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Hong Kong *Manhua*: “Males’ Work for Male Readers”

1. Introduction

Hong Kong *manhua* or Hong Kong Comics, which is somewhat similar to Japanese manga in definition, is the collective term that includes cartoons, comics, and picture story books. Yet, while manga has a very wide variety of genres and is read by both sexes and all ages, Hong Kong *manhua* is in a way the opposite case. It is restrictively defined as “an exotic world of political satire [and] Kung-fu fighters” (Wong 5), has a far smaller readership than manga, and is for the most part consumed inside Hong Kong—“it has not been officially translated into other languages for approximately twenty years [as in 2008]” (138). Since the late 1980s, the comic industry in Hong Kong has developed into what is called as “an oligarchy industry” comprised of two exceedingly popular works, namely Cowman’s *Teddyboy* and Tony Wong’s *Dragon Tiger Gate* (Lo 13). In the meantime, due to the growing popularity of Japanese manga, the market has eliminated most other locally drawn comics which failed to stand out from other titles. Based upon the two aforementioned titles which are still competing intensely amongst each other, this paper will first briefly discuss the historical background of these works, through

which I would further argue that Hong Kong *manhua* and its culture are predominantly the province of men, because of the fact that it is still not socially acceptable for females to read *manhua* and that it is difficult for female readers to identify with the female characters as depicted in *manhua*.

2. Historical Background of *Teddyboy* and *Dragon Tiger Gate*

First of all, it is important to explain what Lo Suk-Wa was referring to when she described the comic industry in Hong Kong as “an oligarchy industry” (13). According to a market research conducted in 2007, it was reported that Cowboy’s *Teddyboy* and Tony Wong’s *Dragon Tiger Gate* already took up “more than eighty-percent of total sales in the [comic] industry”; for the rest of the twenty-percent, which included titles such as “*Bruce Lee: The Legend*, *Heroes of Spring-Autumn*, *Legend of Thunder Wang*, *Hung the Martial King*”, were all written and illustrated by Kingcomics, a company founded and still owned by Tony Wong (“Interviewing Wong Yuk Long Tony”). Therefore, Tony Wong has been known as the father of contemporary Hong Kong comic—not just because he is the comic artist of *Dragon Tiger Gate*, but also for publishing most titles in the market only except for *Teddyboy*.

Both *Dragon Tiger Gate* and *Teddyboy* have been highly-regarded by scholars in the field of cultural studies in Hong Kong, yet also widely-criticized by concerning parents and educationalists. On the one hand, some scholars believe that both works have successfully represented “a very local, urbanized way of life in Hong Kong” since the 1950s (Lo 45). Wang-Lee mentions that the contextual and geographical settings of the two works, especially

Teddyboy, accurately illustrate how Hong Kong has evolved from a scarcely-populated fishing village to a “highly urbanized big city left almost unattended by British and Chinese government...[which led] to the rise of various triad gangs, including 14K, *Hung Hing*, *Sun Yee-On*, to name just a few examples” (52). The depiction of the abovementioned triad gangs and the closely-related triad culture in Hong Kong comics, as well as in Hong Kong movies in the 1990s, is important and “conducive to shape the contemporary urban lifestyle and pop culture” in Hong Kong (54). Furthermore, Tony Wong always modifies his drawing style—drawings in his *Dragon Tiger Gate* in the third edition are more serious and less comical compared to the first edition published in 1970 (see Appendix A for several visual comparisons). In her critique published in 2008, Wendy Wong attributes Tony Wong’s success of making *Dragon Tiger Gate* the best-selling Hong Kong comic from 2002 to 2007 to “[his] more and more mature drawings in recent years which ... mix Chinese martial arts well with the artistic style found in American ‘superhero’ type graphic novels” (46-47). In short, both works are significant in reflecting as well as constructing a Hong Kong culture not just because they represent the already-existing, somewhat darker, ways of life, but also inspire new cultures such as in *Dragon Tiger Gate* where Tony Wong manages to amalgamate different artistic styles.

Yet, on the other hand, many are concerned that these works would instill immoral values in the younger generation. In recent decades, Hong Kong comics in general have come very close to “glorifying violence and vice” (Corrine 117), not to mention that the Cowman’s *Teddyboy* has frequently overstepped the acceptable, perhaps tight, boundaries of violent and

sexual content according to local publishing laws. It has also been criticized for being misogynistic as well as exalting the brutality and horrors of the atrocities done by “*Hung Hing*”, a real triad gang stemmed from the old districts of Hong Kong. As a matter of fact, to prevent it from inflicting psychological harm on young children, *Teddyboy* was required by the government to be packaged and sold in a sealed envelope-like paper bag since the mid-1990s until around late 2010. Such laws in fact have loosened since then and the latest issues of *Teddyboy* no longer come with the paper bag, but simply with a warning notice at the bottom of the cover page which says “[t]his article contains material which may offend and may not be distributed, circulated, sold, hired, given, lent, shown, played or projected to a person under the age of 18” (“Why No More Bags?”). For this reason, Corrine reports that in recent years there has actually been a tendency for parents to “encourage the youth to read manga” (127), which virtually incorporates a wider range of genres and more titles with lighter themes as compared with Hong Kong comics.

Another thing that is worthy of note is that Hong Kong *manhua* is a women-less industry. During Hong Kong Comic and Anime Expo in 2008, Tony Wong, commonly acknowledged as the father of Hong Kong comics, was asked by a Korean reporter to define Hong Kong *manhua*. In response to the question, Wong did not highlight what is so special about his work itself or its artistic representation or style, but defined it in terms of its production and consumption by stressing that “*manhua* is males’ work for male readers”. He furthered explained that “not that we are misogynists, but not a single lady has applied for our job at least for the last five year”

and that “there wasn’t any female comic artist in the whole industry but only one illustration handler, who is fifty-eight years old and retiring in a few years [as in 2008]” (“Interviewing Wong Yuk Long Tony”). In order to understand why this is happening to the industry, it is important to contextualize the following arguments with the cultural as well as historical background of Hong Kong, which indeed shapes the local comic industry from time to time.

3. Male-Oriented Genres

First of all, almost all titles still being sold in the market belong to male-oriented genres, which are predominantly martial arts comics and gangster comics. In Matt Chen’s ethnographic research conducted in 2005, he emphasizes the fact that almost all real-life gangsters in Hong Kong come from what is commonly known as *wuguan*, or martial arts club. These clubs “stemmed from Southeast China and, for better or worse, are historically connected to anti-government underground society”, or what is better known today as triad gang (17). Many of these martial arts clubs today still try to avoid admitting female students because the traditional thinking, namely “fighting is only for men”, is still deeply-rooted among the older martial arts masters. Interestingly, in public imagination, all kinds of fighting in Hong Kong are associated with gangster activities, including those “international fighting championships organized by world-renowned martial arts clubs outside Hong Kong” (Chen 19). According to his interviewees, Matt Chen highlights that this somewhat distorted or biased view towards martial arts is in fact shaped by *Teddyboy* the movie series, which are based on the corresponding comics where fighting is not just a criminal but also a deadly business.

Modern as it may seem, Hong Kong still is a very conservative place when it comes to gender roles and gender relations. While it is fitting for men to read Hong Kong *manhua* which has strong macho and masculine orientation; it is so hard to conceive a lady reading a comic book which centers on some real-life gangsters with panels depicting some very intensive as well as massive fighting scenes. As a matter of fact, the above discussion can also be applied beyond comic-reading phenomenon in Hong Kong. In order to become a socially acceptable woman in Hong Kong, she should avoid getting involved in all kinds of activities in society which are more oriented to males including but not restricted to smoking, drinking alcohol, gambling, even driving and the like. This does not mean that women in Hong Kong are severely disempowered and subordinate to men; they are only limited in certain domains. In other aspects of life, they have complete authority over their male counterparts, including cooking, raising children, dancing, bookkeeping, to name but a few. Since Hong Kong comics incorporate topics which only and entirely belong to males' way of life, they are all male-oriented and thus women are not expected to read them. However, as mentioned previously, women are always welcomed by manga, which virtually has a wider range of genres and more titles with lighter themes (Corrine 127).

4. Heavily Politicized and Leftist

Hong Kong *manhua* is always sensitive in a sense that politics, or more precisely radical politics, is one of the most recurring themes in the two works mentioned earlier. Both works do not simply discuss political issues, but very frequently serve as a political propaganda to

promote certain politicians while blackening other political rivals. What is of note here is that *Teddyboy* never use pseudonyms, but real names, when referring to politicians, whom Cowman might praise or severely criticize. For example, in *Teddyboy's* 1009th issue published last July during chief executive election in Hong Kong, one participant Chun-Ying Leung, better known as CY Leung, is explicitly portrayed as coming from the underground Chinese Communist Party and also having connection to *Sun Yee-on*, one of the most prominent gangs in Hong Kong in recent years (Cowman 15). Appendix B records a detailed visual comparison between the real-life version and the fictional version of CY Leung for reference. This particular example reflects that political criticism in Hong Kong *manhua* is rather direct and blunt. In *Politics and Pop Culture in Education*, Lo Suk-Wa emphasizes that women in Hong Kong are more politically passive when compared to women in other East Asian countries, except China. According to her study, in 2007 Legislative Council election, “the voting rate of women is only 18%, which is far lower than that of their male counterparts (34%)” (56); in the meantime, gender distribution in the Council in 2007 was “in the proportion of around 5 males to 2 females” (59). In this sense, due to the political passiveness among women and a lack of political opportunities for women in Hong Kong, Hong Kong *manhua* is not likely to have a large female readership because most of the works are heavily politicized.

Not only is Hong Kong *manhua* heavily politicized, it also has a strong undertone of radical leftist values. This can be exemplified by *Dragon Tiger Gate's* 1267th issue when Wang Yeung-Tat, one of the co-founders of People Power (an extreme left party in Hong Kong), is first

introduced (Wong 23). Though he does not know any martial arts at all, he is depicted as a heroic figure in the comic who organizes labor union uprising against the corrupt communist government as well as the evil capitalists and offer assistance to the disadvantaged workers — one of whom is inspired by Wang, who represents social justice in the comic, and later joins the protagonists from *Dragon Tiger Gate*, which literally means “Dragon Tiger Martial Arts Club”. Appendix C records one scene from that issue when Wang is declaring his political stance to the public. Again, according to Lo Suk-Wa’s demographic research on voting patterns in Hong Kong, it is reported that women in general are “far more ‘right’ than ‘left’” in terms of political stance (7). Therefore, it is not surprising at all that Hong Kong *manhua* in general does not easily attract a female readership because it is too radical and violent for Hong Kong women, who are conceived by the public as “the milder rightists” and would hate to relate to “plots to shoot government officials and plans to assassinate the chief executive, for example in *Teddyboy*” (7-8).

5. Unrelatable Female Characters

Female characters as depicted in Hong Kong *manhua*, if any, are hardly relatable to female readers. In fact, there are only very few female characters in both *Teddyboy* and *Dragon Tiger Gate*. It is noteworthy that when they do appear in any of the comics, they are not significant to the plot and do not usually sustain over a few issues. Out of the three books I brought to class for presentation, there are indeed only a total of two female characters who do not even seem to be recognizable or important characters. What makes it worse is that females are very

frequently depicted as sexualized objects—appendix D captures a scene from the recently published *Teddyboy's* issue 1115th where the protagonist is committing a non-consensual sex act with a random woman in someone's house (Cowman 11). The story itself does not say where the house is, whose house it is, why the protagonist suddenly enters some kind of a house and why there is a barely-dressed woman in the house. It basically happens without a reason and there does not seem to be a tendency to explain the significance of this scene to the plot development. This somehow suggests that the sex scene is solely designed to satisfy nothing but the male gaze. Apart from being portrayed as sexualized objects, this scene further illustrates that female characters in Hong Kong comics are subordinate to male characters and are physically, as well as mentally, fragile. This is where the problem lies—in reality, women in Hong Kong are by no means subordinate to men and do not appear as fragile as depicted in Hong Kong comics. As mentioned earlier, women and men have different gender roles and both groups have their own provinces where they can claim complete authority over the other sex in Hong Kong. Therefore, the portrayal of women in Hong Kong *manhua* is to a large extent unrealistic, no wonder why female readers fail to identify with female characters in most of the works.

6. Conclusion

Unlike the study of manga, Hong Kong *manhua* has not received much scholarly attention at all, even though it is widely-accepted as an important part of the local pop culture. One of the reasons contributing to this fact might be that *manhua* in general is still conceived as “a low

form of art” (Lo 12)—on the other side of the continuum probably would be text-based literature or oil painting. However limited in scope this research paper might be, I have tried to connect the historical, contextual as well as cultural background of Hong Kong to some cultural-specific practices in its comic industry. In particular, this paper has argued that Hong Kong *manhua* and the its culture are predominantly the men’s province due to the fact that there are limited elements or genres for a female readership, that the comic books are heavily politicized as well as leftist which is generally inconsistent with women’s political stance there, and that female characters are hardly relatable to female readers in Hong Kong.

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Appendix A

1970s: *Little Rascals* Issue 50 (Cover Page)



1982: *Dragon Tiger Gate Heroes* Issue 566 (Cover Page)



2000: *Dragon Tiger Gate* Issue 443 (Cover Page)



Appendix B

Chun-Ying Leung, current chief executive of Hong Kong (real-person):



Fictional version of Chun-Ying Leung in *Teddyboy Issue 1009* (Cowman 15):



Appendix C

Wang Yeung-Tat, one of the co-founders of People Power (real-person):



Fictional version of Wang Yeung-Tat in *Dragon Tiger Gate* Issue 1267 (Wong 23):



Appendix D

Non-consensual sex act in *Teddyboy Issue 1115* (Cowman 11):

