

2018

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This document is the authors' final version of the published article.

APA Citation

Chan, K., & Zeng, W. (2018). Cultural products for children in China: The case of Bonnie Bears. *8th International Child and Teen Consumption Conference*. Retrieved from https://repository.hkbu.edu.hk/hkbu_staff_publication/6487

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Cultural products for children in China: The Case of *Bonnie Bears*

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Presented at the 8th

Children and Teens Consumption Conference,

3 - 6 April 2018, Angouleme, France

Extended Abstract (1,500 words)

The China government have a strict control in ideology of cultural products for children. All TV programs for children should help them to develop morally, intellectually, and physically (Yang, 1996). A qualitative study of children's television programs broadcast in China Central Television (CCTV) in 2003 found that these cultural products were dominated by educational contents and socializations for success and modernity (Chan and Chan, 2008). This tradition and strategy is gradually transformed in the recent years as television channels are moving toward market economy. TV ratings and audience engagements became new performance matrices for state and regional television stations. Children's television programs now are shifting from education-focus to entertainment-focus. This case study examines the success story of *Bonnie Bears*, one of the most popular children animated television series in China since 2012. We shall first introduce the contents, including the storylines, the characters, and its "stickiness". This study random samples four episodes out of seven series of this show for content analysis. Three major themes emerged in its narrative, including humor, animal-human's love-hate relations, as well as social issues and technology.

Keywords: animated dramas; television programs; content analysis; consumer socializations

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Introduction

Children is the future of the country. Television is an important socializing agent for children because of its mass reach, demonstration power, and role modeling (Chan and Chan, 2008). The China government has a tight control of the types of programs broadcast for children or with children's image. In 2016, the fourth season of a popular TV program broadcast by Hunan TV titled "Dad! Where are we going?" was banned. The program was a reality show featuring five celebrities and the travel journal with their children. The program was so successful in the previous seasons that Hunan TV harvested huge profits as the program's title sponsorship soared from 28 million yuan (US\$4.3 million) in the first season to 500 million yuan (US\$76.8 million) in the third season. The program was accused for exploiting children and invading their privacy, as well as paying too much for the celebrity parents. The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television decided that the children of celebrities were prohibited to appear in the shows, or be interviewed in news programs. The decision was to prevent the children falling prey to instant fame (Li, 2016). Eventually, the fourth season of the program was broadcast online instead.

Literature review

There are only a few systemic study of children's program in China. Chan and Chan (2008) studied the children's programs broadcast in a week on CCTV-7 (the children and teens channel) and found that an overwhelming percentage of the programs were produced locally. Most of these programs targeted at elementary school children, with very few programs targeted at pre-school kids or teens. The study found that children's TV programs were filled with educational

contents with emphasis on science and technology. Learning was portrayed as more desirable than playing. In terms of ideology, the sampled programs glorified masculine values of success and legitimized competition as a means for success. TV hosts demonstrated high power distance from the children appearing in the shows. Collectivistic values played an important role as children often appeared in groups to achieve certain goals.

With the growing importance of children as a market segment in China, cultural products of children are expected to undergo tremendous change in program nature, the balance between educational and entertainment contents, as well as the adult-child relationship. Television advertising that was created to gain maximum impact demonstrated such changes. In a focus-group study conducted among adolescents aged 12 to 13 in Changsha, a second-tier city in China, participants were asked to recall their favorite food and beverage commercials, and explain why they liked the advertisements. Altogether 21 commercials were reported as favorite commercials. Results indicated that the attributes of likable advertisements were entertainment value, presenting food as tasty, adopting celebrities as endorsers, memorable jingles/slogans, as well as aesthetically pleasing (Chan et al., 2015). In another focus-group study conducted among teens and young adults aged 17 to 20 in Laiwu, Shandong, a medium-sized city in China, participants were asked to recall bank marketing promotions.

Results found that the marketing promotion they recalled most frequently included product placements, catchy advertising slogans, entertainment contacts, and co-branding activities with online games. Participants were able to recall the bank names as well as how the bank products were featured in popular movies (Chan et al., 2017).

To summarize, cultural products for children in China was changing from educational focus to entertainment focus. There is a need to continue to study this topic to understand the current themes of the popular cultural products in China.

Research questions

This study attempts to answer the following two research questions

1. What are the major themes of popular cultural products for children in China now?
2. How are the themes related to the current issues in the Chinese society?

Research method

The Case study of Boonie Bears

We adopt content analysis as our research method. A popular television program for children titled “Boonie Bear” was selected for analysis. This animated comedy was launched in 2012 (Figure 1). More than 200 episodes each about 13 minutes have been released in the previous seven series. The program become the most popular children’s program in China with over 200 channels broadcasting the show in China. It has been translated into over 10 languages are broadcast in more than 60 countries, including Disney, Netflix, and Star Times (Fantawild, 2016). Because of its great success, three movies were released in 2014 to 2016. Boonie Bears: To the Rescue, the first Boonie Bears animated film gained over 250 million yuen (USD 41 million) in box office sales and broke the box office record of animated film in China. The yearly sales of Boonie Bears merchandise was over US\$320 million (Fantawild, 2016).

The show was set in the context of a forest featuring two bears, Birar and Bramble, who tried to stop Logger Vick from destroying their forest home. Birar was smart and always took the lead to halt Logger Vick's destructive attempts. Bramble was Birar's younger brother. He was a bit innocent and he was obsessed with foods. Logger Vick was continually harassed by Boss Li to cut down the trees of the forest the bears were residing. Boss Li played the villain role of forcing Logger Vick to cut the trees and threatening to cut Vick's wage if he did not conform. The drama played on the conflicts between the bears and Logger Vick, as well as between Logger Vick and Boss Li. There were decisions to make about cutting trees or protecting the forest, and the trade-off between reduced salary and social responsibility. Despite of the tension, the bears and their animal friends sometimes worked with Logger Vick to disobey Boss Li's demands.

We randomly selected four episodes from YouTube, including "Bear the haunt of summer" episodes #5 and #33, as well as Bears come and go in winter #19 and #25 for analysis. Both authors watched the episodes a few times and identified the major themes through discussion.

Findings

Three major themes emerged in its narrative, including humor, animal-human's love-hate relations, as well as the presence of social issues and technology.

Humor

The four episodes contained many jokes in Northeastern colloquial style. Logger Vick's image resembled a renowned Chinese comedian Zhao Benshan. There were a lot of mischief behaviors. The actions of the human characters were exaggerated.

Animal-human's love-hate relations

The Bear brothers and Vick were in love-hate relations. As protectors of the forest and their homes, the Bears tried all their means to resist the plans of the destroyer played by Logger Vick. However, the Bears realized that Logger Vick was not the one to blame. Logger Vick did not want to destroy the forest. He did so because Boss Li coerced him. So, the Bears and Logger Vick sometimes worked together as comrades. For example, the bears made fake trees and pretended Logger Vick cut these trees down. Together they took selfie and allowed Logger Vick to report it to Boss Li.

Social issues and technology

Despite of the program targeting children, the drama series featured many social issues and new innovations. For example, the environmental issues faced by the forest residents resembled the environmental issue of smog faced by the audience. Innovative products and activities such as taking selfie and using Didi (Chinese version of Uber) were featured. Positive social values such as charity donations and volunteering were exhibited by the characters.

Discussion and conclusion

Unlike previous children's programs with strong image of heroic acts, Boonie Bears is much close to the ambiguity of human relationship in reality. Bear-human relationship portrays both conflicts and cooperation. There is no absolute heroes in the drama. The characters have their share of strength and weakness. Bears sometimes win and Logger Vick sometimes win too. The image of Boss Li rarely appeared, but his influences was invincible.

The media content shifts drastically from educational to entertainment. Prevalent social issues and new technology was often featured in a central stage of the show. Creativity was demonstrated through the new form of storytelling of ambiguity, fluidity, and modernity.

Figure 1. Major characters in “Boonie Bears”



Final Note: The final version of the paper presented at the conference analyzed 10 episodes and identified four themes.

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