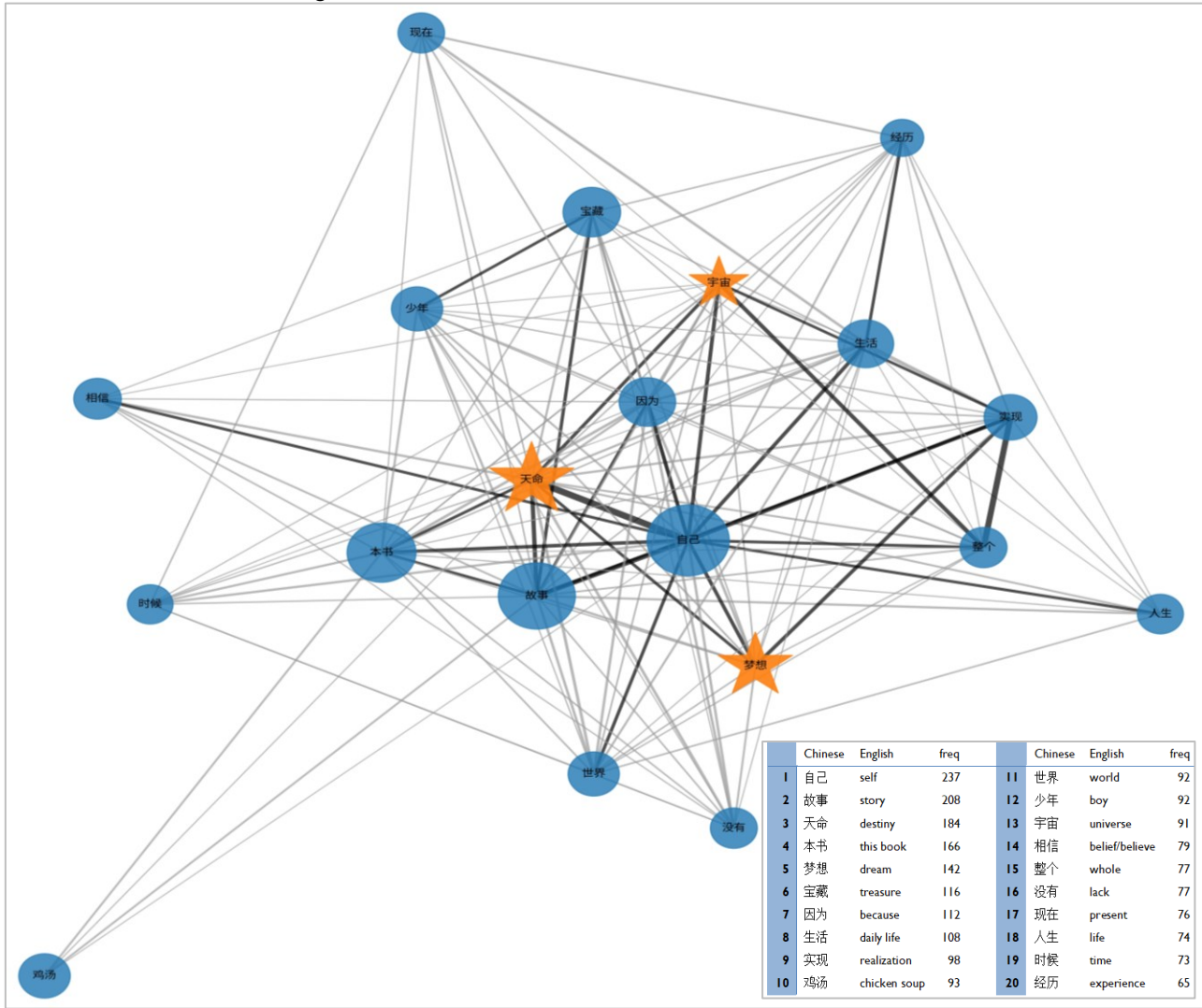
Rank	Positive Reviews Top20	Freq.	Negative Reviews Top20	Freq.
1	故事 (story)	208	鸡汤 (chicken soup)	19
2	天命 (destiny)	184	天命 (destiny)	8
3	梦想 (dream)	143	故事 (story)	7
4	宝藏 (treasure)	116	无聊 (boring)	5
5	生活 (daily life)	109	王子 (prince)	5
6	实现 (achieve)	96	世界 (world)	5
7	东西 (thing)	94	寓言 (allegory)	5
8	宇宙 (universe)	92	现在 (present)	5
9	少年 (young boy)	91	一定 (must)	5
10	世界 (world)	88	一般 (ordinary)	4
11	整个 (whole)	79	喜欢 (like)	4
12	相信 (belief/believe)	76	沙漠 (desert)	4
13	现在 (present)	73	总结 (summarize)	4
14	人生 (life)	72	心灵 (soul/heart)	4
15	鸡汤 (chicken soup)	66	任何 (any)	3
16	经历 (experience)	64	东西 (thing)	3
17	愿望 (wish)	64	一星 (one star)	3
18	永远 (forever)	64	道理 (reason/truth)	3
19	合力 (conspiring)	62	推荐 (recommend)	3
20	想要 (want)	60	一塌糊涂 (messy)	3

Source: The authors

Analysis of the word clouds and frequency data reveals that positive reviews predominantly feature terms such as “故事” (story), “天命” (destiny), “梦想” (dream), “宝藏” (treasure), and “生活” (daily life), reflecting readers’ resonance with the work’s central philosophical and spiritual themes. In contrast, negative reviews emphasize terms such as “鸡汤” (chicken soup), “无聊” (boring), and “一般” (ordinary), suggesting perceptions of preachiness or superficiality. Notably, “故事” (story), “鸡汤” (chicken soup), and “天命” (destiny) appear in both positive and negative Top 20 lists, indicating ambivalent semantic connotations, functioning positively as motivational or inspirational references and negatively as markers of superficiality or hollowness.

The apparent contradiction arises from context-dependent usage of evaluative terms in Chinese online review discourse, where the same lexical item may function as praise or criticism depending on surrounding semantic and pragmatic cues. To further investigate semantic relationships, a global semantic co-occurrence network was constructed (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Semantic co-occurrence network of 20 core terms



Source: The Authors

Note. Numbers in brackets correspond to the term key. Pentagrams denote the three highest-ranked concepts based on a weighted frequency-like index. Node size represents term frequency. Edge thickness reflects co-occurrence strength, with black edges indicating the strongest semantic associations.

In this network, nodes represent the 20 most frequent words, and edges denote co-occurrence within the same review, with a minimum co-occurrence threshold of 10 (MIN_CO = 10) to reduce noise. This approach ensures that connections reflect stable semantic associations. The network exhibits a stable core – periphery topology. Most notably, the nodes “self” (1. 自己) and “story” (2. 故事)—which are among the most frequent lexical items in the corpus—occupy central and structurally intermediary positions within the network.

They maintain strong simultaneous connections with abstract thematic concepts, such as “destiny” (3. 天命), “dream” (5. 梦想), and “universe” (13. 宇宙) (these three terms are the top-three keywords identified based on a weighted average of comment frequency and number of likes), as well as evaluative expressions like “chicken soup” (10. 鸡汤). This bridging function suggests that readers’ discussions are anchored primarily in the narrative and personal identity, through which both inspirational meanings and critical evaluations are articulated.

Around this central core, the network displays a dual-clustering configuration. One cluster is organized around aspirational concepts such as “realize” (9. 实现), “dream” (5. 梦想) and the “whole” (15. 整个) “universe” (13. 宇宙), which exhibit dense mutual interconnections (e.g., “whole” ↔ “realize” = 51) and collectively form the motivational core of readers’ interpretations. The second grouping involves reflective terms related to daily existence, such as “daily life” (8. 生活), “experience” (20. 经历), and “present” (17. 现在), reflecting readers’ attempts to ground the work’s philosophy in their immediate reality.

Interestingly, while the evaluative term “chicken soup” (10. 鸡汤) connects to the central nodes, it appears structurally marginalized, lacking direct ties to the motivational cluster. Meanwhile, nodes such as “self” (2. 自己) and “experience” (20. 经历) function as secondary intermediary nodes linking the aspirational and reflective clusters. Their presence further reinforces the overall cohesion of the network, ensuring that abstract thematic interpretation and practical reflection remain interconnected rather than forming isolated semantic spheres.

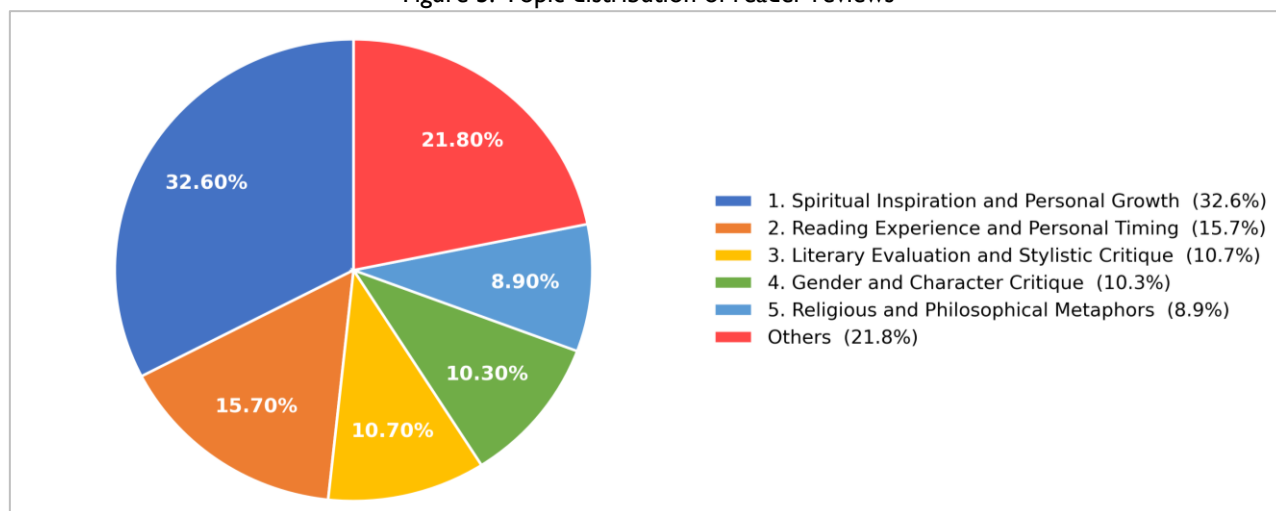
4.3 Topic and aspect-based sentiment analysis of reader review content

To analyze the content structure of reader reviews, this study utilized the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model to identify latent themes within the dataset of 893 reviews. Following word segmentation via *pkuseg* and the removal of grammar words, a five-topic LDA model was trained based on word co-occurrence relationships to identify stable discussion dimensions. The analysis identifies five latent topics: “Spiritual Inspiration and Personal Growth” (32.6%), “Reading Experience and Personal Timing” (15.7%), “Literary Evaluation and Stylistic Critique” (10.7%), “Gender and Character Critique” (10.3%), and “Religious and Philosophical Metaphors” (8.9%).

By integrating these topics with SnowNLP-based sentiment analysis, a pie chart (Figure 5) illustrates the emotional distribution across these themes.



Figure 5: Topic distribution of reader reviews



Source: The authors

The identified topics are as follows:

- *Topic 1. Spiritual Inspiration and Personal Growth*

This topic accounts for 32.6% of all reviews, representing the largest proportion. Core keywords include “梦想” (dream), “追寻” (pursuit), “天命” (destiny), “心灵” (soul/heart), “宇宙合力” (universe conspiring), and “成长” (growth). Readers frequently describe the work as a source of motivation for personal development. A review receiving 474 likes states:

“太多类似于此的小说，把我毒害成一个理想主义者。虽然阅读中几度热泪盈眶，但平心而论，我只不过是个理想主义者啊。” (“Too many novels like this have poisoned me into becoming an idealist. Although I was moved to tears several times while reading, to be honest, I am merely an idealist.”)

- *Topic 2. Reading Experience and Personal Timing*

This topic accounts for 15.7% of reviews. Keywords include “年纪” (age), “时机” (timing), “感动” (moved), “无感” (indifferent), “年轻” (young), and “成年” (adult). Sentiment patterns vary across reviews. One 5-star review states:

“很久没有这样热泪盈眶过了……我相信这本书出现的正是时候。” (“I haven’t been moved to tears like this in a long time... Very touched... I believe this book appeared at just the right time.”)

- *Topic 3. Literary Evaluation and Stylistic Critique*

This topic accounts for 10.7% of reviews. High-frequency keywords include “寓言” (allegory), “童话” (fairy tale), “心灵鸡汤” (chicken soup), “说教” (preachy), “肤浅” (superficial), and “小王子” (The Little Prince). The negative sentiment proportion reaches 52.1%. A review with 1,299 likes states:

“畅销的成人励志寓言，加长版心灵鸡汤。” (“A bestselling adult inspirational allegory, an extended version of chicken soup for the soul.”)

Another review with 841 likes states:

“宿命论心灵鸡汤大合辑。各种说教，多得我都有点恶心了。全书总结就一句：要信命哦亲～”
 (“A grand collection of fatalistic chicken soup for the soul. All kinds of preaching—there’s so much that it made me somewhat nauseous. The whole book can be summarized in one sentence: you gotta believe in fate, dear~”)

Both reviews were posted by users who rated the work 2 stars.

- *Topic 4. Gender and Character Critique*

This topic accounts for 10.3% of reviews. Keywords include “女性” (female), “性别” (gender), “等待” (waiting), “角色” (character), and “陈旧” (outdated). The negative sentiment proportion is 67.3%. One review states:

“我很不喜欢里面的性别论视角，女性只能通过进入男性角色的位置才能成为完整的人，如果寻找女性的角色就只能成为留在原地等待主角的 NPC。” (“I really dislike the gender perspective in it; women can only become complete persons by assuming male roles. If looking for female roles, they can only become NPCs waiting in place for the protagonist.”)

Another review states:

“大男主爽文，性别观念还是太陈旧了……沙漠中的法蒂玛的天命却是在绿洲之中等待这个少年。” (“A male protagonist power fantasy, the gender concepts are still too outdated... The destiny of Fatima in the desert is to wait for this young man in the oasis, rather than wandering around seeking the meaning of life.”)

These two comments correspond to 3-star and 4-star ratings, respectively.

- *Topic 5. Religious and Philosophical Metaphors*

This topic accounts for 8.9% of reviews. Keywords include “炼金术” (alchemy), “预兆” (omens), “宿命” (destiny), “宗教” (religion), “神秘主义” (mysticism), and “唯心” (idealism). Within this topic, the combined proportion of positive and neutral sentiment reaches 72%. A review receiving 3,933 likes states:

“总有这样一本书，在你恰好需要的时候出现在你视野里，这大概也是宿命的一种吧” (“There’s always such a book that appears in your sight precisely when you need it; this is probably also a kind of destiny.”)

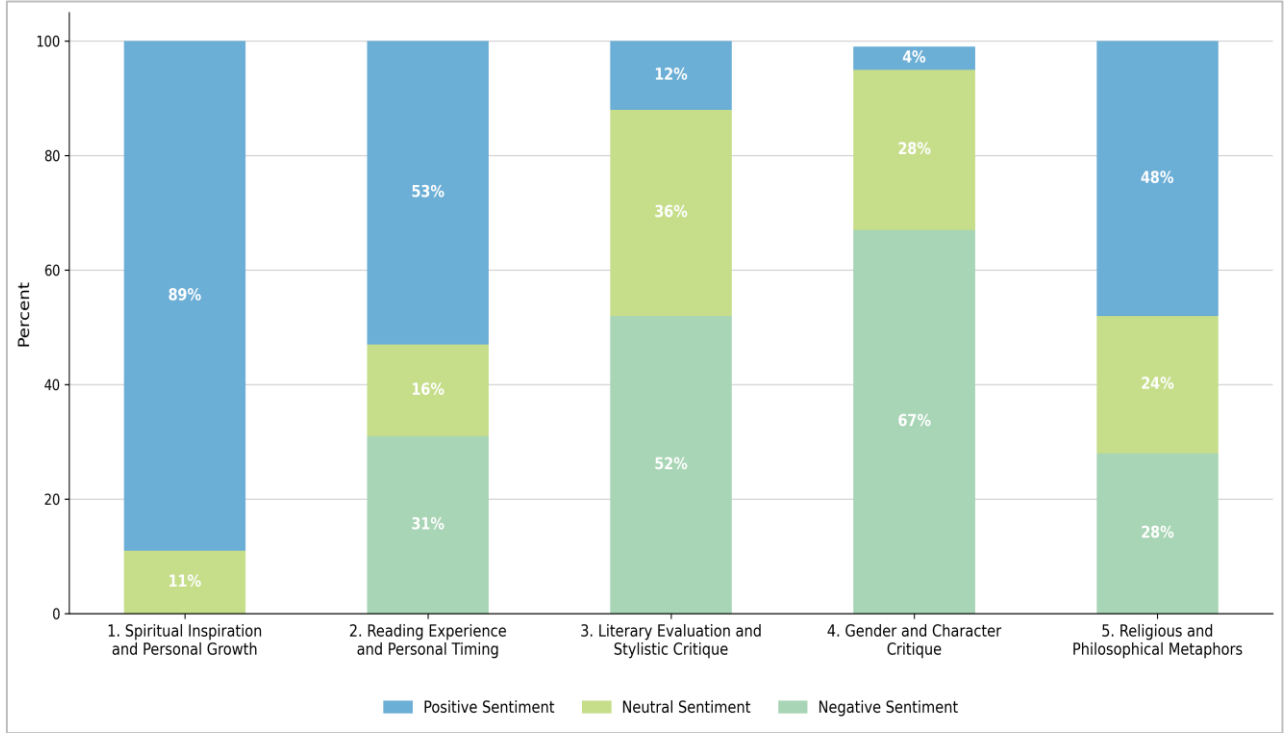
Another review with 2,185 likes states:

“‘炼金术士们守候多年，观察冶炼金属的火焰……于是，有一天，他们发现提炼金属的结果却是净化了他们自身。’所谓使命，终究不是完成一件事，而是成为一个人。” (“‘Alchemists waited for years, observing the flames used in smelting metal... Then, one day, they discovered that the result of refining metal was actually purifying themselves.’ So-called mission, in the end, is not about accomplishing something, but about becoming a person.”)



To provide a more fine-grained comparison of affective variation across thematic categories, the proportional sentiment composition of each topic was further disaggregated and visualized separately (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Sentiment distribution across the five LDA-derived themes



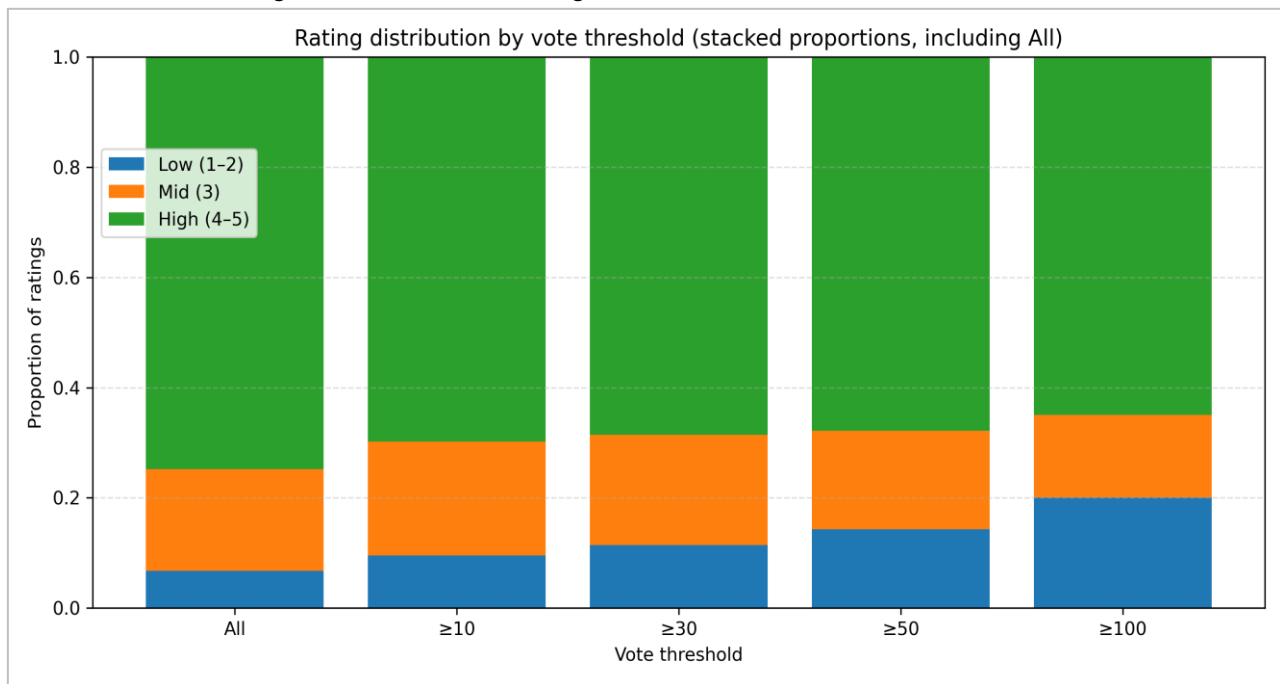
Source: The authors

According to Figure 6, the sentiment distribution per topic is as follows: 1) Topic 1, “Spiritual Inspiration and Personal Growth” has a positive sentiment proportion of 89.4% and 0.0% negative sentiment. 2) Topic 5, “Religious and Philosophical Metaphors,” and Topic 2, “Reading Experience and Personal Timing,” exhibit positive sentiment proportions of 48.2% and 52.7%, respectively, and neutral sentiment proportions of 24.0% and 16.0%, respectively. 3) Topic 4, “Gender and Character Critique”, contains a negative sentiment proportion of 67.3%. 4) Topic 3 “Literary Evaluation and Stylistic Critique” topic yields a negative sentiment proportion of 52.1%, a neutral proportion of 35.8%, and a positive proportion of 12.1%.

4.4 Correlation between the number of likes for specific reviews and emotional tendencies

The number of likes on a reader review reflects its community recognition level and the degree of approval from other users. To investigate the relationship between interaction levels and reader attitudes, this study calculated the proportion of star ratings across different like-count intervals (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Distribution of rating levels across different like-count intervals



Source: The authors

Statistical results show a significant divergence between the overall rating distribution and the highly-liked sample. While “low-rating reviews” (1-2 stars) constitute approximately 5% of the total review corpus, their proportion rises to 20% within the Top 30 most-liked reviews. A descriptive review of these most-liked, low-rating comments reveals they primarily consist of detailed critiques regarding the work’s literary limitations or gender representation rather than simple emotional outbursts. This quantitative shift indicates a structural concentration of community support for critical rather than purely positive discourse.

5. Discussion

Drawing on sentiment analysis and LDA topic modeling, this study systematically reconstructs the reception profile of *The Alchemist* among Chinese readers and situates these findings within broader debates on cross-cultural literary circulation and digital reception. The results illuminate four interrelated dimensions: (1) attitudinal complexity, (2) thematic dialectics, (3) platform-mediated interpretive norms, and (4) methodological implications for digitally informed reception studies.

5.1 The complexity of emotional evaluation: Attitudinal tension in cross-cultural reception

The study reveals that Chinese readers generally maintain a positive attitude toward *The Alchemist*, with a positive sentiment proportion of 78.61% in review texts. This confirms the work’s enduring cross-cultural appeal and its status as a global bestseller, as its core themes of “dream

pursuit” and “destiny realization” resonate strongly with the intrinsic need for self-actualization among contemporary Chinese readers. Nakagome’s (2014) assertion that “hope and faith are the core keys to Coelho’s works” receives strong empirical support here: the high identification among Chinese readers with the “Spiritual Inspiration” theme represents an emotional projection of a universal desire to break through reality’s constraints. This projection transcends cultural boundaries, serving as the primary driving force behind the work’s continued popularity in the Chinese market.

However, a closer examination of the discrepancy between sentiment score levels and star rating levels—where the positive sentiment in text (78.61%) exceeds that of star ratings (74.80%)—unveils the intricate psychological mechanisms of digital evaluation. Within the present dataset, this gap suggests that star ratings may reflect a more conservative overall evaluation than review texts. While text is an implicit, natural outflow of genuine emotional experience, readers may hesitate to provide a perfect five-star rating due to minor reservations, leading to transitional expressions in reviews such as “although I gave five stars, but...”. One possible interpretation is that star ratings provide a single overall evaluation, whereas review texts allow readers to articulate more nuanced and sometimes mixed responses.

This attitudinal tension is further evidenced by the non-synchronous fluctuations observed in the diachronic trends. The significant dip in star ratings in 2019, which was not mirrored by a decline in textual sentiment, indicates that explicit ratings are more susceptible to the short-term influence of extreme negative comments. Conversely, the synchronous rebound of both indicators after 2020 may reflect broader socio-cultural changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. One possible interpretation is that readers became more receptive to themes of hope, dreams, and personal resilience during a period marked by widespread uncertainty, thereby finding greater emotional resonance in the text. So explicit ratings and textual sentiment reflect different evaluative mechanisms: ratings are conservative and context-sensitive, whereas textual expression is affect-rich and stable.

This divergence can be further explained from a value-structure perspective. The discrepancy between emotional expression and explicit ratings also aligns with Fernandes’s (2014) characterization of the book as a “cultural commodity.” In the Chinese context, *The Alchemist* is widely framed as inspirational reading rather than evaluated solely as a literary text. As a result, readers often apply differentiated evaluative criteria, assigning distinct weights to its instrumental or dissemination value (e.g., as guidance for personal growth) and its aesthetic or literary value (e.g., as a work of fiction). This dual framework produces an internal evaluative tension: a reader may criticize the narrative as “simplistic” or “superficial” while still awarding a high star rating in recognition of its perceived motivational or spiritual benefits. Such ambivalence indicates that rating behavior is not a straightforward reflection of textual sentiment but a negotiated judgment shaped by competing value orientations. Therefore, this structural tension highlights the methodological necessity for cross-cultural reception research to employ multi-dimensional evaluative indicators—integrating explicit rating metrics with implicit sentiment analysis—to capture a more stable and accurate representation of overall reader attitudes.

5.2 The duality of thematic reception: The dialectical unity of resonance and critique

Topic modeling identifies five dominant thematic clusters that collectively reveal a striking dialectical reception pattern. Readers simultaneously internalize the work's universal symbolic framework while subjecting it to rational scrutiny. This duality mirrors a well-known global paradox: the text is widely embraced by general audiences yet frequently questioned by critics.

Importantly, this duality is not merely conceptual but structurally observable. The dual-cluster configuration of the semantic network (Figure 4) visually demonstrates this interpretive logic. Thematic lexemes form a dense central cluster representing philosophical resonance, whereas evaluative expressions occupy semi-autonomous substructures embedded within personally situated reflections. This spatial differentiation inside a single semantic system suggests that reception operates through a hybrid interpretive mode integrating affective immersion and analytical distancing. The node “story” functions as a semantic bridge linking these clusters, indicating that both admiration and criticism remain anchored in narrative engagement. Even dismissive labels such as “chicken soup” thus remain structurally tied to readers’ experiential interaction with the text rather than signaling disengagement.

5.2.1 The resonance dimension: Spiritual adaptation and metaphysical exploration

Topic 1 (“Spiritual Inspiration and Personal Growth,” 32.6%) constitutes the dominant interpretive frame, with 89.4% positive sentiment. This confirms the cross-cultural portability of the novel’s symbolic architecture. As Feijó (2015) notes, Coelho’s use of accessible language and universal themes fits the reading habits of the global masses. This is evidenced by Chinese readers’ internalization of keywords like “destiny” (天命) and “universe conspiring” (宇宙合力) as spiritual guidance for breaking through realistic predicaments. This phenomenon provides empirical support for Nakagome’s (2014) assertion that “hope and faith are the core keys” to understanding Coelho’s work, where the pursuit of a “Personal Legend” becomes an emotional projection of the universal desire for self-actualization.

Furthermore, the 72% positive and neutral sentiment regarding “Religious and Philosophical Metaphors” (Topic 5) indicates that many Chinese readers transcend surface-level inspiration to engage in metaphysical dialogue. This echoes Nahdhiyah et al.’s (2023) ecocritical perspective, which interprets the “nature as omen” setting as a harmonious triangular relationship between humans, nature, and the divine. Reader interpretations of “alchemy” as a symbol of “self-purification” and “mission awakening” rather than literal gold-making further align with Sebastian’s (2023) cross-philosophical readings, highlighting the work’s capacity to evoke deep-seated spiritual reflection across cultural boundaries.

5.2.2 The critique dimension: Stylistic resistance and gender sensitivity

Conversely, the high negative sentiment in Topic 3 “Literary Evaluation” (52.1%) and Topic 4 “Gender Critique” (67.3%) reflects the strong sense of textual criticism among Douban’s young, highly educated user base. Readers’ dismissal of the work as “extended chicken soup” or “overly



preachy” finds an academic echo in Bhatnagar’s (2022) critique of the work’s over-reliance on mysticism and insufficient literary depth. Sebastian (2023) adds that the interpretation of symbols in the book is often “mechanistic” and lacks the semiotic openness expected of classic literature, which validates readers’ intuitive fatigue with the work’s “straightforward philosophical expressions”. These patterns suggest a tension between affective reception and evaluative judgment in readers’ responses to *The Alchemist*. Positive sentiment reflects its perceived inspirational and utilitarian value, whereas negative evaluations focus on its stylistic simplicity and limited literary depth. This indicates a decoupling between reception and evaluation, whereby readers simultaneously “like” the text for its emotional function while assessing it against aesthetic standards. Such a dual evaluative structure may extend beyond the Chinese context, pointing to a broader feature of contemporary world literature reception in which multiple value regimes coexist within a single interpretive act.

The most significant area of critique, however, is the “Gender and Character” (Topic 4). The use of the “NPC” (non-player character) analogy by Chinese readers to describe female roles like Fatima highlights a sharp rejection of the “instrumentalized” positioning of women. This forms a dialogue with Bhatnagar’s (2022) observation that female characters in Coelho’s work remain confined to “assisting men in realizing their destiny,” creating a binary opposition between male “seekers” and female “waiters”. While Aljahdali (2016) suggests that translations often involve “adaptive adjustments” for gender representation, the high negativity among Chinese readers suggests that their contemporary gender consciousness has surpassed the work’s original context, making this a focal point of resistance.

5.2.3 Reader subjectivity and the horizon of expectations

The “stage-based differentiation” in emotional reception (Topic 2) validates Jauss’s (1982) “horizon of expectations” theory. The contrast between readers who recalled being “moved to tears” when reading the novel earlier in life and later describing it as “inculcated principles” suggests that interpretation evolves with readers’ life experience. As Bhatnagar (2022) and Sebastian (2023) argue, spiritual experience is highly subjective and depends on the reader’s reserve of cultural codes. In China, younger readers often approach literary texts as spaces for imaginative projection, whereas older readers tend to evaluate them through more pragmatic or realist interpretive frames¹, leading to an inevitable alienation from the work’s idealistic “universe conspiring” narrative. This distinction enriches our understanding of “reader subjectivity” as a dynamic variable in the cross-cultural dissemination of world literature.

5.2.4 Popular enthusiasm vs. critical skepticism: Convergent evidence

The dataset also empirically confirms a broader global pattern: the tension between academic skepticism and popular enthusiasm. The strong positivity surrounding Topic 1 contrasts sharply with the negative sentiment in Topics 3 and 4. This mirrors the longstanding divide between scholarly

¹ See aggregated findings from recent national reading surveys and industry reports on Chinese readership demographics and genre preferences, including data released by national digital reading reports, Tencent Reading Index, and iResearch industry analyses (2021–2024).

reservations about the novel's literary sophistication and its extraordinary mass appeal. The coexistence of these evaluative registers within a single platform suggests that Chinese online reading spaces aggregate heterogeneous readership strata—from analytically trained literary readers to pleasure-oriented consumers—thereby reproducing, in microcosm, the global reception structure of the text.

5.2.5 Universal resonance and the relative backgrounding of Brazilian literary identity

Another revealing absence concerns national markers. References to Brazil, Portuguese language, or culturally specific contexts are virtually nonexistent in the corpus. A concrete example of this tendency concerns the reception of Paulo Coelho himself. Internationally, Coelho is widely recognized as one of Brazil's most influential writers and a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, an institution symbolizing literary prestige and cultural authority in the Portuguese-speaking world. Nevertheless, references to the author's Brazilian identity, Lusophone literary traditions, or Brazil as a cultural frame are virtually absent from the review corpus. This pattern suggests that in the process of cross-cultural circulation, the novel's Brazilian literary origin becomes relatively backgrounded as readers foreground more universal symbolic meanings. Readers overwhelmingly emphasize themes such as destiny, dreams, self-discovery, and spiritual growth rather than national or linguistic affiliations. These patterns suggest that the novel is predominantly received as a transnational symbolic text whose universal themes attract greater attention than its specific literary origins.

5.3 The interaction logic of digital reading communities: Preference for “substantive critique”

The statistical finding that low-rating reviews (1-2 stars) account for 20% of the Top 30 most-liked comments—despite representing only 5% of the total sample—reveals a unique interaction logic within the Douban reading community. This phenomenon challenges the assumption that positive consensus naturally attracts the most community “likes”. Instead, it indicates that Douban users prioritize “substantive critique” (深度评价), valuing analytical depth over mere emotional praise.

This preference appears to be closely related both to the demographic composition of Douban users and to the platform's long-established culture of literary discussion. As one of China's earliest online communities devoted to books, films, and music, Douban developed before the widespread adoption of mobile-based social media and cultivated a tradition of long-form reviewing and reflective commentary. Such a discursive style has long been associated with readers with relatively high levels of education and cultural capital, whose engagement with literary texts often extends beyond emotional identification to include philosophical reflection and critical evaluation. Consequently, the prevalence of lengthy reviews and the community's preference for analytical discussions provide a fertile environment for the emergence of “substantive critique.” By focusing on this relatively small but information-rich corpus—what Roy and Deshbandhu (2025) describe as a “little database”—the present study captures localized patterns of interpretation that might be



obscured by larger-scale statistical trends. The prevalence of lengthy reviews also enables the articulation of nuanced opinions and minority concerns that might be difficult to capture in more fragmented forms of online commentary.

These findings further suggest a form of cross-strata evaluation in digital reading communities, where “high-quality reviews” and “widely liked reviews” may follow different logics of recognition. In particular, the act of liking low-rating yet analytically rich reviews may reflect not only agreement with their critical stance, but also endorsement of a certain evaluative posture characterized by analytical depth and interpretive authority. Such engagement may therefore be understood as a performative expression of cultural capital within the platform-mediated reading space, where evaluation operates simultaneously at the level of textual judgment and social positioning.

At the same time, the broader implications of these findings should be interpreted with caution. The 893 reviews analyzed here represent a particular digital reading community characterized by relatively high levels of cultural engagement and a preference for reflective literary discussion. Their sensitivity to gender issues, emphasis on literary depth, and critical attitude toward the “chicken soup” label may differ from the evaluative priorities of other groups of readers, including users of short-video platforms and more casual readers. Consequently, the present findings should be understood as illustrating the interaction logic of a specific online community rather than generalized to the broader and more diverse Chinese digital reading sphere.

5.4 Methodological reflection: Applicability and limitations of digital humanities in cross-cultural reception research

This study demonstrates the applicability of Python sentiment analysis and LDA topic modeling in reception research concerning Chinese translations of foreign literary works. While SnowNLP is a lexicon- and Naïve Bayes – based classifier operating primarily on surface-level lexical features, it is capable of efficiently capturing overall emotional tendencies in large-scale review datasets. However, its limitations as a general-purpose sentiment analysis tool become evident when applied to literary discourse characterized by irony, sarcasm, and specialized evaluative terminology. For instance, expressions such as “心灵鸡汤” (“chicken soup”) often carry negative connotations in contemporary Chinese literary criticism despite their seemingly positive lexical components. Similarly, ironic praise or metaphorical language may obscure the underlying evaluative stance of reviewers. Consequently, sentiment scores should be interpreted as approximate indicators of emotional tendencies rather than precise measurements of readers’ attitudes. Future research could integrate deep learning models such as BERT (Deng & Deng, 2025), employ domain-adaptive training, or combine machine analysis with manual annotation to better capture the nuanced meanings embedded in literary reviews.

Simultaneously, LDA, while effective in identifying latent thematic structures, is similarly constrained by issues of topic overlap and interpretive ambiguity in short-text literary reviews. The ambiguity of topic membership—since some reviews involve multiple topics—suggests that future work could combine more advanced topic models like BERTopic or introduce manual annotation for cross-validation to enhance the accuracy of topic delineation. Furthermore, this study focused solely on Douban platform data, failing to cover reader feedback from emerging social platforms like



Douyin (TikTok) and Xiaohongshu. Differences in user groups and comment styles on these platforms may introduce new reception characteristics; for instance, readers on short-video platforms might pay more attention to the work's "quotation dissemination" and "visualized interpretations," providing directions for future multi-platform cross-cultural reception studies.

6. Conclusion

This study systematically reconstructs the multidimensional reception landscape of *The Alchemist* in the Chinese digital sphere by analyzing a corpus of 893 Douban reviews, achieving a theoretical synthesis that bridges empirical data and reception theory. The findings reveal that Chinese readers maintain a predominantly positive emotional orientation toward the Ding Wenlin's translation, with textual sentiment scores (78.61% positive) exceeding explicit star ratings (74.80% positive). This discrepancy unveils a phenomenon of "subjective conservatism" in digital evaluation: while reviews serve as a natural outlet for nuanced emotional experiences, star ratings function as a more restrained, socially-negotiated aesthetic judgment. Diachronic analysis further indicates that the reception is dynamic rather than static; a synchronized rebound in both indicators after 2020 suggests that during periods of global socio-cultural uncertainty, the novel's themes of hope and destiny functioned as a form of "spiritual solace" for Chinese youth, highlighting the role of world literature as a catalyst for collective psychological reconstruction.

In terms of thematic construction, the LDA model identifies five latent clusters that characterize a dialectical unity of resonance and critique. The dominance of "Spiritual Inspiration and Personal Growth" (32.6%) confirms the high cross-cultural portability of the novel's symbolic architecture, such as "destiny" (天命) and the "universe conspiring" (宇宙合力), which aligns with the self-actualization desires of the Chinese readership. Simultaneously, the research reveals a significant "aesthetic resistance" among highly educated readers, evidenced by sharp critiques of the work's perceived "preachiness" and its "instrumentalized" gender perspectives—specifically the characterization of Fatima as a passive "NPC". This suggests a shifting "horizon of expectations" where contemporary readers, equipped with higher media literacy and gender consciousness, have moved from the blind idolization of global classics to a state of rational value reflection. Furthermore, the reception is marked by a decontextualized "disappearance of Brazilianness," as the text functions in China primarily as a universal symbolic system rather than a national cultural artifact.

The analysis of community interaction logic uncovers a distinct preference for "substantive critique" within the Douban ecosystem. Although low-rating reviews (1–2 stars) constitute a marginal 5% of the total corpus, they account for 20% of the most-liked reviews, challenging the assumption that community rewards are reserved for positive consensus. This "high-liked, low-rating" phenomenon represents a collective exercise in "Slow Thinking," where the community rewards logical depth and critical insight over simple emotional resonance. By prioritizing critiques of literary depth and gender representation, Douban users perform a humanistic ritual of "conscious clicking" that resists algorithmic reductionism and maintains a public space for intellectual inquiry within the digital marketplace.

The theoretical significance of this research lies in its transition from traditional philological interpretation to a data-driven, reader-centered paradigm, providing a reusable methodological



framework for digital reception studies. Practically, it offers empirical guidance for the cross-cultural dissemination of foreign literature; publishers and translators are encouraged to address modern reader concerns—such as gender sensitivity—through paratextual strategies like updated prefaces or translation notes. While this study is limited by its reliance on a single platform (Douban) and the challenges general sentiment tools face with complex irony, it opens several future directions. Future research should adopt a multi-platform comparative approach (including Xiaohongshu or TikTok), utilize advanced deep-learning models like BERT for higher semantic precision, and conduct comparative analyses across different Chinese translations to further illuminate the evolving trajectory of Brazilian literature in the Chinese cultural sphere.

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Data collection: X. Zhang & X. Huang
Data analysis: X. Zhang & X. Huang
Results and discussion: X. Zhang & X. Huang
Writing - Original draft preparation: X. Zhang
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The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines and approved by the Research Committee of Macao Polytechnic University (approval number: RP/FLT 05/2025/E01).

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Not applicable.

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The data from this research, which are not included in this work, may be made available by the author upon request.



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