



## Southeast Asian Cartooning: An Overview

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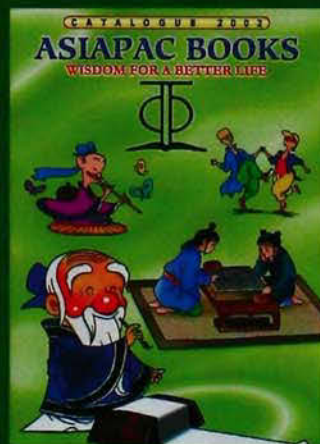
**A** king hires a famous cartoonist to illustrate two books he has written. A comics character lends his name to what becomes known as a national trait. A humour magazine tops a country's most-circulated periodical list. The comic book as a genre functions as one of the main vehicles for communicating messages promoting a nation's social consciousness.

That is the diversity of Southeast Asian cartooning which, beginning with its humour magazines, has existed since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Political cartoons and newspaper comic strips appeared in some countries during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, followed by comic books after World War II. The 1960s-1970s were the heyday of comic books in a country such as the Philippines, when Filipino *komiks* were a major purveyor of family planning messages, the source of half of local film plots, and a way to promote Marcos government campaigns.

Southeast Asia has seen profound changes in its cartooning, particularly comic books, since the early 1990s. For one thing, the style and format of comic books have changed, due to the influx of Japanese manga, new technology, and a different set of comics publishers and creators.

### The Influence of Japanese Manga

Throughout the region, Japanese influence permeates the sphere of cartoon/comics, with bookstores stocking many Japan-originated titles, locally published manga appearing, and Southeast Asian cartoonists imitating the Japanese style. Indonesia's once thriving comics industry was almost ruined because of manga which make up 80 percent of the market; in the Philippines, there is even a genre known as Pinoy manga; and in Singapore, where piracy of manga has stopped, legitimate publishers such as Chuang Yi reproduce Hong Kong and Taiwan editions of manga with licenses from Japanese publishers, and Asiapac both translates manga into English and publishes traditional Chinese stories in manga style. Malaysia still publishes pirated manga, and artists for local periodicals (Art Square Group, *Ujang*, *Apo?*, *Kreko*, *Blues Selamanya*) use the technique, style, and atmosphere of manga. In Thailand, illegal manga publishers still control more than a fifth of the market even though a 1995 copyright law in Thailand reduced the number of manga by half; the other five major publishers produce manga or Thai comics in Japanese style.



Not everything about the Japanese influence can be viewed as negative; no doubt, manga have regenerated interest in some quarters for what was a dying medium. The global manga phenomenon stimulated local entrepreneurs and creators to enter comics production, a result being

that many relatively new companies sprouted – Art Square Group in Malaysia; Chuang Yi, M. G. Creative, and Comix Factory (now defunct) in Singapore; Mango Comics and Nautilus Comics in the Philippines; ElexMedia Komputindo in Indonesia; Bun Lour Sarn (Banlue), Nation, New Venture Generation, and Siam Intercomics in Thailand. To stay afloat, these companies moved into production of merchandise related to the characters in their published materials, games/lifestyle/entertainment magazines, graphic novels, and in some cases, manga.

### The New Age

New information technology, coupled with globalization and corporatism, also has had an impact on Southeast Asian comics. Professional and amateur cartoonists are increasingly displaying their works on the Internet, with cartoon-related Websites such as Myanmar

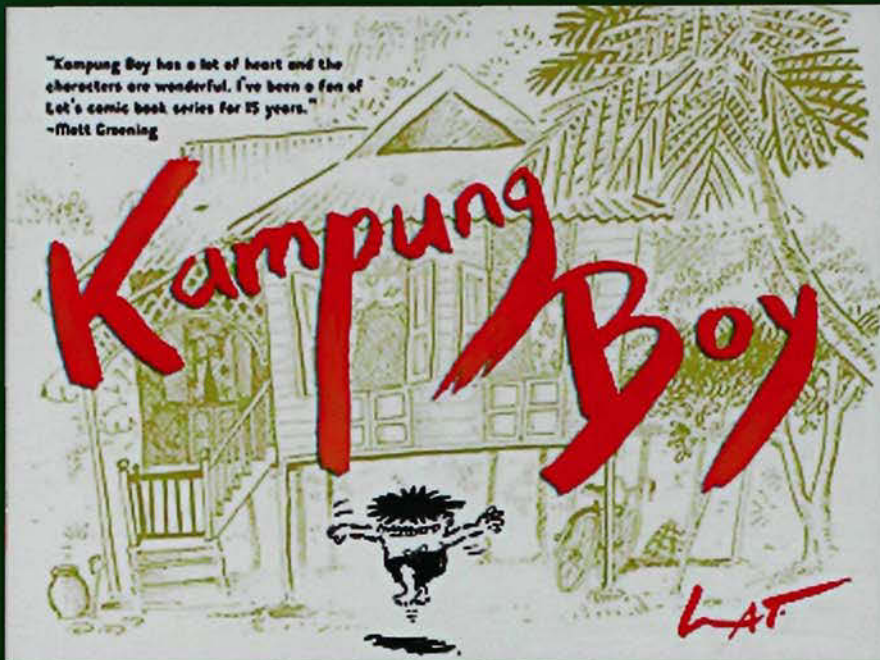


e-Cartoon Network, Weekly Myanmar Cartoon and Entertainment News, Philippine Komiks Message Board, etc.. The situation has changed from that of 15 years or more ago when Southeast Asian cartoonists were isolated, unaware of neighbouring countries' cartoon communities, and usually unknown to the outside world. Lat (Mohd. Nor Khalid, Malaysia), who is known worldwide, now has his *Kampung Boy* finally published in North America; the works of 15

Singaporean cartoonists made up a recent U.S.-published anthology; and Southeast Asian comics are sometimes displayed at international comics festivals.

Other changes experienced by the region's comics since the 1990s are:

- Sales and distribution – from male-friendly comics shops and roadside stalls to comics/Internet cafes, comics shops, and large retail bookstores attractive to both male and female readers;
- Genres – the demise of Philippine *nobelitas*; the rise of graphic novels (such as EQ Plus Publishing's series of Knowledge Comic and "A Day Story Comic" series, both in Thailand; underground/



alternative comics (Althok's *The Bad Times Story* and others in Indonesia; the Hesheit series in Thailand);

- Adaptations and spin-off – rebirth of *komiks* movies in the Philippines; animation adaptations, such as Lat's *Kampung Boy* and Jaafar Taib's *Jungle Jokes* in Malaysia and *Pang Pond* in Thailand; and radio and television versions of comics, such as Johnny Lau's *Mr. Kiasu*, the book that made *Kiasu-ism* (Singaporeans' urge to be number one) known as a national trait;
- Humour magazines – especially in Malaysia, where at various times, as many as 15 regularly-published humour magazines vied for readership (one, *Gila-Gila*, actually topped national circulation charts for a while); and
- Role of women – an increase in readership because of Japanese girls (*shoujo*) and *yaoi* (boy to boy love) comics; more attractive rental/sales venues; female-friendly content (*Cabai*, Malaysian “exclusively for women” humour magazine), and more women practitioners (in Indonesia, most young comics artists are women working for books published by ElexMedia Komputindo).



With Malaysian cartoonist, Lat (on the left).



## Political Socio-economic Constraints

Newspaper comic strips do not seem to have changed much in recent years. In the Philippines and Indonesia, major dailies still carry a rather large assortment of local strips in the national language, while in Singapore and Malaysia, one finds a mixture of a few local and foreign syndicated strips. Thai dailies, except on Sunday when colour sections of U.S. strips appear, usually have one or two local funnies (sometimes political). Explanations given for the limited growth of Southeast Asian newspaper strips are economics (it is less expensive to use foreign strips), government/social pressures, and lessened importance given to newspapers.

The development of political cartooning in a country, as always, depends on the type of government in power. In Myanmar,

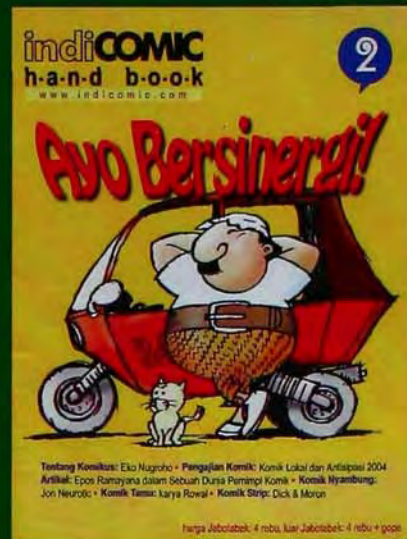
Cambodia, Vietnam, and to lesser degrees, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, cartoonists are stifled by officialdom in dealing directly with political issues, resorting instead to covering social problems or using subtle means to get messages across. Thai political cartoonists seem to be the most outspoken, for even historically-free Philippine political cartoonists face the perils of self-censorship because of the oligarchic control of the dailies. In some cases, political cartoonists have left their countries, going into exile (as with Myanmar cartoonists working out of Thailand) or seeking more lucrative financial arrangements (as with some Philippine cartoonists who went to Singapore).

## Taking off

Perhaps the most significant difference Southeast Asian cartooning experienced in the past 15 years has to do with recognition and professionalism. Individual cartoonists have received honours lately, most notably, Lat and Chai Rachawat being awarded government



*Darna (Philippines)*



*Indonesian comics*

and royally-conferred titles (Chai illustrated Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej's two recent books). In the 1990s, McDonald's created hamburgers for Lat and Johnny Lau characters – Kampungburger and Kiasuburger – but whether that represented an honour is debatable. Professionalism is on the rise with the creation of cartoonists associations (eg. Association of Comic Artists Singapore); comics conventions in Malaysia (Comic Fiesta); Indonesia (Komikasia); and Philippines (KOMIKON); a planned Philippine Comics Art Museum; competitions; exhibitions; awards; and comic art programmes in some universities/colleges.

Much of what has happened since the early 1990s bodes well for a profession, which was floundering in Southeast Asia just a few years ago.

**John Lent**, Professor of Communications at Temple University, Philadelphia, is a foremost expert in the area of comics/cartoons, particularly in Southeast Asia. He is the editor of Asian Cinema and the International Journal of Comic Art.

*Images provided by author*