

Critiques of Gender Ideology: women comic artists and their work in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT *Comic books in Hong Kong have traditionally been produced primarily by male artists for male audiences. Over the past 30 years of comic history in Hong Kong, only three works have been critical of dominant gender ideology. This paper examines these works and their varying approaches to gender politics in Hong Kong. It argues that these artists made use of a creative strategy that took into account the rapidly changing historical context and female audience to create messages that reflected dominant culture while also either subtly or directly questioning source elements of dominant gender ideology. In the 1960s and 1970s, the fashionable and at times frivolous imagery of Lee Wai-chun's 13-Dot Cartoons gave a newly emerging group of young women workers and students a confident feminine heroine and model of modern womanhood. In the late 1980s, the direct critique of Chan Ya capitalized on a moment of political insecurity to briefly introduce her unattractive but insightful characters and outsider perspective. Finally, in the late 1990s, Lau Lee-lee's self-proclaimed feminist work has combined a subtle and at times ambiguous style with shocking, taboo, and intensely personal themes, bringing them directly into the political realm.*

Introduction

Comic books constitute one of the most popular reading media of Hong Kong people (Wong and Yeung, 1999). The market share of locally produced comics in Hong Kong is dominated by boys' comics such as *Oriental Heroes*, *Young and Dangerous* and *God of Martial Arts*. And, like most places all over the world, Hong Kong's comic books, whether locally produced or imported from Japan or Taiwan, are highly stratified by gender in style, character profiles, content, and audience. Only a handful of woman comic artists throughout the past 30 years of the development of Hong Kong comics were able to make their way into the industry and publish their work. Like work by male artists, those by women artists are very gender coded. Most of the works by women comic artists are love stories and soft-hearted cartoons with the major female leading characters targeted at same-gender readers. Although most of the works by women artists in Hong Kong are similar, their works are important in capturing and reflecting gender values. Among their works, three groundbreaking artists have been critical of dominant gender ideology in

Hong Kong to varying degrees. This article examines their work within the rapidly changing social and economic environment of Hong Kong.

The three works examined in this study are *13-Dot Cartoons* by Lee Wai-chun, published from 1966 to 1980, *One Women-Three Markets* by Chan Ya, published in 1989, and *Mom's Drawer at the Bottom* by Lau Lee-lee, published in 1998. This article takes up this so far unexamined subject, starting with the stylish and non-confrontational image of women's abilities and concerns in the work of Lee Wai-chun, continuing with the direct critique of mainstream politics in the work of Chan Ya, and ending with the avowedly feminist and at times shocking work of Lau Lee-lee. This article traces gender ideological transformation in Hong Kong as it is reflected in the works of these three women artists. And it outlines the strategies of increasingly deliberate and direct ideological challenge employed to create critiques of gender norms in successive periods in Hong Kong's recent history.

Gender Ideology, Comic Humor, and Social Change

For over a century, gender has been one of the central topics of concern to theorists and practitioners in the general field of humour and in the more specialized field of comics (see Bruere and Beard, 1934; Meyer et al. 1980; Toth, 1994; Walker, 1988). There are several important reasons for this. As a form or mode of communication, humour has been a masculine genre because its use is understood as a manifestation of aggression (Walker, 1991, p. 61). In part because of this, women have been discouraged from participating in humorous genres, and have been discouraged from entering into fields such as stand-up comedy and comic art. Finally, because they have often been the subject of male-produced humor and have thus not found it funny, women have been found to be lacking in 'sense of humour.' In part because of these concerns, studies of humour have traditionally separated women's humor into its own genre. As Alice Sheppard notes (1991), 'we conceptualize "women humorists" as a special category because humour is implicitly defined as a male realm, and the terms comedian, cartoonist, and humorist are implicitly gender-referenced. We thus feel compelled to distinguish comediennes, woman/lady humorists and woman/lady cartoonists from their male counterparts' (p. 36). For women, the use of humour is in itself a politically charged act.

Comics constitute a specific stylistic genre of humour that has also been traditionally used to objectify and stereotype female characters and to entertain predominantly male audiences. Thus, those women who do venture into fields such as comic art are often aware of their 'outsider' position and the power of their medium to critique patriarchal ideology from a female perspective. As Trina Robbins (1999) points out, comics, and the venues where they are sold, have historically been areas of almost exclusively male activity, with women either marginalized or forced out. In the last few decades, comics with 'female' subject-matter have found a market niche very separate from that occupied by traditional, male-oriented comics. This has been no less true in Hong Kong than in other places.

As Williams (1958) and subsequent theorists of culture have argued, culture should be understood as broad trends and general causes that add up to a 'whole way of life' (Hebdige, 1979, p. 359) that can be studied by examining the meanings and values that make it up. The nature of comics as a means of social critique and as a factor in the process of social transformation has been observed by many. Martin Barker (1989) emphasizes the relevance of political and ideological themes in comic art, noting that 'the

history of comics is a history of controversies' that have involved arguments over the meaning and influence of comics (p. 19). At various times, the influence of comics over readers has been feared as direct and dangerous (*ibid.*). Comics have long been understood as an intensely popular, potentially subversive, and particularly influential form of mass communication, one that could threaten dominant norms and ideology and potentially create social upheaval.

Within the sub-field of comics, gender has been an especially important factor influencing content, ideology, and audience. Feminist cartoons have taken up issues related to their social contexts and contemporary issues related to sexuality, gender roles, and gender politics. Thus, women cartoonists, particularly those with feminist sensibilities, have often produced work that both reflects and encourages social change. As Kathleen Turner (1977) notes in her examination of American cartoon images of women's roles, comics usually depict contemporary settings and issues, such that 'like other symbolic acts, comics as popular art cannot be isolated from the times from which they developed and with which they contend' (p. 28). Turner observes that comics help people cope with their own situations by providing 'equipments for living that size up situations' (*ibid.*). Meyer et al.'s (1980) study of 100 years of cartoon images of women concludes that cartoons are an excellent source of information about changing roles for women over time. Patricia Williams Alley (1991) makes similar observations in her study of the works of two prominent women comic artists from different historical periods. She notes that the comics are helpful in determining 'changes over time in dominant cultural patterns' even when their ideas are 'not necessarily in harmony with the ideology of the dominant culture' (p. 117).

Just as Turner's (1977) and Meyer et al.'s (1980) articles traced the history of comic-conveyed images of women in U.S. comic strips over several decades, this article traces three particular Hong Kong comics from the 1960s through the 1990s, examining their treatment of gender roles and gender politics. While Turner's focus was on the rhetorical components and the functions of the comics examined, and Meyer et al. focused on thematic developments, this article examines ideological dimensions in a historical context. It argues that these three Hong Kong artists made use of a creative strategy that took into account contemporary concerns and the female audience to create messages that reflected dominant culture while also either subtly or directly questioning the sources of dominant gender ideology. Women's comics in Hong Kong, like other popular culture texts, have thus participated in the moving equilibrium that is cultural hegemony. In the 1960s and 1970s, the fashionable and at times frivolous imagery of Lee Wai-chun's *13-Dot Cartoons* gave a newly emerging group of young women workers and students a confident feminine heroine and fashion reference. In the late 1980s, the direct critique of Chan Ya capitalized on a moment of political insecurity to bring an outside perspective to issues of mainstream political concern. Finally, in the late 1990s, Lau Lee-lee's self-proclaimed feminist work has brought gender issues into the public eye through the use of keen observation of taboo and uncomfortable subjects.

13-Dot Cartoons: the emergence of images of the modern woman

With the improvement of the Hong Kong economy in the 1960s and 1970s, opportunities were created for women to join the work force in the industrialization stage (Westwood et al., 1995). These opportunities, once created, remained open to women. Work force participation of women in Hong Kong was at a steady 45–50% during the 1970s and 1980s (*ibid.*). With the increasing number of women working in the production



FIGURE 1. Cover of *13-Dot Cartoons*, by Lee Wai-chun, issue #1, 1966.

sector, many women enjoyed the freedom of being in control of their own finances and the power to create wealth on their own. The appearance of women comic artists in Hong Kong after the Second World War began in the 1960s, at a time when a significant percentage of young women first had some personal income as well as exposure to higher education.

Lee Wai-chun is the most outstanding woman comic artist from the 1960s, and no discussion of women's comics in Hong Kong can omit attention to her historic role. Her work *13-Dot Cartoons*, first published in 1966 (Fig. 1), ran continuously until the beginning of 1980, with 178 issues. The main character, Miss 13-Dot, is a tall, slender, attractive young woman who has adventures that were unusual and exciting for young female readers in the 1960s and 1970s. The name of '13-Dot' was taken from the Shanghaiese dialect referring to a modern but silly young woman. During the first two decades after the war, Hong Kong was full of new immigrants from mainland China. Among all newcomers, Shanghai was the symbol of fashion and sophistication in the local culture of Hong Kong at that time. To a certain extent, *13-Dot Cartoons* provided readers, including blue and white collar workers and college girls whose parents had spare money, with important fashion trend messages. The image of Miss 13-Dot represented a Westernized modern identity and model for the local Chinese women, and this influence is obvious especially before the arrival of Hong Kong television's golden era in the mid-1970s. The name '13-Dot' provided a humorous frame of meaning through which some subtle critiques of gender ideology could be conveyed without directly challenging or threatening dominant ideas about women and their sphere and abilities.

The emergence of Lee Wai-chun's *13-Dot Cartoons* coincided not only with the improving social and economic environment of Hong Kong, but also with the rise of local popular culture led by popular films featuring stars such as Chan Po-chu and Josephine Siao Fong-fong who represented modern young women at that time. The mass-mediated images of Westernized women projected by Chan and Siao were the

reference models for young people growing up in Hong Kong in the 1960s (Ku, 1998). Similarly, Miss 13-Dot was also a reference model on paper for its female readers. Young women copied the styles they found in the comics for their own clothing, and sometimes even took copies of the comic to their tailors as model patterns. The popularity of the *13-Dot Cartoons* is due partly to the way it matched the cultural and social changes of Hong Kong at that time (Wong, 1997).

The countless fashion styles worn by the main character, Miss 13-Dot, and drawn meticulously in every issue are the most established achievement and most easily recognizable characteristic of *13-Dot Cartoons*. Lee's readers were known to carefully count the number of fashionable outfits worn by Miss 13-Dot. For example, a letter from a reader published in issue number 32 counts a total of 1,728 pieces of fashionable clothing depicted from issues number 1 to 28, an average of 62 pieces of clothing in every 56-page issue. The focus on fashions and modern material life in the *13-Dot Cartoons* played an important role in educating readers how to dress like, and live like, a modern woman. The *13-Dot Cartoons* can be criticized as silly and materialistic because it was mainly about a fantasy world of changing different outfits, playing with new and advanced products, and enjoying a life of luxury. The depiction of the life of care-free millionaire's daughter 13-Dot revolves around unrealistic settings and scenarios which were out of reach for the majority at that time, when most people were still struggling for a daily living (Chow, 1997). However, *13-Dot Cartoons* did provide a new positive image for young female readers, very different from the usual women characters in Hong Kong comics by male artists. Such images include those found in the *Master O* by Wong Chak in 1964 or *Ah Lang and Dummy Seven* by Hang-san Ah-wong in 1966, where the main women characters were usually thin and flat chested, nasty women rather than energetic, healthy, and young women as Lee created in the *13-Dot Cartoons* (Wong and Yeung, 1999). Lee's image of women not only brought a modern reference for its women readers at that time, but also provided a confident and adventurous heroine with whom to identify.

13-Dot Cartoons followed a story format with just one narrative in each issue rather than one story line per strip. The fictional stories did project a model of how to consume in the modern way (Wong, 1997). However, many stories also conveyed the idea of gender equality through their narratives. They did not accommodate the dominant ideology of traditional Chinese values according to which men are always more important than and superior to women, but they also did not directly challenge it. For instance, issue number 55, 'Preference for daughter rather than son,' depicts a father as uninterested in taking a second wife, which was still legal at that time in Hong Kong. In not taking a second wife to try for a son, this father also shows preference for the daughter he already has. The story line does not overtly critique the practice of husbands taking multiple wives or the preference for sons, but the sympathetic and positive character of this husband/father is simply shown to be uninterested in doing so. In order to show a daughter is as good as son, Lee depicted Miss 13-Dot winning a car race and a winter swimming contest, and even becoming a bull fighter (Fig. 2). All these amazing events show a woman being as competent as men, or even better. In contrast to the wonderful daughter 13-Dot, two families in the story have sons. One spends all the family fortune and the other refuses to recognize his father after achieving social success. Shifts in social practice are suggested, but not openly advocated. *13-Dot Cartoons* relied on the popular appeal of fashionable design, light story lines and an admittedly 'silly' protagonist to attract a wide mainstream female audience, balanced against the elements of a positive female heroine and occasional situations related to gender issues.



FIGURE 2. Miss 13-Dot becomes a bull-fighter, insert from *13-Dot Cartoons*, issue #55, frame #306, 1969.

The outgoing and cheerful characters of *13-Dot Cartoons* were considered as avant garde in the history of comics of Hong Kong. Indeed, *13-Dot Cartoons* created by Lee in the mid-1960s were situated at the crossroads of the pressure of traditional values and new social expectations for women. This cartoon promulgated consumerism and was in some ways impractical and unrealistic. However, this comic to a certain extent did refuse to accept the assigned duty and stereotyped roles for women in the society of the 1960s, going beyond the traditional values to provide an image of new gender roles of women, and to construct positive women's images that accommodate the cultural and social changes in Hong Kong. With continued economic, educational and legal developments, the status and visibility of women increased and formed the improved situation of Hong Kong society in the 1970s and 1980s, and the *13-Dot Cartoons* became less popular in the mid to late 1970s; they ceased in 1980. As experience with the workplace and higher education became more commonplace for Hong Kong's women, it is likely that the fantasy- and fashion-related themes of *13-Dot Cartoons* became less and less relevant to the issues and concerns facing them.

One Woman—Three Markets: making voices of a pre-feminist perspective

By the late 1980s, many elements of gender equality had been achieved in Hong Kong. Families were spending approximately equal amounts of money on the primary and secondary school education of boys and girls (Equal Opportunities Commission of Hong Kong, 1997). Although parents retained the traditional preference for male children, this preference was no longer strong enough for them to continue producing children to try for a boy (Martin, 1997). Under such circumstances, women in Hong Kong were able to demonstrate their ability and receive recognition from the wider society. Many women were able to further their studies, and those who could not get into post-secondary education had opportunities for employment in the commercial sector. Women's work force participation was constant and took on an importance in women's identity at least



FIGURE 3. Cover of *One Woman-Three Markets*, by Chan Ya, 1989.

equal to that of their role as mothers (*ibid.*). Also, many successful women became socially recognized figures in politics, education, and other fields. For women with secondary school or university education, hard work was almost a guarantee of success. These basic facts of the historical trajectory of the Hong Kong economy and its relationship to workplace opportunities for Hong Kong women undoubtedly influenced the development of women's comics and women comic artists in Hong Kong.

After *13-Dot Cartoons* came to a close, there were almost no prominent local women comic artists in Hong Kong during the whole decade of the 1980s. Female comics reading materials were dominated by imported Japanese comics. Then, in 1989 Chan Ya began publishing comics openly critical of mainstream political figures and events. Chan Ya's full-time job was as a newspaper columnist, and her comic work was just a sideline activity. She produced only one book of comics that was a collection of work previously published in *Sun Man Pao*, a pro-China newspaper, from March to June, 1989, a period that spanned the Tiananmen crackdown in mainland China. As a pro-mainland paper, *Sun Man Pao* became more restrictive about content after the Tiananmen events, cancelling Chan Ya's comic strip and other liberal/critical features not favorable to the mainland government's actions. After a three-month break from publishing, Chan Ya's collected strips from the newspaper were published in a single volume entitled *One Woman-Three Markets* (Fig. 3).

The main character of Chan Ya's comic strips is a big-nosed, thick-lipped, flat-chested woman with her face slightly out of proportion. This character fits Montresor's (1994) definition of the 'grotesque,' which is often used by women comic artists to subvert 'conventional standards of feminine beauty' (p. 335). Like all of Chan Ya's characters, she has no name. The characters simply call each other role-based names such as boyfriend, husband, medical doctor, or simple pronouns such as you, me, or he. The

book is divided into the two categories of politics and gender. Its cover features quotations from various Western philosophers and writers such as Nietzsche, DeBeauvoir, Aristotle, and Shakespeare. With these quotations on the cover, the writer makes herself known as a postmodern, educated woman, and suggests the serious subject matter within. The collection of comic strips covers a wide range of political topics. Regarding the June 4 incident it includes 'Sadness' (p. 13), 'Lying With Reasons' (p. 19), and 'Great Spectacle' (p. 28). For criticizing the hypocrisies of politics, the book includes 'Speechless' (p. 38), 'National Characteristics' (p. 37), and 'Martin Lee's Style' (p. 51). Reflecting on women's sexual characteristics are 'Why?' (p. 27) and 'Flexibility' (p. 57), as well as quite a number of strips dealing with strong and independent attitudes of women, and power relations between men and women. These include 'Good Strategy' (p. 62), 'Wife's Outfit' (p. 71), 'Charity of the Day' (p. 86), and 'Short-term Use' (p. 55).

Because she already had connections with the newspaper (a small circulation evening newspaper), Chan Ya was able to gain a publishing venue for her cartoons almost immediately without having to build up a popular following. With this unusual set of circumstances for her career as a comic artist, Chan Ya remains the most prominent female critic of political figures and events in Hong Kong comic history. Her brief existence as a comic artist can be attributed to her unusual career path and the unique historical circumstances under which she began and ended her comic art, as the events in Tiananmen reached a crisis point and resulted in unexpected physical repression. Clearly the ideological content of her work was the main reason the strip was cancelled. Her work consisted of direct critique of political figures and events, without a softening style or other creative elements that could cushion her message.

Chan Ya expressed the main theme of the comic strip by watching and criticizing society sarcastically and succinctly. For example, on the subject of Tiananmen, a cartoon entitled 'Feeling Sad' (p. 13) depicts the main character's friend saying that she has just made her mother cry by saying that she was hungry. The phrase 'mother, I am hungry' was used as a protest slogan on signs held by student demonstrators on hunger strike at Tiananmen to criticize the government's inability to adequately meet the needs of the people (Fig. 4). Similarly, a strip entitled 'How Spectacular' (p. 28) depicts a young girl talking to an older woman, saying that her friend missed an appointment and must be caught in traffic. The other woman corrects her by noting that in fact the missing friend was the last student to leave Tiananmen Square. By implication, he will never make the appointment, because as the 'last student to leave' he must have been killed. Chan Ya's style directly critiqued mainstream politics, often without reference to gender. Chan Ya's work thus tended to be not only direct but to take on a range of serious topics from the mainstream political sphere.

Her work within the 'Gender' section covers matters related to male-female relationships. In 'Humanitarian' (p. 53) the main character tells her friend that she should not allow her boyfriend to have 'one foot on several boats' and that the boyfriend should be able to refuse some of the offers he gets from women. The girlfriend replies that he is friendly to all women because he is a humanitarian. In 'High Tech' (p. 62) two women are talking vaguely about going out with a man who always holds his girlfriend's hand in public and who always says he loves her. The friend notes that this is only because this is the usual way for men to stop a woman from buying things. Chan Ya's critiques are equally likely to point out foibles of female behaviour and character as those of men. In 'Bluffing' (p. 159) one character states that her husband is really great. The listener, also a woman, reacts by thinking that the woman is lying because 'people who are selling something always say what they have is the best.' Some of Chan Ya's material also



FIGURE 4. "Feeling Sad." by Chan Ya (1989), p. 13.

presents a critique based on class consciousness. In "The Face of Class" (p. 165) she depicts a grumpy-looking woman whose look is so negative that other people wonder who she is. In the final frame it turns out she is the wife of the boss. In another strip, "Association" (p. 171) a woman asks a man if he likes dogs, and he replies that he is not fond of dogs because they are a reminder of his position in the company.

Unfortunately, after her newspaper comic strip was cancelled, and with the publication of her book in September, 1989, Chan Ya's output as a comic artist came to an end. She did not resume publication of her comics in any other periodical, and the collection *One Woman—Three Markets* included only previously published strips. It is possible that her work was too direct and confrontational to gain a popular following, especially since it did not include any mitigating features that would allow readers other possibilities for interpretation or reading enjoyment.

Mom's Drawer at the Bottom: the arrival of self-styled feminism

After Chan Ya's work was published in 1989, there was no other prominent politically oppositional female comic artist in Hong Kong until the emergence of self-proclaimed feminist Lau Lee-lee in the late 1990s. Traditional gender ideology in many areas persisted into the 1990s in Hong Kong. Hong Kong women were gaining success and

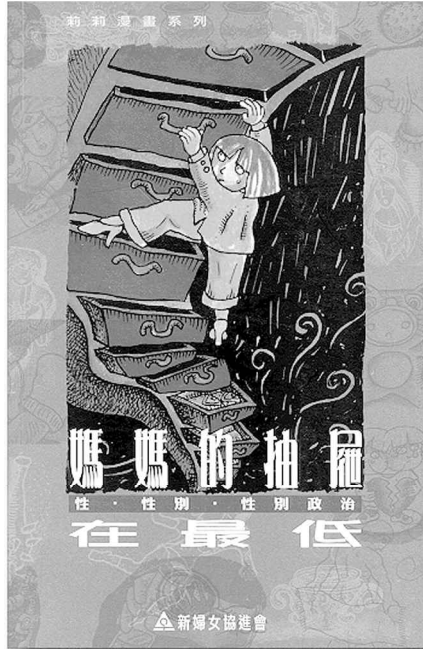


FIGURE 5. Cover of *Mom's Drawer at the Bottom*, by Lau lee-lee, 1998.

public attention in the 1990s, particularly in mainstream politics, and the status of women and men in Hong Kong seemed to be gaining equality. However, women were still making less than men in the same jobs, there was still discrimination against women in the business sector, and the mass media were still exploiting women's images. According to a survey of gender equality (Equal Opportunities Commission of Hong Kong, 1997), people who used the media for entertainment were more likely to have 'stereotypic perception of women' (p. 15). In addition, most people agreed that gender discrimination was still common, with dismissal due to pregnancy, sexual harassment, and specification of gender in job advertisements the most common forms recognized. Many of these topics appeared in Lau's 1998 collection *Mom's Drawer at the Bottom* (Fig. 5). Although the equality of the sexes and the education of the people in general in Hong Kong was much better than in the 1960s, and laws supported gender equality, still Hong Kong people had not developed a progressive mentality with attitudes supportive of the principle of full gender equality. Lau Lee-lee's comics call attention to lingering ideological biases against women. As the first Hong Kong comic artist to label herself a feminist, Lau deliberately engages gender politics and ideology, often by using simple observation rather than polemical argument.

Walker (1991) has observed about the emergence of radical feminism (and radical feminist humour) in the United States that the central enabling factor is 'a critical mass' (p. 72) of women who have experience outside the home. This provides them with exposure to the realities of patriarchal ideology and its accompanying discriminations against women. By the late 1990s, Hong Kong did have such a group of well-educated and experienced professional women who might understand and appreciate Lau Lee-lee's message. Almost immediately, her work generated some media attention and



FIGURE 6. “Sex Counts,” by Lau Lee-lee (1998), p. 57.

sparked discussion of the ideology of feminism in Hong Kong. Her work contains enough ambiguity and subtlety that it may draw its audience partly from non-feminist readers as well. Whatever the reason, Lau Lee-lee’s work provides an unusual mixture of ideological elements. In content it is often shocking, covering taboo and extremely personal subjects. In style, though, it employs flat, direct observation rather than argument or the articulation of feminist concepts and principles. Many strips are almost entirely visual, or rely on the visuals to portray the more shocking or disturbing elements.

In contrast to previous works of women comic artists in Hong Kong, *Mom’s Drawer at the Bottom* published in 1998 is the first self-proclaimed collection of feminist comics. Lau (1998) sees the ‘promotion of self-determined sexual desire’ (p. 1) as a central part of her project. The main themes are concerned with power issues in gender politics. In Lau’s words, the motivation behind her comic work is the optimistic idea that ‘to resist and disrupt, the beginning is never far away’ (p. 201). Thus, the fundamental motivation of the creation of this comic is precisely the central purpose used by Kaufman (1994) and others to define feminist humour: the use of humour to expose reality in order to express a desire for change toward a better society. Using the label of ‘feminist’ is the result of some internal struggle, since the term is misinterpreted in many ways in Hong Kong, and is often even considered to mean a dogmatic ideologue (Lau, 1998). However, none of her characters proclaim feminism as an ideological home. Rather, they are average people making simple observations, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions.

Perhaps the most basic and important element of feminist humour is its direct attack on traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Lau engages in this strategy frequently, with numerous strips on how society unfairly views men and women differently. In one story, ‘Sex Counts’ (p. 57) (Fig. 6), Lau makes a commentary on the power of sexual



FIGURE 7. "Who's Next," by Lau Lee-lee (1998), p. 91.

stereotyping, noting that the character of a baby might be influenced by many things, but that social influences, represented by gendered toys, are the most important. Her style, though direct, does not overtly state 'this is wrong,' but tends rather to leave the reader to draw a conclusion about the simple observations on gender bias she has presented. In two very similar strips, 'Superior Jobs' (p. 95) and 'Body Sell' (p. 97), the negative reputation of prostitutes is called into question. In 'Superior Jobs,' occupations such as lawyer, senator, and real estate agent are compared to prostitution, as a prostitute comments that she does not understand any difference between their pursuit of desire and hers.

Lau goes further than direct feminist critique of cultural norms, gender roles, myths, and biases, bringing private and taboo subjects to the surface and often using visuals as the central element of critique. In 'Who's Next?' (p. 91) (Fig. 7), a young girl is shown cornered by a dark shadow, which turns out to be her father. The father is never clearly drawn, and has no spoken lines, so he is not really 'characterized' or 'stereotyped,' but the shadow grows larger and eventually threatens to blot out the whole frame. Readers can see that the father is sexually abusing the daughter, but this is never stated or shown explicitly in the strip. Rather, the daughter's thoughts are written while the visuals show her increasingly obliterated by the dark shadow. At one point she thinks 'I can move out when I grow up.' But, in the end, the final frame's view of the police station suggests that she has decided to tell her story so that her sister will not also become a victim. The image of the police station at the end also emphasizes the serious criminal nature of child abuse.

Lau's comics, although just beginning to gain some recognition, already mark an important first step that no other female comic artist has achieved so far in Hong Kong,

in being avowedly feminist. However, with the remaining elements of unequal gender ideology and the general lack of acceptance of feminism, Lau's work contains key elements that soften its ideological impact. While addressing themes of central importance in feminist ideology including taboo and highly personal subjects, Lau employs a non-didactic and at times ambiguous style, and often uses the visual dimension of her work to carry the more controversial or shocking elements of her message.

Conclusion

Women comic artists in Hong Kong have been few and far between over the last three decades. This article has examined the work of the three most ideologically critical of them in their historical contexts, arguing that their works have included elements critical of dominant gender ideology in three distinctly different ways, each in keeping with the social and economic context of their production. In the case of Lee Wai-chun, a focus on glamour, fashion, and consumerism was combined with a unique and admirable heroine and treatment of gender issues in some stories to engage a newly emerging audience of somewhat independent young women eager to see themselves as modern and sophisticated. Chan Ya's work before, during and after the Tiananmen Square crackdown in Beijing in 1989 made use of direct critical commentary of contemporary political figures and serious political issues, with frequent emphasis on gender politics. In the case of Lau Lee-lee, examinations of taboo subjects such as incest, masturbation, and menstruation are combined with a subtle style that understates its critique and allows readers to gather key elements of meaning from the visuals. The combination addresses a readership of feminists as well as non-feminists who may have some interest in the issues Lau examines.

The work of all three of these artists illustrates how style and content in comics does reflect the historical context in which they are produced, and that they can be adjusted to accommodate different audiences. In addition, it begins to suggest the wide range of techniques and approaches that can be used to deal with issues of gender and politics in the Hong Kong.

Remarks

The names of Hong Kong artists used here are romanized versions of the original Cantonese. All of the Hong Kong comic works under discussion were written and published only in Chinese. Comics were translated for this article by the authors.

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