

## *Original Paper*

# A Comparative Study of Cultural Connotations of Animal Images in English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

Yanhong Zeng<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Gannan Normal University, Ganzhou, Jiangxi 341000, China

\* Yanhong Zeng, E-mail: 1050370148@qq.com

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### ***Abstract***

*As an important part of children's literature, nursery rhymes are the earliest literary styles that children are exposed to after they are born. They can reflect objective things, living customs and national culture. Through the comparison of animal images in Chinese and English classic nursery rhymes, this paper concludes that there are cultural differences in animal images in nursery rhymes. Some animal images have similar cultural connotations in Chinese culture and English culture, while some animal images have different cultural connotations.*

### ***Keywords***

*nursery rhyme, animal image, cultural connotation*

## **1. Introduction**

Nursery rhymes are an important part of children's literature, and they are the earliest literary styles that children are exposed to after they are born. Nursery rhymes have great educational and influential effects on children's growth (Cui, 2018). Therefore, the shaping of animal images in English and Chinese nursery rhymes will affect children's cognition of animals. This paper selects classic nursery rhymes from Chinese and English countries as corpus, and compares the animal images in English and Chinese nursery rhymes, in order to understand the similarities and differences in cognition of animals in English and Chinese countries, as well as the cultural similarities and differences reflected in them.

## **2. Nursery Rhymes**

Nursery rhymes are not only an important way for children to learn language at an early age, but also the first step to be influenced by the correct moral values of adult society (Feng, 2017).

In China, *Ci Hai* (China's largest comprehensive dictionary) defines nursery rhymes as a kind of

children's literature. Most nursery rhymes reflect children's life, thoughts, emotions, their views on objective things and their dreams for beautiful things (Xia, 1979). *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (China's first normative language dictionary) defines that nursery rhymes are ballads suitable for children to sing and reflecting children's life and interest (2009).

While in western countries, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines nursery rhyme as "a simple traditional poem or song for children" (Hornby, 2016). *Collins Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* defines that "a nursery rhyme is a poem or song for young children, especially one that is old or well known" (Collins, 2011).

As can be seen from the above, both Chinese and English countries believe that nursery rhymes are ballads written for children. In terms of characteristics, China emphasizes that nursery rhymes reflect objective things, while English countries emphasize that nursery rhymes are historical.

To sum up, a nursery rhyme is a poem or song that is mainly written for young children, suitable for children to sing and chant, and reflect objective things related to children.

No matter Chinese or English nursery rhymes, there are many nursery rhymes describing animals. Their authors describe the animals concretely and clearly, which is conducive to children's cognition of animals. However, due to the cultural differences between Chinese and English, there are both similarities and differences in animal images in Chinese and English nursery rhymes.

### 3. Similar Animal Images in English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

Every ethnic group has common perception and understanding of things in life practice (Liu, 2019). Based on the observation of animals in real life, the writers of nursery rhymes compose nursery rhymes reflecting the natural habits of animals, and their common feelings endow English and Chinese nursery rhymes with the same cultural connotation for the same animal.

#### 3.1 The Cultural Connotations of Pig in English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

Pigs are actually smart. In the journal *Animal Behaviour*, the researchers provide evidence that pigs can quickly learn how mirrors work, and use their reflections to observe their surroundings and find food. The average IQ of Suidae animals is between 70 and 85, equivalent to that of a 3- to 5-year-old child. But both Chinese and English nursery rhymes shape a clumsy and lumpish pig's image.

In the Chinese nursery rhyme, for example, 《小猪小猪肥嘟嘟 ("Little Fatty Piggy")》: “小猪小猪肥嘟嘟, 吃饱就睡呼噜噜。叫它起来它眯起眼, 张嘴就说呜呜呜。小猪小猪肥嘟嘟, 地上打滚粘满泥。叫它起来它嘟起嘴, 呼噜一声呜呜呜 (Little fatty piggy, eats fully and sleeps loudly. When being calling, only replies oink. Little fatty piggy, rolls over in muddy. When being calling, only replies grunting)”, the pig only knows eating, sleeping and grunting, showing a sleepy, greedy and clumsy image. Accordingly, in Chinese children's cognition, pig is a lazy and silly animal, and the word “pig” is a rude word. While in English nursery rhyme “A Pig”: “As I went to Bonner, I met A Pig without A wig, upon my word and honor”, the pig is also taken as wigless and mindless animal. It follows from the above that the cultural connotation of pig in English nursery rhymes is similar to that of Chinese.

### 3.2 The Cultural Connotations of Mouse in English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

Mice always carry derogatory meaning for they often occur in sewers, toilets, kitchens, garbage dumps, and other places, moving back and forth between germ-carrying places and clean places, spreading disease and destroying food. This is also demonstrated in Chinese and English nursery rhymes.

As the Chinese nursery rhyme 《小老鼠 (“Little Mouse”)》: “小老鼠, 上灯台。偷油吃, 下不来。喵喵喵, 猫来了。叽里咕噜滚下来 (Little mouse climbs up the lampstand for stealing food. But he fails to get down. Suddenly there comes the cat. He is so frightened that rolls down from the lampstand)”, the mouse goes everywhere for stealing food. In another Chinese nursery rhyme 《小老鼠送礼 (“Little Mouse Gives Gift”)》: “小老鼠, 去送礼, 提着肉, 挑着米, 求猫别再吃自己。猫笑了: ‘谢谢你!’ 一爪抓进嘴巴里 (Little mouse presents meat and rice for the cat as gifts for begging the cat not to eat him. The cat smiles and says ‘thank you’ and eat him in one bite)”, the mouse tries to bribe the cat but is eaten instead, which shows a silly image of mouse. In English nursery rhyme “the Little Mouse”: “I have seen you, little mouse, Running all about the house, Through the hole your little eye In the wainscot peeping sly, Hoping soon some crumbs to steal, To make quite a hearty meal. Look before you venture out, See if pussy is about. If she's gone, you'll quickly run/ To the larder for some fun; Round about the dishes creep, Taking into each a peep, To choose the daintiest that's there, Spoiling things you do not care”, the mouse runs here and there, steals what he want and ruin that he needn't.

As can be seen from the above, both Chinese and English nursery rhymes show an annoying image of mouse. Mouse is always taken as theft, pest, and dirty thing in both cultures.

### 3.3 The Cultural Connotations of Cattle in English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

Cattle is an important helper in ancient China's farming. Agricultural production is inseparable from cattle, so cattle enjoy a high status in China's culture. The nursery rhyme 《牛儿歌 (“Song of Cattle”)》: “牛儿牛儿为谁忙, 忙完春耕忙秋粮; 风霜雨雪它不怕, 摇着铃儿走四方。 (For whom you are busy with, from spring plowing to autumn harvest. Not afraid of wind and snow, wherever needs you you go)” depicts the diligent and hard-working cattle that work for people all year round with their strength and loyalty. Therefore, in Chinese culture, cattle contain the image of dependability, staidness, diligence and loyalty, which is a part of Chinese farming culture.

In English countries, the cattle have a similar image for cattle are also a kind of animal that work for human beings. In the English nursery rhyme “A Cock and Bull Story”: “The cock's on the housetop blowing his horn; The bull's in the barn a-threshing of corn”, the bull is threshing corn for people. In “Cushy Cow”: “Cushy Cow, Bonny, let thy milk down, And I will give thee a gown of silk. A gown of silk and a silver tee, If thou wilt let down thy milk to me”, the cow is providing milk for people. These two nursery rhymes also reflect that cattle are an important part of farming culture.

### 3.4 The Cultural Connotations of Cattle in English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

Sheep in English and Chinese nursery rhymes have the same cultural connotation, representing a gentle

and obedient image. Such as the Chinese nursery rhyme 《小羊羔 (“Little Lamb”)》: “小小羊, 乖娃娃, 吃起草来不独霸。一会儿叫‘妹妹’, 一会儿喊: ‘妈妈’ (Little lamb, good baby, always shares food, sometimes calling mummy, sometimes calling sis)”, the word “good baby” not only shows that Chinese regard sheep as clever and gentle animals, but also expresses their love for sheep. While in English nursery rhyme “Little Bo-Peep”: “Little Bo-peep has lost her sheep, And can't tell where to find them; Leave them alone, and they'll come home, and bring their tails behind them”, sheep can find their way home by themselves, presenting a tame image of sheep.

#### 4. Opposite Animal Images in English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

Different nationalities live in different cultural environments. Religious beliefs, values, psychological cognition and historical environment affect people's cognition of animal cultural connotation. There are not only common cultural subjects in the human world, but also different subcultures with different styles. Therefore, the same animal in nursery rhymes also has different cultural connotations.

##### 4.1 The Cultural Connotations of Tiger in English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

The image of tiger's ferocity and violence is deeply rooted in people's hearts. This image can be found in the English nursery rhyme “Tiger”: “There was a young lady from Niger, Who smiled as she rode on a tiger. After the ride, she was inside, And the smile was on the face of the tiger”. As the nursery rhyme said, the girl was eaten by the tiger, which proves the ferocity of tiger.

However, in Chinese nursery rhymes, the tiger is the “king of animals”, a symbol of power, courage and authority. As the nursery rhyme 《小老虎 (“Little Tiger”)》: “小老虎, 尾巴长。棒打狐狸棒打狼, 大家选他当大王 (Little tiger, tail longer. Hit foxes and beat wolves. Everyone wants him to be king)” shown, the tiger punishes evil animals, protects other animals, and finally wins their respects. Tiger thus contains a positive powerful and authoritative meaning in Chinese culture.

##### 4.2 Cultural Connotations of Dog in English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

Dog has different cultural connotations in English and Chinese nursery rhymes. In Chinese nursery rhyme 《小狗找朋友 (“Little Dog Looks for Friends”)》: “小黄狗, 找朋友, 说猪黑嫌熊丑。兔子尾短耳朵长, 鸭子嘴扁又太脏 (Little dog, looking for friends, said pig was black and bear was ugly. Rabbit was blamed for short tail and long ears. Duck was criticized for flat mouth and dirty fur)”, the dog only sees everyone's shortcomings, so he cannot make friends, creating a negative image of the dog, which reflects that in Chinese culture, dog is often associated with derogative meaning.

However, the cultural connotation of dogs in English countries is quite opposite to that in Chinese. In English nursery rhyme “Hark! Hark!”: “Hark! Hark! The dogs do bark! Beggars are coming to town”, dogs are regarded as a good partner who can guard people's home and a positive connotation of loyalty and accountability.

##### 4.3 The Cultural Connotations of Bear in English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

Bears are large, muscular, and usually gentle, but when provoked or in danger, they tend to get angry and fight fiercely. Chinese and English nursery rhymes emphasize different features of bears with

different cultural connotations.

Chinese nursery rhyme 《小熊跳高 (“Little Bear Jump High”)》: “一摇一摆跑上来, 一二三, 哎呦! 一脚踩在竹竿上, 摔了一大跤 (Forward waddling away, One, two, three, ouch! He stepped on the bamboo and had a big fall)” tells the story of a bear who took part in the high jump but had a fall because of his clumsiness. The story highlights bear’s bulkiness, reflecting the bear has clumsy and stupid meaning in Chinese culture. On the contrary, in the English nursery rhyme “The Bear Went Over The Mountain”: “The bear went over The mountain/ To see what he could see. The other side of the mountain/ Was all that he could see”, bear is no longer stupid, but very intelligent and ambitious, reflecting that English countries emphasis on bear’s strength and intelligence, and the bear thus has positive connotations.

## 5. Conclusions

Chinese and English nursery rhymes carry different national cultures, so there are cultural differences in animal images in nursery rhymes. Some animal images have similar cultural connotations in Chinese and English. Some animal images have different cultural connotations in Chinese and English. Through the comparative analysis of animal images in Chinese and English nursery rhymes, we can understand the cultural connotations correctly. In the process of cultural communication, we should not only need to pay attention to the surface phenomenon of language, but also need to strengthen the study of cultural connotations and improve the ability of language use.

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