

## ОБЗОРЫ. РЕЦЕНЗИИ

### REVIEWS

DOI: 10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-3-840-857

EDN: RRFEQJ

UDC 821.111

Review / Обзорная статья

### Readers' acceptance of Ian McEwan novels in Mainland China: a systematic review

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**Abstract.** With the accelerated development of globalisation and the deepening of cultural exchanges, cross-cultural translation and literary reception have become important topics in contemporary literary studies. This review aims to explore readers' acceptance of Ian McEwan's novels in mainland China. To this end, the databases of CNKI, EBSCO, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis, and Science Direct have been explored, and twenty-one studies published between 2000 and 2024 have been analysed. A systematic review was used as a research methodology, and the studies were analysed using a content analysis method. The findings revealed that there is rich research on Ian McEwan's novels but very few significant studies on how ordinary readers accept translated Ian McEwan novels in mainland China. Moreover, other studies have concluded that Chinese readers widely and extensively accept Ian McEwan's novels as they provoke emotional feelings, arouse ethical considerations, and compel readers to reflect critically. The findings have provided researchers in literature, translation, and intercultural studies with a comprehensive understanding of the current state of reception of Ian McEwan novels in China.

**Keywords:** reception, translation, novel, methodology, work, content analysis, reader, reading

**Author's contribution.** *Wen Nie* – development of the research idea, research data collection, data analysis, manuscript writing and editing. *Leng Chan Siaw* – development of the research idea, research data collection, data analysis, manuscript writing and editing. *Shobihah Dayang* – development of the research idea, research data collection, data analysis, manuscript writing and editing. *Ayuni Nur* – development of the research idea, research data collection, data analysis, manuscript writing and editing.

**Conflicts of interests:** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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**Article history:** submitted August 5, 2024; revised September 20, 2024; accepted October 1, 2024.

**For citation:** Nie, W., Siaw, L.Ch., Dayang, Sh., & Nur, A. (2024). Readers' acceptance of Ian McEwan novels in Mainland China: A systematic review. *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 29(4), 840–857. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-4-840-857>

## Читательское восприятие романов Иэна Макьюэна в материковом Китае: систематический обзор

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**Аннотация.** С ускоренным развитием глобализации и расширением межкультурной коммуникации перевод и рецепция стали важными темами современных литературных исследований. Обзор направлен на изучение восприятия читателями романов Иэна Макьюэна в материковом Китае. В рамках исследования использованы базы данных CNKI, EBSCO, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis, Science Direct, а также проанализирована двадцать одна работа, опубликованная с 2000 по 2024 год. В качестве методологии исследования проведена систематическая проверка, а изучение материала осуществлено с применением контент-анализа. Результаты показали, что несмотря на богатую исследовательскую базу произведений Иэна Макьюэна, существует крайне мало значительных изысканий, посвященных восприятию переведенных романов автора рядовыми читателями в материковом Китае. Более того, другие ученые пришли к выводу, что китайские читатели широко и глубоко принимают романы Макьюэна, поскольку они вызывают эмоциональные переживания, побуждают к этическим размышлениям и стимулируют критическое осмысление текста. Результаты проведенного сопоставительного анализа позволяют всесторонне оценить текущее состояние рецепции романов Иэна Макьюэна в Китае.

**Ключевые слова:** рецепция, перевод, роман, методология, произведение, контент-анализ, читатель, чтение

**Вклад авторов.** В. Нье – разработка идеи исследования, сбор исследовательских данных, анализ данных, написание и редактирование рукописи. Л. Ч. Сяо – разработка идеи исследования, сбор исследовательских данных, анализ данных, написание и редактирование рукописи. Ш. Даян – разработка идеи исследования, сбор исследовательских данных, анализ данных, написание и редактирование рукописи. А. Нур – разработка идеи исследования, сбор исследовательских данных, анализ данных, написание и редактирование рукописи.

**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**История статьи:** поступила в редакцию 5 августа 2024 г.; отрецензирована 20 сентября 2024 г.; принята к публикации 1 октября 2024 г.

**Для цитирования:** Nie W., Siaw L.C., Dayng S., Nur A. Readers' acceptance of Ian McEwan novels in Mainland China: a systematic review // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2024. Т. 29. № 4. С. 840–857. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2024-29-4-840-857>

## Introduction

### ***Background of this study***

In contemporary literary studies, literary translation and cross-cultural acceptance are among the most important directions that attract attention (Yue, 2021). As a cultural product, the translation and reception of literary works in different cultural contexts involves a complex process of cultural exchange and cognition (Li, 2016). Intercultural communication continues to be an active subject in modern philology (G'aniyevna, 2023). Universal human values are exalted through the general and special characteristics of cultures specific to representatives of other nationalities and the opportunities for mutual understanding that are established between peoples (Gyekye, 2004). Reception concerns in fiction play a significant role (Holub, 2013).

As an outstanding novelist, McEwan's work is widely recognised and accepted not only in British literature but has also won him international acclaim (Head, 2013). His works have been translated into many languages and have struck a chord with readers worldwide (Luo, 2017). According to Luo (2017), the success of McEwan's writings has also been reflected in China, where Chinese translations of his novels have earned growing attention and admiration from Chinese readers. McEwan's works play an essential role in literary creation and have a far-reaching influence on literary theory and cultural studies (Yang, 2017). By undertaking a thorough analysis of McEwan and his work, the researcher acquires a better understanding of the evolution and transformation of current English literature, as well as important subjects such as human existence and social ethics, with related research being able to contribute to theoretical and practical advances in cross-cultural communication, but it also deepens the discussion in the subject of literary translation studies (Yang & Zhang, 2017).

This review aims to clarify the research landscape of the literary acceptance of Ian McEwan novels in China, casting light on what we already know and what still needs further investigation. The research originates from diverse fields of study, namely literary studies, translation studies, media and communication, cultural studies, and psychological studies. It furthermore argues for the relevance of understanding this phenomenon and reflecting on tools for interdisciplinary research.

First, this study introduces the perspective that leads us to undertake a review of this kind and presents the research question. Second, the selection and analysis of the research are illustrated. The third and fourth sections follow with the analysis of findings and discussion. The last gives a conclusion of this review and the implications it is meant to bring about.

### **Studies on Ian McEwan novels in Mainland China**

The reception theory holds that readers in different countries have different expectations and aesthetic concepts due to their different language habits, cultural backgrounds and values (Holub, 1992). Before the 1990s, there was a

gap in the translation and study of how McEwan's works are accepted in China (Shang, 2018). In 1992, *Foreign Literature and Art*, a journal under the Shanghai Translation Publishing House, published McEwan's short story *The Moment of Dying* (translated by Wang Yiqun) (1992), which was the first time that McEwan's work was published in China. In 1998, *Foreign Literature* magazine published two short stories by McEwan, respectively *Two Fragments: March 199...* (1978; translated by Zuo Xiaolan) and *To and Fro* (1978; translated by Zhang Jige). Since then, McEwan's works slowly began entering Chinese readers' reading field (Jin, 2021).

Entering the 21st century, the translation of McEwan's works began to take off. On the one hand, periodicals and magazines continued to translate McEwan's short works and long selections; on the other hand, major publishing houses began to compete to buy the Chinese copyrights of McEwan's works and released translations one after another (Huang & Wang, 2021). The translation and publication of McEwan's long stories by Chinese translators is the most complete and systematic of all his works, and at present, all his long stories published before 2022 have been published in Chinese (Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2024).

Research on McEwan's works in China has proved fruitful. In addition to macroscopic studies of McEwan's books, various researchers have done in-depth investigations of individual novels (Zheng, 2020). The general acceptance of McEwan's novels in China has largely occurred in the 20 years since the beginning of the twenty-first century when both the reception environment and Chinese readers have taken on a distinct personality (Liu, 2021). The unique Internet communication environment during this period also influenced how readers accessed information, which affected the acceptance of McEwan's novels in China. In recent years, due to many Chinese translations of McEwan's works published, and the popularity of movies based on his works, especially the movie *Atonement*, McEwan's attention in China has been heating up rapidly.

Existing research results of the reception of Ian McEwan are mainly focused on some of his novels, such as *Atonement* and *The Child in Time*, while McEwan, as a versatile writer in the British literary world today, has not yet received enough attention for his other types of literary works. In terms of research perspectives, most existing research focuses on the themes of growth, time, postmodern narrative techniques, ethics and morality in McEwan's works. However, the acceptance of McEwan in China and related research mainly focuses on academics, and few studies have taken ordinary readers as the research object to explore the reception of McEwan's works in Chinese society and the reading experience of ordinary readers. Therefore, this field lacks a systematic literature review of research on accepting Ian McEwan's works in China. There is a need to conduct a comprehensive review of research within this paradigm as it could help literary studies and translation studies researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current state of the reception of foreign literature in China by critically evaluating the existing literature, conceptually and theoretically. The present study fills this gap by reviewing the relevant research and highlighting the gap for future research within this paradigm. The present study has attempted to answer the following research question: What is the acceptance of Ian McEwan novels in China?

## **Methods**

### ***Literature research strategy***

This study employed a systematic review method based on the research question that guide which studies should be included for review (Snyder, 2019). Systematic literature reviews, either quantitative or qualitative, are valuable tools for acquiring conclusions from enormous amounts of research and advancing scientific theory and evidence-based practice (Harari et al., 2020).

The current review follows established guidelines designed to ensure the research question is addressed comprehensively, using relevant literature that reflects the issue under discussion (Seluk, 2019). This study intended to investigate the acceptance of Ian McEwan's novels in China.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

Five electronic databases were searched to identify research articles that are relevant to the research question and aim of this research, including CNKI, EBSCO, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis, and Science Direct. The collected articles were written in English or Chinese, from peer-reviewed journals, and published from 2000 to 2024. This study investigated the acceptance of Ian McEwan's novels in China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The selection of search terms, "Ian McEwan", "Ian McEwan novels", "McEwan", "reader", "reading experience", "reception", "acceptance", and "accept" was guided by the research question. Boolean (AND/OR/NOT) operators were used to link terms to return literature in the databases.

From the corpus of related analysis, the researchers included only relevant research works for analysis in this research. The included studies were analysed by utilising content analysis. It allows researchers to compare, contrast and categorise the data (Fink, 2019).

### ***Selection criteria***

After inputting the search terms on CNKI, EBSCO, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis, and Science Direct, only articles/theses which met the search criteria were included: articles that are completely accessible, articles on the reception of Ian McEwan novels, publications between 2000 and 2024. Excluded articles were repetitive publications, books, and chapters on the acceptance of Ian McEwan novels and research articles written in languages other than English or Chinese. Thus, the selected articles initially from the databases are 123 from CNKI, 29 from EBSCO, 37 from Web of Science, 38 from Taylor and Francis, and 11 from Science Direct. After removing duplicated studies by Zotero, the resulting studies are 182.

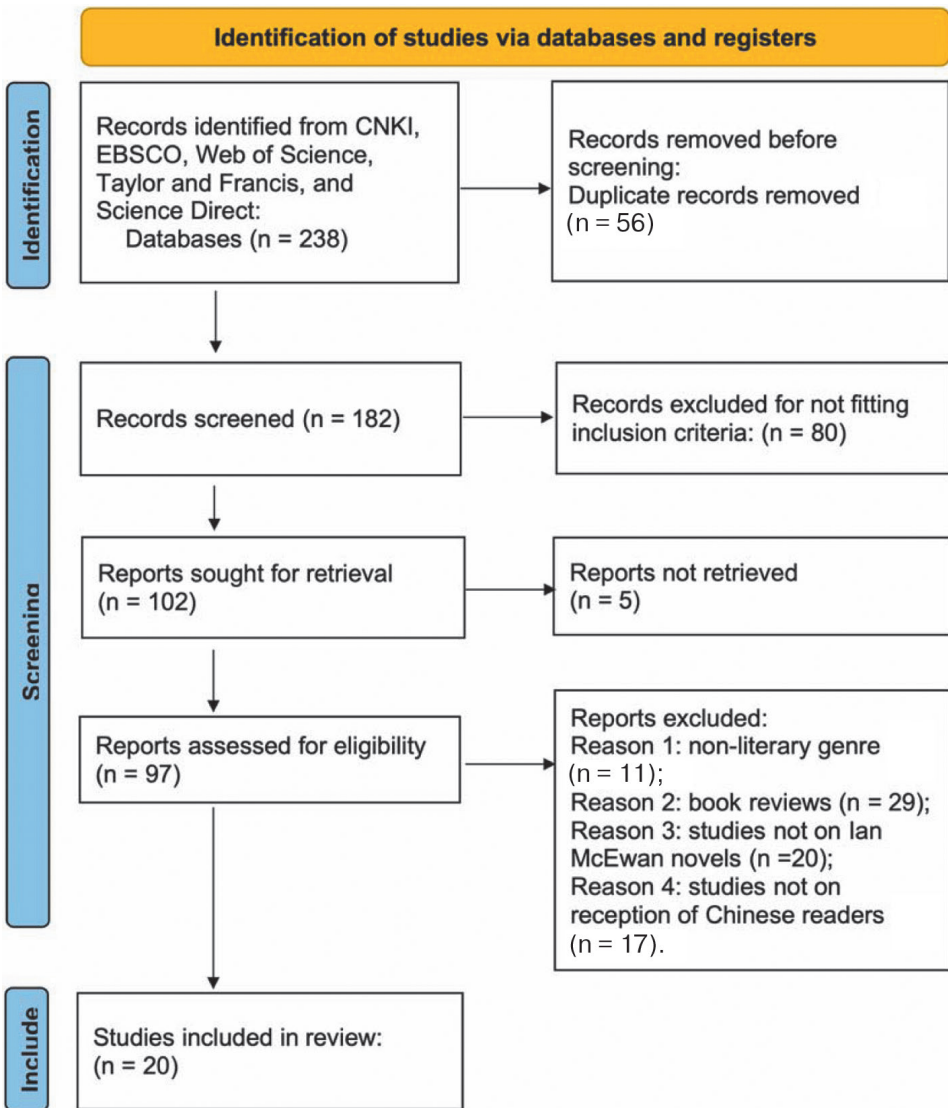
The inclusion criteria of the studies included: a) research on Ian McEwan novels, b) research about Chinese readers' acceptance, and c) research articles. The exclusion criteria of the studies included a) book reviews, b) research on the novelist Ian McEwan himself, and c) non-literary studies.



### Data extraction and synthesis

Initial data extraction was performed utilizing a review template that captured essential details such as each study’s theoretical perspective or framework, data sources, methodologies, and primary conclusion. Two reviewers independently carried out the screening process, with the extracted information consolidated and organised into a summary table.

After examining the title and abstract, 85 studies were excluded as they did not fit the inclusion criteria or the full articles could not be retrieved. The rest of the 97 studies were reviewed for eligibility in terms of full-text screening. Among these studies, 77 were removed as they dealt with the non-literary genre, discussing subjects other than Ian McEwan’s novels, reviewing novels of Ian McEwan, or not revealing the acceptance of Chinese readers. After the mentioned process, the 20 studies were reviewed in the present study (refer to Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Flow diagram of the studies included in this study

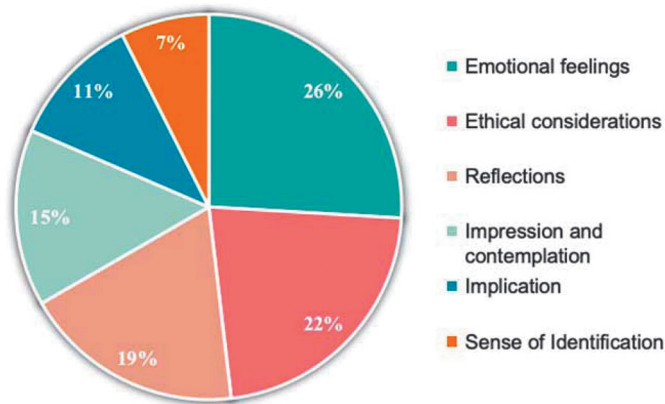
Source: compiled by Wen Nie, Leng Chan Siaw, Shobihah Dayng, Ayuni Nur.

## Results

This section presents an overview of the results found on the extracted aspects regarding the acceptance of Ian McEwan novels in China.

### ***Reader acceptance of Ian McEwan novels in China***

The authors of the 20 included studies, as readers of Ian McEwan's novels, engage in critical analysis and reflection on the characters, ethics, and narrative strategies within McEwan's works (Figure 2). Additionally, through their reading and interpretation of the novels, these researchers also represent the broader Chinese readership of McEwan's works.



**Figure 2.** An overview of reader acceptance in various response

Source: compiled by Wen Nie, Leng Chan Siaw, Shobihah Dayng, Ayuni Nur.

A significant response readers get from reading is that McEwan's novels evoke emotional feelings among readers. Hu (2014) asserts that McEwan's early novels often evoke feelings of depression and unease, compelling readers to grapple with complex motives that influence their moral judgments and to engage in intricate, self-reflective interpretations. Shang (2018, 2019, 2021) stated several times that reading Ian McEwan's works brings striking emotional experiences to the reader. Li (2021) posits that the use of irony in *Enduring Love* elicits sympathy and compassion in readers, compelling them to consider whether and how the narrative ultimately culminates in a queer ending. In the words of Zhou & Wu (2022), as the narrative of *Machines Like Me* unfolds, readers increasingly sympathise with Adam and become progressively more distrustful and alienated from the protagonist, Charlie.

Another noteworthy aspect is the ethical considerations for readers while engaging with McEwan's novels. Wang (2015) argues that McEwan's novels captivate readers with its clever and engaging plot but also prompts them to engage in deep ethical reflection. Yang (2017) also contends that McEwan, by depicting the inner struggles and self-healing of different characters after traumatic events, reveals the universality of trauma while also posing numerous

thought-provoking ethical questions for readers. However, there are also opposing ideas on ethical reflection. Geng (2016) states that readers are not required to adopt a specific stance on the issue of violence, as not all works aim to make moral judgments; instead, readers can approach the circumstances surrounding violence with a critical perspective.

In addition to ethical considerations, readers are often compelled to reflect while engaging with McEwan novels. According to Qiu (2007), McEwan compels readers to reflect critically on this idealised notion of hegemonic masculinity. Similarly, according to Geng (2014), McEwan guides readers to reflect on the complementary roles of science and art. While literary works may not fully resolve the need for confession, they significantly encourage readers to reflect on both the narrative and themselves (Wang & Tian, 2024).

Other than reflecting critically, readers are also given space for contemplation and interpretation of the impression they get in the process of literary reception. Geng (2014) holds that the precise descriptions of the human brain in *Saturday* leave a profound impression on readers. McEwan's portrayal of the characters' urban lifestyle and his focus on human nature anchor this Gothic novel more firmly in social reality, providing readers with ample space for rational contemplation (Geng, 2014). As was pointed out by Wang (2016), readers interpret the same text differently due to variations in their cultural backgrounds, class status, knowledge structures, and social experiences. The numerous quotations and references to literary works and authors in *Atonement* provide readers with ample space for imaginative interpretation of the novel (Wang, 2016).

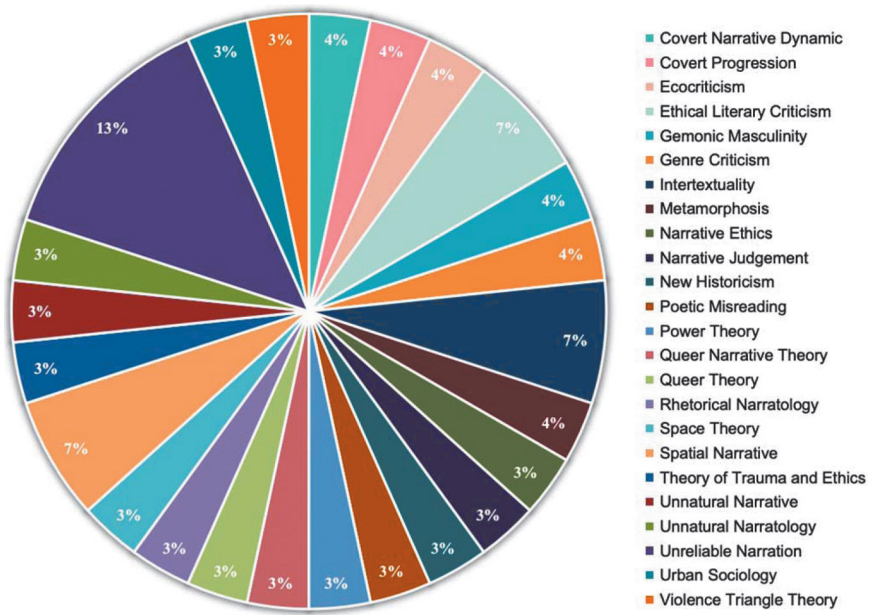
While reflecting and contemplating on readers' self-perceptions and societal dynamics, the studies also highlight the significant historical and contemporary implications of reading and receiving Ian McEwan's novels. Fu (2016) argues that the author's creative and the reader's interpretive processes serve as the text's historical embodiment. Zhao & Liu (2017) suggest that McEwan's call for a harmonious ecology in the novel *Solar* instils hope for readers to break free from cycles of alienation and achieve ecological salvation. Moreover, He (2024) contends that an analysis of the violent themes in *Saturday* reveals not only the hidden violence within British society but also McEwan's plea for a harmonious society.

Researchers hold varied opinions regarding whether readers can identify with the characters or plots in Ian McEwan's novels. According to Zhang, Xin & Li (2014), the plot of *The Cement Garden* makes readers experience a sense of engaging with a vividly realised character brought to life by McEwan but complicates the reader's ability to trust a narrator whose self-representation and ethical alignment are profoundly misaligned. On the contrary, in reading *Comfort of Strangers*, Wang (2011) thinks that the narrator maintains a deliberate distance from the characters, making it challenging for readers to identify with any of them fully.



### ***Theoretical Perspectives of Ian McEwan novels in China***

This section analysed research methods and theoretical perspectives utilised in the included studies. In terms of the research methodology, all the included studies have not explicitly mentioned, while after screening the full texts, it can be drawn that they all adopted qualitative approaches, and 18 of them applied case study methods, as the most defining feature of case study research is its clear delineation of the object of study, which is the case itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The included research employed diverse theoretical perspectives to analyse literary texts (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Theoretical perspectives adopted by included studies

Source: compiled by Wen Nie, Leng Chan Siaw, Shobihah Dayng, Ayuuni Nur.

## **Discussion**

### ***Limitations of the research reviewed***

The overall evidence base regarding the acceptance of Ian McEwan’s novels in China remains relatively underdeveloped. Notably, despite a comprehensive literature search from 2000 onward, only studies published between 2007 and 2024 were deemed sufficiently rigorous for inclusion in this review. Earlier studies focused more on book reviews and the author himself, lacking the analytic depth necessary for literary reception studies. The selected studies concentrated on various novels by Ian McEwan, whose diverse styles and themes contribute to the richness of the research. However, this review’s geographical scope is confined to China, limiting the study of McEwan’s reception to a specific cultural and regional context.

The databases reviewed exhibit several imbalances. There is a significant geographical concentration in the study locations, with most research written in

Chinese and a paucity of English-language studies on the reception of McEwan's works. Moreover, the reception studies predominantly focus on scholars and literary experts as readers, with few studies investigating the responses of ordinary readers in China. While scholars reference general Chinese readers, including academic and ordinary readers, their analyses tend to be framed from an academic perspective rather than based on lived reading experiences. Consequently, the findings regarding how McEwan's novels are accepted are rarely substantiated by the perspectives of ordinary readers.

Methodologically, the consistency of approaches used in the reviewed studies poses a challenge for evaluation. The included studies predominantly utilise descriptive case studies, analysing individual novels from specific perspectives or general qualitative studies focusing on particular aspects of McEwan's work. None of the studies employed quantitative approaches or other qualitative methods to explore actual reading experiences. While qualitative case studies offer in-depth descriptions and analyses of bounded systems, incorporating multiple cases is a common strategy for enhancing research findings' external validity or generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In many studies, the findings are primarily or exclusively reliant on the researchers' academic disciplines. Researchers often adopt a theoretical stance, presuming that McEwan's intended reader responses can be realised, that readers will accept the novels as the researchers interpret, and that readers will respond in the ways illustrated. For instance, *The Cement Garden* and *The Comfort of Strangers* are often regarded as McEwan's "small masterpieces", according to Shanghai Translation Publishing House (2024). However, Zhang, Xin & Li (2014) argue that readers engage with the vividly realised characters in *The Cement Garden*, while Wang (2011) suggests that it is challenging for readers to identify with any characters in *The Comfort of Strangers* fully.

Despite these limitations and the apparent shortage of relevant research in this field, the reviewed studies provide sufficient evidence to address the questions posed by this review and indicate areas where further investigation is warranted.

### ***Contributions of the review to answering the research question***

Few of the studies included in this review directly address the research question posed. Relevant evidence is often embedded within broader inquiries concerning general readers of McEwan's novels, which researchers rarely undertake. Among the studies that examine McEwan's works from literature-related perspectives, most mention what and how readers perceive the novels. Others suggest the broader implications that readers, particularly modern audiences, might derive from his works, or discuss how translations could be improved to enhance the reception of McEwan's novels. These studies raise the broader question of the applicability of findings to general readers who do not approach novels from an academic perspective.

Nevertheless, the evidence base suggests that the reception of Ian McEwan's novels in China is gaining increased attention and popularity. Readers engage emotionally and critically with the settings, plots, and thematic implications presented by the author. Some of these responses are rooted in ethical considerations of the characters' behaviours, reflections on cultural and societal backgrounds, or contemplations of quotations and references within the novels, while others emerge from McEwan's narrative styles. Furthermore, Chinese readers' perspectives in analysing these novels are becoming increasingly diverse. Interdisciplinary studies and approaches enrich the reception studies of world literature, including perspectives from literary studies, cultural studies, psychology, media studies, and more.

The findings regarding the acceptance of Ian McEwan novels in China offer a vividly diverse picture. For one thing, the reader response to Ian McEwan's novels varies from researcher to researcher. Yet some commonly acknowledged emotional feelings, ethical considerations and critical reflections exist. As Hu (2014) believes, some of the elements in McEwan's novels make readers feel depressed and uneasy; at the same time, readers have to think about the complex motives that affect their moral judgments, thus making self-reflective interpretations; in addition, readers can also feel an emotional upheaval in an instant and gain a strong sense of artistic beauty. In addition, through McEwan's call for a harmonious ecology in the novel, readers see the hope of breaking out of the cycle of alienation and achieving ecological salvation (Zhao & Liu, 2017), and sometimes readers also reflect on the current situation of "distance" communication in Chinese society (Geng, 2018).

In addition, the theoretical perspectives utilised in the included studies of Ian McEwan's novels in China have presented a refreshing view. Chinese scholars have attempted to use new critical perspectives to interpret McEwan's works, opening up new dimensions for studying the acceptance of McEwan's novels. A total number of 24 theoretical or analytical perspectives were utilised in the selected studies. Among which Narrative Techniques are the most commonly adopted. Unreliable Narrative, literary ethics criticism, including exploring sexual ethics, ecological ethics and technological ethics, also provides a unique analytical perspective for McEwan's research.

## Conclusion

This systematic review, drawing on studies from 2000 to 2024, reveals that the acceptance of McEwan's works in China and related research has gradually deepened and expanded over the past two decades. The extensive research on McEwan's novels reflects the mainstream Chinese academic community's acceptance of this contemporary British writer and recognition of his literary achievements. However, the existing body of work remains relatively small, and there is a noticeable lack of systematic and comprehensive studies on reader acceptance. Additionally, the research primarily focuses on academic

perspectives, with few studies exploring the reception of McEwan's works among ordinary readers and their reading experiences within Chinese society.

The findings suggest several implications for future research and translation practice. Notably, considering Ian McEwan's broad recognition and acceptance as a novelist, research focusing solely on the reception of his novels within China is insufficient. Future studies should broaden their data sources beyond journal databases to include dissertations, news reports, online book review platforms, and other relevant mediums. In terms of research methodology, future investigations could benefit from incorporating a more diverse range of approaches. This might include quantitative methods, such as distributing questionnaires to general readers of McEwan's novels, qualitative approaches like phenomenological studies, which emphasise the essence of experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), or mixed-methods research. Additionally, expanding the scope of research to encompass other genres of McEwan's work, such as children's novels, drama scripts, and screenplays, could offer new perspectives and deepen research content. Finally, research on the acceptance of McEwan's novels could also provide valuable insights into Western literature's translation studies and practices in China.

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