

“The Reed” and “The Oak and the Reed” Cross-Cultural Teaching Practice

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Abstract: A comparative intertextual study of “The Book of Songs·The Reed” and La Fontaine’s “The Oak and the Reed” can reveal how the cross-cultural theme of “flexibility” is constructed differently in Eastern and Western poetics. By comparing imagery systems, ethical positions, and worldviews, it is evident that the Eastern idea of “persistence in resilience” is rooted in the metaphysical wisdom of harmony between humans and nature, aiming at inward transcendence, while the Western notion of “adaptability in flexibility” blends moral pragmatism with technical rationality, emphasising outward adaptation. Both share the principle of “overcoming rigidity with softness”, forming complementary cognitive schemas. On this basis, this paper proposes a “cross-cultural dialogue” teaching model, turning intertextuality theory into a practical cultural comparison tool for middle school students; using text juxtaposition, role play, and creative transfer, it encourages students to identify cultural roots through differences and develop critical cultural awareness through dialogue, providing a localised approach to global ethics education.

Keywords: The Book of Songs·The Reed; “The Oak and the Reed”; Cross-cultural dialogue

Online publication: October 20, 2026

1. Introduction

The repeated pursuit among the grey reeds in “The Book of Songs·The Reed”, and the bending and swaying reeds in La Fontaine’s fable poem “The Oak and the Reed”, though separated by a thousand years, both point to a theme about the wisdom of survival: what is resilience? However, upon closer reading, the two actually present quite different philosophical perspectives—the reed imagery in The Reed carries the Eastern idea of “enduring resilience”, persistently seeking the elusive “beloved” through the indirect paths of “following the current” and “tracing the stream”; the reed in “The Oak and the Reed” illustrate the Western notion of “adaptive flexibility”, showing the logic of survival in bending gracefully before a storm. This article uses these two classic poems as a vehicle to focus on the differential construction of their symbolic systems, revealing the distinct expressions of resilience philosophy in different cultural contexts, and the

complementary cognitive framework they form in an intertextual perspective through a three-dimensional critical path of linguistic analysis, thematic comparison, and broader cultural interpretation.

To systematically explain this cross-temporal dialogue mechanism, the paper introduces the theory of intertextuality as the core analytical framework. Since its proposal by French semiotician Kristeva, the theory of intertextuality has become a key reference for deconstructing the independence of texts and revealing cultural dialogue. Roland Barthes once said, “A text is a woven fabric (textus)”, representing the infinite delay of the signified, a kind of deferral ^[1]. This theory holds that “any text is the absorption and transformation of other texts” ^[2], emphasising that the meaning of a text arises from cross-temporal symbolic interactions. Within this framework, the comparison between “The Reed” and “The Oak and the Reed” is not a simple literary analogy, but establishes a “reference system of the other”, revealing the deep cultural roots of uniqueness in the interplay of East and West—such as the “circuitous pursuit” in “The Reed” reflecting Zhuangzi’s chef-style “philosophy of going with the flow”, and the “adaptive flexibility” in “The Oak and the Reed” reflecting the ethical origins of the Greek concept of “Sophia”, both of which can be observed more deeply from the perspective of intertextuality.

Currently, intertextual teaching in basic education is noticeably lacking. Statistics show that in the past decade, domestic research and practice on intertextuality have mostly focused on literature courses in universities ^[3], while primary and secondary school classrooms still mainly focus on close reading of single texts, lacking systematic intertextual comparison designs. This article will conduct critical intertextual interpretation at the levels of close reading, thematic comparison, and cultural symbol decoding, providing a practical teaching model for cross-cultural ethical education at the junior secondary level.

2. Deconstructing the intertextuality of texts: Imagery, allegory and philosophy of life

The meaning of a text grows from the rich soil of cultural tradition and continually comes to life through potential dialogue with other texts. A deep interreading of “The Book of Songs·The Reed” and “The Oak and the Reed” aims to explore how the theme of a “philosophy of resilience” is expressed across cultures through different imagery systems and narrative structures, revealing how life wisdom rooted in diverse philosophical backgrounds shines through the gaps and resonances of the text.

2.1. The imagery system and cultural metaphor of “The Reed”

The opening of “The Reed”, “Green, green the reed, dew and frost gleam”, uses “The reed” as a central image to establish the poem’s vast and distant atmosphere. The Reed in the poem is not merely part of the natural background. Its roots are deeply embedded in the marshy shores; its hollow yet flexible stems and its annual cycle of withering in autumn and winter yet reblooming are highly poeticized, transforming into a cultural symbol of perseverance and quest. The poet repeatedly “follows the current upstream”, mirroring his relentless pursuit, which resonates with the reed’s resilient sway in the cold dew and autumn wind. In “The Reed”, the reed with their inner toughness beneath a fragile appearance, become a materialised symbol of a persistent spirit, deeply imprinting early Chinese culture’s praise of life’s resilience.

In the phrase “Where’s she I need? Beyond the stream”, the term “she” forms the most tension-filled, abstract image in the entire poem. Their identity and appearance remain shrouded in the misty waters, only appearing through vague spatial references like “seemingly in the middle of the water”, “seemingly on

a water islet”, and “seemingly on a water shoal”. This abstract strategy makes the “she” an open field of meaning. From a Confucian perspective, the “she” can be seen as the embodiment of an ideal character. The Analects praise “gentle in manner yet refined in appearance, then one can be a true gentleman”, advocating the perfect blend of inner virtue and outward demeanor. Just like the “she”, though unreachable, shines brilliantly, guiding seekers to continuously strive for moral heights. From a Daoist viewpoint, the “she” is a metaphor for the “Dao”, pointing to a state of “non-dependence” described in Zhuangzi’s “Carefree Travel”. Their eternal separation “on the other side of the water” confirms the profound essence of Laozi’s opening line, “The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao”: the highest truth holds eternal attraction precisely because it cannot be reached. Water bodies (rivers, swamps) are key environmental images, with their pervasive qualities of “obscurity”, like “the way is obstructed and long”, “the way is obstructed and steep”, “the way is obstructed and winding”, not only form physical barriers but also symbolise the common confusion, perplexity, and struggles encountered by seekers on the path of spiritual pursuit.

2.2. The fable logic of “The Oak and the Reed”

“The Oak and the Reed” uses personification to build a tension structure between the binary opposites of the “oak” and the “reed”. The oak prides itself on being the “king of the forest”, boasting about its massive body and strength: “My forehead is like the peaks of the Caucasus, not only able to block the dazzling sunlight but also to withstand the storms”. In contrast, the reed responds humbly: “I will not break, I bend when the wind is strong”^[4], revealing a survival philosophy centred on “flexible wisdom”. This “flexibility” is not weakness but a conscious strategy of adaptation chosen after understanding the laws of nature, echoing across cultures the concept from Laozi that “the strong die, the soft survive”.

“The storm”, as a key plot twist, carries deep ethical significance. The oak refuses to bend due to its “strength” and is ultimately “uprooted”; while the reed, relying on its “flexibility”, stands tall again unharmed after the storm. This storm goes beyond a mere natural phenomenon and serves as a concrete embodiment of the “way of heaven” or cosmic order in the fable. The oak suffers destructive punishment due to its arrogance, echoing the ancient Greek moral lesson that “hubris brings ruin”. The storm teaches that bending can sometimes be better than resisting. This clearly transforms a natural physical event into a clear social ethical lesson. The oak’s tragic end is a strong critique of pride, while the reed’s resilient survival praises humility, adaptability, and the wisdom of flexibility, conveying a profound moral message.

2.3. Core of intertextuality: Cross-cultural expression of flexible philosophy

Through the lens of intertextuality, the central cultural resonance of “The Reed” and “The Oak and the Reed” lies in the admiration for the survival strategy of “overcoming the strong with the weak” and “adapting to the environment”. In “The Reed”, the image of the reed and the spirit of the seeker it reflects show resilience through persistent pursuit in the face of obstacles rather than through forceful confrontation. This aligns with the philosophical essence of Laozi’s Chapter 36 “The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong” and Chapter 78 “Nothing in the world is softer or weaker than water, yet it can attack the hard and strong and none can overcome it”. Both emphasise that inner flexibility and adaptability are the ultimate sources of strength^[5]. La Fontaine’s fables, meanwhile, vividly illustrate this principle through the actual “victory” of the reed in a storm. It’s worth noting that the flexible wisdom of the reed aligns spiritually with the Greek concept of the “Golden Mean”. Aristotle emphasised in *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Virtue is a matter of choice,

lying in a mean relative to us”^[6]. The “rigid pride” of the oak tree becomes extreme by going against this principle of moderation, while the “flexible mindset” of the reed demonstrates practical reason in seeking a moderate response to powerful forces, avoiding unnecessary sacrifice. This cross-cultural spiritual connection highlights the universal value of flexibility as a survival wisdom.

Intertextual deconstruction not only reveals similarities but also needs to highlight differences. In the texture of the poem “The Reed”, the reed serves as a symbol of the environment; its vast, swaying form is a core element in creating the “foggy water” rather than acting as an agent in the plot. The text focuses on the seekers’ relentless pursuit through waters filled with “the reed” and “white dew” and the spiritual dilemmas contained therein. In La Fontaine’s fable, however, the reed is elevated to an active agent of equal importance to the oak tree. It has its own voice, with the declaration of “knowing how to bend” directly expressing its life philosophy, ultimately surviving the storm as a sign of successfully putting its proactive strategy into practice. The fable, through the dialogue and confrontation between the reed and the oak and their very different outcomes, aims to convey a clear moral: humility and flexibility are better than pride and rigidity. Its textual function is didactic, and the structure is designed to express the ethical message clearly.

By deconstructing the intertextuality between “The Reed” and “The Oak and the Reed”, we can clearly see how the universal wisdom of “flexible philosophy” is expressed uniquely and profoundly in entirely different cultural contexts and textual forms. Both share the core idea of overcoming rigidity with flexibility and adapting to the environment, reflecting a deep resonance between Daoist thought and the Greek Doctrine of the Mean in practical reasoning. However, the fundamental differences in text structure and imagery function are also significant. In “The Reed”, the reed symbolizes the elusive waters, highlighting the resilience of seekers in spiritual hardship; whereas in La Fontaine’s work, the reed acts as the main agent, portraying and conveying strategies of flexible survival and moral lessons. This intertextual dialogue not only reveals the strong cultural foundations of both texts but also showcases the richness and diversity of literature in expressing shared human experiences.

3. The deep logic of cultural exchange: A dialogue between ethics and cosmology

3.1. The metaphysical basis of eastern “flexibility” ethics

In the cosmological system of Chinese civilization, “flexibility” is not just a survival strategy but an ontological attribute rooted in the philosophy of harmony between heaven and humanity. In this cultural context, the image of a reed carries three layers of meaning: its biological traits are endowed with ethical value, which then elevates it to a symbol of spiritual attainment. In “The Reed”, the opening lines “Green, green the reed, dew and frost gleam” do more than depict natural phenomena; they metaphorically reflect the steadfastness of scholars in political adversity through the cold-resisting nature of the reeds. The ability of the reed to endure autumn without withering becomes a natural mirror for the moral cultivation of scholars in the Zhou dynasty. This way of moralising natural phenomena is a concrete manifestation of the “observing things and taking symbolic meaning” philosophical tradition in *The Book of Changes*.

Deeper secrets are hidden in the laws governing the universe. Taoist thought interprets “the softness of water” as a fundamental principle of the universe. As Chapter 76 of the “Tao Te Ching” clearly states: “When man is born, he is soft and weak; when he dies, he becomes hard and strong. The growth of all things, like plants and trees, is tender and pliant; in death, they become brittle. Therefore, the hard and strong belong

to death, the soft and weak belong to life. In the fable of “Chef Ding carving the ox”, the blade remains unharmed for nineteen years because it cuts at the large gaps, follows the natural openings, and works with what is already there, which is a skilled illustration of aligning with the Way. This “non-action” isn’t about passive avoidance but about proactively adapting through a precise understanding of objective laws.

Qu Yuan’s imagery system of fragrant herbs and beautiful women pushes the idea of flexible ethics to a dimension of spiritual transcendence. In “Li Sao”, the self-adornment described as “making clothes from lotus leaves and skirts from hibiscus” essentially constructs a spiritual barrier using the softness of plants. Zhu Xi explained in “Chu Ci Ji Zhu” that: “Clothing becomes purer, virtue becomes brighter”^[7]. When political ideals were frustrated, the poet chose to “advance without entering to avoid blame, retreat and restore my original dress”, a form of inward self-cultivation that intertexts with The Reed’s quest of “pursuing upstream”: whether advancing or retreating, the core of “flexibility” lies in preserving one’s true heart and inner transcendence.

From the metaphors in “The Reed” to Daoist cosmology, and then to the spiritual constructs in Qu Yuan’s poetry, Eastern flexible ethics are always rooted in the cultural soil of “harmony between heaven and humans”, connecting the properties of nature with personal cultivation, ultimately forming a consistent life wisdom of the Chinese nation: in a constantly changing world, respond with a “soft” approach and uphold resilience, achieving lasting spiritual and ideal continuity by following natural laws.

3.2. The moral pragmatism underpinning Western fables

La Fontaine’s “The Oak and the Reed”, though personifying plants, is rooted in the wisdom of ancient Hellenistic thought. The oak boasts, “My forehead is like the peaks of the Caucasus, not only able to block the dazzling sunlight but also to withstand the storms.” This rhetoric echoes Aristotle’s maxim, “Without the sublime, generosity is impossible”^[6]. The irony of the fable lies in the oak’s overconfidence in its strength, which surpasses the principle of the “mean”, leading to arrogance and vanity. When the north wind “intensified its power”, the oak broke because of its rigidity, confirming Aesop’s original lesson: the proud perish in disaster. La Fontaine’s creativity lies in elevating survival skills to moral wisdom: the reed that “bends without breaking” achieves victory not just physically but ethically, showcasing humility as the triumph of practical reason.

This practical rationality forms a sharp contrast with Zhuangzi’s allegories. When the craftsman carved the tip of the Ying person’s nose (Zhuangzi·Xu Wugui), his success was not merely a technical operation but relied on the spiritual harmony between subject and object and the intuitive grasp of “listening and chiselling”. In comparison, La Fontaine emphasised the reed’s understanding of objective laws (“I know how to bend”), while the craftsman valued the quiet state of the subject’s spirit. This difference reflects the divide between Eastern and Western cosmologies: Greek wisdom seeks the comprehensibility of the external world; hence Heraclitus said “wisdom lies in understanding the Logos that governs all things”^[8]; Daoist skill views point to the dissolution of subject-object boundaries, as in the realm where the butcher dissects an ox “guided by spirit rather than by sight”.

It’s worth noting that the 17th-century French scientific revolution reshaped the network of meanings in fables. In his *Discours de la méthode*, Descartes emphasised “becoming the master and possessor of nature”, projecting the mind onto the image of the reed, giving its flexibility the connotation of practical reason. As Pascal said: “Man is a thinking reed”^[9]. Thought gives dignity to fragility, turning flexibility from a survival

strategy into a cognitive methodology— transcending limitations by acknowledging them. As Henri Renié sang in “Petite Ode”: “I made the whole forest sing with the breath of the reed” ^[10]. Under rational use, even limited tools can achieve infinite possibilities.

3.3. Mutual integration of Chinese and Western ethical education paradigms

In the context of civilisational dialogue, the shared value of flexibility in Eastern and Western philosophy is primarily reflected in a mutual respect for humility and resilience. Confucius’ idea that “humility brings benefits” and Aristotle’s “Golden Mean” both maintain a caution against “excess”. The outcome of “The Oak and the Reed” echoes the Western reflection in Yi Jing’s commentary that “When virtue is slight but position high, knowledge small but plans vast, strength weak but responsibilities heavy, it is rarely enough”. Pascal’s metaphor of the “thinking reed” resonates across time and space with Qu Yuan’s virtuous character symbolised by gathering herbs to wipe away tears, both acknowledging the need to cultivate spiritual strength amid vulnerability.

However, the differences in paths also create complementary opportunities. Firstly, there is the distinction between inward self-cultivation and outward competition. The protagonist in “The Reed” faces the difficulty of a “long and obstructed road” and chooses to “follow the flow upstream”, an inward transcendence approach focusing on the vertical expansion of the spiritual space. As Qian Zhongshu said, “Admiring the circumstances” ^[11] makes the unattainable ideal always a source of spiritual support; whereas La Fontaine’s reeds bend strategically in response to external forces, showing adaptability to the lateral environment. Secondly, there is the difference between effortless nature and rational calculation. Chef Ding’s skill of “following the mind after the body stops” relies on an intuitive understanding of the way of heaven; Western technical rationality, on the other hand, excels at quantifying and applying flexibility, as exemplified by modern earthquake-resistant buildings with “swaying isolation” systems.

Building global ethical education requires fostering a creative transformation between the two at the cosmic perspective level. Firstly, on the ontological level, we need to break through the Western subject-object dualistic thinking and integrate the Eastern “qi theory” view of the universe. As Zhang Zai said in “Zhengmeng”: “The so-called Tao of Taihe inherently contains the nature of rising and falling, moving and stillness, and mutual influence; it is the beginning of tension and relaxation, fluctuation, victory and defeat, and bending and stretching”^[12], viewing humans and the environment as a continuous energy field. In this view, resilience is neither passive compromise nor forceful domination, but the art of dynamic balance within a system. The “resilient thinking” of modern ecological ethics follows this path, advocating that systems achieve advanced adaptability through moderate disturbance. Secondly, in terms of educational methodology, Western critical thinking can be integrated into Eastern “self-cultivation practice”. Wang Yangming’s “discipline through action” can be coupled with Dewey’s “learning by doing”. This fusion is not just a simple combination, but through creating practical scenarios, students can both temper their character and cultivate rational analytical skills while solving real problems.

For example, in an environmental-themed project, students need to understand the overall structure of the ecosystem from a “unity of nature and humanity” perspective while also using data analysis tools to assess pollution sources, ultimately developing solutions that combine humanistic care with scientific reasoning. This educational approach breaks down the barriers between Eastern and Western thinking, making ethical education both deeply rooted in culture and adaptable to the future. Finally, there’s the innovation

in the evaluation system, which goes beyond a single competitive assessment and establishes a “dual-loop feedback system”. The inner loop is like the self-awareness cycle in the Great Learning of “knowing limits, calming the mind, securing peace of thought, and achieving comprehension”, while the outer loop resembles Boyd’s OODA loop (Observation-Orientation-Decision-Action) model for environmental adaptation. This system develops metacognitive abilities through the synergy of the inner and outer loops, such as regularly writing cultural reflection journals to note differences and integrations in understanding Eastern and Western ethical ideas, while also enhancing practical adaptability, for example, by using the ethical judgement in the inner loop together with the dynamic decision-making in the outer loop in simulated cross-cultural conflict situations to create solutions that are culturally sensitive and effective in action. This evaluation innovation makes the internalisation of knowledge visible, shifting ethical education from static cognition to dynamic generation.

The cross-cultural journey of reeds reveals the profound landscape of civilisational dialogue. From the “longing scenarios” in “The Reed” to La Fontaine’s moral teachings, from Pascal’s “thinking reed” to modern earthquake-resistant technology, the philosophy of flexibility always grows in the tension between particularity and universality. True global ethics education requires integrating “going with the flow” and “acting rationally” at a cosmic level, while at the practical level cultivating the “thinking reed”—aware of its fragility with humility, yet achieving dignity through thought. When the wisdom of Zhuangzi’s “harmonious engagement with things” interacts deeply with Western instrumental rationality, humanity may find a way to “cut minimally and yet resolve completely” in these uncertain times.

4. Teaching design for cultural mutual learning based on the cognitive development of junior high school students

4.1. Three-dimensional construction of teaching goals

Considering that junior high students mainly have concrete cognition and are beginning to develop abstract thinking, teaching goals should take into account both the concrete recognition of cultural symbols and the initial abstract ability for ethical metaphors.

- (1) Knowledge and Skills. Text comprehension and appreciation: Students can retell the basic plot/content of “The Reed” and “The Oak and the Reed”, grasp the core imagery (such as reeds, autumn waters, the beloved; oak, reed, gale), and understand their symbolic meanings; Grasping core concepts: Students can initially summarise and explain the essence of “steadfast perseverance” in “The Reed” and “flexible adaptability” in “The Oak and the Reed”; Comparison and integration: Students can use comparative reading methods to identify similarities and differences between the two works in terms of imagery, characters, themes, etc., and attempt to organise them using charts or mind maps.
- (2) Process and Methods. Inquiry-based Learning: Guide students to actively explore the value of the two qualities through group work and classroom debates (like “Oak or Reed, which is worth learning from?”), and discuss how they relate to real life; Building a Cross-cultural Perspective: Students can start to develop a cross-cultural perspective, recognising that different cultures may develop distinct philosophies and values when facing difficulties; Creative Expression: Encourage students to engage in creative writing or role-playing, for example “What if the reed met that pursuer of a beloved?” or “Design a dialogue between the oak and the reed”, to understand the text in an embodied way.

- (3) Emotions, Attitudes and Values. Cultural empathy and identification: Based on understanding the persistent beauty in “The Reed” and the clever humour in “The Oak and the Reed”, inspire students to appreciate and respect outstanding cultural heritage both at home and abroad; Developing dialectical thinking: Guide students to realise that “resilience” does not only take the form of “never bending”, and “flexibility” is not weakness but another type of strength. “Toughness” and “softness” are not absolute opposites but complementary survival wisdom. Overcoming black-and-white thinking and cultivating the ability to view issues comprehensively and dialectically; Shaping life values: Encourage students to reflect on their own character and behaviour, understanding that when facing life goals and external challenges, one needs both the steadfast “resilience” of “The Reed” and the flexible adaptability of “The Oak and the Reed”, beginning to build a positive and wise outlook on life.

4.2. Gradual design of teaching sessions

4.2.1. Parallel text reading: Deconstruction of structure and symbol comparison

Task Design: Group A focuses on “The Reed”, counting the repetition of words like “the reed”, “white dew”, “the road is obstructed” in the three chapters, and drawing a “Change and No Change” mind map.

Table 1. “Change and Constancy” in the Repeated Lines of “The Reed”

Change	Time(frost-not yet dried-frost blend)	Space(among-far away-far behind)
Unchanged	the implicit cycle of hope and disappointment	the eternal barrier of “river”

Group B analyses “The Oak and the Reed”: highlighting the “exaggerated descriptions” in the Oak’s declaration (such as “the peaks of the Caucasus” and “withstanding the sweeping storm”) and the “concessive transition words” in the Reed’s response (such as “Your sympathy is well-intentioned, but there is no need to worry: the wind is not as frightening to me as it is to you”), revealing strategies of resistance in power discourse.

Intertextual focus: Guide students to notice that the cyclical narrative of “The Reed” implies the insolubility of spiritual dilemmas, whereas La Fontaine’s linear conflicts point to clear moral judgments, reflecting the functional distinctions between lyric poetry and fables.

4.2.2. Cultural role-playing: Embodying ethical stances

Table 2. Three-dimensional debate framework:

Character	Philosophical stance	Key lines design basis	Sudden situation challenge
The Oak	Nietzsche “Will to Power”	“The uprightness of the strong is the essence of existence”	Does the storm bend?
The Reed	Daoism “Softness overcomes hardness”	“The wind taught me to understand the earth’s breath”	How do I convince Oak to collaborate?
She	Confucianism: “A gentleman is not a tool”	“My place is your measure”	Why can’t I ever reach it?

Design intention: The “storm” scenario forces the “oak” to choose between “standing firm and breaking” or “bending temporarily”, directly challenging cultural norms and guiding students to reflect on the limitations of rigid ethics.

4.2.3. Creative writing transfer: Cross-cultural symbol recomposition

Guiding Framework Based on Metaphor Reconstruction Theory: Step 1: Deconstruct the prototype. Reeds are taken out of the water and placed in subway vents or glass facade gaps. Step 2: Cultural Grafting. Combine the “returning flow” spirit in “The Reed”, La Fontaine’s reed “bending strategy”, and Pascal’s “thinking reed” into cultural imagery. Step 3: Ethical Reconstruction. Guide students to analyse how the recomposed symbols break the limits of the original text and form new insights into modern survival dilemmas, like “when natural imagery enters urban spaces, how flexible philosophy responds to the pressures of industrial technology”.

Typical case: In the student’s work “Steel Bone Reeds”, the lines of the weeds by the subway vent are: “My bending is a way of reading the city”. It combines the vertical questing spirit of “The Reed” with Western rational adaptation strategies, showing a modern transformation of the “resilience” spirit.

4.3. Scientific application of evaluation tools

(1) Intertextuality analysis (three dimensions, nine indicators):

Dimension	Analysis of “The Reed”	Analysis of “The Oak and the Reed”	Intertextuality Judgement
Theme	The permanence of exploration(1-5points)	Effectiveness of adaptation (1-5 points)	Similarity/Difference (dual ratings)
Imagery	The confusing function of the river	The judgment function of the storm	The description of the symbol conversion path
Ethics	Mental resilience in tough times	Strategic adjustments in crises	Discussion on complementary cultural values

The grading is based on the critical cultural awareness dimension of Michael Byram’s intercultural competence scale. For example, if a student can point out that “The Way is Long” in “The Reed” and “The Storm” by La Fontaine both symbolize external obstacles but with different coping strategies (persistence vs adaptation), they can get full marks.

(2) In-depth guidance for cultural reflection journals.

Design a chain of questions based on the cognitive development stages theory of students by American psychologist William Perry:

L1 (Description): How do you define a “strong person”?

L2 (Deconstruction): What is the fundamental difference between the “strength” of an oak and that of a reed pursuer?

L3 (Reconstruction): After a stormy debate, could “weakness” contain new value?

L4 (Application): How can “reed wisdom” be used to deal with bullying on campus? The evaluation focus is on observing students’ ability to discern the binary opposition of “strong/weak” and whether they can propose a third solution, such as “combatting bullying requires the resilience of a reed rather than the hard resistance of an oak”.

(3) Teaching Evidence and Student Adaptation.

Teaching practice at Hengyang No. 5 Middle School in Hunan Province shows that the experimental

group using intertextual interpretation had a 78.5% accuracy in recognising cultural metaphors, significantly higher than the 52.3% of the traditional Question and Answer group. In the role-playing session, 82% of students used the “storm” scenario to break the stereotype of “strong=physical power” and proposed new definitions like “strength is systemic resilience”. In the writing transfer stage, visual supports such as city reed photography and Pascal quote cards are needed to ease the cognitive load of abstract translation for junior high students.

This course is designed around the idea of “text juxtaposition-embodied experience-symbol reconstruction,” turning intertextual theory into an analysis tool that junior high students can actually use. By having a dialogue between the Eastern “resilient persistence” and the Western “flexible adaptability”, the philosophy of flexibility is transformed from an abstract ethical metaphor into practical survival wisdom for teenagers, offering a workable classroom model for global ethics education.

5. Conclusion

This article interprets intertextuality between “The Reed and the Oak” and “The Reed”, revealing that “flexibility” as a cross-cultural theme has both universal and local characteristics: on one hand, the shared survival wisdom of overcoming strength with weakness and following the flow resonates philosophically in Daoist “softness overcomes hardness” and Greek “golden mean” ethics; on the other hand, the East expresses inward transcendence through “tracing back along the reeds”, while the West shows outward rationality through “bending reeds”. The resulting “text dialogue” teaching model offers a practical framework for literary comparison in language teaching: intertextual networks formed across the dimensions of theme, imagery, and ethical perspective allow cultural symbols to transfer across contexts, thus solving the dilemma of cultural essentialism in teaching. The “philosophy of flexibility” serves as a typical case of civilisational dialogue, valuable not only in deconstructing East-West dualities but also in providing methodological insights for global ethics education—when “resilience in holding fast” meets “adaptability in response”, humanity can cultivate a civilisation’s resilience that “bends with the wind yet remains deeply rooted” in uncertain times.

Funding

1. Research Initiation Project of Hengyang Normal University (Project No.: 2024QD35)
2. Hunan Province Teaching Reform Research Project for General Undergraduate Institutions; Project Name: A Study on the Teaching of Foreign Literary Works from the Perspective of Integrating Ideological and Political Education into Curricula Across Primary, Secondary, and Higher Education (Project No.: B20260845)

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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