

A Preliminary Analysis of the Discourse and Cultural Levels of Folk Literature from the Perspective of "Intertextuality"—Taking AT451 Type Folktales as an Example

Mengyuan Ding*

College of Foreign Studies, Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, China

**Corresponding author*

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Abstract: This paper examines the intertextuality in AT451 type folktales, "The Sister Who Sought Her Brothers," from different regions through a cross-cultural lens. By analyzing stories such as "The Twelve Wild Ducks," the paper explores the intertextual manifestations in folk literature at both discourse and cultural levels and their implications for cross-cultural communication. The study finds that intertextuality in these stories is primarily reflected in two dimensions: the discourse level, including literary allusions, clichés, and intertextuality in genre, theme, and structure; and the cultural level, involving material, institutional, and mental culture. These intertextual elements not only enrich the content of the stories but also facilitate communication among different cultural groups. This research aims to provide a new perspective for understanding the role of folktales in cross-cultural communication and to discuss future directions, including expanding the corpus of texts and further exploring the relationship between intertextuality at the discourse and cultural levels.

1. Introduction

In the 1960s, French theorist Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of "intertextuality" (intertextualité). Intertextuality, also known as "textual interrelatedness," is an important term in contemporary Western literary criticism ^[1], typically used to indicate the intertextual relationships between two or more texts ^[2]. It is mainly employed to address issues such as the generation of literary meaning, the reading and interpretation of texts, the relationship between texts and cultural signification practices, the interrelationship of literary genres, and the relationship between tradition and innovation. It involves a combination with various theories, including semiotics, structuralism, and postcolonialism. The scope of intertextuality is broad, and the issues it covers are complex ^[3]. Its proponents argue that "any text is an absorption and transformation of other texts." ^[4] All contexts, including political, economic, social, psychological, historical, and theological aspects, can be considered a form of intertext ^[5]. The intertextual manifestations of different cultural levels in texts are also a worthy research direction.

Folk literature, as an important form of literary expression, is derived from the tradition of oral

storytelling, encompassing various genres such as folktales, epics, ballads, fables, myths, riddles, and more ^[6]. It serves multiple functions, including entertainment, spiritual upliftment, and providing solace ^[7]. Jack David Zipes also noted that folktales can shape people's lives ^[8]. Therefore, studying the content of folktales holds certain practical value for real-life applications.

This paper aims to examine and analyze folktales of the same type from different regions within the theoretical framework of "intertextuality," focusing on the AT451 type folktales "The Sister Who Sought Her Brothers" and their variants. The primary research questions are: In which aspects is "intertextuality" reflected in different texts? What are the implications of intertextuality at different cultural levels for cross-cultural communication?

2. Literature Review

In the 1960s, Kristeva first proposed the concept of "intertextuality" based on Saussure's structuralist linguistics and Bakhtin's dialogic theory in her work *Word, Dialogue, and Novel*. Subsequently, Barthes, Genette, Fairclough, Hatim and Mason, among others, further explored the concept of "intertextuality." ^[9, 10, 11]

Bakhtin believed that the dialogue between texts is ubiquitous, and every expression in a text is the result of the interweaving and permeation of multiple voices ^[12]. Although he did not explicitly coin the term "intertextuality," his theories of dialogue and polyphony laid the foundation for the concept. Kristeva argued that texts do not exist in isolation but are woven from multiple texts, and that any text is an absorption and transformation of other texts ^[13]. She further introduced the concepts of "geno-text" and "pheno-text," emphasizing the generative and dynamic nature of texts. Additionally, Kristeva explored intertextuality from both horizontal and vertical dimensions: horizontally, the discourse in a text simultaneously belongs to the writer and the reader; vertically, the words in a text are related to past or coexisting literary materials. Barthes defined the text as "interdisciplinary" and "multi-agent," emphasizing the importance of the reader in the generation of textual meaning. Barthes believed that the meaning of a text depends on the ability of the agents (authors, readers, analysts) to gather various intertexts and connect them with the given text ^[14]. Unlike Kristeva's "intertextuality," Genette proposed the concept of "transtextuality" and categorized it into five types of textual interrelations, providing a systematic framework for "intertextuality" theory. Fairclough combined "intertextuality" with sociocultural research, dividing it into "manifest intertextuality" and "constitutive intertextuality." ^[15] The former refers to obvious quotations, imitations, etc., while the latter is related to discourse conventions or discourse order. Fairclough's research emphasized the role of "intertextuality" in sociocultural contexts. Hatim and Mason applied "intertextuality" theory to translation studies, proposing a method for intertextual retrieval from three dimensions of context in translation, emphasizing the preservation of symbolic status, intentionality, and discourse coherence in the translation process ^[16].

In the 1980s, "intertextuality" theory was introduced to China. Many scholars, including Yu Aiju, Xu Shichao, Li Youzheng, and Cheng Xilin, have conducted research on "intertextuality." The dissemination and development of "intertextuality" theory in China can be divided into three stages: the initial translation period, the systematic introduction period, and the gradual prosperity period ^[17, 18]. In the initial translation stage, scholars mainly introduced Western scholars' works through translation. Li Youzheng translated "intertextuality" as "textual interrelatedness," ^[19] and scholars like Zhang Longxi began to interpret the theory of "intertextuality." ^[20] During this stage, research on "intertextuality" in China was still in its infancy and lacked systematic exploration. In the 1990s, the study of "intertextuality" in China entered the systematic introduction period. Domestic and foreign monographs on "intertextuality" theory began to appear, such as Bakhtin's *Collected Works* and Genette's *Narrative Discourse*. At the same time, comprehensive journal articles introducing

the development and research perspectives of "intertextuality" theory emerged, such as those by Yin Qiping ^[21], who combed the development and research perspectives of "intertextuality" theory from different angles. In the 21st century, research on "intertextuality" theory in China gradually flourished. Researchers began to philosophically interpret and critique the views of Kristeva, Barthes, Genette, and others on "intertextuality." The research results significantly increased, and the research areas expanded from literary criticism, linguistics, and translation studies to film, drama, music, cultural communication, architecture, and other social semiotic systems ^[22].

Since the introduction of the concept of "intertextuality," scholars from different countries have paid certain attention to and affirmed the existence of "intertextuality" in texts. Drawing on the insights of previous studies, this paper proposes to use the relevant framework of "intertextuality" theory to advance the research.

3. Theoretical Framework

Combining previous experiences and referring to the "intertextuality" model summarized by Hatim and Mason, this paper integrates the four levels of cultural structure for discussion.

Hatim and Mason's "intertextuality" theory model mainly starts from the discourse level of the text. As is shown in Table 1, "intertextuality" is divided into two categories: "manifest intertextuality" and "constitutive intertextuality." "Manifest intertextuality" is further divided into seven types, including reference, cliché literary allusion, self-quotation, and others. "Constitutive intertextuality" includes generic, thematic, topical, structural, and functional intertextuality.

Table 1. Hatim & Mason’s (2001) intertextuality model

Intertextuality	Manifest Intertextuality	Reference
		Cliché
		Literary allusion
		Self-quotation
		Conventionalism
		Proverb
		Mediation
	Constitutive Intertextuality	Generic Intertextuality
		Thematic Intertextuality &
		Topical Intertextuality
		Structural Intertextuality
		Functional Intertextuality

Source: Zhang Xuemei (2017) A Study of Identity Construction in the U.S. State of the Union Address from the Perspective of Intertextuality Theory ^[23]

Cheng Xilin pointed out that from the perspective of "intertextuality," the world is an infinite text, and everything in the world can be textualized. Therefore, different levels of culture can also be regarded as a type of "intertextual" text, which can be discussed from the perspectives of discourse and culture.

Cheng Yuzhen divided the structure of culture into four levels: material culture, institutional culture, behavioral culture and mental culture. Among them, material culture refers to the sum of human material production activities and their products, such as clothing, food, housing, and transportation, which are tangible and palpable things. Institutional culture refers to the norms that people establish in social practice to regulate their own behavior and the relationships between each other. Behavioral culture refers to the customs and habits that people form in long-term social interactions, which are collective social behaviors rather than individual caprices. Mental culture

refers to people's social psychology and social ideology, including value concepts, aesthetic tastes, ways of thinking, and the resulting literary and artistic works ^[24].

Drawing on the relevant theories of the above scholars, the theoretical framework of this paper is depicted in Table 2:

Table 2. Theoretical framework of this paper

Discourse Intertextuality	Manifest Intertextuality	Literary Allusion
	Constitutive Intertextuality	Clich é
		Generic Intertextuality
		Thematic Intertextuality
Cultural Intertextuality		Structural Intertextuality
		Material Culture
		Institutional Culture
		Mental Culture

4. Discussion and Analysis

The research objects selected in this paper are several variants of the AT451 type folktales from different regions, namely the famous AT451 type "The Sister Who Sought Her Brothers" in the Aarne-Thompson Index (AT classification). The relevant stories include, but are not limited to, "The Six Swans" in the first edition of Grimms' Fairy Tales in 1812, the later added "The Twelve Brothers," "The Seven Ravens," and "The Twelve Wild Ducks" which first appeared in Norwegian folklore in 1833. There is also the most widely circulated variant of this type of story, "The Wild Swans" published in Andersen's Fairy Tales in 1838 ^[25].

4.1 Discourse Intertextuality

At the discourse level, the manifestation of "manifest intertextuality" in the research texts mainly focuses on literary allusions and clich é. The intertextuality of literary allusions is often seen in the references to characters from other literary works, forming intertextual references across texts. For example, the fairy Morgana in "The Wild Swans" originates from the Arthurian legends, where she can create mirages in the air. In the story, she reveals to Elisa the method of rescuing her brothers ^[26]. In "The Twelve Brothers," the youngest brother Benjamin is named after Benjamin in the *Book of Genesis*, who is the youngest son of Jacob ^[27, 28, 29]. In the *Quran*, Benjamin is known as the righteous youngest son, who stayed by his father Jacob's side when the other brothers conspired against Joseph (Benjamin's brother).¹ Similarly, in "The Twelve Brothers," Benjamin plays a similar role by asking his brothers not to kill their sister. The names of the female protagonists in "The Twelve Wild Ducks," "Snow-white and Rosy-red," can be found in the *Song of Songs* in the *Bible*: "My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand." This name, which praises a woman's beauty and purity, is also used in "The Twelve Wild Ducks"². Elisa in "The Wild Swans" (Elisa) ^[30] is a shortened form of Elisabeth, a variant of the Hebrew name Elisheva (אֱלִישֶׁבַע), meaning "my God is an oath" or "my God is abundance." This name, with its religious connotations, can also be traced back to the Hebrew Bible ^[31]. In the story, Elisa, like a saint, endures hardships and suppresses her own behavior to save her brothers. Thus, at the discourse level, one manifestation of literary allusion intertextuality is the naming of characters, projecting the meanings of characters from other texts into the research text, which also helps readers interpret the characters in the story.

Clich é are concepts that have become so widely used that their origins are no longer traceable.

In the research texts, clichés can be phrases like "Once upon a time..." or "Long ago..." [32]. In folktales like "The Sister Who Sought Her Brothers," the story often begins with phrases like "Once upon a time..." to immerse readers in a fantastical context detached from modernity. The endings of these stories also have a fixed characteristic, often taking the form of "And they lived happily/peacefully/in love ever after" and its variants, marking a relatively happy ending. These clichés at the beginning and end of the stories reflect the expression of intertextuality at the discourse level.

"Constitutive intertextuality" is mainly reflected in three aspects: genre intertextuality, thematic intertextuality, and structural intertextuality, focusing on how the genre of the text, the themes explored by the text, and the structural characteristics of the text are connected with other texts.

In terms of genre, the research texts selected in this paper all belong to the genre of fairy tales in English, such as "The Twelve Wild Ducks" from *Norwegian Fairy Tales*, "The Six Swans," "The Seven Ravens," and "The Twelve Brothers" from *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, and "The Wild Swans" from *Andersen's Fairy Tales*. These research texts mostly involve classic fairy tale characters such as princesses, princes, kings, queens, and witches, as well as magical and transformation elements. These character types and plot elements recur in different stories, forming intertextual echoes between works like *Grimms' Fairy Tales* and *Andersen's Fairy Tales*, meeting the aesthetic expectations of different readers. In terms of theme, these stories explore universal themes such as family, sacrifice, love, courage, loyalty, and redemption, which recur in the fairy tales reflecting different cultural and historical backgrounds in the research objects, showing thematic intertextuality.

In terms of structure, the plot structure of the selected texts can be divided according to motifs. A motif is the smallest element in a story that can persist in tradition [33], also translated as "plot unit" or "sub-plot" [34]. Stith Thompson classified and cataloged the motifs in folklore from A to Z. The same motif can appear in several stories from different regions or times, and multiple motifs can also coexist in a single folk tale, piecing together a relatively complex story, thereby constructing a structural intertextuality that transcends time and space. By searching for the motifs in Thompson's index under "Type 451," 21 motifs can be preliminarily collected, such as "Transformation: man into swan" (D161.1), "Disenchantment by sewing shirts for enchanted brothers" (D753.1), "Innocent woman accused of killing her newborn children," "One sister and six (seven, eleven, twelve) brothers" (P253.0.5), etc. These motifs, combined with other types of motifs, are embedded in different stories to form intertextual relationships. The plot of "The Twelve Wild Ducks," [35] taken from Norwegian folklore, is summarized in the table below to assist in the discussion (Table 3):

Table 3: Plot Units of "The Twelve Wild Ducks"

plot	motif
I: A queen who desires a daughter makes a wish that if she has a daughter, she will not mind what her sons turn into. A witch appears, making a prophecy of losing sons for a daughter.	S272. Sacrifice of brothers promised if girl is born *Type 451 G200. Witch
A princess is born, and the princes transform into twelve	D521.1. Transformation through thoughtless wish of parent.

wild ducks and fly away from home.	P251.6.7. Twelve brothers. Type 451. P253.0.5. One sister twelve brothers. Type 451 S272.1. Flight of brothers from home to avoid being sacrificed. D161. Transformation: man to bird of Anatidae group (duck)
II: The princess grows up and learns the truth, leaving home to find her brothers.	
The protagonist follows the path in her dream through the forest, arriving at a cabin.	D1810.8.2. Information received through dream. D1812.3.3. Future revealed in dream.
The siblings reunite and ask for forgiveness. The brothers agree to forgive their sister	
In order to help her brothers regain their freedom, the princess makes clothes, during which she cannot speak, nor can she laugh or cry.	C401. Tabu: speaking during certain time C460. Laughing tabu. Type 451 D753.1. Disenchantment by sewing shirts for enchanted brothers. *Type 451 D758. Disenchantment by maintaining silence. *Type 451 F569.3.1. Silent princess.
III: While gathering textile materials, the princess meets a king, who takes her away and they hold a wedding. After marriage, the princess remains silent, continuing to sew clothes for her brothers.	T100. Marriage. T272. The silent wife. P253.2. Sister is faithful to transformed brother. *Types 450, 451
The king's stepmother schemes against the princess, harming her own descendants.	P282. Stepmother. K2116.1.1. Innocent woman accused of killing her new-born children. *Type 451
The king, believing the slander, orders the execution of his wife.	
The girl places the clothes she made for her brothers on a board, the brothers fly in, break the spell, and return to human form	R158. Sister rescues brother(s). *Type 707 R156. Brother rescues sister(s) D702. Partial disenchantment.

(the youngest brother had one human arm and one arm like wild duck) and helps the sister. The sister is saved and speaks the truth.	
The old queen is executed.	Q297. Slander punished. Q411. Death as punishment. Q285.3. Cruel mutilation punished. Q416. Punishment: drawing asunder by horses.
The group goes to see the princess's parents.	

In the research texts, apart from "The Twelve Wild Ducks," the motif of "sacrificing brothers if a girl is born" is also explicitly shown in "The Twelve Brothers" from *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Regarding the motif of "transformation," it can be found in all the aforementioned research texts. Specifically, the motif of sons transforming due to a parent's careless wish is present in stories like "The Seven Ravens" and "The Twelve Wild Ducks." The transformed creatures can be swans or wild ducks from the Anatidae family, or birds like ravens. For example, the titles of stories such as "The Six Swans," "The Seven Ravens," and "The Twelve Wild Ducks" directly reflect the transformation motif they contain. The conditions to break the spell mainly involve various constraints on the heroine, such as maintaining silence (in "The Six Swans," "The Twelve Brothers," and "The Twelve Wild Ducks"), sewing clothes (in "The Six Swans" and "The Twelve Wild Ducks"), or undergoing arduous journeys (in "The Seven Ravens"). During the period when the sister is working to free her brothers from the spell, a young king appears as her husband, introducing the marriage motif and driving the plot forward. The stepmother (both the princess's and the king's) serves as the main instigator of persecution, forming a unique plot unit in the story. Moreover, in the research objects, when the acts of harm are exposed, the king's stepmother is severely punished... Various motifs alternate within the same story or across different stories, demonstrating the structural intertextuality that transcends time and space. Due to limited space, they are not listed one by one here.

4.2 Cultural Intertextuality

At the level of cultural intertextuality, this paper mainly explores three aspects: material culture, institutional culture, and mental culture.

Material culture includes all tangible cultural products that can be directly observed and touched, such as architecture, technology, and clothing, representing the material aspects of culture. In the research texts selected in this paper, nettles and thistle-down are used as textile materials, carrying certain historical traditions and cultural connotations. The use of nettles as textile raw materials can be traced back to ancient Europe. For example, a 2,800-year-old nettle fabric was unearthed in Denmark³. The characteristics of being flexible and easily dyed have made nettles a popular textile material, which has been passed down through myths and legends. In Norse mythology, nettles are associated with Thor, the god of thunder, symbolizing strength and resilience⁴. In Celtic legends, the sting of nettles has magical powers that can ward off fairy pranks and various forms of magic⁵. In *The Wild Swans*, nettles are the important material for breaking the spell on the brothers, used to make shirts of mail. In "The Twelve Wild Ducks," the material for making clothes is thistle fluff, which also has its own historical and cultural origins. Thistle is the national flower of Scotland and holds an important cultural status. In rural Eastern Europe, thistle is also regarded as a protective plant against evil, often planted or hung in the attic of barns to ward off demons⁶. The above

analysis of the material aspects of the clothing in the stories reflects the intertextuality across cultures in the research texts.

Institutional culture refers to various systems in society, such as the economy, politics, religion, and family structure, which define the roles and behaviors of social members. It has been observed that the research texts can be analyzed from two aspects of institutional culture: the monarchy and Christianity. Under the monarchical system, the king holds the highest authority and has absolute power over life and death. Except for the relatively simple plot of "The Seven Ravens," the other research texts all feature a young king who appears in the middle and later parts of the story as the princess's partner, controlling all the decision-making actions in the latter half of the story and being the holder of power and the initiator of decisions: the "young kings" in the stories have the power to choose a stranger as their queen and also have the authority to order the execution or pardon of their wives (queens) and stepmothers (old queens). In "The Twelve Brothers," the elder king, as the protagonist's father, also has the power to decide the life or death of his sons. The texts are permeated with the authority of the king, reflecting the intertextuality of the monarchical system at the institutional cultural level. The presence of Christianity in the texts is shown through biblical names ("Benjamin," "Snow-white and Rosy-red" ^[36]), infant baptism ("The Seven Ravens," "The Twelve Wild Ducks"), prayers to God, and the belief in God, as well as the role of the archbishop ("The Wild Swans"). The various religious elements contained in texts from different regions demonstrate the intertextuality at the institutional cultural level.

Mental culture includes society's beliefs, values, concepts, attitudes, and ways of thinking. As the most abstract level of culture, mental culture influences people's perceptions of the world and the internal motivations behind their actions. This paper mainly discusses two points: the taboo of the number 13 and the hostility towards witches. In the West, the number "13" is a fearful and unlucky number, associated with misfortune and bad luck ^[37]. The reason why it has become a taboo number is closely related to the story of the "Last Supper" in Christianity ^[38]. The mindset that links the number "13" with misfortune and the attitude of avoiding this number in daily life are reflected in the research texts (mainly "The Twelve Wild Ducks" and "The Twelve Brothers") as the appearance of the thirteenth child (the sister) bringing "misfortune" to the previous twelve children (the brothers). At the beginning of the story, the parents' wish to sacrifice their sons (the first twelve children) for a daughter (the thirteenth child) is followed by the intervention of magical elements, resulting in the transformation of the twelve sons into birds and their departure from home after the birth of the daughter. The fear of the number "13" reflects the intertextuality at the mental cultural level. Attitudes of fear towards certain things often lead to hostility towards them. In addition to numbers, the persecution of "witches" also illustrates this point. The "witch hunts" in 16th- and 17th-century Europe occupy a unique place in collective consciousness. As "practitioners of witchcraft" and "conspirators with the devil," witches were often sentenced to death by burning ^[39]. The condemnation and slander of the princess in the stories reflect the hostile attitude towards witches in specific historical contexts, demonstrating the intertextuality of mental culture.

It can be seen that exploring intertextuality at the discourse and cultural levels helps to explore the linguistic characteristics of folktales, summarize the cultural identities of individuals or groups, and promote cultural identification among different individuals or groups. By considering different levels of discourse and culture, it can also be found that there is a close relationship between the two. The discourse level encompasses certain cultural content, and the intertextuality at the cultural level relies on the textual form of language to be expressed. As a carrier of cross-cultural communication, folktales not only demonstrate rich intertextual features at the discourse level, such as literary allusions and clichés, but also reflect the spread and acceptance of stories from different regions in different cultures through different dimensions of material culture, institutional culture, and mental culture.

5. Conclusion

The intertextuality in the research texts is primarily reflected in two aspects: discourse and culture. This study expands the application scope of intertextuality theory by applying it to the cross-cultural study of folktales, providing a new perspective and analytical framework for future research. Revealing the intertextual characteristics of folktales also helps to understand and protect intangible cultural heritage, offering strategies and methods for cross-cultural communication and exchange. However, this paper still has some limitations. For example, the interpretation of intertextuality at the discourse and cultural levels is relatively superficial, and the discussion of the relationship between the two needs to be further strengthened. The research texts mainly focus on European regions, with limited stories from Asia and other regions. In future research, more relevant literature, story variants, and background knowledge will be sought to support the arguments. It is hoped that this paper can provide some reference for subsequent studies.

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