



Crouching Rabbit, Hidden Dragon? Animating Gendered National Narratives and Postcolonial Subjectivity in Contemporary Chinese Animation

¿Conejo Agazapado, Dragón Oculto? Animando Narrativas Nacionales de Género y Subjetividad Poscolonial en la Animación China Contemporánea

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how great power aspirations and national identity are aesthetically constructed through political animation. We analyze how the animated series *Year Hare Affair* (那年那兔那些事儿, YHA) transforms geopolitical hierarchies into an anthropomorphic menagerie where China emerges as a vulnerable yet determined rabbit navigating relations with the American eagle, Russian bear, and other animal-nations in the zoopolitik. Through critical discourse analysis coupled with computational examination of audience engagement, we theorize zoopolitik as a gendered symbolic economy that renders abstract international relations emotionally intelligible and emotionally compelling. The rabbit's oscillation between kawaii vulnerability and paternalistic authority exemplifies what Bhabha terms colonial mimicry, where the animation portrays China as showing a critical distance to power domination yet mirrors the future trajectory of China to this domination. Our analysis demonstrates how institutional support transforms YHA into an effective apparatus of civic pedagogy. The series' transpacific visual grammar demonstrates how postcolonial states refunctionalize the allegorical aesthetic forms in representations of global order in major powers (e.g., US, Japan) to naturalize their aspirational trajectories. While gesturing toward decolonial futures, YHA transforms complex international relations into emotionally accessible patriotic narratives. What emerges, therefore, is not a clear rupture with the colonized past, but a re-enchantment of geopolitical power, repackaged for a new generation to form their political subjectivities under the aesthetic veneer of animated play.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina cómo las aspiraciones de las grandes potencias y la identidad nacional se construyen estéticamente a través de la animación política. Analizamos cómo la serie animada *El Asunto de Aquellos Conejos de Aquel Año* (那年那兔那些事儿, YHA) transforma las jerarquías geopolíticas en una galería antropomórfica donde China emerge como un conejo vulnerable pero determinado que navega sus relaciones con el águila estadounidense, el oso ruso y otras naciones-animales dentro de una zoopolítica (política animal) alegórica. Mediante un análisis crítico del discurso combinado con un examen computacional del compromiso de la audiencia, teorizamos la zoopolítica como una economía simbólica atravesada por el género que traduce las relaciones internacionales abstractas en narrativas emocionalmente convincentes y políticamente inteligibles. La oscilación del conejo entre una vulnerabilidad kawaii y una autoridad paternalista ejemplifica lo que Bhabha denomina mimetismo colonial, donde la animación representa a China manteniendo una distancia crítica de la dominación del poder, mientras simultáneamente reproduce las trayectorias futuras de China hacia esa misma dominación. Nuestro análisis demuestra cómo el apoyo institucional

transforma YHA en un aparato efectivo de pedagogía cívica. La gramática visual transpacífica de la serie demuestra cómo los estados poscoloniales refuncionalizan formas estéticas alegóricas —originadas en representaciones del orden global de potencias dominantes (como Estados Unidos y Japón)— para naturalizar sus propias trayectorias aspiracionales. Aunque gesticula hacia futuros decoloniales, YHA transforma las relaciones internacionales complejas en narrativas patrióticas emocionalmente accesibles. Lo que emerge, por tanto, no es una ruptura clara con el pasado colonizado, sino un reencantamiento del poder geopolítico, reempaquetado para que una nueva generación forme sus subjetividades políticas bajo el barniz estético del juego animado.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Aspirational Politics, Animation, Postcolonial Theory, Feminist Ir, Geopolitical Imaginary.

Políticas aspiracionales, animación, teoría poscolonial, relaciones Internacionales feministas, imaginario geopolítico.

1. Introduction

In February 2021, Chinese state media revealed details of a June 2020 military clash in Galwan Valley, commemorating four martyrs and one wounded soldier. Among them, PLA officer Xiao Siyuan drew particular attention for his WeChat profile picture: a rabbit in PLA uniform holding a Type 95 rifle, inspired by the animated series *Year Hare Affair* (那年那兔那些事儿). The Type 95 automatic rifle or QBZ-95 is a bullpup assault rifle designed and manufactured by Norinco, and issued since 1995 as the service rifle for the People's Liberation Army, People's Armed Police, and various law enforcement agencies in the People's Republic of China. Figure 1 exemplifies how animation has become a crucial site for negotiating China's national identity and geopolitical aspirations.

Figure 1: Xiao Siyuan's Wechat Profile Photo: A Rabbit Dressed in a PLA Uniform, which was Used as the Profile Photo of Martyr Xiao Siyuan.



Since its 2015 debut on Bilibili, *Year Hare Affair* (YHA) has achieved remarkable success with over 540 million views by May 2022. Its widespread popularity attracted institutional attention, positioning YHA at the intersection of grassroots media and official discourse as a vehicle for “ideotainment” (Lagerkvist, 2008) - a strategic fusion of ideological messaging and entertainment.

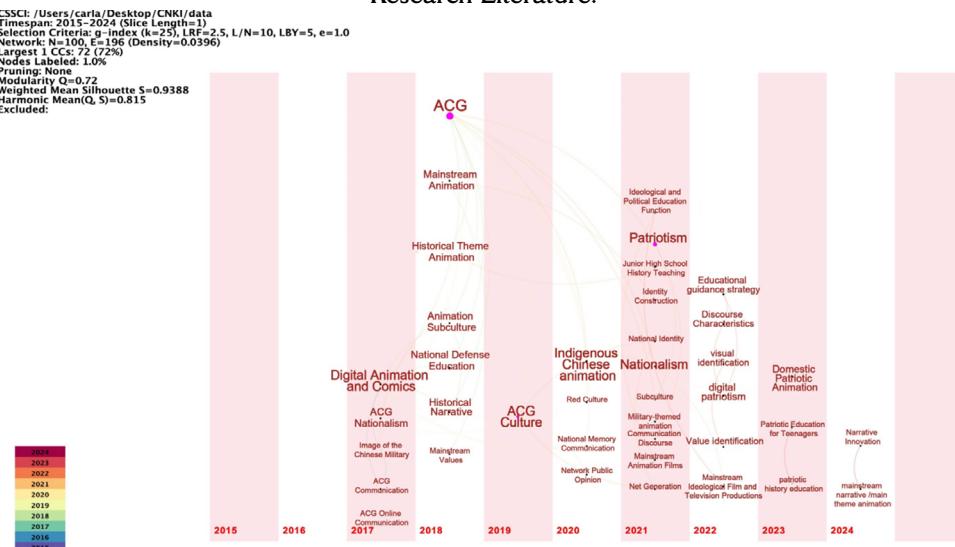
This article focuses on YHA's first three seasons, produced by independent animator Lin Chao before institutional backing. We deliberately exclude later PLA-funded episodes, concentrating on the period when grassroots nationalism intersected with ACG (anime, comics, and games) vernaculars on platforms like Bilibili. This transitional phase, where popular media circulates between subcultural autonomy and institutional integration, offers a crucial site for examining how affective nationalism is cultivated, platformed, and incorporated into cultural guidance mechanisms.

Creator Lin Chao's participation in the China Youth League's (CYL) “Youth Voice” campaign (China Youth Daily, 2016) marked a turning point, with YHA's aesthetic elements entering official youth education by 2018, including the rabbit mascot “Tuantuan” used in Party-sponsored programmes that reached over 400 million young viewers to educate about Party history. In 2021, CYL partnered with Xueersi (one of China's biggest Education Tech companies) to create *Century of Humiliation* (风雨百年), a twenty-episode animated series that accumulated 2.429 million Bilibili views by May 2025. The series' central motto, “Every rabbit has a great power ambition”, exemplifies how YHA encapsulates aspirational politics.

Building upon Finnemore and Jurkovich's (2020) theoretical framework, we conceptualize aspirational politics as future-oriented, prioritizing collective visions over present realities. While their model focuses on state behavior in international relations, we extend it to popular culture, where aspirations are actively shaped through everyday symbols and expressions. This lens enables analysis of how ideological messages are mediated, mobilized, and affectively charged through cultural forms, examining how ideological education operates through emotionally resonant narratives that cultivate an affectively loyal, future-facing citizen ideal aligned with state goals. As Dittmer (2010) argues, popular culture constitutes a key site of "popular geopolitics", where global hierarchies and national identities are reimagined through cultural production. Animation's capacity for visual metaphor makes it especially effective at translating abstract geopolitical ambitions into affective stories, forging temporal links between a mythologized past, precarious present, and aspirational future—bridging emotional investments with ideological alignment. *YHA* reflects a longer transpacific genealogy of zoopolitical imagination in animation, where nation-states are anthropomorphized to dramatize international relations. This trope recalls Japan's *Hetalia: Axis Powers*, where anthropomorphized countries replay global conflicts through caricature (Hu, 2022). *YHA* repurposes *Hetalia*'s format for a Sinocentric worldview, aligning anthropomorphic visuality with aspirational narratives of national rejuvenation.

YHA offers a compelling lens for examining the growing entanglement between ideological education and popular media in contemporary China. Emerging from grassroots subcultural communities on Bilibili, YHA has been selectively integrated into patriotic education frameworks —cited in CNKI-indexed educational research, adopted in patriotic youth campaigns, and embedded within state-linked platforms. Through analysis of 53 academic papers retrieved from CNKI using “那年那兔那些事” as the search term, we discovered that Chinese scholarly discourse on YHA has systematically shifted from peripheral “Animation SubCulture” and “ACG Culture” frameworks toward dense clusters of “Patriotism”, “National Identity”, and “Educational guidance strategy”, revealing how subcultural content becomes pedagogically instrumentalized (See Figure 2). As CNKI studies note, YHA translates abstract political narratives into emotionally resonant, anthropomorphic allegories that simplify ideological messages while enhancing affective appeal. The series’ “cute nationalism” pre-conditions viewers emotionally, cultivating identification with state worldviews before formal political content emerges, aligning with educational discourse promoting *寓教于乐* (educating through entertainment) and *润物无声* (influence without overt persuasion).

Figure 2: Temporal-spatial Distribution of Keywords in “Year Hare Affair” (那年那兔那些事) Research Literature.



Notes: Analysis based on 53 academic papers retrieved from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database using “那年那兔那些事” as search term. Keyword co-occurrence and temporal clustering visualized using CiteSpace software. Data retrieved July 20, 2025.

YHA thus exemplifies soft ideological education where boundaries between entertainment, pedagogy, and national belonging collapse into an aestheticized infrastructure of emotional governance. Platforms like Bilibili and Yiban (易班) now function as para-educational infrastructures. Bilibili's evolution from niche ACG subcultures to quasi-state-endorsed platform illustrates the convergence of digital fandom with ideological governance, while Yiban represents its formal institutional counterpart—a state-sponsored university platform integrating ideological education with digital governance. *YHA*'s trajectory from community-driven animation to state-aligned educational tool encapsulates this broader platform transformation.

This research thus asks the overarching question of how the Chinese animated series *YHA* (《那年那兔那些事儿》) constructs, circulates, and contests a Chinese popular geopolitical imagination across authorial, governmental, and participatory domains. The inquiry unfolds through three interconnected dimensions: first, examining how *YHA* reflects postcolonial and gendered geopolitical visions articulated by its creators as both individual artists and representatives of broader collective historical consciousness; second, investigating how the animation mobilizes aesthetic and symbolic elements to advance aspirational politics and legitimize particular geopolitical narratives; and third, exploring how audiences actively engage with and reinterpret these geopolitical stories through fan cultures and participatory practices, ultimately co-producing national identity and everyday geopolitical understanding within this evolving ecosystem of affective governance through digital platforms.

2. Theoretical Framework

This article contributes to theorizations of animation and geopolitics by developing the concept of zoopolitik: an analytical lens that captures how anthropomorphized characters transform international relations into emotionally legible allegories of trauma, hierarchy, and aspiration. While Japan's *Hetalia: Axis Powers* aestheticizes IR logics through queered, eroticized performances typical of ACG subcultures, *Year Hare Affair (YHA)* retools this format to construct Sinocentric aspirational nationalism. Drawing on Sharp's "geopolitical shorthand" and Barthes' mythological meaning, we analyse that *YHA* condenses complex global hierarchies into emotionally charged, visually simplified tropes—rendering China's geopolitical rise as legible, lovable, and narratively just based on the historical suffering.

Theoretically, this article departs from literature on soft power to argue that *YHA* functions as a cultural dispositif through which postcolonial states use affectively saturated, visually encoded forms to manage subjectivities and aspirational alignment with state projects. By integrating postcolonial theory—especially Chen Kuan-Hsing's "decolonial deadlock" and Bhabha's "colonial mimicry"—we interrogate how transpacific visual tropes are reterritorialized to naturalize Chinese geopolitical aspiration aestheticized through emotional intimacy and kawaii-coded ideological participation of the fan communities.

This article offers three interventions: foregrounding animation as a distinctive medium of geopolitical representation that simplifies without de-politicizing; developing zoopolitik to theorize how anthropomorphic aesthetics encode international hierarchies as affective attachments; and bringing postcolonial critique into dialogue with platform studies to analyze how aspirational nationalism is embodied, desired, and reproduced through digitally mediated visual cultures, constituting emergent modalities cultural apparatus that interpellate subjects into particular geopolitical imaginaries.

2.1. Animation and Popular Geopolitics

This research situates itself within the field of popular geopolitics, which examines how cultural texts do not merely reflect but actively *produce* and *contest* geopolitical meaning (Sharp, 1993, 1996). From television (Weldes, 1999) to comics (Dittmer, 2007), games (Bos, 2023; Woodyer & Carter, 2023) and film (Dodds, 2003), popular media shape what Tuathail (1996) called "geo-power"—the everyday construction of territorial imaginaries, national identities, and global political orders. Through narrative practices, cultural artefacts contribute to the "performative dimensions of statecraft" (Campbell, 1992), redrawing boundaries between self/other and domestic/foreign and producing geopolitical knowledge that naturalizes certain power relations while obscuring others (Said, 1978).

Animation's formal and aesthetic strategies—such as anthropomorphism, temporal compression, exaggeration, and stylized violence—enable it to function as a uniquely malleable medium for encoding and disseminating geopolitical narratives. These techniques afford a high degree of symbolic condensation,

allowing cartoons to distill complex international relations, historical antagonisms, or national myths into simplified, emotionally resonant storylines. In doing so, animation renders otherwise abstract geopolitical formations legible and affectively charged for mass publics.

Crucially, animation's semiotic flexibility and indexical instability—its ability to shift between realism and abstraction, allegory and parody—allow it to generate layered meanings that can simultaneously entertain and instruct. The use of character-driven allegory, in particular, mobilizes personified figures as synecdoches of national or civilizational identity, which interpellate viewers into particular ideological positions (Althusser, 1971). These figures do not merely represent the state; they *invite identification* with its narrative, projecting geopolitical struggles as personal dramas of loyalty, betrayal, sacrifice, or redemption.

In this context, animation has emerged as a particularly potent medium for articulating geopolitical narratives. Its symbolic economy, marked by visual condensation, affective intensity, and aesthetic abstraction, translates complex historical and geopolitical processes into emotionally resonant, easily circulated forms (Dodds, 2010; Hansen, 2011; Thorogood, 2016). As McCloud (1993) argues, cartoons simplify in order to amplify, rendering essentialized representations that shape how audiences intuitively engage with political identities, allegiances, and antagonisms. This *amplification through simplification* makes animation syntactically efficient for encoding ideological meaning in accessible visual narratives.

Fan communities, particularly those rooted in East Asian ACG subcultures, do not engage with animation merely as passive consumers, but as active participants in its narrative and ideological reproduction (Chen, 2022; Jenkins, Ito, & Boyd, 2015). Through practices such as fanart, fanfiction, meme-making, cosplay, and comment culture, viewers selectively amplify, parody, or rewrite the geopolitical narratives embedded within animated texts. In the case of Year Hare Affair, the blending of moe aesthetics with patriotic themes invites layered audience responses—from earnest nationalist enthusiasm to ironic detachment or even playful subversion (Sun, 2017; Tan, 2018). This fluid engagement is facilitated by the discursive and aesthetic grammars of ACG fandom, which normalize anthropomorphized world politics, coded gender performances, and the eroticization or infantilization of nation-states.

2.2. Aspirational Politics as Disciplinary Subjectivisation

The politics of aspiration, as outlined by Finnemore and Jurkovich (2020), involves “lofty goals, change over time, and transformation through imagination”. *YHA* depicts China's rise as ongoing process, blending collective memory with forward-looking ambitions. Yet aspirational narratives actively construct subjectivity, operating as ideological education through affectively charged, aesthetically seductive content that simplifies geopolitical complexity through cuteness, transforming international relations into sites of identification rather than critique. As feminist IR theorists argue, gendered performances are not ornamental: masculinity signifies strength and militarized rationality, while femininity represents moral softness and emotional labor (Cohn, 1987; Enloe, 1990; Tickner, 1992). *YHA* strategically manipulates this dichotomy—the rabbit (China) embodies both hard and soft power logics, shifting between sentimental vulnerability and stoic resolve, rendering the national subject emotionally legible through gendered modulation.

This article conceptualizes aspirational politics as disciplinary subjectivisation that merges Althusser's ideological interpellation with Foucauldian governmentality, producing subjects who aspire in alignment with the state's geopolitical telos. Drawing on Althusser's theory of interpellation, *YHA* hails audiences as “historical youth”, installing implicit moral injunctions where doubt or disengagement betrays national rejuvenation (Guan & Hu, 2020). Unlike classic ideological education mechanism, *YHA* operates within Foucault's regime of governmentality—shaping how individuals conduct themselves through emotional investment in teleological national narrative. Following Foucault's (1982) notion of subjectivation, *YHA* enacts aestheticized ideological education under emotional governance by making aspirational labor feel voluntary and pleasurable through kawaii aesthetics, patriotic sentiment, and nostalgic visual tropes.

This creates aspirational subjectivization: soft subjection where political loyalty is aestheticized and naturalized through digitally mediated visual pedagogy. Viewers are trained to desire national identification, seeing the nation as vulnerable companion, object of care, and extension of self. Yet this process is contradictory—aspiration that elevates also disciplines, demanding perpetual becoming under perpetually deferred promises. This creates ambivalent subject positions, conditioning viewers to feel for, grow with, and fight for the nation simultaneously. Aspirational politics thus substitutes command with

care, coercion with cuteness, creating managed emotional fields where viewers learn to love aspiring on the nation's behalf, even when exhausting or unattainable.

2.3. Postcolonial Critique of Aspirational Politics in YHA

YHA draws extensively from transpacific visual grammars originating in American and Japanese animation cultures, particularly from Cold War-era and neoliberal formations. Series like “*Hetalia: Axis Powers*” and “*America: The Motion Picture*” have long anthropomorphized states through *kawaii*, sexualized, and infantilized bodies, simplifying historical conflicts and making geopolitical antagonisms appear playful, even desirable. In “*Hetalia*”, nation-states are personified as attractive young men engaged in exaggerated interpersonal drama, reframing Cold War tensions through queered, eroticized performances that blur the line between geopolitical conflict and affective desire. Scholars note how such representations, typical of Japanese ACG subcultures, routinely aestheticize IR logics through anthropomorphism, *moe*-fication, and gender-coded tropes (Allison, 2006), reflecting a deeply gendered and sexualized imaginary that encourages identification through emotional intimacy and fan attachment.

Echoing works like *Hetalia* and *Countryballs*, which replayed Cold War dynamics through ironic national caricatures, *YHA* deploys similar techniques to construct Sinocentric geopolitical vision, reflecting a longer transpacific genealogy of zoopolitical imagination where nation-states are anthropomorphized to dramatize world order, creating what Sharp (2000) calls “geopolitical shorthand” that operates through Barthes’ (1977) “mythological” meaning-making where signs appear natural while encoding ideological positions. Both series exemplify how anthropomorphic symbolism allows abstract notions of history, trauma, and frustrations over global hierarchy to be felt emotionally.

What is notable is not merely *YHA*’s adoption of these tropes, but their re-functionalization that addresses power dynamics while constructing alternative worldviews through appealing affects of cuteness, humor, and nostalgic fantasy. Here, cuteness becomes strategically effective in the way that it aestheticizes geopolitical relationships and renders them emotionally accessible. While *Hetalia* queers the international through homoerotic subtext and ironic detachment, *YHA* reroutes gender codes through heteronormative, masculinist framework tied to patriotic teleology. The rabbit (China) is feminized through *kawaii* aesthetics yet tasked with masculine responsibilities: to mature, strengthen, and contribute to national rejuvenation. This mirrors what feminist IR theorists describe as the double bind of gendered subjectivity: femininity associated with moral innocence and suffering; masculinity with rationality and sovereignty (Enloe, 1990; Tickner, 1992). *YHA* mobilizes this contradiction, encouraging viewers to both feel for and fight for the nation, producing what Berlant (2011) calls “cruel optimism”—a structure where the nation’s cuteness and its call to arms become emotionally intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

This dynamic must be critically interrogated. As Chen (2010) cautions, postcolonial states are often caught in a decolonial deadlock, resisting Western hegemony while replicating what they once opposed. This deadlock is often manifested in the colonial mimicry, which is “a desire for a reformed, recognizable Other” (Bhabha, 1994)—an imitation that disavows power while securing its return. *YHA* mimics visual idioms of Western and Japanese animation not to subvert them, but to reterritorialize them in service of Chinese geopolitical aspiration. Moreover, this aesthetic formation must be situated within the broader coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000): ongoing structures of global hierarchy that outlive formal colonialism. *YHA*’s narrative of national rejuvenation—moving from “rabbit” to “dragon”—presumes linear developmentalist temporality that echoes Western modernity’s teleologies. In an interview with China’s media *Global Times*, *Year Hare Affair* creator Lin Chao remarked that “the rabbit must become a dragon,” referring to the symbolic transition from the Year of the Rabbit to the Year of the Dragon in the Chinese zodiac (Li & Huang, 2021). *YHA* should not be understood merely as soft power artifact, but as cultural form participating in coloniality of power, which naturalizes aspirations to reorder global politics through emotionally resonant narratives of care, memory, and cuteness.

3. Case Selection Method

This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992) to examine how the animation constructs meanings across different semiotic modes. The approach integrates Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional model examining text, discursive practice, and sociocultural context with Machin and Mayr’s

(2012) multimodal toolkit and Lazar's (2017) feminist critical discourse analysis. In this context, the feminist analysis informed by feminist international relations theory illuminates how gender representations intersect with geopolitical narratives (Tickner, 1992).

Data collection mainly involves close reading and systematic coding of the animation's episodes and a content analysis of Danmu—audience-generated bullet comments. The analysis pays particular attention to the visual and narrative strategies through which the animation constructs national identities, examining how these elements contribute to broader discourses about China's role in the global order.

To substantiate the sociopolitical context dimension of Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis, this study incorporates empirical analysis of audience-generated Danmu (弹幕) as a complementary data source. Originating in Japanese media and widely adopted on Chinese platforms, Danmu overlays real-time viewer comments onto video content, creating an affective, participatory layer of reception (Guo & Wang, 2025; Zhang & Cassany, 2019). By applying computational analysis, such as topic modeling and temporal keyword tracking, the study examines how audiences emotionally respond to key narrative moments, particularly gendered and nationalistic tropes. Rather than treating discourse as static text, this approach foregrounds how audience affects and interaction function as part of a broader discursive field (Crilley, 2020). These spontaneous, affect-laden expressions reveal how viewers emotionally internalize national narratives, demonstrating how discourse operates as cultural interpellation, structuring not only what audiences believe, but how they embody national subjectivities.

4. Analysis

4.1. Geopolitics in Animation: Zoopolitik and Postcolonial Mimicry

Animation's representational power lies in its ability to condense geopolitical abstractions into emotionally engaging, symbolically charged narratives. *YHA* exemplifies this by casting nation-states as anthropomorphized animals in a dramatized international ecosystem, a symbolic order we term zoopolitik. In this animated menagerie, each animal-nation embodies gendered attributes that intuitively communicate power, vulnerability, and hierarchy.

Through this gendered bestiary, *YHA* constructs an accessible tableau of international relations. The Chinese rabbit, for example, is portrayed with soft, rounded features, a youthful and emotionally inflected voice, and an aura of gentle vulnerability (see Figure 3). By contrast, the Russian bear (see Figure 4) is tall, heavyset, and speaks in a rugged northeastern dialect, exuding paternal authority. The American bald eagle (see Figure 5) is visually dominant and audibly arrogant, oscillating between assertiveness and irony. The eagle's smug charisma suggests both admiration and critique, echoing Chinese media's conflicted attitude toward American power. Similarly, the feminized "Baa Baa Sheep" reinforces visual language of infantilized dependency, framing certain nations as subordinate and structurally reliant on stronger, masculinized powers.

Figure 3: China the Rabbit.



Notes: The picture derives from S1 E8, A rabbit wearing a PLA military cap is the most common image of China in animation

Figure 4: Soviet the bear.



Notes: The screenshot comes from S1 E5, the tall Soviet bear speaks among socialist countries Subtitle translation: "My big bro!"

Figure 5: The United States the Bald Eagle.



Notes: From S1 E2, The American bald eagle appears for the first time wearing a suit, with a series facial expression. Subtitle translation: "It's no big deal".

Crucially, *YHA* does not portray China's international posture through a fixed gender identity, but rather through the strategic use of "playing cute", a performative mode that blends emotional appeal, symbolic innocence, and calculated relationality. In scenes with dominant powers such as the U.S. or Russia, the rabbit bows, cries, blushes, and uses affectionate nicknames like "鷹酱" (Eagle-chan) or "小钱钱" ("little money"), adopting an aesthetic of vulnerability that elicits sympathy or patronage. However, this cuteness is not simply submissive. When engaging with weaker or allied nations—such as the baa baa sheep (symbolizing Pakistan, Figure 6), the rabbit shifts into a paternalistic role, donning a Doraemon-like outfit that signals both benevolence and superiority. This oscillation from endearing junior to benevolent elder does not map cleanly onto gendered binaries; rather, it reflects a calibrated aesthetic diplomacy, where cuteness becomes a tactic for managing power differentials.

This contradiction exemplifies what Bhabha (1994) terms *colonial mimicry*: China mirrors the hegemon (the eagle), borrowing the affective and symbolic language of power, military iconography, capitalist metaphors, and moral paternalism. In doing so, this anime positions China as both exceptional and relatable: an emerging global actor who plays innocent when needed but also disciplines and protects when required. The Doraemon-coded rabbit (Figure 6), far from being anti-masculine, embodies a hybridized authority, one that disarms critique through cuteness while asserting soft dominance through emotional scripting. As Mohanty (2003) warns, emerging powers often resist hegemony rhetorically while reproducing hierarchical relations in their dealings with the more subaltern actors.

Figure 6: China the Rabbit Dressed like Doraemon Holding the Crying Baa Baa Sheep (Pakistan).



4.2. Sculpting Male Gaze: Aspiring States through Sexual Desire

Importantly, *YHA* constructs not only gendered national identities on-screen but also gendered subject positions for viewers. Through heteronormative tropes and masculine-coded fantasies, it implicitly addresses a presumed male audience who internalizes ideals of patriotic protection, martial strength, and heterosexual desire. This ideal viewer is positioned as an aspirational subject seeking to embody the masculine protector-soldier-citizen role.

YHA's gendered address is deeply embedded in the aesthetic grammars of ACG (anime, comics, and games) culture, especially those circulating across Japanese and East Asian fandoms. One key influence is the 「艦娘」(かんむす) (Kantai Collection) franchise, a Japanese media phenomenon that anthropomorphizes warships as young women, often hyper-feminized, submissive, and sexually coded. In this genre, military hardware is not merely represented but *personified* in ways that merge national defense with intimate fantasy, inviting the viewer to desire and "collect" the nation's arsenal. *YHA* adapts similar visual logics for Sinocentric audiences, feminizing military equipment—such as depicting a Soviet fighter jet as a submissive maid in lace headpiece and apron (Figure 7). The low-angle framing between the maid's legs (Figure 8) exemplifies the alignment of military admiration with erotic conquest, characteristic of what Banerjee (2012) terms muscular nationalism. These two screenshots are retrieved from S3 E5, which show a scene from early 1990s where China (shown as a rabbit) lusts after a Soviet fighter jet dressed in a maid outfit with white apron and cute lace headpiece. The first shot is taken from the rabbit's viewpoint looking at the aircraft-maiden, while the second shot uses a low-angle view between the maiden's legs to show the rabbit's desire. This setup presents China in a male role, viewing the feminized Soviet military equipment with obvious attraction.

Figure 7: Soviet Fighter Aircraft in Maid Costume.



Figure 8: Drooling Rabbit - Low-Angle View Between Legs.



Unlike Kantai Collection's historical nostalgia, *YHA* fuses these tropes with aspirational Chinese nationalism, recoding erotic affect into patriotic masculinity pedagogy. It leverages transpacific visual cultures to position viewers as both patriotic subjects and affective consumers of the nation, conflating citizenship with protection, desire, and domination.

Beyond visual eroticization, *YHA* cultivates affective admiration for sacrifice and martyrdom through frequent invocation of terms like "iron and blood", "sacrifice", "heroes", and "flames of war"—language that permeates user discourse and commentary. These tropes establish an affective regime where military strength becomes the desired highest form of patriotic expression, with viewers imagining themselves as future soldiers devoted to national defense. This romanticizes violence and normalizes death as patriotic duty, positioning the nation as needing male protection and becoming the object of devotion, possession, and sacrifice.

Therefore, this appeal to the male gaze constitutes an ideological and psychoaffective project producing the ideal national subject as both emotionally loyal and physically mobilized. Through visual grammar—character design, voice performance, camera angles—the show eroticizes military equipment by coding it as feminized, compliant, and emotionally responsive. This configuration stages the military as an object of desire, rendering citizen-state relations in libidinal terms. The viewer is interpellated into a heterosexual masculine subject position where the feminized military body becomes both fetish and national stand-in.

In Lacanian terms, the military apparatus becomes the object animating desire (see feminist IR theorists like Enloe, 2014 and Cohn, 1987). "Owning" or "protecting" the feminized military figure satisfies both the ego ideal (strong, protective man fantasy) and nationalism's superegoic injunction (duty to serve). Here, heterosexual possession overlays national defense fantasy, making the viewer's state relationship intimate, affective, and erotically charged.

Audience reception data and online fan communities reinforce this alignment. *YHA* has been especially popular among young viewers on platforms like Bilibili, many of whom are familiar with or embedded in ACGN (Anime, Comics, Games, Novels) culture. According to Bilibili, "Year Hare Affair" (那年那兔那些事儿) has produced 7 seasons plus special episodes, accumulating over 920 million total views across all seasons on the platform. The show's intertextual references to otaku aesthetics—maid costumes, twin tails, dere-dere character tropes—draw on male-dominated fandom conventions, consolidating shared cultural language between state messaging and male subcultural communities' affective interests. This targeting reflects the Party-state's broader efforts to combat perceived "masculinity crisis" among Chinese youth and reassert the strong, emotionally contained, heterosexual male citizen as normative ideal.

While *Year Hare Affair* (*YHA*) draws heavily on *Hetalia*'s anthropomorphized rendering of international

relations, it departs from *Hetalia*'s explicitly queer aesthetic. *Hetalia* queers geopolitics through campy humor, homoerotic subtext, and an active腐文化 (fǔ wénhùa) fandom, reimagining international affairs allegorical to intimate, affective, and often queered relations. By contrast, *YHA* reframes the anthropomorphic nation-state not through queerness but through a distinctly heteronormative martial fantasy. In *YHA*, the rabbit's longing for a Soviet fighter jet dressed in a maid outfit goes beyond simple fanservice. Rather, it functions as a postcolonial allegory of modernization, where the feminized weapon symbolizes both a lingering trauma of historical weakness and a fetishized promise of technological sovereignty. Military hardware is not merely instrumental but aesthetically and erotically charged: the desire for weapons becomes a desire for national wholeness, where the feminized object of protection secures a masculine identity. In this schema, martial strength, not relational intimacy, affirms the legitimacy of the nation—grounding *YHA* in a gendered, heteronormative framework distinct from *Hetalia*'s queered affective politics.

*This affective structure operates within broader cultural currents, as Chinese society addresses youth development concerns—evident in initiatives promoting diverse role models and healthy cultural development—positioning *YHA* as cultural innovation that presents emotionally compelling national strength visions rooted in traditional values, patriotic dedication, and positive identity formation. Where *Hetalia* invites playful identification and fannish queering of international order, *YHA* narrows emotional resonance to highly scripted patriotic masculinity, contributing to new articulations of nationalism where the nation's wounds can be sutured through accumulating its military power. Meanwhile, this articulation of nationalism gained reinforcement through circulation on state-affiliated and state-sponsored platforms like Yiban and Xuexi Qiangguo, where patriotic masculinity ideals folds into platformized pedagogy on nationalism, aiming to measure users' affective alignment based on quantifiable engagement metrics that reflects one's ideological commitment.*

4.3. Contested (Anti-)Fan Culture

The fragmented and fractured reproduction of *YHA*'s symbols or narrative elements exemplifies the dynamic and dialogic national identity and contested (anti-)fan culture of *YHA* (Tan, 2018). Initially, the fan forum on Baidu Tieba (那年那兔那些事儿吧) was a heavily moderated stronghold for patriotic fans, known colloquially as "Little Pinks" (小粉红, xiǎo fěnhóng). Dissent was systematically erased, creating an ideological echo chamber where nationalist sentiment appeared unanimous. A crucial turning point occurred when Baidu's central administration abruptly removed the forum's moderation team. The forum was swiftly "occupied" by a coalition of anti-nationalist dissenters (fānzéi [反贼]), including members of satirical subcultures like "Kanagawa Surfing" (神奈川冲浪里) (Zhihu, 2022). The forum descended into what users described as an "anarchic state" of free expression dominated by critique and parody of the state and *YHA*. The original Pro-government fanbase fled to new, smaller forums, which were themselves reportedly infiltrated by undercover dissenters, demonstrating the persistent and adaptive nature of the counter-discourse.

*This critique is not confined to fringe subcultures. On the more mainstream intellectual Q&A platform Zhihu [知乎], a robust and nuanced critical discourse exists. Commentators there systematically deconstruct *YHA*'s historical inaccuracies, accusing it of spreading misinformation and outright fabrications regarding key events like the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia and the history of the aircraft carrier Varyag. They critique the series for promoting a simplistic, chauvinistic worldview and for fostering a fanbase that is intolerant of dissent and engages in what they see as a dangerous form of "great nation chauvinism". The very act of watching and enjoying *YHA* becomes, for these critics, a marker of political naivete or ideological corruption (Zhihu, 2021b). This backlash was also accompanied by the widely used emic and derogatory term "Hare-scum" [兔杂, tùzá]. This term, which translates roughly to "rabbit mongrels" or "rabbit scum", is used by critics to denote what they see as an extremist, irrational, and aggressive segment of *YHA*'s fanbase (Zhihu, 2021a). The digital fan base of *YHA*, therefore, is not a monolithic bloc but rather a complex and internally contradictory assemblage, shaped by generational affects, aesthetic attachments, and varied relationships to state power. This multiplicity, however, has increasingly been flattened and sanitized by platform governance.*

4.4. Co-option: Cultural Educational Mechanisms

In 2015, *YHA* went streaming on Bilibili. The platform's evolution parallels the Party-state's broader strategy of cultivating youth "from within", not through traditional didactic methods, but by *co-opting*

existing subcultural grammars and aesthetics. Originally founded in 2009 as a Chinese “counterpart to Japan’s Niconico”, Bilibili gained popularity through its participatory bullet comment system (弹幕), fostering a horizontal, meme-driven, and participatory user culture.

However, the ideological contestation and ambivalence that characterized earlier fan and anti-fan communities became less sustainable in algorithmically governed environments. Since 2018, coinciding with tightening regulatory oversight and intensifying nationalism in China’s digital public sphere, Bilibili has undergone a marked transition from a niche site for ACGN (anime, comics, games, novels) subcultures into a quasi-official platform for cultural value transmission. Bilibili increasingly functions as an ideological relay station, *embedding Interpellating narratives into the emotive vernaculars of ACGN culture*. However, one needs to admit that the fan base is an artificially maintained and carefully curated environment that creates the appearance of a thriving, grassroots consensus. Its stability, however, is dependent on the platform’s institutional power to manage content quality through algorithmic amplification of desired content and content moderation mechanisms.

Topic modeling analysis conducted on audience-generated comments (danmaku) from Year Hare Affair seasons 1-3 using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) (Figure 9). Keywords are presented in order of topic relevance scores. Thematic interpretations reflect dominant semantic clusters within each topic based on manual coding and interpretation of keyword patterns. Topics represent distinct thematic clusters in audience discourse, revealing how viewers engage with the animation’s geopolitical narratives through affective, patriotic, and historical frameworks.

Figure 9: Topic Modeling Results of Audience Comments (Danmaku) in Year Hare Affair.

Topic	Top Keywords (by relevance)
Topic 0 International Relations & Affective Response	establishment tears cute represent America long live Russia Japan rabbit Pakistan war moved general world image
Topic 1 Patriotic Sentiment & Historical Memory	tribute China proud home now prosperous era true motherland thank you feature film thanks salute history youth today come on historical youth ancestors as you wished grandfather wished
Topic 2 National Identity & Cultural Victory	rabbit sing go home victory plant flowers Soviet Union this life Chinese civilization tears see China no regrets great power
Topic 3 Diplomatic Relations & Territorial Sovereignty	friendship return China-Pakistan lasting welcome forever running period land Taiwan tears Ukraine truth big brother
Topic 4 Military Heritage & Heroic Sacrifice	happiness grateful humming big brother finished celebrate Treasure Island mission this is east wind warrior planting iron and blood sacrifice heroes frontline flames of war Katyusha battle forgive fast war

YHA’s trajectory from fan-made animation to state-sponsored ideological education exemplifies this transformation. Its adoption by the Communist Youth League and EdTech platforms for patriotic education is not merely a case of content co-option, but part of state governance that crafts citizen-subjects through emotionally appealing and aesthetically cute media forms. As our empirical topic modelling and discourse analysis of YHA bullet comments reveals that patriotic affect dominates user engagement, evidenced by emergent themes including reverence for national sacrifice (“烈士不朽”), emotional gratitude for present stability (“今天加油, 历史少年”), and future-oriented collective resolve (“继续建设祖国”) (See Figure 9). The algorithmic visibility and user reinforcement of these comments through likes, reposts, and top-placement “highlighted danmu” (高能弹幕) shows how emotional consensus is engineered through affective infrastructures.

Likewise, popular danmaku like “加油, 历史少年” (“Come on, youth committed to developing China’s historical trajectory”) exemplify this positioning: viewers are addressed as both witnesses and protagonists in the nation’s unfolding journey. Following Althusser’s (1971) interpellation theory, the state asks not merely ‘Who are you?’ but ‘When are you, and what is your historical task at this moment? The Rabbit to Dragon journey functions as a narrative of becoming where ideal Chinese subjects are imagined as aspirational yet collectively disciplined, casting national identity not as stable achievement but as ongoing process, unfinished and always requiring collective striving. This open-ended temporality reinforces the “great rejuvenation” project’s affective vulnerability, intensifying moral urgency of national participation and supporting defensive narratives of external threat. By embedding citizens’ personal development within a fragile but forward-moving national arc, *YHA* animates aspirational vigilance where patriotic subjectivity persists through ever-present risk of reversal, betrayal, or foreign aggression.

At the same time, these patterns in danmaku also mark a departure from Bilibili’s earlier user base, which was once characterized by irreverence, niche fan references, and ironic detachment. Early *YHA* fans often engaged through humor, subcultural in-jokes, or critiques of historical revisionism. Yet as the platform’s content governance tightened and *YHA* was formally embedded in state ideological education, these voices were marginalized, drowned out by algorithmically favored patriotic expression. What we observe, then, is not simply the platform’s ideological convergence with state narratives, but the *reconfiguration of its audience subjectivity* from ironic, or even sometimes dissident subcultural participants, to emotionally engaged participants in patriotic discourse. Therefore, it is not only the animation that is interpellated into aspirational politics. Rather, it is the platform, the algorithm, and the user community that are collectively reoriented toward a vision of digitally-mediated nationhood, one that is infrastructural, participatory, and aspirational all at once.

Recognizing animation’s persuasive power (Cook, Cowan, & Curtis, 2023), the Communist Youth League gradually appropriated *YHA*’s symbolic potential for youth engagement. Rather than treating the animation as mere entertainment, educational institutions began utilizing its affective style and visual familiarity to enhance value-based education and cultural transmission. By 2018’s *Youth Study* (青年大學習) programme launch, this strategic recognition had shaped how ideological education was packaged for youth. Figures like rabbit mascot *Tuantuan* (homophone of Youth League 团) encourage young people to see themselves as loyal, responsible citizens through identification with a cute, relatable character who gently guides them toward national identity aligned with Party-state vision, casting them as hopeful builders of rejuvenated China. *Tuantuan*, the official mascot of the CYLC’s Youth Study programme (Figure 10), is adapted from the rabbit in the popular animation *Year Hare Affairs*. While retaining key visual traits like the green military cap and white body, *Tuantuan* is redesigned with a softer, more playful style, featuring star-shaped antennae and emotive blush to appeal to younger audiences and deliver patriotic messaging “youth aspire to the party” in a more accessible form. By wrapping these narratives in familiar aesthetics, animation, and memes, the line between ideological education and entertainment blurs.

Figure 10: *Tuantuan*, the Mascot of the Youth Study Programme.



Moreover, *Year Hare Affair's (YHA)* widespread circulation on state-linked digital platforms such as 易班 (Yiban) (See Figure 11) and 学习强国 (Xuexi Qiangguo) (See Figure 12) institutionalizes its function not merely as cultural content, but as an educational tool integrated into China's cultural education system.

Figure 11: The Study Programme on Party History on Yiban App . YHA Appears as Part of the Compulsory Module for Yiban users' Study Programme on Party History.

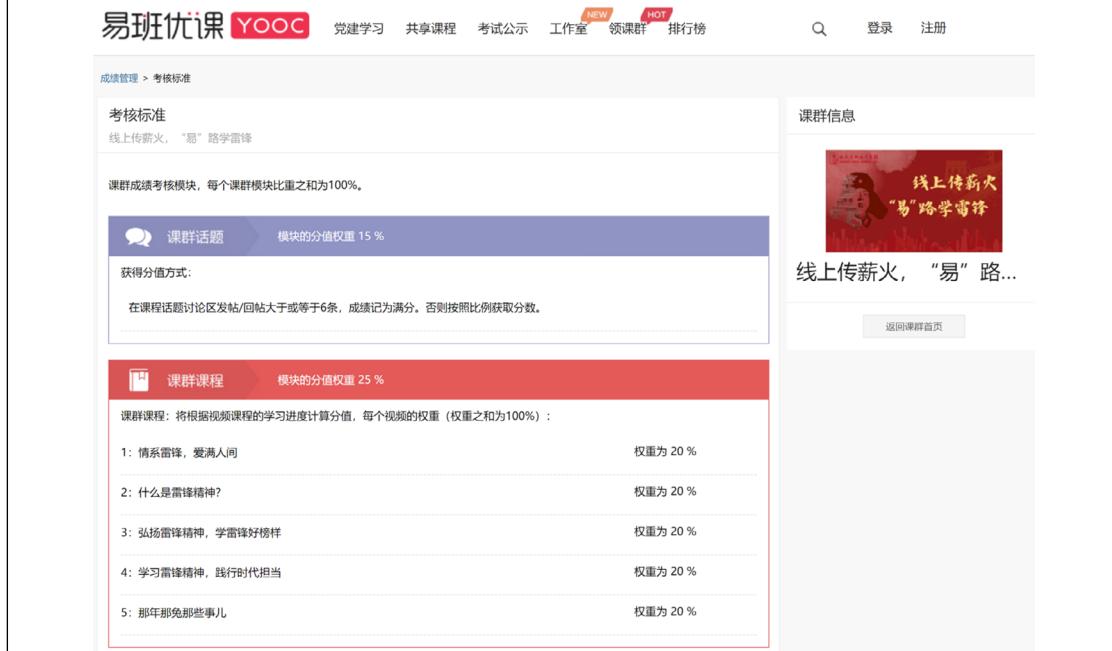


Figure 12: YHA Appears on XuXi QiangGuo, a Chinese Mobile App for Political Education and Civic Learning.



Yiban, developed with support from the Ministry of Education, functions as both a campus management system and an ideological training platform. Within this system, university instructors can assign YHA-related tasks—watching an episode, participating in a themed “bullet comment” discussion, writing a reflection on the Sino-Japanese War episode—as part of formally tracked ideological learning modules. These tasks are often integrated into a broader system of credits, public rankings, and behavioral dashboards, where students’ *sizhèng* performance is evaluated alongside more conventional academic metrics. The result is what we might call a platformised pedagogy of nationalism: a convergence of emotional engagement and bureaucratic quantification, in which political socialization is gamified, visible, and audit-ready.

学习强国 (Xuexi Qiangguo), a higher-tier, Party-directed mobile learning app, further exemplifies this trend. While more focused on Party cadres and civil servants, it has been adopted in universities and even secondary schools as a model of mobile education infrastructure. Its structure mirrors that of commercial ed-tech apps, offering points, leaderboards, and time-tracking features. YHA’s inclusion in such ecosystems marks a shift from animation as entertainment to animation as education infrastructure—part of what could be termed a “pedagogical stack” of digital socialism, in which user behavior is scripted, modulated, and rewarded within state-sanctioned emotional registers.

These platforms represent the digital extension of China’s post-reform *sizhèng* system, where ideological cultivation is increasingly managed through participatory metrics, gamified interfaces, and algorithmic curation. YHA’s animation format—emotionally engaging, meme-friendly, and highly circulable—makes it particularly amenable to this pedagogical model.

Crucially, YHA’s narrative format—rooted in anthropomorphic allegory and emotionally condensed historicism—lends itself to render national values intuitive, desirable, and emotionally engaging. YHA, therefore, reflects a broader transformation in China’s ideological education model: from command-style didacticism to sensory, gamified participation. YHA’s success lies not only in its narrative appeal, but in its platform compatibility—its ability to function simultaneously as a meme, a syllabus item, and a loyalty signal within China’s evolving media-state nexus. While this transformation reflects strategic cultural management, it also demonstrates innovative approaches to youth engagement and value education in digital age. This process, though involving institutional guidance, showcases the dynamic interaction between grassroots culture and official discourse, illustrating the complex negotiations between creative autonomy and institutional objectives in contemporary Chinese digital culture.

5. Conclusion

Year Hare Affair transcends stylized historical retelling to become a rich cultural artifact that actively constructs and circulates national identity, geopolitical aspiration, and postcolonial subjectivity. By transforming abstract state dynamics into an affectively resonant animated ecosystem—what we term zoopolitik—the series renders international relations both intuitively legible and emotionally engaging through gendered allegories. The symbolic rabbit embodies China as a nation in flux: vulnerable yet resilient, feminized yet aspiring toward masculine-coded strength, alternately submissive and paternalistic.

Drawing on a hybrid visual repertoire that includes Japanese kawaii aesthetics, American-style satirical allegory, and socialist realist motifs, *Year Hare Affair* reflects a broader *transpacific media genealogy*, shaped by Cold War visual culture and animated soft power. Its strategic deployment of gendered imagery—combining cuteness, intimacy, and militarised eroticism—interpellates viewers into an affective relation with the state. In doing so, it constructs the ideal citizen-subject as loyal, protective, desirous of the nation, and emotionally invested in its rise. This affective choreography aligns with ongoing ideological projects to cultivate patriotic and disciplined youth through culturally familiar and emotionally resonant media infrastructures, notably platforms like Bilibili.

Yet YHA does more than domesticate Cold War tropes; it operates within a postcolonial logic of aspiration that reflects the ambivalent position of China as both former semi-colony and emerging superpower. While its narrative arc often echoes developmentalist teleologies—equating modernity with technological militarism and masculine autonomy—it also gestures toward what Chen (2010) calls “de-imperialization”: an effort to rearticulate geopolitical belonging through historical grievance, and alternative geopolitical order.

However, this aspiration reflects the complex negotiation with existing global power structures and cultural hierarchies. The animation’s gendered representations reveal tensions between traditional

and modern identity constructions, where different character types embody various aspects of national development and international engagement. Moreover, the series' affective approach - shaped by decades of transpacific cultural exchange - creatively adapts and transforms international visual languages into distinctive Chinese cultural expressions. This represents a sophisticated cultural synthesis where historical challenges are transformed through accessible narratives that make complex geopolitical realities emotionally comprehensible for contemporary audiences. While this process involves the re-packaging of geopolitical narratives for new generations, it also demonstrates the dynamic capacity of cultural forms to serve both entertainment and educational functions in the digital age. The phenomenon illustrates how global cultural influences can be localized and reterritorialized to create meaningful educational content that resonates with specific cultural contexts. What emerges, therefore, is not simply a reproduction of existing power structures, but a complex cultural negotiation that bridges international visual languages with domestic educational objectives under the aesthetic appeal of animated storytelling.

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