
John Lent

"Mr. Kiasu," "Condom Boy," And "The House of Lim": The World Of Singapore Cartoons

Sprouting from Singapore's germinating popular culture, comic art in the past decade almost reached a budding stage before its development was stunted by blight brought on by commercial and societal factors.

The peak growth years were 1986-91, when a Singapore comics tradition was stimulated through indigenous comic books, magazines, and newspaper funnies, and comic book collecting was promoted through specialty stores and conventions.

Big 0 (Before I Get Old) Magazine

Spearheading the campaign to promote comics in Singapore was a cyclostyled fanzine, started by two brothers after the newspaper that carried their comics column folded in 1985. Michael and Philip Cheah, as well as Stephen Tan, wrote the column in the Monitor with an intent to spark interest in comics collecting. "With that column, we built a team, a network, that we had when the newspaper died," Michel Cheah said (Interview, 1992). The interest generated by the column led to the setting up of comic book stores, the 1986 comics convention, and in an off-handed way, the country's first popular culture magazine, Big 0 (Before I Get Old). Michael Cheah (Interview, 1992) described the way **Big 0** came about:

When the Monitor closed, we were invited to be on radio to share our woes. A reader of the column called up and said, "Start your own magazine." Over the air, I said, "It won't happen," but that

night, my brother Philip and I talked and said, "Let's do it." I used my salary from my fulltime job to start Big 0; every month, I put in at least \$500. Actually, every month for five years, I put out \$500 to \$1,000 of my own money to sustain the magazine. The lesson is to start out with something you can sustain.

Starting from those humble beginnings, Big 0 has developed into a full-color, advertisement-filled recorder of Singapore popular culture, concentrating at times on music, film, and comics. Initially, Big 0's comics content was made up of "reflection and commentary," but as readers demanded to know where local talent lay, the emphasis was changed. During the magazine's first three years, the emphasis was split between music and comics; then interest in comics waned, to be revived again briefly in the early 1990s. Commercial considerations, meaning popular music brings in more money, saw comics virtually abandoned by Big 0 by 1994.

But, before then, the magazine encouraged comics by reviewing United States and Chinese titles, hosting visits of foreign comics artists, and publishing local cartoonists' works within its pages and as separate comic books. Prominent among those featured were Eric Khoo and Johnny Lau, enthusiastic cartoonists in their twenties.

Khoo did "The Origins of Condom Boy" and "Conversations Up There" in Big 0 and co-authored all six stories in the premiere issue of *Bizarre Lust Stories from the Crypt*, published by Times Books International and launched at the 1989 Singapore Book Fare. Khoo recognizes that his ability to dabble in comics drawing and filmmaking is a luxury facilitated by his family's wealth. He does not have to make a living from either; since age 23, Khoo has been a director of his father's Goodwood Hotel.

"Mr. Kiasu" and Comix Factory

Although Lau's work appeared in Big 0 at various times, his great success came with the comic character, "Mr. Kiasu," and the company, Comix Factory, which it spawned.

When Lau and his buddies (from military days), James Suresh, Eric Chang, and Lim Yu Cheng, decided to create their own comic book in time for the 1990 Singapore Book Fare, the

atmosphere of Singapore comics was univiting. The fleeting nature of comics companies and the lack of public interest and respect for comics were not encouraging in the least. Newspaper cartoonist Heng Kim Song felt comic book publishers do not last because they cannot sell the 2,000 copies required to stay afloat. He said that the country's three million people basically are not interested in comics, and those who are, demand very high quality contents, drawings, and even paper stock; this he attributes to higher education levels. "Chinese comic books last two or three issues," he said, "if they live to seven, they are doing well." (Interview, Heng Kim Song, 1992).

Others agree, including the comics editor of Big O, Lim Cheng Tju, who said that Singaporeans generally do not treat comics seriously and certainly are not very interested in local ones. Lim figured the total comic book audience to be about 10,000 a generous estimate compared to the more usually-given 1,500. Most comics fans follow U.S. and Hong Kong books, with Batman and the X series selling about 2,000 copies each (Interview, Lim Cheng Tju, 1992).

Such a tenuous market does not nurture a strong commitment from cartoonists, most of whom do comics parttime. "They don't take their work seriously," Lau said, adding, "They are insecure because they don't make enough money" (Interview, Johnny Lau, 1992). Comic Critic Fong Pick Huei (Interview, 1992) said that publishers do not support local cartoonists, while Straits Times' cartoonists Jose Ruiz and Cheah Sin Ann said the dire state of comics results from Singaporeans' obsession with making money (Interviews, Jose Ruiz, Cheah Sin Ann, 1992). With the exception of a couple of cartoonists backed by family money, most are not willing to take chances with comics.

Lau was partly bankrolled by family money when he and his associates created a book based on the brash, obnoxious, and selfish bargain hunter and freebie chaser called "Mr. Kiasu." They had spent many agonizing days the previous year conceptualizing a character and figuring out ways to introduce and promote it. "We were not sure what we were getting into when we did the book," Suresh said. "We just wanted to see what type of response we'd get" (Interview, James Suresh, 1992). The character that evolved was meant to make fun of Singaporeans' fear of losing and desire to be number one.

Using a registry number of a company owned by his mother, Lau and his co-entrepreneurs set out to publish their first book in time for the 1990 book fair. "We did not take it to a publisher because we were not sure anyone would publish it as the chief character exemplifies negative attitudes about Singapore," Suresh (Interview, 1992) said. Also, they chose to self publish and to use the alternative distribution means of introducing the book at the fair for fear of losing control of their character.

From the outset, Lau recognized that cartooning is not strictly an art form—that it must be merged with a business sense. With knowledge he picked up from working briefly in his father's advertising business, Lau merchandized his character, bringing out loads of T-shirts, bumper stickers, bags, mugs, and a "13-inch ruler," hosting a broadcast program, *Radio Kiasu*, and eventually doing a Sunday strip in *The Sunday Times*.

Each year, Lau has been involved in an ever-increasing number of promotionals. In 1993, McDonald's Corp. introduced a Kiasu Burger (chicken sandwich) to its fast food menu, a campaign that lasted two months and provided Lau et al. additional royalties and national exposure on TV animation and radio and newspaper advertisements. Some letters in the *Straits Times* indicated Kiasu Burgers left a bad taste with some Singaporeans because of its mockery of the society. At about the same time, Lau wrote and produced with Brian Colaco, a mini-CD, entitled, "Kiasumania." The CD featured five songs, four about the boorishness of Kiasu and friends and one a love song, "Kiasu Kind of Love." Lau said the CD was "sort of banned because of the 'Singlishness,'" but even without airplay, the 10,000 copies sold out in three weeks (Letter to author from Johnny Lau, Feb. 3, 1994). Also in 1993, Kiasu Enterprise was set up to handle about twenty products (T-shirts, watches, mugs, postcards, school bags, clocks, files, soft toys) that carry the Kiasu trademark and are sold in department stores. Projects for 1994 included an animation series of 13 segments, a "semi-musical" stage play, and the placement of Kiasu products in about eighty 7-Eleven outlets. "We're often criticized by other cartoonists as being too commercial, but if we don't promote, we won't be accepted," Lau said (Interview, 1992). His goal to show Singapore cartoonists that they too can succeed was bearing fruit by 1994, according

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strip artist Cheah Sin Ann (Interview, 1992) said that until the 1980s, anyone could be a cartoonist at the Straits Times where he is employed. "Some oldtimers were office staff who moved into graphics, with the result being low grade strips," Cheah said. Although the Chinese dailies normally have had more local strips, individual titles have not had long runs. Heng Kim Song (Interview, 1992) explained: "Local cartoonists are young; they want an international audience immediately. As a result, they lose touch with the local audience wanting a Singaporean flavor and after a year or two, they given up because they are not accepted by the public."

In the late 1980s, the Straits Times organization decided to give play to domestic cartooning, and in the process, recruited five or six cartoonists. Although the daily Straits Times continued to use all foreign strips, except for Cheah Sin Ann's "The House of Lim," nearly half of the Sunday edition's four comics pages were devoted to local strips. Some of these included an adventure story drawn ala Flash Gordon by Lee Hon Kit; a supernatural strip based on Malay and Chinese ghost stories, called "Souls"; "Kiasu and Gang"; "Crocko," the environment-friendly cockroach, by Victor Teh; "Huntsman," also adventure, by Melvin Yong; the science fiction story, "Speedsword and the Doomsday Pearl"; "Life's Like That," by Lee Chee Chew, and "The House of Lim," by Cheah (Interview, Lou, 1992).

Lee Chee Chew (Interview, 1992) said his "Life's Like That" was "forced" upon him when the Straits Times decided to emphasize local strips: "The Straits Times was being revamped to be like the Chinese dailies with local strips. The editor told me to come up with a strip. It's a freebie. I'm not paid individually for 'Life's Like That'; it comes with the package." What he means by package is that he is hired to do many graphics jobs, not just one strip. Lee's weekly workload included drawing one "Life's Like That" and three to four illustrations for the feature section, as well as design and illustrate two covers for the feature section. He also drew a spot cartoon, "Sun Strokes," every two weeks. He described "Life's Like That" as "non-controversial, diplomatic" in theme and approach.

The one Straits Times cartoonist whose sole responsibility has been to produce a strip is Cheah Sin Ann (see Yuen 1991). Seven days a week, he draws "The House of Lim,"

created in 1989. Originally, the title was to be "The House of Lee," but the editors changed it for fear that it could be viewed as a reference to former head of state Lee Kuan Yew. Cheah (Interview, 1992) said the public has misinterpreted the strip as reflecting Singaporean society, which he never intended: "I meant it to be international; how people view the Chinese." "The House of Lim" is a gag continuity strip based on a weekly theme. Cheah (Interview, 1992) said:

I base the strip on a theme for a week and then on Sunday, I climax it in one big strip on the topic. I switch topics by the week; I also switch characters and some characters may not return for a month. It works for me and it breaks the monopoly.

By 1992, most Straits Times strips were phased out because of the costs (S\$100 to \$140 per Sunday strip by freelance cartoonists) and the low quality work.

Other strips were launched in the other English-language daily, *New Paper*, at about the same time as the Straits Times binge. Most popular was the humor panel, "Orchard Road," done by Colin Goh from 1988 to 1991; it stopped when Goh left for studies in London. Two started in 1991 for *New Paper* were "Aiyoh," a gag strip about a Singapore couple, created by Tan Wee Lian, and "School Daze," gags about children by Koh Cheng Eng.

The Chinese-language daily, *Lian-He Zao Bao* had featured Singapore strips a few years before the Straits Times and *New Paper*, and for a while, devoted one-third of a page to them daily. However, because of poor public response and inferior work, most were cut in the early 1990s, leaving only two single panel cartoons daily. *Lian-He Zao Bao* has attempted to cultivate artistic talent by opening two pages every Sunday for the works of amateur cartoonists, who are paid a token fee.

Comics Collecting

Comic book shops have had a precarious existence since their heyday in the 1980s when comics was an attractive business as Singaporeans used them as investments. For a brief time, as many as 22 shops operated but more recently, the number has been sliced in half, with seven selling predominantly

English-language books and four serving the Chinese-language market with titles from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. Only two shops maintained lucrative businesses by 1992. Lim (Interview, 1992) said shop owners faced stiff competition, selling the same books in a limited market. Between 1988 and 1989, some shops had drops of one-third to one-half in sales. To compete, they undercut prices, selling books for as little as US\$1.80. At the same time, rising freight and operating costs and unsold inventories plagued them. The latter results because shop owners must order and pay U.S. distributors three months in advance, without a clue whether the books will sell in Singapore. Moreover, Marvel and DC, their two major suppliers, do not take returns. To handle the overstock, some shops re-export U.S. comics to Malaysia.

The shops have been less than successful also because of the lack of business acumen on the part of owners, some of whom were comics fans-turned-entrepreneurs, and because of government raids of outlets suspected of selling "pornographic" books. Of course, there is the long tradition of renting comics at roadside *mamak* stores at US 20 cents per copy, an obvious cut into shop owners' potential sales (For more on comics stores, see, Tan, 1986: 48-49; Ming, 1989: 28-30; Tan, 1991).

The comic book stores have not done much for local cartoonists whose works do not have a speculative value. As Lim (Interview, 1992) said, "Comics should be more than a speculative business. The problem is the Singaporeans would rather buy foreign books than local ones as there is no value in the latter."

Problem Plagued Profession

A number of problems deter the proper development of comics in Singapore, foremost of which is the creation and nurturing of a market that will regularly purchase comics. So far that has not happened. Listening to those involved in Singapore cartooning, the scenario they describe smacks of circuitousness: Singaporeans generally are not interested in comics and those who are, favor foreign over local versions; local cartoonists are timid about working fulltime on comics that are not guaranteed by a lucrative market.

Newspaper cartoonist Heng Kim Song (Interview, 1992) said: "You can't make a living only as a cartoonist here. Cheah

Sin Ann and maybe Johnny Lau come closest to that. Cheah is the luckiest as he can spend more time on his Straits Times strip, 'House of Lim'. The rest of us have to spend a lot of time on doing illustrations for our newspapers." Heng added that the small payment (S\$25 per strip on Lian-He Zao Bao, \$30 on New Paper) prevents cartoonists from taking the profession seriously. Most do cartoons while serving in the national service or enrolled in school; Heng said 90 percent of all cartoonists draw parttime.

Ken Lou, an architect who does cartoons parttime, brought up other hurdles Singapore's cartoonists must straddle: over-specialization, a colonial mentality, and the fear of failure (Interview, 1992).

He said: "The system here has made us very specialized, has discouraged us from being a jack-of-all-trades. We are pigeonholed in our speciality. Cartoonists who are not trained as cartoonists do not think they can be cartoonists." Lou felt the society, by its remunerative system, encourages Singaporeans to gauge their aspirations and accomplishments by Western standards. He explained: "A foreign writer or foreign cartoonist will be paid three, maybe ten, times more than the local, strictly on the basis of skin color." Heng (Interview, 1992) said the infatuation with things Western creates high expectations among Singaporeans, so that "the cartoonist must get famous in the West before he can get famous here." The third factor, according to Lou (Interview, 1992), is that "everyone is afraid to fail; they want to be perfect, and if they can't be perfect, they don't try. The kiasu syndrome, as Johnny Lau calls it."

Other difficulties relate to the lack of unity among cartoonists, limited publishing opportunities, and societal and governmental constraints. Singapore cartoonists, according to Lau (Interview, 1992), "don't want to know about one another or to see one another succeed; there is much professional jealousy." Lau (Interview, 1992) agreed that cartoonists are an unsupportive and desperate group; he has taken pride in pointing out that Comix Factory is a success because it is a group effort.

Accentuating cartoonists' ability to survive is the unavailability of outlets, with very few book publishers concentrating on comics and only five daily newspapers operating in the country. As Heng (Interview, 1992) put it, "If the papers don't

like your cartoons, you don't get published." Because all five dailies are part of the government-engineered Singapore Press Holdings, cartoonists are cautious about what they draw. Editors, practicing a tough self censorship, do not prefer local topics in strips, and especially in political cartoons, and they frown upon works that criticize the government, leaders, or Singapore's system.

It's a wonder anyone ventures into comics with so many forecasts and indicators of failure. But they do. Occasionally, independent cartoonists come out with their own comic books, often at great sacrifice. In 1983, Roger Wong quit his job as senior manager in a department store, sold his house, and used the money to bring out "Pluto-man." But, it failed. More recently, Mathew Eu left his job in the government shipyard to devote fulltime to publishing a comic book on the history of Singapore, which he hoped the government would sponsor. When the expected funding did not materialize, Eu abandoned the project even though he had produced the first issue. There have been others who have taken the plunge, such as Wee Tian Beng, who published two Chinese-language comics with a strong Japanese flavor; Lee Lai Lai, who did an autobiographical account called "Passion" of her often unhappy career at the comics publisher, Enoveltic Productions, and Chan Man Loon, who produced a 1989 graphic novel, *Souls*.

Conclusion

A number of commercial, political, and societal considerations have kept the comics industry from sustaining a steady growth rate, probably the same factors that hindered the development of other popular culture forms in Singapore. Although the situation for comics looks bleak, one must take some solace from successes such as "Mr. Kiasu" and "The House of Lim." As long as they show ways to garner interest for, and sales of, comics, there is some hope for the medium in Singapore.

Author

John Lent is a professor at the School of Journalism and Theater, Temple University, Philadelphia, U.S.A.

Notes

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