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Humour and Pleasures of Childhood Text –
English and Chinese Poetry for Children

Portfolio consisting of Dissertation and Creative Work



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Abstract

This dissertation examines poetry written for children in English and Chinese from the nineteenth century to the present. The intention is to explore some of the possible reasons for differences with regard to the question of humour in English and Chinese children's poetry. One finding has been that the concept of childhood and views on comedy have greatly influenced the subversive and educative roles assumed by humorous children's poetry in English and Chinese. The concept of childhood (as we know it today) in the West has developed from a Romantic perspective of innocent childhood, as a playful and delightful state. Towards the mid-twentieth century, children's negative feelings were also reflected in children's literature and humorous children's poetry in English began to subversively parody arbitrary exercise of power by adults. In contrast, in the developmental course of the concept of childhood in China, there is a tendency to regard children as inferiors of the social or family hierarchy, yet also the future of the nation. Children's literature is often endowed with a didactic mission to give messages about morality and proper values to children.

The aesthetic tradition of comedy is also a factor in the differences with regard to the question of humour in English and Chinese children's poetry. Comedy in classical China developed within the framework of an aesthetic tradition of harmony, with the reinforcing of ethical and moral thinking as one of its important objectives.

The higher aim has been the maintaining of a status quo. Aesthetics of comedy in the West has had a tradition of criticizing the limitations of the existing system. Through demonstrating the ridiculousness of the way things are, audiences are invited to judge and look for better alternatives to the system as it is. Subversion of social norms and logic are some of the methods employed. Humorous children's poetry in both English and Chinese is influenced by their respective aesthetic traditions of comedy.

However, the above observations are not borne out in the analysis of playground verse, a form of poetry improvised by children. In adopting Bakhtin's theory in analyzing these playground verses, it is noted that playground verses in both English and Chinese show traits of subversion of social hierarchy and violation of social taboo. Unlike adult-written children's poetry in Chinese, Chinese playground verse shows no intention to educate or reinforce the concept of harmony. According to Bakhtin, the suspension of norms during carnival allows a kind of communication between the superior and inferior in society which is impossible in normal times. Humorous children's poetry can serve as the carnival market meeting place where adults and children's views come into contact. Playground verses in English and Chinese and "urchin verses" (Styles 262) which introduce urban childhood experiences can serve as a reference for Chinese poets, who would benefit from a more open view on humour if they wish to make their works more appealing to child readers.