

ANCIENT CHINESE NURSERY RHYMES AND THEIR CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS

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Abstract. Nursery rhymes represent a distinctive cultural phenomenon with a longstanding history of circulation in China. Beyond their role in early childhood education, these rhymes have historically functioned as a vehicle for expressing public opinion on dynastic shifts and political events in ancient Chinese society, as well as a primary medium for imparting knowledge and moral values to children. This study explores the evolution of ancient Chinese nursery rhymes, uncovering the traditional ways of life, festival customs, and spiritual beliefs embedded within them. From a cultural perspective, nursery rhymes serve not only as linguistic tools for social learning but also as systematic reflections of regional and ethnic cultures at the linguistic level.

Keywords: Chinese nursery rhymes, children, prognostication, religious beliefs, political life, Confucian culture

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1. Introduction

Nursery rhymes are songs traditionally sung by children, characterized by simple language, rhythmic patterns, and the use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, personification, and exaggeration (Editorial Committee of the Encyclopedia of China 1998: 137). These rhymes convey children's perceptions and interpretations of nature, society, and life. Nursery rhymes as a repository of linguistic treasures, rich with the expressions of human knowledge (Zhu 1987: 168). The documentation

of Chinese nursery rhymes extends back over a thousand years; for example, the Kang Qu rhyme (康衢童谣) recorded in *Liezi* (《列子》) dates to the eras of Yao (尧) and Shun (舜) (circa 2100 BCE to 2070 BCE) (Lie 2018: 133). Ancient Chinese nursery rhymes reflect the customs and values of Chinese culture, functioning as both a distillation and an embodiment of national heritage. These rhymes encompass diverse elements, including philosophy, history, geography, religion, and art.

The distinctive cultural value of ancient Chinese nursery rhymes has drawn considerable interest from foreign officials and scholars over time. In 1896, the Italian official Vitale, B.G. (韦大列) published *Pekiness Rhymes* (《北京的歌谣》), a collection of 170 nursery rhymes from the Beijing region (Vitale 2023). Later, in 1900, American scholar Isaac Taylor Headland (何德兰) compiled *Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes* (《孺子歌图》), which included 152 rhymes (Headland 2017). During the late 19th century, Japanese folklorist Nakae Juju (中根淑) conducted comparative research in *A Study of Rhyme Structures* (《歌谣字数考》) to explore the origins and distinctive features of Chinese nursery rhymes (Zhang 2012: 18).

While existing research has primarily focused on the educational roles of nursery rhymes – such as fostering language skills (Zheng 2011: 171-173), stimulating imagination (Yu and Fu 2015: 53-57) and cultivating aesthetic judgment (Zheng 2017: 70-72) – scholarship examining their cultural dimensions remains limited. To address this gap, this study investigates the cultural connotations embedded in Chinese nursery rhymes.

2. The development of Ancient Chinese nursery rhymes

Historical records indicate that the term ‘nursery rhyme’ first appeared in the *Zuo Zhuan* (《左传》) (Zuo, 1988: 55). During the pre-Qin period (2070–221 BCE), nursery rhymes with prophetic elements were frequently employed by political figures to predict dynastic transitions and indicate the potential rise or decline of ruling powers. For example,

檠弧箕服，实亡周国
Yǎn hú jī fú, shí wáng Zhōu guó.

*The man who sold bows and arrows,
Made of mulberry wood,
Was the one who brought down the Zhou,
And caused the kingdom's fall for good.*

The *Historical Records (Shiji)* (《史记》) recounts a story involving King Xuan of Zhou (周宣王) and a prophetic nursery rhyme foretelling danger. Alarmed by the rhyme, King Xuan ordered the elimination of all individuals involved in the sale of bows and arrows made from mulberry wood. Among these sellers was a couple who, fearing for their safety, fled after selling mulberry bows and arrow bags. During their escape, they discovered an abandoned baby girl. They felt compassion, adopted the child and continued their journey to the state of Bao (褒国), naming her Bao Si (褒姒).

Tragically, the couple later passed away, leaving Bao Si an orphan. Subsequently, a resident of Bao committed a crime and, as an act of atonement, offered Bao Si to the Zhou court. Her beauty captivated King You of Zhou (周幽王), who favored her deeply. After she bore him a son, Bofu (伯服), King You deposed the reigning queen and crown prince to elevate Bao Si as queen and Bofu as the new crown prince. This series of events ultimately fulfilled the prophecy embedded in the nursery rhyme heard during the reign of King Xuan, predicting the downfall of the Zhou dynasty during King You's rule (Zuo 2013: 576).

During the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), nursery rhymes were influenced by the theory of cosmic interaction between divine will and human actions (天人感应) and became intertwined with the 'theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements' (阴阳五行学说). These rhymes continued to serve as tools for predicting dynastic fortunes and interpreting omens of prosperity or misfortune. In *Lunheng (Balanced Discourses)* (《论衡》), Wang Chong (王充) documented that:

Nursery rhymes were believed to be influenced by the essence of Mars, compelling children to sing them. Wang Chong attributed some validity to this belief, suggesting that Mars, as a celestial body, emits a 'toxic light' linked to ominous signs. According to this perspective, when Mars occupies the Heart Constellation, calamities and misfortunes are thought to descend upon the state. The fiery and volatile nature of Mars' energy causes these signs to appear intermittently.

The Hong Fan (《洪范》) notes that fire holds the second position among the Five Elements, while speech occupies the second position among the Five Matters; both are classified as belonging to yang energy. This association led to nursery rhymes and poetry being perceived as forms of ominous expression. Once spoken, these words became recorded texts, manifesting as 'strange phenomena' documented in written form. Furthermore, children were also associated with yang energy and were therefore regarded as the originators of these ominous expressions (Wang 1990: 217).

世谓童谣，荧惑使之，彼言有所见也。荧惑火星，火有毒荧，故当荧惑守宿，国有祸败。《洪范》五行二曰火。五事二曰言。言、火同气，故童谣、诗歌为妖言。言出文成，故世有文书之怪。世谓童子为阳，故妖言出于小童。

In Wang Chong's view, changes in Mars' position signaled adverse events for the state, and nursery rhymes were prophetic utterances channeled through children under the influence of Mars. Many of Wang's contemporaries similarly believed that, despite their innocence and limited understanding, children possessed an inexplicable ability to perceive events beyond their direct experience. Consequently, nursery rhymes were regarded not as mere spontaneous chants of children but as expressions of divine will. Through children as intermediaries, Heaven was believed to foreshadow either calamities or blessings (Wang 1990: 217).

During the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 CE), the perceived mystical power of nursery rhymes not only persisted but intensified, becoming even more deeply ingrained in societal beliefs. It was widely believed that Heaven communicated its decrees through nursery rhymes, serving as warnings to rulers. This belief was encapsulated in the saying, ‘What Heaven perceives mirrors what the common people perceive, and what Heaven hears reflects what the common people hear’ (天视自有民视，天听自有民听) (Zhou 2012: 436). According to the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (《三国志》),

After being appointed as Left Prime Minister, Sun Hao (孙皓) relocated the capital to Wuchang (武昌) and commanded the people of Yangzhou (扬州) to transport supplies upstream to sustain the new capital. This directive, compounded by several ill-conceived policies, inflicted severe hardships on the population, driving many into poverty. In response, a nursery rhyme arose, reflecting the people’s suffering:

宁饮建业水，不食武昌鱼。宁还建业死，不止武昌居。

Níng yǐn Jiànyè shuǐ, bù shí Wǔchāng yú. Níng huán Jiànyè sǐ, bù zhǐ Wǔchāng jū.

‘I would rather drink the water of Jianye (建业) than eat the fish of Wuchang; I would rather die in Jianye than live in Wuchang.’

This rhyme was interpreted as a manifestation of Heaven’s disapproval. The metaphor equating life in Wuchang with death symbolized both the will of Heaven and the people’s anguish (Chen 2009: 624).

孙皓立，迁左丞相，皓时徙都武昌，扬土百姓，泝流供给，以为患苦，又政事多谬，黎元穷匮。且童谣言：宁饮建业水，不食武昌鱼。宁还建业死，不止武昌居。荧惑作妖，童谣之言，生于天心，乃以安居而比死，足明天意，知民所苦也。

Historical records indicate that these nursery rhymes were frequently regarded as celestial omens. The ‘ominous movement of Mars’ (荧惑作妖) was particularly believed to amplify the rhymes’ warnings, urging rulers to heed the grievances of the people to avoid incurring divine retribution. When events aligned with the rhymes’ predictions, their perceived supernatural origins were further validated.

In subsequent eras, politicians came to recognize the influential power of nursery rhymes and began leveraging them to shape public opinion and align them with contemporary political events. A notable example from the Sui Dynasty (581–618 CE) was the rhyme:

桃李子，得天下
Táo lǐ zǐ, dé tiānxià.

A person bearing the surname Li shall attain dominion over the realm.

In the Sui political context, such rhymes were far from mere children's entertainment; they were imbued with symbolic meaning related to political transitions. The surname 'Li' symbolized emerging forces and virtuous individuals, while 'attain dominion over the realm' alluded to the rise of a new regime (Wei 1973). As a result, nursery rhymes during this period evolved into layered expressions of social sentiment and political prophecy.

By the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), the educational role of nursery rhymes became increasingly prominent, reintegrating into children's daily lives. With the growth of the commodity economy and the expansion of the urban middle class, popular culture flourished, giving rise to a vibrant tradition of folk literature. As part of this tradition, nursery rhymes gradually shifted away from political themes and became more closely associated with everyday life. This evolution prompted scholars to explore their educational value. For example, Zhu Xi (朱熹) collected and compiled nursery rhymes to teach children fundamental cultural knowledge, practical skills, and moral principles through chant and repetition (Zhu 2023).

During the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE), nursery rhymes further distanced themselves from the religious framework of the 'theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements', aligning more closely with children's daily experiences. Two primary factors contributed to this transformation. First, strict legal measures prohibited the exploitation of children's voices to spread superstitions or rumors for personal gain. According to *The Laws of the Ming Dynasty* (《大明律》):

Anyone who creates prophecy books, superstitious texts, or misleads the public with falsehoods, or circulates such materials to deceive others, will be sentenced to death. Whether the individual is a primary offender or accomplice, they will be equally punished (Zhang 2023: 402).

凡造讖纬、妖书、妖言及传用惑众者皆斩。皆者，谓不分首从，一体科罪。

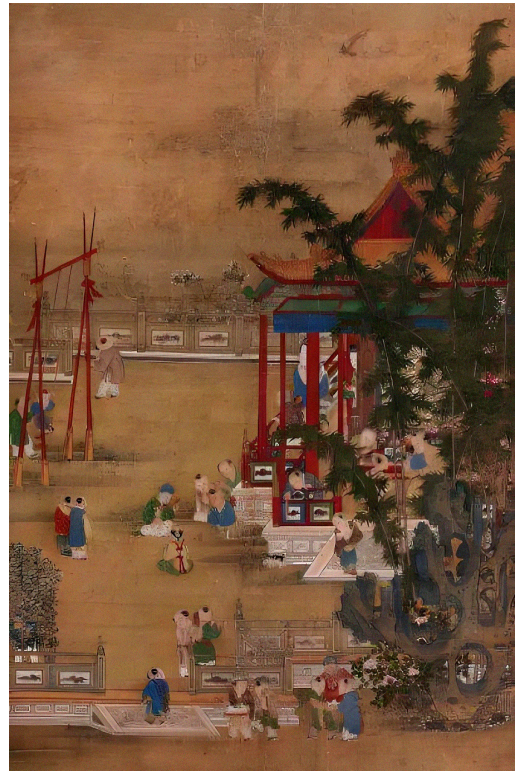


Figure 1. Scenes of children playing during the Ming Dynasty.

These stringent laws resulted in a marked decline in the use of nursery rhymes for superstitious or political purposes (Figure 1).

Second, Ming intellectuals placed significant emphasis on children's education. Wang Yangming (王阳明), for instance, criticized rigid, traditional teaching methods and advocated for innovative approaches that fostered a more positive and engaging learning environment. He argued,

When educating children, it is essential to cultivate a sense of joy, allowing them to develop a natural motivation for learning. When children are filled with happiness and enthusiasm, they progress independently, and their efforts become self-sustaining. This process resembles the nurturing effect of spring rain and gentle breezes on plants and trees, encouraging them to sprout, grow, and thrive gradually and naturally. Conversely, if education resembles frost – suppressing a child's spirit – it can quickly drain their vitality, ultimately stunting their potential and leading to its eventual withering (Wang 2012: 174).

今教童子，必使其趋向鼓舞，中心喜悦，则其进自不能已，譬之时雨春风，沾被卉木，莫不萌动发越，自然日长月化，若冰霜剥落，则生意萧索，日就枯槁矣。

Wang emphasized the use of nursery rhymes and poetry as effective tools for educating children, highlighting their ability to inspire natural enthusiasm and inner joy. Similarly, Lü Kun (吕坤), in his work *Children's Songs* (《演小儿语》), documented the educational value of nursery rhymes and their positive impact on children's learning.

Amidst the cheer and laughter, nursery rhymes seamlessly integrate the study of principles, ethics, and the cultivation of both body and mind. When a child absorbs these values, they naturally influence their peers. Lessons learned in childhood offer lifelong benefits, nurturing a deep and lasting understanding of the world (Lü 2003: 7).

是欢呼戏笑之间，莫非理义身心之学，一儿习之，可谓诸儿流布；童时习之，可谓终身体认。

During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 AD), nursery rhymes became deeply embedded in daily life, aligning closely with early childhood education and serving as an indispensable tool for children's learning. Qing scholar Lu Shiyi (陆世仪) criticized the widespread disregard for nursery rhymes in early education and strongly advocated for their value. He argued,

In early childhood, few children fail to enjoy singing and dancing, as these are natural expressions of the harmonious sounds of the world and the dynamic rhythms of cosmic forces, marking the origins of rites and music. The sages harnessed song and dance to convey the principles of rites and

music, embodying the idea of teaching in harmony with the natural flow of circumstances. In contrast, contemporary education often struggles to strike a balance: permissive approaches risk fostering indulgence and chaos, while excessively rigid methods suppress children's innate tendencies. Both approaches deviate from the sages' original intent in teaching rites and music. Thus, the challenge of effectively guiding children remains as pressing as ever (Chen 2015: 39).

人少小时，未有不好歌舞者。盖天籁之发，天机之动，歌舞即礼乐之渐也。圣人因其歌舞而教之礼乐，所谓因势利导之。今之教子，宽者或流放荡，严者或并遏其天机，皆不识圣人礼乐之意。欲蒙养之端，难矣！

Wu Zhao'ao (伍兆鳌) also observed the importance of simple songs in early childhood, noting:

Young children have yet to grasp complex ideas and attempts to impose such teachings often meet resistance. Simple and accessible songs, however, allow them to listen with enjoyment and recite effortlessly. As children play, they take pride in their ability to sing along, finding joy in memorization (Gao 1992: 951).

幼稚之年未识道理，强而聒之，非所乐闻，惟俚俗之歌，入耳而不烦，上口则不逆，嬉戏之余，使其侣相唱相和，以能诵为高，强记为乐。

In *Collection of Heavenly Sounds* (《天籁集》), Zheng Xudan (郑旭旦) further mentioned:

Children's singing and laughter follow a natural flow, reflecting innocence and harmony. Their emotions are sincere, and the principles they express are fundamental, shaping human nature and social customs (Zheng 1929: 5).

儿童歌笑，任天而动，自然合节，故情为真情，其理为至理，而人心风俗即准于此。

These works reflect Qing scholars' strong emphasis on the educational value of nursery rhymes. Moreover, the period saw the publication of numerous texts related to nursery rhymes, including *Collection of Heavenly Sounds*, *Expanded Collection of Heavenly Sounds* (《广天籁集》), and *Yue Proverbs* (《越谚》). By the late Qing era, collections specifically dedicated to nursery rhymes, such as *Bai Ben Tang* (《百本堂》) and *Bie Meng Tang* (《别梦堂》), featured 74 Beijing nursery rhymes, highlighting their cultural and educational significance (Jin 2022: 82).

Over millennia of development and evolution, ancient Chinese nursery rhymes have become an enduring and integral aspect of children's lives and education.

3. The multiple cultural dimensions of ancient Chinese nursery rhymes

Traditional Chinese nursery rhymes, as a long-standing form of cultural expression, capture societal transformations and reflect the values and lifestyles of specific historical periods. Blending regional cultural characteristics with practical knowledge rooted in daily life, these rhymes form a rich repository of cultural heritage. Their significance is particularly evident in themes such as politics, culture, education, agriculture, festivals, beliefs, and medical concepts. Serving both as a medium for early childhood education and a vessel of folk wisdom, these rhymes offer valuable insights into ancient perspectives on nature, society, and human experience.

3.1. The political culture embodied in ancient nursery rhymes

In ancient China, limited access to formal education often prevented the broader population from fully engaging with the structured moral teachings of the Confucian classics. To achieve the goal of ‘transforming customs and instilling morals among the people’ (化民成俗), local officials turned to nursery rhymes as an accessible medium for moral instruction. Simple in structure, easy to memorize, and often sung, these rhymes aligned well with the cognitive abilities of the general populace and spread rapidly through society. By praising virtuous individuals, these rhymes encouraged the emulation of exemplary behavior, gradually shaping societal values and norms.

Ancient Chinese nursery rhymes frequently celebrated diligent and benevolent officials, reflecting a governance model centered on public welfare. For instance, the rhyme ‘Xiao He (萧何) made the laws clear and bright; Cao Shen (曹参) followed, keeping them right. With peace and calm, the people thrived, and harmony in society survived’ (萧何为法，讲若画一。曹参代之，守而勿失。载其清静，民以宁壹。。Xiāo Hé wéi fǎ, jiǎng ruò huà yī. Cáo Cān dài zhī, shǒu ér wù shī. Zài qí qīng jìng, mín yǐ níng yī.) (Guo, 2003: 715), extols the political ideals of Chancellor Xiao He and his successor Cao Shen. Their non-interventionist governance (无为而治) contributed to a stable and prosperous society.

Similarly, a rhyme recorded in the *Ming Poetry Anthology* (《明诗综》) proclaims:

冯太守，来何迟。胥吏瘠，百姓肥。

Féng tàishǒu, lái hé chí. Xūlǐ jí, bǎixìng fěi.

Governor Feng, the people await; with you in charge, corruption abates.
Under your care, prosperity grows, and peace among the people flows
(Zhu, 1993: 1684).

This rhyme praises the integrity of Governor Feng, whose administration curtailed corruption and fostered prosperity.

Another rhyme, celebrating the benevolent rule of Suzhou (苏州) Governor Kuang Zhong (况钟), states:

况太守，民父母。众怀思，因去后。愿复来，养田叟。

Kuàng tàishǒu, mín fùmǔ, zhòng huái sī, yīn qù hòu. Yuàn fù lái, yǎng tián sǒu.

Governor Kuang, the people's guide, left, and he was missed far and wide. People yearned for his return to care for all beneath the skies (Du, 1992: 656).

These rhymes demonstrate how moral instruction and political ideals were interwoven into folk culture, reinforcing the values of integrity, diligence, and public service.

These nursery rhymes reflect the public's admiration for virtuous officials while serving as a tool for moral education. They reinforce values such as loyalty, justice, and benevolence, contrasting these virtues with corruption and misconduct. By encouraging the public to recite such rhymes, officials subtly instilled moral standards and social norms, embedding ethical principles into everyday life.

Conversely, nursery rhymes also functioned as a medium for expressing public sentiment, particularly during times of political oppression or perceived injustice. When officials mistreated the populace, these rhymes became an effective tool for voicing dissatisfaction and resistance. Their simplicity and accessibility – characterized by straightforward language and ease of memorization – enabled them to circulate widely as silent protest.

For instance, the rhyme 'Qian Dongliang (钱东亮), both dog and mule, do not dare to act so cruel. Commit evil again, you'll be chopped like paste. Harm the people, and your life you'll repay' (钱东亮，狗驴长。你休要，太疯狂。再作恶，砍作酱。杀百姓，命要偿。Qián Dōngliàng, gǒu lú zhǎng. Nǐ xiū yào, tài fēngkuáng. Zài zuò è, kǎn zuò jiàng. Shā bǎixìng, mìng yào cháng.) (China 2007: 126) conveys deep resentment and warns against tyrannical behavior. Similarly, 'A thousand miles of grass, the wind blows it down. If it won't blow down, we'll set it ablaze' (千里草，风吹倒。吹不倒，送他一把火。Qiān lǐ cǎo, fēng chuī dǎo. Chuī bù dǎo, sòng tā yī bǎ huǒ.) (China 2007: 340) uses metaphor to curse oppressive figures, with the burning grass symbolizing rebellion against unjust authority.

To evade direct reprisal, these rhymes often employed indirect language and metaphor. The imagery of burning grass, for instance, conveys disdain without explicitly naming individuals, allowing grievances to be expressed covertly. In this way, nursery rhymes became an informal yet pervasive form of protest, enabling the public to critique oppressive governance under the guise of playful verse.

3.2. Nursery rhymes and ancient education

Nursery rhymes have long served as a vital educational tool for children in China, particularly during the Song and Ming dynasties. Educators of these periods recognized the value of engaging children's interest in learning and often harnessed the rhythmic and melodic qualities of nursery rhymes to promote both cognitive and emotional development. These rhymes, characterized by their simplicity and enjoyment, incorporated historical legends, folk tales, and social norms, offering children an accessible gateway to their cultural heritage. Through recitation, children not only cultivated self-awareness and social understanding but also developed a strong cultural identity while learning about the world around them.

As a medium for historical education, nursery rhymes played a dual role: their rhythmic structure aided children in memorizing historical events, while their content subtly conveyed cultural and societal values. For example, the following nursery rhyme employs concise language and smooth rhythm to introduce children to significant figures and events in Chinese history:

盘古帝王位至尊，日月两轮定乾坤；
三皇五帝坐天位，禹王传子子传孙。
天下大孝舜为先，为帝耕田实可怜；
唐尧创起这甲子，女娲炼石补青天。
昏君无道是纣王，商朝妲己败国亡；

.....

明朝一共二十帝，明末崇祯为皇帝；
李闯竹竿打皇城，北斗回南吴三桂。

Pángǔ dìwáng wèi zhìzūn, rìyuè liǎng lún dìng qiánkūn;
sān huáng wǔ dì zuò tiān wèi, Yǔwáng chuán zǐ zǐ chuán sūn.
Tiānxià dàxiào Shùn wéi xiān, wèi dì gēngtián shí kělián;
Táng Yáo chuàngǒ qǐ zhè jiǎzǐ, Nǚwā liàn shí bǔ qīngtiān.
Hūnjūn wúdào shì Zhòu wáng, Shāngcháo Dájǐ bài guó wáng;

.....

Míngcháo yīgòng èrshí dì, Míngmò Chóngzhēn wéi huángdì;
Lǐ Chuǎng zhúgān dǎ huángchéng, Běidǒu huí nán Wú Sāngui.
Pangu, the Supreme Sovereign of All Emperors,
The sun and moon set the land and shores.
Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors reign.
The Xia's throne passed down in chain.
In filial piety, Shun leads all,
Toiled in fields before his call;
Yao's cycle began the sixty-year spin,
Nüwa mended the heavens within.
The tyrant Zhou lacked sense and grace,
Daji brought down Shang's proud place.

.....

The Ming's twenty emperors met their end,
Chongzhen saw the dynasty bend;
Li Zicheng's bamboo rods stormed the gate,
Then Wu Sangui's turn to decide their fate (China 2007: 520).

This rhyme, with its captivating rhythm, serves as a tool for teaching children the fundamental aspects of ancient Chinese history, especially the legendary accounts of its emperors and dynasties. By seamlessly blending entertainment with education, it not only facilitates the retention of historical facts but also shapes children's understanding of power structures, governance principles, and cultural identity. As such, nursery rhymes functioned as an innovative and impactful medium for cultural transmission in the traditional Chinese educational system.

Beyond historical education, nursery rhymes also played a crucial role in instilling daily etiquette and social norms. Unlike the often-didactic tone of adult instruction, the rhythmic and melodic qualities of nursery rhymes capture children's attention, delivering social expectations in an engaging and intuitive way. For instance, a nursery rhyme from Putian (莆田) offers guidance to young girls on proper grooming and decorum when stepping outside:

阿妹阿妹啊，者早吃糜卜去底落？
阿兄吩咐几句话，出门兆扮活。
头兆梳，粉兆抹，胭脂兆涂，目眉兆画。
头钗记得插，耳圈阿立戴。
还有出门少开嘴，怀倘多讲话。
兆记腹肚里，怀倘放耳外。
做虾嘴尖，做狮嘴大。
做鸭嘴扁，做水鸡（青蛙）嘴阔。
做猫狸喵喵，做狗夷喊喊。

A muì a muì gōu, zó lo xiā ma bè kù dā lōu ?
A yē héng nù guí wù wǒ, gié chuāi ne pà wó.
Táo ne xiǔ, hen ne buo, Ēn nī ne dóu, ma báí ne wǒ.
Táo co gí éi cò, hí kén éi ne duò.
Hā wǔ gié chuāi jiǎo kuí cuì, běi lā dó góng wǒ.
Ne gí Bā dōu lì, běi lā bàn hīān wǒ.
Zòu hó cuì jiān, zòu sāi cuì duǒ
Zòu ào bǐ cuì měi, zòu yǎo méi cuì kuó.
Zòu mó lì miáo a miáo, zòu gào yí huò huò.¹
Little sister, where do you go after breakfast today?
Brother has advice for you, so listen close. When you step out, dress with
care, neat from head to toe:

¹ The pinyin annotations for some of the nursery rhymes in the article do not conform to modern Mandarin pinyin standards. Instead, the phonetic notation reflects the pronunciation of the Southern Min dialect spoken in Fujian Province.

Comb your hair, powder soft, let a gentle blush show, Shape your brows
 with grace, give your cheeks a rosy glow.
 Place your hairpin, earrings too, set them with fine skill.
 And remember – speak less, move quietly, calm and still.
 Hold these words in mind, let them not drift away.
 Or your mouth may grow sharp, like a shrimp at play; Wide like a lion's,
 if not softened in shape.
 Flat as a duck's bill, or a frog's awkward gape. When you speak, let it be
 gentle, never loud, never shrill,
 Soft as a kitten's purr, quiet and still – Not like a barking dog; calm words
 hold sway, Grace and kindness are the proper way (Zheng 2022: 126).

Employing vivid metaphors, such as likening the shape of the mouth to a 'shrimp's sharp point' or a 'lion's wide mouth,' this nursery rhyme creatively imparts behavioral norms, cautioning children about the importance of self-control in speech and actions. Its imaginative approach resonates with children, making the lessons both accessible and memorable.

In traditional Chinese society, nursery rhymes transcended their role as simple educational tools, becoming carriers of societal values and moral instruction. They served as vital mediums for embedding Confucian ideals, emphasizing the significance of education and cultural preservation. Passed down orally through generations, these rhymes not only safeguarded individual learning experiences but also cultivated collective wisdom, fostering an environment conducive to personal growth and societal progress. For example, the widely cherished rhyme *The Song of Tomorrow* (《明日歌》) teaches children to value time, reject procrastination, and dedicate themselves to learning in the present moment:

明日复明日，明日何其多。
 我生待明日，万事成蹉跎。
 世人苦被明日累，春去秋来老将至。
 朝看水东流，暮看日西坠。
 百年明日能几何？请君听我明日歌。
 明日复明日，明日何其多！

Míngrì fù míngrì, míngrì héqí duō.
 Wǒ shēng dài míngrì, wànshì chéng cuōtuó.
 Shìrén kǔ bèi míngrì lèi, chūn qù qiū lái lǎo jiāng zhì.
 Zhāo kàn shuǐ dōng liú, mù kàn rì xī zhuì.
 Bǎinián míngrì néng jǐhé? Qǐng jūn tīng wǒ Míngrì Gē.
 Míngrì fù míngrì, míngrì héqí duō!
 Tomorrow and tomorrow, there's always another day;
 Waiting on tomorrow, we let all things slip away.
 The world suffers from tomorrow's lure –
 With spring and fall, old age draws near.
 Morning sees the river flow east,

Evening sees the sun set in the west.
 How many tomorrows in a lifetime remain?
 Listen to my song of tomorrow's refrain:
 Tomorrow and tomorrow, there's always another day
 (Wang 2012: 308-309)!

The repeated refrain of 'how many tomorrows there are' in this nursery rhyme serves as a poignant reminder for children to seize the present moment and commit themselves to learning. By promoting the philosophy that 'now is the best time', the rhyme cultivates an awareness of the value of time and instills a spirit of diligence – qualities deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions. Its enduring influence lies in its ability to cultivate a mindset of discipline and responsibility, which has resonated across generations.

Another prominent nursery rhyme, 'The land is barren, plant pines and cypresses; the family is poor, but the child must study' (地瘦栽松柏, 家贫子读书。Dì shòu zāi sōng bó, jiā pín zǐ dú shū) (Chen 2022: 229), emphasizes the transformative power of education, even in the face of hardship. This rhyme conveys the notion that education is not merely a tool for acquiring knowledge but a crucial means of changing one's destiny. By encouraging children to persevere in their studies despite difficult circumstances, it reinforces a core cultural belief that education holds the key to overcoming adversity. This perspective has profoundly influenced generations of children, inspiring those from disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue learning as a pathway to a brighter future.

3.3. *The agricultural culture reflected in nursery rhymes*

Agriculture was the economic cornerstone of ancient Chinese society, with most of the population relying on farming for their livelihood (Figure 2). Nursery rhymes offer a unique lens to understand the agricultural practices and social customs of this agrarian society. Far from being mere entertainment, these rhymes acted as both an emotional release during the laborious farming process and a means of preserving agricultural knowledge for younger generations.

Many nursery rhymes vividly depict the rhythms of rural life, capturing the interplay between seasonal work, familial roles, and collective cooperation in agricultural communities. For example:

阿公春春, 阿嬷扫扫。
 簸箕簸簸, 鸡囤啄啄。
 府趣府趣。
 A gōng cēn cēn, A ma sāo sào.
 Be nao be be, gēi yē dò dò.
 Wù kù wù kù.

Grandpa pounds rice; Grandma sweeps the floor;
 Winnowing basket worn and torn, Chicks peck the scattered grain –
 What fun, what cheer, what playful scene (Zheng 2022: 43).



Figure 2. Scenes of rural labor in ancient China

This nursery rhyme illustrates the dynamics of a typical farming household, where every family member contributed to daily chores. Its vivid imagery underscores the communal nature of agricultural work and the intergenerational transfer of responsibilities. Another example:

阿公掘田田烂烂，阿妈掘田一身汗。
 老爸掘田腰骨散，娘姐掘田皮肉破。
 大孙会掘三两下，细孙勿会掘茶水扞。
 老人呆仔齐出动，大操靳命为生活。
 A gōng gé cei-ing cei-ing nuo nuo, A ma gé cei-ing se xīn guo.
 A bā gé cei-ing yáo ōng suò, niǎo lèi gé cei-ing pú ne pò.
 Duǒ lēn ēi gé só nòng gò, seī lēn bēi yào gé dó ruì guàng.
 Lǎo nán dǎi ā zéi chē dòng, duǒ cāo gěi mǐn wěi sei-ing wo.
 Grandfather tills the fields with skill,

Grandmother works with sweat to fill.
 Father feels his back grow sore, Mother's hands are rough, once more.
 Brother digs with a couple of strikes, younger brother serves tea,
 despite the hikes.
 Elders and children together stand, working as one, hand in hand
 (Zheng 2022: 43).

While children may not have engaged in heavy labor, they actively participated in the household environment by performing lighter tasks, such as preparing tea or digging small holes in imitation of adults. These seemingly playful activities served as informal vocational training, subtly preparing children for future responsibilities.

In this rural setting, the household doubled as a workplace and an informal learning environment. Through observation and active participation, children absorbed not only agricultural practices but also social norms and a strong work ethic, values that became integral to their upbringing. Nursery rhymes reinforced these lessons by embedding collective wisdom and practical knowledge, ensuring the continuity of agricultural traditions across generations.

Beyond their educational role, nursery rhymes also functioned as records of agricultural practices and seasonal knowledge. They encapsulated valuable insights into effective farming techniques and the rhythms of rural life, as exemplified in the following verses:

清明谷雨，冻死老鼠。
春分秋分，昼夜齐分。
雷霆未惊蛰，下雨四十日。
芒种夏至，不便出去。
大暑小暑，热死老鼠。
Qīngmíng Gǔyǔ, dòng sǐ lǎoshǔ.
Chūnfēn Qiūfēn, zhòuyè qí fēn.
Léitíng wèi Jīngzhé, xià yǔ sìshí rì.
Mángzhòng Xiàzhì, bù biàn chūqù.
Dàshǔ Xiǎoshǔ, rè sǐ lǎoshǔ.

Qingming, Guyu, the cold kills the mice,
Spring and Autumn Equinox, day and night slice.
Before Jiezu's thunder, forty days of rain,
Grain in Ear, Summer Solstice – stay inside, refrain.
Great Heat, Minor Heat, the mice feel the burn and never return
(Liu 1932: 157-158).

These rhymes helped farmers and their families track vital seasonal changes and weather patterns, which were crucial for determining the timing of planting and harvesting. For example, the rhyme:

枇杷黄，医生忙。
橘子黄，医生藏。
萝卜上场，医生还乡。
Pípá huáng, yīshēng máng.
Júzi huáng, yīshēng cáng.
Luóbo shàngchǎng, yīshēng huánxiāng.

When loquats ripen, doctors become busy.
When oranges ripen, doctors seem less busy.

When radishes are in season, doctors take a break and return to their hometowns (Zhou 2017: 13).

This rhyme employs the seasonal availability of fruits and vegetables to vividly depict how practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine adjust their workload throughout the year. This rhyme not only highlights the cyclical nature of agricultural production but also reflects the interplay between seasonal rhythms and the practice of medicine.

In conclusion, agricultural nursery rhymes serve as a valuable medium for transmitting agricultural knowledge and social customs. They emphasize hard work, a value deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Chinese society. As children recite these rhymes, they unconsciously absorb practical information about farming techniques, seasonal changes, and collective responsibilities. This process helps preserve and pass down the collective wisdom of agrarian life across generations.

3.4. Nursery rhymes and Chinese festival beliefs

Festivals are profound embodiments of national consciousness, intricately woven into the cultural fabric of society. They are not only pivotal components of social life but also act as vessels for transmitting Chinese cultural heritage. The beliefs tied to these annual festivals originate from ideas gradually shaped through ancient Chinese social practices, reflecting a sense of ethnic identity, collective customs, and the psychological cohesion of the Chinese people.

In traditional Chinese society, festivals held immense significance, each characterized by distinct forms of celebration. Given the limited recreational options in the past, festivals were rare opportunities for large-scale gatherings, where entire communities united in collective joy and festivity. For children, the most spirited participants, festivals meant the most eagerly awaited times of the year. Beyond the abundance of special foods, festivals offered a temporary relaxation of elders' strict supervision, allowing children to revel in freedom and excitement. Their exuberance is often manifested in song and dance (Figure 3).

This enthusiasm found vivid expression in nursery rhymes, which served as cultural records, encapsulating the customs and activities of various traditional festivals. Far from being mere playful songs, nursery rhymes acted as cultural artifacts, preserving and transmitting the traditions, values, and practices associated with each celebration. For example, the nursery rhyme for the Laba Festival (腊八节), the prelude to Lunar New Year (春节), vividly portrays the growing anticipation for the holiday through its day-by-day depiction of preparations:

腊八粥，喝几天；
哩哩啦啦，二十三；
二十三，糖瓜粘；
二十四，扫房日；
二十五，冻豆腐；
二十六，炖猪肉；

二十七，宰公鸡；
 二十八，把面发；
 二十九，蒸馒头；
 三十晚上熬一宿；
 初一，满街走。
 Lābā zhōu, hē jǐ tiān;
 lǐ lǐ lā lā, èrshísān;
 èrshísān, tángguā zhān;
 èrshísi, sǎo fáng rì;
 èrshíwǔ, dòng dòufu;
 èrshíliù, dùn zhūròu;
 èrshíqī, zǎi gōngjī;
 èrshíbā, bǎ miàn fā;
 èrshíjiǔ, zhēng mántou;
 sānshí wǎnshàng áo yī xiǔ;
 chūyī, mǎn jiē zǒu.
 Laba porridge, drink for several days,
 Today is the twenty-third, joy fills the air!
 On the twenty-third, eating sugar melons;
 On the twenty-fourth, sweeping the house;
 On the twenty-fifth, frozen tofu;
 On the twenty-sixth, stewed pork;
 On the twenty-seventh, slaughter the rooster;



Figure 3. Scenes of children enjoying carefree moments during traditional Chinese festivals.

On the twenty-eighth, prepare the dough;
 On the twenty-ninth, steam buns;
 On New Year's Eve, stay up all night;
 On Lunar New Year's Day, run through the streets (Zhang 2012: 114-117).

This rhyme vividly captures the bustling domestic preparations leading up to the Lunar New Year. Through its detailed depiction of various tasks, it not only illustrates the diligence and coordination within households but also evokes the cheerful and lively atmosphere that defines the festival. Similarly, another widely recognized nursery rhyme for the Spring Festival chronicles the food-related customs observed during the first fifteen days of the New Year:

初一饺子，初二面；
 初三合子团团转；
 初四煎饼炒鸡蛋；
 初五、初六面团揉；
 初七、初八炸糕煎；
 初九、初十白米饭；
 十二八宝粥；
 十三、十四煮汤圆；
 十五元宵圆又圆。
 Chū yī jiǎozi, chū èr miàn;
 chū sān hézi tuántuán zhuàn;
 chū sì jiānbǐng chǎo jīdàn;
 chū wǔ, chū liù miàntuán rǒu;
 chū qī, chū bā zhà gāo jiān;
 chū jiǔ, chū shí bái mǐfàn;
 shí'èr bā bǎo zhōu;
 shísān, shísi zhǔ tāngyuán;
 shíwǔ yuánxiāo yuán yòu yuán.

On the first day, eating dumplings; On the second day, eating noodles;
 On the third day, round dumplings are turned home;
 On the fourth day, fried pancakes and scrambled eggs;
 On the fifth and sixth, kneading dough;
 On the seventh and eighth, frying rice cakes;
 On the ninth and tenth, eating rice;
 On the eleventh and twelfth, eating eight-treasure porridge;
 On the thirteenth and fourteenth, boiled soup dumplings;
 On the fifteenth day, Lantern Festival dumplings round (Xue 1994: 269).

These rhymes go beyond simply enumerating the foods consumed on specific days; they delve into the cultural and familial significance of these customs. By vividly describing these practices, the rhymes demonstrate how such traditions shape family dynamics and reinforce broader cultural values, highlighting their pivotal role in fostering social cohesion and preserving cultural continuity.

Beyond the Spring Festival, traditional holidays across different regions are similarly captured in nursery rhymes, reflecting diverse local customs and beliefs. For example, the Qingming Festival (清明节), observed on the fifth day of the fourth lunar month, is closely tied to ancestor worship. Nursery rhymes for this holiday vividly depict its rituals, offering an engaging glimpse into these enduring practices:

春暖花开，清明节到来。
 山青青，水晶晶。
 祖先坟前灯笼高照。
 长长的鞭炮声，烧香烧纸为祭祀。
 庄严庄重敬祖先。
 Chūn nuǎn huā kāi, Qīngmíng jié dào lái.
 Shān qīngqīng, shuǐ jīngjīng.
 Zǔxiān fén qián dēnglóng gāo zhào.
 Cháng cháng de biānpào shēng, shāo xiāng shāo zhǐ wèi jìsì.
 Zhuāngyán zhuāngzhòng jìng zǔxiān.

As spring warms and flowers bloom bright,
 Qingming Festival comes in sight.
 Green mountains rise, waters gleam.
 By ancestors' graves, lanterns beam.
 Long firecrackers crack and flare, incense and paper fill the air.
 Honoring spirits with solemn care (Zhang 2021: 22).

Another rhyme expresses the atmosphere of Qingming:

清明节，雨纷纷，家人忙着去上坟。
 祭亲人，祭祖先，从小就要懂孝顺。
 Qīngmíng jié, yǔ fēn fēn, jiārén mángzhe qù shàng fén.
 Jì qīnrén, jì zǔxiān, cóng xiǎo jiù yào dǒng xiàoshùn.

Qingming comes with drizzling rain, Families gather by graves again.
 Honoring loved ones, ancestors dear, Learning respect from year to year
 (Fang 2007: 181).

These nursery rhymes reflect the core cultural essence of the Qingming Festival, emphasizing it as an important occasion for ancestral rites. Rituals such as grave sweeping, lantern lighting, and the burning of incense and paper embody the deep reverence and remembrance people hold for their ancestors. Beyond their practical functions, these rhymes emphasize the intergenerational transmission of filial piety and family responsibility. Such ritual activities extend beyond individual family practices, serving as collective expressions of society's enduring values of filial respect and ancestral veneration.

The significance of festival nursery rhymes lies not only in their recording of ritual details but also in their essential role in transmitting cultural knowledge.

Through the repeated singing of these rhymes, children not only become familiar with the customs of various festivals but also learn about profound values, such as respect for ancestors, family unity, and communal responsibility. These rhymes introduce children to the rhythm of the lunar year, the importance of preserving traditions, and the social responsibilities that tie families and communities together. As both educational tools and emotional connectors, these rhymes play a crucial role in reinforcing cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging.

3.5. Nursery rhymes as a part of ancient medical culture

In ancient China, medical nursery rhymes transcended their role as folk literature, functioning as a means of communication with the divine. In an era of limited medical knowledge and scarce resources, people often turned to folk beliefs and natural remedies to address health concerns. Within this context, medical nursery rhymes emerged as vital tools for invoking divine intervention and protection, particularly for common childhood illnesses. These rhymes played a dual role in both the prevention and treatment of ailments, becoming an indispensable part of traditional healthcare practices.

The form and content of medical nursery rhymes were imbued with mystical elements, often invoking the power of the gods in everyday life. These rhymes held special significance in child healthcare, where they were perceived as effective remedies. In regions such as Jiangnan (江南), numerous rhymes were preserved and employed to treat common childhood ailments. One notable example is a rhyme used to alleviate heat rash in children:

拍拍胸，不伤风；拍拍背，不生痱。
Pāi pāi xiōng, bù shāng fēng; pāi pāi bèi, bù shēng fèi.

Pat the chest, no cold;
Pat the back, no rash (Zhu 2011: 74).

Such rhymes, with their simple and rhythmic language, encapsulated folk wisdom for addressing childhood ailments. The act of gently patting the body not only offered therapeutic effects but also provided emotional comfort, reflecting the traditional understanding of natural healing and physical recovery.

Beyond their role in treating physical conditions, medical nursery rhymes were also employed to soothe infants, particularly those who cried excessively at night due to illness or discomfort. Parents would recite specific rhymes designed to calm their children, such as:

天皇皇，地皇皇；我家有个夜哭郎。
行路君子念三遍；一觉睡到大天亮。
Tiānhuáng huáng, dì huáng huáng; wǒ jiā yǒu gè yè kū láng.
Xínglù jūnzǐ niàn sān biàn; yī jiào shuì dào dà tiān liàng.

Heaven is bright, earth is bright; I have a crying child at night.

Let a noble traveler recite three times, And the child will sleep until morning light (Tian 2018: 66).

This nursery rhyme aims to soothe the child and encourage restful sleep by invoking divine protection and offering comfort. It embodies a reliance on spiritual powers and illustrates traditional folk methods for nurturing and healing children.

In addition to calming crying infants, medical nursery rhymes also held significance in dream interpretation. In traditional Chinese culture, bad dreams were often regarded as ominous portents, prompting efforts to dispel their negative influence. A commonly recited rhyme for alleviating bad dreams was:

昨暝梦不祥，起早挂在墙；
贵人读以遍，万事化吉祥。
Zuó míng mèng bù xiáng, qǐ zǎo guà zài qiáng;
Guìrén dú yǐ biàn, wànshì huà jíxiáng.

Last night's dream was ill-omened; Get up early, hang it on the wall.
When a noble person reads it, All misfortune turns to good fortune
(Zheng 2022: 47).

This rhyme, accompanied by the ritual of placing yellow or red paper on the wall and reciting the words, was believed to dispel bad dreams and avert misfortune. It was thought that if a 'noble person' happened to recite the rhyme while passing by, they could further repel disaster and usher in good fortune. Such practices reveal how children's health and emotional well-being were intricately tied to the perceived protective powers of the divine.

In traditional Chinese culture, spiritual beliefs were deeply interwoven with daily life. Many medical nursery rhymes went beyond treating illnesses to serve as protective charms against potential dangers. For instance, children were often warned not to point at the moon, as it was believed to possess mystical qualities that could bring misfortune. To address this 'taboo', the following rhyme was commonly recited:

月娘，阿姐，我无项汝指。
汝佢通刺我耳，我买饼乞汝迈味。
Guǎi niǎo, ā jǐ, guo bou hǎn de gi.
De bēi là wán guo hīān, guo bēi bie gěi de mài bǐ.

Moon goddess, my sister, I do not point at you;
If I do, you don't cut my ears; I offer you cakes, please forgive me
(Zheng 2022: 47).

This rhyme, by personifying the moon as a 'sister' and symbolically offering it cakes as a form of 'bribery', reflected reverence for the moon's perceived supernatural powers. Singing this rhyme allowed children to seek divine forgiveness and protection, while also avoiding any potential offense to the moon.

In this cultural context, the moon transcended its natural existence, embodying mystical qualities that symbolized the enigmatic forces in the collective imagination of the people. Medical nursery rhymes like this often employed indirect, symbolic, and mystical language, which initially veiled their deeper meanings. Yet, this very mysticism enriched the rhymes with cultural resonance and imbued them with therapeutic significance. Through the act of recitation, people believed they could establish a connection with the divine, seeking blessings and protection against illnesses and misfortune. Such beliefs were deeply rooted in the traditions of Chinese society, weaving seamlessly into the fabric of daily life.

3.6. Nursery rhymes and the inheritance of Classical Chinese

Nursery rhymes, as a vibrant form of folk literature, are firmly rooted in the everyday lives of ordinary people and reflect the authentic characteristics of local cultures throughout China. Passed down orally across generations, nursery rhymes not only convey emotions and narratives, but also preserve and transmit the unique essence of Classical Chinese at a linguistic level. The language of nursery rhymes and their expressive forms are profoundly influenced by Classical Chinese and regional dialects. Elements such as colloquial expressions, local dialects, and archaic vocabulary in these rhymes symbolize both their vitality and continuity.

Nursery rhymes originally emerged from the spoken language of ancient Chinese people and have been preserved through oral transmission across generations. This intergenerational transmission makes nursery rhymes an ideal medium for the continuation and reconstruction of Classical Chinese. Their language not only carries distinct regional characteristics, but also provides an invaluable foundation for studying the pronunciation and phonological evolution of Classical Chinese. The following example of a Fujian nursery rhyme illustrates the Classical Chinese elements embedded within, further highlighting the unique role of nursery rhymes in the inheritance of language.

Example of a Fujian nursery rhyme:

红涂春，白涂塞，郎罢做推怀别。
 郎罢十三十四，郎罢撑船囤做戏。
 郎罢食糜囤食饮，郎罢晒铺囤晒板。
 Ān nō sēn, ba dòu dei, a bà zòu tò 'bēi bia.
 A bà sei sō sei xì, a bà tǎ lěng gue zòu yì.
 A bà xiā ma gue xiā zuǐ, a bà kěn mōu gue kěn bǎn.

The child is hungry, Dad goes to buy some bread,
 Thirteen for Dad, and fourteen for the kid instead.
 Dad rows the boat, the child puts on a show,
 Dad eats his meal, the child drinks water.
 Dad sleeps on the bed, the child sleeps on the board (Zheng 2022: 43).

In this nursery rhyme, the character 涂(tú), which can also be written as 塗, refers to mud in the Fujian dialect. As noted in Han Feizi (韩非子), infants play together,

using dust as food and mud as broth (Han 1989: 89). This usage is consistent with the meaning of 涂 in the Putian dialect, signaling a continuation of the phonetic legacy of Classical Chinese. A similar linguistic phenomenon is found in the terms 郎罢 (láng bà) and 囡 (niān), which mean father and child, respectively. These expressions are common in the Fujian dialect. In Classical Chinese, father was also referred to as 郎罢, and child as 囡. For instance, in a poem by Tang dynasty poet Gu Kuang titled 囡, it says: The child born in Fujian, the officials of Fujian received him... the child leaves the father, the heart breaks, and blood flows (Lin 2014: 103). The term 囡 continues to refer to a son in Fujian. Analyzing such vocabulary allows us to trace the phonetic evolution of Classical Chinese and the preservation of these terms in local dialects.

The word 糜 (mí) in this nursery rhyme refers to boiled rice porridge, a term with deep historical roots in Classical Chinese. According to Explaining Names, Explanation of Food and Drink (《解名·释饮食》), 糜 means to cook rice until it is soft. In the Book of Liji (《礼记》), it is noted: In this month, the elderly are nourished, given walking canes, and served rice porridge (Chen 2023: 400). The Rites of the Yili (《仪礼》) also mentions: Drink rice porridge, morning one scoop of rice, evening one scoop, with no vegetables or fruits (Zheng 2016: 362). The frequent occurrence and widespread use of 糜 in ancient texts offer important insights into the pronunciation and vocabulary evolution of Classical Chinese.

Minnan (闽南) nursery rhymes are regarded as living fossils of Classical Chinese (Lin 1995: 62). From a phonological perspective, the Southern Min dialect features a fifteen-sound system. The consonants in the Southern Min dialect's rhyme books include 边(p), 颇(p'), 门(b), 地(t), 他(t), 柳(l), 曾(ts), 出(ts'), 入(dz), 时(s), 求(k), 气(k'), 语(g), 喜(h), and 英(ϕ, representing zero consonant) (Lin 2014: 102). When nasalized vowels are added, consonants such as m, n, and g appear, and the voiced consonant [d] becomes a voiceless aspirated sound, resulting in a nineteen-sound system that closely aligns with the nineteen initials of Old Chinese phonology (Lin 2014: 102). This suggests that reciting ancient nursery rhymes in the Southern Min dialect produces a more harmonious and rhythmic rendition, which is more pleasing to the ear.

The above analysis demonstrates that ancient nursery rhymes in China preserve and perpetuate the pronunciation of Classical Chinese. While some vocabulary in nursery rhymes may appear outdated or archaic in modern language, these terms are revitalized through oral transmission, breathing new life into their relevance. Therefore, nursery rhymes function not only as vessels of linguistic inheritance but also as tools for reconstructing the phonological systems of local dialects and Classical Chinese. As Dong Zuobin (董作宾) emphasized in his essay On the Relationship Between Folk Songs and Dialects (《歌谣与方音问题》), while scholars in the Qing dynasty retrieved ancient sounds from the 'dead' Book of Songs, we can uncover the origins of contemporary sounds from the 'living' Book of Songs – folk songs – and achieve valuable results (Dong 1923: 1). This perspective underscores the unique role of nursery rhymes in linguistic research. Nursery rhymes not only preserve the pronunciation and grammatical structures of ancient languages but also carry rich social and cultural information.

In conclusion, nursery rhymes, as a vital component of folk culture, serve not only as vessels for preserving the phonetic elements of Classical Chinese but also as invaluable resources for studying the evolution of ancient languages and the transmission of culture. Their existence intertwines Classical Chinese with local dialects in contemporary linguistic life, transforming them into a dynamic cultural heritage. Nursery rhymes offer a window into the history of language and provide significant insights into the transformations and roles of language in local societies. Therefore, nursery rhymes are indispensable tools for studying the phonetic, linguistic, and cultural heritage of Classical Chinese.

4. Conclusion

Ancient Chinese nursery rhymes, deeply rooted in rural society, represent one of the most enduring and authentic facets of folk tradition. Over centuries, these rhymes have accumulated profound cultural significance, becoming an integral part of China's spiritual and cultural heritage. In ancient rural communities, children's lives were closely intertwined with social customs, family education, and production activities from an early age. As they grew, children not only engaged in familial and societal responsibilities but also found joy in play and interactions with their peers.

However, these nursery rhymes go beyond mere reflections of children's lives; they embody a rich integration of religious beliefs, practical wisdom, and educational practices. Many rhymes, expressed through simple yet symbolic language, convey reverence for deities and seek divine protection. Others serve as a repository of practical knowledge related to labor, daily life, and cultural norms. These oral traditions were a means for the ancient Chinese to transmit wisdom, express emotions, and preserve cultural heritage across generations.

Nursery rhymes capture the ancient Chinese worldview, their philosophies on life, and their spiritual aspirations. Passed down through countless generations, these rhymes have not only helped shape cultural identity but also reinforced it, establishing themselves as an indispensable pillar of traditional Chinese culture.

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