

Lest we forget: The importance of history in Singapore and Malaysia Comics Studies

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In a recent volume on the use of cartoons as historical evidence (which I contributed a chapter to), the editors advocated a closer reading of cartoons by considering their historical contexts, in order to avoid the misinterpretations committed by writers unfamiliar with the historical development of comics, their production and reception. They argued that “modern historians have learnt to read written documents as complex texts, whose meaning is rarely self-evident, but cartoons and other visual sources still escape critical analysis[...] a critical historical reading of a cartoon, or a body of cartoons, must look to understand the conditions both of its making and of its reception”. Thus one needs to read a cartoon as a “cultural artifact which is neither a passive reflector of reality, nor passively received by readers” (Scully and Quartly 2009: 1).

We are products of our own experience and history. As a student and now a teacher of history, I have always been concerned in my approach to the study of comics and cartoons, about viewing them through a historical and socio-political-economic lens. Such works cannot and should not be read in a vacuum. A sense of history is important and its application in our reading of comics and cartoons provides insights to present politics and society, especially the impact of globalization and the progress of democratization. I will use examples from Singapore and Malaysia to illustrate this.

Singapore

The following are some of the comic books that came out of Singapore in 2009:

1. *The Illustrated Men In White*, a graphic adaptation of the bestselling book

about the victorious history of the People's Action Party (PAP), the ruling political party of Singapore since 1959. This is a mainstream retelling of the postwar political history of Singapore in a comic book format.

2. *Fixed!*, a free comic book put out by the Competition Commission of Singapore (CCS) to help Singaporeans “identify possible cartel activities and[...]how to bring them to the attention of the CCS”. It explains that the CCS was set up to administer and enforce the Competition Act (2005) and to maintain and promote competitive markets.
3. *Loti*, Vol. 1, by Troy Chin. Chin is one of the best comics artists working in Singapore today. But his new book, about the adventures of a bunch of primary school students and a dog, is a homage to the popular manga, *Azumanga Daioh* by Azuma Kiyohiko in terms of format (four panels) and treatment (light humor).

A reader browsing through these books will most likely go away with two conclusions:

Firstly, that comic books are used by the Singapore government as part of its public outreach to inform people of its policies such as the *Fixed!* comic book. In the case of the *Illustrated Men In White*, a publication by the Singapore Press Holdings, the story it chooses to tell is a pro-government one.

Secondly, that the local comics are heavily influenced by manga, mainly humorous in content, with limited reference to the present political or social realities of Singapore. Comic books, like other components of popular culture in Singapore, are very much divorced from the everyday life of the country.

Even the political cartoons that appeared in the major newspapers in Singapore, especially those drawn by Dengcoy Miel in *The Straits Times* and Heng Kim Song in *Lianhe Zaobao*, seldom deal with actual politics, much less caricaturing politicians. At most, they poke fun at the “softer” government policies, because race, language, religion or competence/governance in general are out-of-bounds topics. Though Miel and Heng are two of Singapore's most accomplished cartoonists in terms of technique and winning international awards, the irony is that they hardly draw cartoons about national topics. Other countries' leaders are made fun of but never our own. In that sense, their cartoons are not so much political or editorial cartoons, but rather illustrations accompanying the lead articles (Lim 2000).

But the history of comics and cartoons in Singapore shows that it was not like

that in the past. Since the beginning of the last century, the medium has been used as a force for change in society. The cartoons drawn and published in the newspapers then were shaped by ideological and political undercurrents to reflect and in turn affect some of the changes happening in society.

Singapore in the 1900s was under British colonial rule. But larger political forces were at work which brought satirical images to the Chinese public in Singapore in 1907. It was the emergence of radical politics and revolutionary Chinese newspapers, namely *Chong Shing Yit Pao*, that brought forth cartoons and established their historical role in Singapore, a role that cartoons would play for the first half of the 20th Century.

Chong Shing Yit Pao (1907 – 1910) was the organ of the Singapore Tung Meng Hui, the revolutionary party set up by Dr Sun Yat-Sen to overthrow the Ching government in China. The Chinese revolutionaries saw the potential of cartoons in getting their message across to the public. This mass medium, made of words and pictures, were meant to serve the propaganda purposes of Dr Sun's vision for a new China. Dr Sun himself wrote articles in *Chong Shing Yit Pao* under a pen-name (Chen 1967).

The first Chinese cartoon in Singapore appeared in the September 1907 edition of *Chong Shing Yit Pao*. This was the first time a Chinese newspaper in Singapore carried pictorials other than those in advertisements. A total of 41 cartoons were published from 9 September 1907 to 21 March 1908, when the cartoons were dropped, possibly as a result of a change in editorship. All the cartoons were anti-Ching Dynasty cartoons, attacking its rule in China (Yeo 1995: 83).

There were attempts to engage local Chinese merchants as reflected in the cartoons depicting the restrictions that the Ching government placed on the trade of the overseas Chinese, especially the high taxes imposed on them. These cartoons were obviously meant to rouse anti-Ching sentiments among the Chinese population in Singapore and sway them to the revolutionary cause of Dr Sun and the Tung Meng Hui.

As shown above, the appearance of Chinese cartoons in Singapore was not accidental, but a deliberate effort on the part of the revolutionaries to use cartoons as a tool for agitation against the Ching government in China. The cartoons were geared towards shaping the mindset of its readers with regard to the tyranny of the Ching Dynasty. As a result, most of the cartoons were left unsigned in order to avoid persecution by the Ching Dynasty and the British colonial government in Singapore. The danger of persecution was a real one as in 1908, the British threatened to use the

Banishment Ordinance to deport Dr Sun and the editors of *Chong Shing Yit Pao* from Singapore for advocating seditious agitation against China (Yong 1991: 31).

While *Chong Shing Yit Pao's* circulation of 1,000 copies was nowhere near the actual Chinese population in Singapore then (219, 577 in 1911), one cannot discount the fact that newspapers had a life span and distribution beyond its actual sales and circulation. A single copy could be passed from reader to reader. Cartoons had the added advantage of having graphic properties which allowed them to be understood by people who were illiterate. Writer Yeo Man Thong argued that the *Chong Shing Yit Pao* cartoons were important in educating the illiterate and influencing their opinions about the political situation in China (Yeo 1995; 82).

Despite the fall of the Ching government in 1911 and the establishment of the new Chinese republic, Chinese politics continued to dominate the content of Chinese cartoons in Singapore. The new Chinese republic was threatened by the imperial ambition of a former Ching government general, Yuan Shih Kai, who harbored thoughts of reviving dynastic rule in China. The successor to Tung Meng Hui, the Kuomintang, also established by Dr Sun, opposed Yuan. In 1914, the Singapore branch of the Kuomintang started *Kuo Min Yit Poh* (1914 – 1919), another Chinese newspaper to further its cause, and made use of cartoons to attack Yuan. Again, these cartoons were signed with pseudonyms or pen-names as there were threats of deportation by the British (Yong 1991: 31).

The death of Yuan in 1916 did not improve things as the next ten years saw China entering a dark period of warlordism, a decade of lawlessness and disorder that would last till 1927, when the Kuomintang under the leadership of General Chiang Kai Shek managed to reunify China (Hsu 1990: 482, 523).

Cartoons continued to reflect the turbulent political situation during this period. What is interesting is that there were signs of globalization at work here. This 1918 cartoon from *Kuo Min Yit Poh* shows Western influences on Chinese cartoonists in Singapore (fig. 1). In “Pleasures of a Rich Dunkard”, the figure drawn to caricature a corrupt Chinese government official, looks suspiciously like Jiggs of George McManus’s *Bringing Up Father*. The famous American comic strip was first published in



Fig. 1: *Kuo Min Yit Poh* "Pleasures of a Rich Drunkard" (1918)

1913 and could have made its way to Singapore by 1918. This cartoon is revealing in its use of Jiggs as a symbol of decadence and corruption – showing what the Chinese thought of the West, and specifically America, reflecting a view that is still prevalent among some quarters in China today. Therefore, history does not just inform us about the cartoons we are studying, but also reveals much about cartoon history as well.

As we have seen, cartoons were in the service of politics and society in early 20th century Singapore. It was art for the masses, to serve a political cause and to rouse public sentiments. In the 1930s, many of the cartoonists subscribed to the dictum of the Chinese writer Lu Xun that cartoons should be tools for social change. Lu Xun's essays on cartoons and caricatures emphasized the honesty of cartoonists' intentions and satire in the service of the people (Lu 1982).

We see this at work when cartoons became part of the anti-Japanese campaign from 1937 onwards after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 7 July. As Japan started its formal invasion of China, cartoons in China and Singapore were drawn to rally the people's support for the war effort against Japan. Cartoons were printed on the front page of newspapers and focused completely on the war effort. In December 1937, the first issue of the *Fund-raising Special Magazine* was launched. It contained articles and cartoons about the Sino-Japanese war.

Cartoons were not restricted to the print medium; there was a major exhibition featuring cartoons in 1937. The National Salvation Cartoon Exhibition, organized by the Society of Chinese Artists from 4 to 6 December 1937, was part of a fund-raising event by the Singapore China Relief Fund Committee. In 1939, there was another war cartoon exhibition by the Kunming Literary Branch Society. Its agenda was to raise funds for the war refugees in China and it managed to collect S\$1486.70 (Yeo 1992: 177).

There was a price to pay for all these activities. The Japanese embarked on their invasion of Southeast Asia in December 1941 and the British defense of Singapore crumbled in February 1942. The fall of Singapore was one of Britain's darkest moments and the Japanese Occupation itself was the darkest period for Singapore cartooning in the 20th century. Several cartoonists were killed during Sook Ching, the Japanese Army operation to purge suspected anti-Japanese elements among the Chinese population conducted in February 1942. Many prominent cartoonists, notably members of the Society of Chinese Artists who contributed to the war effort, were killed.

With the end of the war in 1945, cartoonists took up their pens again to depict

their lives under the Japanese Occupation. The prime example is *Chop Suey* by Liu Kang. *Chop Suey*, a collection of cartoons about life under the Japanese Occupation, was drawn and released very quickly after the war ended. Liu Kang, who had gone through life and death situations during the war, wanted to put out a cartoon book to document the Japanese atrocities, and expose the “twisted culture” of the Japanese to the outside world (fig. 2). He chose the cartoon format to present his experience as well as those of others because “cartoons were the most direct and popular form of expression and medium” (interview 2001). There were both English and Chinese editions of *Chop Suey* printed in 1946. 2000 copies were printed, and despite being priced at S\$2 (a hefty price back then), it sold out quickly. The book was reprinted in the 1990s, after it was rediscovered by a Japanese academic.

Today, the *Chop Suey* cartoons are used as part of the Singapore government’s national education efforts, appearing in history exhibitions and school textbooks, with the message “Never Again” and that Singapore should always defend itself against invaders and not be dependent on colonial rulers like the British. In this case, Liu Kang’s cartoons have been co-opted to serve the political agenda of the day. They help Singapore to remember the wartime past, but they are also part of a master narrative selected and constructed by the state to serve its purpose (Lim 2004).

Indeed, things would never be the same again for the Western powers after WWII. The winds of change were blowing across Asia and Africa and the spirit of independence was in the air. Cartoons would be on the side of the anti-



Fig. 2: A scene portraying Japanese atrocities in Liu Kang's *Chop Suey* (first edition 1946).



Fig. 3: The cover of *Shi Dai Bao* No. 8 (1956/11/05). It shows how in Singapore different races fight for independence together.

colonialists in this struggle. Such works graced the covers of many magazines in the 1950s (fig. 3) and they helped Singapore to gain self-government from the British when the PAP (People's Action Party) came to power in the 1959 General Elections.

But with self-government came the inter-party political struggles. The 1960s saw cartoons being used by both the ruling party, the PAP and its main rival the Barisan Sosialis to demonize each other. The PAP won the fight and continues to be the ruling political party of Singapore today. From then on, cartoons were in the service of nation-building and have lost their contentious nature. In many ways, they have become less political as the government felt that politics was a serious business and should not be made fun of by cartoonists. Cartoonists should only make jokes on matters of no importance. If a cartoon was drawn of a government policy, it was usually positive. Commentary was not encouraged.

This was evident from 1959 onwards. One of the best artists in the annals of Singapore cartooning history is Tan Huay Peng. He drew many biting political cartoons for *The Straits Times* in the 1950s, drawing blood whenever an emperor (eg. the British) decided to show off his new clothes. But there was a distinct shift in the tone and treatment of his cartoons after the General Elections of 1959 which brought the PAP to power. Tan's cartoons became more muted and less satirical. In 1961, he left *The Straits Times* to work for the Economic Development Board of Singapore (Lim 1997).

The Chinese writer, Lu Xun, once said that politics and art are fellow travelers in times of revolution, but once the peace is won, they will go their separate ways (Lu 1982). The Minister Mentor of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, who was Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990, did not like to be caricatured in cartoons and subsequent Prime Ministers like Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong have reiterated the same message of leaving politics out of the cartoons. A bestselling cartoon book on the handing over of power from Lee Kuan Yew to Goh Chok Tong in the early 1990s was frowned upon (Nonis 1991). The message is clear: If you want to comment on the policies or actions of the government, you should join a political party and get into the ring and not snide at the sidelines. The role of cartoonists as political commentators is very much limited.

The Singapore government is well aware of the potential of the cartooning medium in reaching out to the masses through newspapers and magazines. A cartoon with its combination of words and pictures is more powerful than a long intellectual essay in many ways in its terms of outreach. The decision to publish a free comic book to fight cartel activities (*Fixed!*) by the Competition Commission of Singapore in 2009

is proof of that.

Thus cartoonists in Singapore do not draw cartoons about Singapore politics. Instead they win awards for drawing cartoons about international politics and criticizing or making digs at other countries' political leaders. Comic books by the current crop of artists prefer to tell humorous or adventure stories. A certain amount of self-censorship exists in Singapore cartooning today.

Such an overview of the history of cartooning in Singapore gives us an insight to present-day politics and society and raises questions about the progress of democratization. If one of the indicators of democracy is whether we have political cartoons and caricature, then the report card is not very encouraging. The Culture Ministry has issued statements in the past forbidding political caricatures. The only cartoon depictions of politicians that we have today are graphic biographies, which do not portray their subject satirically (such as *The Illustrated Men In White*).

Taking a historical approach, a long view can give us a clearer picture of the historical role of cartooning in Singapore and how that role has diminished over time. It can also reflect the story of democracy, press liberty and censorship. Hopefully, by telling this story, future generations of cartoonists will be inspired to revive the socio-political role of cartooning in Singapore.

Malaysia

If Singapore suffers from amnesia with regard to its own cartooning history, Malaysia suffers from a neglect of a different kind. While political comics and cartoons are still alive in Malaysia due to its vibrant political scene (a recent political comic book was banned because it made fun of the Prime Minister), the issue here is that the younger artists are consciously turning their back on their own cartooning tradition and style; a style pioneered by Malaysia's most famous cartoonist, Lat.

On 5 March 2010, Lat celebrated his 59th birthday with close friends and family (New Straits Times 2010/03/15: S7). Lat's series of cartoon books about Malaysia in the 1950s and 1960s, *Kampong Boy* and *Town Boy*, have made him a household name in the country and won him fans worldwide. These two books have also been translated into different languages (including Japanese) and in recent years been repackaged for the North American market by First Second Books.

His best book is *Town Boy* (1980), an ode to his secondary school years (Anderson School) and his friendship with a Chinese boy in the Malaysian town

of Ipoh. Lat was honored as the “Andersonian of the Century” at the recent 100th anniversary of the school. During that occasion, more than 120 of Lat’s classmates from the class of 1969 traveled from the other states of Malaysia to attend the get-together in Ipoh. Among those who attended were retired civil servants, senior police officers, ex-military officers and businessmen (*New Straits Times* 2010/03/15: S7).

While many have enjoyed Town Boy’s tale of growing up, high school jinks and friendship, most have missed out on the larger significance of the story.¹ The fact that Lat and his friends graduated from Anderson School in 1969 is important as that was the year Malaysia was rocked by its worst racial riots since independence in 1957. The 13 May riots of 1969 were a result of the Alliance Party, the political party that had ruled Malaysia since independence, losing ground in the general elections that had been held earlier. The Malay population felt that they were losing control of the country and that their supremacy was being threatened by the Chinese population. The Malay-Chinese relationship was very strained in 1969. Immediately after the riots were quelled, a state of emergency was declared and parliament was suspended for the next two years (Butcher 2001). This was the background of *Town Boy*. While Lat did not make reference to the racial riots between the Malays and the Chinese in his story, the fact that all these were happening in his final year of high school would have been on his mind when he started to work on this story in the late 1970s.

Lat was born in 1951, during the early years of Malaysia’s anti-colonial movement when the different races of Malay, Chinese and Indian worked together to



Fig. 4: From Lat’s *Town Boy*.



Fig. 5: Ibid.

¹ As seen in the North American reviews of the First Second editions <http://joglikescomics.blogspot.com/2007/10/what-lovely-weekend.html> and http://www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/briefings/cr_reviews/9958/

gain independence from the British. Those were times of cooperation and trust, but the close relationships forged among these ethnic groups started to fray in the 1960s as the economic disparity between the Malays and the Chinese became wider.

In *Town Boy*, friendship is not about money or class. Lat's best friend in high school was a Chinese boy by the name of Frankie. Their friendship was forged over a love for rock 'n' roll music and Hollywood movies. Frankie was the richer boy in class but he remained firm friends with Lat because of their common interests and the many escapades they engaged in. Understanding each other's culture, likes and dislikes is not difficult when you are younger and life's a lark.

The following dialogue reveals how ethnic differences were glossed over in Lat's friendship with the Chinese boy (translation of fig. 4 and 5):

When Lat first visited Frankie at his home, he was offered a pau (bun).

Lat: What is inside this pau?

Frankie: Open and see laaa!

Lat: Mmmm! It has "kaya" (sweet cream) in it...! I like!

Frankie: How come you cannot eat pork?...if I may ask...

Lat: Because my religion says cannot.

Frankie: What else you can't eat?

Lat: Elephant, dog...cat...

Lat: Hindu (Indian) people cannot eat cattle.

Frankie: Yes, Hindus can't take beef.

Lat: Is there anything that you can't eat?

(Frankie paused)

Frankie: Mutton!

Lat: Why?...because of religion?

Frankie: No...because I cannot tahan (stand) the smell...

The above is an example of Lat's gentle humor. But having a knowledge of what happened in 1969 adds to the depth and poignancy of *Town Boy*. Although the latter ends with Lat and Frankie going their separate ways after high school, there is a sense of hope that they will remain friends for life. This is a much more powerful message about the importance of racial harmony than most government campaigns in Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s.

It is unfortunate then that, as in Singapore, a sense of history is lacking in today's Malaysian comics. Not just in terms of story content, but stylistically as well. Lat's nostalgic stories about the past and his concerns with history are seen as passé as the younger artists prefer to tell sci-fi stories or fantasy. Artwise, they are influenced by foreign comics, especially Japanese manga.

Looking at the recent publishing history of Malaysian comic books, such as those by the successful *Gempak Starz*, one can detect a strong manga influence. Set up in 1998, *Gempak* is a Malaysian comic/gaming/hobby magazine published by Art Square Creation. Formed after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the development of this magazine parallels the influence of globalization of local culture.

The success of *Gempak* as an info-comic magazine on ACG (Animation, Comics and Games), especially those of Japan, has led to its own line of comic books, published in Malay and later translated to Chinese and English. The art style is distinctively manga. Recent interviews with *Gempak Starz* artists show that they wear their influences on their sleeves.

Keith: "Japanese comics rule! When I was young, I read Japanese comics before I even started schooling! It's hard to condense how I feel about this comic industry that has produced such great work in only a few words. All I can say is that the success of the Japanese comics reflects the persistence, tenacity and intensity of the Japanese people. Malaysians just do not feel so strongly about things. There is no comic culture in Malaysia. So perhaps we need to carve out a niche in the local comic scene first."

Kaoru: "I believe I'm like one of many, who got involved in the comic industry after being influenced by Japanese comic artists."

When asked about the Malaysian comics industry, most artists felt that it has still got a long way to go. Although the artists said it was unfair to compare Malaysian comics with Japanese manga, most of them are comfortable about drawing in the manga style, hoping to develop their own style in time to come. They see no conflict between adopting a foreign drawing style to tell stories of local content (Popcorn 2009).

The fact is that Malaysia already has its own style as developed by Lat. But with the popularity and spread of manga worldwide and market demands, younger Malaysian artists are charting their own progress and developing their own style within

the manga style.

This trend is not just true of the *Gempak* artists drawing in the style of manga. Other Malaysian artists who have broken into the American comics industry, like Tan Eng Huat and Billy Tan, draw in the house style of the big two American comics companies DC and Marvel. Even the style of alternative comics like the titles published by Drawn & Quarterly (Canada) and Fantagraphics Books (USA) is evident in the works of younger Malaysian indie artists like Chin Yew and Ming. Such is the reality of the comics industry and globalization.

By just looking at the recent publishing history of Malaysian comic books, we can get a sense of the impact of globalization on the comics industry in Malaysia. We can see how global forces are affecting local culture and economy as the local artists adapt to the market demands for foreign comic art styles.

Again, I am presenting this chapter with the hope that having a sense of history would inspire the local artists to embrace their own tradition and style, so that even if they adapt to a more international format and art style, there is still room for local content and concerns. So far, there has been a preference, on the artists' part, for the fantastic and the weird, rather than a concern with reflecting what is happening in society. Two of my favorite Malaysian artists, Leong Wan Kok and Slaium, have produced works of Science Fiction and Urban Horror, rather than on the political changes in Malaysia today.

The context determines the text in both Singapore and Malaysia today. The lack of political cartoons in Singapore is a result of present political realities. The prominence of manga-style comics in Malaysia is a result of the impact of globalization.

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