



## *Little Friends*

### Children and creative consumption in the People's Republic of China

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**ABSTRACT** ● The production and distribution of media content are an increasingly important part of the move to diversify and internationalize China's economy, although changes have been managed so as to maintain central control over the political sphere. This article argues that children are exemplary consumers in an internationalized environment. They retain and reiterate a sense of local and national identity, but are also fully competent in their relationship to new knowledge in a new world. ●

**KEYWORDS** ● children's film ● competency ● cosmopolitan ● internationalization ● patriotism

I

In 1874, a newspaper for children was published in Guangzhou, *Xiaohai yuebao* (*The Child's Paper*). It is believed to be the first such publication in the history of Chinese childhood. There have been a host of subsequent publications, from the radical Shanghai *Shaonian zazhi* (*Youth Magazine*, 1911), to the educational reform-based *Ertong shijie* (*Children's World*, 1922), to the Shanghai weekly *Xiao pengyou* (*Little Friends*, 1922) and many more, of which the 4 May movement's *New Youth* is probably the best remembered. The editorial statement of *Little Friends* declared that the

publication wanted to foster 'brave, active, happy, just and hard-working children'. Specifically Party-orientated broadsheets and magazines were also widely distributed after 1949, including *Hao haizi* (*Good Children*, 1950), (later *Hong haizi* [*Red Children*, 1959]), and *Hong xiaobing* (*Little Red Guard*, 1974), followed by *Xin shaonian* (*New Youth*, 1978). *Zhongguo shaonian bao* (*China Youth Daily*, 1950) is still published, as are regular youth inserts into city papers. This profuse historical list is impressive, but has little contemporary purchase. In 2003, children are more likely to cite the popular cartoon collection *Youma dashi* (*Master Joker*), which translates and reprints strips from European magazines, or a football monthly (if they can afford the cover price) as a favourite read. The subsidized publications that print 'news' for children in the 2000s have a wide casual readership, but this is often because they include English language columns, comics and gossip on popular culture. The brave new worlds of the 4 May movement and the appeal to youth to rise up against the Japanese have long disappeared. State-sponsored publications for children and teenagers are now much more likely to feature the seductions of Mickey Mouse, pop stars and pet care.

This snapshot of print media underpins the contention of these short thoughts on children and the creative industries in China. The argument I propose is that, although children in the Chinese media sphere have long been recognized as part of an economy of national knowledge (hence all those early publications), albeit one based on national political coherence rather than the creative survivalism of market states in the West, they are now transforming into an internationalized consumer base for the media outlets of a knowledge economy. Children from well-off families in the affluent eastern cities are the current paradigm of sophisticated mainland consumption. Their consumption profile is one that does not eschew local loyalties, but can also deal with foreign content and its culturally non-cognate challenges. The argument does not pretend that the trajectory from *Little Red Guard* to *Master Joker* has been smooth and undifferentiated. It does suggest, however, that given that the ways in which children have, over decades, been participants in an economy of nation(al) knowledge, the current shift to a knowledge economy is socially conceivable, but also qualitatively exceptional.

## II

Mickey Mouse is seductive and is designed to be so. Seduction is the breed of self-regulation perfected by the Hollywood model, while censorship, commonly linked to Chinese production, is at the sharp end of media regulation (Landsberger, 2001). The two are sometimes confused in the realm of children. Seduction is, for children, a convincing invitation into a cultural

place that is, apparently, their own. Censorship ensures that the place is contaminated only with the appropriate seductions, whether these are the sayings of a mass-produced Mao Zedong or the syndicated prettiness of Lizzie McGuire. Children respond because they need to belong, and adults understand this very well. The residual commitment to one's childhood world and the maintenance of a sociality fitting with one's own competencies and memories are arguably the strongest forces in human organization. It is the mainstay of adult gatekeeping in children's media and produces some paranoia on the part of adults. The extraordinarily neurotic importance of the child's world to the maintenance of adult memories and to a managed reproducible sociality is common to many media spheres. Children's consumption of creative goods is therefore a closely guarded and potentially challenging activity in the eyes of adult society. Thus, while the explicit proselytizing of Chinese media is often dismissed as crude censorship and didacticism, yet looking at it through the idea of the child as a consumer of creative ideas, it is in some respects similar to the implicit political work involved in the maintenance of social meaning and cohesion in the West. The point for children, as leading consumers in a knowledge economy built on the creative industries, is again that, while the engagement is in many respects quite new, the core relationship between adult producers and child consumers is likely to carry with it the same tensions of specific social anxiety.

The authors of a study of young internet users in Beijing (China Teenage Research Institution, 2000) conclude that new media are changing the relationships between people in urban China, allowing them to operate as friends across generations and even in school environments. Students were using the technology made available to them for the purposes of their education to follow their own interpersonal relationships, to deepen and share local and international cultural interests; to 'make' connections, to chat. The research edged towards defining children as creative agents in a mediated society, a definition that nearly approximates the symptoms of post-Fordist consumers as the cornerstone of a creative economy (Hartley, this issue). There is also a sense that the deliberative opportunities of mediated communications are being *creatively* exploited by schoolchildren. A mediated arena working in parallel with the elite economies of knowledge can host a category of deliberation that is creative, outside the communications mainstream, but that is nonetheless strongly linked to a new media economy. To that extent, the creative communications of middle schoolchildren on the internet in China are acting outside the bounds of the deliberative spheres in Chinese politics and sociality. Their conversations with friends are, one supposes, mainly intimate and unthreatening to the status quo, but their very decisions to use the medium in ways that step entirely outside the limits of regulated content are perhaps as daring as the deliberations of western elites in academia and politics.

## III

However, the new economy is not only about new media. There are signs in children's cinema that children are emerging as cosmopolitan and demanding consumers. The challenge for the creative industries-as-cultural production is to capture the interest of an audience whose horizons are widening very rapidly in response to international entertainment and television formats. Again, there is a continuum underlying this need. Some producers of 'old' children's content have long seen this target group as a creative constituency. They have a high expectation of child competencies and a post-reform era acceptance of their rights to a consumer-orientated media. Qin Yuquan, an extremely senior children's film scholar and scriptwriter, is not a contemporary radical, nor would he expect his ideas to make an impact anywhere except perhaps in the meetings of the Children's Film Society. But he comes from a generation that radicalized China in its own youth and his commitment to children's culture describes a passion for creative coherence that exposes the fault lines between past ideals, contemporary markets and a stagnant economy of social meaning. He claims that there are six things wrong with children's film in China today:

- 1 the filmmakers are interested in the art of the film, not in children;
- 2 they make films in order to make money;
- 3 they make films in order to express their ideas on something in which children are not interested;
- 4 they don't respect the children, so they think that they can make children happy by cheating;
- 5 the films' settings are not appropriate for children's imaginations; and
- 6 Chinese children's films place undue emphasis on the *significance* of a script rather than working hard on the plots and storylines, so the conception tends to be too simple and, as the little actors are too nervous, Chinese children's films are not funny. (interview with the author, Beijing, 10 July 2002)

Qin does admit that there are some good films in circulation, but the six problems he articulates add up to a fundamental problem: Chinese filmmakers do not respect the creativity of their audiences and thus fail to entertain, to inform or to challenge in ways that give children what they are learning to expect – the unexpected, the relaxed and the funny. The questions are whether this is an inherent problem to state-sponsored filmmaking (through the Children's Film Studio); whether the market will force improvement now that private distributors can produce and sell their films direct to the theatres; or whether the break represented by an internationalized imagination cannot be brokered without an equivalent break in all practices of production and exhibition. The spread of video compact disc

(VCD) technology and the penetration of TV have already challenged children's film culture. Co-productions are becoming quite commonplace and domestic animation is drawing on aesthetic thematics from Chinese national style (*minzu shi*), but also from Disney (Gao, 2001). As co-productions become more usual, so too does the need for workable intercultural themes. These in turn challenge the creative consumer practices and skills of Chinese children. Almost all of the films at the 2002 International Festival of Children's Film (at Shandong) contained an element of intercultural communication. Children in one locale are magically removed to another. French children end up in Beijing, Inuit children in Iceland, Polish children find themselves on the Great Wall and, less obviously, but with equally dramatic potential, a Taipei boy discovers ghosts in the Taiwanese countryside (*Grandma's Ghosts*, Rice Films, 1999). The Taiwanese boy experiences urban-rural migration and the dislocation of modernity. His parents are overseas and he is left with a grandma who speaks Taiyü (not Mandarin, which he can understand), who has special relationships with the spirits and whose pet cat turns into a monster (which the boy and his grandma finally unite to defeat). These characters are all engaged in the trauma of translocal relationships and the challenges of intercultural competency, with this (Taiwanese) film in particular offering a sophisticated and critical take on superstition and belief.

In the meantime, children on the mainland are developing their own genealogy of culture. It was a dusty and hot July day in Beijing at the Tsinghua middle school. The classroom was full of children waiting for the last bell so they could leave and get on with their summer holidays. Grades 5 and 6 students had been asked to hang back for one last session, a meeting with a foreign researcher who wanted to ask them about their favourite films. The children agreed to do so; they were in any case quite proud of the questionnaires that they had already completed, full of pictures of favourite characters and comments on the kinds of film that they would make if they had an opportunity to do so. The researcher was aware that some of their parents and grandparents were waiting for them outside in the sun and that it wouldn't be fair to make this session go on for too long. Once the conversation started, however, it was difficult to stop. The children were falling over themselves to tell the researcher that their favourite film of all time was *He li pi te*. The main character was 'brave' and 'intelligent' and they all admired him.

At first the researcher was surprised. She had misheard 'He-li-pi-te' as 'Hai-li-bu' and was amazed that the children were citing it with such passion, although secretly also pleased as this would mean that Shanghai animation still worked for the young Chinese consumer. *Hailibu* is a short animated classic from the mid-1980s and tells of a boy whose kindness to a woodland animal brings him the gift of speaking with beasts. The condition for this gift is that he must never divulge it to other people. If he

does so, he will be turned to stone. The boy is a member of a nomad tribe. One night, as the people are partying under the stars, the animals in the holding pens grow restless. They tell Hailibu that a huge flood is coming and that he must release them and warn his tribe. He tries to do so, but is not believed. Eventually he tells his elders where the information has come from and, as the people flee panic-stricken from the oncoming disaster, Hailibu turns to stone. The film ends with the people's plaintive cry in his honour: 'Haiiii – liiiiii – buuuuu!'

The reason that this film would have been an interesting choice for the children is that it is an old-fashioned, but elegant, animation that nicely achieves a blend of adventure, fantasy and patriotism (*ai guo*), while also including a minority people into a national mythology of self-sacrifice and loving one's people (*ai min*). Had they really chosen this film, then there would have had to be some purchase to the argument that the impact of foreign media content and merchandising had not dented the national inclinations of the young generation and that education methods were still producing patriots in primary schools. Given that Hailibu displays a love of people, but is also susceptible to gifts from a woodland god, it could be argued that the film combines national content with patriotism in a manner that supports revolutionary ideals while also allowing for magic.

Of course, they were actually referring to the international children's hit of 2001 *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The enthusiasm for Harry and Hermione emerged as the session went on and became clearer still as we later compared 58 questionnaires submitted by children from four provinces and metropolitan centres (Shandong, Jiangxi, Beijing shi and Shanghai shi) and several schools. In answer to Question 4, 'Draw a picture or write a few words about your favourite film character', 36 different characters were mentioned. Harry and Hermione achieved 30 percent in the poll. Other (then) recent international releases (such as *A Bug's Life* and *The Lion King*) scored 4–6 mentions. Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Goofy also scored in this range. There were also mentions of Japanese animation TV characters (Atongmu, Sakoro Mamoto). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Disney's 'bridge' to the Chinese and Asian American child *Mulan* was also a favourite, with 15 percent. *Mulan* is both Chinese and American, modern and traditional, filial and headstrong, the girl next door across two continents. She is local and translocal. She has been created, in the terms of the argument here, as a product of a new economy of identity that supports a knowledge economy of media goods; there is a lot of merchandising and internet traffic around *Mulan*. The skill with which these children consume *Mulan* likewise arises as a competency built on a sophisticated attraction to both the known and the merely visible in children's film. This demands not 'just' a cultural competency, but one that requires shifts between political understanding and loyalty, between consumption-based value judgements and locally organized sociopolitical perspectives. It also requires

not just an *internationalist* perspective, but also a flexible *waiguo* (foreign) sense of the local. Thus children demonstrate an understanding of national loyalty, aesthetic taste and brand apprehension. Their flexibility fits them well as players in a new fast economy of knowledge download.

#### IV

Children's consumption of media is generally located in a discussion of educational value, psychological harm or benefit or cultural history rather than in terms of the skill with which they consume international content. In an increasingly cosmopolitan environment, however, children emerge as sophisticated and internationalized. Their contribution to the knowledge economy is that of cosmopolitans who are 'at home'. This is a valuable and exceptional category. The adult cosmopolitan is a figure of limited value: a traveller with boundless cultural and social capital, a bon viveur with an extensive repertoire of tastes and a prodigious stomach for difference (Robbins, 1998). The adult cosmopolitan is not at home and is unbounded to local content; she hovers above the places in which she lives and, if those places are London, Paris, New York or Shanghai, she is not an unusual creature. The other cosmopolitans, the prenatal peacemaker and the post-Marxist socialist are also sophisticates in so far as they eschew the nation as an essential primary political unit. This idealism is not supposed to underpin multinational profiteering, but to claim membership (perhaps ownership) of something called humanity. But these cosmopolitans are not as useful as the cosmopolitans at home to an economy based on the consumption and flow of soft culture around the nation state.

The cosmopolitan consumer is an emerging category of competent who manages without physical access to the whole world. S/he may well be a child. What are their credentials? This cosmopolitan is reduced from the ethical mobility of the idealist, but expanded from the sophisticate. S/he has an affinity with a nation state. S/he has affective engagements with other places, and those other places are both known and imagined locations – Japan, Hong Kong, Hollywood – symbolic sites that qualify the outside world, the *waiguo*. This cosmopolitan makes real demands on these places through their consumption of local and international cultural goods, forcing a relationship with the imagined outside world from the comfort of home and the nation space.

At the 2002 International Festival of Children's Film, the Icelandic Canadian production *Ikingut (Friend)*, telling the story of a little Inuit boy, was screened at 10a.m. on an extremely hot July day, with temperatures outside of 42° Celsius. The cinema was air-conditioned and full to bursting with schoolchildren bussed in from around the city to see the film. They were excited and a little apprehensive. Each schoolchild was able to see one

film at the festival, but it was pot luck as to which one they saw. As the film opened on a long slow shot of ice and snow and as the plot began with a little white boy witnessing debates on religion and superstition in a small Icelandic community, the audience grew restless. Twenty minutes in, they were collectively and completely bored. Then, finally, a new character arrived on screen wrapped in white fur; the Icelanders at first thought him a demon. When he was revealed as a small Inuit boy, new troubles erupted in the community of the film. In the Zibo cinema, his revelation as an Inuit caused another eruption. The children breathed a sigh of relief. 'Look, he's Chinese!', they called and whispered to one another, suddenly engrossed and exuberant at once.

These children were not regular moviegoers, but ordinary Zibo kids with only provincial access to VCDs, cinema releases and TV specials. However, they exhibited a cosmopolitan competency in their reception of the film. They worked from a local familiarity to engage with a deeply foreign text. The success of that engagement was rooted in a sense of locality which was available to transfer through the little boy. He looked Chinese, but was clearly comfortable in the ice and snow of the Icelandic environment. He was recognizable to the audience (or so they thought), but he was also a stranger in a strange land on their behalf. *Ikingut* is a template for an internationalizing audience for the creative industries in China; he was here and there, friend and stranger, not at home, but nonetheless visibly competent in this environment. The audience took its cue from the text and was similarly competent for the remainder of the film.

The idea of the cosmopolitan consumer mooted here gives credit to what people do and what they have to negotiate in order to participate in the internationalizing creative economies of knowledge. The children that I cite above are participating in what Spivak calls the 'gap', the hyphen of the 'nation-state' (Spivak, 1998: 334). For Spivak, the gap is dangerous, it makes room for fundamentalisms and spaces of profound unfriendliness. But, for the internationalized consumer, the gap is a passageway to consumer competency. The children occupy the gap as a place from which to encounter other zones of meaning. In the gap, they have not eluded the state or the nation: they are still local; their Chineseness and Chinese loyalty are in no doubt. They love Mickey Mouse and they admire Harry Potter, but give no indication that such pleasures in any way undermine their domestic political allegiances. This state of affairs really leaves just one choice for the creative industries in China: recognize the media skills and communicative flexibility of children and seduce them intelligently with content that is local, but that has an eye on the international competitors in mode, genre and character. They are already internationalized.



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