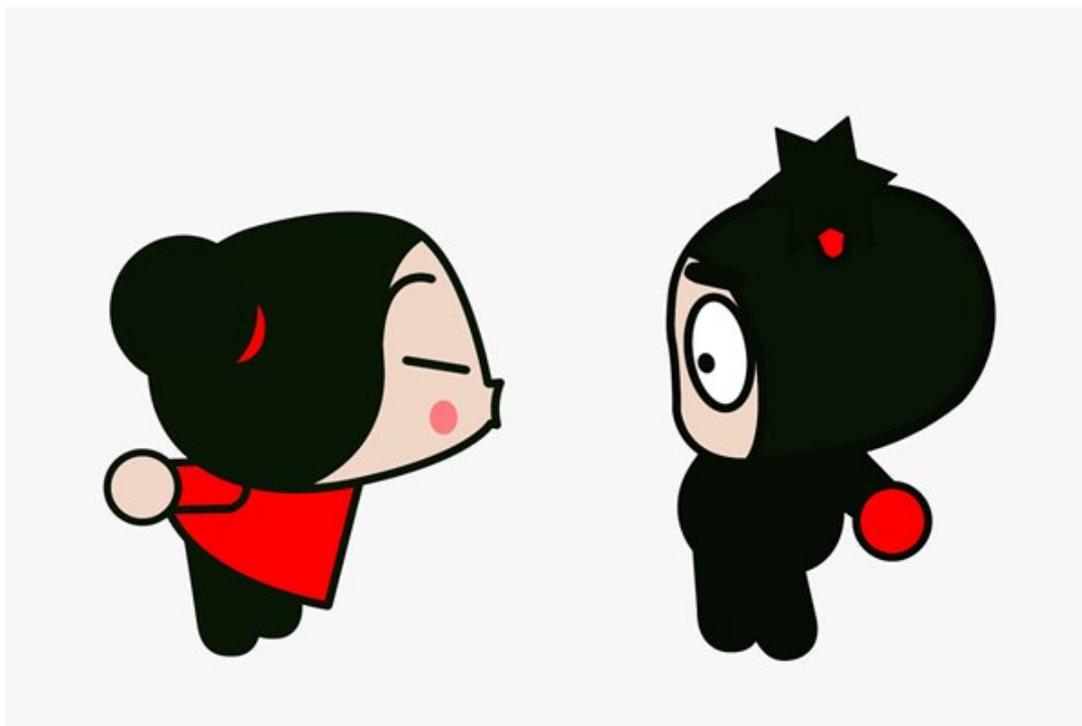




The Asian Character Invasion Proves a Hit at Brand Licensing Europe

Traditionally dominated by US and Europe-originated properties, this year a wave of Asian-sourced animated characters flooded the event, with their creators confident that their success at home could easily be replicated far further afield.



Pucca puckers up: Can the South Korean cartoon heroine kiss goodbye to European success?

At this year's *Brand Licensing Europe* show, the expected character property-based international companies – the likes of *Nintendo*, *Nickelodeon*, *Sega*, *Sony* and *20th Century Fox* – were all present and correct, ensuring attendees could secure selfies with such luminaries as *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Miffy* and *The Powerpuff Girls*. For 2017, however, there was also a strong showing from Asia, with many of the continent's most beloved cartoon characters clearly keen to crack the European market.

Looking to take a lead here was *BroadTeck*, a Guangdong-based licensing and design consultancy. The three-year-old business represents a number of the most high-profile licensed properties to have emerged from Hong Kong and mainland China, including *Squly*, *Zhuai Mao*, *Zombie Cat* and *Happi Playground*.

Assessing his company's portfolio, Marketing Director Ak Lai said: "While I do have a fondness for *Emmy & GooRoo* [a children's net TV series about a little girl living in a magic forest, jointly produced by Shanghai-based *Left Pocket* and Barcelona's



Tomavision], my absolute favourite is *Squly and Friends* [a series of characters, headed by the eponymous squirrel, created by Kowloon-based *Chiilaku*]. It has such strong art and all of the characters are just so beautiful."

Squly fans – and they are legion – can choose from a wide range of products dedicated to their favourite tree-going rodent, including plushes, purses, place-mats, power banks, *iPhone* cases and cable winders. For his part, Lai was not ashamed to admit that his personal *Squly* collection extends to a hat, a pair of boots and a set of *Bluetooth* headphones.

Despite the animated squirrel's clear allure, Lai maintained that it was a very different *BroadTeck* brand that had excited the most interest at the show – *Super Wings*. The product of a collaboration between three geographically disparate businesses – South Korea's *FunnyFlux Entertainment*, China's *Qianqi Animation* and US-based *Little Airplane Productions*, with the Guangdong-based *Alpha Group* acting as both the head licensee and the manufacturer of much of the associated merchandise – the *Super Wings* cartoon series is hugely popular across Asia, but remains little known in Europe and the US.

Since 2013, the *Super Wings* cast of characters – largely colourful, caring jet aircraft – has been beguiling youngsters with its globetrotting, kid-friendly adventures. Along the way, according to Lai, it has spawned a vast array of licensed merchandise.

Taking stock of his company's own *Super Wings*-related output, he said: "At present, we produce clothing, food, confectionery, bags, shoes and a huge number of other items. Our licence is very comprehensive and, thanks to a new deal we have just put in place, all of our range will soon be on sale in all of the *Watson's* personal care outlets in Hong Kong and mainland China."

Looking for similar success was Hong Kong-based *Fantawild Animation*, the company behind the popular *Boonie Bears* and *Boonie Cubs* TV series. *Boonie Bears* – the parent programme – made its TV debut in early 2012, with its tale of how two bears, Briar and Bramble, protect their forest home from a villainous logger proving an instant hit with junior viewers. So much so, in fact, that 2016 saw the launch of *Boonie Cubs*, a spin-off focusing on the childhood adventures of the same characters but with a markedly more educational tone than the original.

Explaining the different focus of the two series, Deputy Director Allen Lo said: "While *Boonie Cubs* is more for the pre-school audience, *Boonie Bears* is aimed more at 4-12-year-olds. In China, though, *Boonie Bears* is family viewing and the related merchandise – currently about 3,000 different products – is on sale pretty much everywhere.



Squly and Friends: China's superstar squirrel and co.



Hoping to take off in Europe: Super Wings.



"Among the most in-demand items are clothes, toys, plushes, backpacks, DIY kits and building blocks, all of which are now available in some 60 countries. In terms of Europe, though, we are really just starting out. We only have limited distribution here at the moment, but we are looking to expand it considerably."

This aspiration was shared by *RoiVisual*, the Seoul-based production company behind *Robocar Poli*, an animated TV show focusing on the adventures of the fictional *Broom Town's* first responders – a helicopter, a police car, an ambulance and a fire engine. Launched in 2011, as with *Boonie Cubs*, it attempts to educate as well as entertain its young audience.

Explaining the appeal of the series, Anne Kim, *RoiVisual's* European Manager, said: "Targeted at pre-schoolers, it's full of colourful, animated characters. In terms of merchandise, we cover all of the product categories, although toys and books are our primary focuses.

"We launched the show across Europe at the beginning of 2016, although it had been running in France since 2014 and in Russia since 2013. It's now shown in 135 countries, with the UK and Italy our next priorities."

Not all Asian brands, however, are quite so omnipresent. *Yo-kai Watch*, for instance, an anime hit in its home market of Japan, is yet to conquer the massive – and hugely lucrative – China market.

The brand was represented in London by *Viz Media*, a San Francisco-based licensing company that specialises in introducing manga and anime properties to the English-speaking markets. Among its success stories to date are *Naruto*, *Dragon Ball*, *One-Punch Man* and *Death Note*.

Yo-kai Watch started life as a role-playing video game on the *Nintendo 3DS* platform in 2013. Since then, the initial concept has been spun off into an anime TV show, three feature films and a series of video game sequels, all of which feature the *Yo-kai*, reclusive creatures that can only be befriended by those wearing a magical watch. Inevitably, toy replicas of the watch are the cornerstones of the spun-off merchandise range, along with a series of friendship medals.

Outlining the current state of play with the brand, Pascal Bonnet, *Viz Media's* European Commercial Director, said: "*Yo-kai Watch* is very successful in Japan and in a number of other countries. We're now launching the third in our line of watch products, which will be backed by a major promotional campaign in Europe, particularly in France, Italy and Spain."

Among the many South Korean companies exhibiting at this year's event was *Vooz Character System*, a licensing and animation specialist with its focus skewed towards an older, largely female market. The jewel in its particular crown is the *Pucca* franchise, which revolves around the adventures of its titular heroine and her extended family, who run a small noodle house in a remote mountain village. Typically, *Pucca's* escapades revolve around her love of a young ninja and are all delivered in a strikingly bold design style, which is said to hold a particular appeal for a late-teens-early-20s female audience.

Explaining the evolution of the series, Subin Hwang, a member of *Vooz's* in-house animation team, said: "*Pucca* started out as a lifestyle brand and then became a TV



animated series. We now license virtually everything – clothing, stationery, toys, food... It's just now starting to catch on in Europe, particularly in Italy, France and Spain. Not so much in the UK, though, where it's only had a lukewarm reception."

While the UK's lack of enthusiasm could be ascribed to the country's growing insularity, more charitably it could be argued that there is already a surfeit of British character franchises, not least *Paddington*, *Peppa Pig*, and *The Gruffalo*. It would be unfair, though, to see the UK as the sole European(ish) provider of such licensed properties, with *Masha and the Bear*, Russia's internet sensation, clearly a match for even the mighty *Mister Men* or the ever-green *Wallace and Gromit*.



Brand Licensing: Where Paddington met Pucca and the Mister Men crossed swords with the Boonie Bears.

Brand Licensing Europe 2017 took place from 9-11 October at London Olympia.

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