

Wong, Wendy, & Lisa Cuklanz. (2001). "Humor and Gender Politics: A Textual Analysis of the First Feminist Comic in Hong Kong." In Matthew P. McAllister, Edward Sewall, and Ian Gordon (Eds.), *Comics and Ideology* (pp. 69–98). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

## Chapter 4

# Humor and Gender Politics: A Textual Analysis of the First Feminist Comic in Hong Kong

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Comic books constitute one of the most popular reading media of Hong Kong people. The market share of locally produced comics in Hong Kong is dominated by boys' comics such as *Oriental Heroes*, *Bruce Lee* and *Wind and Cloud* (Wong & Yeung, 1999). 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. There is a clear division of audience into male or female, with boys reading action comics, and girls reading "soft" comics about romance rather than martial arts. There are very few locally produced comics designed for female audiences, and women comic artists are also very rare in the history of Hong Kong comics.

Reviewing the past 30 years of the development of Hong Kong comics, only about 10 women comics artists of any note can be found. These include, from the 1960s, Lee Wai-chun, Kwan Shan-mei, and Tse Ling-ling; from the 1970s, Kam Tung-fung; in the late 1980s, Chan Ya; in the 1990s, Mak Ka-pik, and Shuet Ching, and most recently, Lau Lee-lee. Only three of these, Lee Wai-chun, Chan Ya, and Lau Lee-lee, can be described as in any way prominent. Although this list of women comics artists of Hong Kong is short, it does not mean the topic is not worth examination, research, and analysis. Rather, this is a topic that has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. The only scholarly article in the field of communication on gender in cartoons in Hong Kong examines television cartoons

rather than print comics (Chu & McIntyre, 1995), and two articles cover the general field of comic art in Hong Kong (Lent, 1995; Bolton & Hutton, 1997). This chapter thus takes up an important but so far unexamined subject, that of women cartoonists in Hong Kong. More specifically, it examines the recent work *Mom's Drawer at the Bottom* by Lau Lee-lee (1998)<sup>1</sup> in historical and cultural context, arguing that as the first self-proclaimed feminist cartoon in Hong Kong Lau's work displays many of the central defining elements of feminist humor while adding new dimensions uniquely suited to the Hong Kong context. The following sections outline the relationships of gender, humor, feminist social critique, and comics. Then, the chapter provides a brief history of key women comics artists in Hong Kong. Finally, it provides a detailed examination of the themes and ideology in Lau's book to illustrate the ways in which it provides a feminist critique and vision within the Hong Kong context.

### Gender Ideology and Humor

For over a century, gender has been one of the central topics of concern to theorists and practitioners in the general field of humor and in the more specialized field of comics (see Bruere & Beard, 1934; Meyer et al. 1980; Toth, 1994; Walker, 1988). There are several important reasons for this. As a form or mode of communication, humor 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 from entering 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 lacking in "sense of humor." As Alice Sheppard notes: "We conceptualize 'women humorists' as a special category because humor 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" (Sheppard, 1991, p. 36). Woman-authored humor is still studied separately from that of men for these reasons.

For women, the use of humor is in itself a politically charged act. 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 and norms 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 recent 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.

The nature of comics as a means of social critique and as a factor in the political sphere has been observed by many. As Kathleen Turner (1977) notes, comics usually depict contemporary settings and issues, so 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" (p. 28). Martin Barker also 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 (Barker, 1989, p. 19). Within the sub-field of comics, gender has been an especially important factor influencing content, ideology, and audience. Like other types of comic art, especially other political cartoons, feminist cartoons have taken part in their social contexts and surrounding controversies.

### Feminist Humor as Social Critique

Feminist humor can of course be defined in many ways, but several consistent definitional themes emerge among the many efforts to delimit this genre of humorous political discourse. A particularly clear and useful definition is offered by Gloria Kaufman (1994) in "Pulling our own strings: Feminist humor and satire." She writes: "Feminist humor is based on the perception that societies have generally been organized as systems of oppression and exploitation, and that the largest (but not the only) oppressed group has been the female. It is

also based on the conviction that such oppression is undesirable and unnecessary. It is a humor based on a vision of change" (p. 23). Kaufman further adds that feminist humor is a "humor of hope" rather than of hopelessness, and that it tends to stereotype male actions rather than characters because it is written by and for people with a low tolerance for stereotyping of people and groups. Importantly, and surprisingly for some, feminist humorists have not created negative male stereotypes to counter those of women found in male-produced humor.

The key characteristic of feminist humor, then, is that it "exposes" reality in its "desire for reform" (Kaufman, 1994, p. 25). Toth's (1994) analysis is in general agreement with Kaufman's characterization of feminist humor, while Sheppard's (1991) definition of women's humor asserts that its key characteristic is that "it derives from the experience and feelings we have shared by virtue of having been born and raised female in our culture" (p. 42). Sheppard delineates five types of women's humor, the most radical of which is "role-transformative" humor which "most obviously and directly seeks to attack gender roles" (p. 47). This type could also be labeled feminist. Feminist humor in general has been characterized as having four defining elements: directly attacking or critiquing gender roles, exposing the realities of gender inequality and discrimination under patriarchal ideology, expressing elements of experience that are shared by women generally, and expressing hope toward a vision of change. These four elements can be seen clearly in Lau's comics.

### **Background on Hong Kong History and Opportunities for Women**

The basic history of the economic development of Hong Kong tells the story of the tough and impoverished era of the 1950s. During the 1950s, although the economy was beginning to develop more rapidly, the society was still confined by traditional Chinese values as well as insufficient resources. Under such conditions, women were often the first chosen to make sacrifices, and many elder sisters born in the 1950s were forced to give up their educational opportunities, with the result that it was common to find girls completing their education only through primary school at best. Chances and resources were

given to boys in the family to further their education, with very little being saved for girls. In such a social environment, the concept of equality between men and women was difficult to imagine. Luckily, 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. These opportunities, once created, remained open to women. According to Westwood, Mehra, and Cheung's (1995) study *Gender and Society in Hong Kong*, work force participation of women in Hong Kong was at a steady 45% to 50% during the 1970s and 1980s. With the increasing number of women working in the production sector, women enjoyed the freedom of being in control of their finances and the power to create wealth on their own.

In the 1970s and 1980s, an era in which Hong Kong faced drastic changes, basically all boys and girls received equal educational opportunities (family-level decisions may not have been fully equal yet during this period) and legal rights for women were also constantly improving. By the 1990s, 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). Under such circumstances, women were able to demonstrate their ability and gain recognition from the larger society. Also, many successful women became socially recognized figures. Especially for those women with secondary school or university education, hard work was almost a guarantee of success. 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. These basic facts of the historical trajectory of the Hong Kong economy and its relationship to workplace opportunities for Hong Kong women have also impacted the development of women's comics and women comics artists in Hong Kong.

### The Rise of Women Comics Artists in Hong Kong

The appearance of women comics artists in Hong Kong after World War II began in the 1960s. Lee Wai-chun is the most outstanding woman comics artist from the 1960s, and no discussion of women's comics in Hong Kong can omit attention to her historic role. Her

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work *13-Dot Cartoons*, first published in 1966, ran continuously until the beginning of 1980, with 178 issues. This work was re-published in 1996 and Lee was recognized as the "master of girls' comics" and as a "paper fashion designer." Indeed, 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*. Because fashion was such a prominent feature of the *13-Dot Cartoons* and was so closely followed by readers, the comic also functioned as a fashion trend reference source for readers in the 1960s (Wong, 1997; Wong & Cuklanz, 2000).

The image of 13-Dot represented a Westernized modern identity and model for local Chinese women, and this influence is obvious, especially in the period before the arrival of Hong Kong television's golden era in the mid-1970s. Although the *13-Dot Cartoons* cannot be classified as feminist because of their emphasis on fashion and style rather than on any overt political or social commentary, the cartoon did sometimes convey the idea of gender equality through the narrative of the story. Lee did not accommodate herself and her creative works into the dominant power structure, the traditional Chinese values according to which men are always more important than and superior to women, but she did not directly critique it. For instance, in issue no. 55, "Preference for daughter rather than son," published in 1969, Lee 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. Shifts in social practice are suggested, but not openly advocated. *13 Dot Cartoons* relied on the popular appeal of fashionable design and usually light story lines to attract a wide mainstream female audience.

After *13-Dot Cartoons* came to a close, there were almost no women comics artists in Hong Kong during the whole decade of the 1980s. Comic reading materials for women were dominated by imported Japanese comics. Then, in 1989, Chan Ya began a newspaper comic strip that was soon collected in a book entitled *One*

*Woman-Three Markets*, also published in 1989, an historic year for China and Hong Kong. While Lee Wai-chun had turned to comics as virtually the only possible avenue to earning a living as a woman artist at the time, Chan Ya's full-time job was as a newspaper columnist, and her comics work was a sideline activity. She produced only one book of comics, which was a collection of work previously published in the newspaper.

Chan Ya's comic art centered on an unappealing character with thick lips and a loud voice. This character fits Montresor's (1994) definition of the "grotesque," which is often used by women comics artists to subvert "conventional standards of feminine beauty" (p. 335). In addition to providing some humor to our understanding of a wide range of contemporary political topics such as Tiananmen Square, the more than 160 comic strips in her book also underlined some important issues related to the equality of the two genders and disturbed the territory previously occupied entirely by male comics artists. As a woman, she expressed and sarcastically criticized complicated and serious political incidents from an outsider perspective. She is the first woman comic artist ever to achieve this "outsider critique" in Hong Kong. Unfortunately, after her newspaper comic strip column was canceled, and with the publication of her book in September, 1989, her output as a comic artist came to an end. It is important to note that although it did critique mainstream politics from a distinctly female perspective, her work did not systematically focus on issues related to patriarchal domination, such as sex, sexuality, discrimination, and gender oppression.

After Chan Ya's work was published in 1989, there was no other similar type of politically oppositional women comics artist in Hong Kong until Lau Lee-lee in 1998. There are many possible reasons for the dearth of women comics artists in Hong Kong, a place in which comic art in general has been a thriving and popular enterprise for many decades. In addition to the perceived threat of female-produced comics with any sort of social critique or political "edge," factors related to the economy and the availability of publication venues are perhaps most important. As Lau Lee-lee has observed (Wong & Cuklanz, 1999), the range of publication venues for non-traditional comics was not yet well diversified through the 1980s, making it difficult for political comics artists to earn a living from their art. Only within

the last decade have a range of magazines and small newspapers emerged, offering a start for new and critical comic artists within political niche markets. Lau's comic art has appeared regularly in a feminist magazine and in a film magazine since 1997. Two of the comics included in the book were previously published in *Hong Kong Cultural Studies* (no. 5, Summer 1996), a semi-academic publication consisting mainly of articles on Hong Kong culture.

Another important factor relating to the absence of women comic artists and feminist comics in Hong Kong is the persistence of traditional gender ideology. Even though Hong Kong women were gaining success and public attention particularly in mainstream politics with figures such as Anson Chan, Emily Lau, Ann Wu and Christine Loh and serving as role models for mainland women, still there was no public expression of a woman's viewpoint on the political and social life of Hong Kong being expressed in comic art. The status of women and men in Hong Kong seemed to be gaining equality, but in fact 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 was 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 a "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.

Although the equality of the sexes and education 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 principal of full gender equality. As Walker has observed about the emergence of radical feminism (and radical feminist humor) in the United States, the central enabling factor is "a critical mass" (Walker, 1991, p. 72) of women who have experience outside the home so that they are exposed 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.

The general awareness of Hong Kong people towards this issue was not strong, as reflected in the mass media, and under such circumstances Lau's comics provide a needed channel to consider issues of gender equality. Almost immediately, her work generated some media attention and sparked discussion of the ideology of feminism in Hong Kong. Lau notes that the written responses to her work, both in the magazines and in *Mom's Drawer at the Bottom* (1998), have been very positive, and she receives no "hate" mail criticizing her for exposing inequality and hypocrisy in the life of Hong Kong (Wong & Cuklanz, 1999).

#### The Initiation: The Birth of Feminist Comics in Hong Kong

In the current political and economic context of post-handover Hong Kong (that is, after the resumption of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997) Lau Lee-lee's feminist comics have been well received by her audience. This indicates that there is at least a segment of the Hong Kong comics audience that is sympathetic to her message of ideological critique and social change. However, it may not mean that a large percentage of the people are feminists. Lau believes that her comics contain enough ambiguity and subtlety that they can draw in a large audience without offending many people. She does not aim for a feminist audience who will already agree with her perspective, but tries instead to address a wider audience of people who might be open to her observational style of conveying ideas about contemporary topics and situations. Indeed, her style of humor is subtle and inoffensive, often treating radical subject matter in understated ways.

In contrast to previous works of women comics artists in Hong Kong, Lau Lee-lee's collection *Mom's Drawer at the Bottom* published in 1998 is a self-proclaimed collection of feminist comics. Lau sees the "promotion of self-determined sexual desire" (p. 1) as a central part of her project. She labels herself a feminist, and, as the title of the book indicates, the main themes are concerned with power issues in gender politics. Even the title of the book implies that the gender equality of the society has still not been achieved, with the housewife's place still literally at the bottom. The drawing on the cover shows a dresser with drawers stacked like a ladder, with a small

girl climbing up the drawers toward the top of the dresser. Lau is playing with the symbolic meaning of the positions of the drawers as indications of the gendered power relations within the family and in society at large. In Lau's (1998) words, the motivation behind her comics work is the optimistic idea "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 humor: the use of humor to expose reality and express a desire for change toward a better society. Lau uses her feminist label to disturb and challenge the power system of Hong Kong, using her own observations to stimulate some critical thinking about power relations and social realities. As Lau says, using the label of "feminist" for herself is the result of some internal struggle, since she understands that the term is misinterpreted in many ways in Hong Kong, and is often considered to refer to a dogmatic ideologue.

Lau's collection includes many examples that illustrate the four central defining characteristics of feminist humor. Her visual stories directly attack traditional gender roles, expose the realities of discrimination under patriarchy, draw on the shared experience of women, and begin to delineate a vision of change. In addition to these elements, her work sometimes focuses on themes and topics unique to the Hong Kong context, incorporating history, myth, common experiences, and elements of popular and political culture to create a humorous critique of mainstream ideology and perspectives. Her style of humor employs simple and direct observation to point out the shortcomings of political and social life. She often uses the visual element to convey the more controversial or potentially offensive elements of the message while using language sparingly.

The general understanding of the connotations of feminism can be problematic in Hong Kong. Even well-educated men may consider women involved in women's liberation to be an untouchable group with whom extra caution should be exercised. These negative associations reflect the fact that most Hong Kong people have limited exposure to this term and the ideology it represents. Without trying to provide interpretations and definitions that the term "feminism" has for Hong Kong people, the contents of Lau's comics give feminism a simple definition. It is the use of a principle of self-awareness to see

and to think critically about one's daily environment, using a fair analytical attitude (Lau, 1998). Often, but not always, the subject matter she chooses from the environment is gender-related. As Lau notes, feminism is a powerful analytical tool that can be used to gain insight and critical distance from personal and social realities. Her perspective is well reflected in the thematic categorization of the issues in the book, which begins with "sex and sexuality" and includes "sex roles," "gender politics," "living," "media," and "home-nation-earth."

#### Direct Attacks on Gender Roles and Stereotypes

Perhaps the most basic and important element of feminist humor is direct attack on traditional socialization, gender roles, and stereotypes. Lau engages in this strategy frequently, with numerous strips on how society unfairly views men and women differently. In strips utilizing this strategy, either Lau as narrator or one of her characters verbally questions elements of socially constructed gender. In one story, "Sex Counts" (p. 57), Lau comments on sexual stereotyping and the function of toys in sex role socialization, noting that the character of a baby might be influenced by many things, but that social influences such as gendered toy assignments are the most important.

Similarly, in "Big Difference" (p. 63) (Figure 4.1), she puts identical pictures side by side, labeling one of the pictures as a woman and the other as a man. In the subsequent frames, Lau discusses how society will react differently to the same behavior depending on whether it is undertaken by a man or a woman. Thus, for example, if condoms are found in a man's wallet, he is called a playboy, whereas if condoms are found in a woman's purse, she will be called a slut. Or, if a man shows his desire to climb the ladder of success, he is called ambitious, whereas a woman with the same attitude would be called aggressive. The only "Big Difference" between women and men is how people perceive and label them.

Lau points out the double standard operating in society's judgments of men and women, with judgments of women coming out more negative than those of men in many cases, even when the behavior of both is similar or identical. Her critique is direct and



Figure 4.1. From Lau, L. (1998). Big difference. Mom's drawer at the bottom, p. 63. Reprinted with permission of Lau Lee-lee.

unmistakable in this example: men and women are often treated differently in the same situation, and this generally accepted practice is wrong. Yet 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 that 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 the first, "Superior Jobs" such as lawyer, senator, and real estate agent are compared to the job of a prostitute as she comments "I still don't understand why the desire I pursue is any different from theirs."

A final example of direct attack on traditional gender roles and concepts, "Something More Important" (p. 77) depicts a girl who helps out with housework at home while her father and brothers do nothing because the father does "big things" outside the home and the brother will do "big things" in the future. Later on, when the girl is an adult woman, she ends up doing a "big" job outside the home after all. She benefits from a Philippine domestic helper and her own mother to help with the housework and child care. In the final frame, the woman wonders why doing housework does not count as a big thing. The woman seems to be noting that traditional women's work should be considered important like other work, even though it is not the type of work she herself does. Her childhood experiences seem to have made her realize that housework should be valued too.

### **Exposing the Realities of Gender and Discrimination under Patriarchal Ideology**

Many of Lau's comics simply depict situations with almost no dialogue or critical commentary from herself or her characters. Often, these strips highlight gendered situations or relationships in a subtle or ambiguous way. Unlike the "direct attack" strategy, which questions socially constructed ideas about gender, strips exposing gender realities more passively make points about the realities of gendered life. In these strips neither the narrator's voice nor any of the characters verbalize an ideological critique. Rather, situations are described and examined, simply revealing problems and truths. In "Explosion" (p. 39) (Figure 4.2), a man who has trouble sleeping calls for phone



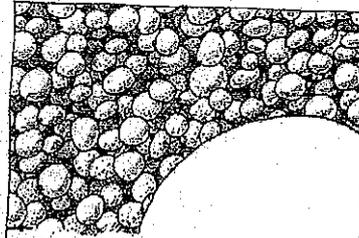
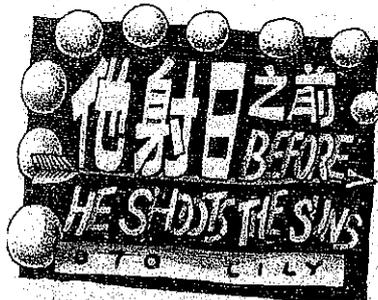
Figure 4.2. From Lau, L. (1998). Explosion. Mom's drawer at the bottom, p. 39. Reprinted with permission of Lau Lee-lee.

sex and achieves satisfaction, falling asleep with the phone in his hand. A woman who also cannot sleep listens to a radio talk show host and telephones in to discuss her problems. She also gains satisfaction and falls asleep holding the phone. The point of the strip is open to interpretation, but at least Lau is definitely suggesting similarities and differences between men and women. While both are so lonely that they must resort to anonymous phone relationships for gratification and both contact women to have their needs met, the man calls for sexual stimulation and the woman calls for emotional support. Various observations about gender are made without overt comment or critique.

Lau also examines male power in many of her comics. One typical strategy is the re-telling of a popular myth in a new way that adds a feminist perspective and a new interpretation critiquing the traditional myth. For example, she tells a story based on a Chinese myth of the beginning of the universe. The story is called "Before He Shoots the Suns" (p. 33) (Figure 4.3), and recounts the tale of an ancient time in which there were thousands of suns in the sky. A legendary woman who has the best aim decides to shoot down most of the suns because it is too hot, but after shooting all but ten, she begins to feel bored, so she leaves the rest of the duty to her best-behaved son, and goes to take a bath. The son who was told by his mother to finish up the job and shoot down nine more suns becomes the legendary hero of the traditional Chinese myth that tells of a heroic man who shot down nine extra suns and left just one so that the earth's temperature would be just right. So, Lau's version points out the idea that women's contributions may not be remembered in the traditional myths and histories, and also makes the point that male successes may have women behind them. In telling this "myth before the myth," she puts a woman back into the story as the central heroic character, thus using comic humor to reclaim women's role in pre-history and pointing out the fact that the traditional myths usually only emphasize the contributions of men. Her strategy is simply to change the story, leaving readers to draw their own meaning from it.

In a final, perhaps more daring example, "Who's Next?" (p. 91) (Figure 4.4), 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."

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A long time ago there were 9999 suns in the sky.

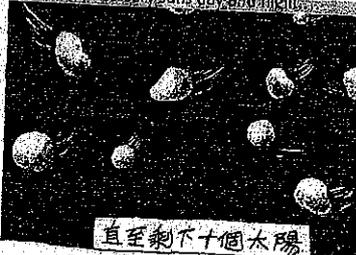


當時呂隱的射藝最好

Lui-yan (a woman) was the best shooter at that time.



為了拯救地球，她日以繼夜射殺多餘的  
In order to save the earth, she shot down all the  
unnecessary suns day and night.



直至剩下十個太陽

... until there were only 10 suns left.



呂隱覺得非常沉悶...  
She got very bored.



這個偉大的任務，便留給最聽話的孩子，  
自己先去了洗澡...  
She left the work to her most obedient son to finish,  
and she went to take a bath.

Figure 4.3. From Lau, L. (1998). Before he shoots the suns. Mom's drawer at the bottom, p. 33. Reprinted with permission of Lau Lee-lee.



Figure 4.4. From Lau, L. (1998). Who's next. Mom's drawer at the bottom, p. 91. Reprinted with permission of Lau Lee-lee.

Thus, like other feminist humorists, Lau avoids creating such negative stereotypes of men even when the subject is child rape. She does not shy away from the subject, but treats it with a feminist and unoffending sensibility. 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. The daughter's thoughts indicate that she is considering what to do and would rather not tell anyone about the situation. 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 become the next victim. Lau says that she targets some of her comics toward a young audience (Wong & Cuklanz, 1999), with the idea that young people will always read comics almost regardless of the subject matter. Here her work can suggest to teenage readers in abusive family situations that their actions can make a difference and that they can help others such as younger siblings. At the same time, the strip calls attention to a gendered reality that is quite unusual to see treated in cartoon form.

### **Depicting the Shared Experiences of Women**

Control of sex and sexuality has been at the center of gender oppression and the analysis of this oppression for centuries. Many of Lau's comics examine sex and sexuality from a female perspective, examining experiences that may be common to many women. In "Well-Behaved Woman" (p. 25) Lau depicts a narrator who says she is a well-behaved woman because she never engages in "bad" behaviors. She says she never wears sexy clothing because other clothing is more natural, and she never watches X-rated videos unless she can't sleep. In the final frame she adds one more item to the list: she never reveals her sexual desire casually to men because they always disappoint her. In each case the woman gives a personal reason for not engaging in "bad" behavior. She is not blindly following the moral prescriptions of society and simply avoiding things that are called "bad," and she also, almost in passing, makes a general critique of men's sexual behavior based on her own experience.

Young readers may not find it easy to understand and identify

with the concepts of sexual liberation and self-determination. However, the section on sex roles may cause them to reflect seriously on their own experiences while at the same time commenting on a shared experience of women. For example, "A Record Throw" (p. 53) (Figure 4.5) tells the story of a young girl who is teased by other kids, as are many young girls, because her period causes some blood stains on her clothes. After a while the girl gets tired of getting teased, and she decides to take revenge by collecting her used sanitary napkins and then throwing them at people who once teased her. The frame showing the faces of the victims of this treatment depicts truly horrified, ghoulish characters. Then, in the final frame, the story ends happily as the young girl turns out to become a successful handball player because she had so much practice at aiming and throwing from her younger days. The story makes a humorous link between the used sanitary napkins and the handball game. Here Lau brings the taboo of the used napkin directly into the story, suggesting that it may not be necessary for women to hide their periods as a shameful or unnatural phenomenon. Bringing the taboo out into the open can begin to normalize it, and Lau takes the first step in helping to create change in social attitudes about women's physical nature. Yet she treats this perhaps shocking subject matter primarily through the visuals.

Some of Lau's comics combine more than one of the four feminist techniques discussed here. In exposing the realities of discrimination under patriarchy, she often also naturally suggests a critique of gender roles. One such example is in "Changing Demand" (p. 65), which depicts the "needs" of various generations. While some of the needs are related to culture more than gender (using a mobile phone, owning a tomagochi electronic pet, or understanding "one country, two systems" in the post-handover era), the point of the cartoon seems to be that different eras ask women to construct their bodies in different ways. The 1970s required a full-figured look, the 1980s required a muscled in-shape body, and the 1990s required a slim figure. This cartoon has no dialogue after the first frame, and Lau uses her technique of simple observation to reveal the reality of how gender ideology affects women's body image in different eras.

In many of Lau's stories, the woman's perspective on daily life is shown to be marginalized, eliminated, or forgotten. In these comics, Lau tells how women's bodies are treated as a sexual subject

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Figure 4.5. From Lau, L. (1998). A record throw. Mom's drawer at the bottom, p. 53. Reprinted with permission of Lau Lee-lee.

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matter, or as a field that requires artificial enhancements to be acceptable. She shows the women whose bodies are subject to these "improvements" being unhappy and unsatisfied with the idea of making such artificial changes. For instance, in "Professional Cut" (p. 99) she draws a woman having a nightmare about a tumor in her ovary. She has gotten some contradictory advice from doctors, one of whom says that she should keep the ovary because she has only one child so far. The other says she already has one child, so she should probably have the ovary removed. The final expert says she should have a full hysterectomy to play it safe. With so many different opinions, the woman cannot understand who her body belongs to, herself, her children or future children, or one or more of the experts who give her such conflicting advice. Again, the familiar experience of feeling subject to a range of expert opinions rather than in personal control over one's body and destiny is shared by many women, particularly in relation to the medical system. And again, Lau uses a simple technique of observation and first-person comment from the woman herself to convey a subtle message that something is wrong. By simply depicting a situation that is probably shared by many readers, Lau makes her critique without articulating a negative commentary on medical practice and without directly attacking gender roles.

### **Suggesting a Vision of Change**

Lau engages in elements of humor that are quite radical in bringing traditionally private or even taboo subject matter out into the public sphere as the focus of her humor. She does not hesitate to discuss "private" elements such as sexual practices, tampons, and other markers of feminine identity and experience. In many instances she softens her critique rhetorically, even though the subject matter could be considered radical or taboo. She is able to use subtle humor to begin to delineate a vision of change for a more positive future. In "Show Them Some Colors," p. 61 (Figure 4.6), Lau tells the story of a woman who, when first going out for job interviews, is advised not to wear black clothing. Since she only has black clothes, she is not happy with this, and she wonders why her clothing should make any difference. Later, the woman attains the position of chair of a human

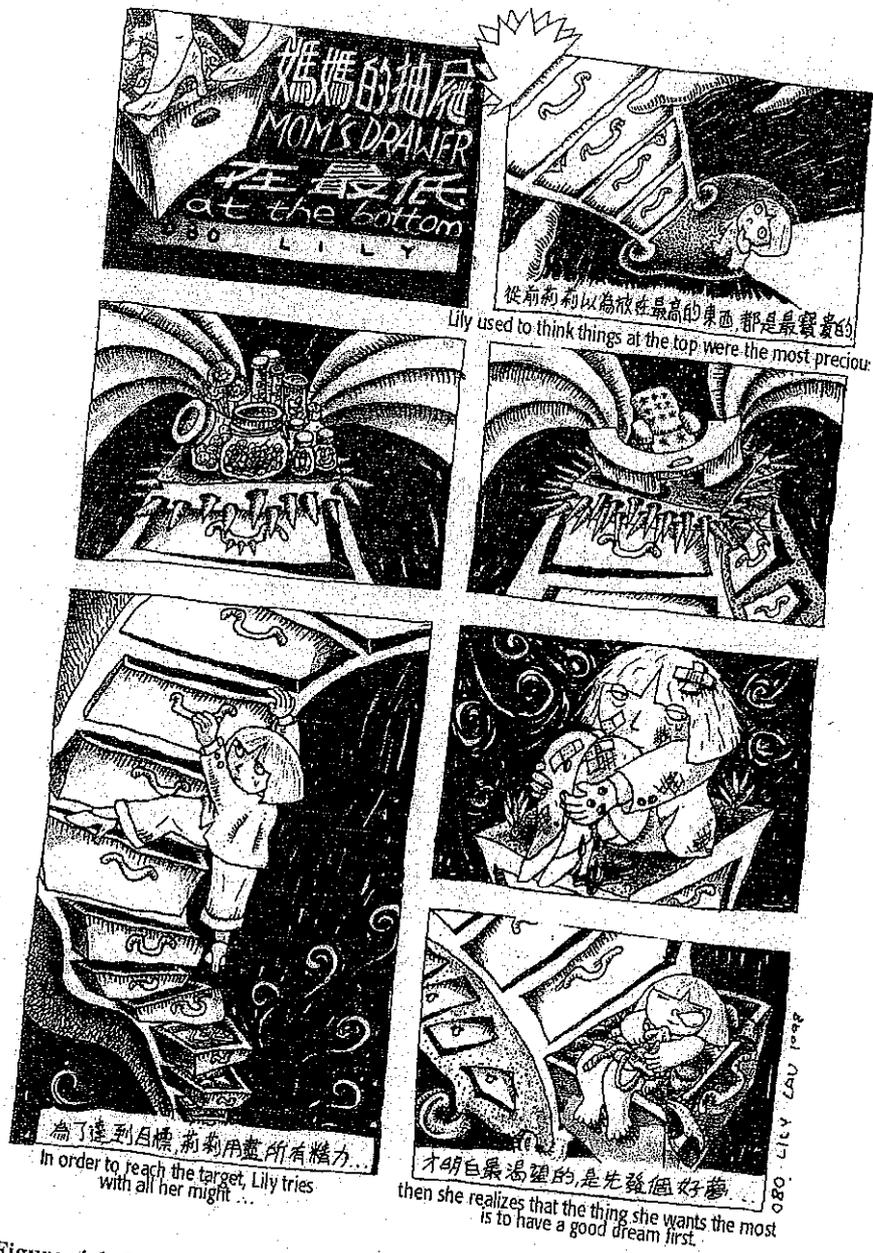


Figure 4.6. From Lau, L. (1998). Show them some colors. *Mom's drawer at the bottom*, p. 61. Reprinted with permission of Lau Lee-lee.

resources department where she can make her own decisions about whom to hire and why. The caption notes that she likes people who have their own views. This strip encapsulates a vision of change in that the same person who was unhappy with an unfair practice in the past is now in a position to do things in a different way. Lau suggests, especially to her young readers, that individuals can make a difference in their own sphere of influence, which might be as large as a whole department. All together, the cartoons in the book suggest a possibility of change at the individual, organizational, and conceptual levels.

"Point of View" (p. 81) highlights the way in which events can be seen from different angles of perspective, with the concluding suggestion that including both male and female perspectives provides a more whole vision of reality. The visuals depict the developmental history of humankind, with the "male" symbol on top, reflecting the idea that history and knowledge are often from the male perspective. Lau shows the human development book with the "female" symbol on the other side, and then, in the final frame, she shows both covers of the book with the "male" and "female" symbols showing at the same time. The story reveals the writer's opinion that perspective and balance are important and that we should be aware of the perspective represented by stories, histories, and accepted knowledge. In this example and the following one, Lau's vision of change is conceptual. By changing our frames of thought we can achieve significant beneficial change for the future, in this case by seeing a fuller perspective of life and humanity.

In a final example, the title cartoon from the front cover ("Mom's Drawer at the Bottom," p. 83) (Figure 4.7) is spelled out in story form. Here a girl is shown understanding that the good things are at the top, and she climbs the symbolic ladder of the dresser toward an unknown prize at the top. Arriving there battered and bruised, the girl decides that it is easier to go back to the bottom drawer and be comfortable rather than struggle with the challenges of climbing. In the final frame, the girl notes that to succeed in life it is better to have a good vision first. In one of the most ambiguous conclusions of the book, Lau suggests that "vision" is important for success and enjoyment of life, and that it may be possible to reframe our understanding of what is worthwhile and not worthwhile such that we can actually see the traditional woman's position or role as



Figure 4.7. From Lau, L. (1998). Mom's drawer at the bottom. Mom's drawer at the bottom, p. 83. Reprinted with permission of Lau Lee-lee.

potentially positive. She does not give reasons that can justify this re-framing of traditional thought; she provides only the idea that struggling toward the top can be painful and unrewarding. She suggests that finding your own place somewhere is the best thing to do, even if you are not at the "top."

### Elements of Hong Kong Context and Experiences

In its elements of subtlety and ambiguity, Lau's work goes at least a step beyond what theorists of feminist humor have set forth as the defining characteristics of the genre. Lau says the target audience of her comics is those who do not understand what she is trying to say, and thus one of the intended functions of her comic art is consciousness-raising of non-feminist or pre-feminist audience members. This element entails a specific encouragement of the self-awareness of the audience, urging individuals to reflect on their own lives and bodies. This may be a particularly adaptive approach to the authorship of politically-charged comics in the Hong Kong context, where feminism has been seen as dangerous and radical, and where a significant feminist market niche may not be available for popular culture offerings such as comics. The added element of moving the political consciousness of her audience a bit further than its members have previously ventured is Lau's way of carrying out what is probably the most important facet of feminist comics, that of providing an attitude of hopefulness and perhaps also a partial vision of a better future for those in the audience and for society at large.

In addition to making use of subtle, simple observation and ambiguity in her comic art, Lau also includes a number of strips that treat subject matter specific to Hong Kong and perhaps only secondarily related to gender issues. In "My Own Room" (p. 71) she depicts the distinctive rooms of various household residents including the sister, brother, master, dog, and finally the maid. Although every family member including the dog has his or her own room, only the domestic helper sleeps under the kitchen stove in a little cubbyhole rather than in her own private space. This strip depicts reality for many Hong Kong households and focuses on the situation of the female domestic helper, but it does not articulate gender politics as a part of

its critique. It observes simply that the domestic helper has her place under the stove and leaves it up to the reader to decide why she is pointing this out. The strip also provides an unusual example of outright sarcasm, as Lau comments that the "room" under the stove is "well-ventilated."

"Good Old Days" (p. 135) (Figure 4.8) also calls attention to themes that are specific to the Hong Kong context. It notes humorously that although in the old days the rice tasted sweeter, love affairs were more passionate, the old government was better, you could buy a bigger house with the same money, things were more clearly black-and-white, and time moved more slowly, still the protagonist feels good because she understands herself more now. It would be difficult to draw any specifically feminist message from this strip. Instead, Lau here focuses on elements of the Hong Kong experience that would be familiar to anyone who has lived there for more than a couple of years. She creates a feeling of nostalgia and then uses a concluding frame that seems to comment on human nature rather than on gender, sexuality, or social critique. Though not as numerous as these other types of themes, examples such as this one help to soften the social critique of the book and bring the pleasure of common understanding and common experience to a wider audience.

### Conclusion

Lau's comics, although just beginning to gain some recognition, already mark an important first step that no other woman comics artist has achieved so far in Hong Kong. Because Lau's feminist comics do not critique a specific political party or leadership hierarchy, they will most likely continue to circulate freely in post-handover Hong Kong. And, as long as the economy remains healthy, magazines and books conveying critical ideological messages should continue to flourish, furthering a cultural environment in which feminist voices are welcome. Hopefully, as her comics reach a wider audience including those who do not readily understand her work, these comics may achieve the important political work of helping an ever-wider audience to see the humor in what she depicts and to reflect on the issues she discusses. As such, her influence may help to raise a feminist



Figure 4.8. From Lau, L. (1998). From Good old days. Mom's drawer at the bottom, p. 135. Reprinted with permission of Lau Lee-lee.

consciousness in Hong Kong, particularly on issues related to socially constructed gender roles and traditional Chinese notions of proper gender roles. Her willingness to address new audiences including young girls and non-feminists may help ensure her continued success.

### Note

1. The initial print run of *Mom's Drawer at the Bottom* (1998) was 1,000 copies, of which about 800 sold within a year of publication. Since publication of this work, Lau has produced a special comic work on anti-racism for the Hong Kong government. A second book expanding on the themes and style of the one examined in this chapter is forthcoming (2001). The translation used for the analysis in this chapter is the authors' own version. Cantonese names have been romanized with the last name (surname) first. A bilingual version of *Mom's Drawer at the Bottom* is also forthcoming in 2001.

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