BEYOND ASSIMILATION AND ANTAGONISM: A FRAMEWORK OF CULTURAL CROSSVERGENCE IN LIU YING'S FICTIONS

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Abstract: Liu Ying's narratives explore cross-cultural engagement between Chinese and German contexts, revealing the limits of three prevalent cross-cultural illusions: universal harmony, rational omnipotence, and the 'individual savior' assumption. Through a buffer-zone ethic, comprising restraint, narrative mediation, and recognition of shared human concerns, her work demonstrates that constructive cultural crossvergence arises from dialogue, adaptation, and ethical tolerance rather than from mere assimilation or antagonism, offering a nuanced framework for understanding intercultural interaction in contemporary migration contexts.

Introduction

Rooted in Chinese cultural traditions while deeply immersed in German society, Liu Ying, a Chinese-language writer in Germany, observes Sino-German interactions from a micro-level perspective. With keen insight, she captures the cultural frictions and negotiations embedded in everyday encounters. Her representative works, including *A Different Sun* (不一样的太阳), Life Elsewhere (生活在别处), and Heron (鱼鹭), vividly portray structural differences between China and Germany across domains such as education, law, religion, and family life.

Scholars have paid sustained attention to the cultural self-awareness reflected in Liu Ying's writing. Existing studies have examined Sino-German cultural differences in her fiction from multiple perspectives, including cultural cognition, narrative strategies, and reader reception, affirming both the literary value and the social significance of her work in exposing cultural conflict and fostering intercultural understanding (Tang, 2019; Hua, 2017; Lin, 2016).

Building upon this scholarly foundation, Wu Daoyi (2021, p. 83) further contended that Liu Ying's creative work not only represents a significant facet of cross-cultural poetics within Euro-Chinese literature but also pioneers new pathways for cross-cultural writing and cultural reflection.

However, focusing solely on the portrayal of cultural differences and conflicts does not fully capture the distinctive dynamics of Liu Ying's literary practice. Rather than treating cultural difference as an end in itself, her work foregrounds processes of intercultural interaction, critical engagement, and mutual stimulation. As Li Jikai (2025, 5) argues, the writings of Chinese-language authors abroad frequently revolve around the recurring themes of "journeying" and "connecting." These themes can be interpreted as a narrative mode reminiscent of the Silk Road, foregrounding processes of cultural crossvergence. Cultural crossvergence does not denote the simple amalgamation or mechanical superimposition of distinct cultures; instead, it refers to a dynamic process in which cultures mutually activate and reshape one another through sustained interaction (Li, 2017, p. 147). In this sense, this conceptual framework provides an effective lens for understanding the intercultural dynamics and cultural generativity manifested in Liu Ying's writing.

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I. Challenging Cross-Cultural Misconceptions

Liu Ying's narratives do not portray cultural exchange as a seamless process of mutual understanding; instead, they dramatize the tension between rational calculation and emotional attachment at moments of intercultural encounter. It is precisely through such narrative tension that cultural "integration" appears as partial and situationally negotiated rather than conceptually resolved. In this respect, Liu Ying's narrative logic resonates with Li Jikai's observation that cultural adaptation does not aim at complete assimilation but persists in dialogue that acknowledges difference (Li, 2017, p. 147), a stance that may be summarized as "harmony without uniformity."

This tension between rationality and emotion is vividly illustrated in *A Different Sun* through a symbolic episode in which two children admire each other's drawings despite their differently colored suns. From a child's viewpoint, difference is neither threatening nor hierarchically evaluated. However, Liu Ying emphasizes that in the adult world, cultural barriers cannot be overcome by childlike intuition or individual goodwill alone. Effective cultural integration requires coordination between institutional frameworks, which provide external safeguards such as school regulations and legal procedures, and emotional bonds, which draw upon familial ties and peer trust. Wei Ling's mother, Hongyun 泓韵, ultimately accepted the school's disciplinary action against her daughter, Wei Ling, over an integrity issue, with calm composure (Liu, 2016, p. 50).

> Emotionally, she was unwilling to accept Richter (黎希特)'s actions; rationally, however, she felt that Richter was in the right. Had the matter not concerned her personally, she would, as an onlooker, have applauded both Richter and the school, praising them for elevating honesty and integrity to such a serious level. High standards of social conduct and moral order, after all, are not built upon empty moralizing. That being the case, why could she not, as a party directly involved, view the matter with the same objectivity?
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> She discussed it with Zu Qing(祖青) and decided to accept the "punishment" calmly. At the same time, she sought to teach Weiling (蔚伶) to turn setback into motivation and to study even harder—for in two years' time, there would still be another opportunity (Ibid., p. 50)[1].

Her emotional disagreement alongside rational acceptance exemplifies the delicate balance between sentiment and institutional norms.

Similarly, in *Life Elsewhere*, Jiaying(佳颖) finds herself in a ceremonial predicament due to differing gift-giving customs between China and Germany (Ibid., 139–140). Ultimately, the shared experience of a dinner—an emotional setting—partially resolves the misunderstanding, demonstrating the potential for coordinating institutional norms and emotional bonds. Such everyday practices provide a sustained and gentle foundation for cross-cultural dialogue.

However, Liu Ying's narratives demonstrate that some cultural differences are difficult to negotiate. Although cultural fusion has become an observable social reality,

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[1] "从感情上讲，她不愿接受黎希特的做法，可从理智上讲，她又觉得黎希特是对的。如果事情不是发生在她这儿，那么，作为旁观者，她会为黎希特和学校的做法鼓掌与欢呼，会因为学校把诚实和诚信提高到了这样严肃的程度而大加赞赏——高水准的社会行为规范和社会道德体系，不是建立在空洞的说教基础上的。既然如此，作为当事人，为什么就不能客观地来看这事呢？
她和祖青已商量过，平心静气地接受这个"惩罚"。同时教育蔚伶，要懂得变挫折为动力，更加努力地学习——两年后，她还有机会。"

it does not necessarily erase core cultural traits; on the contrary, frequent and intimate encounters may accentuate such differences through sustained comparison. When these differences involve deep-seated structural conflicts, such as religious beliefs, value systems, or historical memory, communication may reach its limits. A telling example is the impasse between Shataman (夏塔曼) and Aikay (艾凯) in *Life Elsewhere*, which stems not from isolated misunderstandings but from the fundamental incompatibility of their respective religious discourses (Ibid., p. 123). Even groups sharing similar beliefs, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Catholics, may find themselves in direct opposition (Ibid., p. 147). In this way, Liu Ying suggests that a more mature strategy for addressing such impasses lies not in forced assimilation, but in acknowledging irreducible differences, thereby enabling forms of coexistence grounded in boundaries and tolerance.

In addition to religious conflict, Liu Ying's texts further reveal cultural divisions based on values and historical memory. In *Heron* (鱼鹭), the divergence in values between Mr. Gao's incomprehension of his wife Hannah's "lack of ambition" and Hannah's tendency toward "excessive affection" remains unresolved (Liu, 2023) and is mediated indirectly through their daughter, who functions as a cultural intermediary. Similarly, in *Life Elsewhere*, the narrator deliberately withholds an immediate explanation of the opium pipe—a symbol of historical humiliation maintained in the Roland (罗兰德) household—from Linlin (霖霖), deferring interpretation instead to her mother (Liu, 2016, pp. 114–115). This strategy of interpretative deferral suggests that certain cultural traumas and value conflicts cannot be transmitted instantly and require intergenerational mediation. Through cultural intermediaries and intergenerational transmission, Liu Ying effectively defers conflict, a central strategy for addressing incommensurable cultural divergences.

Building on this recognition of the depth and persistence of cultural difference, Liu Ying moves beyond idealized notions of cultural fusion and adopts a realist narrative stance informed by lived experience. In works such as *Life Elsewhere*, she systematically deconstructs three prevalent cross-cultural illusions through narrative strategies, including plot construction and characterization.

The first is the illusion of "universal harmony." This is vividly illustrated in an episode in which a group of German students lifts Maruva (玛鲁娃), a Turkish student, by the hair to check for lice (Ibid., pp. 133–134). However, Liu Ying does not unilaterally adopt Maruva's perspective to condemn the German students. Rather, the narrative carefully resists reducing cultural conflict to a simple opposition between discriminators and victims. Not every individual is equally implicated in acts of discrimination, and the use of collective labels risks obscuring internal differences within cultural groups. At the same time, the text suggests that racialized prejudice is not confined to a single community. As Linlin recounts, "That day, it was Maruva who first lifted my hair. I tried to stop her, but she insisted on doing it anyway, which was what prompted Tannia to lift her hair in return. Later, in the corridor, it was also Maruva who first verbally abused Tannia, calling her a 'German pig.'" (Ibid., p. 137) [2] By foregrounding this reciprocal dynamic, Liu Ying dismantles the illusion of moral asymmetry that underpins assumptions of "universal harmony."

The second illusion is that of "rational omnipotence," the belief that reasoned argument alone can overcome all cultural and ideological differences. This assumption is sharply challenged in the episode in which Kaimin (凯敏)'s German guarantor abruptly terminates both their friendship and financial support upon learning that Kaimin does not believe in God and adheres to a materialist worldview (Ibid., p. 123).

[2] "那天，是玛鲁娃先撩起我的头发，我不让，她还要撩，这才引得坦尼亚也去撩她的头发。还有，后来在走廊上，也是玛鲁娃先开口骂坦尼亚是'德国猪'的。"

The sudden rupture demonstrates the limits of rational discourse when confronted with non-negotiable core beliefs, revealing the asymmetry between abstract ideals of tolerance and the emotional absolutism that governs lived belief systems.

The third illusion is that of the "individual savior," namely, the expectation that personal kindness or moral effort can resolve structural cultural conflict. Jiaying's failure to reconcile Aikai (艾凯) and Xiataman (夏塔曼) over religious differences (Ibid., pp. 145–147) underscores the limits of individual agency in the face of structural incompatibilities. By deliberately denying Jiaying's narrative success, Liu resists the familiar trope of the empathetic mediator who bridges all divides, affirming that goodwill, while ethically meaningful, cannot substitute for structural accommodation or erase deeply embedded antagonisms.

Through these narrative strategies, Liu Ying systematically dismantles three prevalent cross-cultural illusions. By exposing the limits of formal equality, rational persuasion, and personal goodwill, her work reframes intercultural interaction as an enduring field of tension rather than resolution. This recognition prepares the conceptual ground for what may be termed a "buffer-zone ethic," a practical orientation toward coexistence that sustains dialogue without denying difference.

II. Buffer-Zone Ethic as a Framework for Cultural Crossvergence

In response to the unresolved tensions and the collapse of romanticized narratives of cultural integration identified above, a "buffer-zone ethic" gradually emerges in Liu Ying's writing as a practicable framework for cultural crossvergence. Rather than proposing a utopian resolution to cultural conflict, this ethic operates as a set of situated strategies that make coexistence possible amid persistent difference. It neither assumes the full commensurability of value systems nor resigns itself to cultural antagonism. Instead, it functions within the interstitial space between cultures, aiming to stabilize interaction through restraint, narrative mediation, and ethical attentiveness. Structurally, this ethic unfolds across three interrelated tiers: the lowest level of restraint, the intermediate strategy of translation, and the highest ideal of shared human concern.

At its most basic level, the buffer-zone ethic emphasizes restraint in domains characterized by incommensurable cultural differences, such as religion, political ideology, and core moral beliefs—areas in which direct confrontation is more likely to result in exclusion than understanding. According to Kaimin and his wife Jiaying, drawing on lived experience: "When encountering sensitive topics such as religion, political affiliation, or politics, do not readily express your own views; listen more and speak less" (Ibid., p. 178). This principle does not reflect ethical indifference or intellectual evasion. Rather, it acknowledges the practical limits of dialogue when belief systems function as identity anchors rather than negotiable opinions.

Liu Ying's narratives repeatedly show that even in societies that formally uphold freedom of expression, certain topics are practically excluded from everyday interaction. The inflexibility of Kaimin's German guarantor, who terminates both friendship and financial support over religious disbelief, demonstrates how liberal tolerance often collapses at the threshold of deeply held, non-negotiable beliefs. Similarly, the religious standoff between Xiataman and Aike reveals that mutual recognition does not necessarily lead to mutual accommodation. In such situations, restraint becomes a strategy of coexistence that prevents daily interaction from escalating into irreversible rupture. The buffer-zone ethic thus begins with a clear acknowledgment: not all differences can be articulated without cost, and cultural interaction sometimes depends on the ethical choice not to speak.

Beyond restraint, the intermediate level of the buffer-zone ethic actively seeks to mitigate cultural friction through translation and narrative mediation. Rather than

erasing difference or forcing consensus, this strategy temporarily relocates unfamiliar practices into more accessible cognitive frameworks. Crucially, such translation does not operate at the level of doctrinal explanation but through narrative analogy and representational reframing.

A representative example is Liu Ying's portrayal of Jehovah's Witnesses. Instead of judging the group through theological criteria, Liu likens their disciplined, highly organized, and devotion-centered lifestyle to a form of "communist-style" collective practice, characterized by strict organization and communal responsibility (Ibid., p. 151). This analogy does not function as political labelling or critique. Rather, it serves as a cognitive bridge for Chinese readers, translating a religious community that might otherwise appear radically alien into a socio-organizational form rooted in their historical experience. Through this narrative strategy of analogy, religious difference becomes intelligible without being normalized or endorsed.

Such translation does not erase cultural difference; rather, it suspends its most confrontational aspects by shifting them into a shared register of understanding. Ethical incommensurability, the fundamental difference between incompatible ethical systems, is thereby deferred rather than resolved. This strategy exemplifies Liu Ying's broader narrative method: difference is neither romanticized as exotic nor absolutized as irreconcilable, but strategically mediated through contextual reframing that allows interaction to continue.

A similar mechanism operates in Liu Ying's treatment of colonial history. Rather than framing the discussion in terms of moral binaries such as perpetrator and victim, Jiaying reframes the discourse through comparisons of construction techniques and craftsmanship (Ibid., p. 115). By highlighting material culture and technical skill, the narrative replaces ethically charged confrontation with a discourse of comparability. This shift does not deny historical violence; instead, it acknowledges that immediate moral judgment—often rooted in binary moral frameworks—may foreclose dialogue. Through material comparison, Liu constructs a temporary buffer that facilitates ongoing interaction without necessitating ethical consensus.

At its highest level, the buffer-zone ethic moves beyond strategic restraint and cognitive translation toward the recognition of shared human concerns that persist despite deep-seated cultural differences. This tier does not presuppose the disappearance of conflict or the emergence of universal values. Rather, it reorients cross-cultural interaction around ethical responsibility toward concrete human vulnerability.

Roland's response to Western condemnation of dog meat consumption exemplifies this ideal. Instead of defending the practice uncritically or dismissing criticism as cultural imperialism, Roland highlights the lack of contextual understanding underlying such judgments, noting that "Westerners uniformly condemn the Chinese for eating dog meat, yet they seldom, if ever, delve into the deeper reasons behind this practice." (Ibid., p. 178) [3] He further argues that "it is unwise to condemn or attempt to change another culture's customs without considering their historical and material conditions, whether the issue concerns Muslims avoiding pork or Chinese eating dog meat" (Ibid., p. 178)[4]. His position foregrounds tolerance and understanding not as abstract virtues but as ethical obligations grounded in respect for lived realities and contextual difference.

Importantly, this stance goes beyond cultural relativism. Cultural relativism often suspends judgement altogether, treating all practices as equally valid within their own

[3] "西方人一致谴责中国人吃狗肉，但他们却很少或根本不去探究这其中更深的原因"

[4] "总是去谴责或试图去改变一个民族或地区的传统和习俗是不明智的。对穆斯林不吃猪肉、对中国人吃狗肉，人们应该抱着宽容和理解的态度。"

contexts (Barnes, 1982, p. 23). Liu Ying's buffer-zone ethic, by contrast, does not abandon ethical evaluation; it redirects it. Rather than imposing external standards or retreating into indifference, it prioritizes humility, responsibility, and attentiveness in situations of cultural asymmetry. Ethical engagement, within this conceptual approach, emerges not from agreement but from the willingness to coexist without domination.

Taken together, the three tiers of the buffer-zone ethic form a coherent and practicable framework for cultural crossvergence. The lowest level secures the basic conditions of coexistence through restraint; the intermediate strategy facilitates understanding through narrative translation; and the highest ideal affirms an ethical horizon grounded in shared human vulnerability. This ethic does not promise reconciliation or synthesis. Instead, it offers a mode of engagement capable of resisting cultural extremization while acknowledging the persistence of difference.

In Liu Ying's work, this framework is applied to confront deep-seated, often incommensurable structural conflicts between cultures. Rather than slipping into cultural antagonism or essentialist assertions, Liu Ying consistently upholds an anti-essentialist stance. She emphasizes the centrality of individual difference and specific context in cross-cultural understanding, arguing that cultural identity is not a fixed and immutable attribute but, as Bhabha terms it, an "in-between" state (1994, p. 313), continuously shaped and remade through interaction.

This view is articulated through character dialogues that emphasize the importance of individual judgment over cultural generalizations. For example, one character advises:

> Do not simply lump Germans or Chinese into a single conceptual category, let alone casually place a certain label on others' heads. That is disrespectful and easily leads to exclusion and confrontation. What I have just said to you represents only myself, not Germans as a whole. And you, too, can only represent yourself, not the Chinese. (Liu, 2016, p. 25) [5]

This statement reveals two key ideas. First, cultural identity is characterized by rich internal heterogeneity, and cultural understanding must be grounded in lived experiences within specific contexts rather than in abstract or generalized ideas about groups. Second, cultural identity is not derived from any pre-given essence or historical inevitability; it is a dynamic process, constantly "opening out" and "remaking" through ongoing interaction (Bhabha, 1994, p. 313).

By rejecting the notion of static cultural identities, Liu Ying's work offers a critique of cultural discourses based on grand, essentialist labels. Instead, she foregrounds individuals' lived practices and the differences that emerge in everyday situations. The "buffer-zone ethics" practiced by her characters thus serve as a means of navigating cultural differences, not through assimilation or exclusion, but through the continuous negotiation and reshaping of identity in the space between cultures.

Conclusion

Wolfgang Kubin criticized two extremes in cross-cultural encounters: one that reduces the other to a mere reflection of the self, and another that excludes the other as wholly alien (2017, 160). Liu Ying, by contrast, occupies a pragmatic middle ground between these extremes, opening a space for dialogue and negotiation. As Chen Sihe observes, overseas Chinese writers, through linguistic and cultural crossings, "open new

[5] "不要简单地把德国人或中国人归到某一类概念中去，更不要轻易把某种帽子戴到别人头上，这是对别人的不尊重，容易引起排斥和对立。我刚才对你说的，只代表我自己，并不代表德国人。而你，也只能代表你自己，并不代表中国人。"

horizons," reconfiguring their self-perception (2023, p. 73). However, Liu's focus on contemporary middle-class migrants, while offering valuable insights into cultural friction and negotiation, may constrain the broader social imagination of her narratives, often privileging gentle humanism over more radical depictions of marginalization (Liu, 2018, p. 91). Yet it is precisely through the author's ingenious use of everyday details—the minutiae of women's lives—that she addresses profound issues in politics, education, philosophy, religion, worldviews, and values. In doing so, Liu achieves a narrative practice that transcends the mundane to reach profound insights. Within this very practice, cultural understanding finds a possible path to remain critical while embracing hope. In this sense, her work not only portrays the lived experiences of contemporary Chinese immigrants in Germany but also offers a distinctive expressive paradigm for chronicling the psychological and spiritual history of Chinese migrants.

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