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## **Heroism as Narrative Strategy: Children's Animation and Modernity in Chinese TV**

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### **Abstract**

Entertaining animated television programs often carry significant educational and national discourses that are rarely given much scholarly attention. This article examines the Chinese children's animation program *Boonie Bears* and explores its narrative strategies in portraying heroism. By employing content analyses, in-depth interviews, and focus groups, the article discusses how producers construct animation heroes according to the ideological framework of the Communist Party, economic preferences embedded in the Chinese market, and broader cultural expectations held by society. Finally, this article offers a preliminary exploration of the collaboration between political power and market forces in children's animation, thus revealing the changing needs and interests of the government, producers, and audiences in the process of modernization, and the social significance of animation in Chinese modernity.

**Keywords:** Heroism, modernity, entertaining narrative, children animation, production studies

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## Introduction

In 2016, the fourth season of a popular children's television program broadcast by Hunan Satellite TV titled "*Where Are We Going, Dad?*" was banned by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). This became the first case after the new policy, "Children on TV Ban (禁娃令)", in making reality shows (Li 2018). The program was accused of exploiting children, invading their privacy, and paying too much in the way of fees to celebrity children (Chen 2016). As a result, Hunan TV moved it to an online platform, Mango TV (Ye 2016). However, it was later announced that the sixth season would be cancelled in 2018. This is a subtle, but important case insofar as the Chinese government is concerned, as it has long been involved over the ideological control of media products (Luqiu 2017; Steinfeld 2017), in particular programs for children or programs featuring children (Donald 2004).

As an important cultural genre for children, the history of Chinese animation indicates the authorial, national and educational discourse that are embodied in a complex mix of entertaining narrative strategies (Chen 2017; Wu 2017; Fung 2013). These discourses are able to be understood through the examination of the narrative of heroism (Farquhar, 1993). Heroism has long been a significant tool in Chinese ideological education programming and there are different frames as to whether its contemporary form is able to represent a continuingly political correctness for the Communist Party. As the expectations within the economy and social groups change, the narrative of heroism, modernity and antagonism are accordingly reconstructed to meet the basic demands of making a successful show in China -

balancing ideological achievement associated with the Party, commercial success, and public needs (Zhu 2012). As we can observe, educational content that commands strong ideological concerns is decreasingly represented in children's animation in China. Instead, entertainment is now becoming a more attractive option to produce a popular children-show. Under this condition, the understanding of current narrative strategies of heroism helps us to understand how the authorial, national and educational discourses embodied in children animation shows in China.

Through the analysis of a popular animated TV series titled *Boonie Bears* (2012- ), this article reviews the current narrative strategies of heroism and its social meaning. The framing and presentation of this animation show were at the forefront of the textual analysis, and the data documented was supplemented by two groups of interviewees from the production team in late 2018. The findings reveal the changing needs and interests of producers, audiences and the government in contemporary China, and sheds light on the narrative strategies of heroism for children's animations, which indicates a deeper social significance in the process of modernization in the country.

### **Children Animation in China**

Chinese animations have long been given an important function to construct current social value in China in the past sixty years. It is evident that the development of animation is largely influenced by the policy and social changes in the country (Wu 2009; Jiang and Huang 2017) and these changes in animation have made the storytelling changed accordingly. During 1950s and 1960s, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio produced most of the

animated shows in China. Using a unique oriental aesthetic and Chinese style, it was commonly referred to as the “classical Chinese animation” (Chen 2017; Fung, 2013). These classical animated films earned international and domestic reputation for its professionalism and oriental characteristics. This period is referred to as the first golden age of Chinese animation. While the Cultural Revolution spread over the whole country during 1966 and 1976, Chinese animation could not escape from being an important part of the political propaganda architecture. This period was strongly branded as “ultra-leftism” and embedded in almost every industry in the country (Chen 2017: 176).

From 1977 to the mid-1980s, when the country started to recover from the Cultural Revolution, the second golden age of animation started to bloom, and an increasing number of independent animation studios began engaging in the business. Particularly after China joined the WTO, the state-driven creative industry realised that animation should be considered an important component in its national policy to reflect a clear globalized economic development message, with social impact and political expectations.

After 2000s, the Chinese animation was largely influenced by the global animation industry that was dominated by productions made in the US and Japan (Westcott 2011; Yoon and Malecki 2010). While the Chinese government was keen to develop its local animation industries, it also introduced several measures to develop a strong animation industry that could compete internationally (Ishii 2013). Internally, television stations remained governmental subsidies, and the government encouraged non-governmental companies to participate in the animation production (Wang 2009). In 2016, China’s total animation output

was valued at US\$19 billion, registering an increase of 15% during 2015 (License 2017).

Governmental policies, such as quota systems, limited the import of foreign animation and forbid imported animation to be broadcast during prime time in domestic television channels.

Internationally, the State Council established the “Go Abroad” strategy that aimed at becoming “a strong world power of creation, development, and production in the animation industry” (State Council 2006). In so doing, making the China’s cultural products as powerful carriers of values and beliefs is able to compete in the international stage.

These changes in policy are more often than not associated with the needs and interest of the CPC, as well as to fit social needs. With the development of technologies, Chinese audiences are enjoying the conveniences that are brought about by high-speed Internet that allows them to watch different online animations and participate in the animation franchising. Thus, audiences are no longer satisfied with old-fashioned domestic animation and desire a hero to meet their expectations (Jiang and Huang 2017). In addition, require a higher quality of content production of animated shows for their kids. As a result, animation companies need to rethink their products if they are not meeting the demands which audiences require.

### **Heroic Narrative in Chinese Entertainment Programming**

Heroes are symbolically important in every nation while its representations are various in different national and historical contexts (Wright 2003; Lawrence and Jewett 2002). The narratives of heroism are embedded in various entertaining contents, working as the symbolic expression of justice to satisfy the corresponding social demand. As Alan Moore wrote in *The Mark of the Batman* (1986),

*“The world about us has changed and is continually changing at an ever-accelerating pace, so have we. With the increase in media coverage and information technology, we see more of the world, comprehend its working a little more clearly, and as a result our perception of ourselves and the society surrounding us has been modified. Consequently, we begin to make different demands upon the art and culture that is meant to reflect the constantly shifting landscape we find ourselves in. We demand new themes, new insights, and new dramatic situations. We demand new heroes”.*

As a typical narrative strategy in cultural products, heroism has long been an important feature in Chinese literature, movie and television since WWI, when the Communist Party was fighting with Japanese invaders. From its establishment in 1949, the narrative of heroism was associated with ‘revolutionary themes’ and was a reflection of the fighting spirit for the country at this particular time (Shen 2013). This revolutionary heroism emphasized that individuals should sacrifice their own interests to serve the interests of the collective. Historically it follows the legacy of Confucianism that embraces collectivism and the main propaganda strategy during times of war and in particular, the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, this revolutionary model opera (in Chinese: 样板戏) became the representation of heroism and served as propaganda. More interestingly, heroes were often referred to the working class.

In 1980s, the narrative of heroism symbolised in cultural products becomes a new trend that was known as ‘anti-hero’ and ‘entertainment-oriented’. The perfect impression of combat heroes was no longer to serve the purposes of improving the modernization of China. When the country aimed to recover the economy, the most needed labour was that of a hard-working industrial worker. Therefore, the most common characters for heroism shifted from war heroes and working class to the industrial workers in factories. ‘Labour is Glorious’

became a common term that gave emphasis to the characteristics of being hard-working, brave and aggressive. This narrative was aligned with the development of the Chinese society, which was struggling economically. For example, the success of *Black Cat Sheriff* (黑猫警长), a Chinese animation television series produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, demonstrated how entertaining themes could make a good heroic animation, while *Havoc in Heaven* (大闹天宫) and *Nezha Fights the Sea* (哪吒闹海) were typical anti-heroic animations in which the main characters were not perfect heroes, but become heroes after struggling (He 2015). The success of exploitation and grasp of national cultural factors and contemporary value trends has led to the success of animation in the country, which now signifies the national identity of Chinese animation.

After China joined WTO in 2001, stories about individual heroes were greatly influenced by the American comic and film franchise Marvel by the concept of Western individual superheroes. With the increasing success of China's economy, animation professionals have also focused on ways to improve its international reputation through the use of soft power, in other words, how the narrative of heroism can spread the positive image of the country, as prosperous, democratic and civilized. As the result, by the influences of the national cultural and Western concepts, heroism embedded in the current animation become more entertaining orientated with multiple focus. In addition, audiences have been fervent in asking the plot to express some civilian consciousness, rebellious spirit, and entertainment (Sun 2018). In an increasingly media saturated life, people are no longer limited to traditional heroic characters, fairy tales, or fairy tales, such as princes and princesses. How to tell a good



story with heroes to satisfy the need from the political needs and the new demand from audiences, especially the parents, is a challenge for creative workers.

While since the Chinese government is not ready to embrace the concepts of free expression and changing orders (Keane 2016), the Chinese creative imagination and content is still limited with what can be described as manageable creativity (Bilton 2010), and therefore has been tamed to produce predictable political outcomes (Fung and Ho 2016). Among many failures, there are two successful cases in making animations in the country, the animation TV series *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* (2005-2008) which advocated for the discourse of harmony of the state (Fung 2016; Fung 2013) and *Bonnie Bears* (2012- ) that brings innovative narratives to a negative role (Wang 2014). This article will look into detail as to how *Bonnie Bear* produced the show to achieve the success of a complex format - by paying more attention to entertainment, in which the definition of heroism is accordingly changed.

### **The Story of *Boonie Bears***

*Boonie Bears* depicts the story of logger and two bear brothers in the forests of north-eastern China, with a target audience of six to twelve year olds. The show involves two bears, Briar and his younger brother Bramble, who cooperate with their animal friends to stop Logger Vick (hereafter called Vick) from destroying their forest home. Boss Lee, the villain, harasses Vick continually to cut down the trees and threatens to reduce Vick's wages if he fails to do so. The conflicts revolve around decisions of whether to cut down the trees or to protect the

forest, and the trade-off between money and social responsibility. In the latest series, a female character, Zhao Lin, was introduced into this show.

*Boonie Bears* was produced by Fantawild Animation (in Chinese 华强方特动漫), an animation company based in Shenzhen where they have combined the cultural and animation industries to form a cluster for the convenience of labour and resulted in a new business model (Dai and Zhou 2009; He and Li 2005). Although this show is made by a local company, it was first broadcast on a national television channel — CCTV Children's Channel — as well as on video platforms in China, including iQIYI and Tencent.

The show has become one of the most popular children's TV programs in China, with over 200 channels broadcasting it. As of 2018, more than 600 episodes, each lasting around 13 minutes, have been released over the course of nine series. It has been dubbed into more than ten languages and broadcast in more than 60 countries and territories, and on popular channels such as Disney, Netflix and Sony (Fantawild 2017). The success of *Boonie Bears* consists of dramatic storytelling, vivid dialogue, interesting characters, keeping a finger on the pulse of current events, and humour.

Following the success of the TV series, six animated films targeting youth audiences and parents were released between 2014 and 2019. Box office receipts of the first *Boonie Bears* animated film were 247 million Yuan, breaking the record for animated films in China. However, this record was soon broken by the following *Boonie Bears* movies which reached 300 million Yuan (Amidi 2018). The success of *Boonie Bears* makes it important for

understanding the current stage of children's animation in China, in particular how heroism is constructed in the show.

### **Research Methods**

Textual analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus groups were employed for this research. First, 20 episodes were randomly selected for textual analysis, in which five episodes from each season were selected spanning the years 2015 to 2017 (see Appendix 1). Each episode was around 13 minutes long, and gave a combined episode length of 260 minutes. In order to gauge the basic orientation of the show, the opening songs and titles were examined first. It was evident that the show was strongly connected with current social affairs in China, according to its topics and titles (see Appendix 1). For example, there were topics related to the World Cup, Internet addiction, square dancing and TV quiz shows, such as the popular TV show, *Super Brain*. In China, square dancing is one of the most popular, but controversial activities for elderly population. The main subjects discussed in these animations are friendship, love, environmental protection, and family, rather than scientific competition. The textual analysis was continued by the analysis of the construction of characters, and the relations among different characters. Two key words – heroism and antagonism – were then identified for the narrative strategy of the show.

The semi-structured interviews and focus group proceeded by the first author, based on the results of the textual analysis. Eight professionals involved in the show's content creation joined the interview and focus group sessions, including director, producer, scriptwriter and designer. The first round of interviews was conducted in September 2018,

each lasting around 1.5 hours. The second round of data collection was conducted using focus groups in November 2018, in which six professionals participated.

All the interviewees involved were made aware that their interviews might be quoted in the article. Nevertheless, based on a number of ethical considerations, all citations in this article are anonymous. Each participant will be identified using numbers next to the term Professional to protect their confidentiality. Through this mixed-method approach, understanding how the production team makes decisions, how they interpret certain terms, such as heroism, how they balance political aims, financial pressure, audiences' needs and the underlying reasons for these responses was exposed.

### **Heroism as a Production Strategy**

As mentioned above, there are three main characters in *Boonie Bears*, two brother bears and Vick, in the series produced before 2017. Vick was depicted as a grass-roots worker who was often under economic stress, sometimes selfish, cowardly, lazy and easily disobedient to his boss, but generally retaining a deep sense of kindness. On the other hand, he was also constructed as a “hero”. As one of the key directors explains:

*“The hero who we want to shape in this show is ordinary people. It is different from Hollywood animation. The hero in Hollywood movies is often born with a specialty, or is very talented. But our heroes are ordinary people, even a very humble person. While in some important moments, the spirit of heroism inside this person will wake up. That is the hero we want to feature”* (Interview with Professional 1, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2018)

In contrast to Hollywood animations, such as the Marvel franchise, heroes are typically associated with masculinity and power by separating or transcending themselves from the traditional forms of law, order and justices (Dubose 2007), Vick is thin, weak and born into

an ordinary family living in the forest. While the heroic personality of Vick is restricted by these circumstances, he “sometimes can break the boundaries to do something that he normally cannot do, that is what we call — courage” (interview with Professional 2, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2018). The “boundaries” in the interviewee’s descriptions are mostly associated with the orders given from Boss Lee, illustrating the power vs. powerless dichotomy.

Boss Lee, depicted largely through voice, is pictured as a strict and completely selfish businessman who remains almost invisible, but at the same time plays an important factor to drive the storyline in almost every episode. The power of Boss Lee was represented in how he makes orders to Vick to cut down trees, and against the wishes of the other animals who live there. As a worker, Vick is often under the obligation of his boss, as well as his own financial pressure to cut the trees, but knows that this is home of his animal friends. The production team usually puts Vick in such moral dilemmas — to cut down trees or not to illustrate the internal struggles that a hero should go through. In every episode, the phrase “we should protect every single corner of the forest” is reiterated by the bears and their animal friends to emphasize their determined attitude to protect the forest. . There are three differing attitudes towards the forest from the different characters. As one of the interviewees explains, “the animals represent “idealistic mind” as they do not have financial pressure from the top since their lives depend upon what has been given to them from nature, they live in a pure forest and has a simple and pure mind to protect the forest, while Boss Lee represents the reality that humans have an endless desire to make use of nature” (interview with Professional 1, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2018). The balance between idealism and realism is an

important framework on which to construct the image of the hero, Vick, in this show. As the interviewee indicates,

*“It is a matter of trade-off between idealism and realism. For example, Vick is often in urgent need of money, and quickly accepts the order from Boss Lee. But once this order is involved with moral considerations, for example, there is a mother bird with her baby birds building their nest in the tree, then cutting down this tree is not only an economic issue, it will bring a moral problem. Then Vick may worry about the danger this brings to the bird mother and kid. So, the concern for this bird may make him fall into a struggle: to cut down the tree or not. This struggle is what we want to express. This is a question of morality, which has a strong connection with the image of the hero we want to build”.* (Interview with Professional 1, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2018)

Thus, there are two layers of meaning associated with the term “breaking boundaries” — first, it refers to disobeying orders from the top-down power; and secondly, breaking orders to maintain balance. Although Vick was not always powerful enough to reject Boss Lee’s orders, the intention of the production team is to show how a less powerful figure responds to the struggles and breaks those boundaries. When Vick breaks these boundaries, this hero becomes increasingly ideal to fulfil the producers’ expectations. As one of the interviewees emphasized,

*“Hero is under a growing process and reconstruction. Vick sometimes did not care that much about the feelings of the others, but now, he is actually having more and more positive energy. He has a sense knowing what honour is and what disgrace is. He becomes to know the consequences of his wrong doings. No matter what struggle he is facing, at the end, his will make a decision and on the same side of justice”* (Interview with Professional 3, 22nd November 2018)

The intentional design of Vick’s character fits well within the producers’ expectations. Meaning, Vick is not rich, which according to the governments idea of political correctness, is not promoting luxury on children’s television shows. Vick also cares about the lives of others, which again is emblematic of Chinese culture and fits an educational purpose. While

Vick may look as if he represents the main hero image in Western depictions of the term hero, he is a “hero” but in the collective sense of the term. For example, one of the other bears, Briar, is brave, smart, and friendly, and represents “courage”, just as the production team had designed. His little brother, Bramble on the other hand presents a warm and loving hero. Furthermore, in the current series, the new female character, Zhao Lin, represents a positive image of a modern female child (*Bonnie Bears: The Adventurers 2017*), which is indicative of the female hero. Each of these four characters is an integral part of the composition to the meaning of “hero” that is based on Chinese cultural, political and marketing considerations. As an Asian country, China is traditionally collectivist, encouraging children to care about collective honour rather than individual pride. Even in the show’s theme song, the lyrics mention “heroes”, not “hero”. The details about the intention of designing a hero, or a group of heroes is associated with how the producers’ view themselves and how to present the country in the international market. As one of the key interviewees confirmed,

*“The screen cannot always be full of American-type heroes like Schwarzenegger and Stallone -- they only rely on some effect, and always win, leaving just a drop of blood. Why can’t we shape a Chinese type of hero? We can do it. We need such a hero. In this animation, it is more about shaping four people, but not shaping one single hero”.* (Interview with Professional 2, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2018)

In this show, it is clear that heroism is the narrative strategy for the production team to tell the story, to construct particular characters and to deal with the relations among these characters. The way the production team presents “hero” is associated with the Chinese characteristics: being grass-roots, has weaknesses, but can always overcome difficulties, collectivism over individualism, and that the “hero” is not perfect, but is strong enough to

break boundaries. This approach to heroism on the one hand is the result of the expectations of political correctness and cultural demand, and the other hand it is embedded in the storytelling of antagonism, which will now be explained.

### **Antagonism: from Single to Diversification**

As with any long-lasting children's animation, storylines and characters are continuously updated in order to fit the expectations of audiences, especially those who grow up with a particular animation. One of the strategies used to construct the image of hero in *Boonie Bears* is through antagonism found in single relationships to multiple relationships between diverse parties.

The birth of *Boonie Bears* stems originally from another animation produced by the same company, titled *Kongfu Master of the Zodiac* (in Chinese: 十二生肖闯江湖) in 2010, in which two bears were also the characters. As mentioned by one of the production team members; *"Since these two characters are quite welcomed by children and teens, we would like to retain this bear brother's concept in our new animation, but we, of course, need another conflicted party to construct dramatic scenes, so we created Logger Vick"* (interview with Professional 3, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2018). In the first six series, the antagonism between bears and humans drive the main storyline. However, starting from the episodes produced in 2017, the production team began to move this dynamic to multiple conflicted relationships to cater to the continuously changing audiences who were not satisfied anymore with the single, simplistic type of conflict depicted in the original animation (according to the interview with Professional 2, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2018). For example, this show, which originally targeted



children aged six to twelve when it was produced in 2012, now has an audience target group of 12 to 18 years old. This means that if the company wants to continually catch the audience's eye and improve its audience ratings, the relationships among characters in the show must be more complex. As one of the interviewees stated,

*“We should ensure this show is made for the long run. This is also the lesson from Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf. As your audiences grow up, you will lose them when they get older and more mature. If you do not improve your creativity and storytelling you can only wait for another generation of babies to grow up to watch your show. It takes time and has risk. So, you must upgrade your show and characters too”.*  
(Interview with Professional 4, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2018)

As audiences change, the characters accordingly undergo subtle upgrades to meet the change of age of their audiences, such as putting more emotional expression in the show to enrich the characters' personalities. One of the most significant changes was the transformation of Vick who quits his logger job to become a tourist guide to organize and guide tourists to the forest with the help of his two bears friends and their animal friends in the current series (*Boonie Bears: The Adventurers 2017*). The relationship between bears and humans shifts from conflict-dominated approach to a mixture of conflicted and cooperative relationships. The main story is no longer about protecting the forest; instead, it is the adventure of the forest.

The tourists from the outside become the new threat to the forest, through such activities as dropping litter and attempting to sell bears to make money, scenarios that reflect a few controversies in the Chinese society. The newcomers become another antagonism to the bears and Vick; the latter two became cooperating parties. This new cooperation becomes increasingly strong after the arrival of Zhao Lin, a new female character. Besides the

consideration of the changing audience, another reason for the production team to change the occupation of Vick is quite policy-oriented. As one professional explains,

*“Our story must meet our social values. President Xi said green river and green mountain are gold and silver (绿水青山就是金山银山). So, environmental issues are important. Our national government aims to develop the local tourism economy too. There is a specific national red-header document emphasizing environmental protection issues. So, we decided to seize such an opportunity to produce a program. For us, producing children’s animation invokes a sense of mission and responsibility to the country”.* (Interview with Professional 4, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2018)

According to this new series, the production team put more attention into expressing humanistic care into the show, and in particular the presentation of three main values, namely positive value, eco-friendliness and courage. For example, in one episode, Vick thought about being a logger again since it is hard to make a living from tourism, a thought that was provoked when he imagined a treasure box hidden under a hundred-year-old tree by Vick when he was a boy, which awakens his soul (Forest Treasure 2017, episode no. 12). In the box, the little Vick wrote a letter to himself, saying, “When I grow up, I will protect this forest forever”. This note touches Vick’s heart and brings about a positive change in his relationship with Zhao Lin.

The four characters, then, are presented as the positive social value that the production team aims to spread in the show. While, the outsiders are presented as some unwelcome social value by their uncivilized behaviours, those who kidnapped bears and sold them to make money became the outsiders. The cooperation between Vick and bears can also be observed in the episodes produced before 2017. In the first four seasons, the aim of bear brothers was purely to protect the forest without compromise, but upon knowing the financial pressure that Vick was undertaking with his logging job, the two bears brothers worked

together to come up with creative ways of protecting the forest. For example, one time the bears helped Vick to make fake trees and took pictures to fool Boss Lee by pretending Vick had completed the job that Boss Lee ordered (The Italian Job 2015, episode 3). The interviewee explains the change of antagonism in this animation:

*“In the new series, these four characters [Vick, the bear brothers and Zhao Li] are designed to be bounded together. They are represented as a team. But at the beginning, Zhao Lin does not listen to others, she has a little antagonism; while after encountering a big challenge and crisis, these four characters started to help each other, and then they build friendship and trust. Hence, when they are faced with difficulties and conflicts, these conflicts are no longer inner conflicts among them, rather, they are all external disputes. So, in the new series, the conflicts are external — and they have an adventure together”.* (Interview with Professional 2, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2018)

The antagonism now in *Boonie Bears* is multi-layered: antagonism (with cooperation) among four main characters, conflicts between the main characters and the supporting characters (such as external parties or tourists), the contradictions between the main characters and the antagonism of supporting characters. The type of antagonism in this animation has changed from single and completely conflicted antagonism to occasional and multidimensional antagonism. In this way the four characters — Vick, two bears and Zhao Lin, build an image of the hero with Chinese characteristics, revealing the collectivism that is deeply embedded in Chinese culture and society. As we can observe from the content and interviews with producers, the reasons behind the changes discussed above are from the diversification of audiences, promotion of national policy, and the Chinese culture.

### **Multiple Relations and Modernity**

Children's animations are one way to observe how people understand society, in this show, the presentation of modernization of China can be observed, such as the relationships between urban and countryside, and the increased female consumption power. In *Boonie Bears*, the complexity of modernity is first connected to the presentation of gender by the production team. *Boonie Bears* was a male-oriented animation in seasons one to four, reflecting the male-dominated production team the same as the majority of children animation (Lemish 2010). *"In the first few years, I did not realize our team comprised of all men, and no one had a child. This did determine the way we understood the world of the child. We looked at the world through the eyes of men."* (Interview with Professional 1, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2018). The male-dominated production team may have contributed to the reasons why the earlier series of *Bonnie Bears* paid more attention to conflicts and actions between bears and Vick rather than love stories. As one of the producers explained:

*"We went to kindergarten to observe the kids and teachers, and then, we discovered that kids are physically weaker than we imaged, such as a desk, he cannot move it, he just cannot. And, we also start to realize the importance of mothers and their contributions in children's growing. So, in our latter series, we put more themes on caring for others. Such as, bears and Vick took care of the other babies, changing diapers for them and giving them a bath."* (Interview with Professional 1, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2018)

In 2015, the team started to reconsider their production strategy and started to recruit female creative staff, including scriptwriters, producers and designers. Now the team comprises of a 50/50 split between men and women, and most of these female managers are mothers. The diversity of the production team has brought changes in the storylines. The most significant change is the introduction of a new main character, a twelve-year-old girl called Zhao Lin (*Boonie Bears: The Adventurers*, 2017). The reason that Zhao Lin was

introduced to the show was to first change the demographic audience share as “*more than 80 percent of the show’s previous audiences were male, hence we would like to catch more girl audience for consumption purposes*”, plus “*the show needs a fresh character to bring something new*” (interview with Professional 5, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2018). In designing the character, female independence in particular is the most important characteristic that the production team aims to disseminate to children. As one female professional explains,

*“We didn’t take the princess of Disney model. It means, as women, we do not wait so many years for my prince to rescue me. That is not the case. I am my own master; I can control my own life. So, in Boonie Bears, she (Zhao Lin) is a very independent little girl. She has her own independent judgment. What kind of social values do we have to convey to the audience through this show? We want to encourage them, especially for Chinese women, these little girls. Encourage them to be independent. I think in this case, the show has quite a practical social meaning”.* (Interview with Professional 6, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2018)

As Chinese women increasingly desire self-achievement, a female character who loves the forest, is not scared of adventure, and often makes progress in team work is apposite to the modern female’s expectation. As one of the female scriptwriters shared during the focus group, “*love, independence, courage, wisdom, and friendship create the right spirit to attract modern Chinese mothers, who are thus more likely to encourage their children to watch this show*” (Focus group, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2018). This indicates that the social definition of a woman, at least from the perspective of women themselves, has changed from reflecting old traditions to embracing modern values.

The complexity of modernity also lies in the connection and conflict between Zhao Lin, who is a modern urban girl, and the indigenous characters in the forest. Zhao Lin, the niece of an old friend of Vick, comes back to visit the forest where she spent holiday’s as a child.

Zhao Lin is imagined as those typically born in the 2000's in China. As a result of the one-child policy, Zhao Lin shares the common personalities of being only one child (i.e. sometimes too confident for herself without taking others' opinion into consideration) while living in a world of rapidly developing technology and economy she also has her strength (interview with Professional 3, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2018). Thus, a girl from modern urban city in this show is designed to be conflicted in some ways with Vick who is the indigenous character in the forest. The conflicts between two characters are the reflection of urban and rural divide in the society. That was explained by an interviewee:

*“Before Zhao Lin, all the characters lived in the forest, and have no idea of the outside world. As a stranger, Zhao Lin breaks in the forest, and she brings many new ideas from the urban city, including what she learned from her class. So, she will have a different view with Vick because Vick never went out to the urban city. Thus, these two will have a conflict, and this is an interesting point to observe”* (Interview with Professional 7, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2018).

While the complexity of modernity lies in the multiple relations among these characters through their conflicts and cooperation. Although this animation is set in the forests of northeast China, *Boonie Bears* increasingly targets first-tier cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, which represent the economic achievement and cultural development of China. Hence, more components representing modernity have been introduced in the new series. As the interviewee reveals;

*“We put new characters, such as a fox couple and rabbits, in the show. They are featured as elegant characters. Such a role is aimed at white-collar fathers and mothers, particularly those who live in Shenzhen and Beijing with children. We also designed some activities to represent modernity in this show. For example, what these characters do together is Yoga rather than agricultural work”* (Interview with Professional 8, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2018).

Zhao Lin, as a modern girl, and the indigenous characters in the forest, including Vick and the bears, not only exhibit the urban/rural contrast, but also the complex conflicts and solutions which took place whilst China was shifting towards modernity. Harmony and unity are the key values that reveal how these relationships are correlated to modern Chinese society.

### **Conclusion**

Although direct educational content, such as these scientific competition programs to promote their academic skills, school readiness and linguistic development, has been largely absent from this show, we observed that it is easy to find evidence that children's shows are associated with educational functions and represent the will of the national government to reflect on the cultural and economic expectations of the country. The educational function of a children's animated TV series is through entertainment storytelling, making use of the hero character but with Chinese characteristics, and embedding Chinese ideologies and positive social values in this show.

The hero as portrayed in *Boonie Bears* is filled with Chinese characteristics, namely that the "hero" is seen through the prism of collectivism rather than individualism, and that the "hero" is not eager to win, again a characteristic that differentiates it from other children's shows in which heroes are passionately competitive, and thus more interested in striking a balance between idealism and realism. The cultural meaning of the hero within Chinese characteristics originates from the traditional Confucianism culture. Confucianism offers heroism a basic framework in which heroes are designed to contribute to collective interest,

rather than individuals. The presentation of heroes, as the inevitable result of modernization in China, is the mixture of political, cultural, economic demands. First, the narratives of heroes meet the expectations from audiences, especially the parents, who were all born during the period of China's economic development and exposed to other forms of children's animation from abroad. Second, the changes of national policies have pushed animation companies to appeal to market requirements. Third, *Boonie Bears* is right to transmit the positive social values promoted by the government; in particular, the way the four characters work together to exemplify the group hero identity, which fully meets the government's expectations over ideological concerns.

Although children are the prime consumers of such animated series, incorporating topical current social issues into children's entertainment is considered dangerous in many countries, in particular in China. An interviewee clarified that the production team is careful not to directly connect a specific current social issue with the show, while being guided by what they learned from this specific social issue. Moreover, it is essential to make a show that fits the right political, social and cultural expectations that the current social issues reflects, while not commenting directly on an issue which "is too sensitive to children". The featuring of social issues and technology indicates that this children's animated program retains the educational function and the cultural sensitivity (or positive image) desired by the government. The integration of social issues shows the producers' attempts to embrace modernity in children's animation.



The most discussions of Chinese media stress the limitations and controls that are present in media production, while this research shows that this is an over-simplification and producers and other parties have complex strategies and negotiations. Our interviewees for this production also engaged in “boundary-pushing” activity and danced within a general mixed framework fulfilled with political correctness, creativity and market demands. The core of this production in approach to creating an animated children’s TV show is based on the politics of television production, the needs of audiences living in modern cities, the enthusiasm for professionalism in China’s animation industry, and the financial pressure to score high audience ratings.

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## Appendix 1,

### Episodes selected for analysis

Number and name of season	Time released	Number and name of episode	In Chinese
5 Snow Daze of <i>Boonie Bears</i>	10 July, 2015	4 Forest Taxi	丛林的士
		16 Machine Dog	机器狗
		19 Bramble's Food Warehouse	熊二的美食仓库
		25 Logger Vick's Steam Engine	强式蒸汽机
		35 The People's Quiz	全民问答
6 Sunsational Summer of <i>Boonie Bears</i>	12 February, 2016	2 Vick's Villa	强哥山庄
		5 Forest Party	森林游园会
		12 Survive in the Wild	荒野求生
		33 The World Cup	光头强看世界杯
		38 Vick Quits Internet Addiction	光头强戒网瘾
7 Autumn Awesomeness of <i>Boonie Bears</i>	June 2016	3 The Secret of Vick	光头强的秘密
		6 Big Black	大黑
		13 Fruit Car	水果摇摇车
		23 Assistant of Vick	光头强的助手
		40 Square Dance in The Forest	森林广场舞
9 <i>Boonie Bears:</i>	28 November,	1 Tourist Guide Vick	导游光头强
		2 Enemy Cannot Avoid	冤家路窄

The Adventurers	2017	5 An Unforgettable Night	难忘的一夜
		10 Adventure Dairy	漂流历险记
		19 The Promise of Dandelion	蒲公英的约定