

Educational Meanings in Chinese and Anglophone Coming-of-age Literature for Children and Adolescents: A Qualitative Comparative Textual Analysis

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Abstract

Background: Coming-of-age narratives are educationally significant because they represent how children and adolescents negotiate family pressure, school experience, social expectation, emotional difficulty, and moral choice. The Bildungsroman offers a particularly useful theoretical reference point, since the genre foregrounds psychological and moral development and is closely associated with formation and education. **Purpose:** This article compares six recent Chinese and Anglophone works of coming-of-age literature for children and adolescents. It examines how these texts construct educational meanings and how family, school, teachers, peers, community, labor, and self-narration operate as agents of formation. **Method:** The study adopts qualitative comparative textual analysis. The corpus consists of Wu Zhouxing's *The Astragalus Choir*, Xu Nuochen's *Perfect Dive*, Zuo Xuan's *My World*, Sabaa Tahir's *All My Rage*, Malinda Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, and Erin Entrada Kelly's *The First State of Being*. The coding framework includes five dimensions: developmental dilemma, educational agent, mode of education, moral formation, and developmental outcome. **Findings:** The Chinese texts more often connect growth with rural community, aesthetic participation, bodily discipline, labor experience, teacher guidance, and collective responsibility. The Anglophone texts place greater emphasis on trauma repair, identity negotiation, emotional support, self-narration, and ethical choice. This difference should not be reduced to a binary opposition between collectivism and individualism. Rather, it reveals two narrative grammar rules for imagining how adolescents become moral and social subjects. **Contribution:** The article shows that coming-of-age literature can illuminate dimensions of formation that are often weakened in policy and assessment discourses, including emotional recognition, relational support, identity work, ethical imagination, and value internalization.

Keywords

Coming-of-age literature for children and adolescents, Bildungsroman, Educational meanings, Moral formation, Identity development, Qualitative textual analysis

Introduction

Education is not confined to classrooms, curricula, or institutional arrangements. It also occurs through relationships, narrative memory, bodily practice, social participation, and an individual's interpretation of the self. Literary narrative is therefore valuable for educational research: It can render with particular precision how children and adolescents endure pressure, understand others, negotiate identity, and form moral judgment in concrete situations [1].

In library classification, and curriculum design, it can obscure the boundaries of comparison when Chinese

children's literature is included. This study adopts the term "coming-of-age literature for children and adolescents" to define literary works centered on the psychological, moral, and social development of child or adolescent protagonists [2].

The article addresses three questions. First, how do recent Chinese and Anglophone coming-of-age texts represent children's and adolescents' educational experiences? Second, how do family, school, teachers, peers, community, labor, and selfhood function as educational agents within the texts? Third, without

treating literary works as statistical evidence of national educational realities, what educational insights can comparative textual analysis provide?

Literature review and theoretical framework

Coming-of-age narrative and subject formation

Bildungsroman provides the conceptual foundation for this study. It emphasizes that growth is not merely the biological passage of age but the gradual formation of personality, moral orientation, and psychological structure. Coming-of-age literature can therefore be understood as a symbolic educational space. In such a space, characters reorganize the self through conflict, failure, recognition, and value internalization, and they acquire the capacity to enter social relations.

Literary reading, empathy, and socio-moral learning

Research on narrative fiction supports this article’s educational premise. Gasser, Dammert, and Murphy argue that shared reading of narrative fiction with children serves not only literacy development but also socio-moral learning. Kucirkova, drawing on developmental psychology and literary theory, explains that children’s storybooks may foster empathy through identification with characters, understanding of in-group and out-group relations, and the quality of literary

language [3]. These studies indicate that children’s literature is not merely a language arts resource. It is a medium of moral imagination and social learning [4].

Adolescent identity development and school experience

Adolescence is widely understood as a crucial period for identity development across all cultures. Branje and colleagues show that the formation of a coherent identity is a central developmental task for young people during adolescence [5]. School also participates in this process. Verhoeven, Poorthuis, and Volman demonstrate that educational processes are closely related to personal identity, social identity, and learning-related identity formation [6]. Verbiest and Murman further argue that adolescent literature can support identity development when it represents characters with whom students can meaningfully relate and identify [7]. These studies provide the theoretical basis for analyzing the relation among school, reading, and self-understanding deeply [8].

Methodology

The overall analytical framework of this study is presented in Figure 1.

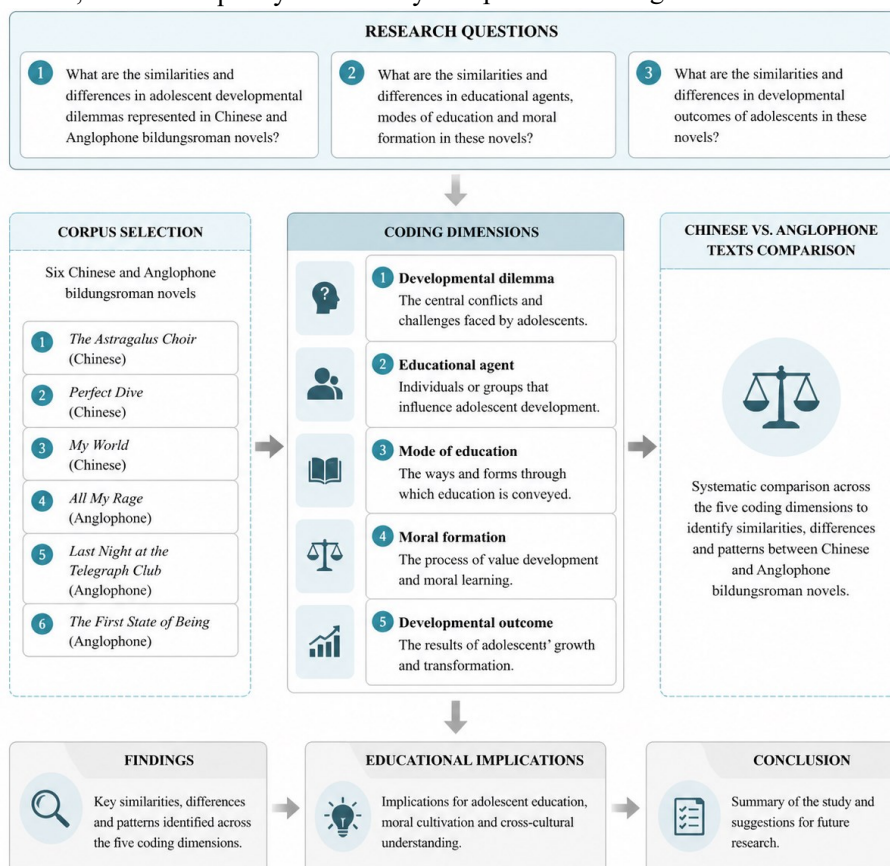


Figure 1. Research and analysis framework.

This study employs context-sensitive qualitative comparative textual analysis. It does not attempt to measure learning outcomes or make statistical claims about national education systems. Instead, it examines how literary texts organize educational problems through characters, conflicts, settings, relationships, and endings. A structured coding framework was developed to guide the analysis, as shown in Table 1. The corpus

was selected according to three criteria: recent publication and interpretive significance; the presence of a child or adolescent protagonist whose growth structures the narrative; and sustained engagement with educationally relevant issues such as family, school, community, labor, identity, or emotion. The final corpus of six texts, with their selection rationales, is presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Coding framework.

Primary category	Subcategories	Operational definition
Developmental dilemma	Family pressure; school pressure; identity pressure; social marginalization	Conditions that make growth conflictual rather than linear
Educational agent	Family; teacher; peers; community; labor; self	Persons, institutions, or relational structures that shape the protagonist's formation
Mode of education	Discipline; accompaniment; healing; aesthetic participation; empowerment	Narrative mechanisms that enable or constrain growth
Moral formation	Collective ethics; personal ethics; relational ethics	Structures through which the protagonist understands responsibility, dignity, and value
Developmental outcome	Social adaptation; self-recognition; responsibility; value internalization	Forms of growth achieved by the end of the narrative

Table 2. Corpus and rationale for selection.

Code	Text	Country/Region	Year	Rationale
C1	Wu Zhouxing, <i>The Astragalus Choir</i>	China	2023	Rural children, aesthetic education, teacher guidance, left-behind children's growth
C2	Xu Nuochen, <i>Perfect Dive</i>	China	2023	Sports training, bodily discipline, perseverance, collective honor
C3	Zuo Xuan, <i>My World</i>	China	2024	Migrant family, urban labor, responsibility
F1	Sabaa Tahir, <i>All My Rage</i>	United States	2022	Family trauma, immigration, school opportunity, adolescent resilience
F2	Malinda Lo, <i>Last Night at the Telegraph Club</i>	United States	2021	Ethnic identity, gender identity, family responsibility, subjective choice
F3	Erin Entrada Kelly, <i>The First State of Being</i>	United States	2024	Friendship, trust, imagination of the future, child agency

The analysis proceeded in three distinct stages. First, repeated close reading carefully identified the major conflicts, relational structures, and educational scenes in each text. Second, category coding was conducted according to the established framework, while overly broad or overlapping categories were refined during interpretation. Third, cross-case synthesis compared the

two groups of texts in terms of educational agency, mechanisms of formation, and moral orientation. To avoid turning literary interpretation into simplistic social generalization, the article discusses how texts construct educational meanings; it does not infer general differences between Chinese and American education systems.

The three-stage qualitative textual analysis procedure adopted in this study is illustrated in Figure 2. Contemporary educational research has also highlighted

the importance of evaluating and enhancing deep learning abilities in technology-supported learning environments [9].

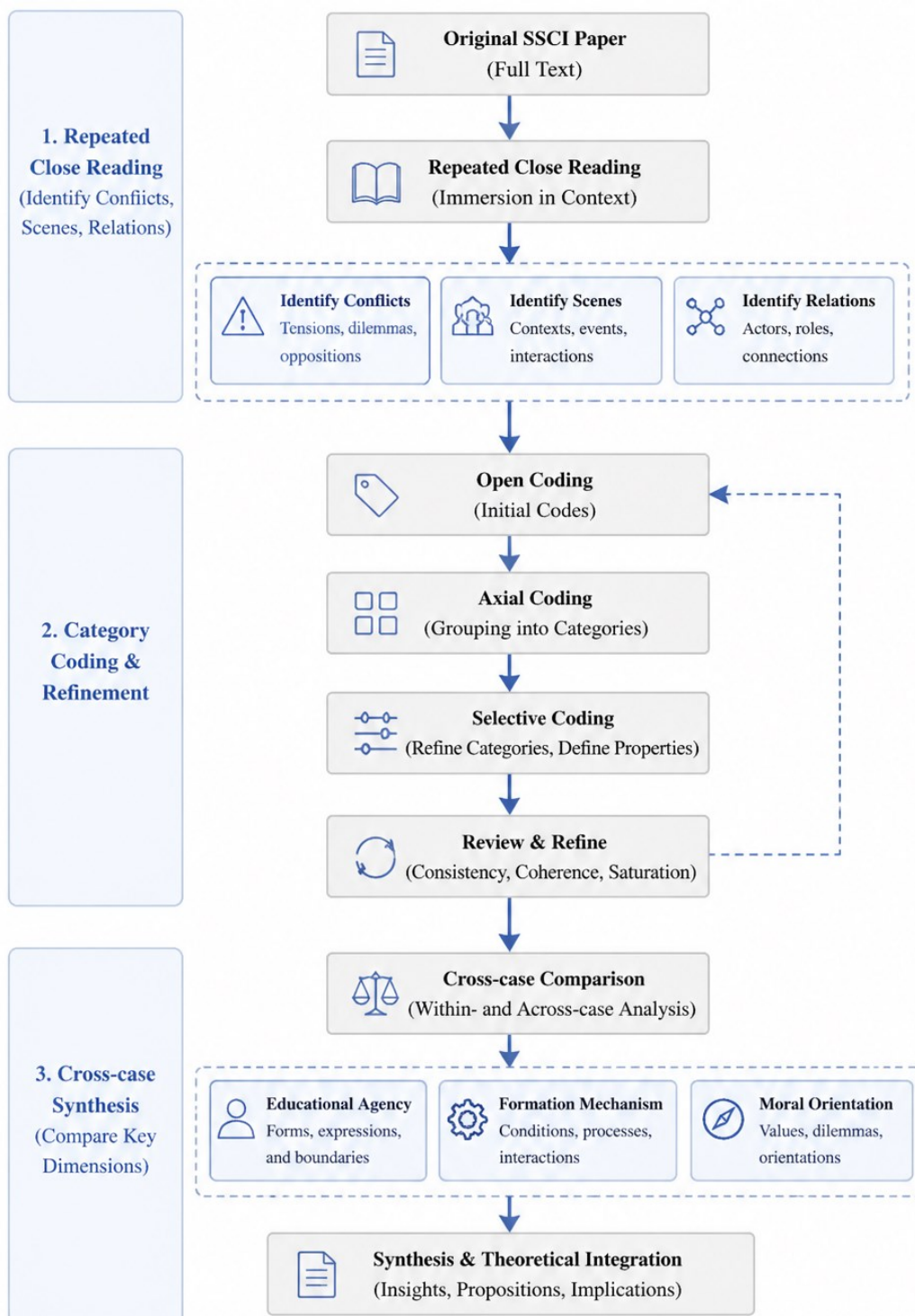


Figure 2. The analytical framework for constructing educational meanings via qualitative textual analysis.

Note: The process follows standard qualitative textual analysis procedures employed in SSCI educational research.

Findings

Chinese texts: Growth through community, discipline, and labor

The Chinese texts tend to understand education as a process through which children locate themselves

within a concrete community.

The Astragalus Choir does not reduce rural children to objects of sympathy or rescue. Instead, music, teacherly accompaniment, and collective performance reorganize the children’s experience of self.

Aesthetic education is not an accessory activity in the narrative. It functions as a mechanism of recognition: It gives children voice, confidence, and a shared space of expression, and it transforms marginalized experience into public expression that can be seen and heard. This form of aesthetic recognition thus serves as a relational educational force that validates marginalized childhood experiences and fosters collective dignity.

Perfect Dive presents a more disciplinary model of formation. Sports training manages the body, reorganizes time, and requires children to persist under pressure. The central issue is not whether discipline is inherently oppressive or liberating. The text is more concerned with how external demands become subjective commitment. The protagonist's movement from being required to persist toward assuming responsibility by choice turns athletic training into a narrative form of moral formation. This narrative illustrates how structured bodily practice can cultivate internalized responsibility rather than mere compliance. It further reveals that moral formation through bodily discipline relies on the gradual transformation of external regulation into autonomous ethical action.

My World extends the educational field from school to urban labor. Through observing delivery riders and the everyday life of a migrant family, the child protagonist gradually understands the operation of the city, the pressure of labor, and the dignity of ordinary people. Education here is not curricular knowledge. It is perceptual training and moral learning. The child learns to notice effort, hardship, mutual assistance, and respect; education thereby moves from the logic of performance toward social recognition. Such experiential learning highlights the educational value of everyday social life beyond formal schooling.

Taken together, the Chinese texts do not dissolve child agency into the collective. Rather, they situate agency within networks of teacher support, team participation, bodily training, family labor, and social responsibility. Growth is therefore represented as the process of entering a shared world and assuming responsibility within it. These works thus redefine collective belonging not as restriction but as a relational foundation for individual development.

Anglophone texts: Growth through identity, emotion, and self-narration

The Anglophone texts present a different set of

educational pressures. *All My Rage* organizes adolescent experience around family rupture, immigration, grief, and the desire to escape. School is not merely an institution of knowledge; it can also become an institutional route toward the future. Yet school does not automatically repair trauma. The educational significance of the novel lies in its claim that resilience is not an isolated psychological trait. It is a relational capacity formed through friendship, memory, responsibility, and self-interpretation. This perspective shifts the focus from individual coping to relational support as a foundation for adolescent resilience.

Last Night at the Telegraph Club places identity formation within social constraint and family expectation. The protagonist's growth is shaped by ethnic history, gendered desire, family responsibility, and public fear. Education in the novel is not classroom instruction. It is the process by which a young person learns to name herself and bear the consequences of that naming. Self-recognition therefore has ethical force, because honesty toward the self also requires confrontation with family relations and social risk. The novel thus demonstrates that identity development is inherently ethical, relational, and socially situated.

The First State of Being writes child agency through friendship, trust, and uncertainty about the future. The novel does not portray children as naive subjects awaiting adult correction. Instead, it shows that children must judge and act even when information is incomplete. Growth is consequently linked to ethical imagination, trust, and responsibility.

These Anglophone texts therefore emphasize emotional repair, identity expression, and self-narration. They do not simply celebrate individual freedom. They are more concerned with how young people, under conditions of trauma, exclusion, and uncertainty, become intelligible to themselves and to others. In doing so, they frame self-understanding and relational recognition as core educational goals for adolescent development. This narrative orientation also highlights the ethical significance of bearing witness to adolescent vulnerability within educational contexts.

Comparative discussion

A detailed cross-case synthesis is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Cross-case synthesis.

Dimension	Chinese texts	Anglophone texts	Educational interpretation
Major conflict	Rural marginalization, training pressure, labor conditions	Trauma, identity pressure, uncertainty about the future	Growth begins from concrete vulnerability
Educational agents	Teachers, family, team, community, labor	Family, peers, intimate relations, self	Education occurs through relations rather than through instruction alone
Primary modes	Discipline, aesthetic participation, recognition of labor	Healing, self-narration, emotional support	Formation requires both structure and recognition
Moral emphasis	Collective responsibility and social contribution	Personal dignity and relational honesty	Moral education is realized through situated choice
Developmental outcome	Socially embedded responsibility	Self-recognition and ethical agency	Growth is both social and subjective

The comparison shows that both groups of texts understand education as human formation rather than information transmission. The Chinese texts more often embed growth in communal responsibility, disciplined practice, and social labor. The Anglophone texts more often foreground identity formation, trauma repair, and ethical self-narration. However, this difference should not be compressed into a cultural stereotype. The Chinese texts also represent emotional vulnerability, and the Anglophone texts also require individuals to be responsible to others.

A more precise conclusion is that the two groups of texts offer different pathways of personhood. The Chinese texts ask how children enter a shared world and assume responsibility within it. The Anglophone texts ask how young people name themselves in worlds that are broken, constrained, or uncertain. Both are educational questions. Both also reveal the inadequacy of an educational imagination centered only on performance and assessment.

Educational implications

First, educators should treat children's experience as a source of educational knowledge. In the sample texts, children and adolescents do not passively receive adult arrangements. They interpret family difficulty, school pressure, social prejudice, labor experience, and uncertainty about the future. Educational practice should therefore make greater room for listening,

narrative expression, and reflective dialogue [10].

Second, moral education should not remain at the level of normative statement. In the sample texts, value internalization occurs through action: singing in a choir, sustaining training, understanding labor, telling the truth, repairing relationships, and assuming responsibility under uncertainty. Moral education is therefore situational and experiential. It cannot be transmitted adequately through abstract slogans alone.

Third, schools should not reduce student development to performance indicators. Academic achievement has practical importance, but it does not exhaust the aims of education. Coming-of-age literature reminds educational researchers and practitioners that emotional recognition, identity formation, relational trust, and ethical imagination are not peripheral to learning. They are conditions through which learning becomes meaningful.

Conclusion

This article has conducted a qualitative comparative analysis of six recent Chinese and Anglophone works of coming-of-age literature for children and adolescents from an educational perspective. The Chinese texts more often associate growth with community, discipline, labor, aesthetic participation, and collective responsibility. The Anglophone texts more prominently emphasize trauma, identity, emotional support, self-narration, and ethical agency. This is not a

hierarchy of value but a difference between narrative grammars of formation.

The article contributes to educational research by showing that literary texts can represent dimensions of formation that policy and assessment discourses rarely capture with sufficient specificity: vulnerability, recognition, relation, agency, and value internalization. Its limitations are also clear. The corpus is small, and textual comparison cannot substitute for empirical research on educational realities. Future studies may extend the corpus across languages, regions, and genres, and may also examine how coming-of-age literature is transformed into educational practice through classroom reading, reader response, or teacher interviews.

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Authors' contributions

Junhao Du, Jiaying Ji and Zhuo Wang contribute equally to the article.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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