

Teddy Bear: The Dearest, Nearest, and Scariest

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The teddy bear, as one of the world's most favorite stuffed toy, is distinct from real animals. In this paper, the author applies anthropological, philosophical and psychological theories to mainly explore two questions: 1. Why has the teddy bear achieved such incomparable commercial and cultural success around the world? 2. Is it accidental or inevitable that a cruel monster, instead of other adorable animals, has become the prototype of a popular toy? The paper discussed the dialectic relations between human beings and the nature and argued that perpetuation, tameness and nearness are three main characteristics that offer grounds for the teddy bear's existence and popularity.

INTRODUCTION

Bears may be the cruelest and the most dangerous wild animals in North America. Encountering a bear could be an exciting experience for tourists in the wild, as well as a horrible one. However, the teddy bear, as a form of the world's most favorite stuffed toy, presents an image distinct from real animals. The teddy bear is benign, soft, adorable and docile. Throughout the world, the teddy bear has become an icon of children's companion and representative of affection, innocence, comfort and family-centered values.

Why has the teddy bear achieved such an incomparable commercial and cultural success across the world? If we look at the history of the teddy bear and how a dangerous kind of monster has become an enduring form of toy, we may find the birth of the first teddy bear and its later success purely accidental. I hypothesize, however, that other than effective marketing and historical fortuity, something innate in both the real bear and the teddy bear has played an important role in forming and perpetuating the teddy bear craze that began at the beginning of the 20st century.

In order to examine whether the popularity of the teddy bear is accidental or inevitable, I first apply anthropological theories of objects to discuss the characteristics of the teddy bear as a commodity and gift. Same as other emotion-exchange gifts, the value of a teddy bear is closely tied with the biography of the bear, the owner and the producer. Secondly, by focusing on the dialectic relationships among the human, the object and the nature, I propose that perpetuation, tameness and nearness are the three main reasons why it is a bear, rather than a dog or cat, that became the prototype of a popular toy. The process of domesticating and caricaturing a real bear as a teddy bear reflects human beings' complex desires toward the nature. At last, I discussed the agency and the imaginary uncanniest image of the teddy bear.

There are many works from *Child and Youth Studies* or *Medical and Psychological Anthropology* analyzing the cultural, medical and psychological implications of the teddy bear. However, few works of the literature have tried to explore why the teddy bear has gained huge success as both an economic and a cultural phenomenon. Even though the success of the teddy bear is often regarded as a then-product of political environment and historical fortuity, and irreproducible, this paper aims to explore more

fundamental grounds for the teddy bear's existence and popularity. When we scrutinize the commercial success of a product, we look at not only its use-value, exchange-value and marketing strategies, but also the receiving end—the culture of the market. This paper synthesizes anthropological, cultural and psychological theories, and tries to reach deeper into the dialectic relations among the human, the nature and the object, which is sometimes beyond cultural boundaries. Taking the teddy bear as a case, this paper offers new perspectives for economic anthropologists and business theorists to consider why certain commodities could be easily and smoothly received by the market while some could not.

THE ORIGIN OF THE TEDDY BEAR

The teddy bear in the United States was initially inspired by the popular cartoon “Drawing the Line in Mississippi” in *The Washington Post* in 1902. According to the cartoon, President Theodore Roosevelt, nicknamed Teddy, traveled to Mississippi to help settle a border dispute between two states, and attended a hunting competition. His hosts, hoping to please this avid hunter, invited him to shoot a captive baby black bear. Roosevelt refused to fire at such a helpless target because it was unsportsmanlike (Greco, 2014). In honor of the president's humanitarianism, The Michtoms in Brooklyn handmade a stuffed bear based on the image of the bear in the cartoon and got the permission from the president to name their toy bear “Teddy's Bear” (Anastasia, 1998). The first bear was immediately sold out and finally gave rise to the mass production of Teddy's bears.

The name “teddy bear”, without the apostrophe and the “s”, first appeared in print in the October issue of the *Playthings* magazine in 1906, and later became a widely accepted term for this plush toy. This little grammatical change reflects a subtle transition in people's perception of this toy. From “Teddy's bear” to “teddy bear”, the name of the compassionate and humanitarian hunter became the name of the innocent prey. At first, people expressed their love for T. Roosevelt through caring his baby bear. Later, they perceived that the bear per se symbolized T. Roosevelt. Their tender affection for the bear and admiration for the president were both represented in the plush toy.

By 1906, the teddy bear craze had been in full swing in the United States. Society ladies carried their teddies to various occasions while children had their pictures taken with teddy bears. There were also numerous popular stories and songs written about the teddy bear. T. Roosevelt, after using the teddy bear as a mascot, succeeded in his re-election bid and started to serve his second term.

However, the cartoon “Drawing the Line in Mississippi” told merely half of the story or the version that merely catered to the public. According to the other version, which is believed to be closer to the truth, T. Roosevelt himself had planned the bear-hunt as a vacation event after settling the anthracite coal strike, rather than going there for a border dispute, and the bear—more likely an adult female bear—was eventually killed, skinned and eaten at camp meals under his order (Varga, 2009).

The two contradicting versions of the history of the “teddy bear” provide us a basis for further analysis of what the teddy bear is and why it has gained great popularity.

THE TEDDY BEAR AS A COMMODITY AND A GIFT

The teddy bear fever has lasted for more than a century. Nowadays, the teddy bear is still among the most popular and classic gifts for children and adults during different holidays and on various occasions. They are found everywhere—supermarkets, souvenir shops, department stores and even farmer's markets—waiting for buyers. Understanding the features of the teddy bear as a commodity and a gift is crucial for exploring the grounds of their popularity.

The Value of the Teddy Bear

The teddy bear is an enduring type of commodity. For the commonsensical definition, a commodity is “an item with use value that also has exchange value” (Kopytoff, 1986:64). The use-value of the teddy bear is often beyond satisfying people's physical needs. Nieuwenhuys told a story about the debate on the use-value of the teddy bear. After the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, plush animals including the teddy

bear from a Dutch NGO were stopped by Indian customs, who believed that teddy bear was not part of essential relief goods and wanted to levy import tax on it. NGO staff argued that the huggables travelled all the way from Netherlands to South India just for the purpose of helping child victims to psychologically overcome the trauma and grief—they are of course essential relief goods (Nieuwenhuys, 2011:413).

Does the teddy bear have use-value as a commodity? According to Karl Marx, a commodity is a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants, no matter these wants spring from the stomach or fancy. The teddy bear satisfies human wants from fancy. In most cases, purchasing and giving a teddy bear as a gift often have a purpose of accomplishing affection-communication and emotion-exchange, as opposed to value-exchange. It is a type of gift that often fits the second stage of gift-giving: “when a close relationship or one with much affection is involved...the concern becomes choosing an item that reflects the degree of fondness the giver has for the recipient” rather than reflecting the monetary value in the first stage (Miller, 2001:99). Its use-value—offering comfort, expressing love or alleviating loneliness—has become something iconic and irrefutable.

In addition to the use-value and the exchange-value, each teddy bear also has its personal value. Here is an example of a specific teddy bear. A woman found it on the shelf of a souvenir store and bought it as a birthday gift for her beloved son Jimmy. However, she left Jimmy and her husband to start a new life one year later. Little Jimmy thought that the teddy bear bore so much unwanted memory, hence, dumped it. By that time, the toy was like a piece of rag and worth nothing. Twenty years later, when Jimmy had become an actor, his teddy bear was rediscovered in his former residence and was given to his son and later his granddaughter. The girl cherished the teddy bear very much and named it Jimmy, the name of her grandpa. Every time when the teddy bear switched its owner, the story about Jimmy’s five-year-old birthday party and its following experiences were retold. One day, Jimmy, the famous movie star, passed away. His teddy bear somehow ended up at an auction. A collector, also a movie fan, paid five-thousand US dollars for it. Now the teddy bear became a part of his collection. The life of the teddy bear and the story continued.

This is a fictional story but also could be viewed as a micro-ethnography of the teddy bear, which involves both the biography of an object and the biography of its owner. Nicholas Thomas explains the personal value of an object as follows:

Artifacts can have peculiarly personal value arising from some association with an individual’s biography...this kind of value, is not a principle of exchange but a principle that is excluded by, or is incompatible with, exchange;...this identification of this form of value could lead to a kind of micro-ethnography, like the history of a ring, that would specify why certain garments or books mean so much (Thomas, 1991:30-31).

Among a series of dichotomies of gift and commodity, the “quantity (price) and quality (rank)” binary is applicable in the case of the teddy bear. While commodities have prices that always fluctuate around the value, gifts have rank (Thomas, 1991:14). The rank is determined by various things: the sociocultural context, the relationship between the giver and the recipient, the biography of the object and so on. The incompatibility between the personal value and the exchange confirms the dichotomy between the rank and the price. The rank or the personal value is made meaningful by the interaction between the teddy bear and the people. If a five-year old boy is not willing to exchange his teddy bear with another teddy bear, it is probably not because of this teddy bear’s greater monetary importance, but of its higher emotional rank—for instance, it is his birthday gift and the carrier of his mother’s love. In a word, as commodities, all the teddy bears from the same assembly line are of no difference; as gifts, each teddy bear is unique.

In the store *build-a-bear*, you can choose the color and material, and dress the teddy bear like a girl or a boy, like a football player or a ski queen. Most customers dress it like either the giver or the recipient. If it is dressed like a giver, it explicitly symbolizes that the giver wants to send himself or herself as a gift to the recipient. In Jimmy’s case, when he passed the old teddy to his son and granddaughter, he was not only passing his memory, but also his life. This coincides with Marcel Mauss in that giving a gift means giving a part of oneself (Mauss, 1990[1954]). Similar cases are not rare. For example, Hoskins told a

story that a person “used the betel bag as a kind of alter ego, a metaphor for his own self, because it was an object that I suggested his claims to serve both as a container of ancestral memories and a mediator of new alliances” (Hoskins, 1998:26).

Therefore, Hoskins articulated that the anthropological approach to the study of objects should “focus on their relations to the persons who produce and circulate them” (2006:82). From the analysis of Jimmy’s teddy bear, we could see that the biography of objects could not be alienated from the biography of the producer and the owner. Without his Mom’s leaving, without his success as a movie star and without his generous granddaughter who donated the teddy bear, Jimmy’s teddy bear would have been an worn toy that merely cost a couple of dollars at a flea market. A collectible’s value usually deeply relies on the scarcity of the biography of the producer and the owner. That is why the ugly and old underwear worn by Queen Victoria could fetch 10,000 pounds at auction.

Interminability and Perpetuation

To think about the teddy bear’s *raison d’être*, we cannot neglect another important feature of the teddy bear and other plush toys—interminability. “Interminability” does not mean that something will never wear out or be destroyed by time, but that “to be replaced” or “to be used up” is by no means its pre-designed destiny. As we know, most consumer goods “are destined to be terminal—or so, at least, it is hoped by the manufacturer” (Kopytoff, 1986:75). Different from consumables, the teddy bear is purchased by people without this kind of intention or anticipation. Once the emotional connection is built between the owner and the teddy bear, the latter becomes unique and incomparable. Is a good teddy bear worthy of being kept, tendered and loved? The answer does not depend on the function, the degree of depreciation, the fashion trends, or the price, but on the biography of the teddy bear and the emotional experience of the owner with it. If you were no longer interested in it, you probably would buy a second one to expand the teddy bear family, or might just keep it in a closet before it would be discovered again. The teddy bear is not the same as a jacket or a computer which has practical use-value and can be legitimately replaced when you have a newer and more advanced one. Therefore, the teddy bear as a toy is not destined to be terminal as other consumables are.

It is widely known that the first teddy bear was based on the real bear that the president “refused” to kill. However, as I mentioned before, the bear was nonetheless killed and eaten. Even if it was not, as a living organism it would have perished sooner or later, like the president himself.

The first teddy bear was made with a motivation of perpetuating the love and respect toward T. Roosevelt. Many objects, such as statues, photos and paintings, are serving the same function. Even though the intention of having a teddy bear is seldom related to the president nowadays—the property of the teddy bear, namely, “perpetuation”, is still there.

When Kopytoff talked about terminality of most commodities, he did not neglect an exception: “There is an area of our economy in which the selling strategy rests on stressing that the commoditization of goods bought for consumption need not to be terminal” (Kopytoff, 1986:75). The teddy bear is definitely one of them. On the website of Vermont Teddy Bear, the largest maker of hand-crafted, American-made teddy bears, there is an advertising slogan: Send a gift they will love forever. The teddy bear will accompany its owner through different stages of life and even many generations of a family. Not many gifts deserve this slogan. People will not love a jacket, a coffeemaker or a car forever, because anything born to serve practical functions is designed to be terminal. Only those objects made to serve emotional functions can escape from doom. The slogan of Vermont Teddy Bear in fact represents people’s wish to perpetuate their affective relations between the recipients and givers.

WHY IS IT TEDDY BEAR?

I recalled an essay that described the eyes of animals in the zoo. The author concluded that the expressions in the eyes of a grizzly bear were the sliest, cruelest and fiercest among all the beasts. The bear is one of the most dangerous wild animals in North America. Deaths and serious injuries caused by bears occur in the United States and other countries every year. However, the teddy bear sitting on my

bed presents an image distinct from the real animal—it is innocent, naïve, adorable and docile. I started to ask why a plush toy based on a bear, rather than a dog or an elephant, has gained such popularity.

Some economic analyses look for the answers in the sociocultural context. For example, the huge market of animated movies results in people more easily appreciating toys based on the images of main characters in the movies. However, the teddy bear is not one of them. Someone may argue that the success of the teddy bear owes to the political environment at that time. However, the global teddy bear craze has existed longer and farther than T. Roosevelt's influence and beyond the political stance.

I believe that there are more cultural and psychological grounds universally for the teddy bear craze. For example, many people noticed that the teddy bear is more like an innocent child than a wild animal. It has become an icon of affection, innocence, comfort and family-centered values. It even seems to have "sacramental powers to heal, protect, and commemorate children and adults" (Varga, 2009:98). That is why we often see the scene that whenever a child feels lonely, he or she holds tightly a teddy bear. But since when and how has the teddy bear achieved such iconic status?

Two important transitions are indispensable in forming its iconic status—the one of T. Roosevelt from an ambitious hunter to a humanitarian protector and the one of the bear from a battered and slaughtered victim to an amiable friend. The modified version of T. Roosevelt's hunting story facilitated these transitions. But Varga also pointed out that these transitions are only possible in the context of "discursive merging of wilderness ideologies and human developmental theory" (Varga, 2009:98).

At first, the wilderness was viewed as frightening and threatening to human lives and civilization. Killing, torture and brutal control over bears were parts of the achievements in conquering the wild. Under the influence of this dominant ideology, T. Roosevelt also saw bears as noxious and deserving to be killed. He did not shoot the unconscious bear in person not out of compassion, but because he concerned himself about the reputation of fair chase (Varga, 2009). However, during the latter half of the nineteenth century emerged a new ideology that human should live in harmony with the nature, which was "capable of rejuvenating the human spirit blighted by urban life" (Varga, 2009: 101). The wild animals now were regarded not inherently evil, but governed by a moral order like the human beings. In the context of this ideological transition, the teddy bear was no longer a miserable victim or a malicious enemy. It became representative of "childhood innocent" that can redeem adult life.

What distinctions between a real bear and a teddy bear are responsible for the commercial and cultural success of the teddy bear? In addition to the "perpetuation" I discussed above, there are also two major properties the living creature lacks: "tameness" and "nearness".

Compared to its prototype, a teddy bear has not only been significantly reduced in size, but also loses all aggressive elements: claws, teeth and sexual organs (Putnam, n.d.). A castrated and modified teddy bear has no attacking weapons and even tempers. Putnam believed that "these transformations correspond to a larger practice of domestication that characterizes the 19th-century social evolution from a rural, agrarian world to an urban, industrial one" (Putnam, n.d.). The process of caricaturing a bear as teddy bear is a process of domesticating and taming the wild life and the nature. It is also a process of pulling the farthest one in reach and turning it into the tamest and the nearest one. Therefore, nowadays the teddy bear can sit on the bed or sofa, or in any corners of the house. You need not to be afraid of or escape from it. Everyone, even a child, can hug, caress or even punch it.

The teddy bear reveals the human beings' two ambiguous desires: on the one hand, they want to conquer and control the wildness and transfer it into civilization; on the other hand, they have an "urban nostalgia for a pre-industrial state of nature" and want to co-exist with the nature harmoniously. As to the question of why a toy dog or a toy elephant has not achieved such prevalence as the teddy bear, I believe that because an elephant is not as dangerous as a bear and a puppy is already close to urban life, it is thus not imperative to "domesticate" them. Along with the forceful exportation of the Euro-American lifestyle and values to other parts of the world, the teddy bear and its implications have been accepted by the world as an essential part of the middle-class Euro-American culture.

Thing-Power: Personifying and Animating the Teddy Bear

The teddy bear went through the transition from a wild animal to a stuffed toy, and finally became our siblings, friends, lovers, children and even grandparents. Decades ago, on television, the British actor Peter Bull openly expressed his love for the teddy bear and his belief in its importance in the emotional life of adults. He received 2,000 letters in response to his public confession. In 1969, inspired by these responses, he wrote a book about his lifelong affection for the teddy bear: *The Teddy Bear Book*, which struck an emotional chord in thousands. Why is the teddy bear so important in people's emotional life? In addition to its special form and history, I also want to discuss its agency.

The movie *Ted* seems to have fulfilled many children's dream that their teddy bears suddenly become alive and have their own wills. Ted is the name of John's teddy bear. No matter how mischievous Ted is, to have Ted as company is still the most important for John and even overweighs John's fiancée. In reality, our teddy bears, although cannot talk or kiss back, also work on our sentiments in some ways.

Jane Bennett proposed the concept of *Thing-Power*, that is, the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle (Bennett, 2010:6). She believed that objects, though inanimate, could provoke affects in you. One may surmise that the agency of the teddy bear only works through or relies on people's fantasy; however, I will argue that either the concrete power or the fantasy indeed roots in the things per se. The teddy bear, an assemblage of cotton, fur and plastic, is indispensable not only in carrying the emotions and materializing the fantasy, but also in creating and arousing sentiments.

Sarah Ahmed argued that objects and others can leave "their impressions on the skin surface" (Ahmed, 2006:54). Husserl also conveyed that proximity or nearness could make things leave impressions on the skin, such as soft, warm and smooth. Through holding and hugging a teddy bear, and through the supernatural power-like psychological suggestions, one gain comfort, power, company and love from the stuffed animal.

In addition to the emotional communication, there is another implicit role the teddy bear plays in our life. I will use another story to further illustrate *Thing-Power*. A few years ago, a teenage Finnish boy saved up 200 euros by picking berries and selling 400 bottles of homemade berry juice, and donated them to a zoo in Helsinki, hoping that the zoo would buy the lethargic bears a new climbing tree. I hypothesize that the boy's great tender feeling toward the bear is created by the teddy bear. I come up with the following formula:

Animal ← Toy → Human = Bear ← Teddy Bear → President

The teddy bear is the catalytic agent working on people's feelings towards the animal. Prior to the existence of this agent, people's impression about the bears was directly and literally from the bears per se. It was not the fantasy that endowed the teddy bear with power; on the contrary, it was the teddy bear per se that created this collective fantasy. Influenced by their own teddy bears in the childhood, people changed their impression about the real animal and even started to love this scary, stinky and distant monster as the Finland boy did.

The materialized and commoditized bear, that is, the teddy bear, is indeed independent from human control and has its own power and agency to influence people's perception of the real animal and the world.

The Uncanny

When I asked people what would be the uncanny experience with the teddy bear, almost all of them answered that an uncanny feeling might be aroused when the teddy bear suddenly became alive and turned fierce. One of my friends even had a nightmare that his teddy bear suddenly turned alive and terrified him with its bloody teeth and roars. German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch believed that "a particularly favorable condition for awakening uncanny feelings is created when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one" (Freud, 2003:208). But as what Freud pointed out in *The Uncanny*, people in reality often treat toys as live people. The teddy bear's animation may be even desirable. What people are afraid of is that it becomes a real bear.

According to Freud, “[u]ncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud, 2003:195). Fierceness and cruelty are the natures of a bear, but now become the most unacceptable properties of the teddy bear. The supposedly most familiar thing becomes the most surprising and strangest one.

Schelling defined *the uncanny* as something that ought to remain hidden but has come to light (Freud, 2003[1919]:199). In the case of the teddy bear, what is repressed is not the cruelty of a bear, but the fear and cowardice of human beings per se. The proximity and intimacy between the teddy bear and us hinges on safety. Imagine that we are in our pajamas and holding a teddy bear, no weapon or bear defense spray at hand, and the toy turns to a real baby bear, even tone like T. Roosevelt’s helpless black bear. Still how weak we are in the face of it! Therefore, I surmise that the real thing we have tried hard to hide and repress since the primitive society is human inferiority and weakness in front of the nature.

CONCLUSION

In 1999, in just the United States, collectors purchased \$441 million worth of teddy bears. In the 21st century, the teddy bear fever continues. It is the nearest and dearest one in our life, but also has the potential to become the scariest one.

The birth of the first teddy bear is more of a historical accident. However, the prevalence of teddy bears today seems inevitable. It signifies human beings’ emotional complex: the lust for conquest, the fear of death, the desire for love and so on and so forth. As long as those emotional desires exist, the creation of a toy bear will eventually find an opportunity to take place.

I dissected the teddy bear’s properties as a commodity and a gift. The teddy bear is a special commodity, first because it only serves the emotional function, and secondly because it is not destined to be terminal. The teddy bear is thus a perfect gift for someone close to you, to reflect your relatively deeper fondness. As a gift, the teddy bear’s value is incompatible with the exchange value. Its value is affected not only by its own biography, but also by the biography of the producer and the owner.

I proposed three major properties of the teddy bear that may be responsible for its cultural and commercial success, that is, perpetuation, tameness and nearness. Perpetuation means immortality on the one hand and preserving transient love on the other. Through turning the farthest and cruelest animal into the tamest and nearest companion, human beings actually satisfy their lust for conquest and desire for love.

I used Bennett’s concept of *thing-power* to analyze the teddy bear’s agency. It is not a toy carrying unconditional acceptance, love and reassurance, but an active agent affecting people’s sentiments and creating fantasy. At last, I applied Freud’s uncanny theory to the teddy bear. The repressed and hidden thing that finally arouses the uncanny feeling is human beings’ unconscious negation of their inferiority and weakness in front of the nature.

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