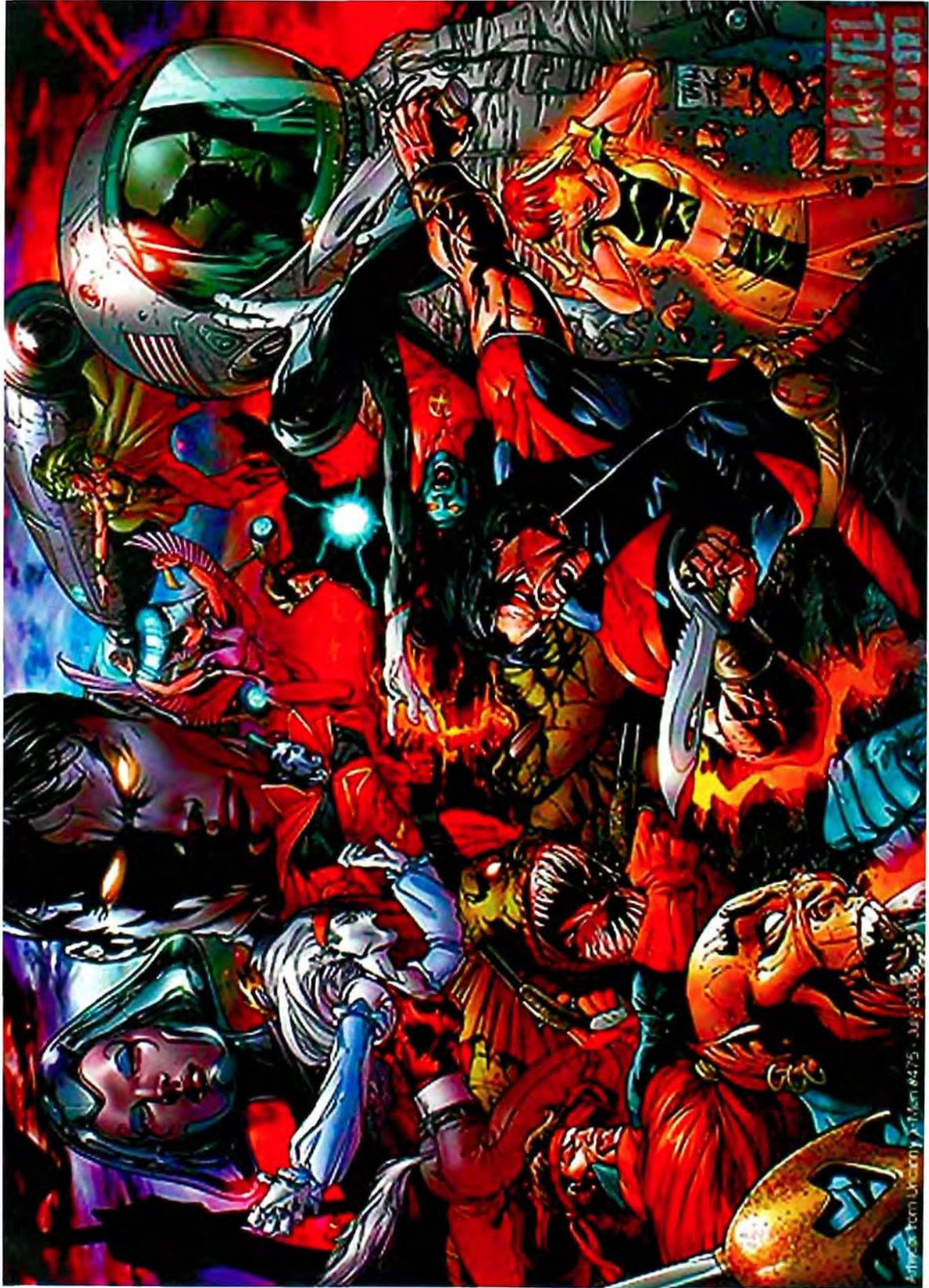


Southeast Asian Comic Artists Invade USA!



Sonny Liew

The world might not be flat like what New York Times columnist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Thomas Friedman has suggested, but it is definitely smaller today with globalization and the advancement of communication technologies. The internet and email have shortened the distance between Southeast Asia and the West, and the development has helped more comic artists in this region in making headway in the American comic books industry. The leading examples are Malaysians Billy Tan (*The Uncanny X-Men*), Tan Eng Huat (*The Doom Patrol*), and Singapore-based Sonny Liew (*Malinky Robot/My Faith In Frankie*).



Billy Tan

Penang boy Billy Tan has been working in Los Angeles for more than a decade, having worked on Top Cow comics, such as *Witchblade* and *Tomb Raider*. He initially majored in business in the US, but stayed on after his studies to pursue his childhood dream of being a comic book artist. He received his break when he tried Top Cow's talent search programme for new comic book artists, and struck gold when they gave him a drawing assignment in 1994. The rest is history and now Tan is helping the popular *X-Men* series for Marvel Comics, an indication that he has definitely hit the big time.

Over at DC Comics, it was editor Andy Helfer who spotted the talent of Tan Eng Huat at a Hong Kong comics convention in 1999, and saw

the potential of this young talent. Tan was Chinese-educated, but his limited English and the fact that he drew for DC Comics all the way from the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur obviously did not hamper his chances of working for one of the two biggest comics companies in America. Cheaper charges for overseas calls (he had weekly conversations with Helfer when he was given assignments for the relaunched *Doom Patrol* series in 2000) and the internet narrowed the distance between the artist and his employer. This is in contrast with the situation in the 1970s when Filipino artists had to relocate to the United States when they worked for DC and Marvel Comics.

Not all who have broken into the American circuit are working on superhero comics. Malaysian-born Sonny Liew is gaining a reputation in the alternative comics scene in America with his Xeric Foundation-funded series, *Malinky Robot* (featuring a couple of youngsters and oddball characters in a futuristic slum). Two issues of this acclaimed comic book have been released. Liew has

also found work with Vertigo Comics (the alternative comics imprint of DC Comics) and worked on the four-issue limited series, *My Faith In Frankie*. Incidentally, Liew cut his teeth as a comic strip artist when



Tan Eng Huat

he drew a daily strip called *Frankie and Poo* for Singapore's *The New Paper* in the early 1990s. He went to study at the Rhode Island School of Design in 2001, and was taught by David Mazzucchelli (famed artist of *Daredevil*, *Batman Year One* and *Rubber Blankets*). Liew is currently based in Singapore and doing freelance design work on top of drawing comics.

However, the two Tans and Liew were not the first ones to break into the American comic book market. In the 1970s, many Filipino artists were hired to work for DC Comics when its editor Carmine Infantino heard rumours about a strike by American artists at DC. He had also heard about the excellent work found in Filipino *komiks*, and decided to look for artists in the Philippines as backup. He flew to the Philippines, and secured the services of many top-notch artists. Ironically, the rumoured strike did not happen, but the gate was opened for the Filipino invasion of the USA with talented artists, such as the late Alfredo Alcala, who gave American artists a run for their money.

Whereas these pioneering Filipino artists had to move lock, stock and barrel to America, today's comics writers and artists in Southeast Asia can do their work in their own homeland (Alcala did not return to the Philippines, and passed away in the West Coast a few years ago).

Some have even ventured to publish their own comic books, and had them distributed in America. Singaporean Wee Tian Beng's *The Celestial Zone* has sold more than 10,000 copies in the US, Canada, and Europe in the past three years. His comics, produced by his own publishing house TCZ Studio, are distributed in America by Diamond Book Distributors (the world's largest distributor of English comics) and are listed in comics catalogue of Diamond's Previews.

Medical doctor Ng Suat Tong is another Singaporean writer who has gone down the publishing route. A frequent contributor of comics reviews for *The Comics Journal*, Ng has put out two volumes of *Rosetta*, an anthology published by Alternative Comics in America, which sought to introduce European and Asian comics to North America. Ng is the editor of these two volumes containing his own comics stories which were illustrated by Nick Bertozzi and Miriam Katin. The *Rosetta* volumes also have the scoop of having two new Lat (Malaysia) stories that gave American readers a chance to read Lat

before First Second's recent release of *Kampung Boy** for the Western book market.

Collaborations between Southeast Asian and European comic artists are also evident in the Asia-Europe Comics Project 2006 in Singapore. Organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation, it saw the involvement of artists from Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia's Alfi Zachkyelle, Lyra Garcellano of the Philippines (see interview on page 19) and Vietnam's Le Phuong.

Just thirty years ago, comic book artists in Southeast Asia would have to send their art samples by snail mail to America to get their work considered by DC and Marvel Comics. Today, globalization and technology have made it possible for comics artists in the region to reach out to a much wider audience in the West.

* *Kampung Boy* is a favourite of millions of readers in Southeast Asia. With masterful economy worthy of Charles Schultz, Lat recounts the life of Mat, a Muslim boy growing up in rural Malaysia in the 1950s: his adventures and mischief-making, fishing trips, religious study, and work on his family's rubber plantation. Meanwhile, the traditional way of life in his village (or kampung) is steadily disappearing, with tin mines and factory jobs gradually replacing family farms and rubber small-holders. When Mat himself leaves for boarding school, he can only hope that his familiar kampung will still be there when he returns. *Kampung Boy* is hilarious and affectionate, with brilliant, super-expressive artwork that opens a window into a world that has now nearly vanished (<http://www.powells.com>).

Lim Cheng Tju, a history teacher in Singapore, has written about cartoons, prints and popular culture in the *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, *International Journal of Comic Art* and *Print Quarterly*.

Images provided by author