

A Chinese Nursery Rhyme: "Little Mouse Climbs the Lampstand"

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural, literary, and historical significance of the Chinese nursery rhyme "Little Mouse Climbs the Lampstand" as recorded by foreign missionaries and remembered by native speakers. Through a comparative study of three versions—recorded respectively in 1909, 1955, and from personal memory in 1994—it highlights the evolution, transmission, and artistic merits of the rhyme. The paper also reflects on the challenges of translation, cultural interpretation, and the oral tradition's role in rural Chinese communities.

Introduction

In the preface to his 1909 book *The Chinese Boy and Girl*, missionary Taylor Huddleston wrote: "A careful observer of various circumstances will find that the games and amusements of Chinese children are many, and they bear remarkable similarity to those of children in other nations." He collected rhymes and games during his stay in Beijing, among which the first one noted—"Little Mouse"—struck a chord with me, having sung it in my own childhood. Though I have long appreciated its artistic beauty, I was unaware of the song's global recognition until I came across Huddleston's writings. This inspired me to re-examine the nursery rhymes of my childhood in Jiaxiang, Shandong (1974–1979), and reflect on their artistic and social meanings.

Historical Context and Collection

Version 1: Collected by Taylor Huddleston (~1909)

- **Performer:** Mrs. Yin, a Chinese nanny for Huddleston's son Henry
- **Location:** A villa in the western outskirts of Beijing
- **Language:** Chinese, translated into English by Huddleston, later retranslated into Chinese by Wei Changbao and Huang Yijiu
- **Time Recorded:** A hot summer before 1909

Version 2: From "Beijing Nursery Rhymes" (1955)

- **Performer:** Unspecified
- **Source:** Appendix of *The Childhood Era* (2000 edition)

Version 3: Personal Memory (1994)

- **Performer:** My grandmother, Jin Chengge
- **Location:** Dajin Village, Jiaxiang, Shandong
- **Recorder:** The author (Shujun Yao)

Comparative Table of the Three Versions

Item	Version 1	Version 2	Version 3
Source	Huddleston (1909)	Beijing	Nursery Author's recollection

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		Rhymes (1955)	(1994)
Performer	Mrs. Yin	Unknown	Grandmother Jin Chengge
Setting	Outskirts of Beijing	Beijing	Jiaxiang, Shandong
Language	Chinese (translated)	Chinese	Chinese
Title	Little Mouse	Little Mouse	Little Mouse
Imagery	Mouse, lampstand, grandma, ball	Mouse, lampstand, grandma	Mouse, lampstand, grandma, bran
Actions	climb, drink, cry, scratch, roll	climb, eat, cry, roll	climb, drink, kick, jump
Line Count (Long)	8	5	7
Line Count (Short)	10	7	9
Word Count	54	32	39

Literary Analysis

Among the three, the third version possesses the highest artistic value. While all three follow a similar storyline—mouse climbs, steals oil, cries for help, and falls—the final rendition uses vivid rural imagery such as "bran" and expressive colloquial phrases like "kick and jump" or "itchy all over."

The shift from "roll down" (in Versions 1 and 2) to "jump into the bran" in Version 3 resonates more with rural Chinese life and adds humor and authenticity. These qualities stem from the oral traditions of grandmothers, who were the principal caretakers of children in rural settings and also the creators and transmitters of these rhymes.

Issues of Documentation and Translation

Huddleston admitted the challenges he faced in documentation:

1. These rhymes had never been written down.
2. Performers improvised lyrics.
3. Obscene or vulgar content needed sanitization.
4. Translation demanded both rhythm and clarity.

Naturally, errors and alterations crept in—evident in his use of refined terms such as "急中生智" (a sudden flash of wit), which are less typical in oral children's songs. Such changes dilute the vernacular power and humor inherent in the original versions.

Cultural Interpretation and Critique

Huddleston held the song in high regard and made comparisons to English rhymes like "Jack and Jill," claiming that "Little Mouse" had greater educational value and poetic integrity. He suggested it taught children a moral lesson against stealing.

However, this interpretation is reductive. Folk rhymes emerge not as moral lectures but as artistic expressions rooted in daily experience. The dramatic scenes—a mouse jumping into

bran or crying for help—serve to amuse and comfort children, not moralize them.

Broader Observations on Nursery Rhymes

Interestingly, similar rhymes emerge across cultures without direct influence, as seen in:

"One touch silver, Two touch gold, Three touch—don't laugh, Or you'll grow old."

This parallels a Chinese rhyme from my youth:

"One grab gold, Two grab silver, Three grabs—if you laugh, you're not a good kid."

This speaks to a universal human psychology and collective unconscious. Such parallels reinforce the shared human condition rather than cultural transmission.

Conclusion

"Little Mouse Climbs the Lampstand" is more than a nursery rhyme—it is a literary artifact, a vessel of cultural memory, and a testament to the creative spirit of rural Chinese grandmothers. By comparing versions across time and geography, this study reaffirms the artistic and emotional resonance of oral folk literature and critiques the limitations of foreign interpretations.

References

Huddleston, T. & Blanche, K. (2000). *The Childhood Era: Chinese Children's Lives in the Eyes of Two Missionaries*. (Trans. Wei Changbao, Huang Yijiu, Xuan Fang). Beijing: Qunyan Press.
Note: All citations without separate attribution refer to this volume.