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Virginie Grzelczyk

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The Politics of Toys: What Potential for Inter-Korean Reconciliation?

Virginie Grzelczyk

Aston University

ABSTRACT


This article focuses on toys that are associated with war, weapons and violence ('conflict toys'), which hold particular salience in parts of the world that have undergone conflicts, such as the Korean peninsula. Using sources ranging from economic reports to defector testimonies and field research in both South and North Korea, the article shows that despite largely different economic and political paths, the two Koreas have developed toy markets that address shared histories. The article suggests that conflict toys can perform an important function in inter-Korean relations: they allow the two Koreas to experience and potentially transcend the status quo. The article further argues that both Koreas can polarise their populations quickly through a controlled propaganda machine in the North, and an omnipresent globalised culture in the South: in both cases, a political message of either conflict or reconciliation could reach many children quickly via toys, and thus be a driver for change for anyone who was willing to use such levers.

KEYWORDS

Conflict; security; toys; Korean peninsula; South Korea; North Korea

Introduction

Dongdameun market in Seoul is vibrant, crowded and colourful. Off Dongmyo subway station, to the right, is Changsin-dong, and the Toy and Stationery market alley. A bit further to the left is the Seungjuin toy store (Seungjin Wangu). Inside, boxes of toys, games and miniature cars are piled high. Towards the back, modular brick sets made by brand leader Lego occupy most shelves. In a corner, there is a selection of bespoke brick sets, made under the South Korean brand of Oxford. A model of a large South Korean coastguard ship is depicted on one of the boxes. The ship is patrolling South Korea's waters and is laden with toy personnel armed with rifles and shotguns, ready to strike. Who are they aiming at? Are they protecting the disputed Dokdo islands from a potential Japanese invasion? Have they spotted a North Korean ghost ship? A submarine? Will children be happy to play with the boat, or will they craft a play story that involves the Koreas' divided past, and the influence of Japanese colonialism in shifting the Koreas' history?

CONTACT Virginie Grzelczyk  v.grzelczyk@aston.ac.uk

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Today, we know a lot about the security relationship between the two Koreas (Kim, 2004; Smith, 2007), the advances in both North and South Korean ideas and societies (Chung, 2019; Hough & Bell, 2020; Noland, 2011), and Korean division and reconciliation (Armstrong, 2005; Bleiker, 2005; Nam et al., 2019). Many of these factors surround children, and today, just as many centuries ago, toys are what surround children the most. They are objects of play just as much as political objects that reflect the societal and historical contexts of a given place and time. They can be used to foster defiance against others or to play a role in bridging deep-seated divides within societies, nations or states. In the Korean context, toys have evolved from simple wooden games to mass-produced copycats of Western creations. They now play large economic and societal roles in both Koreas. So, this article seeks to identify the role that toys can play in shaping how both Koreas see their history, division and future, and how they foster national ideals. To do so, the article establishes the notion of ‘conflict toys’, or toys that speak about a particular type of violence within a particular historical context. It then explores the relevance of toys in both Koreas and evaluates what the presence of conflict toys in these countries might mean for the peninsula’s future. Although both Koreas have taken very divergent economic and political paths, the division and the unresolved nature of the Korean conflict means that toys can convey political meanings. Given the availability of toys in both countries, the potential to influence generations of future adults is real. The research presented here finds that, in some cases, political forces have indeed partnered with toy companies to convey a specific meaning about political situations with their Korean counterpart.

The Koreas have developed as separate societies for the past seven decades, but clear connecting points exist such as the narratives of families torn apart by national division and war (Bleiker, 2001; Hough & Bell, 2020; Noland, 2011) and the shared past and destiny of the Korean nation (Chung & Choe, 2008; Grzelczyk, 2014; Kwon, 2011; Shin & Burke, 2008). The focus in this article is on a material commonality in the form of toys and how they help inform our understanding of values and attitudes present within families and society more broadly. While it is possible to find many business sources and economic reports around toys and toy development in the Republic of Korea (ROK) and there is a strong South Korean online market presence that is easily accessible, there is far less data available about toys in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), and there is almost no economic presence online either. The article supplements readily accessible information with data gathered in May and June 2019 in both the ROK and the DPRK, thus allowing for a degree of comparison between the two toy markets. Although the article does not claim to provide a comprehensive survey of all toys in both markets, the fieldwork offered valuable insights into the toy landscape (what children play with), their availability (where they can be purchased and at what price), and their place within each society (which children have access to what toys). Narrowing down the scope to ‘conflict toys’, or toys that speak about a particular type of violence within a particular historical context, allowed the article to focus on a narrower and more coherent sample of toys. The data presented in this article therefore adds to the literature that engages with tangible resources available on the Korean peninsula, and especially literature that seeks to understand the everyday and mundane aspects of DPRK society rather than only the military or political ones.

From War Toys to Conflict Toys

When is a toy more than child's play?

It was not until the first world exhibition in London in 1851 that toys started to be recognised as marketable objects in their own right (Burton, 1997). Until the 19th century, most toys were miniature representations of situations adults encountered. War was therefore central, as toy soldiers were often thought to play an important role in preparing youngsters for a military career, especially in Europe (Brown, 1990). Empires, politics and armies were represented within specific societies via such toys (Brown, 1990; Ray, 2006), markets began to generate demand for these toys, and eventually manufacturers provided goods that would appeal to customers regardless of the politics of a specific time (Brown, 1993; Benson, 1998). In this light, how children related to toys from both a cultural and historical standpoint has attracted attention (Jacobson, 1999; Patino, 2011), while one aspect of the literature on toys has focused since the 1960s on violent play among children (Andreas, 1969; Bartneck et al., 2016; Hellendoorn & Harinck, 1997). More recently, the literature has asked whether some toys are appropriate for children or whether they should be banned. In several countries, including Sweden since 1979, war toys have indeed been banned (Brown, 2011; Donovan, 2017).

This article addresses and supplements the existing studies on both toys and violence, as well as studies on how to understand further the dynamics that affect the two Koreas. To define the relationship between toys and conflict on the peninsula, Darlene Hammell and Joanna Santa Barbara's (1993) definition of 'war toys' as 'any toy whose fantasised purpose is to kill or wound ... [including] toy weapons, figures who largely interact through weapons and violence, vehicles equipped prominently with weapons, and video, board or fantasy games based on killing or disabling' is a comprehensive and useful starting point. The 'war toys' moniker is popular (Andreas, 1969; Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2009; Rector, 1995; Regan, 1994; Hellendoorn & Harinck, 1997), but activists campaigning against providing violent toys to children are more reticent to embrace the term. They purposefully leave the definition vague, in a bid to capture a broader spectrum of items as opposed to only focusing on toy guns (Goossen, 2013). For the purpose of this article, restricting the focus to 'war' toys is problematic given the diverse nature of interactions between countries nowadays, but the role of states has often remained central. In the United States, the Pentagon was instrumental in assisting in the promotion of toys that supported American military objectives in times of conflict (Varney, 2002). American defence specialists regularly attended toy fairs in the 1960s to offer consulting services on the authenticity of military toy replicas. Sometimes, toy companies have partnered with the state to develop specific toys, such as when Mattel designed a range of weapons in conjunction with the US government (Andreas, 1969). This was, however, long preceded by the use of table-top games in Russia, Japan and Germany. In 1810, for instance, Lieutenant George von Reisswitz created a three-dimensional model landscape bisected by equally sized squares that was called Kriegsspiel and which helped many governments prepare military campaigns (Donovan, 2017). Today, Kriegsspiel has been incorporated into many war preparation activities: the United States Department of Defense purchased military toys for training in the 1960s and 1970s (Andreas, 1969) and the DPRK's Air Force is known to have been training with toy planes as well (NK

News, 2015). Thus, this article takes the concept of war toys in a broader sense and adopts the 'conflict toys' nomenclature. For the purpose of this research, a conflict toy is one that has been designed to relate to a political event or a moment in conflict, or that facilitates such a link through play: in this sense, conflict toys can include, for example, replicas of weapons, puzzles that show war scenes, games that depict conflicts and ask players to find ways to win, or dolls that represent historical figures.

Researching toys

Toys can foster specific gender and societal roles: kitchen-play utensils for girls, toy tools for boys, and erectors and brick sets that develop specific STEM aptitudes. We also know toys and racism might be interlinked: dolls often lack skin-tone and shape diversity as they represent a specific dominant group or fail to recognise others altogether (Varney, 2002). Furthermore, we know toys are important for societal development, as children practise specific behaviours that will help them navigate the real world (Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2009). It is usually understood that most children will learn the difference between what is a real situation and what is a make-believe one through play (Brandl, 2011). Sometimes, those behaviours also address feelings of inequality, inadequacy and fear: research on American children in the 1950s showed the importance of play in alleviating the uncertainties surrounding the bipolar world that pitted the United States against the Soviet Union and the fear of a nuclear holocaust (Keaton, 2010). What do all these studies tell us about the Korean peninsula? They help us understand that conflict toys may allow children, as well as young adults and adults who experience violence and fear, to feel more empowered and accepted in a peer group (Brandl, 2011). Indeed, toys provide a simplified answer to conflict by simulating participation, experiencing feelings of heroism, and expunging some of the feelings of national limbo that come from the lingering tensions in inter-Korean relations and the unresolved nature of the Korean conflict. Yet, while conflict toys might empower, they can also increase the propensity of children to be socialised within the context of having an enemy to fight against and to consider only militaristic means of dealing with adversaries (Hellendoorn & Harinck, 1997). The Koreas are different from one another yet possess characteristics that could allow for toys to be used as political vectors: in the South, the advent of a globalised culture and its propagation online can polarise youth very quickly, while in the North, controlled political propaganda distributed by a regime that also regulates the flow of goods in society can have similarly polarising effects.

Three themes from the war and conflict toys literature are especially relevant to this article: (1) the importance of the military context in the creation of conflict toys, (2) the management of uncertainty associated with conflict and tension and the performative effects of toys in overcoming feelings, and (3) presenting and managing enemies. Those themes (military, conflict, enemy images) are especially salient when considering the Koreas, and have been central to the scholarship dealing with the Korean peninsula over the years. They provide a surprisingly strong and useful link between conflict toys and the reality of the Korean tensions and the Korean peninsula's future.

The Korean Toy Story

Toys have played a central role in Korean society for centuries, as they have in many other parts of the world. They have evolved from traditional wooden kites and games made during the Three Kingdoms period, the Joseon dynasty and the Japanese colonial era, to domestically mass-produced items in the post-Cold War era.

Toys and the Kingdom

Korean history can be traced back to close to 2,000BC and its toy development was quite unremarkable. Though little remains of ancient Korean toys developed throughout the Three Kingdoms period, we know that toys were part of rituals and religious festivals centred on agrarian rhythms (Academy of Korean Studies Encyclopaedia of Korean Culture, n.d.). Festivals were abolished during the Joseon dynasty to privilege a hierarchical culture that did not leave much space for toys or play (Korea Creative Content Agency, n.d.). A culture of natural play emerged based on toys made of earth elements such as twigs and stones, or simple kites (Geumgang, 2016). Play was then severely affected during the Japanese occupation and colonisation: traditional games and toys were suppressed in an effort by Japan to erase the Korean national character, just as the Korean language itself was prohibited. Instead, children were presented with Japanese toys, including paper dolls, a sort of precursor to puppet play. This was a favourite type of toy during the Meiji era, and its development was further influenced by international events such as the Japanese victory against China in the 1894/95 war. Then, paper dolls often represented soldiers and infantry (Kyung Hyang, 2010).

After Liberation in 1945, traditional play was mostly abandoned, at least as documented in the South, because Western influence led to physical changes within Korean society. In the ROK, families moved away from country houses and settled in newly built urban high-rise apartments: commercial toys and games that were suitable for restricted spaces slowly replaced outdoor play and more organic and natural games that had developed out of what was available to freely gather in nature (Academy of Korean Studies Encyclopaedia of Korean Culture, n.d.). American foreign engagement and investment paved the way for new market access and products, with new toys being imported from the United States and Japan.

In the North, the focus was very much on social control and how to manage the relationship between the state and the Soviet bloc on the one hand and the People's Republic of China on the other. In the DPRK the population was mobilised to rebuild society after the devastating destruction experienced during the Korean War. Toys were part of the new societal development and featured in the official public health discourse: in 1956, the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee's Plenum Session stressed how important it was for the Ministry of Light Industry to produce 'hygienic and good-quality toys in large quantity' (cited in Wilson Center Digital Archives, 1956). Toys were also linked to Korean identity and pride, as Kim Il Sung (1989) mentioned in a speech to senior officials of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee on 5 January 1989: toys, coloured paper, card games, chess and kites were seen as essential to people's cultural and emotional integrity, while folk games invigorated national pride and cultural heritage. Traditional games such as

archery, kites and rope-skipping, essentially games that were typical of the Joseon period, were also encouraged. A controlled market relying extensively on Chinese goods for its survival meant fewer toys were available than in the South, however.

Toy markets in modern Korea

The mass production of toys began in Europe in the 19th century, as large manufacturers in France, Britain and Germany were bolstered by the industrial revolution. The toy-making industry then exploded in the United States in the mid-20th century before moving to Japan and Hong Kong in the 1960s and finally in the 1970s to South Korea and China, as producers searched for lower manufacturing costs (Klintman, 2018). In the 1980s and 1990s, toys could be found predominantly in large high-end South Korean department stores, or as wholesale for retailers in markets, and they then slowly became available in generic and specialist outlets as well as online. The first toy library opened in Guro district in Seoul in 1982 and was modelled after the library that had opened in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1963. Founded by Freda Kim, a British missionary, as an outlet to provide disabled children with educational toys, the Korean toy library started a movement that led to the creation of more than 150 toy libraries nationwide (Korea Toy Library Association, n.d.). Seoul is also the birthplace of dedicated board-game cafés: it boasted more than 130 outlets by 2004 and launched a new trend in East Asia (Donovan, 2017). A good number of museums featuring toys began to appear in Seoul as well as in the provinces: the Pollalla Toy Museum in Seoul's Hongdae district showcases an eclectic array of more than 30,000 toys from the 1950s onward (Day, n.d.), and the Hanlip Toy Museum in Paju, Gyonggi province, was developed by the chairman of the Korea Toy Industry Cooperation Association (ILoveCharacter, 2018). Meanwhile, the very comprehensive Busan Toy Museum, and the Korean Traditional Culture Children's Museum in Gwacheon, Gyonggi province, have been part of the spread of the toy mania further afield in South Korea (Geumgang, 2016). The appetite for toys has grown following the increase in the standard of living in the South, as well as the development of a middle class, and the economic recovery following the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Giant toy retailer Toys 'R' Us opened its first store in South Korea in 2007 via a licensed contract with Korean giant retailer Lotte Mart; South Korea now boasts 43 Toys 'R' Us outlets (Pulse Maeil Business News Korea, 2019). This is a major development that illustrates the importance of the contemporary Korean consumer toy market, given that most Toys 'R' Us operations in Australia, Europe and North America have subsequently closed (Washington Post, 2019). The scale of the South Korean toy market is predicted to reach US\$4.3 billion by 2027 (Marketwatch, 2021). South Korean toy production has moved from a classic import substitution model to one that features bespoke Korean content heavily influenced by television, internet and character licensing deriving from animations and franchises. The pressure to conform to the group, and to what others are playing with, reinforced by online advertisements, has created an environment where it becomes difficult for parents and children to 'escape' buying specific toys. Demographic changes are also large market influencers: since most sales rely on children as their customer base, the continued low fertility rate (0.88 in 2021) means that the consumer market is shrinking (Korea Herald, 2021). At the same time, there is more spending power, since parents can concentrate their

finances on raising one child, and some adults shy away from traditional marriage and family structure: 'kidults' are becoming an increasingly important segment of the market (Euromonitor International, 2019).

In the DPRK, market conditions and the availability of toys understandably differ from those in the ROK, given the countries' divergent economic paths and engagement with the outside world, but some patterns are similar. With a fertility rate of 1.9 for 2021 according to the United Nations Population Fund, there is a noted downward trend that is not dissimilar to that in the ROK (United Nations Population Fund, 2021). The North Korean Central Bureau of Statistics 2017 figures on household organisation show that 89.8 per cent of households with children contain mass-produced and store-bought toys while 41.9 per cent possess homemade toys (NK News, 2018). The array of toys available to North Korean children is wide, ranging from the common cars and construction bricks to children's musical instruments and soft toys. Most of the goods are manufactured in China or Japan as is evident from their packaging. The DPRK has developed its own production operations as well. There are quality issues, however, and the North Korean population favours items developed either abroad or via partnerships at the Kaesong Industrial Complex (DailyNK, 2009). Some North Korean entrepreneurs such as Kim Chan Ku tried to develop 'samchoelli' doll production in partnership with the South in the mid-2000s, but these efforts were hindered by the lack of a connection between production volumes and salary, which provided little incentive for North Korean employees to produce high-quality goods (DailyNK, 2007). There are usually no bespoke, branded or licensed foreign toy characters in the DPRK. For many years, toys mainly mimicked weapons and military equipment, but in more recent years, the range of toys has expanded to include dolls and Lego-type bricks, which are particularly popular (IT Chosun, 2018). Toys are available in many locations: marketplaces, general stores in cooperative farms outside the capital city, kiosks in the Pyongyang metro, large shopping centres such as the black-market money Kwangbok Department Store, or dedicated outlets such as the Pyongyang Children's Department Store. While toy outlets in Pyongyang stock a wide variety goods, such as balls, figurines, vehicles and plastic musical instruments, the only three toys available in a token Cooperative Farm Store were an excavator, a police car and a futuristic gun (see [Figure 1](#)).

Conflict Toys, Representation and Prospects for Reconciliation in North–South Relations

Managing a militaristic and militarised environment

Both Koreas are among the roughly two-dozen countries around the world that still have compulsory military service for some or all citizens. In South Korea, military service is required for men for a period of about 20 months, although exemptions or deferral are common for Korean celebrities (BBC News, 2020). In North Korea, compulsory military service is seven years for women, and around 11 years for men (BBC News, 2018). Hearing stories of relatives who fought during the Korean War is part of many family traditions, but those tales are becoming rarer now, more than 60 years after the conflict. The notion that brothers, cousins, aunts or parents served in a real war, or are serving in security and policing areas where the enemy is



Figure 1. Excavator, police car and toy gun on sale in DPRK

Source: Photo by author, Migok Cooperative Farm Store, Sariwon, DPRK, June 2019

clearly delineated, is likely to normalise the presence of military uniforms and weapons as part of children's everyday experience. Peer groups, society and culture will feature militaristic contexts, and the presence of people wearing military uniform in everyday life, such as while on public transport and in supermarkets, for example, will appear normal. Yet, the volume of toy pistols, guns and tanks available for sale on the peninsula is far more than in a less militarised society, or one where the sale of toy guns has been heavily regulated or banned, as is the case in many countries these days. The proclivity for weapons is visible to the casual eye in the streets of both Seoul and Pyongyang. In the South, a large section of the Pollalla Museum in Seoul is devoted to toy guns that were once available in the country, showing that both imported and locally-produced conflict toys were plentiful, while toy guns and weapons were and still are easily available for purchase at markets and in department stores around the country. In the North, a vast array of toy guns is also available in stores and kiosks in Pyongyang (see, e.g., [Figure 2](#)), while small shops in cooperative farms also offer a smaller selection. Defector testimonies supplement these visual cues: they tell us that conflict toys and especially toy missiles have also been widely available in the Kim Jong Un era in day-care centres, kindergartens and schools, especially to celebrate conventional and nuclear missile tests ([DailyNK, 2017](#)). Yet conflict toys are not as numerous as one might expect given the DPRK's militaristic engagement, and defector testimonies also hint at the fact that the market has diversified ([IT Chosun, 2018](#)). Looking at toy availability in metro kiosks and department stores in Pyongyang shows a lot of variety: construction trucks, balls, dolls and playsets, musical instruments such as trumpets and drums, as well as globes, plush animals and bricks.



Figure 2. Toys for sale at Pyongyang Metro Kiosk, DPRK
Source: Photo by author, Pyongyang, DPRK, June 2019

The controlled marketisation that is being implemented in the DPRK means that children are also exposed to a broader set of ideas and ideals via toys, as opposed to decades ago when the focus was mostly on military replicas. It is therefore not hard to imagine that some of the items featured in South Korean toy markets could be offered in North Korean stores and vice versa: this is an important element that connects the two Koreas despite their other differences, and one that is overlooked in the literature given the propensity to focus on differences between the Koreas as opposed to the connections between them, however harmful these may be.

Managing conflict and uncertainty

The main points of reference in the management of history for both South and North Korea are thus not so different: they centre on the one hand on their historic division via the Korean War, and on the other hand on their history as one people and one kingdom, repelling Japanese invasions for centuries, and their further experience of colonisation at the hands of Japan. The spirit of fighting, war and conflict translates swiftly for both Koreas into staple toys that feature tanks, planes and ships, particularly as models to build, or as brick building sets. There are many sources of well-documented materials about these toys in North Korea,

which have been made more accessible over time as travel to the DPRK has expanded: small plastic helicopters, 105 Panzer Division tanks that helped the DPRK take Seoul during the Korean War, and more modern inflatable rockets, some of which display political slogans such as 'one against one hundred' or 'homeland reunification' (NK News, 2011). In South Korea, a wide array of plastic models is available. Many more have been produced over the past few years to commemorate the Korean War. Special series, usually developed for the domestic market, have featured South Korean war heroes such as General Park Sun-Yup, the first army general to receive four stars for his service during the Korean War (Asian Economy, 2009).

If the two Koreas have similarities in terms of conflict toy themes, they are profoundly different in terms of manufacturing and production pathways. Products in South Korea are not only manufactured by domestic companies, as is the case in the North, but also feature foreign manufacturers that specialise in war models (Interpark, 2015). This divergence in market development and product availability stems from the very nature of the economic and political systems of the two Koreas. In the South, most toys are tied to a form of licensing, be it from a historical perspective, or because toys represent a character or anime that is available on television, or that is part of a *manhwa* (cartoon series). Toys are developed as a full medium with strong brand engagement. In the North, another type of subtle licensing is taking place: the political and historical messages that are being carried via the toys, and that are implemented at the elite government level via the control of information. Thus, while in the ROK the societal and cultural context is dominated by the globalised culture of media, in the DPRK the societal and cultural context is dominated by the need to work towards achieving national independence, and by following a very tight script that will trickle down to other layers of the social context, via the family and peer groups such as school friends and mandatory sport and activity partners.

There is evidence that both Koreas offer via the toys they allow in their markets a common heritage that is based on their pre-colonial experience. In North Korea, the emphasis on folk games as an invigorator of national pride and cultural heritage is evident in contemporary times, as exemplified by the tug-of-war games that take place during Children's Day festivals on 1 June every year. In the South, the company Oxford, which manufactures Lego-type brick sets, has developed several products based on Korea's historical figures, including a series around Admiral Yi Sun-Shin, the naval commander famous for never losing a ship during the Imjin War against the Japanese Navy in the 16th century. The famed Korean Turtle Boats made of wood and iron also feature as building sets. Although the success of the brick sets also coincided with the release of a Korean historical blockbuster movie about the Imjin War that led to a 15 per cent rise in sales (ChosunBiz, 2014), there is a clear societal interest in the products as well as a clear development path for products that are focused on a part of history that is not controversial for the Korean people, in both the North and the South, since it features Japan as the common and clear enemy.

Managing the enemy

Enemy images in the North Korean context are easy to come by: the state devotes ample time and resources to maintain a narrative that stigmatises Japan as an antagonist, and the United States as the main reason for the Korean division and the economic woes the country has experienced. Military toys in the DPRK that represent the struggle during the war are thus common.

North Koreans get to express and share their relationship with the enemy within their peer groups and as part of the culture and value context via physical play as well as the arts. This has developed via Mass Games, or large-scale gymnastic performances: they present the evolution of the DPRK across time and its quest for self-reliance and development amidst a hostile environment blamed principally on Japan and the United States. The performances involve many North Koreans, with citizens often practising, participating and performing from childhood. On the one hand, this enables the population to be controlled and used, but it also means that North Koreans have an outlet to collectively re-enact and to some extent process the past, and perhaps to attempt to exorcise it, in a similar way to the observations of Brandl (2011) and Hellendoorn and Harinck (1997) on peer acceptance and overcoming frustrations via make-believe. As a result, because this outlet exists and monopolises a large amount of time in North Korean life, there is less engagement with conflict toys within the family context. The absence of character branding also enables the national branding and its efforts to be central in play narratives and this has been the case for many decades. Indeed, in 1972, a delegation from the American Korean Friendship and Information Center to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea toured the DPRK for two weeks as guests of the Korean Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. They reported on economic development and society, and more particularly on children, and how they drew school pictures of tanks firing towards the American enemy. They talked about their visit to the Children's Palace, a recreation hall where children learned how to assemble rifles. They noted the performance they attended at the Pyongyang Music College and a musical about the liberation movement (Wilson Center Digital Archives, 1972). Almost five decades later, the same games and performances still take place in the DPRK, as youth, toys and the enemy are interwoven in the country's overall narrative against longstanding antagonists. This also features in art depicting the North Korean reality: in an art gallery in Sinuiju, one of the rare border towns allowing passage into China, a for-sale oil painting summarises it all. It features a group of children listening to a military officer on the bank of a river (see Figure 3). One child is carrying a long rifle, another one a plastic pistol on his back, while another boy stands next to a toy missile. A girl is wearing a traditional Korean dress. In the background, tall apartment blocks contrast with roads full of cars. Behind the group, a boat is moored, bearing the code GER2: it is the USS Pueblo, the American vessel captured in 1968 and displayed in Pyongyang as a trophy on the Daedong river. The painting is titled 'Story of Hunting Yankees'. This is where the everyday mixes with childhood, stories of a perennial conflict narrated by a man in uniform with the backdrop of the North Korean capital and its modern-looking apartments.



Figure 3. 'Story of Hunting Yankees'

Source: Photo by author, Sinuiju, DPRK, June 2019

In South Korea, the lack of a strong anti-DPRK narrative does not mean that feelings about the division and the state of Korean affairs cannot arise at times either. However, the ROK has tight national security laws about fraternisation with and support for the DPRK, while at the same time pursuing engagement efforts via the Ministry of Reunification. Thus, it is unlikely that the DPRK would be represented clearly in the world of toys. As such, enemy representations are managed in more subtle ways.

Toys tend to be less political because of the prime marketing importance of characters and licences. This does not mean, however, that discussions of enemies and conflict are completely absent from the products that are developed by some Korean manufacturers. Most of the creativity in this area has been displayed by Oxford Bricks. Two sets that were developed via a Memorandum of Understanding with the Korean Coast Guard display a crisp narrative about territorial integrity that is pervasive in the ROK: the agreement has focused on the Coast Guard to provide information about its own equipment so that Oxford can develop sets that pertain to the policing of border waters (Yonhap News, 2013). This is reminiscent of the 1970s, when American agencies would provide information to model-makers to develop accurate reproductions of tanks and planes. What this also shows is a readiness by the government to instil a sense of politics and history in young people through these toy sets. One of these is of a small Coast Guard boat off South Korea's Dokdo island, to which Japan also lays claim. Another is a replica of the Sam Bong-ho, a large patrol ship used by the Korean Coast Guard. There is an abundance of guns, rifles and other weapons in both sets, something that is not found in Danish Lego. Only a few months

after the historic Panmunjom summit that saw South Korean President Moon Jae-In meet his counterpart, North Korean leader Marshall Kim Jong Un, at the Joint Security Area in April 2018, Oxford released a new brick set to commemorate the event. The set presents a view of the Joint Security Area from the Southern side, with the iconic North Korean building in the background, and both North and South Korean guards along with a press officer standing by the United Nations buildings.

This might herald a shift in the portrayal of the DPRK in South Korea, especially when it comes to the younger population and ‘kidults’. Yet, warming attitudes towards North Korea do not mean that resistance is not to be found in South Korea: a 3D puzzle designed for children that depicts a cheery cartoon version of Kim Jong Un was pulled from the shelves in South Korea after pressure from conservative groups who said the North Korean leader was responsible for human rights crimes and that his makeover as an approachable and cheerful character was not appropriate for young South Koreans (Wall Street Journal, 2018).

Conclusion

The Korean peninsula has now been divided for more than 70 years. The two Koreas have developed parallel economic and political systems, engaging their youths in questions of security and identity in specific ways. For countries that have had to manage conflicting identities, how young generations are told about their historical context is crucial, and not something that only happens within a school or learning environment. This article finds both Koreas in a state of flux: they are attached to a unified past that predates their division and Japanese colonisation, and they also operate in a state of latent conflict, with toy weapons readily available. Because both societies are militaristic, there is less scrutiny around conflict toys than there might be elsewhere, especially in Europe, for example. In North Korea, toy weapons are part of everyday life, even though the country has managed to diversify and expand its toy market via economic engagement with China. In South Korea, awareness about the danger of toy guns, for example, has only recently started to emerge after children have been injured in various incidents (Korean NGO Newspaper, 2011). To put this in context, Sweden was the first country to ban war toys in 1979 (Globe and Mail, 1979), and in 2015, Afghanistan banned toy guns in a bid to sever the link between war and children (Agence France Presse, 2015).

Ultimately, both Koreas are framed by different market constraints: in the North, state ideology and control over the means of production means that toy production and toy imports are regulated by the government. So the state has more leeway to use toys as a vehicle, unless it decides to promote a different message, such as that it is vital to engage with Seoul, for example. In the South, the toy market is dominated by licensing, which also acts as a form of control over what is produced. ‘Peace’ endeavours such as those developed by Oxford Bricks represent only a small part of what could be developed but would also need to contend with people’s feelings towards a brother-in-arms. The common element across both Koreas is a form of licensing that can at times influence society at large and that can also be cross-checked with other media. For example, one of the more visible forms of engagement with the past on the Korean peninsula has been historical television dramas, which have become extremely popular even outside Korea.

While most of these have originated in South Korea, streaming availability means that they have reached other parts of the world, sometimes including North Korea when they have been smuggled in. Given the importance of toy licensing in South Korea, some firms have started to develop toys that represent characters and situations: the 2018 series Mr Sunshine, which is set at the end of 19th-century Joseon, just prior to Japanese colonisation, was featured in a series of brick sets by Oxford. These types of toys are important in the context of the Korean peninsula, as both countries have very rigid education curricula and some subjects are not always treated in depth. Such toys offer the opportunity for Korean youth to experience, through play, a part of their past, as well as to perhaps engage with the more unspoken realities of the Korean division and thus take a step towards reconciliation. There is plenty more to study in this field, however, and one could imagine researching the impact that a potential toy exchange programme between North and South Korean youths could have, just as joint sporting events or cultural performances have been used to promote inter-Korean relations.

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