

Cartoons in Asia

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Comics, caricatures and funny drawings, i.e., cartoons, neither foster illiteracy, nor are they exclusively children's media, nor are they economically uninteresting in the media business, and they are certainly not of American origins. If you look at an American history of comics, the first ones you are likely to meet are the *Katzenjammer Kids* of 1897. And if you take up a German history of comics, it will naturally start with *Max and Moritz* of 1865. Cartoons have the following characteristics: they are either caricatures or satires, they are playful, mordantly funny, humorous and cheerful, and they tell stories in sequences of images. Accordingly, one could, with good reason, look for the predecessors of the comic in Asia. In Indian Mogul art, for example, there is a caricatural drawing of a corpulent noble lady from Dekkan entitled *Fat Begum* (1625), the Chinese artist Zhu Da parodied the imperial officials of his time as proud peacocks (1690), and in the 12th century, the Japanese monk Tuba depicted bizarre farting and penis competitions. Books with sentimental Chinese picture stories from the late 19th century ? in a typical wide format measuring 12.5 x 9 cm and similar on the outside to the 1950s German *Sigurd Heftchen* ? are still in print and are still popular today among Chinese workers.

The Singapore-based and highly official Media Development Authority (www.mda.gov.sg) certainly knew what it was doing when it invited people to Singapore to attend a conference on Asian Comic Art in early September 2004. Without material resources of its own, the city state of Singapore has always lived on trade and business dealings. However, since the National Computer Council conjured up the vision of an "intelligent island" in its 1992 green paper on the future of information technologies in Singapore, that country has been investing enormous sums in telecommunications, Internet and mass media trade. Cartoons are playing an ever greater role in this trade with electronic bits. Because the extremely lucrative ? based on the number of copies and the turnover ? Japanese manga comics industry, in combination with Japanese information technology, has meantime produced a Japanese animation film industry that makes the Walt Disney studios in California seem old fashioned and small, many South Asian countries now want to ride on the wave of this Japanese global success.

On the wave with Japan, but also in competition with it. And Singapore is not the only one involved. "Japan won the war, we have meantime almost lost our identity," emphasises Miel

Prudencio Ma, head caricaturist with the famous *The Straits Times* in Singapore. Miel dishes out jibes not only in the direction of Japan, but also of the USA. And anyone who knows Singapore and its friendship and links with the USA, knows that criticism of the USA is almost impertinent. But since 9.11.2001 and the Iraq War, old certainties in Singapore are also being questioned. In one of his anti-war caricatures, Miel drew a bust of Napoleon on the mount of a cannon. Above the picture is the word 'BUSHnaparte'. In his lecture he adds: 'We are waiting for his Waterloo.'

Given that in Singapore more than 80% of all comics are Japanese mangas, while the remaining 20% is divided between Malaysia and Taiwan, the battle against Japan resembles that against Goliath. Lim Li Kok, manager of the comic publisher Asiapac Books, active since 1983, and also head of the National Book Development Council in Singapore (www.asiapacbooks.com) sees things much as Miel does. Asiapac has published more than 400 comic books for people of 'high aspirations', as well as an internationally successful philosophy series, with titles such as *The Art of War*, by Sun Tsu, or *The Wisdom of Confucius*. 'In the current economy,' Lim Li Kok lectures, in a similar tone as the 1992 government green paper, 'knowledge is the decisive factor both for individual and for business success.' Ms Lim Li Kok knows well that the knowledge economy of the 21st century requires business people with a strong ego, but no longer with a traditional collective personality. Her cheeky children's comic *Mr Kiaszu* features a hero who 'wants everything, and even more'. Although the altogether anti-authoritarian and hedonistic hero Kiaszu incurred the wrath of all Singapore's pedagogues, official Singapore has meantime taken quite a liking to this anti-hero.

Like many TV soaps, cartoons in Asia often have a pro-social leaning; they want to educate and enlighten. Nigar Nazar, the only female cartoonist from Pakistan, stands for this approach, as does Lat from Malaysia, the youthful Yandhie Dono Pratopa from Singapore with his manga style comic posters (www.hexavibe.com) appealing for blood donations, and Fang Cheng from China. Although Fang Cheng's caricatures are funny, if also 'tame', his charming mockery during the Cultural Revolution did not help him much. In the 1960s he was prohibited from practising his profession in China, but later he became Senior Art Editor of the *People's Daily* newspaper. In Pakistan, the young heroine of Nigar Nazar's cartoons is called Gogi (www.gogicomics.com). Of late, Nazar's Gogi cartoons can also be seen on public buses in Islamabad. They address difficult political themes, such as a clean environment and children's rights, and such sensitive issues as sexual harassment.

Like Gogi from Pakistan, Lat's extremely popular comic hero Kampung Boy from Malaysia is also fighting for national unity, ethnic harmony and love of country, and for the preservation of the authenticity and naturalness of traditional Malaysian village life in the face of a modernism in the threatening form of a transnational metal company. Lat, who comes from Ipoh in Malaysia and whose full name is Dato' Mohd Nor bin Khalid, is the secret hero of this conference organised by the Media Development Authority. During the break young art students throng around him. In the one hand they are holding copies of his best-selling comic *Kampung Boy*, published since 1979 by Singapore's powerful Berita publishing house, hoping for an autograph. In the other hand, they have large portfolios with countless cartoons of their own and are hoping to attract the attention and favourable comments of their 'great master'.

That attention has been garnered, for example, by the young student Sonny Liew for his fantasy and underground comic *Malinky Robot* (www.sonnyliew.com). In the issue called *Stinky Fish Blues* the friends Atari and Oliver have their strange adventure in the grubby district of San?ya, between constantly smelling fish, skipped school classes, workers and putrefaction. Atari, with his two Chinese plaits standing out to the left and right, is a Chinese Robert-Crumb-style punk. The Media Development Authority has every reason to be satisfied with their conference: with cartoonists like Sonny Liew, this country is developing a comic art of its very own.

