

Cultural and Educational Significance of Cantonese Nursery Rhymes

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Abstract

Cantonese children's songs, as a rich repository of cultural heritage and educational value, are classified into five distinct categories: game songs, educational songs, folklore songs, time-related songs, and cradle songs. These songs serve diverse purposes, from promoting interactive play and teaching positive life attitudes to preserving regional customs and celebrating seasonal changes. Game songs, like "Guess and Seek," integrate rhythm with play, while educational songs, such as "Little Rooster, Curved Tail," instill virtues like punctuality and collaboration. Folklore songs reflect the lifestyles and traditions of Guangdong, exemplified by "Boat Congee" and "Selling Laziness." Time-related songs, like "Big Rain Falling," celebrate natural and festive changes, and cradle songs, including "Moonlight," offer soothing melodies for infants. Beyond entertainment, these songs embody the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the Cantonese dialect, playing a critical role in cultural transmission. They also enhance children's language learning, imagination, and moral development, making them vital to both preserving Cantonese traditions and supporting early childhood education.

Keywords: Cultural; Educational; Cantonese Nursery Rhymes

Introduction

These nursery rhymes are sung in Cantonese, featuring the cultural characteristics and connotations of the Lingnan region. They are typically created by the folk or passed down through legends, representing the cultural crystallization of spiritual wisdom from people across the country. Cantonese Children's Songs usually refer to children's songs that circulate in regions where Cantonese is spoken. These songs are sung in Cantonese, featuring strong Lingnan regional characteristics and cultural connotations. They are typically created by the folk or passed down orally, representing the cultural crystallization of the people's spiritual wisdom in the entire region.

The Modern Chinese Dictionary defines a children's song as "a popular song among children, with a relatively simple form" ¹. It is primarily aimed at children, with content close to children's lives, rich in childlike fun, easy to spread, and easy to remember. Cantonese children's songs, through the use of figurative language and unique expressions, convey information on knowledge, morals, and emotions, playing an important role in children's growth and cultural heritage.

Cantonese children's songs use rich rhythms, are easy to chant and spread. The use of rhyme at the end of sentences and repetition of words creates a musicality and lively rhythm in the language (Chen, 2022).

Cantonese nursery rhymes are a unique and vibrant expression of the rich cultural heritage of Guangdong Province and the broader Cantonese-speaking regions. These songs, deeply rooted in local traditions, serve as a mirror reflecting the everyday lives, customs, and values of the Cantonese people. From playful melodies that accompany children's games to soothing lullabies that cradle infants to sleep, these rhymes encapsulate the linguistic, social, and cultural nuances of the region. Over generations, they have been a vital medium for cultural transmission, preserving the traditions, festivals, and oral history of the community while fostering a sense of identity and belonging.

Beyond their cultural significance, Cantonese nursery rhymes also hold immense educational value, playing a crucial role in early childhood development. Their rhythmic structures, simple lyrics, and engaging themes make them effective tools for language acquisition, creativity, and moral education. These songs not only help children learn the Cantonese dialect, enhancing pronunciation and vocabulary, but also promote cognitive development and social skills. As cultural artifacts and educational resources, Cantonese nursery rhymes embody a dual significance, blending entertainment with the teaching of language, values, and imagination, thus enriching both the cultural fabric and childhood learning in the region.

Classification and Characteristics of Cantonese Children's Songs

Games

This type of children's song combines singing with children's games to showcase the fun of the game and the rhythm of language. For example, the children's song "Guess and Seek" turns the simple and well-known rock-paper scissors game into a very rhythmic chant that quickly spreads among children. Another example, "Wooden Doll, Do Not Move," is a type of children's song that requires players to recite it smoothly and maintain their composure while being teased. (Edited by Gan Yu'en, "Guangfu Children's Songs Dandan Zhuan")1.2.2.

Education

The content primarily includes a positive and optimistic attitude towards life, good behavioral norms, and community living knowledge. For example: the nursery rhyme "Chicken Son, Tail Curved" encourages children not to be afraid of life's difficulties and to develop good habits like punctuality for school. "Bamboo Breaks Easily" embodies the attitude of learning to work together through collaboration. Most of the content incorporates a positive and optimistic outlook on life, good behavior norms, and orderly life knowledge. For example, "Little Rooster, Curved Tail" encourages children to face life's difficulties bravely and develop the habit of being punctual for school. "One Bamboo Can Bend Easily" advocates for children to learn the attitude of teamwork and collaboration.

Folklore

Such nursery rhymes often document the lifestyles and customs of a region and generations of people. Such nursery rhymes often record the lifestyle and customs of a region and generations of people.

The nursery rhyme 'Telling Tales' is an exact replica of the well-received habit of Cantonese people who like to listen to stories told by local storytellers while they eat at lunchtime. 'Boat Chai Congee' is a record of the boat-based, fishing families in the region, with a bowl of boat congee with fresh fish and tender meat, and a nursery rhyme "Steaming Hot", allowing children to learn the taste of their hometown that can nourish them for a lifetime, and warm their hearts with the congee.

For instance, on the "Eve of Chinese New Year" according to the lunar calendar, children sing "Selling Laziness" on the streets to symbolize driving away the accumulated laziness from the previous year, hoping that after the "Eve of Chinese New Year," a diligent and renewed appearance will accompany every day of the new year. Another example is the children's song "Storytelling," which perfectly replicates the Cantonese habit of enjoying praise during lunch, eating while listening to local storytellers. "Boat Congee" records the life of households who live on boats and make a living by fishing, using a bowl of fresh and tender congee, along with a lively children's song, to instill in children the pure solution of life and the warm taste of home. For example: On the Lunar New Year's Eve in China, children sing "Mai Lan" on the streets, symbolizing the removal of laziness accumulated over the past year, in hopes of starting the new year with a diligent and refreshed appearance. Another example is the nursery rhyme "Jiang Gu Zai," which perfectly replicates the Guangdong habit of listening to storytellers while eating lunch. "Ting Zai Zhou" records the boat-dwelling, fishing-based lifestyle of the local people, presenting a bowl of fish-fragrant and tender boat-porridge, and a "steaming" nursery rhyme, allowing children to absorb the comforting and warm home flavor that can last a lifetime.

Time

Such nursery rhymes are related to seasons or solar terms and subtly help children understand the natural changes.

The Guangdong region is quite humid, often breezy and rainy. The children's song "Big Rain Falling" vividly depicts the scene of rainy streets, with the elder brother braving the rain to sell firewood, and the elder sister dressing up elegantly and venturing out in the rain, presenting a true-to-life picture. The children's song "Spinning Round" portrays the lively scenes of children celebrating the Dragon Boat Festival by buying windmills, watching dragon boat races, and playing with chicks, making people yearn for the vibrant festive atmosphere.

Cradle Song

This type of children's song has a gentle and soothing rhythm, often used to lull babies to sleep. Among them, "Moonlight" is widely loved by the public, depicting the iconic Cantonese lullaby style.

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In terms of cultural connotations, it serves as a carrier of folk culture in the Guangdong region. Many Cantonese children's songs depict local traditional festivals, such as "Moonlit Night," which showcases various festival cultural elements like the Mid-Autumn customs in the Lingnan region, embodying local living scenes and traditional values, conveying a strong sense of nostalgia. Moreover, the rhythm, rhyme, and lyrics of the children's songs reflect the characteristics of the Cantonese dialect, playing a crucial role in the dissemination of Cantonese culture.

In terms of educational significance, it aids in children's language learning. By singing Cantonese children's songs, children can learn pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, improving their language expression abilities. At the same time, the simplicity and understandability of the songs can cultivate children's imagination and creativity. For example, "Sitting in a Row" can help children envision a scene of a family or children interacting. Additionally, many Cantonese children's songs contain moral education content, teaching children's virtues such as sharing and respecting elders.

Related research of the nursery rhyme

Ganz Yu'en (2018) wrote *Guangfu Nursery Rhymes Go Round and Round*. With the passage of time and the modernization of lifestyles, as those familiar with traditional Cantonese nursery rhymes pass away, collecting these rhymes has become increasingly difficult. This is undoubtedly an irreplaceable loss for Cantonese culture. Therefore, it is currently necessary to strengthen this area of work, treating the collection, recording, and research of traditional Cantonese nursery rhymes as a cultural project. Utilizing modern digital technology, we can faithfully record local nursery rhymes in both audio-visual and transcribed forms, preserving a precious cultural heritage for future generations.

Li Qiao (2022) *Research on the Aesthetic Education Value of Cantonese Nursery Rhymes from the Perspective of Educational Anthropology*. In recent years, the state has placed increasing emphasis on the inheritance and development of traditional culture. As a part of Cantonese culture, the development of Cantonese nursery rhymes directly impacts the inheritance and development of Cantonese culture, and its application in aesthetic education in kindergartens is crucial for the construction of children's aesthetic psychology. However, there are few rational voices currently focusing on the aesthetic education value of Cantonese nursery rhymes and understanding their application in aesthetic education practices in kindergartens. Based on this, this study focuses on the aesthetic education value of Cantonese nursery rhymes and their application in kindergartens, using educational anthropology, cultural ecology, and functionalism as the theoretical foundations. It primarily employs field research and textual analysis methods, with a group of local residents, journalists, kindergarten principals, and early childhood teachers in Guangzhou as research subjects, to extensively explore the aesthetic education value embedded in Cantonese nursery rhymes and their application scenarios in kindergarten aesthetic education practices. Field research has found that the value of Guangfu children's folk songs in child aesthetic education is mainly reflected in their spontaneous transmission, expanding children's aesthetic experiences; their subtle influence, igniting, regrettably, the widespread issues when applying Guangfu children's folk songs in kindergarten aesthetic education practices include: kindergarten teachers' insufficient understanding and deep emotional connection with Guangfu children's folk songs, primarily due to insufficient Guangfu cultural Indian influence, lack of dedicated Guangfu children's folk song textbooks, lack of related training, and a professional teaching team. Based on these issues, it is proposed that kindergartens should focus on creating a living environment for Guangfu children's folk song aesthetic education; emphasize cultivating children's interest in Guangfu children's folk songs; and highlight the application of Guangfu children's folk songs in comprehensive artistic forms.

Chen Wenying (2020) wrote *Explorations in the Creation and Performance of Cantonese Songs*. Dialect songs are an important part of national music and one of the important carriers of national culture. "Again, Singing Moonlight" is a Cantonese dialect national vocal music piece created based on the emotional tone of the Cantonese nursery rhyme "Moonlight," integrating the characteristics of national vocal music dissemination and the artistic style of Cantonese nursery rhymes. The paper first analyzes the interpretation of the work's creation from four aspects: lyrical style, expansion of artistic conception and emotions, changes in personification settings, and the harmony between Cantonese tones and melody. Then, it summarizes and explores the vocal practice characteristics of the piece from three aspects: the use of resonant embellishments, control of tempo and dynamics, and the relationship between technical application and emotional expression. As times evolve, dialect songs will inevitably change with the times, absorbing more new spirit of the era. Taking the creation and arrangement of the Cantonese song "Again Singing Moonlight" as an example, the paper aims to further master the contemporary creative thinking of dialect songs in China and, on this basis, simultaneously conduct performance practice experiences.

Zeng Yingfeng (2018) wrote *Folk Singing in the Memory of Cantonese Culture—On the Inheritance and Development of Cantonese Nursery Rhymes*. Cantonese Children's Rhymes, also known as Yue Children's Rhymes and Cantonese Children's Songs, are folk poetry art forms that have been passed down in the Cantonese region. They are simple, rhythmically smooth, and easily recited, closely reflecting life, with women and children being the main performers. Rhymes are the folk chants of times past, embodying the nostalgia of the Cantonese people and capturing the life traces of each historical period. They include political songs, life songs, folk customs songs, and game songs, often existing in multiple versions of contemporary songs. These rhymes serve as a bridge for children to learn speech, knowledge, and characters. The decline of Cantonese children's songs can only be reversed with strong social promotion and educational transmission, such as the vigorous support from schools like Dounanlu Primary School and Liuhua Primary School.

Zhang Ying (2017) wrote *Exploring the Performing Style of Guangdong Traditional Children's Song "Yue Guang Guang"*. In the learning, growth, and development processes of young children, children's songs are very important educational resources that play a significant role in children's physical health development. In Guangdong, there are very rich resources of children's songs, all of which have outstanding aesthetic features and also have certain characteristics in the process of dissemination. This article selects to study the related issues of Guangdong traditional children's songs, analyzing their historical origins, geographical relationships, the structural characteristics of their music, and the content of their lyrics. Taking the widely sung traditional children's song "Yue Guang Guang" in the Guangzhou and Hakka regions as examples, the article explores its emotional expression and other aspects. It aims to excavate its aesthetic characteristics and further grasp its expressive style and characteristics. Related Research.

Conclusion

Cantonese children's songs, rich in cultural and educational significance, can be classified into five categories: game songs, educational songs, folklore songs, time-related songs, and cradle songs. Game songs, like "Guess and Seek," combine rhythm and play, enhancing children's enjoyment and language rhythm. Educational songs, such as "Little Rooster, Curved Tail," instill positive life attitudes, good habits, and teamwork values. Folklore songs document regional customs, as seen in "Boat Congee," which celebrates the lifestyle of fishing families, and "Selling Laziness," a New Year's tradition. Time-related songs, like "Big Rain Falling," reflect seasonal and festive life, while cradle songs, such as "Moonlight," soothe children with gentle rhythms. These songs also serve as carriers of Guangdong's folk culture, embodying local traditions, festivals, and dialect characteristics. Educationally, they enhance language skills, foster imagination, and impart moral values, making them an integral part of Cantonese heritage and childhood learning.

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