

Readers' Reception Trend in Accepting Ian McEwan Novels in Mainland China —A Systematic Review

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Abstract

In the context of rapid globalization and heightened cultural exchange, cross-cultural translation and literary reception have emerged as critical areas of inquiry within contemporary literary studies. This review investigates the trends in the reception of Ian McEwan's novels among readers in mainland China. A systematic analysis was conducted using databases such as CNKI, EBSCO, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis, and Science Direct, focusing on twenty scholarly articles published between 2000 and 2024. Employing content analysis as the primary methodological framework, the findings indicate a significant gap in studies addressing the reception of McEwan's works by general readers. Notably, only a limited number of novels—specifically *Saturday*, *Amsterdam*, *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, and *Atonement*—have achieved considerable acceptance among Chinese audiences since 2014. These insights contribute to a nuanced understanding of the reception dynamics of Western literary texts in a non-Western context, offering valuable perspectives for literary scholars and researchers.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, Literary Studies, Reception, Review, Trend

Introduction

In contemporary literary studies, examining literary translation and cross-cultural reception has become a pivotal area of research (Venuti, 2022). The translation and reception of literary works within various cultural contexts represent a complex interplay of cultural exchange and cognitive processes (Van Doorslaer & Gambier, 2013). This dynamic interaction not only underscores universal human values but also illuminates shared and distinct cultural attributes among different national groups, facilitating mutual understanding across diverse

populations (Pless & Maak, 2004). The current approaches and outcomes of foreign literature research remain inadequate to address the significant historical demand (Liu & Xie, 2019). Thus, it is crucial for scholars to focus on broadening the scope of foreign literature studies, expanding the community of foreign literature scholars, and introducing the literary works of more countries and regions to Chinese audiences (Zeng, 2023).

Ian McEwan, a highly regarded contemporary British novelist, is recognized as a leading figure in modern literature (Head, 2013). His works are celebrated for their profound emotional depth, intricate character development, and sophisticated narrative techniques. McEwan's novels explore diverse themes, including human nature, morality, and social ethics, often delving into the complexities and dilemmas of human existence (Bradford, 2009). Translated into numerous languages, his writings resonate with readers globally. Notably, McEwan's success extends to China, where translations of his novels have garnered increasing attention and acclaim from Chinese audiences (Luo, 2017). However, current research on Ian McEwan in China largely centers on the characteristics of his works or the analysis of individual novels, with limited focus on the reception of his works. Therefore, given McEwan's wide acceptance, translation, and discussion in China, studying the acceptance of this prominent contemporary writer and analyzing his works is both necessary and of considerable academic importance. (Yang, 2022).

This review aimed to elucidate the research landscape concerning the acceptance trends of Ian McEwan's novels among Chinese readers, highlighting existing knowledge and identifying gaps for further investigation. Drawing on insights from literary studies, translation studies, media and communication, cultural studies, and psychology, this review underscored the importance of understanding this phenomenon and reflecting on the necessary tools for interdisciplinary research.

The study commenced by outlining the rationale for the review and articulating the central research question. It then detailed the selection and analysis of the reviewed studies. Subsequent sections focused on analyzing the findings and engaging in critical discussion. Finally, the review concluded with a summary of insights and outlined the implications of the research for future inquiry.

Literary Reception and Reception Theory

Reception theory, also known as reception aesthetics, is a branch of reader-response literary theory that emphasizes the reader's active role in interpreting literary works (Rockhill, 1996). Before the 20th century, translation criticism predominantly focused on the "author" and the "text." However, the emergence of reception theory during the 20th century marked a significant shift towards the "reader" as a critical component of literary analysis (Holub, 2013). The origins of reception theory can be traced to the late 1960s, when German philosopher Hans Robert Jauss introduced it as a counter to traditional literary criticism, which, according to Jauss (1982), overemphasized the author and the text while neglecting the reader's interpretive role. Jauss contended that literary works, like other communicative acts, cannot exist in isolation; they are shaped by the social and historical contexts in which they are read (Jauss, 1982). Key contributions to reception aesthetics include Jauss's (1987) reception history model and Wolfgang Iser's (1980) framework for aesthetic response.

The reception process is significantly influenced by the reader's educational background, expectations, comprehension, temperament, and interests (Holub, 2013). Iser (1978) asserts that the study of literature and art should prioritize the reader's interpretation, response, and engagement with the text, while also considering the aesthetic experience and the social implications of reception. This approach examines the dynamic interplay between creation, interpretation, and the roles of the author, text, and reader, employing a dialogic method of inquiry. Reception theory transcends the limitations of positivist literary history by situating aesthetic experience within its historical and societal contexts. Ultimately, it underscores the importance of the reader's role in constructing meaning, positing that literature is fundamentally shaped by the interaction between reader and text rather than existing solely within the text itself (Holub, 2013).

Studies on the Acceptance of Ian McEwan Novels Worldwide

Global research on Ian McEwan and his literary works commenced in the mid-1970s and has steadily increased since then (Malcolm, 2002). In the 21st century, as McEwan's stature in the international literary arena has grown, scholarly interest in his oeuvre has intensified. According to McEwan's official website (<https://www.ianmcewan.com/index.html>), by 2024, his works have been translated into over 30 languages, accompanied by more than 30 monographs, over 100 audio and video interviews, and over 200 scholarly critiques published between 1978 and 2024. Hundreds of doctoral and master's theses, thousands of research papers, and numerous book reviews have been produced regarding McEwan and his novels.

An examination of databases such as CNKI, Web of Science, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses indicates that journal articles and doctoral dissertations on McEwan, written in over 20 languages, outnumber monographs. Most of these studies focus on his middle to later works, addressing various topics, including ethics, morality, gender politics, narrative strategies, psychological criticism, intertextuality, historical analysis, and ecological criticism. However, despite this extensive academic engagement, research examining the reception of McEwan's works by general readers remains limited.

While McEwan's literature has been analyzed from various scholarly perspectives—including literature, linguistics, philosophy, political science, psychology, and law—there is considerable scope for further investigation. Notably, additional research is needed on the reader response and reception of McEwan's works among non-academic, general audiences.

Studies on the Acceptance of Ian McEwan Novels in Mainland China

Before the 1990s, there was a notable lack of translations and studies regarding the acceptance of Ian McEwan's works in China (Shang, 2018). This changed in 1992 when the journal *Foreign Literature and Art*, published by the Shanghai Translation Publishing House, featured McEwan's short story "The Moment of Dying," translated by Wang Yiqun. This publication marked the initial introduction of McEwan's work to Chinese readers, paving the way for the gradual integration of his writings into the Chinese literary landscape (Jin, 2021).

The early 21st century witnessed a significant increase in the translation of McEwan's works. Various periodicals and magazines began translating his shorter pieces and excerpts from longer works, while major publishing houses actively competed to acquire the Chinese rights to his writings, resulting in numerous translations (Huang & Wang, 2021). Notably,

McEwan's novels have been the most comprehensively translated, with all of his long-form narratives published before 2022 now available in Chinese (Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2024).

In contrast to the robust translation efforts, research on the critical reception of McEwan's works in China has been comparatively underdeveloped. It is widely acknowledged that the academic study of McEwan in China began with the contributions of Ms. Lan Chun (Shang, 2018). In 1998, Lan published two influential papers in *Foreign Literature*, titled *Ian McEwan: His Life and Works* (Lan, 1998b) and *A Review of "The Comfort of Strangers"* (Lan, 1998a). These early works marked the beginning of scholarly interest in McEwan, which has since been bolstered by prominent foreign literature scholars and influential journals such as *World Literature*, *Foreign Literature*, and *Foreign Literature and Art* (Huang & Wang, 2021). As noted by Huang and Wang (2021), McEwan has gradually gained recognition among Chinese readers, leading to increased critical engagement.

Despite this progress, critical studies examining the reception of McEwan's works remain limited. Most research has concentrated on a few novels, including *Saturday*, *Amsterdam*, *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, and *Atonement*. However, as a versatile figure in contemporary British literature, McEwan's other literary forms have not received adequate scholarly attention. Consequently, there is a lack of comprehensive literature reviews that analyze trends in Chinese readers' reception of McEwan's works. This study seeks to fill that gap by reviewing relevant literature and identifying areas for future research. The central research question guiding this investigation was: What are the current trends in the reception of Ian McEwan's novels among readers in mainland China?

Method

Literature Research Strategy

This study adopted a systematic review approach driven by specific research questions that guide the selection of studies for inclusion (Snyder, 2019). Systematic reviews are characterized by their structured and methodical organization (Kraus et al., 2022), with studies carefully chosen from relevant databases. The application of systematic procedures and predefined criteria in the selection process aims to minimize the risks of producing "selective," "biased," or "partial" results—common critiques associated with traditional literature reviews (Durach et al., 2017). This review adheres to established guidelines, ensuring the research question is comprehensively addressed by including pertinent literature that accurately represents the topic under investigation (Selçuk, 2019). The primary objective of this study was to analyze trends in the reception of Ian McEwan's novels among Chinese readers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Five electronic databases were searched to identify relevant research articles aligned with the study's objectives: CNKI, EBSCO, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis, and Science Direct. The articles collected, published in peer-reviewed journals between 2000 and 2024, were available in either English or Chinese. This study examines the reception of Ian McEwan's novels in China during the 21st century. The selection of search terms—including "reader," "accept," "reception," "acceptance," "reading experience," "Ian McEwan," "Ian McEwan novels," and "McEwan"—was informed by the research questions. Boolean operators

(AND/OR/NOT) were utilized to connect these terms and retrieve pertinent literature. Only those directly related to the research focus were selected for further analysis from the identified studies. Content analysis was employed to facilitate the data's comparison, contrast, and categorization (Drisko & Maschi, 2016).

Selection Criteria

Only articles or theses that met the specified criteria were included after entering the search terms into the databases Taylor and Francis, Science Direct, CNKI, EBSCO, and Web of Science. These criteria encompassed fully accessible articles that addressed the reception of Ian McEwan's novels, published between 2000 and 2024. Exclusions included duplicate publications, books, and chapters focused on the reception of McEwan's works, and research articles published in languages other than English or Chinese. This process yielded an initial count of 123 articles from CNKI, 29 from EBSCO, 37 from Web of Science, 38 from Taylor and Francis, and 11 from Science Direct. Following the removal of duplicates using Zotero, the total number of studies was reduced to 182.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) research focusing on Ian McEwan's novels; (b) studies examining the reception of McEwan's works by Chinese readers; and (c) peer-reviewed research articles. Exclusion criteria included (a) book reviews, (b) studies centered solely on McEwan as a novelist, and (c) non-literary research.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Initial data extraction was performed using a review template designed to capture essential details, including each study's theoretical framework, data sources, methodologies, and key findings. Two reviewers conducted this screening process independently, after which the extracted information was consolidated and organized into a summary table.

After evaluating titles and abstracts, 85 studies were excluded for failing to meet the inclusion criteria or because the full articles were inaccessible. The remaining 97 studies proceeded to full-text screening for eligibility. Of these, 77 studies were excluded for focusing on non-literary genres, addressing topics unrelated to Ian McEwan's novels, reviewing McEwan's works without discussing reader reception or lacking involvement of Chinese readers' reception. Consequently, 20 studies were included for a detailed review in this study. Figure 1 illustrates the process of filtering these results.

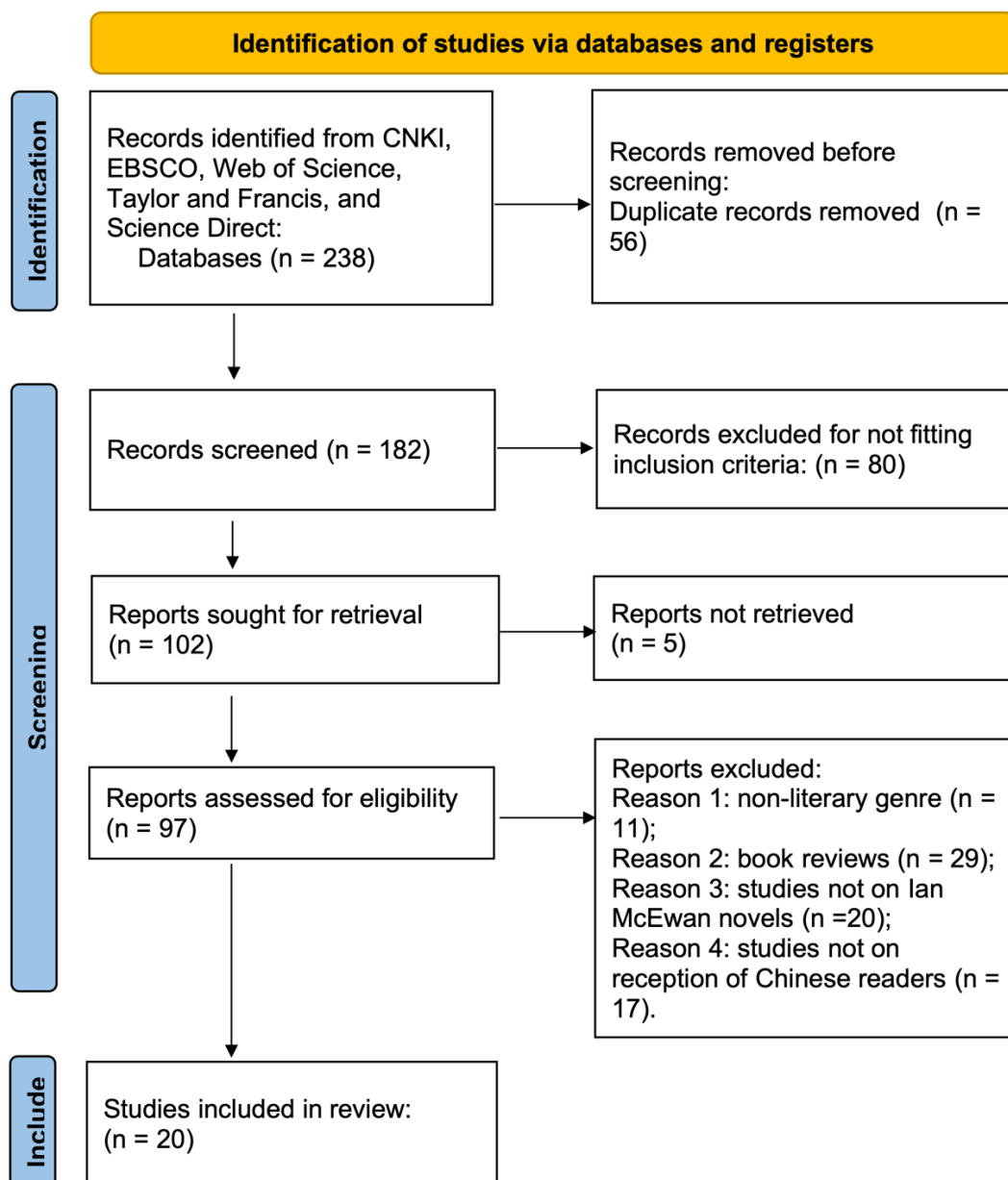


Figure 1

Flow diagram of the studies included in this study (Page et al, 2021)

Results

This section provides an overview of the findings regarding the trends in readers' reception trend in accepting Ian McEwan's novels in mainland China. It includes an analysis of the year-wise distribution of the included studies and the research scopes addressed.

By year Distribution of the Included Studies

The 20 studies included in this review, conducted by Chinese researchers and published between 2007 and 2024, reveal a gradual increase in scholarly output over time. Figure 2 presents a bar chart illustrating the distribution of these studies by year. The earliest study in this dataset appeared in 2007. In the following years, particularly before 2014, publication numbers remained modest, with only one or two studies emerging annually. However, a

marked increase in research activity is evident from 2014 onward, reflecting a growing interest in McEwan's literary works in mainland China.

Despite this upward trend, fluctuations in publication output are noted, particularly with a significant decline in 2018 and 2019, during which only one study was published each year. This period of reduced productivity is succeeded by a resurgence in 2021 and 2024, both yielding two studies, indicating renewed scholarly engagement with McEwan's work. The peak research activity regarding the reception of McEwan's novels in mainland China occurred between 2014 and 2017, with a total of 11 publications during this period.

The publication trend suggests that while scholarly engagement with McEwan's works in China has progressed gradually, it has gained momentum, especially in the last decade. Nonetheless, the relatively low number of publications, even in the most productive years, indicates significant potential for further research in this area. This steady yet limited growth underscores the need for additional studies, particularly interdisciplinary approaches, that explore McEwan's reception among Chinese readers.

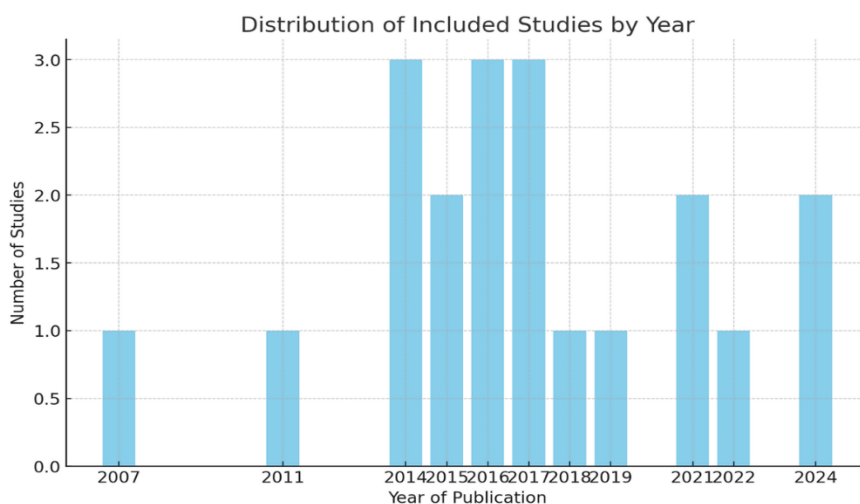


Figure 2
Distribution of the included studies by year

Research Scopes of the Included Studies

The analysis of the 20 selected studies on the reception trends of Ian McEwan's novels among Chinese scholars reveals a concentration on a limited subset of his works, with certain novels receiving disproportionately more attention. The novel *Saturday* (Geng, 2014, 2016, 2018; He, 2024) is the most frequently analyzed, appearing in four studies, highlighting its significance in the academic discourse surrounding McEwan's literature in China. It is followed by *The Cement Garden* (Hu, 2014; Yang, 2017; Zhang et al., 2014) and *Amsterdam* (Hu, 2014; Wang, 2015; Yang, 2017), each cited in three studies, indicating their relevance to Chinese readers.

Other notable works, such as *The Comfort of Strangers* (Hu, 2014; Wang, 2011) and *Atonement* (Hu, 2014; Wang, 2016), appear twice, suggesting a moderate level of scholarly interest. Conversely, several of McEwan's other novels, including *First Love*, *Last Rites*, *Black Dogs*, *In Between the Sheets*, and *Sweet Tooth*, are mentioned only once, indicating a lack of

critical focus. Additionally, some of McEwan's less well-known works, such as *Nutshell*, *Homemade*, *Solid Geometry*, and *Cockroach*, are each cited only once, reflecting limited scholarly exploration of literary reception.

Despite their thematic richness, the relatively low frequency of attention given to certain novels suggests potential avenues for future research. Overall, this distribution indicates that while specific novels dominate the academic discourse in China, there remains a substantial opportunity for a more diversified and comprehensive examination of McEwan's complete oeuvre. Figure 3 presents a pie chart illustrating the distribution of research focus across different works, with each section representing the proportion of studies dedicated to a specific novel or group of works.

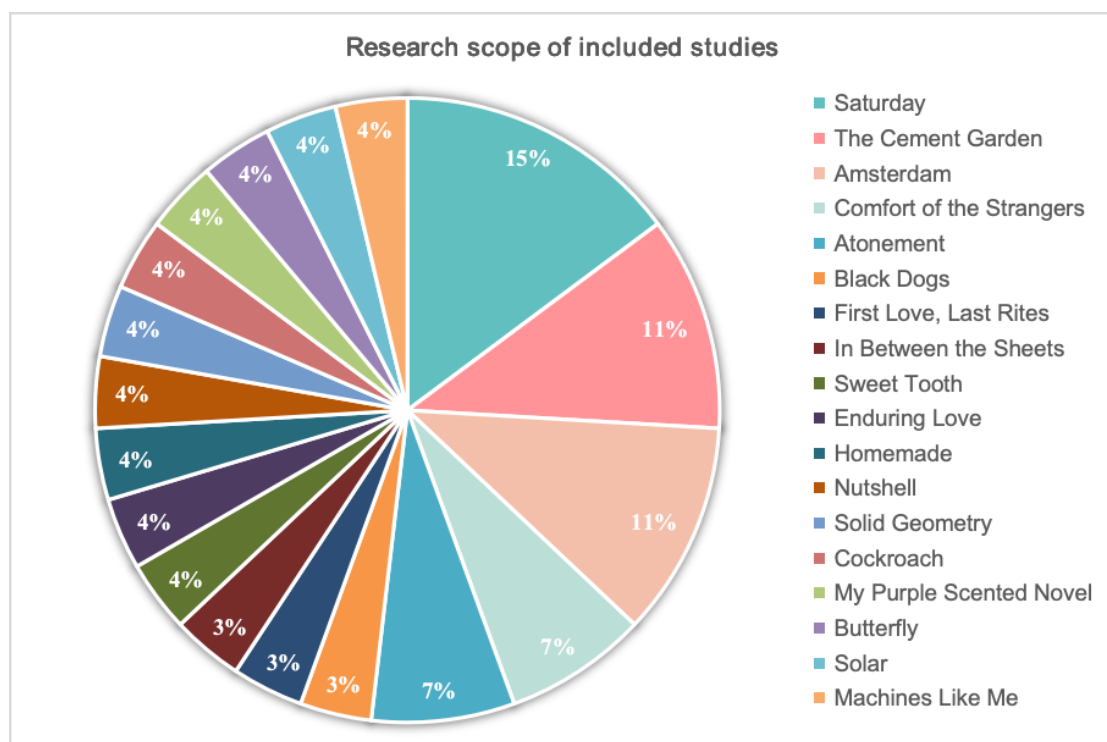


Figure 3
The distribution of research scope across different works

Discussion

Limitations of the Research Reviewed

The existing body of research on the trends in readers' acceptance of Ian McEwan's novels in China remains relatively limited. Despite a comprehensive literature search conducted from 2000 onward, only studies published between 2007 and 2024 met the criteria for inclusion in this review. Earlier investigations predominantly focused on book reviews or the author himself, lacking the analytical rigor necessary for thorough reception studies. The selected studies explore a range of McEwan's novels, with their diverse styles and themes enriching the research landscape. However, this review is geographically confined to China, thereby narrowing the examination of McEwan's reception to a specific cultural and regional context.

Methodologically, the uniformity of approaches across the reviewed studies presents challenges for evaluation. Most selected studies utilized descriptive case studies, focusing on

individual novels from various perspectives or general qualitative analyses addressing specific aspects of McEwan's work. Notably, none of the studies employed quantitative methods to investigate actual reader experiences. While qualitative case studies provide in-depth analyses of defined phenomena, incorporating multiple cases is a common strategy for enhancing findings' generalizability and external validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Despite these limitations and the scarcity of research in this area, the studies reviewed offer a sufficient foundation to address the guiding question of this review while also identifying areas that warrant further exploration.

Contributions of the Review to Answering the Research Question

The existing body of evidence suggests that the reception of Ian McEwan's novels in China is gaining increasing attention and popularity among readers. Chinese audiences are adopting diverse perspectives in their analyses, with interdisciplinary approaches enriching the field of literary reception. Disciplines such as literary, cultural, psychology, and media studies expand the understanding of McEwan's works within the broader context of world literature. The findings regarding trends in readers' acceptance of McEwan's novels in China indicate a growing and more comprehensive engagement with his oeuvre. Over the past 15 years, there has been a marked increase in interest, with McEwan's novels and their Chinese translations sparking a literary movement that has attracted both scholars and researchers.

As illustrated by the publication years and research scope of the included studies (see Figures 3 and 4), the acceptance and scholarly examination of McEwan's novels in China have experienced a significant rise since 2014. The novels that have received the most attention from Chinese scholars include *Saturday* (2005, with its Chinese translation published by Writers Publishing House in 2008), *The Cement Garden* (1978, translated by Shanghai Translation Publishing House in 2011), and *Amsterdam* (1998, released by Yilin Publishing House in 2001). Notably, *Saturday* has emerged as a focal point of Chinese reception studies of McEwan, with numerous scholarly commentaries published in recent years. In contrast, *Atonement* (2001), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), and thirteen other novels by McEwan have garnered relatively less attention.

Conclusion and Implications

This systematic review, covering studies from 2000 to 2024, illustrates that over the past two decades, the reception and scholarly examination of Ian McEwan's works in China have progressively deepened and expanded. The substantial body of research underscores the growing acceptance of this contemporary British author within the Chinese academic community and recognizes his literary contributions. However, the overall research volume remains relatively modest, and there is a noticeable lack of systematic, comprehensive studies focused on reader reception. Most existing research emphasizes academic perspectives, with limited attention given to the reading experiences of ordinary readers in mainland China.

This review's contribution to academic research can be divided into two parts, including study of foreign literature in mainland China, and acceptance study on Ian McEwan in China. For one thing, as the current approaches and outcomes of foreign literature research are inadequate, this research could broaden the scope of such research, strengthen the community of foreign literature scholars, and introduce a wider range of international

literature to Chinese readers. For another, the study of McEwan's works in China only commenced in the late 1990s, and compared to the flourishing McEwan studies worldwide, research on the acceptance of McEwan's works in China remains underexplored. Thereupon, this review shall compensate for the acceptance study of McEwan in China.

The findings suggest several important implications for future research and translation practices. Although McEwan is widely acknowledged as a prominent novelist, an exclusive focus on the reception of his novels in mainland China is insufficient. Future research should broaden its scope to include data from sources beyond academic journal databases, such as dissertations, news articles, online book review platforms, and other relevant media. Furthermore, diversifying research methodologies could enhance future studies, incorporating quantitative approaches such as surveys to gather insights from general readers of McEwan's novels, qualitative methods like phenomenological studies that emphasize lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), or mixed-method approaches.

Additionally, expanding the focus to include other genres of McEwan's work—such as children's literature, drama, and screenplays—could provide new insights and enrich the research landscape. Lastly, investigations into the reception of McEwan's novels may also offer valuable contributions to translation studies and the practice of introducing Western literature to Chinese readers. This review, regarding the reception trend of Ian McEwan's novels in mainland China, could offer valuable perspectives for literary scholars and researchers.

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