

옥스포드 키즈블록 장난감의 비평적 기호학적 분석*

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국문초록

장난감은 아이들의 사회화와 정체성 발전을 위한 핵심 도구이다. 장난감에 대한 연구는 교육, 심리학, 인류학 및 젠더 연구 분야에서 많이 진행되었지만, 현대 장난감의 사회학적 역할에 대한, 특히 한국사회와 관련한 논문은 적다. 이 논문은 덴마크의 레고 블록 장난감을 따라서 한국 옥스포드 기업이 개발한 어린이용 ‘키즈블록’이라는 인기있는 블록 장난감 상품을 연구한다. 이 논문은 옥스포드 기업 웹사이트에서 텍스트, 이미지 및 동영상으로 소개된 76 시리즈에 속하는 총 390 세트를 기호학적으로 분석한다. 이 장난감에 담긴 서사는 엄격한 성유형화된 고정관념을 강화하여 여성의 이등시민 이미지와 가부장적 사회적 역할을 제시하는 반면, 소년은 투쟁 관련 피규어를 통해 남성적 영웅주의를 추진하도록 권장된다. 브랜드가 전쟁과 위협 테마에 초점을 맞춘 것(판매중인 세트의 50% 이상)은 한국의 특정한 사회역사적 맥락에서 해석되어야 한다. 게다가 옥스포드 블록 세트들은 민족주의적 네러티브, 제한된 전통의 재발명 및 한국 문화상품이 촉진하는 신자유주의적 소비주의에 초점을 맞춘 보수적인 국가 아젠다를 구성시킨다.

주제어: 기호학, 이데올로기, 장난감, 성유형, 사회화

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I. Introduction

Playrooms in kindergarten in Pyongyang filled with cute racoon soldier characters, cartoon-style images of missiles and rockets, scale models of Kim Il-sung's birth house or the Tower of the Juche Idea. The USA-produced toys for boys in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Big Jim secret agent (Mattel), G.I. Joe tough soldier (Hasbro) and other action figures loaded with Western Cold War ideology. The famous Lego block toys which are becoming more and more violent.¹⁾ It is commonly accepted that there is an ideological dimension in the toys that we provide children with. Toys and games being an important part of human children's socialization,²⁾ it seems logical that they reflect the social framework in which they are developed and practiced. Many research, especially in gender studies, have shown how toys help construct social identities. This article aims at exploring the ideological frame and discourses embedded in South Korean toys by focusing on Oxford, a South Korean popular brand of interlocking plastic brick toys for kids very similar to the Danish Lego products developed from the 1950s. By elaborating a semiological analysis of the Kids Block category of toys as presented on the company's website, this paper will provide a reading of the axiological agenda of the brand in the South Korean cultural context. A total of 390 sets of blocks will be qualitatively scrutinized through their textual and iconic

1) Bartneck, Christoph, Qi Min Ser, Elena Moltchanova, James Smithies, and Erin Harrington, "Have LEGO products become more violent?", *Plos One*, 제11권(제5호), 2016, pp. 1-27.

2) Among the vast academic literature on the subject, see Cross, Gary S., *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood*, Harvard University Press, 2001 (1999) and the recent and very comprehensive Weisgram, Erica S., and Lisa M. Dinella, eds., *Gender Typing of Children's Toys: How Early Play Experiences Impact Development*, American Psychological Association, 2018, p. 321.

peritexts provided on the website, while quantitatively assessing their themes as well as the genders of the figurines. By doing so, this article hopes to deconstruct the normative narratives and guidelines that indirectly suggest meanings to be given and practices to be done of the block toys by children. After a description of the sample analyzed here and of the methodology, the article will develop three main dimensions of the Kid Block toys: the socialization through the gender-typing of social roles and personalities, the national agenda defining a specific relation to Others, the reinvention of tradition in the consumerist context of Hallyu (Korean Wave). This critical semiotic approach will offer a possible base for more research on the psychological and sociological effects of toys on children in Korea, a field which is yet underdeveloped and should be addressed systematically for fostering appropriate education policies, especially regarding toys commercially produced without much regulation concerning their ideological content.

II. Methodology

1. Critical semiotics approach

Roland Barthes is an obvious reference for a critical approach of toys following his chapter dedicated to 1950's French toys in his <Mythologies>³⁾ essay. As he wrote in this seminal text, “ordinary toys are essentially an adult microcosmos; they are all diminished reproductions of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child were only a smaller man (...). The French toy always means something, and that something is always fully socialized, constituted by the myths or techniques of modern adult life: the Army, the

3) Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, Points Seuil, 2014, pp. 63–65.

Radio, the Post Office, the Medicine, (etc.).”⁴⁾ Barthes and his successors⁵⁾ later developed finer semiotic tools to use for an ideological criticism of the language of popular culture by considering “‘collective representations’ as systems of signs”.⁶⁾ This article will use this semiotic approach to analyze and interpret the peritext of each product presented on Oxford’s website (Kids Block section): images, promotional texts, technical information, videos, as constituting a multi-media text which can be read as a structured narrative. The package cover photo and the illustrated leaflets accompanying the brick sets are not simple pictures of the product in the box: a diegetic message is constructed by the mise en scene of the elements in the set, often divided in several scenes with drawn backgrounds. These textual-iconic narratives are not only descriptive of the content of the set, they also pre-shape the stories that the child will be able to perform with the toy by suggesting possible meanings and practices: they constitutes scripts of representations, behaviors and actions.⁷⁾ The aim of this article is to uncover the narratives scripted in the Oxford ‘Lego’ in order to accomplish a ‘semioclastic’, as Barthes called it,⁸⁾ i.e. a deconstruction of the ideological dimension of these Korean toys.⁹⁾

Even though the academic literature on children’s toys and games is vast, there are relatively few articles focusing on toys’ contents analysis¹⁰⁾ - and

4) *Ibid.*, p. 63.

5) See Hébert, Louis, *An Introduction to Applied Semiotics: Tools for Text and Image Analysis*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2020, p. 302.

6) Barthes, *ibid.*, p. 7.

7) See Rommes, Els, Maartje Bos, and Josine Oude Geerdink, “Designing Gendered Toys”, *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology*, 제3권(제1호). 2011, pp. 185–204.

8) Barthes, *ibid.*, p. 8.

9) The datasheet classifying the 390 sets of the Oxford Kids Block line by themes with figurines’ genders can be viewed on <http://www.benjaminjoinau.com/materials-complementing-my-articles.html>.

virtually none has been found in Korean language.¹¹⁾ I have consulted several articles in Korean language focusing on toys, but none appeared to adopt the same angle as this article,¹²⁾ therefore I will limit my references to the English literature.

2. Presentation of Oxford company

1) History

Oxford company was created in 1961 in South Korea and it took its actual name in 1992. It became a major player in South Korean toy industry. It developed sets of interlocking plastic brick construction toys on the model of the famous Lego brand, using the very same standards, so that products from both companies are compatible. Oxford toys are now available in major toy stores and outlets such as Lotte Mart nationally. They have gained a

10) A good example can be found in Machin, David, Van Leeuwen. Theo, "Toys as Discourse: Children's War Toys and the War on Terror.", *Critical Discourse Studies*, 제6권(제1호) (February), 2009, pp. 51-63.

11) But in English, there is an excellent and recent article about Korean toys: Grzelczyk, Virginie, "The Politics of Toys: What Potential for Inter-Korean Reconciliation?", *Asian Studies Review*, 46:4, 2022, pp. 668-684.

12) Several papers approach the semiotic dimension of toys from the design and production point of view, such as: 이서울, 김은정, 「완구 패키지디자인의 색채분석을 통한 아동 성역할 정체감 제고 및 개선 방향 연구 (A Study on the Improvement of Children's Gender Role Identity through Color Analysis of Toy Package Design)」, 『일러스트레이션 포럼』, 제72권(제1호), 2022, 17-27쪽. Some papers, the psychological effects of gender-typed toys: 송하나, 최경숙, 「장난감의 성유형적 특성과 유아의 성이 높아 행동과 정서 표현에 미치는 영향 (The influence of gender-typed toys and children's gender on children's play behaviors and emotion expression)」, 『유아교육연구』, 제30권(제3호), 2010, 335-352쪽. Other papers consider the marketing dimension of toys: 강수정, 이제성 & 이준영, 「키덜트 소비자의 장난감 소비동기와 소비행태 (Motivation and Behavior of Kidult Consumers' Toy Consumption)」, 『소비문화연구』, 제23권(제1호), 2020, 41-68쪽.

reputation abroad among the ‘kidult’ (adults who purchase toys intended for children) mania fan community as a high quality ‘Korean Lego’ and are sometimes looked by international buyers on Ebay or Amazon¹³⁾ for their good value for price and exotic themes.

2) Categories of products

The present research is based on the Oxford company’s website and its presentations of the available products.¹⁴⁾ It shows 9 categories of toys: Bebe Block (from 3 months old), Brain (over 12 months), Toddler Block (over 38 months), Kids Block (over 5 years), Pulp Block (over 8 years), Pixel Block (over 12 years), Jumbo Blocks (over 12 months), Character Block and Special Products (which are Kids Block sets made in collaboration with public and private companies, not on sale on the regular Oxford retail market).

3. The research sample

1) Series and sets

The category studied here is Kids Block, which represents the leading category of the brand with the most numerous sets (boxes) and the most popular products corresponding to the Danish Lego brick toys. It touches the large target of 5 to 12 years old boys and girls (without mentioning the adult ‘manias’ who collect the sets). It is the category studied here. It comprehends

13) For example, see The Brick Blogger, <http://thebrickblogger.com/2011/07/oxford-toys-overview> (last visit 13/11/2022).

14) Oxford Toy, <http://oxfordtoy.co.kr> (last visit 12/11/2022). There is an English section, where we take the translations and transcriptions of Korean names used for the products.

76 series as visible on the website, with a total of 393 sets or boxes (three of them being mentioned by the title without picture are not available on the market).

It is difficult to find on the website an order of presentation of the series other than chronological: the most recently launched sets seem to be at the beginning. Similar series, such as the popular Cobra military series (7 sets) are not displayed together. There is not thematic order, except from the sub-series Sweet (for girls), Town and Bricks for mania.

The recurrent series such as Cobra military series or Kwanggaet'o king series (3) may have been regularly redeveloped because of good sales, but because we couldn't get access to detailed sales numbers, it is difficult to assess the marketing strategies. Some concurrent series with very similar products (all the robot fighters and transformers series: Droid-X, Z-Force, X-Clone, Guardian Force, etc.) seem to have been developed in parallel without a readable marketing rationale. Several opportunistic series seem to accompany an incoming event (Best 11, with 11 soccer players, probably developed for a World Cup), a trend, a popular movie or TV series (*JSA*, *Mr Sunshine*, 『진짜 사나이』 *Chintcha sanai*, 『무한도전』 *Muhan tojŏn*, probably *Kingdom* for the Joseon-era Zombie series 좀비실록 *Chombishillok*), while others are limited editions (Synggyemun). Some series consist in only one set, when others such as Town (61), Sweet (21) or Military (13), showcase more than ten different sets. We can imagine that the company's development strategy follows a blend of opportunistic policies echoing ongoing social trends and response to successful items by launching meme products. It is also obvious that the developers also follow a specific agenda which intends to create a demand for more specific and ideologically loaded items.

2) The peritext: texts, images, languages

Each set is presented on the website with a product name, a code number, the minimum age of use, the price and a photo of the box (displaying the front and two sides). It often comes with the reproduction of the presentation leaflet accompanying the game in the box. This reproduction gives examples of staging of the set gears, vehicles, figurines, buildings, etc. It also can give, as the box front cover, a drawing representation of a background or of an environment to help the imagination of the customer with the context in which to interpret the set and also to provide ideas of way to play with it. This mix of photographs, images, and even sometimes simple texts (in English, such as “No!”) in speech bubbles are a guideline for the mise en scene of the toys by the child. They also introduce special features of the set such as a functioning lamp, a motorized part, etc. These guidelines are present on the leaflet, but also on the different sides of the box itself. Not only do they incite the customer to buy the product, but they pre-determine their way to use it and the meanings to produce with it. These photographs of the set always show clearly the little figurines included in the set: they are an important element in the decision of the child and cannot be deceitful, so these pictures were of a great help for assessing the number of characters by gender. Rarely, a video is added to give a dynamic presentation of a series (such as Shooting attack).

Except on the English part of website which has just the basic information, there are also texts describing the sets in an engaging manner. The texts are written in Korean, but sometimes a set or a whole series has an English title : Military, Town, Sweet, Change, Bricks for mania, Empire, etc. Sometimes, the Korean name is a mere transcription of the English word, such as 나이즈 (*naich'ũ*) which represents Knights in Korean pronunciation. Some of the English words used are quite difficult for a Korean child using this toys, it is

therefore hard to decipher the strategy behind the use of this foreign language in the naming process. It could be seen that it targets the international market, but comparing with the products present in the English section doesn't corroborate this hypothesis: while some English-name products are absent from the English section (such as Empire), some Korean-named items are present in this section, such as Dokdo (which has on the box a different English title: Coast guard...). It seems therefore difficult to find a logic in this process, which doesn't mean that there isn't. It may be assumed that a product with an English name may sound 'cool' to some kids (X-Clone, Iron Cop, Z-Force, etc.), at least for those able to read and understand it, and also that some parents may find an indirect educational value in a toy named in English. It is worth noting that one set in the English section (the Imjin War Panoksŏn or battleship) is in Chinese character.

III. Socialization and gender-typing

A recent study seems to show that young chimpanzees in nature play with natural objects, such as a simple wooden branch, using them as toys and even as dolls. It seems that a gender difference has been observed through an experiment on apes in captivity, male chimpanzees being more interested in toys with wheels such as cars (one theory is that male toddlers have more energy to spend, which wheeled toys allows) and female in dolls.¹⁵⁾ Even though no definite conclusion can be yet elaborated from these observations, it introduces us to the roots of the long-debated question of the social construct of genres among humans. It is therefore, more than ever, important

15) De Waal, Frans, *Différents – Le Genre vu Par Un Primatologue*, Les liens qui libèrent, 2022, p. 480.

to scrutinize the factors that can contribute to such a social construct, toys offered to and used by children being a ‘pièce de resistance’ for the matter.¹⁶⁾

1. Boys’ series

The numbers speak by themselves: Oxford Kids Block is a man’s world. On the 390 sets, we counted 1546 figurines, among which 122, or only 8,56% of them, were females... It can be argued that this Kids Block toys are principally targeting young boys, which is the reason why most of figurine characters are male, the child looking in his toy for a mirroring effect of identification. It means that there is a basic bias among Oxford developers, thinking that little girls don’t want to or shouldn’t play with construction block toys. But if they absolutely want to, though, Oxford seems to offer them a possibility with neutral series such as Korean and world monuments, the Town series revolving around urban everyday life (transportation, post office, shops, etc.). They even have a series which is clearly targeting girls, the Sweet series, whose English name is reinforced by the pink color used for the packages (21 sets). So, the relatively poor number of sets which is specifically aimed at girls show that they are considered as a market niche, which in return doesn’t help in girls becoming a larger market segment.

16) If the academic literature is gigantic on the question of social construct of genre, there are less works dedicated to genre-typing and genre stereotypes through toys. The *Sex Roles* journal offers regular empirical and theoretical studies. Among the important works, see Davis, Jac T. M., & Hines, Melissa, “How Large Are Gender Differences in Toy Preferences? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Toy Preference Research”, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 제49권(제2호), 2020, pp. 373-394. Dinella, Lisa M., Weisgram, Erica S., “Gender-Typing of Children’s Toys: Causes, Consequences, and Correlates”, *Sex Roles*, 제79호, 2018, pp. 253-259. Weisgram, Erica S., and Lisa M. Dinella, eds., *Gender Typing of Children’s Toys: How Early Play Experiences Impact Development*, American Psychological Association, 2018, p. 321.

Indeed, even if a little girl plays with the sets which are apparently targeting boys (such as military or vehicle sets), they will see very few female characters among the figurines, which reproduces, while aggravating them, social patterns of gender inequality. Gender identification will prove harder for girls playing with Oxford toys, much harder than with Lego and other figurine toys such as Playmobil which have developed a more inclusive and gender-conscious policy. Therefore, it is not incorrect to consider that Oxford Kids Block have a very traditional divisive dimension, reproducing and even reinforcing gender assignment and construct.

South Korean society has been well described as a patriarchal society with a very traditional approach of the division of social roles according to sex and of gender-typing.¹⁷⁾ It has also been noted that South Korean society should be analyzed in a post-Cold War context of national division and of decades of ‘War politics’ (officially the Korean War has just been halted by a cease-fire treaty). The national division is itself the object of a ‘sexionalisation’ of the nation, a gendered divide affecting the roles of men and women.¹⁸⁾ Men have in this context the monopoly on violence, war, and maintenance of social order, which includes police forces, surveillance, risk management, etc. It can therefore be assumed that the following themes are mostly targeting a male customer. The occasional female customer wouldn’t really benefit from the narratives developed through these sets, where the rare female figures are

17) See Chang, Kyung-Sup, *The Logic of Compressed Modernity*, Polity, 2022, P. 240.; Kim, Andrew Eungi (ed.), *Korean society : An introduction*, Korea University Press, 2017, pp. 103–205.; Kim, Keong-il, Choi, Hyaewool, & Sin, Kyung-ah (eds.), *Korean women : A sourcebook*, The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2017, p. 326.

18) See Joinau, Benjamin, “Sleeping with the (Northern) Enemy : South Korean Cinema and the Autistic Interface.”, Valérie Gelézeau, Koen De Ceuster, and Alain Delissen, *De-Bordering Korea: Tangible and Intangible Legacies of the Sunshine Policy*, Routledge, 2013, pp. 172–188.

mostly secondary helpers or victims.

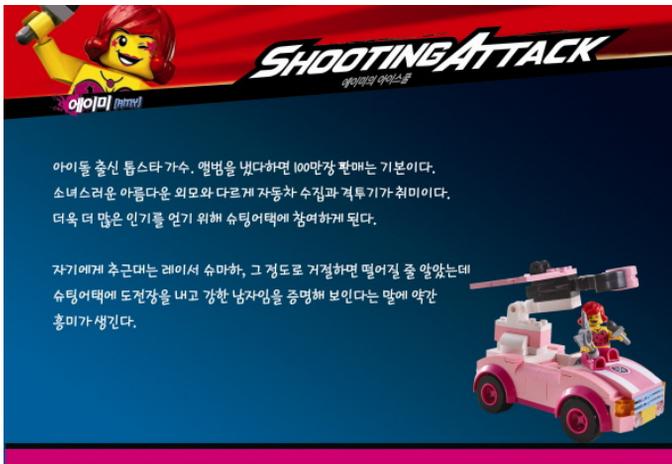
1) Vehicles and transforming robots: speed, mechanics and change

Following this logic, we assume that most of the sets included in this ‘vehicles’ theme are aiming at male users. This theme is represented by 15 series and at least 57 sets,¹⁹⁾ or 15% of the total of items. It is therefore a very important category and a classic among boys-oriented toys. F1 racing cars, transport trucks, ‘monster trucks’, old vehicles, speed boats, excavators, ships, oil cars: everything on wheel seems to have been considered. There is of course a preference for those vehicles evoking power, strength, or speed. And men’ jobs requiring physical strength which have long been refused to women for being too hard and dangerous, such as construction works, are well represented in this section. In general, mechanics-related toys (car garage, etc.) seem to appeal more to boys, as if technology was a male domain. In this theme, the female figurines are rarely drivers or engineers, they are most of the time passive passengers of the vehicles.

The series Shooting Attack offers 6 different cars with their driver (each having a name) equipped with a functioning catapult allowing kids to play a shooting competition between them. One of the cars is called Ice Cool, and contrary to what the name could evoke, it is pink and very girly. The driver is a female named Amy who “controls ice”. She wears lipstick, she blinks, and she has two stars on her face. Her outfit is a sexy pink cleavage revealing her naked shoulders. She cannot be mistaken for a man and is even obviously sexualized from a male gaze. She is a car racer competing against men, but

19) At least, because many sets in other categories, especially in the military and police sections, also propose vehicles. We include here only the sets which don’ t belong to another theme.

she holds a mike (she is said to be a famous singer selling a minimum of 1 million copies of each of her albums) and seems to use other qualities such as her charms to win. Whether the set is used by a boy to gender his race competitions, whether it is used by a girl who likes cars and catapults, the female image proposed here is diminishing. It shows that this vehicle category is indeed intended to male users more than girls.



〈Figure 1〉 Shooting Attack series, Ice Cool Amy set, © Oxford Co.

Kids seem to be universally fascinated by transformations, hence the commercial success of movies, anime series and derived toys which stage such ‘transformers’. There is a series called Change which features three sets, a sport car, a city tour bus and a house which can be transformed, using the same blocks, into another form. But there are 10 series including a total of 31 sets dedicated to the fighting and transforming robots and vehicles: Trans Kaion, Battle Ranger (배틀레인저), Battlebot (배틀봇), Metachanger (메타체인저), Droid-X, Guardian Force, X-Clone, Z-Force, Iron Cop, Iron Soldier.

These are roughly variations on characters such as Grandizer (UFO Robot Grendizer, Japanese anime series, 1975-77), Transformers (American and Japanese media franchise started with toy line in 1984), Terminator (first movie, dir. James Cameron, 1984), RoboCop (first movie, dir. Paul Verhoeven, 1987), etc. Interestingly, on 10 of these series in Oxford line, 7 have English names, the 3 remaining Korean names being Korean transcription of English words. Does an English name bring to such a product more legitimacy, more attractiveness or is it simply a way to mark the foreign origin of these futuristic robots? The polymorphic warriors and fighting machines are all dedicated to violent combats against evil forces and to maintaining social order. This brings us to the next category.

2) Conflict toys

As we have noted before, even if nothing directly types war and combat related sets as male toys, there are other subtle ways to target dominantly boys' preference for violent narratives including heroism, weapons, and fights. The category known as 'conflict toys'²⁰⁾ is the most represented in Oxford Kids Block line: a total of 64 series including 197 sets, which represent 51% of all the line. This group features sets about aforementioned fighting robots, war and military themes from past and present, different police forces, firemen and other rescue squads. As expected in this context, male figurines are dominant: on 889 characters, 12 only (1,35%) are female. If we look at their roles in the covers' narratives, they are victims to be saved (Special Rescue Squad: 2 women are saved in the collapse of an apartment building; 119 Rescue Team), secretaries ('Helen' character in the Police series, set on presidential police squad), refugees of war (Sherman Tank),

20) See Grzelczyk, *ibid.*, p. 668.

princesses to be protected (Knights, Samkukji), zombies (Chombishillok), and for 3 of them only, police officers. It is obvious that these sets do not aim at little girls.

The Cobra Military line (7 series, 36 sets) seem very popular since it is regularly updated with new series whose names include the year of production (2018, 2022). In the specific military context of South Korea with the threat represented by North Korea and compulsory military service for men, armed force characters are more than a classic boy's game. They echo a national narrative of a long history of unsolicited foreign attacks. The role played by US army from the liberation in 1945, through the Korean war and after, left a bitter ambiguous feeling toward this ally. This is reflected in several sets, such as the Sherman Tank (which will be analyzed later), Military Segyejõnchaeng (World Wars) or the US Missouri Battleship. Usually American vehicles can be recognized by the kaki color and the white star on them. In the Cobra Military series called Code Name Cobra, there are three kinds of figurines: yellow skin characters representing Korean soldiers, pinkish and brown characters standing for US Caucasians and African-Americans, and skull-like white characters whose scary features are difficult to locate for sure, even if they seem to belong to the American side. As the textual description of the series states it, the best elite troops and most recent weapons of each country have joined in this Cobra squad. One set, called the Decagon, is a clear reference to the American Pentagone, the box cover bearing a background drawing of the White House. Even if Korean armed forces did collaborate in previous conflicts such as Vietnam and do practice regular joint drills in the Peninsula, it seems to be a wishful rewriting of history to give agency of Korean soldiers on the American land itself. It should be noted that the Korean flag is deployed on the Decagon roof in the centre, along with two other fantasy flags: the USA's symbol disappeared

with this new re-centered narrative. One set called Assault Vehicle shows on the box cover a drawn background of a barbed wired area, which could be seen as the DMZ zone where many American and Korean bases are located.



〈Figure 2〉 Joint Security Area set, © Oxford Co.



(Figure 2 bis) Screenshot from the movie *Joint Security Area* (2001)

The DMZ as a symbol of the divided country is directly addressed in a special set called Joint Security Area, referring to the area in the Panmunchŏm village where inter-Korean meetings are held. It is a touristic spot, made even more famous by the *Joint Security Area / JSA* movie released in 2001 (Park Chan-wook) in the midst of the Sunshine Policy launched of President Kim Dae-jung. After the meeting of the former with Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang, Oxford released a first version of this set. The set presented here in Figure 2 is the updated version of 2018. The presentation leaflet of the set directly quotes a scene of the movie in an iconic fashion, the block characters mimicking the famous closing scene. There are 5 figurines on the JSA zone seen from the South Korean side (the two meeting barracks with the North Korean observation building P'anmungak in the back): one South Korean soldier, one US soldier, one journalist from South Korea, two North Korean soldiers. One of the North Korean soldiers has a fierce look with scars on the face and an unshaved beard, the other one has a placid smile on his face and reminds us of one of the characters of the movie. What is exactly the situation staged here? The sad symbol of the national division or the toy-ization of a famous Korean Wave movie ? It seems that fiction is purposely used here to introduced characters that we won't find in other sets: North Koreans had to be

euphemized through the reference to a movie that probably very few, if not none of the children playing with the set know. Does it mean that this is one of the sets made for the kidults collecting these toys? Or is this narrative aimed at the parents whose agency is well known in the buying of these sets? Whatever the answer may be, through these different boxes, the culture of conflict and national division enters the imagination and practices of Korean boys.

3) Affairs of the city: security matters

Lego launched two different gender-typed construction sets series called Lego City (for boys) and Lego Friends (for girls).²¹⁾ This marketing strategy may be reflected in the creation by Oxford of two parallel series, called Town (in blue packages, for boys) and Sweet (in pink packages, for girls). Town series is supposedly dealing with the everyday affairs and life of the city not covered by other series, especially conflicts and vehicles related ones. As a matter of fact, these 61 sets do deal with police, SWAT forces and firemen activities: 26 sets on 61, 42,6% of them develop the themes of maintenance of civilian order, security, and rescue. There is for example a series of 5 sets launched during and after the COVID-19 pandemy named in English transcribed in Korean script ‘Town Heroes’. The set of 8 figurines comprehend 3 police forces officers, one firefighter, one engineer fixing city infrastructures in emergency situations, one coastguard, one doctor with a surgical mask, and one character wearing a white COVID suit covering his body and head. The coastguard, which is seen shooting with his machine gun with a crazy smile on his face is not only creepy, one can only wonder what is his function

21) See Reich, S. M., Black, R. W. & Foliaki, T., “Constructing Difference: Lego® Set Narratives Promote Stereotypic Gender Roles and Play”, *Sex Roles*, 제79호, 2018, p. 285.

among the ‘heroes’ of the city. Actually, while acknowledging the role of the medical personnel during the pandemics (and normalizing the biopolitical management of the crisis), this series shows as well how the paramilitary themes spread in different other civilian fields, as a metaphor of the rampant surveillance in Korean society.

These untold heroes of everyday life (which is ironically a recurrent theme in North Korean feature films) show the importance of the theme of courage and bravery in the construction of male Korean identities (none of these heroes are female). Moreover, there is a civic lesson behind sets showing the regulatory power of police, firemen and rescue forces saving lives. We can see in one of the Police series a set dedicated to anti-demonstration forces, as well as in the Figurines set of the SWAT Town series. The ‘risk society’ analyzed by Ulrich Beck²²⁾ is well portrayed in Oxford’s Kids Block sets: we already mentioned a collapsing appartement building of Special Rescue Squad, there are other sets whose background picture is a city in flames and chaos such as the Town Heroes sets, the 119 Special Fire Departement, or the apocalyptic K-1 Special Force set which evokes a scene from a *Terminator* movie. The SWAT Town series (total of 10 sets) depicts elite police forces fighting against various crimes, from a bank robbery to a hijacking of a plane or of a bus, or chasing running criminals on highway. Another set in Town shows a bomb squad, an accident which never happened in South Korea. This prevalence of the representation of different crimes and accidents in Korean modern urban environment through these toys surely participates in the building of a culture of risk, where control and surveillance are seen as an

22) Han, Sang-jin, ed., *Beyond Risk Society: Ulrich Beck and the Korean Debate*, Seoul National University Press, 2017, 658 p., Suh, Jae-Jung, and Mikyoung Kim, eds, *Challenges of Modernization and Governance in South Korea*, Springer Singapore, 2017, p. 227.

urgent necessity and police officers as saviours.

In contrast to this man's world, we can also, by comparison with other figurine toys brands, see what are the themes absent in the series for boys. Besides the conflict and vehicles themes, the series Town does also feature more 'regular' civilian activities such as the post office, a two-stories house, convenient store, several coffee shops, etc. But where are traditional candid entertainments and leisure such as sports (except one set about soccer), circus, the zoo usually beloved by children, etc.? There are some animal figurines, horses, dogs and cats, but many dogs actually appear as police forces auxiliaries... We don't find any farmhouse reflecting the traditional rural dimension of Korea. Nature is only evoked through a set devoted to camping (which is actually a product placement for the Kia Soul car). And more surprising in a country crazy for education, there is not a single school-related set...

2. Girls in Oxford

1) Representation of female figures

As already noted, female characters are a minority in Oxford Kids Block line, not only in series traditionally targeting more boys such as war and police, but in general: for example, the Town series has only 19,8% of female figurines. But even the Sweet series which is targeting girls with special themes and a pink color doesn't show a reverse in the tendency: there are 34 female characters for 32 male figurines. Oxford world is therefore a male dominated universe where women are not only outnumbered by men, but are also having subaltern roles and positions. We have already mentioned the roles given to women in the Town series: victims to rescue, weak princesses to be protected or criminals as in the Town Heroes Police HQ set. In general,

women are staged as having inferior social positions: in the Hospital sets, doctors are men, nurses women. They are usually secretaries in offices, such as in the Decagone where the only woman is depicted behind a computer in one picture, and drinking coffee with the president in another.

2) The Sweet series for girls

This subaltern image is not challenged in the Sweet series for girls, but reinforced by other traits attached to women in the themes and narratives of the sets. The series has 21 sets, among which 14 are related to food and beverage consumption: there are 5 sets related to ice-creams shops and carts, 3 to donuts, 2 to pizza, 2 to coffee, one to cola beverage, one to hamburger. Some of these sets are direct product placements of famous American brands such as Dunkin' Donuts or Baskin Robbins with apparent logos (7 sets). There is only one woman cooking (in the Pension set), the others are mere consumers of food products, which are mostly related to imported brands advertising for themselves. There are interestingly 4 sets showing advertising vehicles, as if women were the major target of consumer products advertisement, almost as if it was a social role. While men are saving the world, what do women?

They mostly consume. Besides the food related sets, they are seen as customers of bike, fashion or toys shops, and of hairdresser salon. Beauty and appearance are classically associated with women in traditional gender types, as research have shown for the Lego brand as well²³⁾. They are also the keepers of the house, as show the Two-stories House and the Pension sets. Their main goal is to marry a handsome and rich prince, as tells the Princess Castle set. What do they do the rest of the time? They enjoy coffee in the Beach Coffee Shop, reminding us that women are leisure-related beings. This

23) See Reich, S. M., Black, R. W. & Foliaki, T., *ibid.*, pp. 285–298.

sum-ups the themes developed in the Sweet series: women are mostly associated with consumption, beauty, leisure.

It is important to note that the modern women portrayed in Oxford products don't really cook. They eat and drink imported food. When they do cook as in the Pension example, they prepare a pizza on a barbecue oven. There are, outside of the Sweet series, only two sets where women are associated with food: the Kia Soul Camping set of Town, where the mother is cooking something like a soup in the tent while the husband is doing the barbecue (quite a classical division of food labor) and the Korean House set, where a woman wearing an apron is in front of a Korean traditional meal on a low table. These are two rare evocations of Korean traditional food, the only dish presented in a set being Japanese sushi in the Brick for mania series - it is quite surprising that K-food is not the object of more attention. Actually, there may be an indirect statement regarding the shifting role of women in



〈Figure 3〉 Two-stories House, © Oxford Co.

Korean society importing foreign values (foreign goods being here a possible metaphor). Indeed, except the traditional Korean house mentioned before, the other houses in Oxford series are Western style buildings. Strangely enough, in the Sweet series, the only residential house is not the ubiquitous apartment complex (which appears in the Special Rescue Squad set as a collapsing tower), but a quite rare two-floor dwelling with a small garden, which seems to mirror Western practices more than Korean ones.

This set is a perfect example of gendered role assignment (see Figure 3). In the pink house, the wife is comfortably sitting on the porch, waving goodbye to her husband who is in his car, probably leaving for work. In the house in the back, the TV set is on. In the small garden, a young female (holding a cellphone), probably the daughter of the family, is also waving goodbye to the man. A perfect image of the typical heteronormative nuclear family, with women characterized by their inactivity (unproductivity) in front of men working as hard as they fight for the sake of society in other block sets.

These social roles are confirmed by another interesting set from the series, the Princess Castle, with a very elaborated narrative on the descriptive leaflet available on the website. In a Western-style middle-age pink castle, a blonde princess is waving from a terrace to a young charming prince wearing a modern navy-blue suit with necktie and top hat. The narrative is developed in other pictures: another young man is serenading with a guitar below the princess balcony, but apparently, he is not a successful player, since he only attracts dogs and cats. The charming young man is seen in a series of pink heart-shaped pictures arriving on his white horse, proposing to the princess and offering her a bouquet of red roses. Bells are ringing, the next picture stages the wedding banquet with a large wedding cake, a big table attended by a servant, a chef and an old butler with a mustache. Other pictures describe the princess in her white wedding dress, wearing her everyday red dress in

front of her dressing-table, or standing in front of a gift in her bedroom decorated with a pink teddy bear. This timeless (as well as anachronical) princess showcases the supposed major traits of a young woman, a child-like, spoiled, superficial wedding material living in fairy tales. Isn't it funny that the young 'prince' looks like a modern-day salary man with his suit?

IV. Learning national agenda with toys

Modern toys have been known for being effective tools of individual socialization of children and when they are not anymore the products of local, neutral craftsmanship, but of larger private companies whose interest can mingle with public institutions, they don't only convey conventional values of a group or society, they can also become beacons of national agendas and politics. We will see in this section how Oxford brands produces its own take on national narrative by constructing an oppositional historic discourse while branding Korean national culture in its own limited way.

1. National(ist) narratives

Oxford brand developed several series pertaining to the ambiguous and complex relationship of Korea with Others in an historical perspective. The direction taken by the choice of themes, periods, episodes, and the angle taken by the script-writing of the sets clearly construct a 'victim narrative'²⁴⁾ to which contemporary official historiography has been prone to.

24) About the victimization and the 'sweet-power' of South Korea, see for example Cicchelli, Vincenzo, and Sylvie Octobre, *The Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture: Surfing the Korean Wave*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 134-140.

1) Kwanggaet'o series: appropriating the Northern heritage

In the historical wars section, a recurrent theme revolves around the figure of Kwanggaet'o the Great (374-413, r. 391-413), king of the Koguryŏ kingdom who made an empire rival to China. During his reign, the territory of this 'Korean' kingdom reached an extent that no other Korean State will ever attain. He is therefore a major figure of national pride. What is interesting is that there has been after the Korean war a long historiographic battle between the two Koreas regarding the ancient period of the Korean Three Kingdoms. While Park Chung-hee's South Korea had put all its archeological and ideological efforts in showing the preeminence of the Shilla kingdom which had its capital in present Kyŏngju (in the South), North Korea has developed a discourse on the unparalleled greatness of the Koguryŏ kingdom. It is therefore interesting to see that Oxford company, which cannot be suspected of proximity to North Korea, has been using since many years this northern kingdom in no less than 4 series and 15 sets. It is worth noting for example that there is absolutely nothing in the Oxford line about the 5 centuries long Koryŏ medieval kingdom (918-1392), which is also claimed to be a North Korean heritage (the ancient capital being in present day Kaesong in DPRK). There isn't either any set about the cultural heritage of Koguryŏ such as the royal tombs adorned with fascinating wall-paintings: the block sets are all about the culture of war of a king whose surname was, ironically, the Peacemaker. We can think that this emphasis is probably due to recent years claim by China that Koguryŏ was a Chinese kingdom and the parallel inscription of Koguryŏ tombs by both North Korea and China at the UNESCO World Heritage listing in 2004.²⁵⁾ We can therefore wonder if this

25) See Ahn, Yonson, "The Contested Heritage of Koguryo/Gaogouli and China-Korea Conflict.", *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 제6권(제1호), 2008, p. 16.

accent put on the Kwanggaet'o series is not an indirect way of counteracting the cultural imperialist drive of China.

2) Resisting Japan: Imjin War and Independence fighters

The Japan related series seem more obvious to locate in the national discourse. If we except one set featuring Japanese sushi, Japan is mentioned in Oxford Kids Blocks through two major themes: the 16th century invasion war referred to as the Imjin War conducted by the shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the fighters for independence during the 1910-1945 Japanese colonization of Korea. The later are referred to as Toknipkun or army for independence, knowing that there was not a unified resistance movement at that time.

Both series have an educational and ideological purpose of maintaining Japan as the archenemy, with Japanese fighters described through sinister facial expressions and stereotyped outfits to distinguish them easily from Chosŏn (Korean) fighters. In the Imjin War related 4 series and 14 sets, we not only can see Hideyoshi's figurine, but many other famous characters from that time. The central Korean figure is of course 'The General' (Changgun), Yi Sun-sin, the national hero who gives his name to two of the series. He is a national saviour who 'invented' the Turtle Ships to fight successfully against the outnumbering Japanese army. His face is on one of the Korean banknote and his bronze statue stands in the middle of Seoul's Champs-Élysées, Kwanghwamun avenue. But the second purpose or cause for the Changgun recent set can also be seen as a more opportunistic drive: the phenomenal success of the movie *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (dir. Kim Han-min, 2014). The Heroes of the Independence Army series (2 sets) followed also a series of feature films and TV series on the colonial times which attracted the favour of the audience, such as *Mr Sunshine* (dir. Lee Eung-bok, starring Lee

Byung-hun, 2018), which ranks as the fifth most viewed TV series on Korean cable channels. This drama has its own block series in the Oxford line, with 3 sets. One shows the scene of the assassination in Harbin train station of the ex-first Resident-General of Japan in Korea, Ito Hirobumi (1842-1909), by Korean nationalist fighter An Jung-geun. Thus, scenes from history textbooks seen as well on television can then be re-enacted by children with their construction sets, perpetuating the colonial collective memory.

3) Revisiting the Korean War : analysis of the Sherman Tank set



〈Figure 4〉 Sherman Tank set, Cover photo, © B. Joinau.

The Sherman Tank set from the Brick for Mania series offers a complex and ambiguous script. It is centered on the American tank of the same name (M4 Sherman, officially Medium Tank, M4) widely used during WWII and

also during the Korean War (1950-53). The set features 4 different figurines : two American GI's, recognized by their uniforms, pink skin completion and sinister faces. Their facial expressions are important, although one of them is difficult to read, while the other soldier's face with sideburns and a goatee shows signs of anger: he radiates violence. The other two characters are yellow-skinned male and female figurines which can easily be interpreted as a Korean couple. They wear worn-out patched Korean traditional *chōgori* jackets: they are poor or have been impoverished by the war. The woman has a zigzag-line mouth expressing despair, which is confirmed by the position of her eyebrows and by a tear on her cheek. The Korean man seems upset, according to the shape of his mouth and of his eyes, he his depicted with an arm up, as if he was complaining at the soldiers in their tank. On the cover picture, the tank is staged in front of a two-story Korean house (Korean tiles and a signboard in Korean) which seems to have been severely damaged by fights: two wooden planks hold the front while the signboard displaying



〈Figure 5〉 Sherman Tank set, Presentation leaflet, © Oxford Co.

‘International Toys’ (*kukche wanku*) hangs half broken. In the background, a rural landscape of fields and low hills. The tank stands in front of the house, and we don’t know if the two soldiers are shouting at the Korean couple. Is the tank responsible for the damage on the house? Are the soldiers evicting the owners of the house by force?

The next picture, interestingly designed in black and white as an old photograph to give it the legitimacy of an historical record, shows the Korean couple on the road of exile: the angry husband is leading the way with a white bundle on the back, while the wife is falling on the ground. In a following picture, the kind-looking soldier hands a chocolate bar to the woman who is holding a color photograph which seems like a picture of a model house: is he trying to comfort her while forcing her to relocate? The chocolate bar has the same design than the Hershey’s bars which became famous as a precious treat given by American soldiers to the Korean population during and after the war. In the back, the very upset husband holds half of the signboard which used to hang in front of his house / shop bearing the word ‘International’. What could be the subtext?

In an interesting *mise en abyme*, the Korean couple (who are themselves actually toy figurines!) apparently used to sell toys in their shop. But they also seemingly became the ‘toys’ of international (=foreign) forces playing with their lives and their country. The external power, even if it is the American ally, is shown here as a threat and a destructing agent forcing the Korean people to move on the international stage. The chocolate bar could be seen as a symbol of the commercial imperialism and of the cultural Westernization brought by foreign forces along the liberation and the alliance during the war. This ‘Korean War - Special Edition’ set is probably not as much about the Korean War itself than about the effects of the war on traditional Korea (symbolized here by the rural setting of the miserable couple). Could it be

more than that, and a possible evocation of one of the accidents caused by the presence of American armed forces on South Korean territory, such as the 2002 crushing of two 13 years old Korean schoolgirls by a 57-ton armored US vehicle, which caused huge anti-US demonstrations? It would be an over-interpretation, but the script built by the iconic documents presenting this block set surely suggests a very anti-American subtext.



〈Figure 6〉 Sherman Tank set, Presentation leaflet, © Oxford Co.

4) Confronting others

China, Japan and the USA are not the only ‘Others’ who are revisited by Oxford toys. For example, there is a series called Dragon Battleship with 3 sets featuring old sail battleships: one Yi Sun-sin’s Turtle ship, one Japanese ship and one apparently Western battleship featuring dragons on its sails (?) but also Caucasian pink-face figurines wearing hats belonging to the 19th century Western fashion. Whereas the two other boats evoke obviously the 16th century Imjin War, the Western ship could be an evocation of the Western (French, then American) attacks on the Kanghwa Island close to Seoul in the 1860s.

(1) Foreign figurines

As we already noted, the Western characters can be generally spotted by their pinkish facial completion, which comes as a strange appropriation of orientalist and racialist stereotypes, Asian being yellow. Some figurines displaying this skin yellow color in a setting which is clearly exotic (such as medieval Western castles and knight culture) are probably used to permit an acculturation by the children of these foreign items and periods.

As we will develop further later with the Police Headquarters set, there are also some more subtle or indirect depiction of culturally and ethnically different others, and oftentimes in quite xenophobic or diminishing terms. Some characters are difficult to identify: for example, the criminal in the Town series is depicted at least 4 times as a man with a monocle. The eyeglass was never a Korean specific feature. Who is this strange criminal chased after in several sets by modern days Korean police ? Is the monocle, a very odd attribute in Korean context, used to qualify a socially and morally deviant person as a ‘foreigner’ to Korean society, an individual alienated by his behaviour? The fact that another criminal character appears several times in police related sets as wearing a yellow shirt with leopard pattern is also interesting. Is it a sign that the figurine belongs to the local mafia, often portrayed in movies and TV series as wearing flamboyant and not so classy foreign designer’s brands cloth? Anyway, you can obviously judge a book by its cover in Oxford world.

(2) Borrowed history

The outside world is therefore present in this world, through the figurines representing foreigners, but also through specific block sets dedicated to things not Korean. For exemple, there are two series about Chinese mythical

past: the Samkukji (Chinese Three Kingdoms era related wars, 2 sets) and the Chiyou Emperor (a Chinese god of War, 3 sets). The Chinese Three Kingdoms era has been the object of several novels, cartoons, animes, movies, and, as the Chiyou god, they are part of Korean cultural heritage as well. They are to Korea a little bit what ancient Greek or Roman culture and times are to Europeans: foreign, but part of one's cultural shared knowledge. More interestingly do we find a set dedicated to the Knights of the Round Table or a set about Jesus' Last Supper (when there is absolutely no evocation of Buddhism, the traditional religion of Korea). Two sets dedicated to a sad episode of Western recent history, the Titanic, are probably related to the lasting success of James Cameron's movie (1997). But is it really for children, who are probably ignorant of the film as well as of the accident of the ship, or for adults ?

(3) Analysis of the Police Headquarters set

The Police HQ set offers a very clear and even bold narrative that we need to analyze separately. In a big police head quarter equipped with heliport and helicopter, SWAT vehicle, police car, watch tower, and several police officers, a man dressed as a cook enters the police station on a scooter. He is a Chinese food delivery guy, as can be guessed by the typical food container at the back of the motorbike with the Chinese characters 'chunghwa yori' (Chinese cuisine). He has a beard, facial scars, and wears a helmet. He goes to the prison cell where one of his acolytes is in jail. This criminal, with a sinister expression on his face, is shirtless, one can see his tattoos on his chest, and he is bald. It is easy to recognize the typification of the Chinese-Korean mob guys working in restaurants as a cover. In the next picture, the scooter driver helps his friend escape the police station by breaking a fence with his 4x4 jeep equipped with huge wheels. All the police forces are after them, and

in the following picture, they are arrested, hands up in front of a barking dog and two officers holding machine guns. In the final picture, the police station is back to normal with order restored.



〈Figure 7〉 Police HQ set. © Oxford Co.

The xenophobic anti-Chinese (or anti-Chosŏnchok or Korean-Chinese) discourse is blatant and doesn't need extra interpretation. It is worth noting that in the picture where the criminal is seen escaping from jail, the toilet of his cell is upside-down and there is an excrement on the floor (see Figure 7). This is part of the plastic elements in the set, and not a simple drawing. This motive is found in another police station related set, Town Heroes Police HQ: here the two criminals are a couple. The woman gets in the police station under the disguise of a yogurt selling cart (the infamous yakurt cart). When she gets to her male friend's cell to help him escape, he is having a poo: same staging, with falling toilets and the little excrement on the floor... We know that the scatologic images can please children targeted by these toys, but the

awkwardness of the occurrence of these two isolated mini plastic faeces let us think that they are used here as metaphors instructing the kids that criminals are like the ‘droppings’ of society.

2. Reinventing tradition and consuming Hallyu

1) Reinventing Korean tradition?

Oxford company brings its contribution to the reinvention of Korean traditions by transforming some cultural items into playable toys which allow the children to not only, literally, reconstruct them, but also world-play with them to appropriate their meaning. The selection of the items is quite instructive.

Indeed, despite a rather aggressive nationalist agenda when dealing with war, conflicts and geopolitical relations, Oxford line of block toys doesn't offer much in term of traditional Korean culture. We have already mentioned the quasi absence of the much praised K-food and of several Korean kingdoms of the past (Shilla, Paekche, Koryŏ, etc.). Actually, apart from the Imjin War, the long Chosŏn kingdom is rarely mentioned. Except from several soldiers and weapons from the Chosŏn time, the only cultural item of that era that we could locate is the Chiphyŏnjŏn (Hall of Worthies) set, describing the Lecture Hall promoted by the king Sejong the Great (1397-1450) to develop science and knowledge. We can see in a traditional building several scholars working on books, surrounded by some of their famous inventions. Sejong is credited with the invention of the Korean script *hangŭl*, which is celebrated every year on a special holiday, one of the reasons for the statue of Sejong to be on the Kwanghwamun avenue with Yi Sun-shin admiral. This is also the only evocation of sciences and of education in the 390 sets. Otherwise, a traditional wedding as it was performed in the past is

the object of two sets, and we can be sensitive to the fact that the only traditional custom directly depicted by the Kids Block series is related to the institution of traditional marriage.

We don't find more national heritage buildings and landmarks either. Sunggyemun, aka Namdaemun, National Treasure n°1 which was burnt to the ground in criminal fire in 2008, is the object of no less than 5 sets, probably related to the accident and the renovation of this national heritage. With the Kyŏnghoeru pavillion from the Kyŏngbok Palace in Seoul and the Pulkusa Temple's pagoda in Kyŏngju, there are only 3 landmarks seen as worth a mention by Oxford company. In contrast, there are more foreign monuments available: the Leaning Tower of Pisa (2 sets), the Eiffel Tower (2 sets), London's Tower Bridge, the Coliseum and the Taj Mahal.

As we see, the nationalist stance is mostly focused on geopolitical and body/gender politics: relations with other countries and nations, in present as well as in past times, and the gendered division of roles. Cultural traditions are less important, whether they are not in the ideological agenda of Oxford company's executives, whether they are not good selling items among Korean youth.

2) Consuming Hallyu

A much stronger stress is put on consumerism. Among the different sets dedicated to modern urban lifestyle which are gender neutral, we find several shops and stores belonging to the now 'traditional' cityscape of Koreans: the ubiquitous convenient store, the game room (*orakshil*), the bike shop, the toy store, the sandwich corner, the restaurant, several coffee shops. As mentioned when discussing the girl-oriented Sweet series, these sets reflect changing patterns of consumption as well as globalized lifestyles that children want to reproduce in their plays. No traditional artisan, very few private businesses:

most of the shops in the sets belong to the franchise style of business (chains). For example, the sandwich shop in the Town series is called Soboroway, which is a transparent allusion to the American Subway chain present in Korea.

Several brands are thus placed in the sets quite blatantly, as we have already seen in the Sweet series. In the Town line, the coffee shop is openly named Ediya, a local chain. This collusion of the Oxford toys with private companies and brands is part of its business model. On the website, the *kihoek sangp'um* or Special Products section features the series and sets developed for private companies and also sometimes public institutions and which are not on sale in the regular chain of supply of Oxford toys. They are sold or given as gifts by the brand ordering them. They represent no less than 94 series for a total of 216 sets: Kumho Tires, Korean Air, 7Eleven convenient stores, The Red Cross, Ocean World amusement park, Krispy Kream donuts, Outback family restaurants, SM Entertainment K-pop production company, Kia Motors, Kwangju FC soccer club, Cheju Island Airport, Hyundai Department Store, MBC TV channel, etc.

As we see, these different brands use the brick toys to capture future consumers and build their customer loyalty from a young age. Even BTS band has its own set. Actually, the Hallyu or Korean Wave of cultural products is well represented in the Oxford toys: we already mentioned several movies and TV series which are mentioned directly or indirectly in the sets (*Mr Sunshine*, *Joint Security Area*, zombie movies like *Kingdom*, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*). They offer a positive synergy between a historical event or period and a media blockbuster whose success will insure good sales. It has been said that one of the characteristics of Hallyu is the high transmediality of its products.²⁶⁾ It couldn't be better illustrated than these Oxford sets which are spin-off products, a practice adopted from a long time by other toy brands

such as Lego and Playmobil. What is interesting is that most of these Oxford sets are not official derivative products under licence, they are just a postmodern nods to the original.

Another example of transmediality are the two series made after popular reality TV shows, *Chintcha sanai* (Real Men) and *Muhan tojŏn* (Infinite Challenge): the first one was a popular show where TV celebrities had to endure the harsh conditions of army base life (187 episodes). The sets include Sam Hammington, the New Zealander-Australian comedian who became very famous with this show. The military service being compulsory for all Korean men for a two years period and knowing that it is at the centre of many debates and controversies, the block set can be seen as a world-play preparation for little boys of this modern rite of passage. The other TV show is also a reality style program where celebrities have to perform absurd, dirty, sometimes impossible tasks. It was the most watched TV show in Korea from 2005 to 2018, with a total of 566 episodes. Useless to say that it is a national television media heritage which deserves 4 sets in Oxford Kids Block series. One of them depicts the everyday life of salary men in an office. The details of the decor and objects are stunning. All the figurines seem to enjoy their company life. The little kid playing with this set will probably desire such a fun and exciting working environment. unless he or she watches later one of the dystopic TV series produced in Korea such as *Misaeng* (Uncomplete Lives, 2014) or *Squid Games* (2021) which display a completely opposite narrative.

26) See Cicchelli, and Octobre, *ibid.*, pp. 60–62.

V. Conclusion

Oxford brand brick toys series Kids Block for children between 5 to 12 years old have been semiotically analyzed in order to decipher the discourse imbedded in the packagings and in their peritexts. These toys, whose some sets or series have been the object of collaboration with Korean State institutions and large private companies, happen to be much more than innocent and neutral games. They foster a structured ideological narrative which is globally conservative and even nationalist, mirroring a strong anti-Japanese agenda with occasional stances on American and Western powers as well as a diffuse xenophobic orientation. The heavily gendered-typed brick sets reproduce Korean mainstream gender politics by producing gender stereotypical scripts which not only assign and reinforce traditional gender roles, but also constrain little girls to subaltern positions (victims, secretaries, nurses, stewardess, etc.). On 390 block sets studied, a majority was designed for boys, with a strong accent on conflict themes (war, military, police, action toys) and vehicles, reaffirming a male ideal image of a heroic, individualistic and technologically well-equipped man. This aggressive and effective masculinity, while diffusing a normalized vision of modern war and hazards, reflects the ongoing neoliberal values which go beyond the military realm. These toys also contribute to a justification from a young age of regimes of surveillance and punishment in society with the numerous police-related sets. Through the world-play that the hazards related sets stage, the young boy is invited to be trained and to accept the inherent risks of our modernity. Block sets with neutral or girl-oriented themes are a minority. The Sweet series, which follows the Leogo Friends series, is boldly gender-typed for female child with packages designed in pink bright colors. The themes in the series elaborates on stereotypes already found in other toys brands, such

as a female tropism towards social encounters (leisure), beauty, marriage and sentimental relations. Korean Lego insist also on the female consumerist dimension, where the traditional nurturing of women is displaced into a (foreign) food consuming frenzy. It seems to reflect a conservative discourse on the contemporary shift of Korean women's role, who went out from the (national) domestic sphere into the (globalized) public sphere - which can also be seen as being a metaphor for the rapid transformations of Korean society since the 20th c. experienced as a forced upheaval. National branding is therefore mostly determined in the toys series by an oppositional dimension against Japan, China, Western forces. National division is addressed in only one set (with the distancing use of the reference to a famous movie), confirming the victim narrative according to which national miseries occurred always from external agency. National heritage and cultural traditions are rarely depicted, showing a quite paradoxical, or amnesic, nationalist discourse. Focus is put on the other side on recent pop and media culture (Hallyu related) - which also showcases the commercial and loose ethical stance of the brand. This analysis raises a lot of questions regarding the potential impacts of these toys on Korean children. We hope that it can serve as a base for further qualitative research on the uses and representations of these brick sets by children, in order to assess their cognitive, psychological and sociological effects.

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〈ABSTRACT〉

**Boys Will Be Boys
– A Critical Semiotic Analysis of the
Oxford Block Toys –**

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Toys are a central tool for socialization and identity development of children. Studies on toys are numerous in the fields of education, psychology, anthropology, and gender studies. There is less literature on the sociological dimension of modern toys, especially in South Korean society. This article studies the very popular children's construction sets line 'Kids Block' developed by South Korean Oxford company after the Danish Lego block model. A total of 390 sets belonging to 76 series presented on Oxford website by texts, images and videos are semiotically analyzed in this paper. Gender-typing representations are reinforced through these toys which are incredibly gendered, portraying a very subaltern female image and social role while boys are encouraged to nurture their masculine heroism through conflict related figurines. The focus made on war and risks themes by the brand (more than 50% of the available sets) are to be interpreted in the specific context of Korea. Further analysis also shows that the Oxford block sets are also rewriting a conservative national agenda around nationalist narratives, a very limited reinvention of tradition and a focus on neoliberal consumerism as promoted by South Korean cultural products.

Key Words : Semiology, Ideology, Toys, Gender-type, Socialization