
Gruesome nursery rhymes in Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes

Aiqing Wang*

University of Liverpool, United Kingdom

*Corresponding Author; Email: aiqing.wang@liverpool.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

孺子歌图 Ruzi Ge Tu ‘Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes’ is an anthology cumulated, rendered and illustrated by Isaac Taylor Headland (1859-1942) in 1900, which comprises 152 nursery rhymes predominantly prevailing in Beijing during the Qing (1644-1912) dynasty and aims to nurture sympathy for Chinese children and paint portraits of the masses from both ends of the social spectrum. Chinese nursery rhymes are replete with depictions pertaining to familial bonds and adoration, yet they simultaneously abound with fiendish plots and representations in graphic detail as well as political statements alluding to historical events and personages, parallel to their Western counterparts. In Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes, there is a range of nursery rhymes concerning decease, suicide, impoverishment, dilapidation and animal abuse, whereas only a proportion of them entail educational purposes and convey moral values.

Keywords: Nursery rhymes, Qing dynasty, (lack of) educational purposes, moral instruction

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INTRODUCTION

Nursery rhymes are short poems or songs that are often made up of trivial musical verses’ (Dunst et al, 2011, pp. 1). Nursery rhymes denote ‘[v]erses, either spoken or sung, often originating in oral trad. and adult sensibilities but preserved in the world of young children’, and they were referred to as songs, ditties or Mother Goose rhymes prior to the early 19th century, until the terminology ‘nursery rhyme’ was coined (Spaar, 2012, pp. 959-960). Since time immemorial, nursery rhymes have been playing a preponderant role in written and oral literature accommodating (pre-)literate audiences (Goldthwaite, 1996; Galway, 2017; Scheiding, 2019).

Chinese literature abounds with myriads of enthralling nursery rhymes (Kromann-Kelly & Lin, 1986), epitomised by a nursery rhyme anthology entitled 孺子歌图 *Ruzi Ge Tu* ‘Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes’ that is edited, rendered and illustrated by Isaac Taylor Headland (1859-1942) in 1900 (Gomme, 1902). As stated by the translator in the preface, although the anthology is merely constituted of 152 nursery rhymes predominantly prevailing in Beijing, the amount of nursery rhymes in China is surmised to be elephantine, exceeding the total amount in England and America; analogous to their equivalents in the West, Chinese nursery rhymes also entail a veritable cornucopia of themes, represented by humans, animals, acts, games, occupations, foods, body parts, etc (Headland, 1900, pp. 5, Zhang, 2020). The collection is intended to nurture sympathy and fondness for Chinese children and shed light on Chinese culture and characteristics, so instead of faithfulness and accuracy, Headland’s rendering places emphasis on rhyme and literary style, thereby entertaining an English-speaking readership (Jin et al, 2013; Luo, 2019; Niu & Wang, 2020). It is worth mentioning that Headland supplements each piece of text with a relevant photograph taken during the late Qing (1644-1912) era, painting vivid portraits of Qing people from both ends of the social spectrum (Chang, 1923; Ma, 2018; Zhan & Zhao, 2021).

Nursery rhymes function as the embodiment of profound historical connotations and enriched cultural discourse, among which the macabre works epitomise philosophical construal and psychological rationale of the society per se (Zhao, 2014). The earliest extant nursery rhymes can be attested in the 14th century, replete with explicit depictions pertaining to slaughters, accidents, decapitations and animal abuses, while alluding to religious persecution, public execution, prostitution, etc (Burton-Hill, 2015). Nursery rhymes, especially those during the 17th and 18th centuries when children were regarded as miniature adults, were not actually designed for children, owing to ‘the often bawdy, profane, and even violent content of some of the verses’; that is to say, ‘the overwhelming majority of nursery rhymes were not in the first place composed for children; in fact many are survivals of an adult code of joviality, and in their original wording were, by present standards, strikingly unsuitable for those of tender years’ (Opie & Opie, 1951, pp. 3; Avery, 1984). To be more specific, a profusion of nursery rhymes are underlyingly political statements alluding to historical events and personages, such as *Ring Around the Rosie* implying the 1665-1666 Great Plague of London, *Rock-a-bye Baby* indicating incidents prior to the Glorious Revolution, *Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary* referring to Mary I of England or Mary I of Scotland, etc (Opie & Opie, 1951, pp. 301; Roberts, 2005, pp. 33-35; Flinner, 2013; Winick, 2014; Watkins, 2018). Another source of nursery rhymes is real crimes, represented by the infamous rhyme appertaining to Lizzie Borden (1860-1927), an axe murderer accused of hacking her father and stepmother to death, as in Example (1) (Hughes, 2016; Hart et al, 2021).

(1) Lizzie Borden took an ax, And gave her mother forty whacks. When she saw what she had done, She gave her father forty-one.

(Robbins, 2003, pp. 147)

By virtue of apprehension about ghoulish representations, in the 19th century, writers such as Samuel Taylor and Sarah Trimmer endeavoured to alter nursery rhymes, so as to prevent their macabre nature from nurturing youngsters’ sadistic inclinations (Flinner, 2013). Nevertheless, in *The Nursery Rhymes of England* compiled by James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps in 1886, there is still a prodigious amount of nursery rhymes featuring killings of humans and animals (Halliwell-Phillipps & Scott 1886). Other prototypical examples include the celebrated *London Bridge is Falling Down* that is surmised to allude to builders’ deed of sacrificing children by burying them in the foundations of London Bridge (Milne, 2018), which is still collected in the 1913 *Mother Goose: The Old Nursery Rhymes* (Rackham, 1994, pp. 91), as well as *Goosey Goosey Gander* featuring cruel retribution, which is compiled in the 1881 *Mother Goose or the Old Nursery Rhymes* (Greenaway, 2007). It is notable that apart from appearing independently, macabre nursery rhymes are also embedded in fairy tales that are frequently gruesome and marked by eroticism and violence (Isaacs, 2013). For instance, in Grimm’s fairy tale entitled *The Juniper Tree*, there is a song depicting murder and cannibalism, as in Example (2) (Bernheimer, 2010).

(2) My mother she killed me, My father he ate me, My sister, little Marlinchen, Gathered together all my bones, Tied them in a silken handkerchief, Laid them beneath the juniper tree, Kywitt, kywitt, what a beautiful bird am I!

(Brothers Grimm, 1944, pp. 224)

Chinese literature also abounds with gruesome nursery rhymes. A considerable proportion of nursery rhymes prevailing in pre-modern China function as political metaphors anathematising historical reversals and societal issues, as well as travails and predicaments of the masses (Shu, 2007). For instance, 乌鸦叫叫 *Wuya Jiaojiao* ‘Crying Crows’ (Trans. Mine) censures corruption and the burden of taxation plaguing the Yuan (1279-1368) society by means of comparing avaricious court officials to crying crows that generate a fearsome atmosphere, as in Example (3); analogously, an untitled nursery rhyme in Example (4) expatriates a quagmire of cataclysms and slaughters imposed on civilians by the Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900, the year of 庚子 *Gengzi*. Similar paradigms are exemplified by 北风吹上天 *Beifeng Chuishangtian* ‘A North Wind Blowing’ (Trans. Mine) that alludes to a barbarous imperial conflict during the Ming (1368-1644) dynasty (Zhang, 2020).

(3) 乌鸦叫叫, 皂隶笑笑, 倾家荡产, 不够七十二项包银款。

Crows are crying while officials are laughing. All possession is insufficient to pay off seventy-two types of tax.

(*Crying Crows*. Zhang, 2020. Trans. Mine)

(4) 庚子年, 闹得凶, 八国联军进北京。又开枪, 又放炮, 又杀老来又杀少。太后皇帝逃跑了, 前门楼子轰塌了, 百姓生活惨透了, 国家江山谁来保?

The Eight-Nation Alliance invaded Beijing in 1900. They killed the old and the young with guns and cannons. The emperor and the empress dowager fled, and the city gate collapsed. Who could rescue the country and people in misery?

(Untitled. Zhang, 2020. Trans. Mine)

In modern China, there is also a myriad of nursery rhymes and songs that are featured by dolorousness, melancholy or fright. For instance, in a crime drama 隐秘的角落 *Yinmide Jiaoluo* 'The Bad Kids' (2020), a children's song 小白船 *Xiao Bai Chuan* 'Little White Boat' (Trans. Mine) successfully triggers viewers' dread, in that it is adapted from a 1924 requiem *Half Moon* composed by a Korean musician Geuk-yeong Yun during Japanese colonisation of his motherland (Wright & Acraman, 2018; Yu, 2020).

DISCUSSION

Educational nursery rhymes

Nursery rhymes with moralistic, socialistic and naturalistic themes can equip children with moral, social, cultural and aesthetic education (Abarry, 1989; Keray Dinçel, 2017). In *Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes*, there is a multitude of works highlighting strong family bonds and doting nurture, as illustrated in Examples (5-7); there are also entertaining, comical rhymes, represented by Example (8).

(5) 推磨带磨 做个烧饼 送外婆

We push the mill, The flour we make, And then for grandma A cake we'll bake.

(*Grinding Flour*. Headland, 1900, pp. 66)

(6) 别怕别怕 跟着妈妈穿裤穿褂 别号别号 跟着妈妈穿裤穿袄

Do not fear, do not fear, We'll put the pants on mama's dear, Do not cry, do not cry, We'll put the coat on mama's boy.

(*Mama's Boy*. Headland, 1900, pp. 77)

(7) 风奶奶 送风来 俺家孩子 好凉快

Old Mother Wind Come this way, And make our baby Cool to-day.

(*Old Mother Wind*. Headland, 1900, pp. 129)

(8) 忽听门外人咬狗 拿起门来开开手 拾起狗来打砖头 又被砖头咬了手 骑了轿子抬了马 吹了鼓打喇叭

Just outside my door, I heard someone say, A man bit a dog in a dangerous way; Such a message I n'er for a moment could stand, So I took up the door and I opened my hand, I snatched up the dog I should say double-quick And threw him with all of my force at a brick; The brick—I'm afraid you will not understand—I found in a moment had bitten my hand; I mounted a chair, on a horse I was borne, I blew on a drum, and I beat on a horn.

(*Mixed*. Headland, 1900, pp. 46)

Nevertheless, apart from pleasurable nursery rhymes, *Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes* is also rife with spine-chilling and abominable narratives, such as Example (9) that is entitled 'Eight Bald-Heads' by the translator and concerns fatal illness, decease and burial. Nursery rhymes collected in the anthology predominantly prevail in Beijing (Headland, 1900, pp. 5), yet there are various versions of *Eight Bald-Heads* in other regions. For instance, in Qingdao, Shandong Province, there is a nursery

rhyme entitled 十麻子 *Shi Mazi* ‘Ten Pockmark-Faces’ (Trans. Mine) prevailing in the 20th century (Qingdao News, 2003), which bears similitude to *Eight Bald-Heads* and is more detailed, as in Example (10).

(9) 大秃子得病 二秃子慌 三秃子请大夫 四秃子熬姜汤 五秃子抬六秃子埋 七秃子哭着走进来 八秃子问他哭甚么 我家死了个秃乖乖 快快儿抬快快儿埋

A bald-head is sick, And the second’s afraid, The third calls a doctor, The fourth gives him aid. By the fifth he is borne, By the sixth he is buried, The seventh comes crying Because he is worried. When asked by an eighth, Why it was that he cried, He said, ‘In my home, A dear bald-head has died.’ ‘Come, bury him quickly, I fear a great hoard Of the seeds of his spirit Will spring from his gourd.’

(*Eight Bald-Heads*. Headland, 1900, pp. 130-131)

(10) 大麻子有病二麻子掐, 三麻子买药四麻子熬, 五麻子买板六麻子钉, 七麻子挖窝八麻子埋, 九麻子上山哭起来, 十麻子问他哭什么? “高高的天矮矮的地, 不让大麻子跳出去!”

A pockmark-face is sick, and the second comes for his sake. The third buys herbal medicine and the fourth boils it. The fifth buys timber and the sixth makes a coffin. The seventh digs a hole and the eighth buries him. The ninth arrives the hill, and the tenth asks why he wails. ‘The sky is high and the ground is low. The pockmark-face can never jump out of the hole!’

(*Ten Pockmark-Faces*. From Qingdao News, 2003. Trans. Mine)

In other literary works, 秃子 *tuzi* ‘bald-head’ is substituted by its homophone 兔子 *tuzi* ‘rabbit’, which, I posit, renders the nursery rhyme more joyous, as in children’s literature exemplified by a novel 绿螳螂 *Lü Tanglang* ‘Green Mantis’ (Trans. Mine) composed by 余雷 Yu Lei. There is no denying the fact that when cited in horror stories, the alternative versions concerning rabbits, and less commonly, shrimps, still incur dread, as in novellas 空前绝后 *Kongqianjuehou* ‘Unequaled’ (Trans. Mine) composed by 周德东 Zhou Dedong and 神秘的童谣 *Shenmide Tongyao* ‘Mysterious Nursery Rhyme’ (Trans. Mine) composed by 冯舒 Feng Shu.

Moreover, I propound that there are close affinities between *Eight Bald-Heads* and the nursery rhyme *Ten Little Indians* in a 1939 mystery novel *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie, which has variant versions such as the one composed by Frank Green in 1869, as in Example (11). The rhyme in *And Then There Were None* indicates the plot of the mystery, in that the manners of decease in reality coincide with those depicted in the rhyme, causing terror and suspicion among the imprisoned characters (McAllister, 2011; Stoddard 2011).

(11) Ten little soldier boys went out to dine; One choked his little self and then there were Nine. Nine little soldier boys sat up very late; One overslept himself and then there were Eight. Eight little soldier boys travelling in Devon; One said he’d stay there and then there were Seven. Seven little soldier boys chopping up sticks; One chopped himself in halves and then there were Six. Six little soldier boys playing with a hive; A bumble bee stung one and then there were Five. Five little soldier boys going in for law; One got in Chancery and then there were Four. Four little soldier boys going out to sea; A red herring swallowed one and then there were Three. Three little soldier boys walking in the Zoo; A big bear hugged one and then there were Two. Two little soldier boys sitting in the sun; One got frizzled up and then there was One. One little soldier boy left all alone; He went and hanged himself and then there were None.

(*And Then There Were None*. Epigraph & Chapter Two)

Given the fact that nursery rhymes saliently contribute to children’s learning in terms of linguistic competence, cognitive ability, physical development, emotional growth and musical skill (Kenney, 2005, Kamal Abdulmajeed, 2020), I postulate that *Eight Bald-Heads*, along with its variants and English counterparts, might have been created to cultivate children’s numerical ability through a list of numbers. Additionally, since the nursery rhyme is presented in a form of story, it could enhance children’s logical and narrative skills.

Moral values

Ghoulis nursery rhymes in *Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes* are also deployed to promulgate traditional moral values in pre-modern China. The nursery rhyme in Example (12) is entitled *The Shrew* by the editor, in that it depicts a woman's pugnacious and petulant deeds, including committing suicide. I propound that notwithstanding the creepiness, the elaboration is not to scare young audiences, but to promulgate stringent precepts oppressing women in feudal society, encapsulated by 三从四德 *san cong si de* 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' (Gao, 2003; Rosenlee, 2006, pp. 90-92; Lee, 2009). 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' is extracted from the earliest extant rhetoric regarding women's prenuptial education, viz. the treatise 女诫 *Nü Jie* 'Lessons for Women' composed by a female historian 班昭 Ban Zhao in 106 AD (Chang, 2000; Donawerth, 2002, pp. 14; Wing, 2003). This set of institutions prescribe women's comportment in terms of dictating 'three obediences', namely, women's subservience to their fathers prior to prenuptial life, husbands during postnuptial life and sons in widowhood; as for the 'four virtues', they denote women's compliance with moral codes, meticulous utterances, decent demeanour and diligence (Hamilton & Wang, 1992, pp. 85; Lee, 1998; Pang-White, 2016). The female character in Example (12) saliently defies her husband and fails to demonstrate acquiescent behaviour, and is hence censured as a 'shrew', which means the nursery rhyme functions as an informal form of prenuptial education for girls in imperial China.

(12) 黑老婆儿满地滚 嗔着他男人不买粉 买了粉他不搽 嗔着他男人不买麻 买了麻他不打
嗔着他男人不买马 买了马他不喂 嗔着他男人不买柜 买了柜他不盛 嗔着他男人不买绳 买了绳他上吊 吓了他男人一大跳

All over the ground the old black woman rolled, And for not buying powder her husband did scold; He bought her some powder, which she would not use, And for not buying hemp him she'd soundly abuse; He bought her some hemp, but she only got worse, And scolded because he had not bought a horse; He bought her a horse but she never would feed it, And scolded because 'twas a clothes-press she needed; He bought her a clothes-press, but nothing she packed, And scolded because 'twas a rope that she lacked; He bought her a rope and she hung herself dead, And frightened her husband near out of his head.

(*The Shrew*. Headland, 1900, pp. 118-119)

In terms of Example (13), it involves a violent act of 开瓢 *kaipiao* that is a slang expression indicating 'to break one's head'. As mentioned previously, the English rendering by Headland is only fairly faithful (Jin et al, 2013; Luo, 2019; Niu & Wang, 2020), which means there are mistranslations in the anthology, including that of *kaipiao*. Example (13) recounts a mortal's irrational misconduct that begets an immortal's fury and divine retribution, which serves as a creed admonishing profanation and promoting reverence for deities.

(13) 有个小秃儿本姓高 初一十五把香烧 人家烧香为儿女 秃子烧香为长毛 到了三天毛长上
又烧香又挂袍 到了三天毛掉了 搬倒了老爷架火烧 老爷一见冲冲怒 拿起大刀就开瓢

There once was a bald-head, his name it was Lee, No one ever burned so much incense as he; Now, people burn incense to get them an heir, But baldy burned incense to get him some hair. When he found in three days all his hair had returned, He the god gave a coat and more incense he burned; When he found in three days all his hair had dropped out, He upset the god and he kicked him about. Then the god became angry and took up a sword, and made into dippers that bald-headed gourd.

(*Bald Head Lee*. Headland, 1900, pp. 114-115)

Nonetheless, Example (14) that also features a mortal-immortal interaction seems meaningless, as using oil extracted from one's head to fry bean curd is absurd and repugnant. It is noteworthy that the source text entails 阎王 *yanwang* 'the King of Hell' and a slang expression 发疟子 *fa yaozi* 'to catch malaria' (Trans. Mine), whereas in the target text, they are translated into 'the king' and 'to go to bed' respectively, which might indicate Headland's effort to render the narrative less fearsome. A more faithful yet less euphemistic translation, therefore, is shown in Example (15).

(14) 秃子秃上脑箍 箍出油来煎豆腐 豆腐黄见阎王 阎王戴着铁帽子 吓得秃子发疟子
Little baby, go to bed, We'll put a hoop around your head, And with the oil we get thereby, Our little bean-cake we will fry. And when we've fried our bean-cake brown, We'll see the king go into town, An iron cap upon his head; Now-you-must-surely-go-to-bed.

(*Go to Bed*. Headland, 1900, pp. 32)

(15) A bald-head puts a hoop around his head, and with the oil he gets thereby, his bean curd he will fry. When he's fried his bean curd brown, he sees the King of Hell. An iron cap upon his head, the King of Hell frightens the bald-head to malaria.

(*Ibid.* Trans. Mine)

Another nursery rhyme that is void of rationale is in Example (16), which concerns dilapidation and impoverishment. Additionally, animals in Example (16) are disabled, parallel to those in 两只老虎 *Liangzhi Laohu* 'Two Tigers' (Trans. Mine) (Example (17)) adapted from the celebrated French song *Frère Jacques* and its English version *Brother John*, which was further adapted into 国民革命歌 *Guomin Geming Ge* 'Song of National Revolution' (Trans. Mine) and 土地革命歌 *Tudi Geming Ge* 'Song of Land Revolution' (Trans. Mine) in a war and political context during the Republican (1912-1949) era (Bai, 2014; Shi, 2014). Anomalous to their equivalents in *Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes*, English nursery rhymes also portray animals' disability, exemplified by *Three Blind Mice* that is originally *Three Blinde Mice* in Thomas Ravenscroft's *Deuteronomia* or *The Seconde Part of Musicks Melodie* (1609) (Opie & Opie, 1951, pp. xx; Lewis, 2013, pp. 82), as in Example (18); the three blind mice are surmised to denote the three Oxford Martyrs, viz. Protestant bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, who were tortured, blinded and burned at the stake during the Marian persecution (Milne, 2018).

(16) 高高山上有一家 十间房子九间塌 老头子出来拄拐棍儿 老婆子出来就地儿擦 看家的狗儿三条腿 避鼠的狸猫短个尾巴

On a very high mountain A family dwell, Of ten of their rooms, Nine of them fell. The old man comes out With a great deal of trouble; His wife hobbles after, Her body bent double. Their three-legged dog Is as thin as a rail, And their rat-fearing cat Is minus a tail.

(*Home on the Mountain*. Headland, 1900, pp. 150-151)

(17) 两只老虎, 两只老虎, 跑得快, 跑得快。一只没有眼睛, 一只没有尾巴, 真奇怪, 真奇怪。
Two tigers, two tigers, run fast, run fast. One has no eyes, and the other has no tail. How strange! How strange!

(*Two Tigers*. YeShell, 2012, pp. 121. Trans. Mine)

(18) Three blind mice, three blind mice, See how they run, see how they run. They all ran after the farmer's wife, Who cut off their tails with a carving knife, Did you ever see such a thing in your life? As three blind mice.

(*Three Blind Mice*. Opie & Opie, 1951, pp. 306)

Barbarousness towards animals

In *Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes*, apart from Example (16) that depicts disabled animals, Example (19) is prone to cruelty to animals. Notwithstanding a relaxing and naturalistic representation at the beginning, the ending of the rhyme tends to entice children into torturing animals. Given the fact that symbolic meanings are often bestowed upon animals in order to offer moral instruction (Walker, 2014), it is justifiable to assume that the nursery rhyme in Example (19) is deployed to advocate diligence and discourage idleness, though it potentially triggers children's tendency to abuse animals.

(19) 这个小牛儿吃草 这个小牛儿吃料 这个小牛儿喝水儿 这个小牛儿打滚儿 这个小牛儿竟卧着 我们打他

This little cow eats grass, This little cow eats hay, This little cow drinks water, This little cow runs away, This little cow does nothing, But just lie down all day; We'll whip her.

(*The Five Toes*. Headland, 1900, pp. 157)

In terms of Examples (20-22), they are marked by animal cruelty for meat. In Example (20), a slippery and evil personified crow tempts a human into slaughtering a sheep, so that it can eat the viscera. In Example (21), various ways of using and eating every part of an old cow are expatiated in graphic detail, and the first-person narration intensifies the brutality. As for Example (22), the rhyme describes the methods to skin and cook white-breasted crows, which manifests savagery. In Western nursery rhymes, animals act as a prominent category (Clark, 1995, pp. 28), yet there are expressions illustrating an inclination to impose harm on animals (Davies et al, 2004; Keray Dinçel, 2017; Watkins, 2018) or to slaughter them (Halliwell-Phillipps & Scott, 1886). For instance, a representative nursery rhyme describing the killing and consuming of animals is *This is the House That Jack Built* (Halliwell-Phillipps, 1844, pp. 175-178).

(20) 老鸦落在一棵树 张开口就招呼 老王老王 山后有个大绵羊 你把他宰了 你吃肉我吃肠
An old black crow sat on a tree, And there he sat and said to me: 'Ho, Mr. Wang, there's a sheep
on the hill, Which I wish very much you would catch and kill; You may eat meat three times a
day, And I'll eat the parts that you throw away.'

(*What the Old Crow Said*. Headland, 1900, pp. 41)

(21) 老牛无言每日忧 牛棚夜晚冷飕飕 牛皮鞞鼓用棒打 骨头蹉簪去驳头 零碎骨 又把骰子
做 牛肉割碎入汤锅

A sad old cow to herself once said, While the north wind whistled through her shed: 'To head a
drum they will take my skin, And they'll file my bones for a big hair-pin, The scraps of bone they
will make into dice, And sell them off at a very low price; My sinews they'll make into whips, I
wot, And my flesh they'll put in a big soup pot.'

(*What the Old Cow Said*. Headland, 1900, pp. 40)

(22) 寒鸦儿寒鸦儿过 一遍打十个 熬着吃炒着吃 剥了皮儿更好吃

Look at the white-breasted crows overhead! My father shot once, and ten crows tumbled dead.
When boiled or when fried, they taste very good, But skin them, I tell you, there's no better food.

(*The Crows*. Headland, 1900, pp. 55)

CONCLUSION

In this research, I hermeneutically scrutinise fiendish nursery rhymes collected in *Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes*. Parallel to their counterparts in the West, Chinese nursery rhymes concern macabre elements such as decease, suicide, impoverishment and dilapidation, and they also function as political statements alluding to historical events and personages. A proportion of fearsome nursery rhymes manifest educational purposes, exemplified by *Eight Bald-Heads* that is aimed at cultivating children's numerical ability through a list of numbers. Other nursery rhymes are equipped with moral values of imperial China, represented by *The Shrew* prescribing women's compliance with 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' and *Bald Head Lee* admonishing profanation. Nonetheless, there are repugnant nursery rhymes that seem to be void of rationale, especially those featuring animal abuse and slaughter.

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