

Discipline and Punishment in Chinese Children's Songs

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the implicit contents of Chinese children's songs and exhibit the unspoken rules in them. This study began by discussing the importance of nursery rhymes. Every child has his or her own distinctive features, and these characteristics are developed by different educational systems. Children's infancy is a golden period that needs most care and instruction, and nursery rhymes certainly occupy an irreplaceable position. This paper suggested four major factors Chinese nursery rhymes influence children unknowingly: animism, reduplication, collectivism, and appreciation of brutality. This research summarized some of the relevant Chinese children's songs in support of setting up institutions that contribute to children's cognitive development. It clarifies the standards and punishments which nursery rhymes have established. If children refuse to submit to the commandments in nursery rhymes, they should take responsibility for their behaviors like shoulder physical injuries and spiritual impairment. Alarming warnings is a keynote of this paper because they not only cause a reaction, but also call to action effectively. This paper concluded that the crisis in nursery rhymes could be a favorable turn if parents take advantage of it. In other words, children could benefit from nursery rhymes if parents make the right choice on option and interpretation.

Key words: Nursery rhymes, Chinese culture, Education

Nowadays, many parents read bedtime stories or sing nursery rhymes to their children every night, and these fairy tales and lullabies are multi-functional materials which help children to grow up through fantasy and eternal truths. According to *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* written by Bruno Bettelheim, “a child needs to understand what is going on within his conscious self so that he can also cope with that which goes on in his unconscious” (7) and “The child needs most particularly to be given suggestions in symbolic form about how he may deal with these issues and grow safely into maturity” (8).

Several studies have been conducted on issues related to the dark sides of European seemingly bright tales and lighthearted songs. For instance, “the prince and the princess lived happily ever after” is a typical cliché which ends as many fairy tales do. In fact, the reality may prick the bubble of people who live in an imaginary world knowing that the happy ending does not really exist. Two well-known psychoanalysts, Erich Fromm and Bruno Bettelheim, claim that a story everyone knows, Little Red Riding Hood, which originated from *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* “concerns an adolescent’s confrontation with adult sexuality”; besides, the hidden meaning is shown by symbols of this folk tale (qtd.in Robert Darnton 3). Another example is “My mother has killed me” in Mother Goose nursery rhymes:

My mother has killed me,
My father is eating me,
My brothers and sisters sit under the table,
Picking up my bones,
And they bury them under the cold marble stones.

This creepy content is wrapped up by its merry background music. Therefore, it proves that no matter which fairy stories are told or which children’s songs are chanted, they are just like the sugar-coated poison which engages children’s attention

with modest storytelling and delightful melodies.

However, quite a few studies have been directly done on emphasizing behind obligatory regulations or causing a warning of potential threats in Chinese fictitious stories and children's songs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the mental effect of Chinese children's songs in disciplining children to behave themselves and how these nursery rhymes build up spiritual and intellectual developmental systems. Children's songs are double-faced, that is, they have delightful and warm background music with spooky lyrics. This may misguide naïve children to conceive these folk songs are melodic tunes that evoke happiness and satisfaction while they are more cruel and sophisticated aspects. In response to this problem, this study is devoted in the hope of providing interpretation of dangerous outcomes and certain fates in classic Chinese children's songs. Most importantly, this study aims to investigate what criteria Chinese children's songs have established and show the evidence of punishments they would implement if anybody fails to follow the standard.

I. The Impact of Parenting with Nursery Rhymes

Speaking of preschool education it is well-known that parental involvement holds the strongest power in this field. Parenting is a tricky and subtle task for most of the parents, and it occupies an important position in their children's early education. Jerome Kagan, an American psychologist, points out how parents affect children based on three main ways which are "direct interaction, emotional identification and transmission of family stories" (164). He elaborates on every mechanism. Additionally, Kagan mentions that parents' direct interaction has "greatest effect on intellectual development and character traits". The second and third mechanism, parental emotional recognition and the conveyance of family accomplishments have "a greater influence on children's confidence or doubt about his/her talent" (166). It is

evident that parenting has enormous impact on the child's perspective on future success or failure.

Due to parenting is very crucial in children's infancy, parents should be cautious about which styles they will engage. Besides, childhood education has a strong connection in forming personality and nursery rhymes are matters for the cultivation of children's good qualities. Xu Si Ying (徐思穎) asserts that implicative lyrics of nursery rhymes can be deepened and rooted in children's mind to make personality develop smoothly and positively. Additionally, Xu categorizes various Chinese children's songs and specifies which of them should be recited in different age stages based on Erikson's previous four stages of psychosocial development (78). Xu declares that mothers can sing lullabies which have words like "love you" and "protect you" to pacify babies in the first stage, a period to establish trust. The second stage is about children's independence and awareness of shame, so parents can chant songs reflect life experiences and include reduplication that children can easily follow and hum (80). Parents should choose nursery rhymes sustain abundant words because children's comprehension of rhymes had greatly advanced among the third stage which develops children's self-motivation and feeling of guilty (81). The fourth stage is a period of deciding whether children are active or passive, hence except for complexity rhymes should resonate with positive values to encourage them to think and have a sense of responsibility (82). According to Xu's points of view, it can be inferred that nursery rhymes can be regarded as a resourceful educational material, and they are a significant element between adults and infants' conversation.

As a matter of fact, nursery rhymes initially are not as innocent as people think. Elaine Danielson defines nursery rhymes as "verses customarily told or sung to small children" (3). Nevertheless, she suggests that most children ballads are "originally composed for adult entertainment" and they were considered to be inappropriate for

children in seventeenth century England because “adult perceptions saw brutality, dishonesty, and irresponsibility” (4). Furthermore, Danielson keeps emphasizing on the importance of nursery rhymes, and also points out four benefits of learning nursery rhymes which include the competence of learning language’s intonation patterns, new terms and concepts, comprehension of basic reading and writing, and the appreciative ability toward poetry (7). Susan Partridge generalizes about how nursery rhymes have effects upon children’s learning competence. She mentions that children’s deep-seated interest in rhymes will facilitate their linguistic acquisition. Besides, Partridge claims that children’s songs “provide many thought-provoking questions, and they stimulate the imagination and creativity” (7). It is proved that preschool children are sensitive to nursery rhymes. Therefore, Partridge argues that children’s recognition of nursery rhymes “can be their path to read and enjoy it if handled properly by their teachers and parents” (11).

As mentioned previously, nursery rhymes need to be filtered by adults and send the right messages to children. Children’s songs are penetrating in children’s lives, and they are also shared with adults because they are chanted during growing process to transit naïve children to sophisticated adults. Therefore, children’s songs have hidden meanings which consisted of adults’ thoughts in some particular aspects. However, the situation could be more formidable. According to *BBC News*, it is mentioned that “nursery rhymes put kids at risk” because they “send dangerously inaccurate messages to young listeners.” On the basis of journal of *Canadian Medical Association*’s finding, it is examined that lyrics of nursery rhymes contain dangerous subtext. In addition, these rhymes are “often recited to children, but little thought is given to their content” (Sarah M. Giles, Sarah Shea 1295). Based on the standpoints of *BBC News* and *Canadian Medical Journal*, words of nursery rhymes should be on guard because they are inclined to become catastrophes.

On account of being insecure and seemingly nonsensical in lyrics, nursery rhymes are not considered to contain literary quality for the most part. Nonetheless they belong to children literature. Children literature is a general and integrated term which refers to variety of compositional genres to children. Fu Lin Tong (傅林統), an educationist, clarifies that a nursery rhyme is “a song exists in children’s life and also an earliest song for children to learn” (323). Fu separates nursery rhymes into culture inheritance and literary creation based on the distinction of functions (91). Another scholar Xu Yi Zong (許義宗) classifies children literature according to its forms, and he ranks nursery rhymes within the field of verses (Fu 88). What is more, Fu emphasizes on educative characters in children literature by indicating Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, the eighteen century French writer, because of her resolute stance for leading children’s thoughts and behaviors and patching children’s defects appropriately through conversation at the same time (67). Fu declares that emotion and knowledge are two main indirect experiences which children could obtain from literature, and former one intensely influences children’s mind to enrich children’s imagination and feelings while latter one cultivates children’s power of judging and thinking to improve their own values (73). Besides, Fu comments that real children literature should evoke potential wisdom and morality in children’s consciousness (71). All in all, it is quite clear that nursery rhymes are integral parts in childhood, and these songs embody the spirit of adulthood simultaneously.

II. Persona Buildup: Correction in Infantile Chants

As a saying goes “Spare the rod, spoil the child.” However, not everyone agrees with this proverb, so what are the proper solutions in nurturing the child? More often than not, when it comes to parenting it turns out to be the point at issue. Some parents hold the conviction of love and concern, while others are supporters of strictness and discipline. Actually there are no right and wrong of these two beliefs in education, but

they are evaluated by whether both of the child's outer behaviors and inner thinking are growing positively and normally. The better parents at handling the development of children, the easier children cope with their own problems in the future. Obviously, the literature infusion in childhood is the fastest and most efficient mechanism to give knowledge to the child and infect them directly. This section attempts to analyze the elements of those songs which take important roles in Chinese children's childhood and examine how these nursery rhymes generate chemical changes in children's progression. In short, this section decodes the intangible messages in Chinese children's songs. Lastly, by appreciation of nursery rhymes, not only sentimental element can be dug out, but cultural genes will emerge from unseen ideology in different countries.

Except for entertaining, the main purpose of nursery rhymes is utilizing various forms in music and lyrics to convey identical concepts to the child's mind. Nonetheless, the interpretation of children's songs could be different from person to person because of diverse gender, age, perspective, and especially cultural inheritance. Therefore, the conveyance of nursery rhymes requires much attention and concern to assure children of the accuracy of cognitive development, and it should avoid going beyond children's ability and hypercorrection when adults want children to conform their behaviors to the rules or customs of society. In accordance with Chinese culture, Chinese people value the morality of life and strong attachment between family members. As a result, ethical subjects or parents' anticipations are inserted into Chinese nursery rhymes. In these songs when the child fails to obey the regulations, he or she deserved to be punished for the sake of creating positive personalities. One typical example is *Auntie Tigress*, which is derived from the folktale:

It has been long time ago, my mommy told me so.

In the very deep of night, Auntie Tigress would show up.

Crybaby had better stop weeping, or she will bite your little ears.

Naughty guy had better go to sleep, or she will bite your little fingers.

I still remember, I still remember, I closed my eyes and said,

Auntie Tigress please don't bite me, good kid has fallen asleep.

This well-known song narrates the story of the evil spirit of tiger transforms into an old lady to deceive children and devour them. Mostly parents use this horrible chant to persuade their kids of stopping crying and going to bed immediately. The tigress in this song and the wolf in *Red Riding Hood* are different tunes played with equal skill. Both wolf and tigers are ferocious animals, and the clear-cut images of them cast an intense power upon children. Thus, children can connect the tiger with the monster which bares fangs and brandishes claws. Deep in the night creates a dark, silent, and dreadful atmosphere. "Bite ears" is the punishment for the child who cries on every occasion or whines all the time. "Bite fingers" is the punishment for the child who refuses to sleep. Specific penalties dominate over children and generate fears, so children choose to follow what parents have sung to them for the sake of protecting themselves. Little by little, the child would understand that holding back tears and closing their eyes are ways to survive. Once kids believe in the punishments of this nursery rhyme, they convert the fears into discipline.

Conventional wisdom holds that Animism is the attribution of a living soul to plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomenon. Children rely on their own imaginations to endow consciousness and sensibilities to characters in nursery rhymes no matter whether these characters are alive or not. The lyrics of *Auntie Tigress* describe an evil spiritual tiger disguises itself as a human and eats human being. The tiger with human looks represents that animals can have conversation with kids, and think of many strategies to seduce children to become their delicious cuisine. Another Chinese children's song which has to do with Animism is *A Fawn*:

A log cabin in the woods, a fawn stands at the window and looks out.

A poor lamb run desperately, knocks the door urgently.

Help me! Help me! Save me! That hunter wants to kill me.

Come on in! You poor lamb, I can provide you a shelter.

A fawn stands in the front of window in a log cabin, and it seems that he lost in thought. All of a sudden, a lamb runs to the cabin and asks for help. She looks like a damsel in distress. Because the hunter wants to hunt the lamb, her life is at stake. At the last, the fawn decides to provide the lamb with assistance to save her. Both portraits of the fawn and the lamb are vivid, so the child can draw a mental picture of two leading roles and realize the predicament. The song aims to inspire the sympathy and empathy of kids, and tell kids that people shouldn't be indifferent and should stand in others shoes when someone who is in need of the help. However, if looking at the reverse side, due to the lack of crisis consciousness, the punishment of the lamb is to put herself in danger. A sharp warning is shown directly in the chant and it can make children introspect if their mindsets toward different events happening in their daily lives are in the right way. Step by step, the cognitive development of children is enhanced. In addition, children become more mature and they become capable of possessing more knowledge of social life.

Children are pure and their minds are as clean as white walls. If they are colored or even tainted, the involvement and interference of adults are confirmed. An Italian physician and educator, Maria Montessori, remarks on a child's mind can "absorb knowledge quickly and effortlessly" and proclaims that "the child from birth to six years has an 'absorbent mind' ("The Montessori Dictionary")." In other words, the child's brain is compared to a sponge which incorporates information altogether and convert them to be his or her frame of reference. Therefore, the problem brings about a complex issue that is how much adult intervention should fit in for children's

learning environment. What is more, constructing a health, honest and real world for children is a rather fundamental assignment for parents. Adults have responsibility to straighten children's behaviors if they are not walking on the right way. One invisible and influential path is through nursery rhymes to make children obedient or even self-disciplined. *I am Willing to Be a Good Child* is a Chinese children's song which offers evident conditions about being a well-beloved person:

I am willing to be a good child, keep myself tidy and full of energy.

Wherever I go, everybody loves me, everybody loves me.

I am willing to be a good child, study hard and work hard.

Wherever I go, everybody loves me, everybody loves me.

The repetition of "I am willing to be a good child" has the function of brainwashing. Children inject the sentence to their heads, and gradually turn it into their mindset whenever they sing the song. Besides, being neat, vigorous and diligent are requirements of becoming popular. The child would realize that he or she could not be considered as a good person until he or she owns these satisfactory characteristics. "Everybody loves me" becomes an incentive for children to behave themselves without adults' commands. Supposed parents want to emphasize the points, they could give children assistance to look at the other side of the coin which being slack and filthy would make friends or peers stay away from them. The allusive principles are established to drill children in dignity and being hard-working.

Nursery rhymes may have either positive or negative affections. Chinese culture has powerful influences over Chinese children's songs in some sense. As a result, Chinese children's songs have control over children's mentality in terms of reduplication. Chinese people pay much attention to the ethic and interdependence between human beings. Moreover, Chinese culture values relationships between family members and even people's loyalty toward their own country under

collectivism. Spontaneously, the concept of guard home or defend the country were instilled in the Chinese children's songs. One well-known chant which shows perfect demonstration of patriotic spirit is *As Long As I Grow Up*:

... My neighbors are so honorable, fight for the well-being of our people,

Kill enemies with great bravery, with no fear of decease

Do it, do it, I will kill the enemy, too.

As long as I grow up, as long as I grow up.

Revolutionary soldiers are so honorable, shout for the virtue of our country

Risk lives to kill the enemy, make sacrifice for our country

Do it, do it, I will kill the bandits, too.

As long as I grow up, as long as I grow up.

The appreciation of those people who serve in the military exaggerates soldiers' merits and achievements. Violence, cruelty, and bloody scenes seem to be praised as brave deeds. "As long as I grow up" embodies a child's strong sense of duty to protect his own country, while this emerges the problem that children turn out to be captives of politics and wars. Because children naturally internalize soldiers' obligation of keeping an eye on their nation, they believe in unseen disciplinary standards. Without capacity of recognizing beautified and rationalized brutality in lyrics, children accept all the warlike messages and eventually have difficulty to eliminate the faith branded in their minds. Transparent logic in easy-memorized lyrics with simple melody gives a punch in the child's head. The song is chanted repeat and repeat again by parents, and children pay little attention to possessing their own ideas and only focus on the results in lyrics. As a passive recipient, the child does not understand that these lines can be a beginning of cognition. The advantage is that this rhyme can shape up patriotism in children's unconsciousness, but children become cold-blooded and inhuman little by little because they are penetrated with beliefs of slaughter and

salvation. Furthermore, children do not know they are losing egos and not able to filter the messages which mold them into an acrimonious person.

Undeniably, nursery rhymes feature very largely in constructing children's mental landscapes. Once children feel a sense of responsibility and guilty after knowing the bad consequences, they appear to be under control no matter how disobedient they are. However, adults' expectancy in lyrics could have counter-effect if behavior modification beyond the range of children's acceptance. For instance, children may easily under illusion that all animals are fierce or barbarous behaviors are reasonable. Therefore, children's fixation in thinking is hard to break down. In general, Chinese children's songs imperceptibly hypnotize children into following everything which these songs have already said; even so, children in a state of chaos should be put in order. Finally, nursery rhymes are productions of culture, and cultural inheritance is compulsory for every country and generation.

Conclusion

This paper has been concerned primarily with unfolding the doctrinal setting in Chinese children's songs and revealing connotations of penalties in these songs. Nursery rhymes are basic units in stimulating infantile sentimental emotion. In spite of the fact that parents inevitably need to educate children with musical assistance, parents are likely put their children into threatening conditions due to careless and improper disposition of nursery rhymes. Nursery rhymes employ children's sensibilities which mingle with imagination to reach consensus in thinking. So far Chinese children's songs have created a deep-rooted pattern of what a so-called role model should be. Regardless of concrete specification or unobvious dictates in lyrics, the standards in Chinese children's songs tell children to be submissive, upright, warmhearted, and so on. However, children's failure in abiding by regulations would bring certain chastisements. They may get hurt, feel shame or be blackballed, and so

forth. What is more, nursery rhymes do not only sneak in children's mind, but also accommodate them to the society in the future. On the whole, only choosing an adequate nursery rhyme with suitable explanation can ensure children against unintended attack of nursery rhymes, and parents should assure children of physical and mental health until they are full-grown.

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