

Drawing the ideal modern woman: Ms. Lee Wai-Chun and her Ms. 13-Dot

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The Chinese term *manhua* (漫畫) is used in Hong Kong to refer to satire and caricature, political and editorial cartoons, and all other genres usually called cartoons (卡通) or comics (漫畫) in English. Up until the 1980s, only a handful of women artists (女漫畫家 *manhua-jia*) made names for themselves producing Hong Kong *manhua*. The first and ultimately most successful of these female artists was Lee Wai-Chun (李惠珍), creator of the *siu-nu manhua* (少女漫畫 *girls' comics* or *shōjo manga*) *13-Dot Cartoon* (十三點漫畫).



Fig 1: The first issue of *Ms. 13-dot* (1966).

This 56-page comic debuted in July 1966 (fig. 1), with each 6-panel page depicting an independent story revolving around the main character, *Ms. 13-Dot* (十三點). The comic ran continuously until early 1980, with a total of 178 issues. The artist's prolific drawings of *Ms. 13-Dot's* ultra-fashionable outfits garnered a great deal of recognition for the comic and its creator, with Lee becoming known in Hong Kong as the “master of girls’ comics” (少女漫畫掌門人) and a “fashion designer on paper” (紙上時裝設計師).

13-Dot was created at a time when Western popular culture had begun to influence Hong Kong’s local cultural production. Prior to the mid-1960s, the drawing technique of most Hong Kong comic artists closely followed the traditional Chinese style. The arrival of *13-Dot* in 1966 provided a new artistic direction for the local comics and complemented the rising youth culture in Western popular music and movies (Wong and Cuklanz 2000). With full-color cover designs to inspire readers, Lee’s detailed drawing style and the dazzling array of outfits worn by *Ms. 13-Dot*, readers often used the comics as a fashion

reference for making clothing for themselves, since ready-to-wear Western outfits were still too expensive for most people at the time. A reader once counted 1,728 separate pieces of clothing in issues 1 through 28, with an average of 62 pieces appearing in every 56-page issue. This focus on fashion along with the Westernized lifestyle depicted in the stories became an educational tool not only to teach readers about how to dress like a modern woman, but also to present an ideology of an ideal modern woman, one with an independent nature and active lifestyle (Wong and Cuklanz 2002).

Lee Wai-Chun's *Ms. 13-Dot* is a beautiful high-school student living in a fictional Asian city called Fada Shing (發達城 Fortune City) along with her banker father, Chow San-Ngan (周申銀 Mr. Cash) and mother, Lo Lai-Que (魯來嬌 Mrs. Lovely). The name *13-Dot* (十三點), from the Shanghainese dialect, refers to an empty-headed but cute young woman who overdoes things, like a pendulum clock that bangs 13 times for twelve o'clock.

According to Lee, it was her personal preference for creating modernized comic characters, rather than the old-fashioned traditional Chinese drawings, that led her to draw *Ms. 13-Dot* with "colorless" hair (achieved by not inking the hair color in the drawings). It was fashionable to wear wigs in the 1960s, and this technique enabled Lee to play with the character's hairstyles to match *Ms. 13-Dot's* trendy and seemingly infinite wardrobe.

In addition to the modern imagery and adventurous protagonist, many *13-Dot* stories conveyed the idea of gender equality through their narratives. The stories did not embrace traditional Chinese values, which assume that men are always more important than and superior to women. For example, issue number 55, "Preference for daughter rather than son", depicts a father who is uninterested in taking a second wife, a practice which was still legal in Hong Kong at that time. Through *Ms. 13-Dot's* carefree, independent adventures the artist managed to break away from the traditional image of feminine behavior favored by 1960s and 1970s Hong Kong society (Wong and Cuklanz 2002).

Because *Ms. 13-Dot's* wealthy father provides her with a comfortable, carefree lifestyle, she is able to have and do everything she wishes, although the character also frequently uses her fortune to help people in need. Each 56-page issue includes an individual story where *Ms. 13-Dot's* actions convey good will and positive social messages in addition to the underlying theme of gender equality.

13-Dot ceased publication in early 1980 and, for almost two decades, was nearly

forgotten by its readers while Lee was working for a children's magazine. Interest in Lee Wai-Chun and *13-Dot* was rekindled in 1986, when a former reader, Tina Lau, interviewed Lee for an article in *City Magazine* (issue no. 114). Lau's article portrays Lee as a shy woman who hides behind her husband, and the author's disappointment with Lee as the creator of *13-Dot* is apparent in the article. In reality, Lau's perception is evidence of the changes Hong Kong women have undergone since *13-Dot* was launched. Lee is part of the older generation of Hong Kong women, which did not encourage the concept of self-promotion and belief in themselves (Wong and Cuklanz 2000).

Her former-fan-turned-writer, Tina Lau, is of the younger generation, who grew up under the influence of Western values and the independent *Ms. 13-Dot*. Fans of *13-Dot* grew up to embody the boundless spirit of *Ms. 13-Dot*; they are largely educated, adventurous, forward thinking and Westernized women who have embraced modern values. Whether or not they ever read a *13-Dot*, younger Hong Kong women who grew up in the 1970s later matured into a generation of women with confidence beyond what Hong Kong had experienced before.

Thirty years after *13-Dot's* debut, Publications (Holdings) Ltd. (博益出版社) reprinted the comics with the artist's permission in July 1996. This 168-page reprint consisted of three stories selected by the artist from the original version and published without alteration. This first reprint did not receive much publicity, but still achieved very good sale records (fig. 2). This reprint not only recaptured the memories of 1960s readers who were in their 30's and above, but also attracted new readers who missed *13-Dot* while growing up in the 1960s or 1970s. By 1996, most of the significant Hong Kong artists from the same period had retired or passed away, leaving Lee's *13-Dot* one of the few comics and creators left from before the 1960s and '70s. The pleasant themes in *13-Dot* were representative of the positive social and cultural memories of Hong Kong people, and the publication of this 30th-anniversary reprint brought recognition of the important legacy of *13-Dot* and Lee Wai-Chun in the history of Hong Kong comics.

The 1996 publication date of *13-Dot* coincided with the period just before the British government handed sovereignty of Hong Kong over to the Chinese government. This was an era in which Hong Kong people actively sought out local cultural history and artifacts to help construct their impending post-British identity. Thus, the printing of the 30th-anniversary edition of *13-Dot* was not a coincidence; in fact, it helped fulfill some of the public's need for nostalgia as they contemplated the end of British



Fig. 2: *Ms. 13-Dot*, the first reprint (1996).



Fig. 3: The cover of *An Illustrated History of 13-Dot: The Work of Lee Wai-Chun* (2003).

colonial rule and the unforeseeable future to come under Communist rule.

Admirers of *13-Dot*, the Hong Kong public's quest for nostalgia did not end after Chinese control began on July 1, 1997; it continued because of the economic downturn the city endured after the handover. I co-authored a retrospective book, *An Illustrated History of 13-Dot: The Work of Lee Wai-Chun* with the artist in 2003. After the book was published (fig. 3), Lee organized her second solo exhibit in February 2003 at a design bookstore, and was interviewed by numerous popular magazines later that year. Those interviews, like the previous ones, focused mainly on the comic's nostalgic importance.

In August 2003, *13-Dot* was reprinted in a trade paperback size, with a total of 20 issues printed over approximately two years (fig. 4). Unlike the 30th-anniversary version, Lee altered the stories' dialogue with new typesetting and cleaned up the artwork via computer. With these minor updates, this paperback-size reprint was treated as a new title for young girls. This 2003 version also provided an alternative for Hong Kong readers who wished to read locally produced manhua (in a market heavily dominated by Japanese material) with positive, non-violent themes. This time, with the inclusion of new young readers, the comic was being read as a classic Hong Kong comic, strictly for entertainment purposes. *Ms. 13-Dot* was no longer an ideal modern woman for her readers to look up to, but rather a nostalgic icon representing the “good old days” of Hong



Fig. 4: The second reprint of *Ms. 13-Dot* (2003).

Kong.

The world of *13-Dot* was, until very recently, confined to paper. In July 2006, Lee Wai-Chun collaborated with figure design artists Ricky Lam and Andy Lau to produce three different versions of *Ms. 13-Dot* figure doll, effectively changing the two-dimensional comics character into a three-dimensional form (fig. 5). The figure doll was never intended for mass circulation. Diehard *13-Dot* fans and collectors purchased most of them. As a skilled seamstress, Lee enjoyed the new creative possibilities this medium offered, and soon began photographing the *Ms. 13-Dot* figure dolls wearing tailor-made outfits she sewed herself.



Fig. 5: *Ms. 13-Dot* fashion dolls (2006).



Fig. 6: *Love in Paris* (2008).

One of her fans from the 1960s, now head of the publicity department of the French Tourism Board (Hong Kong), invited Lee to Paris and commissioned her to produce a series of *13-Dot* postcards for promotional purposes. Lee brought along her figure dolls and created a series of photographer Gina Garan's "The Art of Blythe Dolls" style work. Later, she added new drawings of *Ms. 13-Dot* done by computer to the photos she took in Paris and produced a set of eight promotional postcards for the French Tourism Board. The promotion was well received and, to a certain extent, this new creation by Lee transformed the 40-year-old comics character by adding a contemporary touch.

Using Photoshop, Lee expanded the work she produced for the French Tourism Board (Hong Kong) into a full-color, 152-page graphic novel, *Love in Paris* (戀戀巴黎), which she published in February 2008 (fig. 6). With modern advancements in

computer and printing technology, the artist no longer had to restrict her work to black and white line drawings. She collected hundreds of fabric samples, scanned them into her computer, and then transposed the fabric patterns onto the outfits that she drew. This graphic novel continues the depiction of *Ms. 13-Dot* as a diehard fashionista, but now in full color and with real fabric patterns. *Love in Paris* is a travel journal documenting a 7-day trip to Paris taken by *Ms. 13-Dot* and her friends, basically a guide to shopping and entertainment in Paris without the hardcore “how to get there” travel information.

This graphic novel was published by Cosmos Books Limited (天地圖書), one



of the biggest publishers in Hong Kong, which organized a traveling exhibit in collaboration with a big property development company as part of its book promotion (fig.7). The original *13-Dot*, the reprinted versions of 1996 and 2003, the figure dolls, and a miniature house Lee created were among the items unveiled in displays at four major shopping malls in Hong Kong. Perhaps there is no better place than a shopping mall filled with fashionable clothing to dedicate an exhibit to *13-Dot*; visitors can bring the fantasy to life by doing what *Ms. 13-Dot* would undoubtedly do: go shopping! The character embodies a lifestyle that would make many

Fig. 7: The *Ms. 13-Dot* Travelling Exhibition (2008).

women envious. Forever frozen in adolescence, *Ms. 13-Dot* will always be young and beautiful.

The traveling promotional exhibits were a huge success, bringing the 40-year-old comics back to life for former readers and a new generation of fans, although sales of the graphic novel can never compare with those of Japanese manga. Hong Kong’s comics market had changed dramatically, to one dominated by Japanese manga with locally produced manhua on the decline. Contemporary comics fans in Hong Kong have grown accustomed to reading Chinese translations of the ubiquitous Japanese manga simply because the locally produced material is too weak to compete. Lee’s *13-Dot* is the only girls’ comic originally created in Hong Kong to be found among the many titles of *shōjo* manga available today.

For Lee, *13-Dot* was a playground, a world of self-expression and a temporary escape from reality. In light of the gender ideology embedded in the comics, it is ironic to learn that Lee never intended *Ms. 13-Dot* to be a feminist symbol of equality. She

merely wanted to create a positive, non-violent comics for girls, and maybe even for boys as well. Within the unique social and cultural environment of 1960s Hong Kong, *Ms. 13-Dot* was born as a cultural product symbolic of the city's emergent materialism.

But it has not always been easy for this 40-year-old comic to survive, when virtually all of the work has been done by one person (fig. 8). *13-Dot* is not just a series of comics, but also a true story of an independent woman artist struggling to keep her dream alive, to share her *Ms. 13-Dot* with the world over a span of four decades. The comics has transformed from an accidental symbol of an ideal modern woman into a nostalgic icon representing a passage in the lives of Hong Kong women, then, ultimately, into a legendary surviving icon among original Hong Kong comics.

In the current age of diversification and globalization, many comic titles have moved into new mediums such as movies, games, and various licensed by-products. With the one-woman operation of Lee, *13-Dot* will likely never develop in these directions without licensing the comic title to investors. Because the readership of girls' comics is a relatively small market, it would be difficult to convince potential investors to develop *Ms. 13-Dot* into a collection of licensed products. While a major jewelry company, Just Gold, did release a series of *13-Dot* jewelry in 2009, production never reached full scale because of the worldwide economic downturn that began in September 2009.

So the question of where *13-Dot* can go from here remains. While Hong Kong's government is good at promoting the original work of Hong Kong's artists and designers, they still must face unforeseen local, regional, and global competition. Locally produced manhua in Hong Kong reached its peak in the 1980s and early 1990s, dominated by the fighting and violence genre, but local manhua production is now a dying industry in Hong Kong. This girl's comic now represents something much larger than issues of gender or genre. *13-Dot* has become an icon and representative of original Hong Kong manhua, just as the industry faces an uncertain future.



Fig. 8: A self-portrait by Lee Wai-Chung (2008).

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