

Network Analysis as a Modernist Intervention: the Case of Chinese Poetry Readings

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Recently, a substantial number of literary scholars have turned their attention to the use of network analysis and new computational methodologies in order to understand literature from new perspectives and, potentially, for new purposes.¹ These efforts are being undertaken on a global scale, analyzing literary scenes and discourses that lie outside the Euro-American space that has, for too long, limited the research supported by literature and comparative literature departments. The products of these inquiries sometimes make these two undertakings—the analysis of large data sets and the globalizing of literary reading—seem to be intimately interrelated, a set of zoomed-out, theoretical analytical structures that can be applied across cultural and linguistic boundaries.² According to Franco Moretti’s metaphor, when one reads from the distance of aggregate data, one “sees” a wider geographic and cultural field. This essay takes the opposite position, arguing that no method of large-data analysis can be a culturally neutral and transparent hermeneutic.³ Network analysis in particular actively performs modernization and globalization on its objects, deforming nonmodern and local materials into parts of a modernist narrative. However, large-scale data analysis in general does not require us to reproduce the modernist, globalizing ideologies of network theory: we can shape our data analysis using the ideological and cultural techniques of the materials we intend to study.⁴ In this essay, recent scholarship on

1 The core of this community is at the Chicago Text Lab’s Global Literary Networks project, directed by Hoyt Long and Richard Jean So, but it spans from Franco Moretti’s literary study *Distant Reading* to Hilde de Weerd, *Information, Territory, and Networks*, a monograph on imperial informatics in the Song dynasty, to several forthcoming monographs and dissertations.

2 “That’s the point: world literature is not an object, it’s a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts.” Distant reading is his hypothesized answer to that question. See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 46.

3 This is true as well for small-data hermeneutics, but their ideological content has been the subject of much debate.

4 This is meaningfully different from the way Moretti thinks about the novel: “when a culture starts moving towards the modern novel, it’s *always* as a compromise between foreign form

networks in contemporary and premodern China will serve as a corpus from which to point out real and potential lacunae in network analytical criticism. Recent works of literary anthropology about Chinese poetry events will then point toward potential revisions and rethinkings of literary networks, and disaggregate data-driven scholarship from implicit cultural imperialism in a way that will allow it to flourish.

1 What Is a Network?

The word “network” first appeared in the English language in the Tyndale Bible in 1530, used to describe an altar grating, a “work (esp. manufactured work) in which threads, wires, etc. are crossed or interlaced in the fashion of a net” (*OED Online*, 2015, “network”); long before there was a sense of a social or biological network, networks were commodities. This sense of the word is what lent itself to our more recent extension of the term into a name for physical constructs that take the shape of a net, like railroads, telephone systems, and electrical circuits. So described, these constructs gain a ghostly second valence: not only are they the results of work that take the shape of a net, they are now net-shaped systems of objects that themselves aid in the performance of work. This sense of the word requires the network to be viewed conceptually, from above: an electrical network of any size cannot be viewed in the way an altar screen can; it can only be imagined as if seen from the air.⁵ Most recently, the term has gained force as a verb, such that “to network” now means to do the work of bringing commodities or people into relationships to one another, to attach a computer to a network, or to organize abstractions into an interlinked system. Yoked together by the historical metaphorical logic of the term, these three valences, commodity, tool, and action, are simultaneously experienced when we use the word “network” today. No matter how abstract the materials at hand—invisible electrons, digital bits, or theoretical constructs—when we network them, we think of them metaphorically as physical commodities undergoing circulation, and when we say that they are networked, we refer implicitly to some human work that put them into that relationship.

and local materials” (*Distant Reading*, 52). I read this as an implicitly imperialist position in which the international influence shapes local raw material: we must also attend to *local form*, culturally situated hermeneutics and ways of knowing, and the way local form shapes foreign materials.

5 It is worth mentioning that this perspective is usually fictive: once one is high enough off the ground to see a substantial part of the power network, individual lines are too small to be distinguishable.